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Border trouble: Capitalism, preventative counter-reform, and the immigration rhetoric of the U.S. Democratic Party

Kłopoty na granicy: kapitalizm, prewencyjna kontrreforma i retoryka imigracyjna Partii Demokratycznej w Stanach Zjednoczonych

Abstract

This article analyzes President Biden's 2024 executive order banning asylum for undocumented immigrants, along with other similar examples of U.S. Democratic Party rhetoric, as emblematic of a latent fascist stance within the ostensibly liberal Democratic Party. Employing Alberto Toscano's conception of *late fascism*, I contend that the border rhetoric of U.S. Democrats has long evinced a fascist discourse that uses the supposed threat of the immigrant body to retrench the conditions of capitalism. As I argue, this political disposition, rather than representing an overt challenge to Donald Trump and the increasingly xenophobic GOP (U.S. Republicans), has brought the parties into alignment and helped inaugurate a new era of ascendant nativism and racist violence.

Artykuł analizuje rozporządzenie wykonawcze prezydenta Bidena z 2024 roku, zakazujące ubiegania się o azyl przez imigrantów nieposiadających dokumentów, a także inne podobne przykłady retoryki Partii Demokratycznej USA, traktując je jako przejawy ukrytej faszystowskiej postawy w ramach pozornie liberalnej Partii Demokratycznej. Wykorzystując koncepcję *późnego faszyzmu* Alberta Toscano, autor argumentuje, że retoryka graniczna amerykańskich Demokratów od dawna przejawia cechy dyskursu faszystowskiego, który wykorzystuje rzekome zagrożenie ze strony imigrantów do utrwalania warunków sprzyjających kapitalizmowi. Jak wykazano, taka postawa polityczna, zamiast stanowić bezpośrednie wyzwanie dla Donalda Trumpa i coraz bardziej ksenofobicznej Partii Republikańskiej, przyczyniła się do zbliżenia obu ugrupowań i zapoczątkowała nową erę narastającego natywizmu oraz przemocy na tle rasowym.

Key words

fascism; neoliberalism; democracy; border; immigration
faszyzm; neoliberalizm; demokracja; granica; imigracja

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In recent years, the U.S. Republican Party (GOP), has adopted an increasingly xenophobic and nationalistic political posture. Since claiming the House, Senate, and Presidency in the 2024 elections, the GOP under Donald Trump announced a sweeping set of reactionary, anti-immigrant measures including a planned mass deportation initiative (Rojas 2025) and an effort to end birthright citizenship (Fritze 2025). But while the policies of the Party have been terrifyingly extremist, the American Democratic Party has also long been guided by a similarly xenophobic political outlook, particularly with respect to immigration policy. On June 4th, 2024, Biden signed an executive order temporarily declaring economic refugees who had illegally crossed the U.S. border ineligible for asylum (Martínez-Beltrán 2024a). President Biden's executive order employed the same law that Donald Trump had instituted in 2017 when banning immigrants from several Muslim countries and in 2018 when he similarly barred undocumented immigrants from applying for asylum (Martínez-Beltrán 2024a). Indeed, Biden's border strategy, coupled with other reactionary positions and policies of the administration, prompted critics to allege an ideological affinity between the Democratic Party under Biden's leadership and the GOP (Perlmutter 2024), with some critics going so far as to level the charge of fascism against the Democrats. Writing for *The Intercept* on June 5th, 2024, Natasha Lennard maintained that Biden's conservative border policies reproduce decades of bipartisan "border fascism." Such assertions, and the demonstrably illiberal policies they critique, raise questions about the nature of fascism in the context of the U.S. Democratic Party's political discourse and about the public function of fascist rhetoric more broadly. To date, Ryan Skinnell (2022), Nathan Crick (2022a, 2022b), Stephen J. Hartnett (2022), and others in rhetorical studies have sought to link contemporary fascism to the past, tracing

elements of fascist rhetoric from its interwar emergence to the contemporary GOP. Such a critique, however, generally glosses how fascist arguments come to be articulated by political actors not explicitly affiliated with the far-right. As such, many in rhetoric have missed opportunities to attend to the scope, variance, and depth of fascism as a contemporary political, and neoliberal, modality. In this assertion, I follow political theorist Zeynep Gambetti in the contention that "we must stop thinking of fascism as a political configuration at odds with (liberal and neoliberal) forms of power" (2020, 4). Rather, she argues, we must "try to discern the subterranean forces that reconfigure our modes of being in the world" (Gambetti 2020, 4).

In this article, I approach the border rhetoric of the American Democratic Party through a conceptualization of fascism significantly divergent from that of mainstream rhetorical theory and, indeed, from dominant academic discourse. Instead, I build upon a robust, though largely neglected, strain of leftist criticism attuned to fascism's complementarity with capitalism. This critical perspective arguably begins with Max Horkheimer's (1989, 77) charge from "The Jews and Europe" that "whoever is not willing to talk about capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism". For Horkheimer, capital turns to fascism to resolve its essential contradictions. In his view, the two cannot be bracketed from one another but, rather, must be understood as coterminous. A further intervention in this conversation is 1977's *Fascism and Dictatorship* by sociologist and philosopher Nicos Poulantzas, a work that seeks to understand fascism not as an abstract ideology but as inseparable from capitalist imperialism. As Poulantzas argues, imperialism is not limited to a set of discrete economic activities "such as monopoly concentration, the fusion of banking and industrial capital into finance capital" and so on but, rather, a comprehensive political and ideological system following from these conditions (1974, 19-20). Alberto Toscano (2023) is the latest critic in this lineage, developing a theory of fascism as a radical intensification of illiberal and dictatorial tendencies imbedded within neoliberalism, a "second-order or reflexive affirmation of neoliberalism's authoritarian underside" (2023, 72). Unbound to a specific historical context, fascism, per Toscano, is undergoing an extended emergence, a "*longue durée*" (2023, x).

In this analysis, I employ Toscano's construction of fascism as a capitalist modality to respond to Gambetti's (2020) call for a conceptualization of fascism responsive to its current expression. I specifically utilize Toscano's controversial reading of fascism as a "potential" (Toscano 2023, 51) within capitalism—unmoored from mass pageantry and the party form—that attempts to retrench capitalism through demonizing the body of the racialized (and, at times, classed and sexed) Other. With Toscano, I contend that this form of fascism primarily

operates by way of *racial panics* that demand violent *preventative counter-reform* (2023, 113), a form of preemptive repression enacted on the body of the Other to shore up capitalism's operation. In this argument, I align with the contention that the logic of empire animates U.S. border policy *irrespective of party* (Chávez 2024). As Karma Chávez argues, the logic of empire in the U.S. "assumes both a particular and necessary character of the U.S. nation-state and that the preservation of that unique and exceptional character is central to our present and future safety, and to the maintenance of the entire globe" (2024, 655).

In what follows, I apply the above definition of fascism to illuminate the xenophobic undercurrent in U.S. Democrats' neoliberal border rhetoric, recasting this discourse as a class of fascist argumentation, one that does not merely seek to deter mass illegal immigration but, rather, to instigate panics around the racial Other to protect American capitalism. In this claim, I notably subscribe to Naomi Klein's (2007) theory of disaster capitalism as a form of capitalist governmentality that achieves its illiberal ends by way periodic shocks to the economy, exploiting natural or manufactured disasters to amass power through small, sporadic coups. In this approach, I strive to complicate the discipline's reductive understandings of American partisan conflict on race, immigration, and the U.S.-Mexico border, demonstrating that attempts to strengthen American capitalism through the rhetorical and material disparagement of the racial Other, what could be called "border fascism" (Toscano 2023, 157), operates on both sides of the American duopoly. Crucially, in centering my critique on the U.S. Democratic Party, my intention is not to exonerate or deflect criticism from the explicitly fascistic disposition of the Trump administration and the contemporary GOP—which is extreme—but to argue that a deep current of xenophobia animates the totality of the American political apparatus. In this assertion, I join with writer Daniel Denvir, who maintains that nativism has been a perennial force in the U.S. imaginary and that it became a bipartisan "mass politics" (Denvir 2020, 9) in the 1990s when both GOP and Democratic administrations sought to strengthen state sovereignty by bolstering border security. As he argues, under Bush and Obama, "The unprecedented militarization of the country's Southwestern border and the systematic identification and removal of unauthorized non-citizens became routine in a bipartisan political theater to convince Americans everything was under control" (Denvir 2020, 9).

For Democrats, the U.S.-Mexico border functions as a crucial *topos* in protectionist arguments, standing as a site inherently in need of fortification and control. With respect to Michel Meyer's characterization of *topoi* as "the implicit of the rhetorical transaction" (2014. 448), the *topos* of the border in Democratic rhetoric obliquely positions the U.S. frontier as synecdochic of the nation itself

and, as such, necessitating regulatory intervention. In this framing, I respond to Josue David Cisneros's framing of the U.S.-Mexico border as broadly rhetorical and rich with signification, a "physical and ideological" space establishing "identity as well as exclusion" and marking "identity and 'belonging'" (2013, 5). So positioned, the border becomes the vital material and rhetorical site where arguments of national vulnerability and territorial defense coalesce. It is here, however, where Democratic and Republican approaches differ. GOP arguments regarding the border typically conclude with reactionary policies presented as the self-evident solution to the threat of the asylum seeker. Amy N. Heuman and Alberto González advance such a claim, contending that Trump's rhetoric traded in a "new essentialized racism situated within a border rhetoric" that cast Mexican immigrants as "deviant and dangerous" and a threat to U.S. sovereignty (2018, 338). Democrats, however, while pursuing a similar rhetorical framing, rationalize the contradictions between xenophobia and liberal democratic values (see Taylor 2015). The obvious antinomies are ultimately reconciled by an appeal to realism, or *Realpolitik*, a "marker of moral disengagement" (Hariman and Beer 2022, 16), the notion that, at times, callous or objectionable actions are necessary to maintain broader Democratic values. Biden employed precisely such a strategy to defend his executive order in June of 2024: "To protect America as a land that welcomes immigrants, we must first secure the border and secure it now." It is through such a double movement that Democrats, albeit not without significant criticism (Samuels and Bernal 2024), advance fascist policies through the guise of maintaining commitments to democracy, inclusivity, and other liberal values.[1] Notably, this article focuses on the American context and the physical site of the U.S.-Mexico border, but similar expressions of fascism are visible across Europe today (Rauhula 2023).

Beyond its challenge to disciplinary framings of fascism, I strive to trouble the univocal, and often uncritical, construction of democracy within rhetorical studies. In many cases, rhetorical scholars have posited an essential allyship between rhetoric and democracy, asserting that the judicious practice of rhetoric affirms and sustains democratic culture. In his examination of the history of American pragmatism, Robert Danisch defends "the necessity of rhetoric for American democracy" (2007, 2). Other inquiries have relatedly posited an antagonism between democracy and fascism, arguing that the reaffirmation of democratic norms can combat racist and authoritarian regimes. Nathan Crick, while he perceptively diagnoses a dialectic of destruction and salvation within the fascist position, nevertheless sees a tension between fascism's anarchic violence

1. Fraser (2019) notably terms this strategy "progressive neoliberalism" (10), a political style employing socially liberal signifiers of the new social movements to advance capitalist policy.

and a democratic order: “Fascists challenge the validity of the conventional laws of civil society and the standards of reason” (2022a, 5). Both applications frame democracy as a social and political good but, crucially, fail to explore democracy as a rhetorical construct or as a *topos* of neoliberalism. Building upon Ralph Cintron’s diagnosis of democracy as a fetishized “virtue term” utilized to bolster both the “self-interest” (2020, 13) of political winners and the self-importance of political losers, this article demonstrates how the embrace of neoliberalism has permitted liberal democratic governments to defend fascist claims and policies in the name of democratic ideals.

This article additionally defends the recentering of a critique of capitalism in the study of political rhetoric, particularly with respect to the discourse of the far-right. I argue that rhetorical scholars, in frequently neglecting questions of political economy in their analysis of reactionary discourse, often overlook the material provenance of extremism. In *Political Perversion: Rhetorical Aberration in the Time of Trumpeteering*, Joshua Gunn defends this perspective, noting disciplinary analyses reducing Trump to a mere fascist demonstrate “a failure to understand the authoritarian mood of our time as cultural and systemic…. we would do better to focus on relationships… on the relation between publics and personae, on the links between relations among people and the forces of production” (2020, xi). With Gunn, I challenge disciplinary scholars who posit political discourse, fascism specifically, as abstract, elective, or fundamentally rooted in language while glossing its material provenance. Stephen J. Hartnett offers such a discursively based analysis, contending that “while fascism lacked coherent political content, it was remarkably consistent in its use of rhetorical strategies…. In this sense, fascism was less a political philosophy than a rhetorical style” (2022, 36). Such an assessment omits how political ideology, fascism specifically, is inextricable from its material relations, conditions, and crises. I likewise break with Bradford Vivian’s assessment of language as “an especially fertile source” (2021, 374) of the preconditions of fascism. Vivian’s assertion that “linguistic structures, sign systems, or narrative forms” harbor the potential for fascist *incitement* (2021, 362), I suggest, avoids an engagement with the political economic source of fascism.

In what follows, I first discuss contemporary rhetorical theory’s exploration of fascism, maintaining that disciplinary interventions on the issue tend to overlook the logical and temporal distinctiveness of contemporary fascism, its ambivalent relationship to democracy, and its deep connection to the profit motive. Following this review, I introduce Toscano’s (2023) critique of fascism and situate it within the leftist lineage of criticism, seeking to draw close connections between fascism and neoliberal capitalism. From Toscano, I derive a conceptualization of fascism as an expression of racist authoritarianism rooted in and protective of neoliberal

conditions. I subsequently turn to three expressions of fascism in the political rhetoric of Kamala Harris (2021), Joe Biden (2024), and Nicholas Krystof (2024). Comprehensively, my analysis aims to illuminate how the liberal democratic culture that undergirds contemporary Democrats' claims to virtue, particularly with respect to the GOP, are discredited by a hierarchical and exclusionary neoliberal fascism enacted on the body of the asylum seeker.

Rhetorical tendencies

As I maintain, four dominant theoretical tendencies have restricted the scope of rhetoric's critique of fascism. First, rhetorical scholars have drawn strong lines of continuity between past iterations of European fascism and contemporary expressions, an associative move that works to build a robust taxonomic case for the designation of contemporary reactionary politics as fascist but that nevertheless glosses significant historical and rhetorical differences between early fascism and its contemporary neoliberal counterpart. Second, rhetoricians have generally understood fascism as the exclusive province of the far-right, thus neglecting circumstances in which fascist rhetoric overflows these boundaries and is evinced by alternate political contingents and formations, even under the banner of progressivism. Third, and relatedly, these critiques position an inherent, and untenable, antagonism between fascism and democracy, suggesting that fascism is both a danger to democratic culture and vulnerable to the expansion of liberal democracy. Fourth, and most critically, rhetorical scholars have neglected the deep and intrinsic association between fascism and capitalism and, as such, have often positioned fascism as merely a political discourse rather than a technology of power rooted in material conditions and contradictions. Such a reading, I argue, has disregarded both the material provenance and the logical foundations of fascism as a means of (re)asserting capitalism.

In his introduction to his 2022 edited collection *The Rhetoric of Fascism*, Nathan Crick (2022a) follows the four tendencies introduced above, positioning fascism as an enduring discourse with no intrinsic connection to capitalism. Fascism, he argues, is *the systematic deployment of the totality of rhetorical devices that identify both the victimhood and the inborn dignity of a newly crystalized social group whose mythic rebirth requires internal and external purification through redemptive violence* (Crick, 2022a, 5). As Crick acknowledges, such a definition intentionally foregrounds fascism's core linguistic, or logical, operation while deemphasizing its localized expression. To the extent that such a definition includes a material grounding, it is a function of a privileged group seeking to reassert dominance over a subordinate one after a challenge to its authority. While

Crick does not directly ascribe the rhetoric of fascism to the far-right, his use of Kenneth Burke, and Burke's touchstone of Adolf Hitler, nevertheless positions this discourse as largely the province of avowedly or explicitly conservative groups. Crick, moreover, identifies fascism with "fascist movements," (2022a, 7) a gesture that associates fascism with the far-right. Such a move also, notably, alleges an effectively unbroken continuity between past expressions of fascism and contemporary ones without acknowledging the essential differences between the populist tenor of past fascisms and that of the current neoliberal moment. Additionally, Crick identifies an essential conflict between fascism and the norms, structures, and practices of democratic society: "Fascists challenge the validity of the conventional laws of civil society and the standards of reason by appealing to a more fundamental law of nature" (2022a, 2). The judicious application of rhetoric is accordingly positioned as a means of supporting these threatened structures: "we must… wield the critical tools by which to blunt the effect of fascist rhetorical devices… Let us not fall for the con game that makes us complicit in our own ruin" (2022a, 9). While Crick acknowledges fascism's deployment as a means of protecting privilege, his analysis does not ascribe to fascism an explicitly capitalist valence.

Most contributions to the collection follow a similar course. Stephen J. Hartnett's (2022) chapter, "'Lock Her Up!': Fascism as a Political Style from Mussolini to Trump,'" identifies fascism as primarily a property of language and, speaking to the first rhetorical tendency described in this section, traces it, largely without contradiction, from its origins in fascist Italy to Trump. Building on Robert Hariman's (1995) seminal *Political Style: The Artistry of Power*, Hartnett contends that Trumpian fascism draws from Hariman's four key styles—realist style, courtly style, bureaucratic style, and republican style—to form a chimeric fifth style to wage war on "cosmopolitanism and meritocratic elitism" (2022, 37). In addition to working to trace links between Trump and the fascism of the 1930s, the text likewise firmly defines fascism as a conservative, anti-left discourse with no intrinsic links to capitalism.

Regarding rhetoric's tendency to ascribe fascism solely to avowed conservative movements and figures, the collection offers a noteworthy exception in Rya Butterfield's (2022) "Calling Out: Enforcing Conformity in China's Cultural Revolution." The chapter focuses on the device of "Calling Out," which Butterfield identifies as "bringing the specific actions of a living individual into public view for the purposes of exemplifying and condemning injustice and calling for its eradication by collective action" (2022, 129) and associates it with the actions of the Red Brigade during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR). While Butterfield commendably attempts to understand fascism as able to be evinced by

political entities other than those strictly belonging to the far-right, her chapter nevertheless problematically suggests that fascism is reducible to totalitarianism. Marxist critic Michael Parenti, it should be noted, dismisses such conflation of fascism with communism as an integral component of the dominant political orthodoxy that has "used fascism to protect capitalism" (1997, xiii).

The same volume also offers an incisive analysis, and an exception to the tendencies I discuss here, in Patrick D. Anderson's (2022) "Obfuscating the Empire: Daniel Bell's Contributions to Cold War Liberalism," a text that resists the major tendencies in both the volume and the field. In the chapter, Anderson reviews sociologist Daniel Bell's challenge to fellow sociologist C. Wright Mill's critique of fascism. Mills, Anderson details, sought to understand "the emerging fascistic social structure [of] the United States" (Anderson 2022, 151) in its imperialist and capitalist project. Of this articulation, Anderson examines how Bell's critique "obfuscate[d]" (2022, 152) Mill's charge and, thus, encouraged the further development of fascist tendencies in the country. Anderson valuably seeks to recuperate Mill's understanding of fascism as "a social structure in which the political, economic, and military institutions are increasingly coordinated by their respective elites in the pursuit of consolidating their respective monopolies" (2022, 152) and "an imperialistic foreign policy organized around military aggression and economic domination" (2022, 152) meant to strengthen the position of the nation.

In a separate analysis, Ryan Skinnell (2022) largely reproduces much of what I have suggested are the core stances or tendencies of disciplinary scholarship on fascism. In his article "Two Truths and a Big Lie: The 'Honest' Mendacity of Fascist Rhetoric," Skinnell argues that fascism's defining discursive feature is its manipulation of the truth, specifically through making use of an exploit in the culture of democracy: "I argue that fascist rhetors exploit an inherent instability in liberal democracy regarding empirical truth in order to amplify authenticity and sincerity as more stable, and therefore more trustworthy" (2022, 176). As he maintains, liberal democracy, insofar as it is intellectually rooted in Enlightenment thought, is particularly indebted to the norms of empiricism, skepticism, and rationality (Skinnell 2022, 177). The practice of democracy, in Skinnell's construction, requires the careful mediation of these elements to account for the human factor. "Democracy," he argues, "requires reason and compromise to negotiate the handling of fact-based truth" (2022, 182). As he contends, this bending of absolute truth to avoid the terror of absolutism potentiates a more radical negation of the democratic project by fascism. Fascism, he argues, insists upon its own model of truth based in transhistorical myth, autocratic leadership, and authenticity (Skinnell 2022, 184-187). Effectively, such models of truth are not to be considered

as strictly opposed but, rather, in an open and ambiguous relationship (Skinnell 2022, 191). Skinnell's analysis, however, assumes a continuity linking prior Hitlerian forms of fascism and those roiling contemporary politics (2022, 191) and largely avoids the question of capitalism, treating fascism as a discourse of power, albeit one not intrinsically associated with profit. Skinnell, however, breaks with disciplinary convention in his assertion that liberal democracy, because of its inherent contradictions, is not necessarily opposed to fascism but, in many cases, its accelerant. As noted, he acknowledges a blurring between the Enlightenment notion of truth and the fascist one (Skinnell 2022, 191). In my following analysis, I expand upon Skinnell's charge to recast the anti-immigration rhetoric of U.S. Democrats, despite being enacted under the frame of liberal democracy, as an intensification of neoliberalism's extractive violence.

While these analyses have presented constrained conceptions of fascism at a remove from capitalist conditions, other critiques in the field have indeed explored fascism's complementarity with contemporary neoliberalism. Damien Smith Pfister's (2020) "Digitality, Rhetoric, and Protocological Fascism; Or, Fascist Ants & Democratic Cicadas" employs the work of philosopher Bernard Stiegler to offer a critique of "protocological fascism," what Pfister describes as "a new phase of digital industrialization built around standardizing profit" (2020, 191). While Pfister places the profit motive at the root of this form of fascism, he nevertheless glosses how fascism can, indeed, emerge from liberal democracy rather than from the absence of it.

As I have attempted to demonstrate in this section, rhetoricians, with some important exceptions, often reproduce four key tendencies that position fascism as static, far-right, anti-democratic, and without an intrinsic relationship to capitalism. Such restrictions, particularly with respect to capitalism, have dramatically delimited the field's capacity to interrogate fascism as it emerges in neoliberal and liberal democratic contexts and have led to its neglect of material relations between discourse and political economy.

Fascism, early and late

For rhetorical theorists, Toscano (2023) valuably demonstrates how authoritarian, racializing discourses may be inoculated against criticism through appealing to progressive and democratic values. He specifically breaks with those seeking to draw a clear and unbroken connection between interwar fascism and the expressions of fascism visible around the world today. In his construction, contemporary fascism is "largely emptied… of mass movement and utopia… a fascism that is not reacting to the imminent threat of revolutionary politics, but which retains

the racial fantasy of national rebirth and the frantic circulation of a pseudo-class discourse" (Toscano 2023, 2). In his theorization, while the mass populist current of the interwar period is certainly gone, a deceptive common appeal remains concerning class. This appears to be an appeal to the marginalized working class, yet Toscano cautions that it is an ersatz class discourse, a "racialized simulacrum of a proletariat" (2023, 2) that, in fact, impedes class politics rather than advancing it. In this assertion, Toscano builds on a crucial critique of radical activist George L. Jackson, who argues that fascism seeks a "positive mobilization of the working classes" (1971, 121) by weaving "the illusion of mass society" (1971, 121) in which elites would continue to rule. As my subsequent analysis of Nicholas Krystof's (2024) opinion article will illuminate, such claims are not solely the province of the right but are also evinced through the framework of progressive values and liberal democracy that attempt to engender working-class panics.

Toscano additionally liberates fascism from the province of the avowed far-right, accordingly explaining how fascism can be evinced by liberal democratic governments. While fascism, Toscano (2023) maintains, is mostly deployed by avowed conservatives, it is also able to be evinced by those of the political center who have embraced neoliberal logics. "Political orders widely deemed liberal-democratic," he argues, "can harbor institutions that operate as regimes of domination and terror for ample sectors of the population, in something like a racial dual state" (Toscano 2023, 156). Analogously to Ryan Skinnell's (2022) analysis, Toscano alleges a certain complementarity between contemporary expressions and evocations of liberal democracy and those of fascism (2023, 191). For Toscano, neoliberal constituencies of the center, U.S. Democrats for example, are equally capable of enacting regimes of racial violence as the far-right, particularly when such actions can be rationalized as in the service of democratic ends and values.

This capacity exists precisely because fascism is not simply a racial ideology or a technology of power but a *feature of capitalism itself*. On this point, Toscano details a close complementarity between Italian fascism and early neoliberals on the question of freedom and the state, not, to be clear, to illustrate an unbroken link between the fascism of the past and that of the present, but to illustrate the twinned trajectories of fascism and neoliberalism on the question of political liberty. As Toscano argues, in the early 1920s, Mussolini sought to appease the left, noting the "fundamentally *liberal* economic philosophy of fascism" (2023, 57). Likewise, liberals, at least at first, became enamored with fascism. Toscano cites how Luigi Einaudi, who would later be a member of the Mont Pelerin Society, "welcomed the fascist government's efforts at balancing budgets and curbing social spending" (2023, 52). With respect to this intellectual affinity, both fascism and neoliberalism, Toscano alleges, have emerged as a form of

anti-government governmentality—despite claims that neoliberalism represents a radical commitment to free markets and the minimization of governance, Toscano argues that the contemporary neoliberal state retains significant power but, simultaneously, "promises its own demise" (2023, 66-67). According to such a reading, liberal democratic governments, or governments that operate under such a fiction, are capable of embracing and enacting fascist policies because they have fully embraced the politics of neoliberalism.

Finally, as previously noted, unlike contemporary rhetoricians who frequently divorce fascism from capitalism, Toscano understands fascism as an essential tendency *within* neoliberalism. As Quinn Slobodian historicizes, neoliberalism emerged in the interwar period not to liberate markets, as is commonly believed, but to protect capitalist institutions, "to encase them, to inoculate capitalism against the threat of democracy, to create a framework to contain often-irrational human behavior, and to reorder the world after empire as a place of competing states in which borders fulfill a necessary function" (2024, 2). According to David M. Kotz, the neoliberal policies that became ascendant in the late 1970s concerned 1) changes in the global economy, in which the IMF and the World Bank "became enforcers of a new, more open global system of trade, investment, and money" (2017, 13) as well as general promoters of neoliberalism, 2) a regime of privatization and deregulation on the national level, including the deregulation of the financial industry, 3) the undermining of labor, and 4) a heightened competition among deregulated corporations (2017, 13-31). For Toscano, such policies are not the bulwark against fascism that many maintain but, rather, are allied with it. Indeed, in his construction, fascism represents a "turbocharging of inherent traits of the neoliberal order" (2023, 72), a manifesting of the authoritarian, extractive, and subjectivizing violence already inborn in the capitalist project.

In his analysis, Toscano offers rhetoricians a means of understanding how capitalist interests become policy claims, specifically claims that enact a form of racial violence to recapture putatively endangered territory. Such an understanding undergirds my analysis of U.S. Democrats' anti-immigration discourse that deploys the *topos* of the precious border to enact racially repressive restrictions to protect neoliberal capitalism.

On the border

Throughout Biden's presidential tenure, Democratic voices both within and beyond the administration responded to supposed threats to the neoliberal state by enacting and defending fascist preventative counter-reforms to stem illegal immigration. Hewing closely to the initiatives and rhetoric of the Trump

administration, these counter-reforms have enacted a "revanchist politics of security and protectionism" (Toscano 2023, 43) that has sought to reclaim the vulnerable border and protect the nation from the foreign Other, as a vector of insecurity and economic destabilization. However, unlike Trump, who trades in an overtly racist rhetoric of the dangerous and diseased foreigner, the Biden administration and other U.S. Democrats rationalized these reforms as undertaken in the service of ultimately progressive values. In this move, Democrats reproduced a deception Dominico Losurdo (2014) locates within liberalism, in which an instance of obvious ideological contradiction is rationalized by an appeal to a future moral rectification. As Losurdo details, many in the context of the American Revolution were sustained by "the illusion that the institution of slavery was destined rapidly to disappear in the republic produced by a great struggle for freedom" (2014, 137). In Losurdo's telling, the illusion is an expeditious one, permitting ideologically incongruent policies to continue by way of a rationalizing fantasy (see also Ramazani 2021). For contemporary U.S. Democrats who have embraced neoliberalism, fascist policy and rhetoric on immigration are similarly rationalized by an appeal to realism, the position that the dispassionate execution of objectionable or ideologically contradictory actions is necessary to achieve desired political ends (Hariman and Beer 2022, 16). To be sure, this analysis could well take up a vast array of similar examples. Indeed, beyond Harris, Biden, and Krystof, other U.S. politicians and figures have adopted similar stances—as noted, the Democratic Party has been broadly acknowledged to have taken a dramatically more conservative line on immigration and the border over the past several years (Perlmutter 2024). On the question why this has occurred, it may be argued, in part, that the Democrats' turn is a response to a similar rightward shift of both the U.S. public and the GOP (Martínez-Beltrán 2024b). While there may be come truth to this claim, I additionally maintain that this shift is both the result of Democrats' increasing capitulation to the capitalist class (Marantz 2024) and, following Denvir (2020), part of their longstanding and perennial enforcement of the nation's nativist project.

In this analysis, I first look to Kamala Harris's remarks delivered in Guatemala on June 7th, 2021, in a joint press conference with Guatemala's president Alejandro Giammattei, part of a larger initiative by the Biden administration to address corruption and other sources of illegal immigration in Mexico and Guatemala (Harris and Giammattei 2021, see Jaffe and Sherman 2021). I maintain that the statement enacts an illustrative expression of liberal democratic fascism by employing the destabilizing threat of the migrant to deter illegal immigration, racially caricaturing economic refugees as vectors of instability, and employing this threat to strengthen capitalist hegemony. However, unlike far-right arguments,

which unapologetically present grotesque caricatures of the undocumented, Harris occludes her racializing stance beneath a veneer of care and reparation (Casares 2024).

Harris's (2021) argument specifically emerges from the invocation of a crisis located in the danger of the body of the foreign Other. She isolates the "illicit drugs that are being smuggled and humans who are being trafficked across [U.S. and Guatemalan] borders, undermining the security of both the people of Guatemala and the people of the United States" (Harris and Giammattei 2021). In such a statement, drugs and the undocumented are conflated, and both are figured as undesirable, unsafe, and subverting forces for the U.S. Later in the speech, Harris reiterates this position, equating asylum seekers with the threat of insecurity and reinforcing the United States' commitments to territorial sovereignty: "I want to be clear to folks in this region who are thinking about making that dangerous trek to the United States-Mexico border: Do not come. Do not come. The United States will continue to enforce our laws and secure our border" (Harris and Giammattei 2021). With an association to Toscano's notion of the appeal to "security and protectionism" (Toscano 2023, 43)—as well as to "protocological fascism" (Pfister 2020, 191)—Harris counters the threat to the border with the purportedly necessary, and notably unevidenced, procedural defense of U.S. territorial sovereignty.

Harris rationalizes this implicit threat of discipline by affirming a set of progressive, liberal democratic values. As she insists, the position of both the United States' and Guatemalan governments is "to give people a sense that help is on the way, to let them know that they are seen, that they are heard" (Harris and Giammattei 2021). Striving to palliate potential asylum seekers, the statement voices no explicit commitments other than that of witnessing and recognizing suffering. Harris additionally affirms that the core of the problem lies in the foreign body as a vehicle of economic destabilization and, accordingly, maintains that the only reasonable position for the U.S. to adopt is that of self-protection. Harris's affirmation of progressive values in recognizing Guatemalans' "need for support" ultimately sanctions the realist demand for the immediate violence of border protection (Harris and Giammattei 2021).

With resonance to Toscano's characterization of fascism as neoliberalism amplified, Harris also seeks to combat the foreign intrusion of the Other by intensifying the reach of neoliberal capitalism (Toscano 2023, 72). As a means of stemming the flow of unwanted economic refugees, Harris promises, "We will launch a young women's empowerment initiative to increase education and economic opportunities for girls and women" (Harris and Giammattei 2021). While an ostensibly progressive gesture, it may nevertheless be read as the operationalization of liberal feminism to bolster neoliberal capitalism. (see Foster 2016).

Harris additionally promotes a green capitalist initiative, promising the promotion of "'ecopreneurs.'" As with Harris's feminist initiative, such policies have been extensively critiqued for providing an ethical cover to expansions of capitalism (Buller 2022). Finally, Harris promises to open Guatemala to foreign investment, noting that she "recently convened some of our biggest CEOs who have a profound interest, for many reasons, in supporting the work that happens here" (Harris and Giammattei 2021). This statement likewise offers a progressive framing to capitalism, readable as a form of Nancy Fraser's (2019) progressive neoliberalism, promising capitalist intensification, albeit tempered by the values of entrepreneurialism and development. Cumulatively, these moves may be analyzed as aiming to intensify the extractive systems of global capitalism to deter the blight of migrancy and to regain control of the border.[2]

While Harris's argument invokes the border crisis to retrench neoliberal capitalism, its most repressive element concerns a critical omission, namely the U.S.'s role in the destabilization of Central American economies, particularly its involvement in Guatemala's 1954 coup and its contribution to the current conditions of migration (see Borger 2018). As Harris offers, "The United States recognizes that it is both in our interest and reflective of our values to help create that opportunity and to share in economic prosperity" (Harris and Giammattei 2021). Casting Guatemala as a state with no historically relevant associations to the U.S., the statement intimates that Guatemala's poverty and lack of opportunities are natural and endemic rather than externally imposed. In Harris's remarks, invocations of democracy are superficially employed to oppose corruption, but ultimately function to occlude the United States' role in destabilizing Latin America while bolstering its current efforts to curb illegal immigration into the U.S.: "If we are truly to have and fight for democracies, especially in a world where increasingly they are under attack, one essential ingredient of our priorities must be to fight corruption" (Harris and Giammattei 2021).

More uncompromising than Harris's comments are those of President Biden in June of 2024 announcing his sweeping asylum ban. Following Toscano's theorization, Biden enacts a policy of reactionary panic, or counter-reform (Toscano 2023, 113), employing the *topos* of the precious but vulnerable border inherently in need of saving. Along with the deployment of the destabilizing ingress of the figure of the migrant, this strategy functions to deepen authoritarian control and to protect American capitalism. This argument is secured by a rationalizing appeal to realism, namely the necessity of dispassionate unilateral action in the present to preserve progressive values in the long term. As Biden (2024) argues, the purpose of

2. This remark about the U.S.'s "biggest CEOs" (Harris and Giammattei 2021) taking an interest in Guatemala also cannot but index the enormous violence and ecological ruin that major corporations have visited upon Latin America, and as such cannot but be read as a threat of domination (Randazzo 2021).

his policy is "to gain control of our border, restore order to the process." Matching Harris's (2021) framing of the border as vulnerable, such a claim positions the border as inherently in need of a revanchist intervention. This assertion is repeated more intensely later in the speech when Biden (2024) calls on Congress to hire "1,500 more border security agents; 100 more immigration judges… 4,300 more asylum officers… and around 100 more high-tech detection machines to significantly increase the ability to screen and stop fentanyl being smuggled into the United States." In this claim, human beings and drugs are equated and used to justify expansions of the carceral state to secure and "protect" American sovereignty.

Biden rationalizes these dictatorial policies by appealing to Democratic values and comparing them favorably to those of the far-right. Acknowledging the difficult reality that his position is largely indistinguishable from that of conservatives, Biden seeks to defend Democrats on the level of their political virtue: "I believe that immigration has always been a lifeblood of America. We're constantly renewed by an infusion of people with… new talent." Biden here reaffirms the longstanding trope of America as an inclusive nation, albeit with the capitalist revision of positing immigrants as "talent." In such a framing, the moribund invocation of the American Dream is exchanged for a reference to the neoliberal conception of human capital (see Becker 1964). Such an appeal also speaks, albeit in a moderated fashion, to Crick's diagnosis of fascism's tendency to destroy "the world to save it" (2022b, 15). Biden (2024) acknowledges the destructive, illiberal tendency of his immigration policy, but promises its service to a greater political good: "We must face a simple truth: To protect America as a land that welcomes immigrants, we must first secure the border and secure it now." This paradoxical statement acknowledges the violence of the protectionist policy but rationalizes this action through an appeal to the continuation of democratic values. As Biden hedges, "I take these steps today not to walk away from… who we are as Americans but to make sure we preserve who we are for future generations to come."

In this article's final example, I turn to Nicholas Krystof's June 8th, 2024, op-ed "Why Biden Is Right to Curb Immigration" from the *New York Times*, a text that extends support for Democrats' border crackdown through a deceptive appeal to class politics. Krystof, notably, is an avowed liberal whose focus at the *New York Times* has long been social justice and human rights. In 2022, he briefly left the paper in a failed attempt to run for Governor of Oregon (Baker 2022). Despite his avowed progressivism, Krystof (2024) employs many of the same fascist tactics as Harris (2021) and Biden (2024) in his defense of a restricted asylum policy, citing "a torrent of illegal crossings" (2024) to defend a preventative counter-reform reinstating control of the border. Like Harris (2021), Krystof (2024) argues that the U.S. is "inadvertently" incentivizing illegal immigration from places like

Guatemala (without acknowledging the U.S.'s culpability). He rationalizes the violence of Biden's border policy with an appeal to progressive values: "Are we, the people of an immigrant nation, pulling up the ladder after we have boarded? Yes, to some degree. But the reality is that we can't absorb everyone who wants in, and it's better that the ladder be raised in an orderly way by reasonable people" (Krystof 2024). In this statement, Krystof offers an exemplar of Toscano's assertion that liberal democratic governments are indeed capable of enacting fascist policies and acting as "racial dual state[s]" (2023, 156). Krystof (2024) additionally upholds the continuation of a progressive democratic state, albeit one whose benevolence is restricted to Americans like Krystof's neighbor, "a surly seventh-grade dropout" who was "outcompeted by immigrants with a well-earned reputation for hard work." Krystof's concession to immigrants' industriousness attempts to enact a rationalizing prolepsis, much like Biden (2024) and Harris (2021), to suggest that his position is neither racist nor xenophobic, but one motivated by concern for the native-born working poor.

It is in this seemingly tender appeal on behalf of U.S. workers, however, that Krystof's (2024) argument is at its most reactionary. Krystof specifically echoes Toscano's diagnosis of fascism as operationalizing "pseudo-class discourse" (2023, 2), making a false appeal to class that masks an argument for racial restriction. As Toscano contends, such a seeming rebirth of class politics is not a matter of challenging economic domination, but should, instead, be regarded as "another reminder that not the least of fascism's dangers are the fascination and confusion its boundless opportunism sows in the ranks of its opponents" (2023, 21). Krystof (2024) employs an all-or-nothing fallacy to trouble the notion of immigration *tout court*: "However much we believe in immigration, we're not going to welcome all 114 million people around the world who have been forcibly displaced, not to mention perhaps one billion children globally." He then proceeds to dramatize a tension between foreign workers and the native-born: "poor Americans can find themselves hurt by immigrant competition that puts downward pressure on their wages" (Krystof 2024). In a claim with clear associations to nativist and protectionist "America First" rhetoric (Thomas 2016), Krystof (2024) contends that immigrants, as the far-right charge tends to go, *are* indeed taking Americans' jobs and that such a threat is particularly grievous to the working class. Krystof acknowledges the often-repeated argument that immigrants take low-paying jobs that many Americans are unwilling to do, but faults economic conditions: "Many native-born Americans may not be willing to toil in the fields or on a construction site for $12 an hour, but perhaps would be for $25 an hour." Obliquely, Krystof levels what appears to be a progressive, class-based charge at the American economic system, namely the argument that a deregulated labor economy has

allowed for a racial underclass to emerge. The suggestion that laborers could very well be paid more is a superficial attempt to redress such racial stratification and support the fair pay of U.S. workers. Yet, the essential danger in Krystof's invocation of panic is not the underpayment of the working class but the specter of the foreign Other. Krystof's suggestion that Americans might be willing to do agricultural work for higher wages is, hence, not a call for the reactivation of the labor movement or for a comprehensive cost of living adjustment but a false class discourse that occludes a racially exclusionary claim beneath an ostensibly considerate appeal on behalf of workers. Indeed, Krystof's argument, with respect to Jackson's previously discussed charge (1971, 121), gestures at an advancement of the working class with the ruling class firmly in place.

As I have attempted to argue in this section, contemporary Democratic rhetoric regarding the U.S.-Mexico border is marked by a fascist tendency operating under a progressive frame. Such a discourse exploits economic anxieties over immigration that seeks to reclaim the border to reassert capitalist sovereignty.

Democracy in name

In this article, I have sought to offer a corrective to the significant body of scholarship in rhetorical studies striving to map the logic of contemporary forms of fascism, but occluding critiques of fascism that understand its intrinsic connection to capitalism. It is this neglect, I contend, that has foreclosed analysis of expressions of fascism that extend beyond far-right party politics. While I have utilized Toscano's (2023) conception of late capitalism to illuminate the reactionary logic of U.S. Democratic Party's discourse on border security, the aspiration of this article is not primarily to defend yet another definition of fascism. Indeed, I acknowledge, per Patricia Roberts-Miller (2022, 121), that not only do stipulations of fascism operate by way of a complicated set of motives, but they often run aground because of conceptual indeterminacy. Fascism, as Jackson maintains, "is in constant motion" (1971, 118) and avoids a clean definition. My purpose here, accordingly, has not primarily been to offer a new taxonomy of fascism, but to understand how capitalism, xenophobia, and nativism are entangled and, crucially, able to be expressed by a variety of progressive neoliberal actors.

Additionally, this analysis has also sought to trouble rhetoricians' often uncritical embrace of democracy and their neglect of political economy in exploring contemporary political discourse. Such an absence, I maintain, has left considerable gaps in the field's capacity to explore the mounting authoritarianism of the center, particularly as it pertains to immigration. Such a concern is noteworthy insofar as the Democratic Party steadily adopted the discourse of law-and-order

in its domestic and foreign policy prior to its loss to the GOP in the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Regarding this discourse, historian Anthony Gregory details how Democrats' pro-policing and tough-on-crime stances are longstanding aspects of the Party's political platform, originating with President Franklin Roosevelt's anti-crime policies of the 1930s (Gregory 2024). While a law-and-order approach has largely been the province of Republicans for well on a generation, it has also always informed Biden's hawkish stances crime and foreign policy (Scahill 2021). This was, perhaps, most clearly expressed in Biden's continued arms sales to Israel (Faguy 2025) throughout what both the International Court of Justice, and now the United Nations, have deemed a genocide (Poidevin 2025). That a tough-on-crime mentality reemerged as a Party-wide concern during Biden's presidency, Branko Marcetic argues, represents "an exhaustion of political imagination and psychic defeat" and an unwillingness to challenge Republican's rightward shift with progressive policy (Marcetic 2023). It likewise index's the Party's long history of nativism (Denvir 2000). As I have argued, on the issue of immigration, the Democratic and Republican Parties have come to resemble one another, leading to assertions that a meaningful left challenge to Republican authoritarianism has collapsed in the U.S. (Nader 2024).

At the Democratic National Convention in August of 2024, the Party struck an explicitly militant and protectionist tone, inviting several law enforcement officers to emphasize its stance. In an emblematic example, Bexar County Sheriff Javier Salazar celebrated Kalama Harris for "fighting border crime for years" (Salazar 2024). Referring to border sheriffs like himself, he added, "we're like Kamala—we protect and serve, we enforce the law, we show compassion, and we fight like hell to protect our border." Such a statement, like that of Harris (2021), Biden (2024), and Krystof (2024), employs the *topos* of the border as requiring protection and control to justify a procedural, or protocological (Pfister 2020, 6), application of the law. Salazar (2024) likewise justifies this approach through an appeal to the value of "compassion." As with other expressions of fascism within the Democratic Party discussed here, Salazar attempts to rationalize a violent and restrictive set of economically protective policies through the frame of tolerance and democratic virtue. Regarding such brazen authoritarianism, rhetoricians must register the ways in which fascism is increasingly enacted by those claiming to abhor it.

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