

An Attack on All of Us

How the Right Hopes to Use the Shooting in Alexandria

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Those who wish to carry out acts of violence always seek to frame themselves as victims. If they are perceived as victims, this can legitimize the violence they perpetrate, or at least distract from it. So it was a godsend for the far right when James Hodgkinson opened fire in Alexandria on June 14, wounding House Majority Whip Steve Scalise and four other people. It gave them a chance to turn the story around: suddenly “Leftists” were the violent ones. Never mind the millions imprisoned and deported under Scalise’s governance, never mind the police murdering a thousand people a year, never mind the Republicans’ effort to deny tens of millions access to health care, never mind the white supremacist mass murders and stabbings and threats all around the US—those are so normalized as to barely warrant a mention. Yet a single shooting and a Shakespeare production, and suddenly everyone wants to talk about “left-wing violence.”

When Trump supporters shot a demonstrator at a talk by Milo Yiannopoulos on January 20, did Speaker of the House Paul Ryan take the floor to say, “An attack on one of us is an attack on all of us”? Of course not. The *us* he was talking about in yesterday’s speech was not *human beings*, or else we would have heard from him earlier. The *us* Ryan is concerned about is a much narrower group of people: beneficiaries of the power structure, like himself. Ryan’s *us* could mean politicians, it could mean the political and economic elite that Trump epitomizes yet pretends to oppose, it could mean wealthy white men, but it definitely doesn’t mean *everyone*.

Nowadays, most people are desensitized to institutional violence. Drone attacks on civilians don’t shock us. Solitary confinement doesn’t shock us. Many of us are becoming increasingly accustomed to police regularly killing people where we live. But when the people who control and benefit from those institutions are attacked, everyone is shocked—because, irrational as it is, we associate those institutions with our own well-being, even as they strip away our freedom, privatize the resources we once shared, and destroy the natural environment we depend on for life itself.

Most people ignore the violence that is ceaselessly inflicted on those at the bottom of the social hierarchy; yet when violence strikes those at the top of the hierarchy, everyone is outraged. This is fundamental to the American mindset: we identify more strongly with our rulers than with our own neighbors. We don’t want to see the wealth that the capitalist class has harvested from us redistributed because, as we all tell ourselves, one day that could be *us* at the top of the pyramid enjoying it. When Donald Trump, Paul Ryan, and Steve Scalise carry out attacks on people like us, we hardly notice; but we experience an attack on them as an attack on “all of us.”

Escalating to the Right, Rushing to the Center

Hodgkinson does not seem to have been involved in anarchism or “leftist” groups; like countless other ordinary Democrats, he seems to have passed briefly through Occupy and volunteered for the Bernie Sanders Presidential campaign. Nevertheless, both far right commentators and corporate media outlets immediately sought to connect his attack with anti-fascist and anarchist organizing. Their goals are different but complementary.

The far right is trying to use Hodgkinson’s attack to legitimize and catalyze more violence from autonomous right-wing groups. They want to create a siege mentality in which right-wingers will be more likely to join fascist groups or carry out shootings and stabbings. They have no scruples about ruining the lives of those who buy into their propaganda—consider the unfortunate Edgar

Welch, whose credulity enabled them to weaponize him in the pizzagate debacle. The perpetrators of the aforementioned January 20 shooting have been similarly abandoned.

Even though Hodgkinson was apparently seeking to target representatives from the Federal Government, which many on the far right have historically purported to oppose, right-wing pundits have seized the opportunity to demand government crackdowns and even martial law. Only a few days after their Islamophobic “March against Sharia,” the explicitly fascist Daily Stormer used Hodgkinson’s attack as an excuse to call for a “White Sharia.” This makes the symmetry between ISIS and the far right explicit enough. It also underscores a fundamental contradiction in far-right rhetoric and ideology: they simultaneously want to frame themselves as the targets of state repression and as its righteous advocates. In this regard, we can see the cognitive dissonance at the core of their project: they have to see themselves as both helpless victims and all-powerful executioners.

Meanwhile, Democrats and corporate media outlets are taking advantage of this opportunity to bewail the breakdown of “dialogue” and criticize “extremism” of all varieties. It’s hard to imagine anything more “extreme” than attempting to maintain business as usual in this state of affairs, but let’s set that aside for a moment. Hodgkinson’s attack takes place in a climate of widespread anger and disillusionment—not only with Trump, but with the Democrats and with government itself. In this situation, every vested interest of every political persuasion finds it urgent to produce another enemy, a greater danger, to distract a seething populace.

The function of calls to resist “extremism” in this situation is to relegitimize the machinery of the state itself, especially the deep state which has been trying to rein in Trump in hopes of stabilizing neoliberal capitalism for a few years more. The consequences of this rhetoric neatly complement the efforts of the far right: in the US as in France and elsewhere, autonomous far-right groups already operate in a symbiotic relationship with the state. What far-right groups legitimize, the state will ultimately carry out; what the state cannot do, autonomous far-right groups will. A retreat to the “center” from “extremes” functionally serves to advance the far-right agenda, especially under the Trump administration.

Not Shootings, but Revolutionary Social Change

Attacks like Hodgkinson’s are practically inevitable in a time when people’s livelihoods are being destroyed. It certainly wasn’t his taste for Democracy Now! that motivated Hodgkinson to take up the gun; they didn’t even have the guts to report on the J20 arrests until well after the Inauguration, let alone call for shootings. No, it was desperation that drove Hodgkinson, pure and simple.

In perpetuating an unbearable status quo, the authorities are ensuring that men like Hodgkinson have nothing to lose. The resulting gestures of suicidal despair fit into their plan the way that the burning of the Reichstag fit into Hitler’s program: they offer an excuse to ratchet up repression and tension.

Bernie Sanders is missing the point when he decries the violence of Hodgkinson’s attack and argues that only nonviolent activity can bring about social change. There are no hierarchies without violence; accepting a hierarchical social order means accepting and legitimizing violence as a fundamental aspect of our society. The question is not whether to be violent or not, but how to bring about the end of this social order.

If we could organize widely and effectively enough, providing grassroots solutions to the challenges of our time, people like Hodgkinson might have something to live for. Rather than directing suicidal revenge attacks at politicians, they could invest themselves in social experiments that pave the way for new communities, new ways of being. We have to be able to defend ourselves and our projects from the violence of the state and the far right, but our true conflict is not with individuals like Steve Scalise and Paul Ryan—it is with a social order that enables them to gain so much power in the first place. We should aspire to create a situation in which no Trump, Ryan, or Scalise would be able to earn the ire of any Hodgkinson, in which no one would be able to wield so much power over anyone else.

This is not the kind of war that the far right are calling for, pitting different factions and demographics against each other in a zero-sum race to annihilation. It is a revolution, aimed at transforming the ways we relate to each other and understand ourselves. In attempting to bring about a revolution, we will encounter adversaries, but we must not understand them as enemies.

The shooting shows that things are reaching a breaking point. The Left offer only programs from another century, programs that never delivered the freedom and security that they promised us before. The Right have no plan except to maintain the status quo by means of ever-increasing exertions of violence, while the far right is peddling a dystopia of racial and religious segregation, war, and genocide. By contrast, we seek to open up spaces in which to experiment with new, expansive forms of togetherness and belonging. Anarchists, not Trump and his minions, are the true rebels against all the elites of the world and the systems that elevate them to power, and the only ones with a vision of a way of life beyond the impasse to which capitalism and the state have brought us. This is why fascists and the far right miss no opportunity to demonize and attack us.

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