**Headline:** The Insurrection at the U.S. Capitol Is a Sign of a Much Deeper Problem Than Donald J. Trump

By Albena Azmanova and Marshall Auerback

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**[Article Body:]**

While the majority of Americans deplored the events at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, it was troubling to see a [YouGov poll](https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2021/01/06/US-capitol-trump-poll) indicating that one in five voters approved of the assault. Their attitudes were buttressed by a significant number of House and Senate Republicans who have egged on the matter [by continuing to call into question the legitimacy of last November’s election result](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/10/capitol-attack-republican-senators-josh-hawley-ted-cruz-face-resign). This is a sign that the rot in the American political system goes deep.

Upgrading the physical security around the country’s political institutions is of little long-term value, especially if the activities that occur within them continue to manifest ongoing dysfunction worthy of a banana republic.

Let this be our wake-up call, America’s “Beirut blast.” The bomb explosion that devastated large parts of Beirut last summer was not an isolated, unfortunate occurrence, but the profound manifestation of decades of incompetence, complacency, and corruption in the Lebanese government—an outcome of the ruling classes’ criminal neglect of essential public needs.

By the same token, the events of January 6 should be viewed as the point U.S. political dysfunction reached its breaking point. While the country still appears to remain economically powerful, it has become politically weak and socially fragile in ways characteristic of a society in decline. The focus on the relatively small group [that broke into the Capitol as a result of lax security](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/capitol-invaders-were-bitter-dangerous-and-pitifully-lost-89srf8xt9) is akin to focusing on the Beirut blast wreckage to the exclusion of all else. Far more significant are the surveys of representative samples of Americans that reveal [deepening mistrust of the core institutions](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/18/opinion/sunday/institutions-trust.html) and a growing commitment to sectarian interests which have, in many parts of the nation, superseded commitment to the republic itself.

This sheds a different light on the events. While the spark that ignited the violent pro-Trump upheaval was the incumbent’s allegations that the November presidential election was fraudulent, for many the assault on the Capitol was also an insurgency against the entire political class. “All these politicians work for us. We pay their salaries, and we pay our taxes. And what do we get? Nothing,” as a [member of the mob stated](https://www.insider.com/trump-stupporters-capitol-mob-video-2021-1?utm_source=copy-link&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=topbar), with another calling “every single” politician in the Capitol “a traitor.”

On this particular point, the grievances of the violent mob and the findings of scholars align: America is an oligarchy, not a functioning democracy, as the [detailed study](https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-echochambers-27074746) by Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page argued in 2014. Thus, much as this was an assault on American democracy, the storming of the Capitol was also a sign that American democracy had already failed. Surely, these clumsy “revolutionaries” did not storm the Capitol because they are living the American Dream—and they are blaming, unsurprisingly, the whole political class for their malaise.

Whenever economic explanations of this radicalization are attempted, inequality is singled out as the root of working-class discontent. Commentators from [Joseph Stiglitz](https://www8.gsb.columbia.edu/faculty/jstiglitz/) to [Thomas Piketty](https://bit.ly/38NHN3y) or [Emmanuel Saez](https://eml.berkeley.edu/~saez/) relentlessly hammer on one theme above all others: an economic inequality that has deep roots in the political system. A cross-party consensus is now emerging on fighting inequality through redistribution—from raising the minimum wage to increasing unemployment benefits.

One reason why inequality has attracted so much attention is that it is easily measurable. Indeed, [reports of the top 1 percent of Americans taking $50 trillion from the bottom 90 percent](https://time.com/5888024/50-trillion-income-inequality-america/) easily appeal to our sense of injustice. However, there are [studies](https://hbr.org/2016/11/what-so-many-people-dont-get-about-the-u-s-working-class) of the white working class which reveal that despite the outrage about inequality, many in this demographic still admire the rich. Additionally, the singular focus on economic inequality obscures another phenomenon—the massive economic insecurity which is affecting broader swaths of the population beyond the “precariat” (those in poorly paid and insecure jobs). While insecurity is not easy to measure and report, it is in fact [at the root of](https://bit.ly/3stg1Rx) the social malaise of Western societies.

Seeing economic precarity as a root cause also helps to better explain why so much of the working-class radicalization has taken a turn to the right. Right-wing populists specifically evoke language that triggers conservative instincts—the evocation of family, a desire for stability, for clinging strongly to what is familiar (“Make America Great Again”), as opposed to plunging into political experimentation with something new—with the “foreign,” to the American mind, European-style social democracy. On the other hand, many on the libertarian right champion free-market fundamentalism, which fosters competitive, rather than communal attitudes—especially when public goods are converted into private rents via privatization, which in turn limits access to resources that mitigate the effects of that intense competition instead of enhancing social solidarity.

Even under recent Democratic administrations, economic recovery from the 2008 financial meltdown happened through growth in insecure employment. The services jobs that fueled U.S. economic growth for the past 40 years—until the pandemic began to [destroy](https://theintercept.com/2020/09/01/biden-economic-policy-us-economy/) them—were numerous, but of low quality. The rise of neoliberalism at the expense of the conservative-liberal divide that preceded it has enabled employers to tilt the terms of our capitalist economies heavily toward capital and away from labor, via the evisceration of unions, the deconstruction of the welfare state, and the privatization of public services. Most importantly, funding for public services and social programs has been repeatedly slashed. It is this impoverishment of the public commons that has increased the importance of personal wealth in securing essential goods such as health care and education. Thus, economic inequality matters enormously, but as a grave symptom of a broader problem—that of massive, and growing, fragility of society as a whole.

As a result, the American economy has begun to resemble a new modern feudalism with a small technocracy dominated by Silicon Valley tech overlords and Wall Street billionaires at the top, and a large, uneducated, rapidly growing serf class at the bottom with no social safety net to protect it. Even if the wealth gap were to be considerably reduced by transfer from rich to poor, precarity would persist because it is rooted not in inequality, but in a depleted public sector, in a public authority that has abandoned the public and increasingly [become a vehicle for predatory capitalism](https://www.amazon.com/Predator-State-Conservatives-Abandoned-Liberals/dp/141656683X).

The pandemic exacerbated both the inequality and the precarity. Wall Street and the stock market have boomed over the past several months, generating affluence imbued with unprecedented levels of risk. At the same time, job growth has collapsed, and unemployment remains stubbornly high. Millions of Americans have withdrawn from the labor force, their jobs likely destroyed for good as the long-term impact of the economic shutdown wreaks havoc in many industries. That has become a literal life consequence for working people in a system that continues to introduce restrictions to curb the pandemic.

It is a particularly acute paradox in the United States, where health care remains largely predicated to employment via employer-funded health care systems. So we have the makings of a vicious cycle: restrictions are introduced to slow the pandemic, which in turn creates further job losses, which in turn can mean loss of employment and, hence, loss of access to health care provision. The very policies designed to safeguard health, then, ultimately exacerbate the problem. Add all of these factors together, align it with a demagogue working to undermine an election result, and you get the ingredients for a very poisonous outbreak of the kind we witnessed on January 6.

The forces that led to the evisceration of working-class security are now extending to those ensconced in historically well-paid jobs, from lawyers to IT engineers. Even in the midst of a severe recession and a rapidly accelerating pandemic, policymakers [remain remarkably indifferent to these trends and the ongoing precarity](https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-12-27/larry-summers-trump-pelosi-2-000-stimulus-checks-are-a-mistake?sref=qD0EKJAt). They persist in believing that what has happened is merely a disruption to a solid structure, a deviation from normality, all of which can be rectified by the right mix of policy stimulus. A growing political consensus in the United States to tackle inequality appears to be emerging (especially in the wake of the recent Georgia runoff election, which put the Senate back under the control of the Democratic Party). But no matter how equal society becomes in terms of wealth distribution, without a dramatic government investment in public services, notably education, health care provision, and job security, distrust and disillusionment in American institutions will persist, and with that also the rise of militancy by a radicalized underclass.