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The Politics of Envy Always Ends With the Guillotine

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More than 25 years ago, Doug Bandow, Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute, and a frequent contributor to these pages, pronounced in his book, *The Politics of Envy: Statism as Theology*, that we “live in an age of envy.” Pointing out that “people don’t so much want more money for themselves as they want to take it away from those with more,” Bandow wrote that “greed is bad enough, eating away at a person’s soul, but envy is far worse because it destroys not only individuals, but also communities...”

Bandow was prescient about the growth of government, and the envy that has driven it. But it is unlikely that even he could have predicted that the symbol of the malign envy that drove the Reign of Terror of the French Revolution — the guillotine — would arrive with great fanfare a few days ago on the front steps of the Washington, D.C. home of Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos. Videos posted on social media show the guillotine — the notorious apparatus used for beheading executions during the Reign of Terror — with a sign reading: “Support our poor communities. Not our wealthy men.”

The crime for which Bezos is alleged to have committed was simply being “too rich.” With a net worth of around \$203 billion according to *Forbes*, Bezos is held in great contempt by the envious among us. One video posted on social media showed a female protester in D.C. with her face covered call out over a megaphone: “When they become threatened, and we have no voice, the knives come out.” The *New York Post* reported that a digital flyer circulated online titled “Abolish the Present. Reconstruct our Future,” named the Amazon CEO’s residence and declared: “End the Abuse and Profiteering. Abolish the Police, the Prisons, and Amazon.” One of the leaders of the protest, Chris Smalls, a former Amazon employee who was fired earlier this year after reportedly organizing a work stoppage at the company’s warehouse on Staten Island, NY, warned Bezos during the demonstration that “We are just getting started... We’re going to go to every single location you’ve got across the country and set up show until you meet our demands as workers.” Smalls, who is a co-founder of the Congress of Essential Workers, then led a chant of “If we don’t get it, we shut it down.”

Smalls and his resentful comrades know that the guillotine has a special significance because it brings to mind the ultimate envious revenge that was exacted by the poor against the rich in the bloody Reign of Terror in France in 1793 when the Jacobins beheaded nobles, priests, and wealthy landowners because they were viewed as “enemies of the Revolution.” Today’s socialists look upon the French Revolution with a kind of yearning that they too might experience such startling success in destroying those with “more.” During the 2020 Democratic primary, Martin Weissgerber, a well-paid senior field organizer for presidential primary candidate and self-described “Democratic Socialist,” Bernie Sanders, claimed (on video) that it

was time to “Guillotine the rich.” Weissgerber was videotaped saying that he was a communist and was in contact with groups that planned to hold mass “yellow-vest” protests in the streets of the United States as they did in France: “I’m ready to start tearing bricks up and start fighting... I’ll straight up get armed, I’m ready for the revolution.”

In Maine, Bre Kidman, a Democratic Party candidate for the United States Senate, has chosen the guillotine as a logo for her campaign merchandise — claiming that “it’s aimed at being a sign of revolution by lower and middle classes.” Adorning t-shirts and campaign buttons, the guillotine symbol is playing an increasingly prominent role in progressive politics. Kidman, who decided to run for office after receiving training from the Victory Institute, which runs programs for potential LGBTQ candidates, describes herself as a “queer, feminist mermaid,” and hopes to be “the first gender nonbinary queer” elected to the United States Senate, displacing Maine’s long-serving Republican Senator Susan Collins.

A cover story on socialism published last year in *New York* magazine by Simon van Zuylen-Wood described the annual “Red Party” he had recently attended in Brooklyn: “It was a party where (without irony) attendees called each other comrade.” With the title “When Did Everyone Become a Socialist?” the author noted that those gathered were celebrating the socialist success of banishing the Amazon headquarters from the City and talked about building something great in Queens instead of Amazon. When asked what they might build, one of those gathered cynically quipped, “a guillotine.”

A now-popular socialist magazine, *Jacobin*, replicates the revolutionary fervor for today’s revolutionaries. In addition to the print version, there is an online *Jacobin* blog with articles on “The Lives the Free Market Took,” and another on “The Paranoid, Reactionary Dreams of Ronald Reagan,” which claims that President Reagan’s “hyper-nationalist worldview grew out of the paranoid jingoism of postwar America.” The late-President Reagan has become yet again a target of hateful envy for the current crop of Democratic Socialists.

One who has capitalized on symbolic Reagan-envy is Democratic Socialist, and Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), who appears to have tapped into the envious resentment of her constituents in the 14th district of Queens and the Bronx two years ago when she ran on a socialist platform and defeated ten-term Representative Joseph Crowley. Now that she has a national audience, Ocasio-Cortez has escalated her attempts to use envy to divide the country, suggesting that President Reagan was a racist who “pitted white working-class Americans against brown and black working-class Americans to screw over all working-class Americans.” Promising a federal job to every resident who wants to work, and government salaries even for those who do not want to work, adequate housing, free college tuition, as well as “healthy food and access to nature,” Ocasio-Cortez has perfected the appeal to envy that promises to punish the rich and empower the poor. At an event in January, 2019 with writer Ta-Nehisi Coates, Ocasio-Cortez suggested that “I think a system that allows billionaires to exist when there are parts of Alabama where people are still getting ringworm because they don’t have access to public health is wrong.”

Ocasio-Cortez has surrounded herself with revengeful aides like senior counsel and policy advisor Dan Riffe, who goes by the Twitter handle: “Every Billionaire is a Policy Failure.” In a profile piece in the *Washington Post*, Riffe was described as having been “raised by a single mother in trailer parks and public housing in eastern Tennessee becoming an avowed foe of the ultrawealthy.” Resentful about his co-workers on Capitol Hill who appeared to him to have

enjoyed easier lives than his own hardscrabble childhood, Riffle told reporters that when he first started working on Capitol Hill, he thought Democratic aides would be activists and idealists. However, he found that they were people who grew up on the Upper West Side and went to Ivy League schools: “These are people who don’t think big and aren’t here to change the world... They only conceive of the world as it is, and work within that frame. They don’t think, ‘Here’s the system; it sucks and we should burn it down.’”

Riffle recently re-tweeted a tweet from Anand Giridharadas which read: “The people up above are up above because they are stepping on people down below. And the people down below are down below because they are being stepped on.” The tweet seems to encapsulate Riffle’s own thinking. In an interview with Vox contributor Dylan Matthews, Riffle made it clear that he wants to “eliminate” billionaires claiming that he is not exactly sure where to draw the line on “how much” is “too much” for wealthy people to have, and suggests that we may be allowed to vote on it: “We can have all 300 and some-odd million Americans vote on it and come up with an average that everybody thinks is a reasonable amount of money. But at some point there has to be an upper bound, right? There’s nothing in this world that anybody wants or needs to do that you can’t do with let’s say, \$10-15 million. And so at some point there has to be a line. To me, \$1 billion is way, way, way, way past the line.”

One of the ways Riffle proposes to “remove” the wealth from those he considers to have “too much money” is through the stock market:

One of the things that I am intrigued by is what we can do about stock ownership and shareholders. Most of the galactic billionaires that we’re talking about there — it’s not like they have a checking account or a saving account with \$100 billion in it. It’s valuation of stock that they have. For Jeff Bezos, it’s ownership of Amazon. For Bill Gates, it’s ownership of Microsoft. So, employee-owned companies are something that we’re talking about. ... There’s other ways that you can force the divestiture of an owner of a company once we hit a certain threshold.

New York magazine points out that today’s new socialists are not just incremental welfare statisticians. Like the bitterly resentful Dan Riffle, they too are working in government to do as he suggests, “burn it down.” Envy is driving this movement — just as it has always driven the envious move to socialism.

Doug Bandow understood in 1994 when he published his *Politics of Envy* that there would always be a significant portion of the population who will vote for the candidate who promises to take away the most wealth — and sometimes the very freedom — from the greatest number of “undeserving” people. But, the 2016 election of President Donald Trump disproved the theory that promoting the envy of the rich helps to win elections. Rejecting progressive promises to destroy the rich and the powerful, voters awarded President Trump with the presidency because he reassured them that America can again be the “envy” of others if we are willing to change course. President Trump knew that most of us do not envy the rich — we admire them. We may even want to emulate them. He understood that for most of us, our dreams are not to hurt those who have more than we do, we just want to have good jobs that pay us enough to raise our families and feel secure. That was why Trump was elected in 2016 — and it is why he will be re-elected in November.

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