

# Nemesis

## Susan Neiman

“Will workers be served by a president who openly praises union-busters? Of course not, but Trump’s promise was to be their retribution, not to solve their problems.”

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This is an excerpt from our post-election symposium, [“On the Return of Trump.”](#)

One emerging consensus in these post-election days is that woke ideology has lost. Harris ran an impressively unwoke campaign. But as James Carville said, “we couldn’t get the stench off” the woke messages transmitted by, among others, the old white man in the White House. It’s less clear who, or what, has won. Understanding this is crucial to preparing for the future ahead.

The first misunderstanding has been brewing for years: the view that woke is left. Both those who support it and those who loathe it think so, and if that were true, defeat of the woke would be a mandate for the right. Woke has indeed been propelled by long-standing left-wing emotions: when in doubt, our hearts are with the underdog. Once you put these aside, you’ll find some very reactionary philosophical assumptions. *We only really connect with members of our own tribes. The call for justice is a liberal smoke screen for calls to power. The search for progress is hopeless, for every step forward leads to subtler forms of misery.*

There’s reason to hope this is where tribalist thinking runs out. The election overturned the first assumption, even for those who thought the key to analyzing elections was counting demographics. But the phrase “identity politics” is a misnomer, for it presupposes we are fundamentally definable by race and gender. (Those of us who have long believed that we are not may take momentary if bitter consolation in the fact that the percentage of Latino Trump voters surged or that women did not save the Harris candidacy.) Can we reject the other two principles of woke ideology and move forward?

The assumptions that justice is hogwash and progress a mirage are deeply ingrained in both woke and Trumpist ideologies. In darkest moments, Trump’s victory can make those whose lives have not been governed by material interests feel like the suckers he thinks we are.

Seventy percent of those who voted for a vicious and vulgar tyrant said their main concern was the economy. Doesn't that show that the bottom line is always the bottom line?

Here's what is certain: *The Economist's* October claim that the American economy is the envy of the world is not true for the half of Americans who would be threatened by an unexpected \$400 bill. Without the language to specify their anxiety, voters—and the journalists who quote them—name inflation. But the fear and pain of inflation are tied to a system in which no structures exist to prevent homelessness or illness if you are faced with an unplanned expense. Few Americans can imagine such structures, which is why talk of economic uncertainty is confined to talk of inflation or wages. Yet in other wealthy countries, health care, housing, sick leave, parental leave, and education are considered social rights—matters of justice. All were codified in the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, after two years of deliberation chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt. Still, Americans consider them matters of luck.

Biden called himself a pro-union president, but when faced with a national rail strike before the 2022 midterms, even pressure from his White House could only negotiate a wage increase. The workers' central demand, five sick days per year, went unmet. Tell this to a European and they would hardly be more appalled if you said we eat babies for breakfast. Embedded in legal systems that guarantee sick leave if a doctor prescribes it, they cannot fathom citizens accepting anything else. Against such assumptions, Biden's visit to a UAW picket line was a symptom of the symbolic politics that reeks of empty posturing.

Will workers be served by a president who openly praises union busters? Of course not, but Trump's promise was to be their retribution, not to solve their problems. The problems are as international as the systems that created them, which is why some analysts point to a bias against incumbents that marked recent elections.

Bernie Sanders is on the right track, but dividing the country into blue (collar) and white (collar) is only slightly more helpful than dividing us into shades of skin tone. Class reductionism is almost as counterproductive as ethnic reductionism. The rage at a system so brutally irrational is not confined to the working class. A week after the election, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that few professors can afford the American dream. Substituting class for race only exchanges one tribe for another, when the message of this election is that we are *all* appalled by the (dis)order around us. Theodor Adorno wrote that fascism is always an option within liberal capitalist societies, where people sense that reality is at odds with official discourse but have no tools to explain the gap except

eliminating the Other. Even Democrats find it easier to focus on restricting immigration than to imagine structural social change.

Trump's rants make no sense? Neither do the battery of advertising messages we ingest every day without noticing how they prime us to abandon sense entirely. (My own favorite is a blueberry farm that advertises "the berry that cares.") Nor is it only Arab Americans in Michigan who are outraged by a government sending billions of dollars to demolish Gaza while rehabilitating those whose war on Iraq destroyed the world's last hope that the US could be a force for moral clarity. After the largest student protests since the Vietnam War, why are we talking about Dearborn?

America's plight is peculiarly irrational because we have the means but not the vocabulary to fix it. Trump voters were drawn to a man who expressed the diffuse but palpable rage you encounter when returning to the United States after a sojourn elsewhere. It burbles in airports and supermarkets across genders and demographics. And as Hannah Arendt wrote in *On Violence*, rage is not an automatic reaction to misery and suffering: "Only where there is reason to suspect that conditions could be changed and are not does rage arise. Only when our sense of justice is offended do we react with rage."

### **Susan Neiman**

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