



Resisting fascist mobilization: Some reflections on critical pedagogy, liberation theology and the need for revolutionary socialist change

Peter McLaren

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Resisting fascist mobilization: Some reflections on critical pedagogy, liberation theology and the need for revolutionary socialist change

Did you say socialism?

Anti-Marxist and anti-socialist sentiment in the United States is nothing new but in recent years it has been helmed by talk show personalities such as Sean Hannity who now have crony capitalism's most famous consigliere in their digitalized pockets, and who are sinisterly adept at ginning up Cold War rhetoric in fulminating screeds to suit these post-truth times. Despite its honorable affinity with the ideas of Henri de Saint-Simon, Robert Owen, William Morris and Charles Fourier, its historical connection with British Chartism, and its intellectual association with English-born American revolutionary Thomas Paine, the topic of socialism remains a dirty word in mainstream popular parlance (some even see it as synonymous with terrorism), with the exception of youthful advocates of Bernie Sanders, green anarchists and eco-socialist warriors in the tradition of Joel Kovel, Michael Löwy John Bellamy Foster and bleary-eyed social justice activists and self-schooled revolutionaries emboldened and revived whenever there is an upsurge of worker or student militancy against the indelible corporate totalitarianism that currently besets us. While there are growing constituencies not yet ready to capitulate to the forces of corporate neoliberalism—new social movements, youth organizations, and social media forums dedicated to advancing socialism—there unfortunately remains a lack of alternative models that are within reach of achieving hegemonic ascendancy anytime in the foreseeable future. Given the capacious nature of the term socialism and the manner in which consent is manufactured in our society by our corporate media apparatuses (Chomsky is perhaps the best illuminator of this process) large sectors of the public cannot be expected to be familiar with the conditions that impacted the life expectancy of textile mill workers in New England in 1912 Lawrence Massachusetts, or fully comprehend the consequences of, say, Larry Summers destroying the bulwark between commercial and investment banks, or how the endgame will play out for the victims of sub-prime loans. Long-festered worker anger among deckhands, engine workers, pursers, farmers, warehouse workers, mechanics, machinists, aerospace workers, dockworkers, miners, construction workers, carpenters, public sector workers, ironworkers, automobile workers, and a host of other groups—who have not had the opportunity to avail themselves of Marxist critiques of contemporary capitalism—has been corralled by Trump (not unlike the tactics of Italy's Five Star Movement), and marshalled in the service of building his cult sponsored chaos. Trump was able to connect viscerally to minimum-wage-slave constituents and those devastated by the loss of farming and manufacturing jobs, many of whom live in neighborhoods afflicted with contaminated water and an opioid epidemic. Capitalism does not provide what the people want; it provides what people who can afford it want. Because Marx exposed the inherent instability of capitalism in ways that the capitalist class and its Oprichniks cannot afford to be absorbed by the wider public, Marx's ideas have been twisted from their original intention (by both the left and the right but my focus here is on the right) and the distorted appropriation of Marx's works has not ceased up to the present, this time carried on the shoulders of alt-Right

and right wing media and their firebrand pundits who blame 'cultural Marxism' on the Frankfurt School theorists, feminists, critical multiculturalists and anyone associated with advancing 'political correctness'. In addition to alt-Right groups such as Turning Point, which is geared to gaslight Republican university students and cobble together cadres of reactionary millennials refashioned from the casualties of the culture wars, the tentacles of Opus Dei can be found slithering through Washington's corridors of power, augmenting the ideological garishness of the alt-Right anti-globalists and ethno-nationalists with ghastly sacerdotal intensity, colonizing the summits of power with aerosol anti-cultural Marxist sentiments in the service of the anti-Kingdom (didn't you know that white people are the most oppressed people in the country, especially white Christian defenders of the Second Amendment!). The most eerie and sinister cabals of the alt-Right, pseudo intellectuals led by Steve Bannon and his conservative Catholic allies, stand ready to commandeer the fight against socialism, single-payer health care and *Roe vs. Wade* on behalf of the Empire of Darkness (Bannon has a base in the Catholic Church). Bannon, fiercely anti-globalist, fears the global vision of the Church held by Pope Francis (who is very much the Pope of South America and beyond Europe) and prefers to see the future of the Church firmly ensconced within the Western world of Catholic tradition that includes free market principles. How European, male-centered priapic monotheism has served Bannon and his ilk is a story that one day needs to be told before the opening of the first of the Seven Seals, when Bannon mounts his white horse, adjusts his crown and affixes an arrow to his bow.

As seen from behind the cyclopean walls of Europe, the US was the promised land, and Europeans were designated by God to be the recipients of this land, by force if necessary, and the Doctrine of Discovery, and papal bull *Dum Diversas* issued by Pope Nicholas V in 1452, and *Requerimiento* of 1513 ensured that. It was the beginning of the fantasy of an Anglo-Celtic wonderland that persists up to the present. The alt-Right has tried to give an aura of respectability to the notion of European 'identity', claiming that it needs to be defended against political correctness, feminism, erasure by immigration, global trade, multinational institutions, and left-wing multiculturalism. Some strands within the alt-Right have co-opted some of the language of the left in order to disguise its deep-rooted fascism. Discerning readers who follow the efflux of the alt-Right's ideological imperatives recognize that many of its rhetorical devices include gas-lighting, gish galloping, the fallacy of *ad hominem*, weaponizing the big lie, and convincing the public that their untutored opinions gorged on gossip count as much, if not more so, than well-reasoned arguments. In fact, the wildest conspiracy theories today circulating within the information ecosystem are claiming the status of fixed repositories of truth and defended as absolute facts.

Liberation theology rose to prominence in South America in the 1960s and 1970s as a way of responding to the persecution of Latin America's poor and as a means for examining systemic oppression, that is, oppression built into social structures previously understood as apolitical, or even liberal democratic. Poverty is seen as evil, as this comes out of the Gospel message. But it is precisely a Marxist analysis of class that gives to liberation theology the foundations for understanding what must be changed in order for poverty to be overcome. I always find it troublesome when liberation theology is criticized for its 'politicization' due to its incorporation of a Marxist critique of political economy while being praised for its singular commitment to the poor and to social justice. But it is its connection to a Marxist analysis of class that to a large extent prevents liberation theology from becoming lost in the quagmire of liberal moralism and the politics of pious charity—a stance which to its credit seeks to assist the poor yet regrettably leaves the very structures responsible for such poverty untouched and in tact, such as those scaffolded by the connivance of private tyrannies we call corporations and financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. But the key point to recall is that 'structures of poverty' (i.e., capitalist forces and relations of production, extraction of surplus value as both the means and ends of capitalism) are also forms of social sin that encapsulate us in their repetitive form and as such these forms need to be dismantled and replaced with more

egalitarian structures. Marxism is fundamental in meeting this challenge but it has been so demonized by the corporate media since WWII that the Catholic Church is loathe to even whisper the word. And to be brutally honest, the Catholic Church's storied affinity for fascism in the early 20th century must not be ignored (Francoist Spain, Portugal under Salazar, Italy under Mussolini, Pavelić's Croatia, Slovakia, Bavaria, Austria, and so on) when attempting to gauge its antipathy toward Marxism. We can thank the Second Vatican Council in 1962 for helping to put an end to this odious trend when, in 1962, Pope John XXIII formally opened Vatican II, which was closed under Pope Paul VI in 1965. Vatican II marked the beginning of a dialogue with a contemporary world faced with major political, social, economic and technological changes. However, a number of fascist regimes loyal to the Church survived into the 1980s. Regrettably, fascist and authoritarian regimes are creeping back to the political sphere once again worldwide, defending the global neoliberal economic agenda in countries as culturally disparate as Russia, India, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Brazil, the Philippines, Israel, and Egypt. Their leaders rarely display any reluctance in dispatching their adoring followers to stamp out freedom and human dignity everywhere they go.

Brazil's Bolsonaro has bragged that he intended to 'enter the Education Ministry with a flamethrower to remove Paulo Freire' (Jeantet, 2019). Freire was a staunch supporter of liberation theology. While the Catholic Church has never formally denounced liberation theology, John Paul II appointed conservative bishops in Latin America in order to lessen its hold on the people.

We can all agree on the multitude of dangers that new technologies pose to the survival of democracy. It is difficult not to be enraged by the fact that information about every citizen is being entered into databases created by Big Brother Government. That there exist RFID (radio frequency identification) chips in credit cards, passports and enhanced drivers licenses is something to make the hair on our necks bristle. Google can share with others the credit ratings of people inflicted with fatal diseases. The NSA is listening to our phone calls, our text messages, and our cell phones serve as ID tracking devices and can deliver to the appropriate vendors information on what food we buy, what garbage we throw out, our purchases, our favorite websites and where we spend our time.

How concerned should we be about surveillance society? Very concerned. The information in our computers and cell phones is being monitored and entered into government and commercial databases and these databases serve as firewalls that you need to get past if you want a certain job, a car, a house, or if you want to purchase—anything! They also turn everyone into terrorists-in-waiting. Anyone can be targeted depending upon the flavor-of-the-month enemies of the state. So whereas both the left and the right worry about the availability of commercial devices that enable anyone to read the RFID chips in your credit card, and to make illegal transactions with your card without your credit card actually leaving your purse or pocket, the right and left have very distinguishable ideological concerns surrounding the surveillance society. The political right believes that environmental protection and sustainable development—as propagandized by the United Nations—is really a ruse manufactured by the shadow government to seize people's private property. They want as much land as possible given over for capitalist production, with as few regulatory checks and balances on pollution and worker rights as possible. They ardently believe that the surveillance society is really aimed at the persecution of Christians, libertarians, anti-globalists and anti-abortion advocates. Rarely do you see in their videos or literature citations by the leading scholars in this field on the left, such as Noam Chomsky who could actually help deepen their arguments against the surveillance society. These are evangelical Christians afraid that Big Brother is going to open the gates to hell, a one world totalitarian government linked to the United Nations that they argue promotes abortion and uplifts pantheism and pagan religions and non-Christian beliefs. At the same time they promote Anti-Semitic conspiracies about George Soros controlling the U.S. diplomatic corps in Ukraine. If Christians are not allowed to discriminate against LGBTQ communities, or if they are prevented from praying in public school classrooms, or if they cannot get creationism into the curriculum

as a counterpoint to the theory of evolution, they claim that this amounts to persecution. At the same time, these same Christians are engaged in a holy war against socialism, and fail to consider that early Christian communities were socialist. In fact, the great union organizer, Eugene Debs, maintained that 'socialism is merely Christianity in action'. Advocates of critical pedagogy are supremely wary of surveillance society and much of its critique of information technology overlaps with similar critiques offered by the right. But clearly, critical educators view it more as a means of imposing a theocratic government, a way to monitor and control anti-capitalist activists, socialists, cultural Marxists. As a critical educator, I am more worried about the surveillance society being purposed by fascists in the anti-globalist, pro-prosperity gospel Trump administration to persecute any journalist who doesn't slobber over Trump's charisma and fawn over his policies, to purge critical scholars from the universities, to attack environmental and immigration activists. But I'm also concerned about the surveillance of right-wing activists, and this is one topic around which the right and the left might come together. In March 2019, the main office of the legendary Highlander Center in New Market, Tennessee, one of 10 buildings on the Highlander Center's campus, was set on fire by an arsonist who left behind a white supremacist 'hashtag' symbol. The Center, which was founded by Myles Horton and focuses on desegregation, organized labor and economic injustice once hosted such civil rights icons as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks and Congressman John Lewis. Recently, at an event that received twitter support from Trump, thousands of armed gun rights activists stormed into Richmond Virginia to protest new gun control bills being introduced by Democratic lawmakers. These groups included far-right militants such as the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers and American Guard, some wearing a jacket patch reading 'RWDS' — shorthand for 'Right-Wing Death Squad'. The RWDS insignia has been associated with support for fascist Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, and other dictators from El Salvador, Brazil, Nicaragua and Guatemala who employed death squads that tortured and murdered thousands of leftists, including Catholic priests and nuns, during the Latin America 'dirty wars'. Having met the children of leftists who were 'disappeared' by right wing death squads in a number of Latin American countries, I can only feel saddened by the vileness of these gun protesters who likely were taught little of world history. Spending their time on computer platforms communicating with their fellow gun lovers who seek to blame frustrations associated with their personal lives on immigrants, people of color, liberal progressives, and LGBTQ and feminist activists, is a recipe for history repeating itself, which as Marx famously opined, first as tragedy, then as farce.

The Trumpland Express

Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* can help us better comprehend the besotted arrival of Donald Trump and his imperial presidency onto the creaking stage of world history, stepping from an escalator that had just descended from the atrium of Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue in New York. On the French republican calendar, the date—18 Brumaire CCXXV—marks the beginning of a *coup d'état* led by Napoleon Bonaparte and his allies in which they overthrew the governing Directory and established a Consulate, giving Napoleon the power to choose his own advisors. For many historians, this marked the end of the French Revolution. Four years later, Napoleon crowned himself emperor. There was another *coup d'état* in 1851 involving the nephew of Napoleon I. This is the focus of Marx's essay. Marx's groundbreaking work examines from an historical materialist perspective the rise to power of Charles Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, the third son of Louis Bonaparte, the brother of Napoleon I, and his staging of a December 2, 1851 coup. Louis-Napoléon's coup enabled him to remain in office and implement a series of reform programs. His justification for his seizure of dictatorial powers was his universal popularity throughout France. In November 1852 he was confirmed as emperor and remained so until 1870.

Lee (2020) writes:

In an open letter published in December 1851, Bonaparte announced the dissolution of the National Assembly, which he called a 'hotbed of conspiracies'. In January 1852 he put in place a new constitution, all the while accusing 'démagogues' of spreading 'fausses nouvelles' ('fake news'). In December 1852, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte became Napoléon III. France's Second Empire commenced. Described as 'the first modern dictator' and 'one of the first modern leaders to rule by propaganda,' Bonaparte went from being France's first elected president to its last emperor. The Second Empire lasted until 1870, when the emperor, conscious of his declining popularity, declared war on Prussia – and lost.

Marx's work examines the contradictory relationships between the appearance of a struggle and its objective social content. Marx's method was designed to uncover the social forces and internal relations at work during the revolution of 1848 and to explain how and why the revolution of 1848 in France had led to Louis Bonaparte's coup d'état in 1851. The proletariats of Paris would learn significant lessons from the experiences of 1848–1851 to enable their successful workers' revolution of 1871. In his Preface to the Second Edition in 1869, Marx wrote that the intention of his essay was to 'demonstrate how the class struggle in France created circumstances and relationships that made it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero's part'. Marx's (1851) classic work also began with the famous quotation: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living'. Personally I prefer the following translation: 'People (die Menschen) make their own history, but they make it not however they want, not under self-selected circumstances, but out of the actual given and transmitted situation. The traditions of all the dead generations burden, like a nightmare, the minds of the living' (Marx, 1869).

Marx's classic work raises the question of how a Bonapartist regime could arise from the contemporary historical-political circumstances of U.S. society and turn the White House into a pavilion of vengeful narcissism and political chaos. As in nineteenth-century France, there exists today in the United States, in the words of Miller and Fluss (2016), 'increasing desperation of poor and working people and a decimated left ... subordinated ... to capitalist parties ... where members of vulnerable groups found themselves lured in by the siren song of right-wing strongmen'. Like Trump, Charles Louis- Napoléon Bonaparte 'pretended to be the savior of a country bathed in blood from workers' struggles'. Both Bonaparte and Trump 'exploited people's economic distress by planting seeds of nationalistic and racial anxieties in those who would listen to their messages of restoring political honor and making their countries great again' (Miller & Fluss, 2016). Miller and Fluss (2016) also provide us with a comparison between Marx's descriptions of Louis Bonaparte and Donald Trump's media persona:

Bonaparte is said to be 'clumsily cunning, knavishly naive, doltishly sublime, a calculated superstition, a pathetic burlesque, a cleverly stupid anachronism, a world-historic piece of buffoonery and an indecipherable hieroglyphic for the understanding of the civilized— this symbol bore the unmistakable physiognomy of the class that represents barbarism within civilization'. Even Bonaparte's speeches anticipate Trump's rally rants: 'I am justified in repeating how great the French republic would be, were it allowed to pursue its true interests, to reform its institutions, instead of being constantly disturbed, on the one by the (socialist) demagogues and on the other by monarchist delusions ... I promise you peace for the future'. While in London in 1848, Bonaparte joined a special constabulary to combat Chartism and other socialist tendencies. Similarly, Trump's line is very clear in singling out scapegoats instead of capitalism: 'Mexicans are taking our jobs. They're taking our money. They're killing us'. Trump has had a long history of racial scapegoating, even referring to his Black workers as 'lazy'. These points send a very clear message to struggling white Americans: the problem is 'the Mexicans'; the problem is 'the Blacks'—in the same way that Bonaparte's message rang clear to the peasantry: The problem is the urban proletariat and its socialist leaders.

Miller and Fluss (2016) cite the observation by Marx's liberal counterpart, Alexis de Tocqueville, that 'Bonaparte's rise was in direct proportion to the fear of socialism'. They further

note that 'Trump's rise, in comparison, is linked to white conservative fears of emerging social movements such as Black Lives Matter'. They point out that 'in order to quell such fear, Bonaparte and Trump promised to restore law and order'. There are other similarities between Bonaparte, who 'saw himself as the defender of petty bourgeois and rural elements against those who were hurting the French nation' and Trump, who believes that 'it is shadowy global elites and international finance that fleeces America of its wealth and prosperity'.

Lee (2020) draws out some comparisons between the age of Trump and Flaubert's great novel, *Madame Bovary*, which describes a world of insincerity, accusations of conspiracies and fake news, and lies masquerading as truth. In a 1852 letter, French author Gustave Flaubert wrote, 'When will we write the facts from the point of view of a cosmic joke, that is as God sees them from on high?' (Lee, 2020). Lee writes that, 'In many ways, we're living out an extreme version of the cosmic joke Flaubert envisioned' (2020).

Again, according to Lee (2020):

A continual stream of tedious lies, meaningless clichés and empty grandstanding has disillusioned Americans just as much as it confounded Emma Bovary. Lieuvain's boring, bizarre address at the agricultural fair has its modern equivalents – think of Trump's meandering rally speeches, or his complaints about toilet flushing and cancer-causing windmills. Republican Congressman Devin Nunes is currently suing a fictitious cow for defamation, while the president's supporters applauded the statement that there was a war on 'Thanksgiving'. With the assassination of Soleimani, disregard for truth and reality – and examples of *Madame Bovary*-esque word salad – remains as blatant as ever. Mike Pence's reference to Soleimani's involvement in 9/11 is as detached from reality as Emma's vision of Roman ruins bordering a forest of tigers, camels, swans, sultans and English ladies.

Reality is unfinished, as are we as humans, which is why we have a constitutive need it seems to supplement reality with fiction. In the case of the US political scene, the fictional narratives have to be engaging, frenetically dramatic and entertaining enough to dazzle reality into obscurity, to conjure a new reality into being from imagined reality. The alchemist that transforms these fictional narratives to real events is, of course, the media industrial complex. These new events must have the capacity to distract us from other situations that have become 'all too real'. What is currently 'all too real' in the US is the impeachment of Donald Trump, a figure of unruly menace who could easily be considered the apogee of what Marx referred to in his writings on the Paris Commune as "the haughteous masters of the people." And so a powerful fiction must be used to suck a different reality out of the vortex of the all too real. The imminent threat of attack from Iran! Yes, that should do it! Consequently, as the impeachment drama was playing out and expanding into new directions, the US sprung a surprise targeted assassination directed at Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani. Trump's murderous outlawry has prompted a retaliation from Iran and a state of grinding tension that could erupt into war at any moment. Trump has threatened to commit war crimes if Iran responds, destroying 52 Iranian cultural sites. Trump now has brought about an 'all too real war' situation that now surpasses the drama of 'all too real impeachment'. There is nothing that brings support to the leader of the US the way that war does. Nobody does war like the US, who are the world's masters of war. Of course, pundits are appearing all over the news cycle, mostly on Fox News, who approve of the assassination. But of course, nobody points out that these pundits are all tied to the arms industry, such as Jack Keane, retired Army general, Van Hipp, chair of the lobbying firm American Defense International, David Petraeus, the retired general who had commanded U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, and who works for Kohlberg Kravis Roberts and Co., the investment firm with holdings in several major defense contractors, John Negroponte, a former State Department official who is vice chair of the defense and aerospace lobbying firm McLarty Associates, and Jeh Johnson, former Homeland Security secretary in the Obama administration who currently serves on the board of directors of Lockheed Martin, one of the largest defense contractors in the world (Fang, 2020).

Kirell (2020) captures the lustful insanity of war profiteering in the United States when he describes comments made by the odious Stuart Varney of Fox News, which represent unbridled moral lunacy posing as far-sightedness:

Over the span of his three-hour morning show, the Fox host repeatedly basked in the explosive glow of the precision drone strike's boost to Raytheon, Northrop Grumman, and Lockheed Martin stocks.

'Nice gains', he salivated over the defense contractors' stock prices like a sports commentator watching back an iconic play.

'Show 'em to me, show 'em to me, please', the Fox host giddily pleaded with his producers at another point—referring to the latest price increases—practically bouncing in his chair like a child asking for a lollipop.

Ultimately, Varney could hardly contain his glee upon noting that, should you pick up stocks in 'missiles and guns and stuff like that, you could do well today'.

Don't Varney's comments reflect the same perverted logic as that expressed by Kieran Christopher Williams, a 19-year-old facing capital murder charges in a fatal shooting at a concert inside a Texas club. As news cameras captured the spectacle of Williams being walked in handcuffs by law enforcement officials, Williams promoted his social media account, reciting his Instagram handle to reporters, and remarked: 'That's me, I'm an upcoming artist' (Madani, 2020). Squeeze whatever notoriety you can out of every circumstance in which you find yourself. If there are drone strikes, purchase stocks in the arms industry. If you shoot someone, make sure they follow you on social media.

Does critical pedagogy have a place in a modern-day Bonapartist, Bovary-esque universe? Leveraging the tendency of students to question established doxa when confronted with new epistemic understandings, critical pedagogy attempts to outmaneuver ideologies requisitioned to restrain students from conceiving socialism as a credible alternative to capitalism. Professors who practice critical pedagogy highlight issues germane to the survival of the planet (ecopedagogy), to how we treat immigrants and refugees, to challenging structural racism and racialized microaggressions, to exploring questions of gender and sexual identity, to supporting feminist politics, to combating white supremacy and hate speech on campus. For the most part they support internationalist, antimilitarist, and égalitarian ideals. Critics of the Trump administration who are alarmed by its discernible shift towards Bonapartism have in some instances provoked a backlash by conservative faculty, administrators, and boards of directors against critical pedagogy, which they condemn for reducing all knowledge to questions of politics, power, and exploitation, thereby exacerbating the culture wars that have plagued the country for decades.

Since liberation theology combines Marxism, critical pedagogy and the teachings of Jesus, the question must be raised: Will this praxis of liberation be better positioned on university campuses to challenge the Bonapartism of the Trump administration and its Christian evangelical minions? The message of liberation in the Bible brushes against the grain of the beliefs embraced by most Christian fundamentalist evangelicals who support President Trump. Debates have arisen around Venezuelan President Maduro's recent approval of the creation of the Evangelical Theological University of Venezuela. Is it a concession to the political right? Or is it a means of ensuring that the Venezuelan evangelical movement is not coopted by the forces that animate its American counterparts—anti-abortion, pro-capitalism, sexual abstinence, forces that emphasize the message of the prosperity gospel (God will help you achieve the Christian goal of becoming rich) and the desire to run the country as a theocracy, based on biblical rules and injunctions.

For those teachers and students who claim to be Christian, liberation theology presents a particularly difficult challenge for students on the right, since it puts social justice for immigrants, refugees and the poor squarely within the Christian wheelhouse. It has made it much more difficult for biblical literalists to maintain that the devil must have inveigled himself in the lives of those who support progressive ideals. For professors whose moral universe demands that they torque the subject matter of their classes towards topics that express a preferential option for

the oppressed, all learning should embody a praxis of liberation. That does not mean that content for STEM classes such as biochemistry, aerospace engineering, chemistry or physics will be compromised; rather, it means that certain consideration will be taken in teaching these classes regarding how this subject matter can be taught in ways that highlight liberatory praxis, or ethical action in and on the world. After all, what is the point of reading the word and the world simultaneously, i.e., critically, if we are not prepared to take the necessary action to change the world in the interests of the most vulnerable?

In 1989, not long after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a number of Jesuits who were sympathetic to liberation theology were assassinated in El Salvador when the Atlacatl Battalion, an elite Salvadoran death squad trained and equipped by the United States, broke into the José Simeón Cañas Central American University on the outskirts of El Salvador's capital, and raided the residence where six Jesuit intellectuals who were critical of the ruling junta – Ignacio Ellacuría, Ignacio Martín-Baró, Segundo Montes, Amando López, Juan Ramón Moreno and Joaquín López y López—were living. They were summarily executed along with their housekeeper and their housekeeper's daughter. During the civil war in El Salvador, priests and nuns who stood alongside the poor were frequently tortured and killed by right-wing death squads who perceived them as communist sympathizers. In 1977, priest Rutilio Grande was gunned down on his way to Mass in the rural town of El Paisnal and in 1980, four American churchwomen — Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel, Ita Ford and Jean Donovan — were raped and killed by Salvadoran government security forces. Those were the days when carrying a Bible in your rucksack could draw the attention of the authorities who might then consider you to be a subversive. And while Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated while celebrating Mass at a chapel at the Hospital de la Divina Providencia on March 24, 1980, the same day in which he delivered a sermon calling on Salvadorean soliders to stop carrying out the government's repression of the people, held some sympathy towards liberation theology, largely influenced by the teachings of his friend, Rutilio Grande, he was certainly in no way a revolutionary Marxist. The following year a U.S. School of the Americas-trained Salvadoran Army unit known as the Atlacatl Battalion unleashed the largest single massacre in recent Latin American history in the village of El Mozote, hacking to death and burning alive approximately 1,000 civilians – men, woman and children. In the name of fighting communist insurgents, the U.S. spent more than four billion dollars funding a twelve year civil war that left seventy-five thousand Salvadorans dead.

Cindy Wooden (2019) writes:

Pope Francis told the Jesuits how he once asked a Central American bishop how the sainthood process was progressing for the assassinated Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador. 'He replied: 'Absolutely out of the question. It would be like canonizing Marxism.' That was just the prelude. He went on in the same vein'.

Liberation theology captures the sentiment of Isaiah 61, verse one: 'He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners comes to liberate the oppressed'. Jesus identified the first two verses as a prophecy regarding himself, the Messiah, when he read from this chapter in Luke, 4:17-21:

¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

¹⁸The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

because he has anointed me

to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind,

to set the oppressed free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor'.¹

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹ He began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'.

Luke's chapter can be interpreted as an exhortation towards action. We as God's liberators will rebuild society. For those of us who understand capitalism as a form of robbery and slavery, this speaks to us with a special force. When, in Isaiah 61, verse 8, God announces, 'For I, the Lord, love justice, I hate robbery and iniquity' our attention is drawn to the gap between the rich and the poor on this earth, today, drawn to the dire conditions of the poor at this precipitous moment of our history. Even amidst the richness of the U.S., the connivance of private tyrannies we call corporations have left many cities here in financial peril, such as Camden New Jersey, the poorest city in the nation, with a 19 percent unemployment rate, and Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota, that has 57 percent unemployment rate. The Trump tax cuts will worsen this situation in the long run. But does anybody really care about inequality in the United States, except its most suffering victims?

The message of liberation in Luke's gospel brushes against the grain of the beliefs embraced by most Christian fundamentalist evangelicals who support President Trump. Yet at the same time it represents a continuing challenge. Perhaps Venezuela has found a way of limiting the most baleful aspects of Christian evangelicalism's right wing. But in the US this group has now been weaponized in the support of Donald Trump, and has turned Christianity into a monstrous cult whose 'swindle of fulfillment' has exposed to all who have eyes to see the blatant hypocrisy of its religious claims. Financial, legal and political advantages given to evangelical churches, and support for phony ideological battles such as America's War on Thanksgiving or America's War on Christmas, has become sufficient reason for supporting a Bonapartist ideologue such as Trump. This is a group of Christians whose fire and brimstone animus towards political correctness, gays, immigrants, Muslims, refugees and feminists has stoked militia groups across the country to threaten civil war and to prepare for the 'boogaloo' (race war after the government collapses) if Trump is not elected to a second term. This is a group whose festering hatred of all things liberal harkens back to pre-Enlightenment days. Christianity of this stripe can no longer be taken seriously by people of faith who still place importance on rational thought. Debates over liberation theology may help clarify some of the issues surrounding the relationship between religious faith and politics but it is unlikely that liberation theology will survive the onslaught of the right wing media in a form potent enough to become a serious menace to the powers that fuel Trumpland. Today we still have a long way to go, as the struggle for a liberal progressivism (mocked as "political correctness") in our schools and society is being challenged in numerous quarters by a rising tide of angry, homophobic evangelicals led by Franklin Graham. In the meantime, Paula White, Trump's Pentecostal spiritual advisor, issues the following command before congregants at her City of Destiny church in Apopka, Florida: "In the name of Jesus, we command all satanic pregnancies to miscarry right now... We declare that anything that's been conceived in satanic wombs that it'll miscarry, it will not be able to carry forth any plan of destruction, any plan of harm" (Cole, 2020). I wonder what offspring from a satanic womb might have contributed to an exhibit marking the recent centennial of women's suffrage at the National Archives. Here administrators at the National Archives made a fateful decision to alter a display that included a 49-by-69-inch photograph of a 2017 Women's March. Signs carried by marchers critical of Trump were blurred beyond recognition, lest our great leader or his followers be offended. During the days of the Cold War, the US would frequently criticize official Soviet photographs in which prominent figures such as Leon Trotsky were carefully airbrushed out of existence, as if they had never been born. Is historical erasure the next step in the age of Trump? Airbrush away all criticism of Trump. It seems as if it's already here, since any news item that Fox News doesn't cover is apparently not worthy of being called history. Earlier in the year didn't Trump bemoan the fact that he was denied a Soviet-style military parade? We would first need to find Trump a balcony from which he could watch the spectacle with his confederacy of sycophants, parasites and sinecurists, a space redolent of the balcony above the Piazza Venezia.

For all the unshackled populist let's-rupture-the-system-and-drain-the-swamp bravado that emanates from the alt-Right, its dream is to recreate our social universe as a pulp novelist's cowboy rodeo version of Jean Luc Goddard's Alphaville in reverse. Alpha 60: No-one has ever lived in the past. No-one will ever live in the future. The present is the form of all life. Embrace the oblivion of our human condition and grab whatever you can. Don't question the Great Pretender. Go along with our "health alteration committee," our "executive action committee," our "preemptive neutralization committee" (official euphemisms for White House "kill lists") and we will keep you secure at the price of your freedom! The logical science that must rule us is embedded in the art of deal-making and money laundering exemplified by all the hucksters in Los Vegas and Atlantic City—and a sucker is born every minute! And praise the Lord that this is so!

A sucker is born every minute

If you want to win at this game you must accept without reservation that Noah's Ark held every species of animal including all species of dinosaurs (apparently they got along pretty well with humans in those days). And you need to take seriously the most outrageously ignorant claims, often the ravings of religious zealots. Let's see if I can make something up on the spot. The money to finance the purchase and completion of the Ark, primarily through junk bonds with a 14 percent interest rate, was raised by Trump thousands of years ago with some help from Robert Tilton. The souls of Trump and Tilton were borrowed from the Chamber of Guf, the Otzar or Treasury of Souls, located in the Seventh Heaven, then put back again after the deal was made and the Ark was completed. Intense flooding in 2304 BC caused the space in the Ark housing the two velociraptors—our favorite genus of dromaeosaurid theropod dinosaur—to collapse and the velociraptors went on a feeding frenzy in the adjacent pens. Tilton was able to stop the carnage by incanting in tongues the language of the theropods. Hoo ba ba kanda!!! He da ma zonto! Praise Jesus. Hoo ba ba kanda! Oh la ba kanda! Centuries later, the souls of Trump and Tilton were retrieved from the Chamber of Guf and embodied in flesh and blood humans in the 20th century, ready to face whatever consequences awaited them as a result of the choices they made. See how this all falls into place! So don't you dare let your children's teachers try to sell you on evolution or climate change or the whole house of cards will come crashing down and the Rapture will be delayed even longer. Praise Trump. Praise the Chosen One. Well, I'm not sure if this admittedly crude attempt at creating a conspiracy theory will catch fire, but in case it doesn't we have QAnon and a host of others to keep us engaged and entertained in our argy-bargy confrontations with other tribes.

The truth is that those draining the White House swamp and fighting the culture wars on the side of the free and the brave are doing so from the vantage point of the cesspool on Wall Street and the one percent who control most of the country's wealth. When a poor person votes Republican, in the hope of financial stability, it's tantamount to cleansing a wound created by capitalism's inherent instability with fecal matter. Your vote is unlikely to bring you a luxury home in a tony neighborhood. It's only going to get worse for you. But your whiteness will always be valued—count on that! Just let the market sort out your life chances and focus on the really important things—like the latest selection of firearms available for online purchase from Brownells, in case you are thinking of surprising your dad with an AR-15 for his birthday. Or purchasing for him some alt-Right fashion accessories.

Rule them, humiliate them, destroy them: but he seems like such a gentleman

Richard Spencer, the tweedy icon of white ethno-nationalists tries to disguise his racism and anti-semitism by hiding behind fitted trousers, snappy vests, pocket squares and a 'high and tight'

Waffen SS hair style, and appearing like he just emerged from a sporty blow-dry bar. But one only has to consider his craven, unscripted remarks after the infamous 2017 Charlottesville Unite the Right rally and the charade is exposed:

We are coming back here like a hundred fucking times. I am so mad. I am so fucking mad at these people. They don't do this to fucking me. We are going to fucking ritualistically humiliate them. I am coming back here every fucking weekend if I have to. Like this is never over. I win! They fucking lose! That's how the world fucking works.

Little fucking kikes. They get ruled by people like me. Little fucking octoroons ... I fucking ... my ancestors fucking enslaved those little pieces of fucking shit. I rule the fucking world. Those pieces of fucking shit get ruled by people like me. They look up and see a face like mine looking down at them. That's how the fucking world works. We are going to destroy this fucking town. (cited in Coaston, 2019)

Here Spencer sounds more like a representative of the Einsatzgruppen of the Security Police and SD (Sicherheitsdienst, the SS intelligence service of Nazi Germany) than the snappily clad Duke University doctoral student dropout who specialized in European intellectual history. Yes Richard you were always who you were and will always be who you will be, but we can see behind the façade of who you are now. You are in a similar league of madness as Philip Van Cleave, president of the Virginia Citizens Defense League, who supports lethal 'puppy pistols' for use by kindergarten students, in a similar league as the militia members across the country who seek to bring about the second civil war, in a similar league as the sycophantic evangelical Christians such as Franklin Graham and Jerry Falwell Jr. and Paula White who support Trump as God's 'chosen one', in a similar league as those supporters of QAnon who are fighting the inglorious Satan-worshipping deep state pedophiles in the mainstream media, Hollywood and the political establishment. But continue to pose as a rarified soi-disant intellectual ready to do battle with the cultural Marxists who have infested the American academy with verminous treatises dealing with equality, liberation and justice. You will be protected by Trump's wealthy minions. After all, what could go wrong when you support the man in the Oval Office? What could go wrong when you support God's 'chosen one', when your leader enjoys the status of a popular saint?

Trump awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to the king of hate radio, Rush Limbaugh, during his 2020 State of the Union address. This could not be more revealing of Trump, since it showcases to the world whom he believes deserves the highest civilian honor in the United States. For decades Limbaugh has treated black people as problems instead of people who face problems. He decried as "uppity" black people who become actional through moving beyond the need for white recognition (he accused Michelle Obama of "uppity-ism") and maintained that race riots were part of the Obama regime's plan for the nation. He referred to feminists as Nazis and liberals as traitors. He fomented hatred throughout the country, sometimes by defending slavery, or comparing gay marriage to bestiality, or accusing actor Michael J. Fox of faking Parkinson's disease, or calling toilet water a step up for some migrants, or asserting that the New Zealand mosque shooting was a false flag operation, or maintaining that school shooters vote Democrat, or attacking free school lunches for poor children, suggesting that hungry children should "dumpster dive," or that NASA's announcement of finding water on Mars was part of a climate change conspiracy. When Georgetown University law student Sandra Fluke advocated that employers cover the cost of their employees contraceptives, noting that her friend had an ovary removed because her insurance company wouldn't cover the cost of prescription birth control she needed to stop the growth of ovarian cysts, Limbaugh called Fluke a "slut" and responded: "So Miss Fluke and the rest of you feminazis, here's the deal ... If we are going to pay for your contraceptives and thus pay for you to have sex, we want something. We want you to post the videos online so we can all watch" (Bassett and Bendery, 2012).

So you want to be a saint?

We might want to pause for a moment to consider the phenomena of popular sainthood. How difficult is it to become a popular saint these days? In the US it's available to politicians who, despite acting like reprehensible brutes, are able to give the evangelical churches access to power, which in the long term translates into more money and prestige than they could ever hope to acquire. And not that difficult, if we look south of the border for an example.

It turns out that even Mexican cartel members can be venerated as saints. Back in 2011, just minutes before I was about to give a speech in Morelia, Michoacán, La Familia Michoacana attacked the city, setting more than 40 passenger buses, trucks and cars on fire and using them to blockade the exits from the city. Moreno González, also known as El Chayo ('Nazario' or 'The Rosary') and/or El Más Loco ('The Craziest One'), who headed the La Familia cartel, surrounded the state capital and a two-day shootout ensued that saw 11 people killed. My comrades and I took cover in a hotel amidst the machine gun fire. Moreno González, leader of La Familia and who later went on to head The Knights Templar cartel, was killed by Mexican authorities in 2014, after which time Michoacán natives reportedly began to venerate him as a saint. After all, The Knights Templar cartel, like the Trump administration, is run as a quasi-religious cult. Maria Guadalupe Lopez Esquivel, a leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, and also known by her alias 'La Catrina', was killed on January, 2020, in the municipality of Tepalcatepec, Michoacán, after a shootout with Mexico's army, National Guard and state police. Only 21 years of age, this 'Dame of Death' had thrilled her social media followers by showcasing photos of her in sexy poses while carrying automatic rifles and handguns. Time will tell if she will be venerated as a popular saint. If sainthood is open to a pathological narcissist, serial liar and misogynist adept at murdering foreign nationals, destroying democracy and the rule of law, and betraying our military allies—and also open to a pinup cartel assassin—then sainthood is clearly up for grabs today.

How does Trump expect to maintain his status as a saint? One answer would be: water pressure. Yes, water pressure. Water pressure in Trumpland is equivalent to holy water in the Catholic Church. In a grievously calculated move by a man who is forever beholden to Machiavellian thinking, Trump is reaching into—not the world of golden showers rumored in "opposition research"—but the everyday Home Depot world of shower faucets, dishwashers and bathroom appliances. Trump's base can relax in the thought that Trump will guarantee that their fecal matter will be swept away from their porcelain toilet bowls with the mightiest flushing motion possible, calibrating a seemingly unending swirl that leaves no excrement left behind, their hair and bodies will be soaked like a sponge after only a few minutes in the shower, their dishes will be sparkling clean after thunderous foamy pulses from their dishwasher. He will even throw in the old fashioned light bulbs to boot! But will he give up the secret of his hair gel? All of this takes us back to the 1950s suburban American Dream. Ultimately it's a question of cleanliness, of purity, of white picket fences, of segregation, of bleaching everything as white as possible. And from a sociolinguistic perspective it means getting your message across with working-class directness by using a restrictive as opposed to an elaborative linguistic code (Bernstein, 1971)—and that message in Trump's filthy mouth is unmistakably irascible and racist, tantamount to flushing all those dirty immigrants from shithole countries and from America's skid row tent cities into the sewers of our broken democracy. No more namby pamby drivel from liberals that weakens our military, disrespects our firemen, our law enforcement, our coal miners and our president and which is dangerously attracting our youth to politically correct LGBTQ communities and the lecture halls of the cultural Marxists. No beaming aboard Starship Lolita with Hilary Clinton from the dingy basement of her pizza restaurant sex dungeon, even if Trump praised Captain Epstein's appreciation of beautiful women, many of whom were admittedly on the younger side. The future will be all boots on the ground, not the sound of the Matter-Antimatter Warp Drive and phasers burrowing through rock, but the snap of the pants during the goosetep, the crunching sound of the boot descending upon the face of a foreigner. How

long will it be before the masterful displays of Fourth of July American patriotism echoing unity in difference segue neatly into depictions of fist pumping Trump supporters, the pulsating circuitry of veins in their throats transforming the chant “build the wall” into a crescendo of hatred? How long before reflections of children of different races dancing together in Walden Pond are eagerly replaced by torch bearing neo-Nazis chanting “blood and soil”? Know they not that they have unwittingly screamed for the release of Barabbas over Jesus?

Let’s not lose ourselves in the ideas of those who pervert religious beliefs for their own benefit. And I don’t care how sincere they are. Let’s not give up on science. Take evolution, for example. Present forms of life come from previous forms of life. Humans arose from non-humans. We share a common ancestor with chimpanzees. These are facts, plain and simple. Theories explain facts. We evolved from ape-like ancestors. That’s a fact. Unlike the case of creationism, facts don’t claim absolute certainty. We only partially understand the mechanisms from which facts occur. There are new facts that we can discover to help us better understand how those mechanisms of evolution function. And yes, you can still be a Christian and accept these facts!

Here is a suggestion: Read what liberation theologians say about the Bible—that the Kingdom is realized in the praxis of social justice. There’s much more to it than that, but we can’t lose sight of the condemnation by Jesus of differentiating wealth, i.e., economic inequality. Prevent this lurid cult of Trump from growing stronger and from turning the recent history of the United States into a graveyard of secrets and a companion to infamy, transforming us all into the shadows of the people we once thought we were, or believed that we could become. Study the history of fascism and how it is co-constitutive with religious fanaticism. Square-up to the deceptions of the Trump administration. Work to comprehend the appeal that Hitler had on the German people in the 1930s so that you are able to recognize how charismatic leaders can serve the common good (strengthen our commonwealth) or—with the help of 4chan or Reddit—serve as instruments of obfuscation, deceit, hatred, chaos and genocide. A good contrast to be studied in the seminar room would be the charismatic leadership of trade unionist, socialist and founding member of the Industrial Workers of the World, Eugene Debs, and the dark, fetid charismatic presidency of Donald Trump. The survival of democracy and our basic humanity demands that we recognize this distinction. We cannot afford to live in sinful harmony with Trump’s expiatory self-aggrandizement and festering narcissism. We need instead to create interlaced networks of intracommunal negotiation and coarticulate communal patterns between our classrooms and surrounding communities so that we can critically reenter the vast and uncharted spaces of human sociality and solidarity. We are choking on the carnage that has defined us as a people, and our souls are in peril of being made crusty and scabrous, impervious to all those characteristics and qualities that our crestfallen ancestors had reasoned would, eventually, lead us to rise above the ashes of our inhumanity. We remain nation in decline, clumped upon a planet that is hurtling backwards towards its own prehistory. It is as if our opportunity to make history has been rescinded, until we learn to abandon our white Christian ethno-nationalism, until we face our settler colonial past, until we unlearn the presumptions that define our monstrous indecencies and patriotic cruelties. Our challenge at this moment is to resist the regime that slyly enables all of this before the furious allure of political depravity and the existential barbarity of being that follows in its wake ensures that we will reap the whirlwind. In the meantime it is difficult not to take refuge in the future anterior, in a time that has not yet arrived. It is difficult not to feel nostalgia for a post-Trump social universe that has not yet occurred.

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Notes on contributor

Peter McLaren is Distinguished Professor in Critical Studies, Donna Ford Attallah College of Educational Studies, Chapman University; Chair Professor, Northeast Normal University, China; and Professor Emeritus, University of California, Los Angeles.

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Peter McLaren
Chapman University, Orange, CA, USA
Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China
 mclaren@chapman.edu