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QAnon and the Digital Lumpenproletariat

Isaac Kamola

Clyde Barrow's *The Dangerous Class* comprehensively chronicles the history and changing conceptualizations of the lumpenproletariat, and the place this unruly population holds in the writings of Marx, Engels, and the Marxist tradition more generally. Barrow demonstrates that the term "lumpenproletariat" is commonly used in a variety of ways. As an economic category, it captures the creation the industrial reserve army and surplus population. As a cultural category, it describes a desperate and unemployed population that live outside the capitalist wage economy and therefore is culturally unmoored from proletarian life. This population includes the most desperately impoverished as well as conspirators, unemployed intellectuals, bankrupt aristocrats, and those "nonworking social groups that obtain a living through some form of hustling, gambling, thievery, chicanery, or organized violence" (69). Rather than sharing a common class-based culture, the lumpenproletariat exists in desperation but without class solidarities.

As a political category, the term lumpenproletariat describes a population that, being disconnected from capitalist production, exhibits "reactionary and mercenary tendencies" and therefore acts in ways that are "always attached to some other class—the peasantry, the monarchy/aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, or sometimes the proletariat" (70). They are a class that, while ravaged by a capitalist economy, nonetheless lack a clear ideology or clear political relation within a class politics. Therefore, "[w]hen the lumpenproletariat becomes politically active it brings large numbers of desperate people, an unbridled capacity for violence and brutality, and a willingness to side with anyone" (70). Historically, political leaders such as Louis Bonaparte—whom Marx calls "*chief of the Lumpenproletariat*"—have harnessed this unpredictable population to form an unexpectedly powerful political base (76).

The second half of *The Dangerous Class* examines how the lumpenproletariat has been mobilized within contemporary relations of deindustrialization and the ongoing decomposition of the industrial proletariat. He notes that as "an entire generation of proletarians slowly watched themselves and their children sink into lumpenproletarian status," in walked Donald Trump (147). The surprising success of this pathetically farcical Bonaparte raises the ominous question: "What is to be done with this swollen and energized lumpenproletariat? ...so long as the fundamental logic of capitalist development remains intact...it will continue to grow" (147).

Barrow's analysis of the lumpenproletariat is particularly useful for understanding the increasingly large percentage of the population what lives by hustling on the margins of the digital economy. Today, twenty-four percent of Americans work in the gig economy, where "the line between lumpen and proletarian worker becomes blurred."¹ In addition to living in economic precarity, the digital lumpenproletariat also manifests as a volatile online cultural and political presence. The cultural and political realities of the new digital lumpenproletariat are clearly visible in the sprawling incoherent networks that purvey, circulate, and profit from QAnon conspiracies.

QAnon is an omnibus conspiracy movement that began in 2017 with anonymous posts on the image messaging board 4chan (and later 8chan/8kun).² Q—supposedly a high-ranking Trump government official—posted cryptic messages calling upon his supporters to wage a war against a

¹ Villanova, Michael. "The Lumpen in Marx's Works and Its Relevance for Contemporary Political Struggle." *Capital & Class* (2020): 16.

² For an overview of QAnon, see: *Q: Into the Storm*. Directed by Cullen Hoback. New York: HBO Documentary, 2021; Feeld, Julian, Travis View, and Jake Rockatansky. *QAnon Anonymous* (podcast); Zuckerman, Ethan. "QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal." *Journal of Design and Science*, 6, 2019.

deep state network of pedophile elites, including many within the Democratic Party, Hollywood, and the media establishment. Q accused these elites of cannibalizing young children and drinking their blood, and rallied a “digital army” to lay the groundwork for a mass police action—“the storm”—during which Trump would arrest and execute the Satan-worshipping cabal.

It has proven difficult to accurately capture the depth and breadth of public support for QAnon—although all indications point to many more followers than any traditional political analyst would be comfortable accepting.³ It has proven even more difficult to capture the socio-economic makeup of those drawn to this bizarre conspiracy theory. However, QAnon—like its protagonist, Trump—clearly channel popular feelings of economic deprivation. After all, QAnon became popular during the COVID pandemic lockdown, a time of considerable economic turmoil—with 9.6 percent of the workforce unemployed.⁴ With people trapped at home, online traffic skyrocketed, as did the popularity of Q. A once ardent follower described how QAnon was “comforting, a way to get...bearings in a chaotic world that felt increasingly unequal and rigged against middle-class people like her....Evil cabals could be defeated,” whereas a general sense of economic dread could not.⁵

Determining the degree to which QAnon is driven by economic hardship requires additional research. However, within the virtual world economic discontent has also become cultural. For example, QAnon grew out of the 2014 Gamergate controversy—an organized harassment campaign against promoters of greater diversity in video games. This online culture war mobilized a large—and otherwise politically apathetic—online population, “communities [that] view[ed] themselves as the aggrieved party...repeatedly victimized by the mainstream, by ‘Liberals,’ and by women and minorities who ‘take’ their jobs.”⁶ Organized largely on 4Chan, Gamergate mobilized an online mob of the culturally disaffected and politically estranged (and primarily white) young men. Once activated, these communities unleashed an online meme-driven politics that morphed into elements of the alt-Right, pro-Trump online activism, and eventually QAnon.

In the years since, the QAnon conspiracy is sustained by the grift of a large network of YouTubers, live streamers, “researchers,” message board administrators, and other content producers. Many of the main influencers left waged employment to become online peddlers of conspiracies. Wellness gurus, supplement peddlers, authors and artists, and merchandizers channeled the QAnon phenomenon for economic gain.

As a movement lacking in coherent ideology, Trump and elements of the Republican party were quick to harness this volatile and disaffected population. Rather than condemning a movement responsible for violent acts (and labeled a domestic terror threat by the FBI), Trump instead tweeted QAnon content 315 times and praised followers as “people who love our country.”⁷ Many

³ Shanahan, James. “Support for QAnon is Hard to Measure—And Polls May Overestimate It.” *The Conversation*, March 5. <https://theconversation.com/support-for-qanon-is-hard-to-measure-and-polls-may-overestimate-it-156020> (last accessed April 2021).

⁴ Lauren Bauer, Kristen Broady, Wendy Edelberg, and Jimmy O’Donnell. “Ten Facts About COVID-19 and the U.S. Economy.” Brookings Institution, September 17, 2020.

⁵ Tavernise, Sabrina. “‘Trump Just Used Us and Our Fear’: One Woman’s Journey Out of QAnon.” *The New York Times*, January 29, 2021.

⁶ Bezio, Kristin MS. “Ctrl-Alt-Del: GamerGate as a Precursor to the Rise of the Alt-Right.” *Leadership* 14, no. 5 (2018): 557.

⁷ Kaplan, Alex. “QAnon Twitter Accounts. The FBI Has Linked the Conspiracy Theory to Domestic Terror.” *Media Matters*, August 1, 2021. <https://www.mediamatters.org/twitter/fbi-calls-qanon-domestic-terror-threat-trump-has-amplified-qanon-supporters-twitter-more-20> (last accessed April 2021).

Republican politicians—including Eric Trump, White House deputy communications director Dan Scavino, Michael Flynn, and Representatives Devin Nunes, Lauren Boebert, and Marjorie Taylor Greene—have actively promoted QAnon. A whole class of political operatives has sought to harness this explosive political energy, including Jerome Corsi, Alex Jones, Roger Stone, and others. The Republican Attorney General Association, bankrolled by major corporations and the Koch donor network, provided the infrastructure for the Capitol rally on January 6, but QAnon helped provide the mob.⁸

Rather than beggars, vagabonds, and swindlers spilling into the streets of a rapidly industrializing city, the digital lumpenproletariat is not only part of a growing online economic precariat, but also large, excitable, and dangerous cultural and political force, operating outside rational political calculation, class analysis, or even ideological coherency. It is therefore a population ripe of the political taking.

Barrow concludes his book with the suggestion that one possible alternative to the seemingly inevitable dystopian lumpen future is “postindustrial socialism,” which would provide a guaranteed income, a shorter workday, and greater control over our time (Chapter Six). This possible future, however, requires organizing a radical mass movement—one which will inevitably come into direct conflict with a well-funded, well-organized, and politically savvy plutocratic class that has the most—economically and ideologically—to lose from such transformations. This struggle for a more just postindustrial future will be fought online and in the streets. As such, Barrow provides a valuable starting point for beginning to understand the real dangers this new digital lumpenproletariat poses. While this dangerous class might unexpectedly prove a radical—if unpredictable—ally, simply ignoring it will only ensure its continual mobilization for the purpose of derailing redistributive policies with its volatile cocktail of cruelty, idiocy, and desperation.

⁸ O’Brien, Luke. “How Republican Politics (And Twitter) Created Ali Alexander, The Man Behind ‘Stop The Steal.’” *Huffington Post*, March 8, 2021. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/republicans-twitter-ali-alexander-stop-the-steal_n_6026fb26c5b6f88289fbab57 (last accessed April 2021).