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# Reading the Crisis: Democracy with Richard Seymour

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## K Biswas

Hi, everyone. Thanks for joining us. I'm K Biswas. I'm a critic and chair of community radio station Resonance FM. I'm delighted to welcome you to the fourth conversation of our third series of Reading the Crisis, which is part of the Stuart Hall Foundation's programme In Search of Common Ground. Inspired by the life and work of British-Jamaican intellectual Professor Stuart Hall, this series asks what kinds of tools and strategies are needed to confront this conjuncture and where are the intersections where current solidarities can be built. There's a new format this year, whereby me and Aasiya Lodhi present six in-depth online conversations with significant writers and thinkers, covering what we consider to be the most pressing issues of our time. Today we discuss democracy, while elsewhere in the series we talk about the economy, technology, migration, culture and the climate. Running until November, each one-on-one conversation will hopefully help to demonstrate how engaging in conjunctural analysis, as Hall envisioned, can enrich creative and political practice and deepen academic and organising work. Hall's approach to making sense of the current political moment encourages us to ask ourselves what roles can we play in the pursuit of a more just world.

In today's conversation, we consider democracy with Richard Seymour. We will look to cover key themes in his exceptional book Disaster Nationalism and also look at one of Stuart Hall's essays, Political Commitment, written 60 years ago at a time when Britain was two years into a new Labour government. This can be found in the Duke University collection Selected Political Writings, published in 2017. Have your questions ready for the second half of this conversation, when there'll be 40 minutes or so for a Q&A. Please submit comments using the chat box at any time during the event, and remember, live captions are available by clicking the CC button in the Zoom bar. So now I'd like to welcome our guest, Richard Seymour. Richard is the author of Disaster Nationalism: The Downfall of Liberal Civilization, published by Verso in 2024. Raised in Northern Ireland, Richard is the writer of several books, including The Twittering Machine: How Capitalism Stole Our Social Life, published in 2019. He's contributed to the New Statesman, The London Review of Books, and has a series, Interregnum, on the wonderful Politics Theory Other podcast. Welcome, Richard. It's such a pleasure to speak to you.

**Richard Seymour**

Thank you so much for having me here.

**K Biswas**

It's great to have you here. So you started work on Disaster Nationalism in 2019, and since then it feels like global democracy has entered a new conjuncture. What big challenges to democracy have taken place so far in the 2020s?

**Richard Seymour**

So in Disaster Nationalism, you'll remember I refer to the work of Fernand Braudel, the historian, who distinguishes, I think usefully, between three types of temporality. There's the event – the stuff of everyday social media feeds. There's the cycle – something like the cycle of neoliberalism, what comes next, and the *longue durée*, which is the underlying abiding structure, which just keeps repeating the same things over and over again in different forms. So I was interested in the cycle, the medium-term duration, a few decades in which a certain set of social changes will germinate and develop and mature. And I thought, what kind of cycle are we entering into now that neoliberalism is on the way out? And back in 2019, I'd written about this and suggested, well, we kind of know what's coming because we've seen the political outcomes, and I had in mind the growth of right-wing street and paramilitary movements, the success of far-right electoral campaigns, even in contexts which would normally be understood as failure. You know, Modi getting re-elected after five years of not doing very much for people. Relatedly, the failure of left-wing campaigns to make a decisive rupture, so resultantly, they were defeated or they succumbed to, I suppose in Gramscian terms, *trasformismo*, the idea that the centre takes over your policies, neuters them, extracts all the radicalism and sells a version of your agenda to the public. And that's kind of what Bidenism was with regard to the American left.

And on the other side, a lot of confusion on the left, like a lot of diagonalism, a lot of left-wing intellectuals defecting to the right, and I think there were three key moments of the last few years – one, COVID-19, obviously. Suddenly the sovereign individual is countercultural, you have to consider yourself a risk, and a lot of people weren't up for that. And that included a lot of *bien-pensant* progressives, particularly in Germany, but not just Germany. The invasion of Ukraine, which I think was more of an elite consolidation – rearmament, moral rearmament of the West, physical rearmament, Cold War redux, militarism instead of reform. And in fact, in some cases, military build-up took the place of things like climate transition. Again, Germany's a good example of that. The Gaza genocide, because there for the first time you see this symbiosis between the far right and the hard centre. They both tend to thrive on the same conditions and to play off one another. Well, we saw that become effectively a global coalition between liberal centre governments and the far right in Israel. And so that led to authoritarian crackdowns all over the world, major... ructions.

In the UK you could mention the Truss interruption, only because it resulted in a sort of broad centre alliance behind Starmer, so he didn't have to bother with the left any more. He could exclude them more thoroughly than he already had. If we want to talk about challenges to democracy, I think provocatively you could say, look, the big challenge is democracy itself, and I don't just mean that democracy under certain stresses inverts into what Michael Mann calls "murderous cleansing", where the ethnos replaces the demos. but that it's so enfeebled by decades of neoliberal assault and involution that what remains of it is actually pretty poorly placed to handle the challenges that are coming – you know, the dysfunctions arising around climate change, global economy, war. So what you see is the forces of the hard centre that I mentioned, they find it much more convivial to adopt the far right's idioms and its policies and form an effective symbiosis with it, both thriving on demoralisation and passivity for different reasons, than to resist that. And, you know, that's one of the reasons why the same old strategies keep getting played out, and they never work for the parties that adopt them. So those, I think, are the big challenges to democracy in the 2020s.

### **K Biswas**

And I suppose throughout the 21st century, I mean, it's been replete with these shocks, especially these economic shocks that took place in 2008, during the pandemic, and arguably might now be on the horizon in the wake of the conflict with Iran. As people become increasingly worried about their abilities to make ends meet, why does the politics of resentment seem to be trumping the politics of hope at the ballot box? And I suppose maybe here's a good opportunity to talk about the role that respectable political parties and traditional civil society groups have played in not really addressing these crises.

### **Richard Seymour**

You know... You talk about hope. In a way, what is there to be hopeful about? You know, I could make a few off-the-cuff sort of observations and see where we get with that. It is true that there is an ongoing cost of living crisis – certainly things like energy, water bills, housing costs, at least in the UK – that's obviously a stressor, but I think you have to look at how much of this isn't about money in any crude sense. Family, gender roles, sexuality, your neighbourhood, your town, the town centres dying... All that kind of stuff, a lot of it racially coded in various ways. I think all this is the sort of thing that belongs under the heading of what Hegel would call *Sittlichkeit*, or ethical freedom, ethical life. And that is basically your practically embodied freedom. You know, without that practical embodiment, it doesn't mean anything, and that's the problem – it's withered over the last few decades, for obvious reasons, so I think that based on that, there's a phenomenological core which for certain groups of people – we on the left use the tautology "lived experience" – that for certain groups of people, that lived experience is converted into various terrors that work as figurative stand-ins for a systemic crisis whose causes are actually often remote or abstract, you know, not possible to blame on any single malevolent intentionality, but that's why we get the conspiracy theories.

So we have the idea of migrant men as the source of sexual predation. A lot of the riots are provoked by instances of sexual transgression or alleged sexual transgression. Not to sugar-coat it – some of these are awful, hideous. Like, for example, I come from Ballymena. I lived there, anyway, for a while. I come from Northern Ireland, and they had riot there over the case of the rape of a girl. When they found out that the suspects needed a Romanian translator in court, so then it became a problem, and Northern Ireland's one of the worst countries in the European Union for violence against women and girls – sexual violence, physical violence, whatever. And if you were to have a riot every time somebody was raped or beaten or murdered, the country would burn to the ground. Well, maybe it should, but I think we have a series of other sort of stand-ins. You know, the trans women who supposedly represent a kind of deviant feminisation of masculinity. And it's that, not a certain other version of masculinity, which results in a sexual threat. Or it's drag queens and all the rest of it.

So I think our increasingly stalemated democracy and our relative feeling of powerlessness, anyway, has been transformed into these theories of, you know, deep state conspiracy, sexual conspiracy, and you ask why that should happen. And I say, obviously, on the one hand, resentment is everywhere we look. Class societies breathe resentment. They excrete resentment from every pore, and certainly late neoliberal capitalist society has been organised, I think quite explicitly, around a kind of paranoia – everyone's a competitor, anyone could stick the knife in. They're all out for themselves. Anyone who speaks to the public interest is a hypocritical power maximiser. Anyone who speaks to welfare is probably a parasite or a power-maximising politician who just wants to build a client base. So the slogan could be "they're all out to get me". And so everything has been reorganised in social life to actually make that feel true, for large groups of people, anyway.

Now, you combine that with all these general crises of trust – trust in society, trust in politics, even epistemological trust – who can know what the facts are when everybody's lying? Even doctors are lying these days – And then think about what happens in areas that are disconnected from centres of financial and communicative and political power, and they're experiencing regional decline and they have limited working-class organisation, very little organised left, lots of evidence of social dysfunction, drug addiction, you know... A lot of these places are not doing well, but in those sort of areas, you don't have to be poor or working class to feel resentful, to feel like you've been left to rot, to feel like your relative status has been eroded, and usually that will have taken place over a few decades. You don't maybe have the same problems as urban areas, so for example, high house prices is not going to be a problem so much in Clacton. You're more likely to drive a car rather than use public transport, so there you have Raymond Williams' mobile privatisation. You know, you drive long distances to any real amenities. And so what you see about the urban centres, the urban working class, the university towns, all that stuff, it's fairly unfamiliar and difficult to relate to. And in that circumstance, Labour isn't an option, the Tories aren't going to do much for you, you're terrified of and despise the left – they're the enemy. So what's there to do?

And I think that's where you see groups like Restore Britain, Reform UK, get in on the act. You get this blob thinking. Joel Kovel called it "black hole thinking", where basically all the

crises and dysfunctions in a particular moment are being crushed into this singular chimerical figure of evil – the globalists, the socialists and the Treasury. They're the ones that did it. The EUSSR, the deep state, antifa, the Arabs, the Muslims, the cultural Marxists. These are the ideas that correspond to what I suppose Spinoza would call the sad passions. You know, passions, emotions that actually limit our power to act in the world, and, you know, lashing out on the basis of those emotions can feel like agency, but it really isn't. So you're right, just to conclude on that. The traditional politicians, the old hard centre and what-have-you, they pursued this kind of two-step strategy of austerity on the one hand and stimulating social enmity on the other. Cameron was the classic example of this. It was just as he started austerity that he abandoned this woolly liberalism, you know, "hug a hoodie", for an assault on multiculturalism, net migration targets, pandering to UKIP. So they kept adopting the far right's framing and priorities, but of course, because they can never deliver what the far right actually wanted, you get the worst of both worlds. You drive them up the agenda and keep them frustrated so they're going to keep growing.

### **K Biswas**

So I feel that a lot of these viewpoints, having been marginalised for so long, have now entered both Parliament and the public realm. You know, disaster nationalists are vocal in public life. They're represented in parliaments in most democratic countries now. How have they been able to harness these digital cultures to popularise their messages, from participating in online forums to using troll farms to bombard social media platforms?

### **Richard Seymour**

So I think the first thing to say is the fascists were the first... Apart from the sort of anarcho-reformist cyber-left, the fascists were the first to really act on the potential of the internet. You go back to Don Black and his Stormfront website – outright Nazi website, did extremely well. Far-right actors had long believed that they had to take a sort of monastic retreat from the cultural mainstream because they said it was brainwashed by cultural Marxism or whatever. So, come 2010, roughly then, the social industry is coming to the fore. All these platforms, Twitter, Facebook and so on, suddenly matter, and it's after the credit crunch, and despite the initial progressive promise of these platforms – you know, "we're on the side of revolution", green movement in Iran, all that kind of stuff – it becomes a way for the far right to get back in. And the question is how.

And I argue that we're not talking about a battle of ideas, we're talking about cyberwar. Olavo de Carvalho is very clear about this. He's the Brazilian intellectual associated with Jair Bolsonaro. He says it's not about destroying ideas, but about destroying the careers and power of people, so the strategy is to leverage the emotional mulch that I was describing of late neoliberal capitalism into this nationalist dream work – they're all out to get you. Who's out to get you? It's the Muslims, it's the Marxists, whoever. And then into a strategy of revenge, so it turns this resentment on a series of fungible targets who it might be entertaining to berate, to harass, to threaten, to get sacked, to kill. So there's a participatory sadism at work there. And there are ways in which that becomes institutionalised. It doesn't have to be, but Bolsonaro had his Office of Hate, which is

almost too on the nose, it's so Orwellian. Netanyahu had his networks of trolls. Modi has paid trolls as well as a reward system for his various DIY online vigilantes. You could get a reward follow from Modi, which is a great honour. Just to be clear, I'm not claiming this changes to a great extent how people vote or anything like that. That's not how I think it works. What I think it does is activate a crowd who are then orchestrated on the basis of digitalised affinities – slogans, hashtags, likenesses – not self-organisation, and it conducts their aggression in a particular way. So basically, what you have is, the hard centre will tell you, "Yeah, the Islamo-left are taking over, the migrants are coming, there are too many of them, the Muslims, ooh, they're a bit of a danger, but leave it to us. You stay passive, you obey the law, you stay at home." The far right says, "No, here's the enemy, now come on the streets and do something about it." It's a very potent way, I suggest, to harden up the base and keep them loyal and excited, and it gives them a low-cost way to get involved if it's just on social media to start off with. Gets them ready to fight, and if it results in things like harassment, rape threats, murders, not much evidence that it damages them.

So what's interesting here is the orchestration of a rhythm. Peter Pomerantsev actually describes this in relation to Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, where his campaign seeded Facebook groups based on local communities, and they were not overtly political, but they made sure that every day, and then with increasing regularity as election day came closer, they would post on Duterte's top issues, which were violent crime and drugs, and so you would generate a rhythm of seemingly spontaneous locally-rooted concern that would then gain media attention, which would then change the polling, and so on. I think in that case, you could probably argue that that did have some sort of effect, though how to distinguish it from other factors, I don't know. Just to avoid the idea that this is a bunch of stupid people getting taken in and we're all clever, on the social industry, we are all potentially recruits for strategies that we don't understand. I think it's Nick Dyer-Witheford who describes it as a *levée en masse*. So some people are quite happy to be tools, in the literal sense – the far-right base, very happy to be lied to, happy to be used, because they trust their leaders, and if they're lied to, they think that's proof of how clever their leaders are.

But often, the point of that sort of engagement, that recruitment, isn't really about challenging how we think or making us think or feel differently. It's not even to secure our consent for something. It's to elicit its specific somatic response, one that goads us into a particular kind of engagement – hyperactive posting, reflexive lashing out, and in a way that enables their strategy, so for us to be contrasuggestible to all that, we would need to be aware of how susceptible we are in a domain where social relations have been distilled into digital relations between nodes, where we're constantly bombarded, force-fed with affective content that is being designed and curated specifically to direct our attention and our passions. And so our relationship to the social industry, I think, needs to be reformed. We need to see it more as an instrumental reality, a force that we have to engage with, but which is hostile, and which we always relate to critically and never is the main space where we argue, organise, debate among ourselves, because that just results in the fabled shitstorm.

**K Biswas**

I want to pick up on the point that you made that it's often dismissed that these are a bunch of stupid people, by... the liberal centre, I think, historically, have always said support for the far right is linked to things like education and poverty and decline. But you mention in your book that higher-status people from educated middle-class backgrounds are often found to be the first people rallying to the cause of far-right leaders. So what role does class play in support for disaster nationalisms, and are its parties, whenever they get into power – you mentioned Duterte and Modi – are they ever able to deliver for working people?

**Richard Seymour**

Well, short answer to the last question is no, but I'll come back to that. Yeah, it's a general pattern – what you see is not necessarily the poorest and most deprived, the so-called and much-maligned white working class. It's rather the downwardly mobile. It's the threatened, especially if they've been in a middling position or a relatively privileged position. Classic example – 6th of January, 2021, the so-called insurrection. Many of the leaders were people who ran, for example, regionally large businesses, and, you know, we're not talking about the ruling class, the American bourgeoisie, but middling capitalists, and they did well until the credit crunch, and then they started suffering bankruptcies, had all the misfortunes that come with that. Probably divorces, family break-up, all that kind of stuff. That's particularly difficult, I think, divorce for older men in those circumstances. And there comes from that a fear of being sucked into the mass of toiling humanity. You thought you were on top, you thought you were doing well, you thought you had some distance from that horrifying void, and you know how those people are treated, because you were part of that. The licensed sadism, kicking people when they're down, blaming them for being down, grovelling to the already affluent and especially the wealthy. You do not want to be part of that.

What's interesting is that disaster nationalists, they talk class... Perhaps they used to more than they do now, to be honest with you. I think there's been a right shift on that. But they talk about the white working class, mostly insofar as it indexes ethnicity, so the idea is that white workers are an obedient, respectful, lawful bunch – which is slander – whose ethnic entitlements to recognition and respect and state access have been lost as the state has started to acknowledge minorities and institutionalise certain legal rights against racist or homophobic or sexist violence. And so what they offer is not even what Michael Mann called class transcendence, you know, the idea that in the interwar period, we'll nationalise the working class, we'll woo them away from communism by mitigating the sources of their discontent with reforms – promising quite substantial reforms, rarely delivering on them – and, of course, by displacing the antagonism onto a war with traitors and enemies and ethnic outgroups and all that sort of stuff. But what today's disaster nationalists offer isn't transcendence. What they offer is muscular capitalism, ruthless capitalism, gloves-off capitalism, more centred on the priorities of investors than before, more centred on the dynamic agency of the corporation, free from all these woke constraints like, you know, environmental regulations. So I guess the question is, what is that about? Who wants that? And why do they want it, you know, if it doesn't benefit them?

To an extent, I think this reflects the subjectivity of people who want the advantages of living in a society without the trade-offs of living in a society. So there's a kind of... I mentioned the paranoia about society. You know, "everybody is against me", etc. I think there's a deep... I think it's Wendy Brown calls it sociophobia. There's a deep paranoia about claims made on behalf of society. You know, you remember during COVID-19 – social distancing is communism, masks are muzzles, and you have the social justice warrior as the folk devil, who wants to emasculate the tacitly masculine individual. In practice, it's striking that across the board, far-right leaders, when they get into power, do absolutely nothing for the working class at best. At the very best, their conditions are kind of stagnant, a little worse than under their predecessors. That's Trump. At worst, you see real living standards decline, substantial decline in living standards. That's what happened with Modi, and of course, they lied about the data. They changed the way of measuring, they covered things up, they lied about the data, but even so, it was very visible – consumption fell, especially among the lower half of society. Didn't damage him electorally. He actually got re-elected... I think it was with a slightly increased share of vote. There has to be this caution against reading... First of all, don't read class off income. It's a very bad habit. Or think about class politics in terms what happens to your wallet. You know, people generally don't vote with their wallets. I think it's a big mistake to assume that they do. The practical, phenomenal experience of class life has to be symbolised and organised before it becomes an active political force. Otherwise, it can just be passive, apathetic... "Politicians don't care about me, I don't care about them," that kind of thing. "I'm just going to look after me and mine." And then... if you get a certain wedge of people, who... let's say they're working class, and they vote for the far right despite all these privations, to me, that raises that question of what their desire has been. It's been detached, obviously, from their practical needs, and that what they wanted and to some extent probably also needed was a win, something to feel good about, and disaster nationalism comes to you as a kind of antidepressant, the red pill, a morale booster, a source of excitement, of simulated agency, efficacy. It tells you, well, look, if we can destroy a neighbour, even it means you lose to the corporations who you don't especially love, but they're not the ones who are bothering you right now, if you can destroy a neighbour, that means you win. And that is reactionary class politics.

### **K Biswas**

And I want to draw something out around your point around, I suppose, emasculation. Now, disaster nationalism has so much to say about masculinity and violence. And in this country, there's been a public conversation through the screening of Adolescence, the Netflix show, and Louis Theroux on the manosphere and things like that. So I feel that since Disaster Nationalism came out, we're having more of a public conversation about masculinity and violence. You discuss things like the libidinal urges related to these lone wolf attacks, but also mention vigilante groups, law enforcement's willingness to tactically embrace violence. So what are the knock-on effects of disaster nationalist leaders flirting with violence, both in rhetoric and in reality?

### **Richard Seymour**

Yeah, it's a good question, and in terms of masculinity, I'm very careful, I think, not to... I don't want to buy into the kind of liberal conceptualisation of masculinity, toxic masculinity, all that kind of stuff. I do think there's something going on there, and something deeply problematic, but I'm wary of the kind of discourse that you get around the Stephen Graham show, you know, which I think is a kind of Keir Starmer agenda. I would say it's actually more generally about sexuality and the social eros and its displacements in gender, and how it's given a masculinist articulation is worth thinking about. A lot of the incel stuff you could see as a particularly masculine ideology of social atomisation, of loneliness, of the need to make a connection with another, but also, reciprocally, the fear of doing so, because who can you trust? I mean, who can you really believe in? Who would you devote the rest of your life to, really?

And something many people are now using AI for, knowing that it's just AI, they form loving relations. They love their AI chatbots as a kind of self-medication, I think, which I think is worrying. But I think this affects everyone, the general decline of sociability, decline of dating, cupidity, fertility, and I think men are being schooled, those who get into inceldom, to see it as something that hypergamous women are doing to them. You know, "you're stealing our enjoyment". Now, I don't take them as face value. They say they're incels – well, we're all incels some of the time. We're all involuntarily celibate some of the time because we don't all get the sex we want. I think that they are voluntarily celibate in a way that they don't acknowledge. They can't... they say they can't get laid. I would say the "can't" conceals a "won't", a refusal. I think their ideology, actually, the way they talk about women, who they're supposed to be deeply interested in, expresses an extreme ambivalence about eroticism, and a kind of needful fear, and a dark impulse sometimes to replace it with violence – to, like, take a shortcut.

And sometimes we use the language of privilege to talk about these people. I don't buy that. I think we're talking about fuck-ups. I've never seen a less privileged bunch in my entire life. What do they really want? You know, it's not old-school patriarchy or even old-school masculinity, because their heroes... Look at them – they're a bunch of hysterical men who talk about pussy-grabbing and rape jokes and shooting women between the legs, and... what was that hideous thing that the Tate brothers said? "Let's slave these bitches." I mean, that's the kind of thing they're talking about. That is not even... It's not even just transgression. That is dissolution. It's a revolt against civilisation and its innovations. You know, and it's ultimate fantasy. I think the Tate fantasy, "everybody's a rapist"... You know, let's all rape one another... I mean, it's impossible fantasy. It's a horrible, vile fantasy. But it's something to do with the way in which contemporary reaction oscillates between wanting to obliterate society and wanting to shore it up with extreme authoritarianism and kitschy fantasies of traditional roles like the trad wife and so on that only make sense as images on Instagram, purveyed images of a kind of Cold War experience that's long gone.

Then again, there's the other side... God, I could go on and on about this. I'm going to try and sort of compress this a little bit. The other side is where far-right politics gets laced with arousal precisely where it's connected to disgust and the drive to obliterate, so we've had fantasies of extreme sexual evil. In India, they had what's called the Romeo jihad. This is the idea that suave Muslim men are seducing our Hindu girls and leading them astray –

the original cuck fantasy of the Hindu right. Save the Children fantasy of networks of elite paedophiles, you know, trafficking children in tunnels and concealed in furniture. It's not like we don't have real instances of elite paedophilia and so on. There's quite a lot of child abuse across society, across classes. But they have to come up with a fantasy, and a lurid and entertaining one, and perhaps one that's very exciting to them. Nazis were preoccupied by Jewish men seducing Aryan girls... I think these fantasies are not forced on them – they've chosen them.

And so there's this ambiguity which I link to the concept of fear arousal. You know, there's this sort of bodily response which can be the same one way or the other, which is why often as a teenager you watch a horror film and then get off with your partner or whatever... The idea here is that they desire something in what they terrify themselves with, and that is the other side of erotic decline, where the solution is to invigorate late capitalism, which isn't very sexy, I hate to say it, and Freud would have said that means it's unlivable, it's impossible to bear. They invigorate it with the proximity of annihilation, and often that's linked to the idea of civilisational decline. You know, the gays are doing it to us, "globohomo", all that kind of stuff, or it's the gender ideology – they're doing it to us. All these blob fantasies, and you're right to link this to violence, because, it's... They call it stochastic terror, and that just means we can't say for sure what individuals are going to be sufficiently primed by the interpellations.

But I've always thought that this was always on the brink of becoming and tipping over into what you could call the armed shitstorm, where the logic of the shitstorm on social media is, you suddenly get a crowd who are very angry about something for about two seconds and they chase... you know, they find some poor person and target them for a day. And the idea that you get a crowd that's forged through digital connections around a set of vague, but exciting ideas, ready to take arms – because the whole point of disaster nationalism is to give you something to take arms against. And they find each other in meatspace, and with sufficient incitement and encouragement, they commit an atrocity.

And I suppose the canary in the coal mine here was the Gujarat pogrom. Now, I mean, that's too grim even to describe here. I talk about it a lot in Disaster Nationalism, and I go into some pretty awful details, but suffice to say you can talk about what happened in broad terms as, in February 2002 – sorry, 2002, pardon me – that was a year after a big earthquake in the state of Gujarat. BJP government, right-wing Hindu nationalist government, handled it very badly. They were losing popularity. In February 2002, there's a fire on a train near Godhra train station. A lot of the people who were burned are right-wing Hindu pilgrims. And the local government, the state government immediately blames a Muslim mob, which they say, thousands of Muslims, they threw fire bombs and they tried to kill them. No evidence for that, by the way. And so what happened was local Hindu mobs, often not only with the encouragement of state leaders and politicians, local activists, fascist organisations, but money from local business leaders to get things done, actively supported by the police, they went after Muslims with rocks, iron bars, acid, swords, fire. They did the most brutal, gruesome things they could think of in a totally carefree way, knowing that they could do anything. It was all licensed. And it was all in the cause of good, right? And so Modi – governor – never had to say "I officially approved these murders". All he had to do was enable it and then do his big Hindu pride rallies and talk

about how morale would be improved if we could only deal with all these "Alis and Jamalis", which was his idiom for Muslims. And the BJP's popularity shot up. They won the next election with an increased vote share, and the increase was strongest in the areas where the violence was worst.

Now, that means to me that ethnic murder, murderous cleansing, is not necessarily an electoral embarrassment, as we would once have thought, or an impediment for this kind of far right, but a unique selling point. It's an energising point. They drill people with anxiety, they reach to the core of their being, even their sexuality, they shake it up and then they administer the release, the murderous assertion of some kind of pseudo-agency. So that's, I think, how you get from masculine worries and all that kind of stuff, sexual trouble, to lashing out in that way.

### **K Biswas**

I want to touch briefly upon our side before I go to read a short extract from Stuart's essay, and if people have questions at home, please drop them in the chatbox at the moment. So it seems that anyone seen to be doing anything vaguely progressive has now been designated as an enemy to the far right.

### **Richard Seymour**

Yeah.

### **K Biswas**

And you talk a bit about, I suppose, the psychology of their side. But what about our side? Are there new limits to popular political participation? Do psychological barriers prevent our mass movements opposed to their agenda getting our act together?

### **Richard Seymour**

Yeah, you know, that's a good question. First of all, I don't think the limits that we encounter are new or are primarily psychological. There's an element of that – I'll come back to it. I think there's a real strategic perplexity here. Like, you mentioned mass movements – OK, so what kind of mass movements? Opposed in what way to disaster nationalism? What's the basis for unity, what sort of tactics could we converge on? Left has been recovering over the last decade after a long recession, and one could say an historic defeat, that demolished our institutions – our publications, our organisations, the union rank and file – and we now have to think anew about questions, many of which have not yet been properly phrased, let alone clarified through struggle or organised debate. Pretty clear we can't just have a dress rehearsal of the '20s or the '60s. There's no point in organising separately on the basis of questions like reform or revolution, because frankly, the situation blocks both reform and revolution.

I think what people are looking for at the moment on our side is a sufficient political container in which they can mature and grow, in which these questions can be thrashed

out so that we're not just constantly oscillating wildly between extreme fatalism and extreme voluntarism, or in another way, between hypermoralist invigilation of discourse, calling out, all that stuff, and hyperpragmatic opportunism, you know, "maybe we'll be a bit racist to win favour with those who support a National Health Service" or whatever, all that kind of stuff, and then beyond the strategic problems, we also face the difficulty of what you could call the blocked transition – over the last decade or so, every attempt to force through the transformation that addresses both an immediate crisis and some of its causes, going from Syriza to Corbyn – ruthlessly crushed. And, yes, that did point us to limits in those projects, but, you know, they also were up against real ruling-class power that gets pretty united when it faces a threat, and so one of the symptoms of the blocked transition is that the work of the transformation is taken up in this displaced and often reactionary format.

I do think, in terms of the psychology, I think we're as susceptible to dysphoria, perhaps even more so, because we can't process that through enlivening fantasies, compensatory fantasies, in the same way. I think that one of the problems is also that we live in a culture that kind of blackpills us. I mean, that was very visible towards the end of the Corbyn project and after. The idea is you're tuning in every day to be told you're shit, and everything you like is shit, and you deserve to die. Yeah, that leaves an emotional scar. And one of the good things about having been in a Trotskyist sect during the lean years... Many bad aspects of that, but one of the good things is it gives you a certain patience with defeat. You expect defeat, you expect to be hammered, you expect to be constantly in the minority, you expect wins to take time to mature, so you don't lose it if there's an electoral setback or if one of your leaders turns out to be not what you thought he was, or whatever it happens to be. And so I think... You know, I wouldn't recommend anyone join any specific sect right now, but I think that what we're really missing is the organisation, the opportunity. I know we're going to come back to this, but it's the opportunity to actually subordinate one's will to a wider cause without it being an authoritarian imposition, without it being something somebody else is demanding of you. You're doing it because you're serious about the cause. That's the only reason. I think that's what we need to learn from.

### **K Biswas**

And we'll go from, I suppose, one Labour leader you mentioned, Corbyn, to a previous one, which is Harold Wilson. And I'm going to read out a passage from Stuart Hall's essay Political Commitment, which was published in 1966. Wilson had taken over a couple of years previously, and before that was 13 years of the Tories, and Stuart writes quite an abstract piece, but I'll just get straight into the passage and we'll see what you make of it. "Revolutions of different kinds transform and transpose – they do not transform and transpose out of nothing: historical continuity is always preserved, and the means and methods of change which are adopted become in a sense the content of the transformation. The test of the movement to surpass neo-capitalism will be the ability of that movement, within its own organisation, to develop forms, structures, and relationships which represent real alternatives to those which belong, typically, to the dominant social system. A movement organised along bureaucratic lines, in which the 'experts/rank and file' or 'full-time politicians/ political consumers' dichotomies of the

society are tragically mirrored, will never be the agent of a democratic, egalitarian revolution." Now, Richard, do you feel in recent years that it's this question of how best to organise, whether to follow traditional political routes or try and mobilise wider society? Has that frustrated those seeking to quell this rise in disaster nationalism?

### **Richard Seymour**

I think the dialectical shape of an answer here would be that if you want to mobilise wider society for a fundamental transformation, you're going to have to build the bureaucracy. The Stuart Hall essay was written in a period quite unlike ours. Radicalisation, peace movements, anti-colonial movements all around the world, anti-racist campaigns, incipient feminism, expansive working-class organisation, mounting strikes, unequalled by anything that's occurred since 1989 in this country, and it corresponded to a time when the critique of bureaucracy and the call for self-activity had a certain relationship to the critique of the USSR and the argument that real socialism necessitates the self-activity and ultimately self-emancipation of the working class. Those coordinates don't exist. The anti-bureaucratic critique has kind of been absorbed by capitalism, lost a lot of its force, and it's not, you know, that there haven't been big movements – Stop the War, for example. And it's not that the Corbyn era wasn't formative of an authentic if germinal socialist consciousness, but the class is extremely disorganised in general, if we can talk about the class in the singular any more, and I'm not sure our dilemma can be stated in terms of bureaucracy versus self-activity.

I do think there are limits to our inherited bureaucracies, the Labour bureaucracy, for example. If anybody wants to investigate a little-known sect called Your Party, they'll discover the limits of the Labourist bureaucracy in there. But what would it mean to mobilise wider society in an era of mass demobilisation? Now, how do we get there? And that's what I mean when I say build the bureaucracy. You need organisations that are not bureaucratically top-heavy. They have to have some bureaucratic centralisation – unions, parties, co-ops, neighbourhood campaigns, movement coalitions. I think we're past the era when we thought horizontalism was going to get it done. And it kind of means... even in horizontalist organisations, the same is true. You kind of need these self-selecting cadres with a lot of free time doing useful things, but then you also need bureaucratic rules to constrain them and make sure they don't, you know, act up, and in the short term, I think what the left needs is some victories, even on the etiolated terrains of Parliament and trade union activism and so on, to give people confidence that it's even worth considering self-activity in the first place, because why bother, you know, if... ...life is short? Disaster nationalism has fed on that general demoralisation and demobilisation, a kind of general decay and disappointment with society, and it is therefore strongest when our side is the least active, the least organised, because it's being well funded – you know, lots of tightly-knit organisations and think tanks and party media assemblages and social media enterprises. They're very good at gaming things – gaming the media, gaming the parliamentary system. They swallow up a lot of attention. So we obviously need to occupy some of that abandoned space.

One last point on this, and we're kind of stuck... We can't just wish our way out of this, we can't opt out of it – but we're kind of stuck with a celebrity-based and consumerist model

of politics, and that's not going away. look how we lapped up Mamdani, Great guy, you know, but in sober terms, he's a highly constrained figure. The New York City mayor fiscal role has been hemmed in since the fiscal crisis of the mid-'70s, when they basically turned the budget and the debt resolution over to banks and corporations and implemented austerity, but the mere fact that he's saying the things that he does, delivering on a few deliverables and linking that to a wider idea of transformation – and succeeding to a limited degree on very hostile terrain – very important. That's where we are. I don't think we can sidestep that.

### **K Biswas**

Yeah, it is an interesting point about sort of what one does when electoralism doesn't seem to be getting us anywhere, and I feel that Stuart and his New Left comrades in the '60s, all... you know, they did their own thing. They founded New Left Review, and Stuart went to Birmingham to found the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Perry Anderson had just written this wonderful Origins of the Present Crisis, which gave a kind of historical overview as to where the country found itself in the mid-'60s, and EP Thompson had written Making of the English Working Class. And I feel that they all found some hope in CND... Also, in a couple of years after this essay was written, the May Day Manifesto. These are radical, I suppose, movements and provocations to the movement.

### **Richard Seymour**

Yeah.

### **K Biswas**

And I feel that at this moment, we may be lacking some of that. And, I don't know, two years into a Labour government, which we find ourselves in now, knowing that the far-right threat is looming here from the respectable nativist populists of Reform or the unacceptable face of the far right, Restore, how can progressive social movements make the biggest impact on the politics of Britain before the next election?

### **Richard Seymour**

First of all, it's only a matter of time before Restore Britain is the respectable face and that you've got an actual street-fighting fascist organisation in opposition. If I knew what to do, I'd be doing it, but I think I know kind of some things not to do. One thing we mustn't do is agree to our own permanent subalternisation, and I think in the UK, that's essentially the path of chucking in our lot with Andy Burnham and hoping against reason for the best, which I think would result in this sort of desperate tendency which you sometimes see in John McDonnell and Momentum and that lot to exaggerate anything good that's done or said and to rationalise and mumble when something awful happens. We'd also lose the insurgent thrust that replaced Starmer with Burnham in the first place, and I think Reform would become the de facto opposition while Labour continued to adopt Reform's priorities and language on migration and race and law and order and so on, albeit more quietly, and I think that would be an absolute disaster.

So the biggest impact we can make in the next few years, I think, is precisely as insurgents trying to effect a rupture. That could be many things – supporting the left and the Green Party, civil disobedience over Palestine, trying to build something new. I just mean that we don't have to be chiefly concerned with such questions as well, how well's Labour doing, and what about tactical voting? That kind of thing.

Let me give you an example – Ed Miliband just made his big speech about sanctioning trade with the Occupied Territories. More significant symbolically than materially – I mean, it's not nothing, but I think it bespeaks a kind of geopolitical fragmentation as US hegemony declines as much as anything else. But he also made a big point of condemning anti-Zionism, and he's been denouncing this motion that's being debated by the Greens saying Zionism is racism. I don't expect better from him, but of course, he's a hypocrite to exult in the policy change and to commend those who rightly protested against genocide while denouncing the very forces – the radical Palestine left, the anti-Zionist left, Polanski's Greens – that got rid of Starmer and created the conditions for him to go to the Foreign Office and do what he's doing. And I think we have to see this in terms of the Labour left – and I'm not just talking about the soft left, but the Labour left tout court – are followers, not leaders. They need to be pushed or they need to be dragged, so we've got to keep trying to build outside of the parliamentary consensus. I'm not against electoral initiatives. I just mean it's not to do with being, you know, keeping up with parliamentary protocol or the media consensus, trying to be nice and so on.

We've got to keep trying to relate to moods of rebelliousness, of outrage, of not taking any more, no matter how transient they are, because sometimes they can be consolidated. One of the few things pushing official politics just slightly to the left and civilising it a little bit and blunting the edge of the reactionary offensive is precisely that we've been doing that, albeit not enough, and, you know, in sometimes self-destructive ways – see passim on Your Party. And it also works the libidinal economy in the best possible way. What I mean is, we don't end up being hostage to this miserable, affective economy of electoral realism, of bargaining with power, of pleading for fair coverage from a hostile media and so on, which, you know, I saw some of that in the latter years of the Corbyn era, when things were going to shit. So our attitude has to be "we welcome your hate", I think.

### **K Biswas**

OK. Let's turn to a couple of audience questions. We've got this question from Nigel. "In what ways are your analyses in Disaster Nationalism possibly linked to those of Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor in End Times Fascism", and he ends that with "The Fight for the Living World". Oh, that's the subhead, right, OK. End Times Fascism: The Fight for the Living World. So your analysis in 2024 and Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor's analysis in 2026 – do you find overlap?

### **Richard Seymour**

Oh, yes. it's significant. I mean, not for nothing it's called Disaster Nationalism. Obviously, I'm riffing on Naomi Klein's concept of disaster capitalism. And I think that we have a

strong overlap with the emphasis on the apocalyptic dimension of contemporary reaction. Look, I've just started reading the End Times Fascism book, and of course, the first thing I did when I got it was flip through looking to see if there was any mentions of me. And yes, there was! So I look forward to reading it immensely, but I already know from reading their essays, and I know from what I've read in the book that they have a similar concern that I do that the contemporary far right is preoccupied, obsessed with images of annihilation, of decline... Not just decline, collapse, and it's very animating for them. I don't know in what ways, what nuanced ways I'm going to differ with them. I do know that I thought Doppelganger, Naomi Klein's previous book, probably her best yet.

**K Biswas**

It's brilliant. It's absolutely brilliant.

**Richard Seymour**

Yeah, so, anyway, you were going to say?

**K Biswas**

I was going to say, maybe we can draw a longer thread to some of the work that's pointed the direction to where we find ourselves. I'm thinking The Paranoid Style in American Politics, the Hofstadter, in the '60s, and I find that prescient 60 years on, and I feel that there are a number of thinkers like yourself who have regularly published updates of a wider critique every few years. So your Meaning of Cameron was brilliant, when David Cameron was in power in the 2010s. You had Liberal Defence of Murder, when the, I suppose, self-described war hawks from the broad left of centre like Christopher Hitchens were popping their head up. Do you find there is this kind of thread through your work over 20 years?

**Richard Seymour**

I mean, there will be some continuities there, because throughout my political life, I have known some victories, usually coming a bit late. Like, Stop the War started to have an impact on politics in a serious way, I think, when we saw Britain opt out of war in Syria, for example. Did have some other impacts, and it was quite important at the time, but I just mean, we didn't win, but then we started to have belated victories, and I think they were important. But we also had a lot of defeats, and we also had a lot of movements that suffered repression and so on. Kettling, you know – I went through that a few times. People being beaten, brain damaged. And throughout all that time, there've been some very dark things.

So, you know, we're starting off with the outfall of 9/11, and the catastrophes, the moral and political catastrophes of the War on Terror and culminating now in disaster nationalism, and I see there's a strong continuity between them. And to me, I've been trying to historicise them as a way of making the problems tractable. So it's not just, you know, I'm trying to be clever – although also I am – but I'm trying to take something that's

very distressing, you know, people giving in to their worst impulses, capitulating totally to irrationality, to viciousness – people who one would have expected better from, often enough – and turning that into a problem of historical development. If we can understand it historically, we can't stop tragedy, we can't stop these things from happening, but we can inure ourselves to it to some extent and we can prepare for it.

And we can also not lose faith, you know, if we understand that, yes, that these reversals happen, and sometimes periods of reaction are quite prolonged. Nonetheless, we can come through. And there's... I think there is an implicit... I would say throughout all this, I've been trying to grapple with the question of ideas and the emotions that bind people to certain ideas. I didn't always have the vocabulary for that, and my vocabulary has changed. Initially, it was maybe just orthodox Marxism, whatever you interpret that as, Gramscianism, a bit of psychoanalysis later on. These days, a bit of philosophical idealism, a bit of Hegel, a bit of phenomenology, all that kind of stuff, but always trying to grapple with, why do people do what they do? What motivates this very strange behaviour? And... yeah.

### **K Biswas**

As a reader of your work, I do find them coming at the right moment. Certainly, your last three books, I felt that there was this moment of chaos where people didn't really understand what was going on, but would look out the window or look at their social media feeds and just... find it very difficult to make sense of the world, and I feel that your interventions have been very helpful, and I also do think are quite hopeful when read in full. I'm going to ask another question from the Q&A. An anonymous attendee asks: "Is democracy a guarantee of prosperity? "Many countries with different forms of government have achieved significant economic development and progress. What factors, beyond the type of government system, determine a country's prosperity and development?" That's interesting.

### **Richard Seymour**

Ah. Look... I think if you wanted to talk about prosperity and development... and these are loaded terms, right? As soon as you start talking about prosperity in any country, whose prosperity? What kind of prosperity are we talking about? Like, China – incredibly rich, and it started growing frantically long before the population, the wider wage-earning population, started to catch up. And in fact, its growth spurt in the '90s and part of the 2000s was basically based on the massive hyper-exploitation of the working class, who were made incredibly precarious, you know, drawn in from the rural areas, deprived of their traditional rice bowl – the iron rice bowl, the welfare system, all that kind of stuff – and super-exploited. Now, that's what's called prosperity and development. Now, for various reasons, mainly of political stability, the Chinese regime got its act together and understood that actually, we're going to have to temper and mitigate some of these social consequences. If these people are going to continue to agree to be exploited and work to produce mega-profits for hand-picked, often hand-picked Chinese giants, we'll need to give some regional development, we'll need to do a bit of redistribution, we'll need to limit what this emerging capitalist class can do. On top of that, of course, also, the

bureaucracy, the party state wanted to make sure that they didn't become an independent power, and so you got this fusion of party state capitalism, where essentially, the party has got to have a cell in every business over a certain number of employees, that kind of thing.

And they get involved quite directly in, you know, business decisions, investment decisions, that kind of thing. Done very well. They have all the contradictions and crisis tendencies of capitalism generally, but I think that you could argue that the party state dimension and the way in which it's sewn into the ordinary fabric of capitalistic decision-making gives them a slightly more instrumentally rational oversight, a class-wide purview, if you like, of the situation, and partly also because the party state is generally populated at the top by people who've done practical things like engineering, sciences and so on. They're not the kind of morons we tend to be governed by. They're vicious, ruthless people, but they're not morons. I think that that results in some... I mean, I've got to confess a certain ambivalence about this. Like, some things that they do are inherently rational for the future of civilisation, and that's buried in there with a lot of repression and brutality and murderousness, and I think that incipiently we're going to see some version of Chinese imperialism. You know, like, I'm talking about militarised Chinese imperialism at some point.

So do you want to double down and cheer because they're incredibly well-developed and prosperous? Eh... I think we have to have, as Fredric Jameson once said, the flexibility of mind to recognise in the same thought that capitalism is all at one and the same time the best thing that's ever happened to humanity and the worst thing that's happened to humanity, and if we can understand prosperity and development in those ways, we'll understand that yeah, sure, it can be used in ways that lift people out of severe poverty, that spread certain material benefits that we need. It can also destroy us. So, yeah, just to come back to the question of democracy, which is sandwiched in there, and it's very important, I think we have to argue that democracy, our right to have a say in what happens to us, our agency, is not contingent on whether it results in good or bad developments, in terms of whether we get growth or not. The idea that you can only have democracy if you have growth, that it's conditional – no, I absolutely refute that. I'm not prepared to submit to someone else's examination or invigilation of my rights. That's my answer to that.

### **K Biswas**

Great question. Thank you, Anonymous. We've got another question in the chat from Amin. "Does the rise of polarisation and division represent failure of democracy, or is it an unavoidable challenge within democratic societies?" So, polarisation and division.

### **Richard Seymour**

You know, I think the late Christopher Hitchens, before he went to the dark side, had some interesting thoughts about this. Essentially, the idea that we should think of democracy's aim as being to reach a consensus where we all kind of agree on everything is quite a sinister one, and a latently authoritarian one. And whenever you sense a consensus emerging, well, who's that consensus for? Who's doing it? Whose interests does it serve? I

think polarisation and division is mostly a positive thing. I think it is... Let me put this more precisely. This side of the revolution, or whatever you want to call it, this side of capitalism and socialism, when we live in a class-divided society, when we live in a society with oppression, when we live in a society where millions of people are treated in a dehumanising and exploitative way, we need division and polarisation, because if there wasn't division and polarisation, that would mean we were OK with this, rather than we're having a serious fight about it.

And if we need division and polarisation, we need that to be expressible in democratic terms. Democracy has to be capable of handling it, and that's exactly what was stripped out to a large extent. I mean, the erosion of parliamentary democracy is a long story. But you could certainly trace some of it back to the neoliberal cycle that I mentioned earlier. There was a quite self-conscious, class-conscious effort to remove certain capacities and powers from democracy – privatise them, turn them over to quangos, subject them to market mechanisms – just to make sure that the public can't demand too much. So, yeah, I... Sorry, I've forgotten the question now.

**K Biswas**

Is it unavoidable in democratic societies, basically?

**Richard Seymour**

It's unavoidable, and in the immediate term, desirable. I think if we lived in a society where most of our needs were met and we didn't have systematic persecution, exploitation or abuse, then we could talk about the idea of having a broad concordance, but I hope nobody's under the impression that we're ever going to get to this cultural ground zero where everybody kind of agrees on the most important values. I don't think that's right, and I don't think I want that.

**K Biswas**

I think Butskellism's basically dead. It was interesting to hear the Prime Minister yesterday talk about trying to get consensus about Britain's relationship with the EU and also mentioning George Osborne, the Conservatives' option, Ed Davey, the Liberal Democrats' option, for our future relationship with the EU. I'm just, like... I feel that that ship has sailed, and it might be the type of thing that he's signalled, but has absolutely no hope of creating on a parliamentary level, let alone a societal level.

**Richard Seymour**

Yeah.

**K Biswas**

I do want to talk a bit about the conclusions in your book, because that final chapter made a huge impact on me. You write in your conclusion, "the paradox in this book has

been that, where real crises abound, disaster nationalism is enthralled by entirely fictional crises." So do you think it would be better to mobilise people to take action on those real crises related to, say, climate breakdown and its associated migrations, rather than focus our attentions on debunking these fictitious crises that are popularised by disaster nationalists?

### **Richard Seymour**

Yeah... I think it's easy to say. It's much harder to do. I mean, it's not like we haven't tried mobilising, but sometimes you just find as a matter of historical fact that the coalitions and strategies and the tactical repertoires that you need aren't always available. I think there has been this general trend toward rapid mobilisations – flash movements, as they're called, which can have a great effect in the moment, but dissipate too quickly and don't leave any kind of institutional residue. So it would be nice for me to be able to say, yeah, let's just organise around the real crises and, you know, that'll cut through it.

I think part of the problem is that disaster nationalism is self-consciously, to an extent, insofar as it can be coherently all bracketed together, it's supposed to be entertaining, supposed to be fun. Like, it's... You start off, for example, being an unemployed Welshman, alcoholic, very depressed, doesn't have good relations with the family, and then you watch a Panorama documentary about grooming gangs and then you start googling Tommy Robinson and you start watching his videos and they're enthralling if you don't care about the politics... Maybe not his videos specifically, I don't know, but that sort of genre of video is enthralling. And then the feeling of... what he said was, "I'm a soldier against Islam." He told his mates this in the pub before he drove to London and tried to murder people outside Finsbury Park mosque, after previously trying to murder Jeremy Corbyn – generally not mentioned. He told his friends he was a soldier against Islam, and then when they caught him, he said he wanted to kill all Muslims, but he'd killed one and he said he'd done his job and he was happy, he couldn't have been happier. And I think it's the fact that it's fun, that we want to be buzz-killers when it comes to this kind of organisation. So that I don't think we can just go to them and say, "Hey, look, forget about all that stuff – would you like better healthcare? Would you like us to nationalise water? Can we talk about anything other than the thing that you're really obsessed with?" I don't think we can do that. At the same time, I don't think we can go to them and say, "You know what, there's a rational kernel to what you're saying about the migrants." You know, "it hasn't been very well organised" and, you know, "what kind of state capacity is there if all these small boats can get over here?" I don't think that's going to work, because that cedes the terrain and it makes you sound kind of stupid, because it's false. I think that one has to... again, the kind of dialectical shape of this would be, one has to look for who can be drawn into some kind of activity.

So you can mobilise against them... Like, for example, it was much easier when fascists had these stupid little marches and you could get your mates together and outnumber them and send them home feeling demoralised with their tails between their legs, you know, having achieved nothing. Great. And there's a good reason, by the way, that these guys are not marching in Tower Hamlets any more like they tried to, because they would

get their heads handed to them. But my point is that if it's possible to demoralise them, to inculcate fear and confusion and disarray, one should do so. But one should also... It's not personal, it's not like we want them to be lost to fascism. Those who are willing to be drawn into activity, and some useful, productive activity – You want to defend your housing? You want to defend your workplace? You care about your neighbourhood? Great. Let's do something together, and then I'll argue with you. And in the context of that kind of working together, yeah, then you can debunk things, although often, it's not so much about the facts and who has the facts, because people often don't like being corrected. They think it's self-important, and it's like, "You don't know me that way, why are you talking to me like that?" It's often about the encounter. So you build relationships. And I think that that's something like the shape of how we're going to get through this.

### **K Biswas**

Amin asks a follow-up question in the Q&A. You obviously mentioned the Finsbury Park attack, and in your book, you mention the murder of Jo Cox, these very serious, high-profile murderous events, and Amin asks, "Why do serious crimes such as murder and sexual violence continue to occur even in highly developed countries? What social, economic, cultural, institutional factors contribute to these, and what solutions are being implemented?" I mean, I can't answer that question, but if I know someone who might be able to have a stab at it, it's you, Richard! Why does murder and sexual violence happen in developed countries?

### **Richard Seymour**

I think because the old idea that it arises primarily from deprivation is not quite right. Yes, there are crimes of deprivation, and certainly being deprived can brutalise one. There is a really lovely wistful idea that to be oppressed or exploited is to be virtuous. No! It fucks you up. It doesn't bring out the best in anyone. But... so, yeah, that can sometimes, you know... To be at bottom end of society and to be treated like shit and to be excluded from everything, yeah, that can lead to a certain type of criminality, like, you could become a petit bourgeois proprietor. "I'm going to sell drugs," you know, or "I'm going to look after me and mine by burgling some people," and usually you're burgling other working-class people, so not great. Or you could become a loan shark, a little Thatcherite, you know, backed up by some henchmen. Those are the kinds of crimes I would associate with deprivation and deprived areas and so on, and for people's individualist strategies, desperate strategies, to get out of them, but when you're talking about murder and sexual violence, I really think of these as crimes of... well, particularly with murder, anomie. What Durkheim calls anomie – the sort of social dislocation and atomisation and the feeling that it inculcates of just meaninglessness, sheer nihilism. Like, "we live in a dog eat dog world", it's a world in which, as I said, it doesn't make any sense. It's paranoid – "everybody's out to get me, and on top of everything else, I can't believe anything anybody says, so I don't know what's the truth. Nothing makes sense. The news is just a bunch of bewildering fragments, and other people, they're always trying to rip me off, and I can relish my own victimhood," and, you know... And, you know, "I'm going to get a gun." You know? "I'm going to have a gun. And if somebody wants to come for me, I'll do what you're supposed to do. I'm going to man up and shoot them."

Sexual violence, I just think when we're talking about sexual violence... There are... It's going to be multi-causal. I think it's interesting that, like other violent crimes, sexual violence in North America and Europe, most of the countries, I think, that would fall into those categories, it fell from 1995 onwards, pretty straight, and I wonder why. I've always wondered, what is it about these crimes and this particular time period that you start to see a collapse? Do you know what? I've seen there's a fairly... It's a slightly sort of wacky theory, but it's kind of got the evidence for it, which is that we stopped putting lead in the petrol. We stopped poisoning people with lead, and it strongly correlates with... You know, people who are growing up with that don't have the same propensity toward this kind of antisocial behaviour. I have no doubt that that is... If it's operative at all, it's a catalyst, rather than the underlying cause. I think there have been civilising forces, like, for example, feminism has changed how men think and feel. Not uniformly, but a lot of men just started to think and feel differently, and it became less acceptable among men to, you know, to have... Hit one's wife, for example. And one couldn't make a joke about rape and expect that... I mean, obviously, again, it varies, but I think just mores and attitudes changed, and the result is that there was a bit less space for that kind of behaviour to be normalised. All sorts of other factors involved there too.

All I can say is, if we build a society in which there's increasing sense of meaninglessness, of nihilism, then what you're going to get are the crimes of nihilism. And here I think what's interesting is that even as the crimes that I'm talking about – murder, one-on-one murder, and sexual violence – declined in these countries during that period, other forms of violent crime increased. Lone wolf murders increased. Mass shootings increased. That's mostly focused on America here, but, you know, America sneezes, we all catch the cold. You had examples of this in Europe too. And I think those are crimes reflecting... Invariably they have a political dimension, even if they're not overtly politically expressed. And I'm not saying this to justify this stuff. It's horrible. But I am saying that to sort of take it out of the individualist domain of "some guy just went crazy"... Why are so many guys going crazy? You know, that would be the good question to ask. And I think that it's partly a kind of assertion of political agency, and partly, it's a kind of rebarbative regurgitation of War on Terror conditioning. That's particularly notable, that the main perpetrators in the US, or at least the biggest group of perpetrators, are ex-soldiers, people who've come out of the army. You know, you've gone out and you've been trained to kill, and you come back, and the people you were told were enemies are all over the place. So...

### **K Biswas**

Thank you so much for the questions, Amin. I'm going to ask Richard a final very brief question, and expect a brief answer. It's the biggest question, which is, do you think in your lifetime it's more likely that democracy as we know it renews itself or simply ends?

### **Richard Seymour**

Oh, man, you know, I can't approach this as a disengaged intellect. You know, if I was a betting man, I'd say, yeah, structurally, the odds favour fascism, violent polarisations in which fascists win more than we do, anyway. I certainly don't think parliamentary

democracy as we know it has the capacity to renew itself within, from within. It would have to be invigorated from without, and then we would need to change what it is. But the great thing about politics, which also makes it agonising, is that we don't know everything. You know, the social totality is just not that transparent. Often there are these strange potencies being formed that we didn't foresee – that happened with the Corbyn moment.

In the last analysis, I am not pessimistic for humanity, because I think ultimately that socialism is in some sense an expression of an original striving of the species, not just some fancy idea invented by European intellectuals. Teleology has got a bum rap to mean some sort of determinism. "Oh, you're teleological, are you? You think it's all inevitable?" No! In the original sense, teleology applied to organisms. It meant a striving for the fullest expression and development of one's capacities, and I think that this sort of striving for universality and for communion, and all the rest of it – that desire is certainly muted and obtunded under late capitalism, and all the anomic conditions that we've talked about. It comes through in putative desires, which are often big, for a better society, for more generosity, more abundance, abundance of the good things. Sometimes it comes out in a political campaign. You remember the Sanders campaign, and the line that he would often come back to was, "When we stand together," and people will start cheering. And it was about the offer of collective adventure, of doing something that is good and rational and humane together, that social eros.

And of course, you know, I'm aware, and people will say to me, this theory, if this exists, then it's produced some pretty awful and perverse outcomes – you know, look at the terrorist dictatorships of the 20th century and all the rest of it... And I would say, yeah, I mean, in a way, it makes sense that this defeat of communism was authored by regimes calling themselves communist. That's exactly the kind of historical irony that Marx and Engels would have expected, albeit been appalled by. You know, the self-destruction of an idea as it reaches its real historical limitations in that moment can be disastrous, but even so, even with all that, I would say that every decent accomplishment of the species, from abolition to democracy... and I dare say, you know, this hunger lurks in all of us even now in however abbreviated and distorted and misrecognised a form... That has been behind our best accomplishments. In the old Platonist language, we would have called it a collective striving for the good, the true and the beautiful, and the earthly and concrete realisation of that is just what we call communism. I think that is something that is on the agenda for humanity. Whether we'll get there or not, I have no idea, and certainly not in my lifetime.

## **K Biswas**

What a wonderful way to end. Thank you so much, Richard, for sharing your insights with us. Really appreciate you joining us. And Richard's book, *Disaster Nationalism*, is out on Verso from 2024. Thanks to Tayyab Amin for producing this event, and also to our funders, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Hollick Family Foundation, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Power of Pop Fund. Huge thank-you to all of you for joining us today, and some great questions. There'll be a recording of this event available in the next few weeks. Please sign up to the newsletter and the social channels, and do keep an eye out on the Explore section of our website, which has an ever-growing free-to-access set of

digital learning resources. That's at [stuarthallfoundation.org](http://stuarthallfoundation.org) And finally, please join us for the next Reading the Crisis conversation, where I'll be talking to Sheena Patel about culture on Wednesday, 14th of October from 5:30pm UK time. Hope to see you there. Thanks and goodbye for now.