

On the 'Hodor Effect' Paralyzing the US Left



Anna Curcio, militant scholar and coordinator of [Commonware.org](#), interviews Alvaro Reyes of the Workshop for Intercommunal Study about Charlottesville, white supremacy, and contemporary challenges for politics in the US. [Original [at Commonware](#) in Italian and [at CounterPunch](#) in English]

Anna Curcio: Could you briefly explain the events that took place in Charlottesville and help put them in context?

Alvaro Reyes: As some of your readers may know by now, on August 11 and 12, an alliance of some 500 white supremacists and neo-Nazis marched through the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, in what they called a “Unite the Right” rally. They gathered to protest the planned removal of a monument of Robert E. Lee, the general that led the slave-holding confederate states’ army during the U.S. civil war. “Unite the Right” organizers have since hailed this rally as the largest gathering of white supremacists in decades.

In response, many hundreds of antifascist counter-protesters also converged on the city to repudiate what they rightly denounced as “racist terror.” On the afternoon of the 12th, James A. Fields, a neo-Nazi associated with the white supremacist group “Vanguard America,” attacked the antifascists by plowing his car into the crowd (a tactic that we now know right-wing organizations had been promoting online for the last few months), injuring 35 people and killing 32-year-old Heather Heyer, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America.

Fueled by anger over Heyer’s death, people across the country have since demanded that confederate monuments be removed from their cities. On Monday, August 14, here in Durham, North Carolina, protestors took the streets and pulled a statue of a confederate soldier off its pedestal, bringing it crashing to the ground. The very next day, the Baltimore city council voted unanimously to take down all confederate monuments. The demand for the removal of confederate monuments has spread like wild fire across the country and has grown to target a whole array of monuments dedicated to figures involved in slavery, Native American genocide and the massacre of Mexicans in the United States, and even

monuments from the more recent past. A substantial movement for example has emerged demanding the removal of the statue honoring Frank Rizzo, the Police Commissioner and Mayor of Philadelphia from the late 1960s to the early 1980s who was notorious for terrorizing Black and Latino Philadelphia with a 'shoot first ask questions later' approach throughout his time in office.

It is important, I think, to note that for both the fascist and antifascist forces, the struggle over these monuments is not just about the way that history gets told; it is about two different visions of what we should do regarding the extraordinary level of racism present in the country today. The fascists point to these monuments as a reminder of the white supremacist foundations upon which the United States was built and argue that these foundations fully justify calls for the incarceration of Blacks, the criminalization and deportation of Latino migrants, and the exclusion of Muslims. Meanwhile, the antifascist forces point to these monuments to argue that unless we deal with the foundational nature of white supremacy in this country - a white supremacy, it must be remembered, that served as a direct if rarely mentioned inspiration for Hitlerian fascism - we cannot adequately explain the contemporary growth of racist extremism. In other words, it is as if it's only at the moment when the global conditions of possibility for that project called the United States are rapidly disappearing that everyone is forced to see that project for what it was.

Do you think that events of Charlottesville and its aftermath constitute a turning point in politics in general and racial politics more specifically in the U.S. today?

It may sound cliché but I think the answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, we have certainly not been accustomed to the level of organized neo-Nazi violence that we saw in Charlottesville and in that sense, it changes the forces that we must now consider as part of the national political equation. On the other hand, I think it is a mistake to believe that there has been some sudden and sweeping upsurge of neo-Nazi organizing since Trump's election, which is how this situation has often been portrayed in the media. The truth is that these extreme right-wing groups have been growing slowly but surely since September 11, 2001, and those who have been following this growth were not surprised at all by what took place in Charlottesville. And despite the fact that we have to take their growth seriously, we must also recognize that in a country of 323 million people, any movement that can only muster 500 adherents for a national convergence is a movement with an extremely limited operational capacity. If we don't pay attention to this fact, then the overwhelming media coverage these events have received may very well make us think that there is already a neo-Nazi around every corner, creating a sense of panic and paralysis that, at this point, is out of proportion to the dimensions of this particular problem.

This is not, however, to understate the threat that white supremacy poses to U.S. society.

Quite to the contrary, my point is that by overstating the threat of organized neo-Nazi violence we risk missing how the more mundane operations of a structural white supremacy have, since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, proliferated within the mainstream political parties (Democrats and Republicans) to such an extent that it is nearly impossible to imagine that either party could survive any serious reckoning by U.S. society with white supremacy. If there is a “turning point” at all, I think it is to be found here, and we must think of the events in Charlottesville within this context.

But I want to pause here and give specific examples of the key role played by mainstream Republican politicians in sustaining this more structural white supremacy. For the last forty years, they have been appealing to white voters in the suburbs of the country’s major urban centers by promoting an all-out tax revolt against the city-centers. After desegregation, middle and upper income white residents fled to the suburbs, creating a crater-sized hole in the capacity of cities to raise tax revenue. The loss of revenue was compounded by de-industrialization that emptied the city-centers of job opportunities. This created a particularly toxic situation in which there was a concentration of extremely marginalized economic subjects confined within cities that had little to no resources to help them meet their needs. Instead of explaining the origins of this “urban crisis” and white suburbanites’ own complicity in its creation, the Republican party for decades promoted the entirely delusional and racist narrative amongst its white voters that the condition of these city-centers was due to the faulty moral character of the Black and Brown residents that by that time made up the majority of those cities. According to Republican propaganda, by asking for State and Federal funds to alleviate this situation, these Black and Brown urban residents were now unjustifiably reaching into the pockets of productive white professionals - in effect, stealing - in search of the money that their faulty moral character would not allow them to make through hard work. Thus, although often avoiding explicitly racial references, the Republican party was absolutely central in creating and circulating the myth of the “undeserving poor” - a mass of Blacks and Latinos portrayed as criminal “thugs” and “welfare queens” freeloading off hard-working whites.

Now, this might seem like a distant and rather schematic historical account, but I think it’s essential to understand both the re-emergence of explicitly white supremacist organizations and the parallel swell of racist extremism that found a voice in the figure of Donald Trump. To see this connection more closely, we need to revisit a debate that immediately followed the election of Trump. On one side, there were those who insisted that Trump’s victory had been due to his ability to use his speeches to acknowledge the anxiety created by deteriorating economic conditions across the country. Others argued that such an explanation downplayed the fact that it was Trump’s explicit appeal to racism that motivated a large part of his base to forgo other more mainstream candidates and vote Trump. The fact is that both of these arguments miss entirely the specific effects of the history I have just briefly outlined.

That is, thanks to 40 years of mainstream Republican propaganda regarding the “undeserving poor,” for a sector of the U.S. white population today, there is no “economy.” There is only a structure of conspiratorial parasitism that posits our current social decomposition as a consequence of the fact that their own hard labor is being feasted upon by a swarm of ‘others,’ a horde of shiftless Black and Brown bodies violently demanding unearned handouts (Trump’s “Mexican rapists”, “Muslim terrorists”, and Black “inner cities”), a situation they believe can only be solved by the elimination of these others from the scene. In other words, this sector of the white population has been carefully trained to read the social decomposition created by the contemporary involution of capitalism as one and the same as an alien attack on white (and particularly male) society. In the United States then this is how, for this sector of white society, what might otherwise be understood as the consequences of a “class war” are instead channeled into a “race war” that only gains valence as the collapse of contemporary capitalism deepens. After Charlottesville, every major Republican figure was quick to denounce both Donald Trump for his thinly veiled endorsement of the Unite the Right Rally and the neo-Nazi organizations that had gathered there. What these Republicans don’t acknowledge is that the well of racial resentment that they helped dig has finally taken on a life of its own, making them largely irrelevant, providing Donald Trump with his core political base, and now threatening to swell into organized fascist violence.

Ok, but you also seem to want to claim that the Democrats were just as complicit in this exacerbation of structural white supremacy as the Republican, is that right? But how can we square that idea with the fact that the Democrats were the ones behind the first Black president of the United States?

That’s right, it is an entirely counterintuitive proposition and it has been very difficult for people here in the U.S. (and nearly impossible for people abroad) to understand that the Obama phenomena and his administration fit into a larger pattern of the Democratic Party’s role in exacerbating structural white supremacy, the dramatic results of which we are now living through. On the one hand, the Obama presidency was undoubtedly the product of a long civil rights era that had sought to break down the rather explicit forms of white supremacy that had barred Black people from political office through organized participation in the Democratic Party. In this respect, the civil rights movement was incredibly successful—consider the fact that in the mid-1960s there were some 600 elected Black officials in the United States and that by the time of Obama’s presidential campaign there were over 10,000!

What we must take into account is that the Democratic Party, whose mildly reformist agenda had been built in dialogue within labor unions and the civil rights movement, had by the time of Obama’s rise transformed into a party whose sole purpose is the monological administration of capitalist collapse (i.e. “neoliberalism”). Yet, with such a strong Black

presidential candidate, the Democratic Party was able to (temporarily) evoke the affective charge of the battle against explicit white supremacy and its historically reformist alliances at the very moment it was enthroning the neoliberal narrative regarding the ongoing capitalist crisis. That did not last long, however, and as soon as it became apparent to the public that the Obama administration would in no way challenge the preset automatism of the neoliberal agenda, the Democratic Party at every level entered into its own free-fall implosion, losing 17 governorships (53% of their seats), 13 U.S. Senate seats (22% of their seats), 61 U.S. congressional seats (24% of their seats), and at least 960 seats in state legislatures across the country by mid-2017 (24% of their seats).

But in order to understand how this shift within the Democratic Party actually exacerbated structural white supremacy at the very same time as it created opportunities for Black and Latino politicians, we need to examine it in the context of the urban fiscal crisis I discussed above in relation to the Republicans. Due to the fact that the Republican's electoral base became increasingly suburban, it was left almost exclusively to the Democrats, and more often than not Black mayors and Black and Latino majority city councils, to manage the major urban centers. Here the Democratic agenda was at first an attempt to fight the suburban tax revolt and demand increased state and federal resources for investment and jobs. When this was not successful, the Democrat party began to slowly turn on its urban base by adopting a two-pronged strategy to rid themselves of the concerns of this electoral base (knowing full well that within the two-party system these Black and Latino residents had nowhere else to go). On the one hand, Democratic administrations in cities across the country looked to increase revenues by handing city policy over to real estate developers and the financial industry in hopes of large infrastructural investment that would lead to "revitalization" (i.e. gentrification) and therefore increase the possible tax pool. On the other hand, they looked to put an end to public housing, transportation, schools, and parks that might allow for the continued presence of low-income Black and Latino residents in the city centers.

This toxic mix came to a head during 2008. Due to systematic discriminatory predation, many Black and Latino families were given subprime mortgages that forced them and many others into default. This, when added to the continued upward pressures on rents and property values due to gentrification and the destruction of public resources, led to an absolute collapse of Black and Latino wealth and the mass migration of Black and Latino residents out of the metropolitan areas. Here the public image of "racial progress" touted by the Democratic Party generally and Black and Latino politicians in particular runs up against a brutally grim reality. For example, consider that the racial wealth gap today is far worse than it was 30 years ago: that Black and Latino communities lost between 30% and 40% of their wealth in the late 2000s; that median Black household wealth is less than 7% that of white household wealth; and that if you are a single woman of color your median total wealth is a grand total of five dollars! Larger and larger portions of these communities

have been transformed into “surplus populations” with little or no relation to the increasingly financialized global economy, and contained by swelling police forces and disproportionately warehoused in the prison system.

In other words, the policies of the Democratic Party have been the key mechanisms for the mass-displacement, dispossession, and thus continued racial subjugation of Black and Latino communities—for the exacerbation of structural white supremacy. Some might claim that the Democratic Party had little choice but to implement these policies given the changing nature of the capitalist economy. I would like to point out, however, that these larger, structural changes did not make the Democratic Party some passive victim. To the contrary, they became infinitely adept at glorifying these changes as some sort of progress and simultaneously blaming Black and Latino communities for their condition. Consider in this regard the Clinton-manufactured narrative of Black and Latino “superpredators” who demanded repression not solidarity, or Obama’s vision in which these and other social problems were not due to a capitalist economy gone mad but to resistance to that economy, what he called “the excesses of the 1960s.”

Yet, I would claim that this strange marriage between Black and Latino politicians and the neoliberal agenda dominant within the Democratic Party is also culpable in the re-emergence of explicit white supremacy in that today, if you attempt to raise the issue of the death-driven dynamics of contemporary capitalism, as for example Bernie Sanders tried to do in the most mild-mannered fashion, the issue of “race” is weaponized against you. That is, if you dare mount a critique of the neoliberal agenda of the Democratic Party, you are immediately accused of not caring about “race” or “racial inequality,” which the Democratic Party apparently does care about since it is today home to thousands of Black and Latino politicians. Given the influence that the Democratic Party has on the media and even the University system, this effectively becomes a bar to the discussion of the dynamics of capitalism at the very moment when that conversation is so obviously needed. The outcome is that within mainstream discourse, the sole “coherent” explanation for the destructive effects of contemporary capitalism that is circulated on a large scale is the eliminationist imaginary of the extreme right wing that I explained above. This situation became obvious during the last presidential election where, once the Democratic Party had done everything possible to eliminate Bernie Sanders, the options were between the explicitly racist explanations of the crisis offered by Trump (“Make America Great Again”) or the absolutely delusional statements on the part of Hillary Clinton that there simply is no crisis (“America is Already Great”).

Since Charlottesville, Donald Trump has made some troubling statements that basically amount to an endorsement of the “Unite the Right” rally. It is obvious that throughout his campaign he made innumerable racist statements, but what do you think that his link is to these more organized and explicitly neo-Nazi groups? Why does he seem to refuse to

denounce them?

Yes, in fact Donald Trump went so far as to say that there were some “very fine people” that participated in the “Unite the Right” Rally. He has most definitely refused to condemn these organized fascist groups and since Charlottesville has gone on a bit of an offensive himself. He has insisted on defending the racist monuments around the country and just a few days after Charlottesville, chose to hold a campaign-sized rally (some 15,000 people) in which he went on at length about the dangers of immigration and the necessity to “build the wall” between the United State and Mexico. In addition, he surprised everyone by going so far as to pardon Sheriff Joe Arpaio, a brutal racist who was convicted for illegally targeting Arizona residents based solely on race and who made a name for himself nationally by keeping prisoners and immigrant detainees in outdoor prisons where they were known to have been beaten and left to die.

One has to wonder why Trump, after being criticized for his tacit endorsement of the neo-Nazis in Charlottesville, would come out and double down on his relation to explicit racists. From my perspective, Trump realizes that his administration is being penned in as both his global and domestic agenda are increasingly dictated by the mainstream of the Washington establishment. He is also very aware that this isolation is likely to lead to an investigation of his long-term involvement in money laundering that may very well end in a criminal prosecution. I am increasingly convinced then that Trump realizes that it is his extreme racist middle-class base that he can actually rely on, and that this base is not likely to be swayed to the contrary by either Democrats or Republicans. In other words, it seems more and more likely that he will continually pump his racist base with ever more scandalously racist remarks and policy for the foreseeable future so that he when the time comes, he can use them as an insurance policy of sorts against the establishment: “if you try to get rid of me, I’ll light the match on this powder keg.” This is where I see the real danger over the next few years—although this is not a reality today—that through Trump, that sector of the electorate that has shown so much sympathy to his racist statements might very well begin to build formal links to those organized fascist groups that Trump is currently doing everything to normalize.

We’ve talked about the Republicans, the Democrats, Trump and this small group of neo-Nazis, but what about the movements on the left? What about Black Lives Matter? There must be an enormous amount of social energy that is not captured by any of these elements? Where are they? Are any interesting proposals coming from these groups?

Yes, absolutely. It’s amazing to watch how the discontent with all of these options is absolutely palpable and, I would say, even constitutes the dominant feeling in the country. Despite appearances, there has been no massive shift to the right. Even at the level of electoral politics it is important to remember that had it not been for the decision made by

the Democratic Party and its donors that they would rather lose the presidential election with Hillary Clinton than win it with Bernie Sanders, we would today very likely be talking about the possibilities and limitations of “socialism” (which for Sanders clearly means nothing more than the welfare state) rather than the endorsement of neo-Nazis by the White House. In fact, even today Bernie Sanders is by far the most popular politician in the U.S., with approval ratings almost double that of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton (who, even after nearly nine months of the catastrophe that is the current administration, is still more unpopular than Donald Trump). We also have to take into account that in response to these neo-Nazi rallies there have been enormous crowds around the country denouncing racism, with *Antifa* contingents ready to physically confront the fascists if necessary, and overall outnumbering the right-wing extremists to such an extent that these hate groups have had little choice but to not show up for or even cancel their own events. All of this must be added to the very strong after-effects of the uprisings in Ferguson and Baltimore that powerfully questioned the direction this society is headed and led to a whole wave of activism around the brutal effects of policing and incarceration on Black communities.

All of this is very promising, with each of these instances creating waves of excitement and rounds of street protests, but nevertheless leaving one with the very distinct and ominous impression that none of this has been able to in anyway cross, let alone slow down or stop, the process of social collapse. It seems to me that in the U.S. (as in much of the rest of the world), we are in the depths of something I like to refer to as a collective “Hodor effect” (after the character from *Game of Thrones*), where at a deep level we have understood the enormity of the task that lies before us (i.e. the creation of an affirmative alternative before the snowballing collapse created by the structural impasse of capitalism engulfs us all), while on a daily basis we seem mired in paralysis, involving ourselves again and again in practices that simply aren’t up to what’s required of us by the situation. Nevertheless, the hope is that for us, like Hodor, that paralysis is also the sign that when the moment arrives, we will collectively do what needs to be done.

Of course, unlike *Game of Thrones*, we cannot simply wait for this to be true. We must work to make it true and in that sense we need to analyze, situation-by-situation, how each of the openings mentioned above might become dead ends. For example, on the one hand, the Bernie Sanders phenomena has clearly opened up capitalism as an object of critique on a mass scale in this country like never before in my lifetime. On the other hand, it has led to a lot of people, money, and energy being redirected into the political party that has shown no other interest than to absolutely crush Sanders and marginalize his base. Or, on the one hand, the rise of *Antifa* has importantly brought to consciousness the increasing necessity of organized forms of self-defense as neo-Nazi organizations gain cohesion. On the other hand, being against Nazism is a rather low political bar that is likely to lead us right back into bed with the forces that got us into this mess. In addition, there is a growing segment of people on the left who, absent affirmative political alternatives, reduce politics to physical

confrontation. This is a dangerous proposition in an age in which the State, having lost legitimacy and capacity in so many other arenas, would like nothing more than to “solve” problems in the one arena that it still clearly easily dominates—violence. Finally, on the one hand the revolts in Baltimore and Ferguson shook the consciousness of the country in a way that left the foundational and ongoing anti-blackness and racism of this society exposed for all to see. On the other hand, these uprisings have given life to a new generation of well-connected Black activists (more than a few that have been involved with Black Lives Matter) who have turned to electoral politics and are likely to become the new life-blood of a moribund Democratic Party at the local level. Even today you can hear many of these “Young Democrats” exclaiming that the Obama years constituted some type of golden age or at the very least an era of “progress.” Of course, this perspective leaves one with little to no explanation for why these revolts occurred nearly at the end of Obama’s second term. Could it be instead that these revolts were an act of rage and despair from communities who, having expectations heightened by the rise of a Black president, came to understand that the promise of Black political inclusion has little to no relation to them?

Time and again, the U.S. Left remains absolutely obsessed with resolving our situation by changing the politicians. It seems that our job on the left today then must be to broaden the discussion to show that the depth of the abyss that we have entered makes changing politicians rather beside the point. We must instead insist on changing politics; we must insist on an affirmative vision capable of creating some coherence out of the mass of discontent by insisting that life beyond capitalist collapse is immediately practicable. If we do not move beyond imagining that the administration of this collapse, no matter how diverse, is the best the Left has to offer, then we as a Left (of all races) in this country will share responsibility when the exacerbation of structural white supremacy continues to spill over, in greater and greater numbers, into organized fascist violence.