

ANTON JÄGER

## HYPERPOLITICS IN AMERICA

**S**PEEDING THROUGH REAGAN'S America for a Tocquevillian travelogue on 'the only remaining primitive society on earth', Jean Baudrillard noted a paradox about US power in the late 1980s. 'America no longer has the same hegemony', yet 'it is, in a sense, uncontested and incontestable.' Presaging the unipolar moment that would follow, he claimed that 'American power does not seem inspired by any spirit or genius of its own', but rather 'works by inertia.' If the US originally possessed the features of power, was it now 'at the face-lift stage?' Or was it rather entering a phase of hysteresis—the process by which something continues to develop by inertia, whereby an effect persists even when its cause has disappeared? For Baudrillard, this was the real crisis of American power—'a potential stabilization by inertia, of an assumption of power in a vacuum', much like 'the loss of immune defences in an overprotected organism.'<sup>1</sup>

Baudrillard offered two explanations for this. The first was the absence of dependable adversaries. The US had been more powerful in the two decades after 1945, but so too were the ideas and passions ranged against it: 'There is no real opposition anymore; the combative periphery has now been reabsorbed (China, Cuba, Vietnam); the great anti-capitalist ideology has been emptied of substance.' The second explanation was endogenous—a loss of inner dynamism: 'But here again, though it seems quite clear the American machine has suffered something like a break in the current, or a breaking of the spell, who can say whether this is the product of a depression or of a supercooling of the machinery?'<sup>2</sup>

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Surveying the American political landscape of 2024, Baudrillard's diagnosis seems prophetic. There are enemies everywhere now—from Tehran to Moscow to Beijing; not to mention Palestine's embattled

defenders in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq—but scant recovery of a ‘spirit or genius’. Despite its continuing stature as world hegemon—a formal empire stretching from Okinawa to Guam, via Ramstein and Incirlik; unchallenged control over the global reserve currency; the most influential culture industry and most powerful armed forces in human history—the costs of America’s faltering machine have become acutely clear. The assorted patch-ups for the malaise—globalized cheap labour, bottomless household debt—began to come unstuck in 2008; the next round of fixes—QE, near-zero interest rates—fuelled a housing crisis while channelling funds to tech monopolies and the super-rich.

Over the past decade, the country’s political scene has undergone a series of spectacular convulsions, with the two parties and electorates seeming to drift ever further apart. Despite America’s unrivalled dominance on the world stage and continued cultural magnetism, Democrats and Republicans now find it nigh impossible to cohabit the same political space. In recent presidential contests, key postulates of liberal democracy—legitimate oppositions, peaceful handovers of power, constitutional continuity—appeared up for grabs. Extra-parliamentary mobilization, on the streets and in the courts, was egged on from on high; the anti-Trump Resistance matched by the Occupiers of January 6; the battery of legal cases against the 45th President by prosecution of the hapless son of the 46th. ‘Stabilization by inertia’ has eroded American elites’ capacity to buy consent from their population—and from each other.

Since Andrew Jackson’s 1828 election in the first direct presidential vote—after which electors were allowed to hold a cookout in the Oval Office—American politics has been marked by a compound of demotics and plutocracy. In 2024, a late-modern rendition of this amalgam was delivered with flair, yet not without a tinge of paranoia absent in previous presidential cycles, and clouded by a sense that the US has increasingly lost its grip on political developments at home and abroad, symbolized in a head of state whose mental capacity was a matter of conjecture.

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The past year has provided its own perpetuation of the turbulence. Presiding over an inflationary economy slowly cooling down and an

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *America*, London and New York 2010 [1988], pp. 126–8.

<sup>2</sup> Baudrillard, *America*, pp. 126–7.

international order bursting at the seams, Harris and Biden's Democrats sought to consolidate a transversal bloc to stabilize their grip on American power in the coming decade and put the world economy on track for a green transition. In the meantime, the GOP fully acquiesced to its Bonapartist drift: a hollowed-out party, more business cartel than mass outfit, was colonized by Trump operatives blusteringly prepping themselves for regime change. The party conventions were showcases: WWE wrestlers and country stars pledging to physically shield their candidate from harm at the RNC, Georgia rappers counting down to state announcements at the DNC; Sun Belt frat boys for Trump, Ivy League poetesses for Harris.

The social anatomy of the two parties reflects the shifting tectonics of American political economy in the 2010s, stuck between the supposed imperatives of green re-industrialization and those of on- and off-shore fossil-fuel production; inflation-fighting and continued demand for the dollar as the world's safest asset. Two blocs have coagulated around this complex. On the one hand, a cross-class, carbon-intensive coalition is grouped around Trump and his cronies, mostly purged of GOP neo-conservative stalwarts, and trading suburban conservatives for peripheral blue-collar workers, along with rural petty bourgeois, exurban middle management, real-estate capitalists, crypto merchants, Silicon Valley's right-wing and steel producers who survived the *laissez-faire* onslaught of the 1980s. By contrast to the coalition that Reagan assembled, Trump's is denuded of white college graduates but buoyed up by degreeless whites.<sup>3</sup> It benefits enormously from the anti-majoritarian features of the American Constitution and relies on voter suppression both formal and informal for its mandate. Its mobilizational capacity is now cushioned by a Ford-like tech tycoon who hopes to use Trump to guarantee his access to state funds, while some labour leaders have warmed to a newly revisionist right in the party formally interested in co-determination schemes and collective wage bargaining.

On the other side stands a broad-tent Democratic Party which seems to have redefined the very notion of 'inter-class'. Sociologically, the DNC now houses urban professionals, left-liberal activists, civil-rights veterans, intelligence operatives and every faction of American capital from Palo Alto 'progressives' to Wall Street *haute finance*. A visitor to this year's National Convention in Chicago noted that it now acts as the party of labour and of capital; the party of debtors and of bankers; the party

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Karp, 'Party and Class in American Politics', NLR 139, Jan–Feb 2023.

that mocks the Ivy League but is largely run by Ivy Leaguers; the party of anti-monopolists and of Silicon Valley; the party for immigrants and for border security; the party of insiders and of the marginalized; the party of the football team and of the sorority; the party of family and of freedom; the party of ceasefires and of the war machine; the party that opposes fascism but abets a genocide.<sup>4</sup> That even-handedness needs correction, though: bankers and war-mongers predominate in Democrat ruling circles, the indebted and the marginalized among its rank-and-file. Perhaps the nearest comparison would be an inverted Peronist developmental bloc, with the industrial proletariat left out and finance capital firmly in the saddle over its manufacturing counterpart.

## 4

At face value, the current American political scene offers a marked contrast to the cycles of quiescence in the 1990s and early 2000s. Then, journalistic brouhaha over sex scandals and election fraud papered over the growing retreat from public life initiated by the American population. Turnout fell to 49 per cent of the voting-age population in the presidential election of 1996. Three years later, as Clinton handed a presidential medal to Rawls as ‘perhaps the greatest political philosopher of the twentieth century’ who had ‘helped a whole generation of learned Americans revive their faith in democracy’, popular disengagement was reaching levels reminiscent of the early Jim Crow and Progressive era.<sup>5</sup> Now, however, workplace and community associations were dissolving in the acid of deindustrialization and triumphant market logic. Always an instantiation of imperfect party competition, the American duopoly was becoming an effective example of *non*-competition; the semi-sovereign people, as political scientist Elmer Schattschneider had once termed them, were increasingly non-sovereign.<sup>6</sup> In conditions of convergence, culture wars alone offered a simulacrum of rivalry. ‘Politics’, historian Charles Maier notes about American political culture in the 1990s, ‘seemed so satisfactory that the country could occupy itself

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<sup>4</sup> Christian Lorentzen, ‘Not a tough crowd’, *LRB*, vol. 46, no. 17, 12 September 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Clinton, ‘Remarks by the President at Presentation of the National Medal of the Arts and the National Humanities Medal’, Washington DC, 29 September 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Mair, ‘Ruling the Void’, *NLR* 42, Nov–Dec 2006; citing E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America*, Chicago 1960.

with the pressing issue of whether the apparent genital pleasuring of its president by a White House intern constituted “sex” or not.<sup>7</sup>

This post-political quietude persisted into the early 2000s. As Perry Anderson noted in a reflection on the 2000 election, the illusion of choice between presidential contenders hid the rigidity of the consensus underlying the contest. Gore’s loss of the Presidency had ‘predictably given rise to partisan legend depicting it as an unprecedented theft of the popular will, ushering in a regime of the direst social and political consequences.’ Yet to Anderson there was ‘every reason to take a coolly sceptical view of both claims’; ‘the gap between Gore and Bush’, after all ‘was modest’, while a ‘Left that adopted [the myth] exposed itself as a frightened dependency of the Democratic establishment’, unable to think outside of the two-party norm.<sup>8</sup> As Anderson reiterated on the eve of Obama’s election, ‘partisan conflict and ideological tension are now much more intense [in the US] than in Europe’, not due to increased social conflict but to ‘America’s schizophrenic value-system—a culture combining the most unbridled commercialization, with the most devout sacralization, of life: “liberal” and “conservative” in equal extremes’, with ‘scarcely any relevance for opposition to capital.’<sup>9</sup>

## 5

A short quarter-century later, some co-ordinates of the portrait offered by Anderson now appear explicitly out of date. With the fall-out from the financial crisis marking a clear turning point, protests on the campuses and in the streets have seen a spectacular uptick. The Black Lives Matter demonstrations after George Floyd’s killing in 2020 ranked as the most numerous instances of public protest in national history, with the January 6th mobilization against Biden’s inauguration another peak. Electoral participation rose, too. In November 2008, as Wall Street teetered on the brink, turnout reached 57 per cent of the voting-age population. In 2020 it hit 61.5 per cent, the highest proportion of Americans to cast a vote for a presidential candidate since 1900.

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Maier, *The Project State and its Rivals: A New History of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, Cambridge MA, 2023, p. 317.

<sup>8</sup> Perry Anderson, ‘US Elections: Testing Formula Two’, *NLR* 8, March–April 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Perry Anderson, ‘Jottings on the Conjunction’, *NLR* 48, Nov–Dec 2007.

Political emotions have become not only more heated but more tenacious. Compared to the speed with which uproar over the Supreme Court's ruling for Bush Jr. on the Florida recount in 2000 subsided, supposed instances of democratic backsliding—whether from the right or the left—are now the subject of sustained indignation. Another metric of high feeling: the frequency of presidential assassination attempts this past season has already outpaced all campaigns in the last four decades. There were three in the late-nineteenth century—Lincoln in 1865, Garfield in 1881, McKinley in 1901—followed some sixty years later by Kennedy and the failed shot at Reagan in 1981, the last on record. In the last two months, two attempts have been made on Trump's life, a clear indication of the choice matrix which American citizens discern in the coming election. Polarized, paranoid, zero-sum, American political life now outstrips much of Europe in terms of voting tallies and popular involvement, as well as cultural partisanship. Consent to the ruling order can no longer be taken for granted.

Yet in other important respects, the essentials of Anderson's analysis have stood the test of time. Both parties are still committed to preserving American hyperpower abroad, with minor inflections in modality. Varieties of marketization still characterize the political offerings: on the Democrat side, a transfer state stimulating ecological investment through subsidies and profit guarantees; tariff walls and tax cuts for the Republicans. The term 'party' is perhaps too flattering for these loose coteries of elected officials, donors, publicists and would-be candidates, with no formal membership models and little to no civil-society infrastructure, except for NGO personnel. The GOP and DNC are better understood as para-state vessels that have changed remarkably little since their description by Engels in 1891:

Nowhere do 'politicians' form a more separate, powerful section of the nation than in North America. There, each of the two great parties which alternately succeed each other in power is itself in turn controlled by people who make a business of politics . . . We find here two great gangs of political speculators, who alternately take possession of the state power and exploit it by the most corrupt means and for the most corrupt ends.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, after ten years of political turmoil, levels of civic membership and associational density that characterized the era of mass politics have barely recovered from the historic nadirs to which they dropped

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<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Engels, 1891 Postscript to Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*.

in the 1990s. For fledgling social movements operating in debt-driven service economies, the solidarities of the online world remain an insufficient replacement for those of community and workplace.

## 6

Predictably, this situation has initiated a frantic round of historical analogizing by the coastal intelligentsia. To analysts, the United States is experiencing its own Weimar moment, a return to the Gilded Age, teleporting back to the early Nixon era, or reliving the Old World's Wars of Religion. Some dominant strands can be sifted here. Since Trump's *éclat* in 2016, a host of historians and sub-intellectuals have prophesied the country's tendential slide into fascism. Stories about terrorized Springfield residents, increased paramilitary activity and exterminationist rhetoric usually make up the argument in question, with the Proud Boys as a return of *Freikorps* militancy and a party cadre dedicated to Project 2025.<sup>11</sup> Trumpism here presents a contemporary iteration of a far-right threat indigenous to the previous century.

The comparison lacks obvious bite on many fronts. Most of all, it suppresses one of the key elements of any far-right threat throughout the twentieth century: the presence of a left on the verge of a revolutionary breakthrough. Even in the most conventional analyses offered in the Third Period, fascism had to be understood on a dual timeline: an inability of bourgeois classes to stabilize their rule after the Great War, and an increasingly militant proletariat vying for state power. Caught in this limbo, ruling elites invited the parties of frustrated veterans to step in to solve the deadlock by smashing the anti-capitalist threat; fascism expressed both the resolution and repression of the revolutionary intermezzo. None of these features apply to the contemporary American case. What does the fascist heuristic accomplish, then? Its main consequence is to rally the disaffected left behind their lesser-evil capitalist masters—as if Biden's crimes paled to nothing beside the not-dissimilar ones of Trump.

A more telling analogy is the suggestion that the us is experiencing a 'second Gilded Age'.<sup>12</sup> At the time, party polarization prevailed over

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<sup>11</sup> Alberto Toscano, 'A Fascist Spectre is Haunting America', *In These Times*, 16 October 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Matt Karp, 'The Politics of a Second Gilded Age', *Jacobin*, 17 February 2021.

an extremely unequal economy in the midst of the Second Industrial Revolution. There are some similarities to be traced. In recent interviews, Trump has himself intimated the extent of ‘McKinley-like tariffs’, hoping to protect the steel sector against global overcapacity, while a devaluation of the dollar has now been weighed as an option. In the same era, a populist insurgency from outside the party steered it in a different direction, seeking to loosen the money supply. Then as now, the Democrats were seen as a predominantly inflationary coalition, in favour of decoupling from a repressive gold standard, while the Republicans stood out as a deflationary bloc bent on maintaining the nation’s industrial developmental trajectory.

There, the analogies quickly end. Rather than a digital outfit with loosely co-ordinated actors, Populism grew out of a co-operative farming movement that had already achieved a foothold across the South and Midwest; only after much delay were they forced into co-optation with the Democrats. This frontier peasantry sought to launch itself into corporate modernity. The era was one of rising rather than stagnating American power; US steel production had already overtaken Britain in the 1890s; mass immigration was at an all-time high. The machine, as Baudrillard might have said, was just revving up.

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None of those parameters are applicable today. Rather, the contemporary situation presents a recalcitrant hybrid, difficult to relate to historical exempla. On the one hand, popular involvement in American politics has seen a relative resurgence compared to the disengagement of the 1990s and early 2000s. At the same time, institutionalized involvement is at all-time lows, while American parties have only further cartelized and fused with the media or donor classes.

How best to describe the result? Some formalization is possible here: a politicization axis, on one hand, measuring degrees of mobilization, and a social axis, measuring degrees of civic affiliation and membership, on the other. Plotted on these, the first line—an aggregate of turnout, protest activity, political assassination—shows a marked uptick in the wake of the 2008 credit crunch. At the same time, this upward sloping curve is crossed by a downward-sloping line: a continuous decline



of indices tracking civic engagement. Throughout the recent ‘decade of protest’, the secular decline in American membership organizations only accelerated; unions, clubs, associations, political parties and now—spectacularly for American life—churches continued to lose members, exacerbated by the rise of a new digital media circuit and tightening labour laws, and compounded by the ‘loneliness epidemic’ that metastasized out of the actual one of 2020.

The result is a curiously K-shaped recovery: while the erosion of American civic life proceeds apace, the country’s public sphere is increasingly subject to convulsive instances of agitation and controversy, from storming of government buildings to online conspiracy theories. General discontent runs high, fuelling political emotions; anger at police racism or Zionist violence—at immigrant crime or Chinese weather balloons—boils over.

Here the concept of ‘hyperpolitics’—a form of politicization without clear political consequences—may prove useful. Post-politics was finished off by the 2010s; the public sphere has been repoliticized and re-enchanted, but on terms which are more individualistic and short-termist, evoking the fluidity and ephemerality of the online world. This is an abidingly ‘low’ form of politics—low-cost, low-entry, low-duration, and all too often, low-value. It is distinct both from the post-politics of the Clintonite 1990s, in which public and private were radically separate, and the traditional mass politics of the twentieth century, always low in the US. What Americans are left with is a grin without a cat: a politics with only weak policy influence or institutional ties.

If the hyperpolitical present appears to reflect the world of social media—with its curious mix of activism and atomization—it can also be compared to another amorphous entity: the market. As Hayek noted, the psychology of planning and mass politics were closely related: politicians would bide their time over decades; Soviet planners read human needs across multiple five-years plans; Mao, keenly aware of the *longue durée*, hibernated in rural exile for more than twenty years. The horizon of the market, however, is much nearer: the oscillations of the business cycle offer instant rewards to participants. Today, politicians wonder whether they can launch their campaigns in a matter of weeks, citizens turn out to demonstrate for a day, influencers petition or protest with a tweet.

The result is a preponderance of social-media ‘wars of movement’ over institution-building ‘wars of position’, with the primary forms of political engagement as fleeting as market transactions. This is more a matter of necessity than of choice: the legislative environment for durable movement-building remains hostile, and American activists must contend with a vitiated social landscape and an unprecedentedly expansive *Kulturindustrie*.

## 8

Beneath such structural constraints lie questions of strategy. While the internet has radically lowered the costs of political expression, it has also pulverized the terrain of radical politics, blurring the borders between party and society and spawning a chaos of vaguely mandated online actors. What Hobsbawm called ‘collective bargaining by riot’ remains preferable to post-political apathy.<sup>13</sup> Without formalized membership parties, American protest politics is unlikely to return us to the ‘super-political’ 1930s. Instead, it may usher in postmodern renditions of *ancien régime* peasant uprisings: oscillations between passivity and activity trailing presidential media cycles, without reducing the overall power differential within society. Hence the K-shaped recovery typical of the 2020s, distinct from the late twentieth-century landscapes surveyed by Anderson and Baudrillard.

The ‘long decade’ of protest can then be recast less as a successful assault on the Washington citadel from below but rather as a mutation in the methods of managing elite-mass relations. The solution to the 2008 crisis of massively over-leveraged financial institutions—pumping the stock exchange and asset prices—further widened the gap between top and base across American politics, as between capital fractions. Yet it has not tilted the social gradient, and popular oversight over the apparatus of government remains weak.

This presents the chequered board on which the new political surge has been played out. The world hegemon’s public sphere has been reoccupied, yet the burst of re-politicization has not increased popular control

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<sup>13</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, ‘The Machine Breakers’, *Past & Present*, vol. 1, no. 1, February 1952.

over government nor put important areas of policymaking within grasp. The spectacular mismatch between output and input, which American political scientists had long diagnosed—public support for a proposal (for instance, Medicare) being negatively correlated with its chance of being implemented as a policy—has only deepened, as the Biden–Harris record shows.<sup>14</sup> Spraying money at America’s misfiring machine—\$8 trillion under Trump, another \$6 trillion under Biden—combined with proxy wars and re-shoring (‘a foreign policy for the middle class’), produced a hectic spurt that saw real wages fall far behind prices for food, fuel and housing, the gains in headline GDP growth going disproportionately to the top 20 per cent. Two-thirds of American households report living ‘paycheck to paycheck’, while 57 per cent found the higher borrowing costs under Biden especially hard.<sup>15</sup>

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A morphology of American political culture *anno 2024* then appears in contrast: neither the mass politics of the 1890s–1960s, nor the post-politics of the long 1990s. Behind the current conjuncture lurk strategic questions which American left-wing thinkers were keener to tackle in the 2010s, when the question of surrogate parties, dirty breaks, or left-wing caucuses maintained a constant relevance. Today, very few of these still stand on the mental radar of the left-circuit. As Tim Barker has noted, leading figures of the American left have maintained a highly Oedipal relationship to the Democrats. On the one hand, it is the party somehow uniquely responsible for a resolution to Israel’s punishment campaign, while on the other, it has long served as hallowed institutions of elite Zionism and the Cold War security state.<sup>16</sup> Ironically, the result of the extra-party assault of the 2010s has been to tighten the hold of the DNC as the horizon of the American left. Heightened political emotions can also be captured by party cartels.<sup>17</sup> After a decade of experimentation

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Gilens, ‘Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness: Who Gets What They Want from Government?’, *Princeton Government Working Papers*, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Karen Petrou, ‘Bidenomics has a mortal enemy, and it isn’t Trump’, *NYT*, 16 November 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Tim Barker, ‘False Hopes’, *NLR–Sidecar*, 27 September 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Lorentzen, ‘Not a tough crowd’, on the 2024 DNC: ‘I have attended four previous political conventions and I have never witnessed a crowd so much in love with politicians or so ecstatic about expressing it.’

with semi-independent party activity, a Squad that still sees itself as an anxious battalion for a better Democratic Party is the main remnant of America's left-populist wave.

The American rendition of hyperpolitics is not necessarily dysfunctional for the country's ruling order. What it presages for the next four years is mostly more of the same: extra-parliamentary challenges, legal contestation, high political emotion—and, just as under Biden, promulgation of a bipartisan agenda that can pass a gridlocked Congress. Internationally, this means material support and legal cover for Israeli expansionism and proxy war on Iran, an aggressive stance towards China and proxy war with Russia, waged with a roughly bipartisan degree of ambivalence. Domestically, it suggests an ongoing aggressive-permissive policy on the southern border, continued tensions around state-governed abortion policies and further tweaks to the tax code. Hysteresis *à la* Baudrillard may have a long way yet to run.