How Militant Is Militant Enough? Democratic Activism, Violence, and a Tragic Vision of Politics

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Abstract: The Storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 took many by surprise, yet mimetic studies had long warned against the powers of leaders that aspire to fascism to turn a mob contra democracy. This essay draws from a genealogy of imma- nent thinkers of mimetic contagion—from Nietzsche to Deleuze, Foucault to Charlie Brooker—to revisit the attack on the Capitol from the perspective of simulations that are false, yet generate all- too-real intoxications in the crowd. It argues that if modernism witnessed the "decay of the mimetic faculty" (Benjamin 1986) we are now witnessing its revival in the digital age—if only because new media disseminate hypermimetic conspiracy theories that go viral online and can be turned to (new) fascist practices offline.

William E. Connolly is a theorist of existential crisis—of the planet, and of American democracy, both of which are threatened by the ascent of Trump and Trumpism. In this essay I focus on Connolly's conceptual- ization of threats to American democracy and whether or not it suffices to address those threats. If not, what might be done to augment it?

One way to frame Trump's threat to American democracy is to examine his vision for the country—and how he plans to realize it— and ask, Is it fascist? The evidence says yes. He aspires to a homo- geneous (White Christian) polity and presents himself as a messianic savior who alone can deliver it. He would redefine the role the mili- tary plays in American society and politics, deploying it to police the southern border and seize, imprison and deport unwanted immigrants by the millions. He considers violence a convenient political tool and has indicated that he might unleash the armed forces to suppress any large-scale public opposition to his agenda. He intends to exact revenge against a vast array of enemies in and out of government, initially focusing on officials who worked to hold him accountable for his coup d'état and other election-related crimes, as well as those from his first term who have publicly stated that he is unfit for the nation's highest office. He has declared the media the enemy of the people and plans to beat the free press into submission and silence. (It is already

working.) He also considers American higher education a subversive threat to the "real" America and is trying to radically reform or destroy it, especially its commitments to critical, independent scholarship and open dialogue and debate. He is purging the federal government— what he calls the deep state—of employees who are not unquestion- ably loyal to him, replacing them with sycophants. In Trump's view, the government does not serve the American people. It serves him, who only serves himself. Trump loves to summon his supporters to mass rallies where he disseminates a wide range of grievances, disin- formation, and MAGA propaganda. Like any good demagogue, he plays on and stokes the anger and resentment of his followers, prom- ising them retribution for their victimization at the hands of corrupt bi-coastal liberal elites. He has targeted vulnerable minorities for persecution and exclusion from public life, trans people perhaps most prominently. Routinely invoking crisis, chaos, and emergency, he promises to reverse what he calls America's historic decline at the hands of his predecessors. He insists the Constitution gives him total control over the country and that, as president, he can do whatever he wants. This includes usurping Congress's power of the purse, thereby neutering it, and rewriting, even negating the Constitution in the process. It includes deconstructing departments and agencies estab- lished by Congress. It includes disappearing people from American streets and sending them to foreign prisons, due process be damned. It also includes defying federal court orders that get in the way of his ambitions. What Trump(ism) aspires to is an autocracy known as Red Caesarism, a post-or anti-Constitutional form of rule that can resur- rect the American republic through dictatorship.1 Thus, he seeks the democratic party's destruction to establish one-party rule. Trump may not (currently) possess shock troops on the street ready to enforce his will through the barrel of a gun like his European counterparts of the 1920s and 1930s, but this difference suggests that Trump embodies a distinctly American brand of fascism.2 Either way, in Donald Trump and Trumpism, American democracy faces a credible death threat.

A TRAGIC VISION OF POLITICS

At least since 1987's Politics and Ambiguity, Connolly has been writing about democracy and the threats it faces: "Democracy is the pride and the hope of modernity. It also contains danger. The danger does not flow merely from forces hostile to democratic institutions. It resides within the ideal itself."3 His thinking on these issues has evolved as the threats themselves have evolved. Of late, Connolly has devoted considerable attention to Donald Trump and emergent fascism. As the trajectories in American politics attest, the very exercise of American democracy coupled with commitment to its basic values may result in its dissolution. One pertinent question is, What can—what must—a democracy do to defend itself to survive in a world hostile to it and remain a democracy worth defending? Insofar as there are no clear-cut answers to this question, it is hardly surprising that Connolly's calls for democratic activism and political militancy on behalf of democracy unfold in conjunction with an appreciation of the tragic possibilities inherent in social and political life. What does such an appreciation entail? Here are two key interrelated components:

1) America is a pluralist democracy in which some constituencies aspire to realize a more just and equal polity while other elements work to subvert and defeat democratization in the name of returning to an exclusive ideal rooted (somewhere, supposedly) in its past. It is America's very success, however partial, in overcoming its problem- atic past that drives reactionary elements to demand lost powers and privileges and target hard-won advances for rollback and elimination.

2) American democracy is a fragile achievement requiring tending and care. Precisely because the greatest threats to it arise from within America and its ideals, it may not be possible to stop right-wing forces from destroying the country they profess to love. Democratic constit- uencies must be ready to take the initiative to defend it, but there are no guarantees of success and there is only so much that can be done to preserve American democracy without also risking its (partial) undoing.

   I would like to add a third component designed to put pressure on Connolly's democratic vision.

3) In certain circumstances, American democracy may need to draw on a darker side to sustain itself. That is, it may have to resort to (seemingly) undemocratic measures to contain, control, and defeat antidemocratic forces and ambitions. This points to an uncomfortable reality that has emerged, or emerged more fully, in American polit- ical life of late. Given American democracy's formidable enemies, Connolly's calls for democratic activism and militant politics might have to exceed the parameters he would like to establish for them— the commitment to nonviolence in particular. Interestingly, it could be argued that Connolly's own analyses and insights suggest a potential openness to political possibilities that he ostensibly resists or rejects. What might prevent Connolly's thinking on violence from evolving? Perhaps it's due to his tragic conception of politics. While he recog- nizes that actions can have unintended, unanticipated consequences that subvert, at least in part, long-standing achievements and aspira- tions, he seems reluctant to affirm such courses of action even if they might also produce good effects. For Connolly, then, the tragic serves as a warning and a limit. It forecloses certain political options because the cost of success, despite the fact that there is always a cost, is deemed problematic or unacceptable. More on this below.

ENEMIES OF DEMOCRACY

American democracy has been under siege since 2015. After four years of repeated Constitutional assaults, Donald Trump was voted out of office in 2020, barely but decisively. Refusing to accept defeat, he declared war on American democracy and on January 6, 2021, orches- trating a violent insurrection to keep himself in power for another four years—at least. Though it failed, his war continued as he sought resto- ration and vindication. Having reassumed the presidency on January 20, 2025, he has escalated it.

With American democracy's future at stake, how should demo- cratic forces respond to Trump and MAGA Republicans? To answer this question, perhaps we need to pose another one first. How should we conceptualize Trump and his supporters? Are they fellow citi- zens pursuing legitimate political objectives, meaning they should be thought of as opponents or adversaries? Or, given their many assaults on American democracy, have they placed themselves in another cate- gory altogether? Are they enemies of democracy? If so, what are the implications? And how might Connolly be of assistance here?

Connolly is a theorist of democratic contestation and agonistic respect. Drawing on Nietzsche's notion of the spiritualization of enmity, he recommends a restrained mode of engagement with "adversaries who exercise reciprocal respect and self-limitation through mutual appreciation of the problematical bases from which they proceed."4 Connolly's agonism operates under no illusions. It extends an invi- tation to others. Not all of them will accept it (or its premises), but "the operative faith in a post-Nietzschean problematic, its generally cheerful pessimism, is that interventions it poses may strike respon- sive chords in some constituencies it engages."5 There are no guaran- tees, of course, but even if you fail now (perhaps because the timing was not quite right), you can always try again later.

Yet, as Connolly knows, sometimes things cannot wait, not with democracy at stake: "Those who resist the pressures of a normalizing society, indeed, must explore what can be done to restrict dogmatic constituencies who strive to repress the very differences upon which they depend for their organization."6 America's ascending fascists are nothing if not dogmatic. How should they be "restricted"? Is restriction, setting limits and exercising control, sufficient? As Connolly notes, this is a "difficult and dicey issue" with profound implications for democ- racy.7 Twenty-two years after The Ethos of Pluralization, from which I just quoted, Connolly writes more explicitly in Aspirational Fascism about what forms restriction might take: We "must sometimes…forge a pluralist assemblage of resistance to unitarian drives to the nation and, above all, to aggressive fascist drives to the internal and external racism of a ruthless, aggressive nation. These latter movements intend to decimate pluralism. Protests, town meetings, electoral campaigns, and, in severe situations, a general strike composed of several constit- uencies are needed here."8

In terms of resistance, this is a good list. But is it enough? Insofar as it is safe to assert that we are in a "severe situation," what other forms of resistance might be needed? For starters, is a fundamental reori- entation to politics required? Does resistance need to be rethought? Does it need to include the possibility of violence? Chantal Mouffe can be of assistance here.9 Her conception of agonism might enable us to glimpse an unthought in Connolly's thinking. For Mouffe, in a demo- cratic political community, opponents are to be treated as adversaries not enemies, which means that their ideas can be contested but their right to defend them is off limits. Questioning the legitimacy of their existence is also off limits. In this agonistic dynamic, the notion of the enemy is not eliminated but displaced.

This agonistic ethic, however, presupposes certain obligations and thus limits. Citizens must "accept the democratic 'rules of the game'" in order to

enjoy the protections they provide. What, then, of those actors and constituencies that ignore, flout, or seek to destroy these rules? How are they to be conceptualized and engaged? On Mouffe's account, those who seek to end the game "thereby exclude themselves from the political community."10 They have rendered themselves enemies, though there is no reason to believe they would agree to or accept such a designation. This means that to defend itself, a democracy would have to exclude them—hence Connolly's suspicion that things will get dicey.

Mouffe's attribution of agency to offending parties is critical. When agonism slides into antagonism, when adversaries render themselves enemies, Mouffe's analysis indicates who will bear responsibility for the shift in identification, and the consequences that may result. These consequences might include the need to deploy violence—in self-de- fense. Most liberals and leftists in the United States, however, seem unwilling or unable to defend American democracy in this fashion. This appears to include Connolly, whose conceptualizations of the general strike reflexively eschew violence. Though this is a principled position, it does not necessarily follow from the logic of his thinking.

Connolly's aversion to violence may be traced, in part, to Rousseau, a longtime interlocutor whose significance to Connolly's thinking have gone unremarked (as far as I know). Rousseau, like Connolly, offers a militant defense of democracy. While appreciating many of Rousseau's contributions to modern democratic thought, Rousseau's militancy isn't among them. For one thing, Connolly's commitments to pluralism render Rousseau's national identity politics uninviting. For another, though he does not address it directly, Rousseau's militant defense of democracy through law would also be problematic. From Connolly's perspective, it would tend to undermine and compromise it.11 More specifically, Connolly would question Rousseau's politici- zation of crime and lethalization of punishment. Nevertheless, while Rousseau is no agonistic democrat, he offers a compelling argument for how a democracy should respond to existential threats—that is, when its citizens become its enemies and endanger it—that remains pertinent in the age of mega democracies. Or so I would like to suggest. Rousseau, Trump, and January 6 Connolly has engaged with Rousseau's thought at least since Appearance and Reality in Politics.12 Rousseau is invaluable insofar as he identifies a number of threats to a democratic community: Free riders; lawbreakers (whom Rousseau calls malefactors); the sovereign people themselves; the government; the (would-be) rich and powerful. While Connolly has intermittently drawn on Rousseau in his own diagnoses of democracy's ills, he does not tend to utilize Rousseau for possible solutions to those ills. Rousseau's militancy on behalf of democracy is fraught with danger, including to the democracy he cherishes. Nevertheless, this may be the occasion to rethink Connolly's otherwise understandable aversion to Rousseau.

Setting the stage for his encounter with Rousseau in Political Theory and Modernity, Connolly writes: "[Rousseau] knows that the modern world intensifies the demand for order partly because it reduces the individual's inclination to accept it."13 To some, Rousseau's moraliza- tion of social and political life seems inapt for the twenty-first century, but he had a keen appreciation for the vulnerability of democratic sovereignty, an achievement perpetually susceptible

to undoing. Not only was it threatened by the self-regarding demands of the private will. It was also subjected to routine assault from another insidious source: “Just as the private will acts incessantly against the general will, so the government makes a continual effort against sovereignty.”14 For Rousseau, this points to the indispensability of civic virtue revolving around the self-restraint of virtuous citizens, where “the best policing is self-policing.” In a polity where citizens give laws to themselves, the “constraints” imposed “are self-imposed” for “purposes self-defined,” which is the definition of freedom.15 When self-policing fails, and citi- zens would enjoy the benefits of membership without contributing to it, the polity is at risk of ruination should this injustice spread. This is when the state must be ready to step in—to force citizens to be free; that is, to live up to the terms of their commitment by enforcing the laws they imposed on themselves and now seek to ignore or evade.16 Rousseau’s democratic state is a militant state, and the law is an expres- sion of its democratic militancy.

Rousseau theorizes democracy’s defense against internal disinte- gration in detail when he discusses lawbreakers in Book II, chapter v of On the Social Contract, tellingly entitled “On the Right of Life and Death.” He lumps all lawbreakers into one broad category: “[E]very offender who attacks the social right becomes through his crimes a rebel and a traitor to his homeland; he ceases to be one of its members by violating its laws, and he even wages war against it. Then the state’s preservation is incompatible with his own, so one of the two must perish; and when the guilty man is put to death, it is less as a citizen than as an enemy.”17 Insofar as Rousseau recognizes violence is neces- sary to found a democratic order, it should come as no surprise that violence might also be necessary to sustain it, in this case through a death penalty.18

As far as Rousseau is concerned, the lawbreaker has no one to blame but himself for his fate. Lawbreaking creates an existential crisis, and the response must be proportionate. Deviations from the law act much like a cancer that can kill the polity before it can be detected— hence the need for the strongest of deterrents at the first sign of trouble. The death penalty for law-breaking and law-breakers, however draco- nian it might seem, is preferable to the death of the community, which would result in much greater evils.

How does Rousseau’s theorization of democratic self-defense relate to Trump’s fascist threat to American democracy? Trump’s first term effectively constituted a “continual effort against sovereignty” and, according to Rousseau, “the usurper of sovereign power is a despot… one who puts himself above the laws themselves.” Trump did not fully succeed, but Rousseau would still classify him a despot, thus a tyrant.19 Trump’s conduct after losing his 2020 reelection campaign, particu- larly his January 6 performance, crystallized his dictatorial ambitions. When he unleashed his mob on the Capitol in a desperate bid to retain power, he not only violated his oath of office to ensure that the laws are faithfully executed. He committed seditious conspiracy and incited an insurrection. What greater political offense can a president commit?20 Trump’s would-be putsch rejected the fundamental democratic norm that there are winners and losers in elections and losers must accept defeat. They cannot overturn election results and negate the sovereign will of a democratic people.

The transfer of power must proceed. If it does not, democracy is done. Trump's January 6 insurrection was tantamount to an act of war against American democracy. Trump betrayed his homeland and rendered himself its enemy.21

To put Trump's crime in perspective, a Rousseauean order would never allow such a figure to run loose and wreak havoc on it in the future (which is precisely what Trump is doing in his second term). "One only has the right to put to death, even as an example, someone who cannot be preserved without danger."22 Rousseau's stance regarding ordinary lawbreaking may be uncompromising, but there was (and is) nothing ordinary about Trump's life-threatening crimes against American democracy. In Rousseau's accounting, his preserva- tion would be incompatible with American democracy's preservation. While the American constitution contains no formal provision for such a democracy-saving measure, it may presuppose an unwritten commitment to one that requires, if you will, a Rousseauean ethic about the sanctity of the law springing into action when institutions fail to protect it. (I return to this theme below.) Pace Connolly, then, despite Rousseau's shortcomings regarding diversity, we may not want to say "good night" to him and leave his thought behind just yet.23

ROLE PERFORMANCES AND EXPERIMENTATION

Connolly's democratic activism and militancy differ importantly from Rousseau's, which conceived of politics one-dimensionally as a capstone requiring minimal public participation and performance by citizens.24 Connolly, on the other hand, explores "the array of roles we perform in life" that help constitute us and the role experiments we might undertake in anticipation of targeted political interventions when called for. Though we are always implicated in relations of power, we should not assume that we are ready to undertake political action whenever the time comes. We need to prepare to put ourselves in the best possible position to engage the political sphere, especially if militance is dictated.25 Connolly addresses a wide range of citizens: students, parishioners, scientists, dissident writers and economists, middle-class consumers, skilled mechanics, Catholic priests, climatol- ogists and tech geeks. He also includes teachers, who might change the content of their courses, redirect some of their "retirement funds to sustainable investments," or become bloggers. Given the fascist tenor of the times, I'd like to add—and think through—another more mili- tant possibility for teachers, one that pushes Connolly's thought in a Rousseauean direction, for Rousseau, too, is a theorist of democratic militancy available to but effectively refused by Connolly.26

Let's say you're a professor on the left living in the western United States. You bring a gun-owning friend to a reading group where the subject of discussion is Carl Bogus's Madison's Militia: The Hidden History of the Second Amendment, which delineates the latter's origins in southern fears of slave insurrections. The second amendment, contrary to recent mythmaking, was not the codification of an individual's right of gun ownership or the people's right to resist state tyranny. Rather, it was a brazen manifestation of white supremacy. Your conservative friend appreciates the history lesson, but notes that he grew up with guns and routinely went hunting when younger. Guns have always been a part of his life,

so he doesn't think much about them. But he does think it's none of the state's business.

Your friend then turns things around and asks if you've ever fired a gun. You respond that you've never even touched one. He suggests it's time. You accept his invitation. He takes you to a shooting range, teaching you how to handle both pistols and rifles. You hate the former and enjoy the latter. You also make "friends" at the range with people from very different social, political, and cultural contexts than yours. They talk about the various fears they have, the anger they feel, and how gun ownership speaks to them. You can't quite relate, but you appreciate their sincerity. This leads you to reflect on your own fears and anger, especially in the aftermath of January 6. You ask your friend for a recommendation and buy a Rossi Rio Bravo 22 LR Lever Action Rifle. It's not (just) a symbolic purchase. You start to relate to gun ownership in a new way. You know that the Right revels in its celebration of violence. They love to parade around dressed in camo with their weapons, especially to intimidate democratic citizens. Amongst themselves they love to say, "we have all the guns." It's not just posturing. You know it's true and you start to think about what it might mean—politically—one day (soon). You think of January 6 and how lucky we (a democratic we) got. You buy a few other items. Gas mask. Baton. Bullet-proof vest. Helmet. You take a self-defense class. Exercise regularly. Change your diet. You understand the need to be not just mentally but physically prepared—for marches, demonstrations, sit-ins, die-ins, occupations, blockades, general strikes.

You learn that a number of groups determined to re-cover the Second Amendment for democratic purposes have formed recently. Pink Pistols. Black Guns Matter. National African American Gun Association. Latino Rifle Association. Socialist Rifle Association. You sense this kind of effort needs to be affirmed, emulated. You converse with friends and colleagues, tossing around ideas for names. Guns in Theory. Theorists with Guns. Poli-Sci Pistols. Is the day coming when democratic citizens will have to defend democracy or see it perish? Some on the Right, including an outspoken Arizona Congressman, believe a civil war has already started, even if the shooting hasn't.27 Moreover, half of Americans anticipate a civil war in the next few years.28 Some on the Right are looking forward to it.29 You believe the Left needs to be ready. Or at least it needs to look like it's ready.

ROLE PERFORMANCES AND EXPERIMENTATION, II

Recalling anti-fascist successes fighting fascism in Europe in the 1930s, your mind again flashes back to January 6.30 You remember watching television in stunned horror as Trump incited the mob he summoned to Washington, D.C., and exhorted them to march on the Capitol, fight like hell, stop the steal, and prevent their country from being taken from them, knowing there is only one way this objective can be accomplished. As the newly minted insurrectionists assaulted the police protecting Congress, you could feel the anger and resentment simmering inside you, and you wondered not only about the reinforcements that did not come. You wondered about another absence. Where

were the American people who believe in democracy and the peaceful transfer of power? Where were the people who knew Trump lost? Where were the people who knew that this was a coup in the making, that American democracy might die then and there? You started to ponder the productive role that resentment could play in politics because of the good effects it can produce.31 It can inspire and mobilize people.

Washington, D.C., is overwhelmingly Democratic. There were 8,000 insurrectionists, 2,000 of whom entered the Capitol, a mere frac- tion of the Democratic citizens in metropolitan Washington. Tens of thousands of democratic citizens, in a pluralist assemblage, could have descended on Washington, D.C., on January 6 to assist the police that were placed in the ironic position of defending democracy. This (un)armed assemblage could also have surrounded the Capitol five or ten deep on January 5, the day before Trump's assault, as a show of strength. If Trump's minions knew they would be met by a much larger force—potentially armed—to oppose them, would they have showed up? You have to wonder.

You also have to wonder what a democratic people might have done the day after Trump's coup. The House did not impeach him until a week later on January 13; his Senate trial did not start until February 9. On January 7, however, enraged citizens could have surrounded the White House and demanded Trump's resignation, even arrest. They might have given him twenty-four or forty-eight hours to comply, providing people from across the country ample time to descend on 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in a show of democratic force. If Trump did not acquiesce, it would have been their obligation to storm the grounds and effect his capture. The White House is well-protected, of course, but security revolves around thwarting isolated, individual threats (someone scaling the perimeter fence, for example), not beating back an embodiment of the sovereign people themselves. There is no defense against this democratic power. The Secret Service could resist, of course, or it could threaten to hand over Trump to the swarm, thereby doing what other institutional players were unable and unwilling to do: make sure he never again poses a threat to American democracy. What would Trump do then?

This might seem fanciful, but then you remember that in the summer of 2022, Sri Lankans, faced with a dire economic crisis and rallying for structural change, demanded that the country's top leader- ship resign their official posts. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa refused to step down. Sri Lankans overcame differences in race, religion, and ideology to unite for the greater good. They constructed a small village outside the presidential palace and occupied it for months. Conditions worsened and crowds grew larger and larger. Given the president's persistent refusal to resign, the protestors finally stormed his office and home. Rajapaksa self-exiled to the Maldives and later resigned.32

THE REBIRTH OF THE GENERAL STRIKE

In Facing the Planetary, Connolly argues that there is "a planetary crisis in the making" and "the situation is urgent."33 In short, "we live in a dangerous time."34 How should democratic forces respond? It is imperative to up "the ante

of militancy against extractive capitalism and the world order it promulgates." The goal: to "resist and overturn it."35 These are fighting words. While it is critical to "accentuate mili- tancy" and pursue "more intense modes of activism," the latter must also be "worthy of attachment."36 These are indispensable tasks in the face of "the Right's extreme agenda" in "an era replete with neofascist potential."37

To combat this potential, Connolly, drawing on the contributions of Sorel and Gandhi, contends the general strike can be "updated and recrafted."38 He appreciates Sorel, but considers "his thinking… limited for the contemporary condition" given his affirmation of violence. He prefers Gandhi, who "teaches us how to act militantly while disciplining ourselves to avoid violence, treating nonviolent militancy as both an intrinsic obligation and a strategic strength."39 Connolly's general strike, then, starts with "a strong presumption" against violence defined as bloodshed.40 He reiterates the injunc- tion against it several times.41 Here the specter of tragedy seems to inform his thinking. He argues that it's vital to maintain a distinction between who you are and what you oppose. You do not want to defeat your cause while advocating for and advancing it. Who knows what damage might be done to democratic possibilities and results if you mirror your adversaries? It's also important to refrain from violence on pragmatic grounds. It would likely provoke a fascist backlash and "they have the guns."42

The pragmatic objection to violence, however, cuts both ways, as Connolly knows. Notice the qualification in the following formu- lations: "You can strike, but you are unlikely to maintain either momentum or integrity if you slide into violence. The slide of one faction of the New Left in Europe and the United States into violence in the late 1960s after a period of initial effectiveness may teach the same lesson."43 The uncertainty in these sentences may explain why there is a strong presumption against violence, but it is not absolute. Moreover, to concede that "they have the guns" actually points to their impor- tance. They can be empowering and decisive in a struggle between antagonists. To disavow guns is, potentially, to disempower yourself. In other words, disavowal cedes to the Right a monopoly on a poten- tially critical mode of agency, which they'd be more than happy to exercise if push came to proverbial shove.

More concretely, what might a cross-regional, cross-country general strike entail? Connolly envisages the construction of barricades, block-ading highways, shutting down factories, and a host of other, more indirect initiatives such as investment strikes and reducing consump- tion practices.44 People refuse to go work. They stop traveling. They alter the way they live.45 These actions may not bring the economy to a grinding halt, but they can cause serious disruption and damage. Such a development might be improbable, which Connolly recognizes, but the key is to do what you can when you have the opportunity. And since opportunities are always opening, you need to make them "live possibilities that speak to the urgent needs of this time."46 Spectatorship is not an option.

Connolly's conception of a general strike puts noticeable pressure on his affirmation of nonviolence. He knows that with or without a public disavowal of violence, the state, perhaps joined by paramilitary forces on the Right, might take the occasion to launch a counterattack.47 What happens next? Does the general strike conclude, or does it defend itself? If it is to end, it's unclear why

it would have been initiated. If it is to defend itself, what might self-defense entail? For example, what preparations can be made to defend the barricades or the factory or university gates? What about the use of violence? Isn't there a differ- ence between violence done in self-defense and violence as a premeditated act of unwarranted aggression? If military and police come with helmets, shields, gas masks, and clubs, does the general strike do like- wise? This might lead to bloodshed, but isn't defense of the barricades, including through violence, part of the logic of constructing them in the first place? If not, does a credibility gap open between a diagnosis of the fascist tenor of the times and the response designed to redress it? To refuse the general strike the option of violence may amount, in the end, to a form of anticipatory obedience.48 It's as if you have effec- tively announced that the strike is ultimately conceived as a symbolic statement, which signals your weakness in advance. Simultaneously, it affirms the state's monopoly on violence. What's more, if the state already knows your limits, such knowledge can be used against you in at least two ways. One, it reassures the state that whatever collec- tive power the general strike might represent is likely limited and temporary and can be safely ignored or weathered. Two, it emboldens the state to take harsh(er) measures by giving it a sense of impunity since the cost of violence will be paid by only one party to the conflict. Either way, the mystique of the general strike, one of its key elements, has been lost. It's one thing for a general strike to fail without having achieved its goals. It's another thing for it to fail without having given it every chance to succeed.

What happens, then, if and when the nonviolent general strike fails? What's the next move, the fallback plan? Connolly doesn't address this outcome. He appears unduly determined to avoid the tragic possibility that democracy may find itself in a position where, to defend itself, it has to mimic its enemies. Following Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Connolly's starting point seems to be that it's always better to be the recipient than the perpetrator of violence, but when democracy itself hangs in the balance it is not clear why this position is necessarily pref- erable. It looks suspiciously like nobly living with defeat in the name of retaining the moral high ground—a decidedly untragic ethic.

THE POSSIBILITY OF VIOLENT RESISTANCE

If crisis and urgency predominated in 2013 and 2017, the publication dates of The Fragility of Things and Facing the Planetary and Aspirational Fascism, things have only worsened since as neofascist potential comes to fruition in the United States.49 Does this development call for a change in political calculations? If so, might such a shift be part of the tragic condition in which we find ourselves? Does Connolly's diag- nosis of the contemporary fascist condition, adjusted for recent devel- opments and anticipating those to come, call for a militancy greater than or different from what he has affirmed or would like to affirm so far? Insofar as the general strike needs to be rethought and recrafted, perhaps the same is true for the commitment to nonviolence? As Connolly notes, "in a world of tragic possibility there is no guarantee that the need to act will be matched in fact by timely action."50 There is also no guarantee that the action

taken, even if timely, will be suffi- cient. This seems the likely fate of a general strike the parameters of which are too tightly drawn in advance of its enactment.

The idea behind the possibility of democratic violence is not to indulge what Connolly calls "macho tactics," but, first, to signal the fierce seriousness of ascending fascism and the need to do something about it post-haste, and second, to coerce more democratic outcomes otherwise not forthcoming. Connolly is not wrong to fear a violent backlash, but it might trigger its own backlash if the state loses control and the bloodshed it inflicts is unduly gruesome. In the tragic aftermath of such a sequence of events, there might be a broader social and political reckoning, including about the state's monopoly on violence and the farcical insistence that violence has no place in American democracy when it is violence-laden.

Connolly himself offers an example of such reconsideration. In 2013 he posted a short piece in The Contemporary Condition about a little- known, little-watched film, The East. It depicted a group of environ- mental militants deploying creative forms of violence to right wrongs and bring a modicum of justice to victims of corporate predation in a world where the state has been captured by corporate forces and no longer serves the people it is duty-bound to protect. The film presented several scenarios in which violence of various kinds and degrees was shown to be justifiable and effective—if not perfectly so Connolly both appreciates and (gently) rebukes the eco-warriors of The East. He is concerned that they "slide too close to the adversaries they oppose and pursue some actions that are apt to backfire under the glare of publicity." But they never do become their enemies and some of their actions prosper when made public. Connolly also considers them "invaluable prods" or "spurs." He concludes, tentatively: "They are, perhaps, the Antigones, Nat Turners and John Browns of today."51 A fascinating list of figures associated with resistance and militancy, especially Turner and Brown, who differ from Antigone in at least one notable respect: They each turned to violence. Connolly neither extols nor glorifies them, but does secure them a place in his pantheon of activists, thus complicating his relationship to violence. Turner and Brown not only deployed it with righteous ruthlessness; they demon- strated that strong cases can be made for the necessity of violence in politics. Neither may have succeeded in achieving his immediate goal, but each made a vital contribution to slavery's ultimate eradication by bringing the country closer to accepting the terrible truth that it would take violence—in this case, a war—to destroy it.

HOW DEMOCRACIES DIE

What I see as an instability in Connolly's reflections on nonviolence is on full display in his late 2018 engagement with Levitsky and Ziblatt's influential How Democracies Die.52 While appreciative of their efforts to sound the alarm on "the contemporary threat to America," Connolly argued that their critical study didn't go far enough. There are "deeper sources" of the threat in Trump's drive toward fascism that go unmentioned, including neoliberal capitalism. How Democracies Die, not unsurprisingly, tends to focus on electoral politics, which "are absolutely critical to democracy," but also insufficient. Social move- ments

need to be incorporated into resisting Trumpism. Connolly is also concerned about the temporality of Levitsky and Ziblatt's anal- ysis. Indeed, democracies may "die slowly," but Connolly argues that "we now face rapid aspirational drives toward fascism." He wrote this before two (failed) impeachment trials, the first of which could have removed Trump from office and barred him permanently from returning. Writing over two years before January 6, Connolly argued, "we are living through an attempt to assassinate democracy."53

What should pro-democracy forces do if institutional efforts to defeat Trump fail? "My own sense is that… concerned citizens need to foment a nonviolent, general strike."54 This would involve work stoppages, street demonstrations, "flooding town halls," and lobbying high-placed public officials. Connolly hopes it doesn't come to this, but if it does, is the proposed response commensurate to the threat identified, especially an empowered second-term Trump unchained by the Supreme Court? Or is there a discrepancy between analysis and remedy, as mentioned above? For example, wouldn't it be possible for Trump simply to outwait a nonviolent general strike? Or, if that scenario seems fanciful, what if Trump invokes the Insurrection Act and deploys the military to crush it?

Connolly concludes with positive words about "resist[ing] efforts to assassinate democracy," but this language, in particular its bloody imagery, is striking—and unusual for Connolly. More importantly, it poses a conceptual challenge. Connolly may have been reaching for a resonant metaphor in 2018, but the phrase takes on new and added meaning in the wake of January 6, 2021, and November 5, 2024. When democracy is under violent assault, what range of options becomes available? Don't the terms of the analysis implicitly legitimize the use of lethal violence, especially insofar as it would be a matter of self-de- fense? This appears to be a case of an analysis authorizing forms of opposition that exceed the limitations formally placed on them. Connolly may insist on nonviolence, but this does not render violence illegitimate. What's more, in the opening days of Trump's second term, "assassination" attempts against democracy have resumed and multi- plied, especially against the Constitution, which Trump seems to think he can rewrite with executive orders.

As if taking Connolly's analysis to heart, twelve days before the 2024 election Levitsky and Ziblatt made a last-ditch attempt to expand their thinking, exploring American democracy's defenses against fascist threats from within.55 The most effective response they iden- tified was their version of militant democracy, deploying the state to repress antidemocratic forces. Regarding Trump, this would have meant using Section III of the 14th Amendment, which bars ex-public officials who have "engaged in insurrection or rebellion" from holding national office. The Supreme Court, however, arbitrarily negated this possibility. When all else fails, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, it is left to civil society to act. Mirroring Connolly's commitment to nonviolence, they write, "influential groups and public leaders" must raise their voices in opposition. This approach, however, seems to be a classic case of much too little, far too late. Interestingly, they might have reworked and combined these two options and proposed a militant social move- ment, but perhaps, for them, this is too much democracy from below. Either way, their discussion of militant democracy is, historically speaking, narrow and "excludes" even raising the possibility of the ultimate

militant measure, tyrannicide, though it is an honorable part of the republican political tradition dating back to ancient Rome and Caesar when the latter attempted to make himself king. This option is of course unthinkable to them, at least publicly, even though logi- cally the ultimate form of exclusion would not be banishment, as they imagine, but death.

A QUESTION OF NECESSITY

Where do these brief reflections on militancy leave things? Unlike Trump and his henchmen, who revel in affirmations of political violence, democratic constituencies might find themselves invoking it out of necessity as Trump's destruction of American democracy proceeds apace.56 As of mid-March 2025, the country's political insti- tutions have proved powerless to neutralize Trump. At best, they have presented minor obstacles and annoyances.57 More often, they have enabled and facilitated him. There is a real possibility, then, that the country will stand by and watch its democracy die rather than deploy the final republican sanction against him, even though it was built into the constitutional fabric of the country by its vaunted founders.58

NOTES

1. The Supreme Court's ruling in Trump v. United States, granting him immunity from criminal prosecution for official acts, greatly facilitates such an outcome. On Trump's post-Constitutional rule, see Jason Wilson, "'Red Caesarism' is rightwing code—and some Republicans are listening," The Guardian, October 1, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/01/red-caesar-authoritarianism-republicans-extreme-right; Jonathan Swan, Charlie Savage and Maggie Haberman, "If Trump Wins, His Allies Want Lawyers Who Will Bless a More Radical Agenda," The New York Times, November 1, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/01/us/politics/trump-2025-lawyers.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare; and Damon Linker, "Get to Know the Influential Conservative Intellectuals Who Help Explain G.O.P. Extremism," The New York Times, November 4, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/04/opinion/sunday/conservative-intellectuals-republicans.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare.

2. Trump may not control organized shock troops (yet), but the Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, and Three Percenters, among others, would answer his call in an instant. When Trump pardoned roughly 1500 insurrectionists who tried to execute his coup d'état in 2021, he signaled to his (most extreme) loyalists that they, too, are above the law. Trump's de facto paramilitary forces are ready for—would even welcome—armed rebellion and bloody civil war on his behalf, either to put or keep him in office or to implement some aspect of his agenda. Right-wing militia groups, for example, have already volunteered to serve on the southern border to hunt immigrants and carry out his deportation plans. My thinking here is indebted to David Runciman, "Is Donald Trump a fascist?" The Guardian, 21 September 2024; Jan-Werner Müller, "No, Trump is not a fascist. But that doesn't make him any less

dangerous," The Guardian, October 29, 2024; and Robert O. Paxton, "I've Hesitated to Call Donald Trump A Fascist. Until Now," Newsweek, January 11, 2021.

3. William E. Connolly, Politics and Ambiguity (University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 3.
4. William E. Connolly, The Ethos of Pluralization (University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 29.
5. Connolly, The Ethos of Pluralization, 29.
6. Connolly, The Ethos of Pluralization, 89.
7. Connolly, The Ethos of Pluralization, 89.
8. William E. Connolly, Aspirational Fascism: The Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy under Trumpism (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 74. See also, 78.
9. The point here is not to initiate an engagement between Connolly and Mouffe, but to use Mouffe to facilitate a deeper exploration of Connolly's own internal struggle regarding democratic politics and violence.
10. Chantal Mouffe, The Return of the Political (Verso, 1993), 5.
11. See, for example, The Ethos of Pluralization, 137-138, 165-166, on the violence constitutive of Rousseau's democracy.
12. William E. Connolly, Appearance and Reality in Politics (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 101–102, 108–109, 118, 183–184.
13. William E. Connolly, Political Theory and Modernity (Basil Blackwell, 1988), 41.
14. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, On the Social Contract with Geneva Manuscript and Political Economy, ed. Roger D. Masters, tr. Judith R. Masters (St. Martin's Press, 1978), 196.
15. Connolly, Political Theory and Modernity, 58, 57.
16. Rousseau, On the Social Contract with Geneva Manuscript and Political Economy, 55.
17. Rousseau, On the Social Contract, 65.
18. Rousseau, On the Social Contract, 110.
19. Rousseau, On the Social Contract, 98.
20. Rousseau reinforced the need for capital punishment in the penultimate chapter of On the Social Contract. From a Rousseauean perspective, given "the sanctity of the social contract and the laws," which Trump swore to uphold, he put himself in harm's way on January 6: "If someone who has publicly acknowledged [the law's sanctity] behaves as though he does not believe [it], he should be put to death. He has committed the greatest of crimes: he lied before the laws." Rousseau, On the Social Contract with Geneva Manuscript and Political Economy, 65, 131.

21. Trump, proudly, considers himself a lawbreaker—in his case in the mold of Billy the Kid, Jesse James, and Al Capone, each a social parasite, cold-blooded killer, and even a sociopath. Matthew Schmitz, "Trump Embraces Lawlessness, but in the Name of a Higher Law," The New York Times, May 2, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/02/opinion/trump-trial- 2024-election.html.

22. Rousseau, On the Social Contract, 65.

23. Connolly, Aspirational Fascism, 82.

24. William E. Connolly, Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming (Duke University Press, 2017), 126; Rousseau, On the Social Contract with Geneva Manuscript and Political Economy, 108.

25. The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism (Duke University Press, 2013), 182, 183.

26. Facing the Planetary, 127.

27. Luke Broadwater and Matthew Rosenberg, "Republican Ties to Extremist Groups Are Under Scrutiny," The New York Times, January 29, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/29/us/republicans-trump-capi- tol-riot.html.

28. Jared Gans, "Half of Americans expect a civil war 'in the next few years,'" The Hill, January 21, 2022, https://thehill.com/blogs/blog- briefing-room/3569350-half-of-americans-expect-a-civil-war-in-the- next-few-years/#:~:text=Researchers%20from%20the%20University%20of,soon%2C%20while%2047.8%20percent%20disagreed.

29. See Stephen Marche, "The next US civil war is already here—we just refuse to see it," The Guardian, January 4, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/04/next-us-civil-war-already-here-we-refuse- to-see-it; and K.K. Ottesen, "'They are preparing for war': an expert on civil wars discusses where extremists are taking this country," The Washington Post, March 8, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2022/03/08/they-are-preparing-war-an-expert-civil-wars-discusses-where-political-extremists-are-taking-this-country/.

30. See Mark Bray, Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook (Melville House, 2017), See Stefan Dolgert, "The praise of ressentiment: or, how I learned to stop worrying and love Donald Trump," New Political Science, 38:3, 354–370.

31. Sam Cabral, "Sri Lanka's anti-government protests have gone quiet— for now," BBC News, Colombo, January 8, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-64142694.

32. William E. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 130, 124.

33. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 129.

34. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 121, 122.

35. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 122, 128, 122.

36. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 123.

37. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 130.
38. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 131.
39. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 132.
40. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 131, 132, 135, 146, for example.
41. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 146.
42. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 131, emphases mine.
43. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 132.
44. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 144.
45. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 147.
46. Such a response might actually become less feasible if the left were well-armed.
47. See Timothy Snyder, On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century (Crown, 2017), 17–21.
48. Snyder, On Tyranny, 161.
49. Snyder, On Tyranny, 149.
50. William E. Connolly, "'The East' and Corporate Terrorism," The Contemporary Condition, https://contemporarycondition.blogspot.com/search?q=Connolly+2013+The+East.
51. William E. Connolly, in "A Discussion of Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's How Democracies Die," Perspectives on Politics (16):4 (December 2018): 1095–1096.
52. Connolly, "A Discussion of Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt," 1095- 1096.
53. Connolly, "A Discussion of Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt," 1095- 1096.
53. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, "There Are Four Anti-Trump Pathways We failed to Take. There Is a Fifth," The New York Times, October 24, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/24/opinion/democra- cy-defense-us-authoritarian.html?searchResultPosition=1.
54. See, for example, Jamelle Bouie's piece on the prospect of near-civil war triggered by Trump's post-election mass deportation plans. Bouie, "Trump's Taste for Tyranny Finds a Target," The New York Times, May 24, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/24/opinion/trump-deporta- tion-immigration-border.html?searchResultPosition=2.
55. On May 30, 2024, Trump was convicted in a Manhattan court on thir- ty-four felony counts of falsifying business records. Though this was an election interference case, that is, a crime against democracy, Trump can still run for and hold office. Following—and because of—his reelection, he received no punishment.

56. The framers, after much debate, adopted an impeachment mechanism to remove rogue presidents from office. At Franklin's suggestion, they included this device in the Constitution to make assassination unneces- sary and keep violence out of politics. If, however, impeachment failed to produce the correct result, if, for example, a guilty president was acquitted despite the evidence, assassination remained a failsafe, the ulti- mate guarantee against executive tyranny. See Steven Johnston, Radical Republicanism: Tyranny and Tyrannicide, American Style, manuscript in progress.