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USA

The Rising Price of Insanity

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THERE WAS NEVER anything like it: In the midst of a mounting public health disaster, a phalanx of state governors deliberately and maliciously sabotaging the elementary measures required to protect the population. Driven by a toxic mix of greed, political opportunism and pure ideology, “opening the economy” in states from Florida and Texas to South Dakota outweighs the terrifying realities of overwhelmed hospital Intensive Care Units as well as burnout-and-COVID-depleted medical staffs. Insanity!

Before the delta variant of the coronavirus took over, achieving the elusive population “herd immunity” in the United States would have required probably 75% of the U.S. population age 12 and over to be fully vaccinated. It was clear, well before the hoped-for July 4 target date, that this requirement wouldn’t be met, and that many state governments wouldn’t enact or enforce vaccine mandates.

While case loads are declining in the country as a whole, hospitals in states with rightwing mandate-refusal regimes are in desperate crisis. Notoriously, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis issued an executive order barring county school boards from enacting mask mandates in public schools. Fortunately for him and everyone else, a court order said he couldn’t enforce it — sparing the governor from direct responsibility for mass infections — but he then blocked funding for the salaries of defiant school board officials.

Similar battles are raging in states and school districts around the country, in defiance of all medical science and common sense. With the super-contagious delta, to say nothing of potential new variants, the necessary vaccination level for herd immunity is probably 90% if not higher. There is no realistic prospect of achieving that in the United States, let alone in the global population — for so many of whom no vaccines are even available — while booster shots are rolled out in the United States and other rich countries.

A year after then-president Trump was pimping hydro-chloroquine, bleach or ultraviolet light exposure as COVID treatments, people deluded by anti-vaccine drivel were injecting themselves or even drinking Ivermectin, a drug for treating parasites (particularly in farm livestock) — not viral infections. Insanity!

System Insanity

All this was before the Texas anti-abortion law was enabled to take effect by the Supreme Court. We’ll discuss its specific consequences below. The larger context is that this law represents the escalation of a yawning crisis of the political system, one that mainstream media and pundits finally realize threatens the stability of the U.S. “Constitutional” order.

Among Trump’s other obscenities, of course, was the mass deportation of Central American asylum seekers under “Title 42” on the pretext of preventing COVID spread. The Biden administration, in a move as criminal as it is cynical, has kept this measure in place to carry out the forced return of desperate Haitians from the U.S.-Mexican border back to the country they’d fled a decade ago.

Like Democratic presidents Clinton and “deporter-in-chief” Obama before him, Biden calculates that the way to blunt Republican attacks on immigration is to outflank them. It’s a tactic that doesn’t work, of course, combining moral bankruptcy with political futility as the purveyors of white nationalism continue spewing their “replacement theory”

fictions without letup.

What might have once seemed like fringe phenomena, stolen-election conspiracy theories and vaccine-mandate refusal are entrenched manifestations of irrationalism running wild. They're ghastly but not terribly surprising phenomena — in today's circumstances where at least a third of the U.S. population still believes that Trump won the 2020 election.

Driven by a major political party taken over (willingly) by Trumpism and an ecosystem of far-right media platforms, the consequences are unfolding toward a massive crisis of regime legitimacy. Alarm bells are ringing along a spectrum from neoconservative ideologue Robert Kagan to liberal historian Timothy Snyder ([Washington Post](#), September 23, 2021, and *New York Times* *Maga-zine*, June 29, 2021 respectively).

Deeper systemic irrationality is embedded in capitalist production's dependence on fossil fuel. Hurricane Ida, a relatively routine Category 1 storm that intensified in just over a day over super-warmed Gulf of Mexico waters to a monster Category 4, made landfall on August 30. It slammed directly into Port Fouchon, Louisiana, a hub for refinery and transport of 15% of the United States' crude oil and five percent of its natural gas.

Thus thousands of livelihoods in southeast Louisiana, the economy of the state and a substantial part of the whole country (e.g. fuel prices) depend urgently on the most rapid recovery and resumption of the very same fossil fuel oil extraction that made Ida, and will make coming climate-change events, such massive disasters. And this even as areas of the Louisiana coast become indefensible against future storms and probably best left uninhabited.

That so-called "recovery" depends on a certain level of climate-change denial, or willful blindness to its consequences. The same is true of the drive to extend the Enbridge Line 3 and 5 pipelines in Minnesota and Wisconsin, discussed by activist Rebecca Kemble in this issue of *Against the Current*.

This system insanity is no one's "fault," least of all the workers and dislocated folks whose jobs or homes, or both, are in shambles, although developers who overbuild along vulnerable coastlines bear part of the responsibility. The real point is not who's to blame; it's that we just can't go on this way if human civilization is to survive this century.

Far Right Running Riot

The Ida catastrophe happened to be sandwiched between two manifestations of growing political insanity, in the wake of the 2020 election and the January 6 Capitol riot, driving the United States toward a potential existential crisis of government legitimacy. They are continuations of what we called in our previous editorial (ATC 214) "the long J6 riot." First, the gerrymandered Texas legislature rammed through the long-delayed voter suppression bill that makes the voting process more onerous for Black and brown and poor voters and allows blatant intimidation by partisan thugs called "poll watchers" at the ballot box.

Texas Democratic legislators had fled the state to deny the governor's special session a quorum, but their intense lobbying efforts in Washington DC failed to elicit serious action from the Congressional Democratic leadership, which is consumed by the tangle over social infrastructure legislation (a topic for another discussion in itself).

Republican right-wingers were further emboldened by a white-supremacist 6-3 majority Supreme Court ruling that upheld a voter-suppression Arizona law. As the Court majority signals its intent to leave the Voting Rights Act a hollow shell, other assaults will follow. For example, the gerrymandered Michigan legislature is employing a petition

drive to empower itself to enact, against popular opposition, restrictions on voting that (due to an arcane procedural rule) can't be vetoed by the governor.

Mainstream media have belatedly awakened to the scale of the menace. The editorial pages of The New York Times and Washington Post, the CNN and MSNBC commentariat, and other outlets are now consumed with "the attack on our democracy." They seem to be hoping that the Department of Justice or Congressional investigations will turn it back, while Robert Kagan places his hopes in the dwindling bands of "traditional conservatives." Lots of luck with any of those forces.

Then, just as Hurricane Ida left the eastern USA soaked and flooded, in a lightning offensive Christian-fundamentalists seized Texas, outlawed abortion and deputized their army to be vigilante bounty-hunting terrorists, an innovation that the Supreme Court majority said was too "novel" to be halted without further litigation. Consequently of course, this atrocity too is metastasizing to other states.

The Texas law is not only the most blatantly un-constitutional statute, both in its substance and its implementation, ever passed by a state legislature in modern U.S. history. More than that, it is deliberately and intentionally unconstitutional, as every single Texas legislator knows. And so does everyone from first-year law students to the Supreme Court, which is why its 5-4 ruling allowing the law to take effect was described by Justice Sotomayor as "stunning." Judicial INSANITY!

The Texas atrocity has spurred strong popular outrage, shown by pro-choice mobilizations on October 2 when tens of thousands of people rallied and marched in over 500 cities. Support networks are emerging to assist women who need to go out of state for abortion services. Other forms of defiance will develop as more and more people grasp the reality that women's rights, like African-American civil and voting rights, can be rolled back if not constantly defended.

In public opinion, abortion rights are more widely supported today than in 1973 when Roe v. Wade was decided. That makes the present Court ruling an even more outrageous overreach. Pending further litigation over the Texas law and its replicators in other states, it's important to note Chief Justice Roberts' vote with the minority, not because he's pro-choice but, we suspect, because Roberts may be fearing the monster he's helped to create. It might destroy the sacred legitimacy of the Court itself — as it should.

Rules? What Rules?

Challenging the legitimacy of the Court is exactly what the leadership of the Democratic Party should be saying, then overriding the filibuster on voting rights and reproductive freedom. Don't hold your breath — the neoliberal Democratic leadership plays by rules that no longer exist, which means playing to lose. In its own way, expecting a different result is also — insanity!

In the wake of all this, what then is the mounting price of insanity? In essence, what used to be rules of U.S. bourgeois politics are vanishing in the midst of escalating crises. The right wing is aggressive, emboldened and unconstrained by rationality, science, public opinion or even considerations of the longer-term health of the political system itself, let alone the survival of humanity.

We have to face the reality of our condition in a system careening out of what, until recently, was considered normality. There is no escape now from the new COVID-19 wave — thanks to the Florida and Texas governors and their fellow Republican crazies in other state houses.

The U.S. Constitution itself is hollowed out with no meaningful "equal protection under law," reproductive rights for women or voting rights that the Texas Christian-fundamentalist zealots or other state legislatures are bound to

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respect. You may have a right to carry a semi-automatic loaded rifle into a Texas polling place to terrorize Black and Latino voters, but not to have your school board protect your kids from unmasked and unvaccinated super-spreaders.

The coronavirus plays by its own rules, making up new ones with each mutation. Meanwhile Hurricane Ida, the California Caldor fire, and a dozen other disasters including spreading wildfires in Arctic forests from Alaska to Siberia, have shown that they don't play by old rules either. The environmental catastrophe makes up its own rules as it goes along.

That's a bit like the right wing running amok – except that the forces of nature are a lot stronger, more permanent and even deadlier.

Who will meet the challenge? We fully recognize that today's small and fractured radical left is not capable of doing so on our own. Whether the zombie-like remnant of "moderate" or establishment Republicans, or "enlightened elites" of corporate capital, will wake up to their political order's drive toward self-destruction, is an open question, and current signs are hardly encouraging.

There is, however, an important role for left and socialist activism. This isn't a moment for despair in the face of the social, political and natural emergencies confronting our society and our world, but a time to help build movements that will create their own new rules, not play by those of a dying order. The October 2 mobilizations for reproductive justice must be just a beginning. [1] The fight not only to restore sanity but for democracy, social justice and survival must be won by insurgent movements, or not at all.

Source: November-December 2021, [ATC 125](#).

PS:

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[1] See "[October 2 reproductive rights actions: reports from the field](#)".