

INTRO: This is part two of my interview with Joshua Stevens. If you have not yet listened to [part one](#), I highly recommend that you do that first. It was [episode #156](#) of The Maverick Show and it provides some really important context for this episode. If you have already listened to [part one](#), then please enjoy part two of my interview with Joshua Stevens.

Matt Bowles: You have actually been nomading longer than I have. I remember watching your travel experiences and before I became a nomad and I was just like, wow, he's traveling all of these different places and he's having all of these different experiences. So maybe if you could just sort of take us a little bit on that journey. And I think a great place to start would be 2012 because you and I were actually both in Egypt in 2012, albeit at different times. I was there for about two months and then I went back and I was there in 2014 for about nine months. But I wonder if you can share a little bit about one that transition into the nomad or semi nomadic lifestyle that you've ostensibly maintained for pretty close to a decade anyways. I would say now.

Joshua Stephens: Yeah.

Matt Bowles: And if you can talk a little bit about the transition into that lifestyle and then particularly to share about your experiences in Egypt during the Arab Spring at the early part of that journey.

Joshua Stephens: Yeah. So, you kind of have to wind the tape back about six months to Occupy Wall Street, which was a moment that I think most of us who came out of that post Seattle wave of mass action scenarios around the political conventions and IMF meetings and things like that. It was not a moment that we anticipated that came out of Obama riding to office on this wave of idealistic young people who were kind of seeing the writing on the wall in terms of how their student debt obligations and the state of the economy were on a collision course. And so, they thought, we're going to get behind this progressive leader and he's going to dance with the one who bring him and all this stuff and they were knocking on doors and bringing people out and doing all this stuff and. And then nothing happened for them.

So, when the 2008 financial collapse happened and everybody got fucking rolled, they were rightly pissed. And when they first took over Zuccotti, I remember I was living in New York and I remember thinking, this isn't going to last. They're going to put up a tent and the NYPD is going to come in and kick the shit out of every last one of them and, and clear that park and it's going to be over. Like it's a noble thing that they're trying to do, but it's very naive and it's not going to last. And then a week later, it was still there. And the day that [Troy Davis](#) was executed in the United States, there was a memorial gathering for him in Union Square that I went to. And it turned into a sort of spontaneous march and we were getting attacked by cops all the way through Soho. I remember ducking behind cars with this Israeli anarchist who was living in Brooklyn and like hearing windows smash and like all kinds of stuff. And then we ended up in Zuccotti and in the park.

And I'm looking around and I'm seeing these 19- to 21-year-old who clearly had no political education or mentorship or anything. And they've got placards out that, I'm not even exaggerating, had like JFK conspiracy on them and stuff. And I was just like, oh my God, I don't want any part of this. This is going to like veer into anti-Semitism any minute. It was maybe a week later that that march came out of Zuccotti and headed uptown in Manhattan and those two young women got pepper sprayed outside of Union Square. And it was live streamed. And I was actually in an IAS board meeting maybe half a kilometer away at NYU when that happened. And that got livestreamed. And I think that everyone watching who was like over the age of 40 was like, that could be my kid. And suddenly everybody was in that movement like

overnight. I would go so far as to say that if those two young women had not been pepper sprayed outside of Union Square and had it not gone viral, we wouldn't be talking about Occupy Wall Street because it would have been over within about 48 hours.

But suddenly there was all of this mentorship and all of these skills and all of this energy and it took off in this way that people like me who had come out of that post Seattle moment were just like, holy shit. And there was a moment where they did a poll, like 66% of New Yorkers backed the movement. You know how many millionaires there are in New York City. You know how many people you've got to have to have 66% of the population of this city that's ostensibly its own country backing this anarchist movement, right? Huge and brilliant forms of organization, by the way. You know, they were organizing public spaces, having working group meetings in public spaces. And, like, the NYPD would come and find some reason to kick them out of the lobby of some, you know, building or whatever. And they particularly were going after the Direct-Action Working Group. So, the Direct-Action Working Group began holding their meetings on the Staten Island Ferry, because once the ferry was out on the water, the NYPD couldn't disperse them.

And I just thought, like, this is my shit, right? This is the kind of gaming and engineering that I live for. I was not in that working group, but when I learned about that, I was just like, oh, my God, they're so fucking smart. So that movement persisted beyond the eviction of the park. There were basically assemblies in every neighborhood in Brooklyn, parts of Queens, parts of Lower Manhattan, and they were doing actions and coordinating with community groups. I was working with the Puerto Rican community in Williamsburg trying to fight the closure of a public school. There were just all kinds of. It was a moment. And when Sandy hit, I mean, the anarchists were the ones who were doing the fucking recovery work. Like, the National Guard came in and were just like, what do we do? And suddenly they were working under the leadership of anarchists who came out of Zuccotti Park. So, like, that had all happened and was heavily inspired by the Arab uprisings.

And I was making a trip to the Middle east to go back to Palestine. And I knew that my passport was flagged at Ben Gurion because when I left in 2003, I got in pretending to be a gay tourist. And they didn't want to look like they were homophobic, so they just let me in. But on the way out, when they ran the magnetic strip on my passport, it was like I was their 1 millionth customer. Cops came in, they sent somebody to take my bags off the plane. I got strip searched three times and interrogated for three hours and the whole thing. And I was like, well, they know who I am, so I probably shouldn't land in Tel Aviv ever. And so, I knew to get in, I was going to have to go to Cairo and then take the bus through the Sinai. And I landed in Cairo and had a couple contacts there, and I was like, oh, while I'm here, maybe I'll see if there are anarchists in Cairo that were, you know, I've heard rumors there were anarchists involved in overthrowing Mubarak. I'd love to talk to them and find out what they're thinking about and what they're doing.

And as soon as I told people that, they were like, oh, you should talk to this guy and this guy and this woman and this guy. And I ended up in Cairo for two weeks and interviewed a number of people and went back to Cairo less than a year later and interviewed even more people. And really like that set up a whole thing where it was just like, there are anarchists organizing in the Arab world that nobody knows about in Palestine, in Iraq, in Syria, for sure, in Egypt. And well, these are people who are anarchists who are engaged in incredibly vital struggles of immediate consequence. And that's a different sport than being like an anarchist in the United States fighting, I don't know, student debt or fighting for housing or whatever. They're immediate, but they're immediate in a very different way than the Arab Spring was. And the Arab uprisings were in many ways quite successful initially. And so, I just thought all of the ways in which I think

we're getting it wrong in the States might benefit from the perspective of people who share this political vision and this political praxis, but who are applying it in a much more acute and in some ways successful sort of context. And so maybe they have insights that we could really learn from. And I think that actually proved to be true.

There were a number of things that came out of those interviews and came out of my sort of like seeking those people out and talking to them, that I was just like, God, we have so much to learn from what they're doing. Unfortunately, when these stories and these interviews went live, I would create a column on Twitter and search for the URL for it so that I could monitor who was tweeting it and, you know, see what they were saying and whatever. And if it was like somebody in the Middle east or somebody doing Middle east studies, they were all about it, by and large. And if it was white activists in the west, they were like, fuck this guy, he's an Obama loving liberal. They were really butthurt about it. And that just struck me as like, I don't know, on some level it was disillusioning. And on the other hand, it was just like, well, what does it take to get people to listen to these people? What do we have to do? And that was like a two-year process of writing about these people and mostly doing interviews. I didn't really want to represent people. I wanted to just sort of signal boost them and let them be read in their own words. And most of that I never saw a penny for.

Matt Bowles: When you were telling that story, you mentioned briefly about the LGBTQIA dynamics and perception that Israel attempts to create, can you share a little bit about the role of pink washing for people that have never heard that term, what that means in the Israeli colonial project, and how that manifest?

Joshua Stephens: My decision to do that, because, you know, again, the ISM is this thing that it's very serious. The Israeli security operation and apparatus was very aware that there were all these mostly anarchists coming internationally and going into the west bank, and they needed to clamp that hose, right? And if you landed in Tel Aviv with dreadlocks and all black car hearts and tattoos and whatever, they had you, they were putting you right back on the plane. So maybe, I don't know, three weeks before I left, I was at an ISM benefit concert in D.C. and Adam Shapiro was there because he spoke between bands or something on stage, and I was talking to him. It was the kind of thing where you had to have your story locked in when they questioned you when you landed, right? And I was like, man, do I need to be boning up on the holy sites and stuff? Because I'm hearing stories about, like, if you don't know exactly where you're going and exactly, it's history, if you slip up at all, you're out.

And he was like, honestly, man, I'd just, like, trim your hair back a little bit and maybe buy a gay travel guide and just make them think you're a gay tourist. They're not going to know what to do with that. And I was like, are you for real? And he was like, yeah, man. They don't want to be seen turning gay people away. And they're not prepared for that. They're prepared for you to have some story about going to the holy sites. So, I got off the plane and they were like, so what's the purpose of your trip to Israel? And I was like, you know, I have this friend in Jerusalem I'm going to visit and said, going to check out any of the holy sites? And I was like, yeah, not so much. And they were like, well, what are you going to be doing here for a month? And I was like, I was kind of thinking about checking out the gay scene. And they were like, really? Are we known for that. And I was like, you like gays in the military, right? And they're like, yeah, of course. And I was like, well, that's more progressive than where I'm coming from. And they were like, huh, welcome to Israel. It was that easy.

Meanwhile, literally one booth over, there's this retired couple from like Scotland or something who are like hippie musicians who maybe even Christian, I don't remember, but they were brought there, they had a

letter of invitation and all this stuff to like do something at some church in, in Jerusalem. And they were being grilled like they were Hamas assets. And like, I got, literally it was like a two-minute conversation and I got in. And so that is a manifestation of that pink washing impulse, which is to sort of brand Israel around being very pro queer and very open to these sorts of things as a way of both distracting from its policies in the west bank and around Gaza, its apartheid policies, even toward Arab residents of Israel. And also, to sort of justify all of that by saying, well, they're not as accepting of queer people or they're not as progressive or like, whatever.

And I actually encountered this a little bit while I was in the west bank on that trip. There was a screening of a documentary called [Jeremy Hardy](#) versus the Israeli Military. And [Jeremy Hardy](#), now deceased, but he was this British comedian who lost a bet with a documentary filmmaker that he was friends with. As a consequence, he had to go do ISM and she filmed it and I had not seen the film, but it was being screened in Jerusalem and they wanted somebody from the ISM to come and like kind of do Q and A after. And I got tapped and so I went, I saw the film and you know, it was a leftist audience of Israelis, anti-occupation activists, but they still had a lot of the kind of colonial baggage. And one guy said to me, you know, how do you feel about working alongside people who are so patriarchal and homophobic and whatever? And I was like, I'm going to stop you right there. Because the reason Israel is occupying the west bank is not because these people are homophobic or sexist or whatever you're talking about.

And if you were really committed to remedying those contradictions and if you really believed that Palestinians are just like you, you would take seriously that there are people on the ground in the west bank fighting for those things and you would be doing everything you can to get your fucking boot off their neck. And that's really the dynamic of underside of pink washing is even if people aren't vocally saying that this is the justification, it's the way that they sort of absolve themselves psychologically for what's happening and for their culpability for it by saying, like, well, these backward, primitive people, they have to be controlled in some way or somehow overtake our society or something like that, rather than being like, you know what? You're just as capable as I am of making meaningful decisions about your life. And so, I'm going to find the people who are committed to those things, and I'm going to back them. And that was not really on the menu that night. Like, it was a shock to them when we had that conversation. And I just found that really. I don't know, maybe I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was.

Matt Bowles: I also want to ask you about your experiences in Greece. And I know you've been multiple times. I've been to Athens, been to some of the islands. But you have spent a lot more time there. And I'm wondering if you can share a little bit of context. I guess, first of all, for people that are not familiar with the political situation in Greece, just in terms of the history of the austerity measures and the protests, as well as the rise of golden dawn and fascism in Greece. And then I would love for you to share a little bit about your experience there and what you learned and what you saw.

Joshua Stephens: I haven't been since 2015, but at the time, you had this twofold trajectory, or I guess like a trajectory of conditions that were producing a sort of tinderbox, basically. One was, in Greece, you have this neighborhood, Exarcheia, that's in the center. A lot of people like to describe it and romanticize it as this sort of anarchist liberated zone or whatever. And that was really not my experience of it. My experience of it was that it was maybe something more like early 90s lower east side. Yeah, there were anarchists there, and, yeah, there was a counterculture there. And yeah, it was a little more, I guess you could say, like, culturally feral, that there was a lot of dynamism and things happening because it was not so heavily political. And, you know, there's this mythology that, like, police can't enter Exarcheia and all this stuff. And

that's not entirely true, but there were a lot of other things about it that were quite ugly as well. Anarchists in Exarcheia had to work really hard to get drugs pushed out of Exarcheia because the organized crime syndicates, as it were.

The organized crime world in Athens was basically taking desperate immigrants and refugees and turning them into sort of street level salespeople and sending them into Exarcheia and creating a heroin epidemic and all these other things. And people were like, look, if there's a fucking heroin problem at Exarcheia, the police are going to come in and shut all of this down, right? So, like, the first thing we have to do is push this out, right? And there was an incredible undertaking to do this. And it's a thing that nobody talks about in the anarchist world outside of Greece. It blows my mind because like, literally from one visit to another, I was sitting outside a cafe and noticed that the bar storefront on the corner had been bombed. And I asked my friend who was also kind of my fixer there, I was like, what happened to that place? And she was like, oh, well, people found out that the guy that runs that place was basically holding drugs and dealing drugs, and so he had to be dealt with. And I was like, what?

And so, you had this neighborhood that had this orientation where people were very serious. And you also have to keep in mind that Greece still has mandatory conscription in the military. And anarchists in Greece, I was told, are of two minds about this. One is, f*ck you, I'm not joining your national military. You can put me under the prison and I will never fucking become part of this. And the other is if you guys want to teach me how to use surface to air weapons and automatic rifles, okay? And that's where you start to see these things that were making headlines at that time of people firing rocket launchers at banks and all this other low scale warfare kind of stuff and insurrectionary sort of anarchist stuff. But there was a kid named Alexei Grigoropoulos who was like 15, who was in Exarcheia with his friends and got into a confrontation with the police, police. And the police shot and killed him. And the feeling in Greece, at least as it was described to me at the time, was that, you know, in most places we think about the state having the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. And that's not really as widespread of an understanding in Greece.

And so, when the state kills someone, the feeling that was expressed to me was, look, if the police kill somebody, there has to be a price paid for that. There has to be consequences for that. Like it's not okay for the state to do that. And so, when people were killed by the police, folks burnt shit to the ground. And that was happening at the exact same time that the 2008 financial crisis was rippling through Europe and Greece had had their economy sort of inflated. So that the euro could be established and banks made shit tons of money off of this. And it was unsustainable. And in the long run, once 2008 hit, the party was over. And that was true for a lot of Southern Europe. And suddenly you had this fiscal crisis and then you also had this upsurge in a sort of radical rejection of the police and of violence. And adjacent to that you had the sort of rise of fascism in response to the refugee crisis. And that was Golden Dawn.

And you know, the irony is, you know, now people in the States, they're worried about being attacked by Proud Boys or Oath Keepers. But back then in 2012, when I was in Athens and my friends on the ground there were like looking over their shoulders for potential fascist attacks and stuff. It was totally disorienting to me. Like, I was just like, really? You guys are afraid of being like beaten up in the street by fascists? And they were like, fuck yeah, man, it happens all the time. Fast forward less than a decade and that's the reality on the ground in the States. So, when I was there, there was already a lot of excitement in the States and in Europe broadly about primarily the sensational visuals of low scale street warfare between the police and protesters. And that shit was going viral and being shared. And AK Press did this book called [We](#)

[Are an Image from the Future](#) that, you know, was all these footages of all this stuff in it, you know, completely different dynamics than what people face in the States.

In Greece, police are in a lethal situation, obligated to retreat. And if there is not a path to retreat, then they can engage lethal force. So that's why you see all these scenes of people fighting cops in the streets and they're winning and the police are backing off because as long as there's a path for them to retreat, that's their legal obligation. Not so in states. And so, like there was that happening, but then on the ground when I got there, there are these Popular assemblies, which are these neighborhood assemblies that people formed to deal with the extremes of the financial crisis and the extremes of impending austerity. And overnight, out of the blue, they applied this new tax to the electricity bill and people couldn't afford it. And so overnight, like people's electricity was getting cut off, like in the middle of the winter. And some of these popular Assemblies, they had people in them who were just from the neighborhood, who were electricians, and they were just like, okay, we're going to send you guys to turn people's electricity back on and we're going to have an order of priority for that.

The first people that get their electricity back, the elderly and new parents. And they were administering social needs through these mechanisms. And a lot of times they were supplanting the existing structures in a lot of these neighborhoods. And it was fucking fascinating the stuff that they were doing. Like I went to one of these meetings and it was in like a theater in a city run community center. And I sat through this meeting and I was like, I was asking the guy that took me there, I was like, so like, you guys do this every week now? And he was like, yeah, and the city lets you do that. Who's the point person at city hall who's letting you guys use this space? And he was like, oh no, they don't. There's no engagement with them. And I was like, okay, well I just sat through a meeting with you guys in there and we didn't get kicked out. And he was like, well, when things really kicked off, we occupied that building for two months. So now they kind of feel like a once weekly meeting is a bargain. And you know, it's like these kinds of situations where they were just like, fuck it.

There are pain points for the state and we have the means to exercise power in ways that can immediately impact people's, people's lives. And I thought that that was so fascinating and so rich and so inspiring and so many interesting things happening. And AK Press wasn't publishing books about it. They were publishing books about people setting shit on fire and fighting cops. But really the most interesting things that I encountered on the ground in Greece were people driving drugs out of Exarcheia. I mean, like, literally there was like a series of weeks, as I understand it, where organized crime was sending people in on motorcycles to shoot anarchist organizers in Exarcheia. And drive-bys were happening and stuff because they were getting pushed out. And then you had the popular assemblies where, you know, there are doctors administering things and there are kitchens and people are being fed and there's children's programming and education programs and all this stuff happening. I was like, nobody's talking about this, but this is where the real work is. Like, this is the shit that could potentially in the long run supplant the state.

I remember one night, a lot of these guys at the time, their English was not great and I had no Greek. So, like our conversations were pretty constrained at times. And this one guy said to me one night at a bar, he was like, you guys have CSAs back in the States, huh? And I was like, he can't be talking about what I think he's talking about. And I was like, CSAs. And he's like, yeah, you know, like the shares with the farms and whatever. And I was like, really? That's what you're talking about? Because that's NPR liberal tote bag shit. Like that's what you're interested in. And he was like, yeah, that's what I mean. Like we want to do

something like that here. But in reality, one of the ways that like the IMF and the EU was trying to strong arm them was to say, like, if you don't adopt these austerity policies, your fucking supermarket shelves are going to be empty.

And so, people were like, okay, well then, we now start forming relationships with the agricultural sector to start producing for our own subsistence because we're not going to fucking bend to these motherfuckers. And so, for them, that was deeply radical and they were very serious about these things. And there was just a massive disconnect between what I was seeing on the ground and what my peers were talking about in the States. And that still to this day has never been resolved. To this day, people don't talk about that as much. It's still talked about in terms of, you know, these radical confrontations, when in reality the most radical shit that was happening was shit that had to do with people's immediate needs.

Matt Bowles: You mentioned when you were telling that story about how fascism was perceived in the United States very differently than it is now. And I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about the emergence of fascism in the United States and the different avenues and manifestations over this very recent time period. And maybe just starting off for people that don't have a really specific understanding of fascism, maybe just start off with a bit of a definition in terms of what is fascism. And then if you can talk about all of the different things that we've seen with, you know, everything from fascist street fighting units in the United States to QAnon conspiracies, to all sorts of different right wing Covid disinformation and things of that nature. And maybe, you know, tie some of these things together and explain a little bit about the actual landscape and fascism in the United States today.

Joshua Stephens: Yeah, so I mean, the first thing is you just look at the phonetics of the word. Immediately we're drawing off Italian phonetics, like the SCI being pronounced like S-H-I in English, that's Italian and that comes from the word *fasci*. And *fascēs* are like bundles of sticks. That were gathered and bound together for kindling. And that's where the ideology of *fascismo*, sort of like, that's the reference point, is this idea of a society bound together by this, like, common identity. And a big piece of that is, whereas the left was sort of manifesting this antagonism between workers and those who owned the means of production. Fascism and *fascismo* sought to sort of reconcile that tension and say, like, no, we have common interests, right? And the common interest is national identity. The common interest is whatever. Which, of course, from the jump is a project of establishing a nostalgia for a past that has never existed.

There is zero evidence for any claim that there has ever been a moment in history where people at the level of working and production and subsistence and whatnot had common interests with the rich or the powerful or royalty. That contradiction has never been resolved in history. It's not that we have lost our way and deviated. And that's why these conversations you hear people having now about, like, oh, the United States is so divided, and it's like, it's always been divided. There were settlers and natives at one point, you know, like, they didn't have common interests. And so, like, *fascismo* was this attempt to sort of reconcile that and get people unified around this nostalgia for a national identity. And, you know, what makes fascism distinct? I think a lot of people throw that word around and don't understand that it actually is not just authoritarianism, because totalitarianism and authoritarianism have all sorts of expressions that have nothing to do with fascism. They're just Assad or the Saudis or, like, any number of places where there's just a power center at the top that imposes everything from the top down and runs everything from the top down. That's not fascism.

Fascism is about a sort of mutually reinforcing relay between that sort of power and a grassroots element that has internalized this nostalgia. And that nostalgia is always very militaristic, very romantic about the

military, very romantic about the imposition of order and any sort of force or institution that is used to maintain that order. So right away, we see why you're constantly seeing headlines about police being exposed for being involved in fascist organizing or fascist organizations. You never see police being exposed for being involved in an anarchist labor union. That just doesn't happen. There's something about that institution that has a deep historical resonance with fascism. It's also very nostalgic about conventional gender relationships. It's always very patriarchal. It's always very traditionalist. And this is where you always have the church somehow woven into this.

The Catholic Church in Spain was deeply complicit in propping up and aiding Franco and aiding fascism and normalizing fascism and guilt and manipulating people into tolerating it. Going back to the Spanish Civil War. There are a lot of people like, well, the anarchists weren't all great either. They like burned churches and stuff. And it's like, yeah, because there were people murdered and stored in the fucking walls of these monasteries. And so, fascism is this specific ideology that is about the restoration of some perceived prior order specifically organized around some sort of national identity. And so, you have it, whether it's in the States around anxieties and aggrieved whiteness. That's actually a really great way of illustrating this, is that, yeah, white working-class people have been getting fucked since day one, right alongside all working-class people. But instead of seeing that as the contradiction of capitalism and a logical outcome of capitalist accumulation and capitalist modes of production, they see it as, oh, all these non-white people are taking what we deserve.

And instead of aligning with the people who share their conditions and closing ranks with those people in order to confront those who own the economy and run the economy and have been exploiting them, they close ranks with the people at the top around some national identity. This is the faux. And this is also why historically, businesses, capitalists, corporations and whatnot have bankrolled this shit. That's why they're bankrolling it now. [Peter Theil](#), fucking bankrolling so much bash of shit in the United States. It's because it's in his interests. So, this is the sort of like texture and quality of fascism. And I think the really key thing to understand is that it's not just this top-down authoritarianism. It has this relay between this sort of macro political expression and this micropolitical expression. And that was sort of the sum of Trump's Twitter presence, was he was president, but he had this Twitter presence where he could animate and marshal and condition the attention of millions of people at the ground level to where they were running people into hiding who had said unfriendly things about Trump in universities and all these sorts of things all the way up to now.

You know, people shooting security guards at supermarkets for asking them to wear a mask. That's how fascism works, is it conditions the attention of people at the ground level so that they become active participants in an active grassroots movement around reimposing this false past. And that was present on the ground in Greece, obviously, like this, like nostalgia about Greeks are getting fucked over by the international financial crisis, whatever. And instead of going after the institutions that were actually responsible for that, they went after immigrants. And I mean like they were killing people, they were killing people, they were beating people. So many Pakistani immigrants were murdered. People had their throats slit like all kinds of crazy shit. And at the time I just thought like, wow, that is fucking bananas. Like there being this like right wing presence that was so lawless and so brazen.

And now I woke up one morning and saw January 6th footage on the news. That's the reality of it. And it doesn't have to adopt some ideology, it just has to have this texture and have these, these relays and have this sort of nostalgia for some sort of fictitious past that is organized around a sort of racial or national

category or something and about the restoration of this romantic past. And that is the thing that is really resurgent right now and really terrifying. And it's not just in Europe, it's not just in the United States, it's in India, it's in Turkey, it's in Brazil. I spent the better part of two years in Bangkok, very much part of Thailand's history. And how do you fight that without going at it at the grassroots level? And in Athens the attitude was if we don't fight this in the neighborhoods, they will become our prison cells. Like that was the chant coming out of anti-fascist marches in the streets was if we don't fight them in our neighborhoods, our neighborhoods will become prison cells. And that was really animating for me in that like, wow, they see this sort of [Bookchin](#) esque resistance at the neighborhood level and at the level of the neighborhood assembly, not just as a sort of like direct sort of aggressive confrontation or, but at the sustenance and provenance of people's basic needs as a way of combating it.

Because you know, the fascists were doing that, they were coming out and setting up food, not bomb style food distribution to poor people and saying like, you know, you're Greek, you deserve this. And the anarchists were like, oh hell no. There's no fucking way we're going to let you sort of co-opt this intervention and turn it towards xenophobia and turn it toward all these other sorts of regressive of things. And I just thought that that was a brilliant strategic intervention to sort of stake out this is our neighborhood and this is not going to happen. And we understand that the means of confronting this won't always be so direct. They will be more indirect. They will be slower. They will be about relationships and people's needs. And in the States, all anybody wanted to talk about was like Molotov's and street fights.

Matt Bowles: Can you, especially in the United States context and in very recently, can you talk about the significance of conspiracy theories in terms of the QAnon discourse, in terms of the COVID disinformation, in terms of the anti-vax movement and some of the conspiracy theories that are underlying some of that movement? Can you share a little bit about the significance of how that's manifesting and sort of explain and unpack some of that a little bit?

Joshua Stephens: Yeah, I mean, conspiracy theory has always been part of the fascist project, right. I mean, it's sort of the flip side of establishing that falsified nostalgic past. Right. Is to sort of like create these accounts for how that past was corrupted or taken away or whatever. Is that in turn of the last century sort of moments in Europe, particularly Spain, there's a lot of talk about the Black Hand, which was like this imagined sort of like Chupacabra basically that was, you know, disrupting businesses and firebombing places and arson and like all this stuff. And like a lot of it was in fact done by the police or done by business owners as this way of creating this perception that there was this threat that people had to sort of like come together to combat. And oftentimes that took and not that long down the historical timeline became anti-Semitic, protocols of the Elders of Zion, blood libels, all this stuff. Those things are not any different than like Pizza gate and QAnon and whatever. It's just like, oh, you know, they're like eating babies in the basement of this cafe or they have these child sex rings and whatever.

And of course, in the same moment in which people are firing this shit into Reddit and talking about under Joe Rogan, these right wings are being exposed for running child sex rings and like all kinds of stuff. These people aren't confronting something in its actuality. They're confronting the disruption of this contrived romantic past. Because so like, actual child sex crimes don't seem to fucking matter to them. What matters to them is child sex crimes as a potent psychological anchor to leverage people into caring about the restoration of this romantic past, this restoration of some Garden of Eden or something. And that's why a lot of these people are like, they describe themselves as constitutionalists. It's like, oh, I'm here to defend the constitution. That's, you know, what the three presenters and the Oath Keepers are all about is I'm

defending the constitution. I mean, the constitution is a deeply problematic document, for starters. Right? But it's also been violated left and right. And you guys are all for violating it left and right.

But it serves as a potent emotional anchor for sort of leveraging people into believing that they have something at stake in the corruption of this. This past that you have this contrived romance for. And so that's where you get a lot of this QAnon stuff, I think. And I mean, you know, [Chomsky](#) gets into this a lot, is like, conspiracy theories are always very easy because it provides a very singular explanation for what are in many ways incredibly complex institutional arrangements. Right? And the fact of the matter is that there doesn't need to be a conspiracy to account for the things that are wrong in our society, because all you need is an analysis of institutions. That's why the Wire was so profound as a TV show. It was like season to season. It was an institutional analysis, and it was just like, yeah. Want to know why Baltimore's fucked? Well, we're going to take a look at the docs, we're going to take a look at the schools, we're going to take a look at the newspapers, we're going to take a look at City Hall and election finance.

You don't need a conspiracy to account for those things. And I think that kind of the, like, feedback loop there is that. That institutional inertia in the United States has created a health care crisis, has created privatized healthcare, and conditioned people's attention for generations in ways where if you're walking down 6th Avenue in New York and you see a cyclist hit by a car, the first thing they're going to say is, don't call me an ambulance because I don't have insurance and I can't afford it. You see people not getting cancer screenings. You see people rationing insulin. You see people dying for treatable things, and you see Flint not having drinkable water for fuck knows how long. And suddenly you have people saying, oh, wait, this vaccine thing is coming from these people that have made my life a fucking living hell for generations, in which I was born into an awareness of being deeply suspicious, of engaging with medical institutions because it could bankrupt me. F*ck, no. There is that at the ground level of people being incredibly traumatized to the point of generational trauma around privatized healthcare.

And then at the top, you have the [Peter Theil](#), the [Bannon](#). All of these people who stand to benefit financially, benefit from manipulating and playing on this trauma and this anxiety and mobilizing that around a classically fascist project. And that's where that sort of stirring starts to happen, where that whirlpool starts to happen, of grassroots adoption of a particular worldview in a particular set of reference points and a particular set of explanatory mechanisms for things that are really just institutional inertia, that this is how the economy works. This is how people who have accumulated more wealth than they could spend in 20 lifetimes exploiting people, letting people die, making people miserable. And instead of being angry with them, you want to create and invent this whole other enemy. That shit has always been part of the fascist project is that if people are directing their attention at these phantasmic sorts of enemies of this romantic past, then they're not actually going to be a threat to the actual establishment or the actual institutions that bear responsibility for the conditions that have traumatized these people. And that's how we get to this place.

Matt Bowles: How do you see the impact and the momentum and the trajectory of the effectiveness of some of these things? Because it strikes me that, let's just say, people that I'm casually acquaintances with or connected with on social media, maybe I know them from high school or whatever, that are not people that have historically posted on political topics at all or things of that nature. And all of a sudden, they might start posting on the fact that they feel that the government is infringing upon their rights by forcing them to either wear a mask in order to go to this place or need to get vaccinated in order to be able to do this. And they're starting to now be public about posting their grievances about this and starting to

direct their critiques towards whether it's a government or whether it's just a private business that's enforcing this on them or whatever, something that's inconveniencing and aggrieving them, and that they're now conceptualizing it as an injustice that's being done towards them. And it might be the first literally thing in the political realm that I've ever heard them say. What is the significance of that and the number of people, people that are gravitating towards something like that? And then what doors does that then open for them to go down this rabbit hole that you're describing?

Joshua Stephens: I think coming from an organizing background, if you're trying to build capacity and build momentum within a movement, you pick winnable points of intervention. It's just a natural. It's the logical sort of thing, right? And I think there's some version of this happening for people who are otherwise apolitical. You know, some suburban soccer mom or whatever, some petty bourgeois small business entrepreneur, whatever, who are otherwise apolitical, right? No interest. Maybe they vote Republican or whatever, but. Or maybe they throw money at things. They're not actually typically engaged politically in ways that have any immediacy in their lives. Right. It's all kind of politics of principle, right. It's not politics of necessity. And so, the points of intervention for their politics are somewhat abstract. They sit at some distance from them. Whereas, like, whether to wear a mask or not wear a mask, super easy to be defiant in that situation. It's like wearing an American flag pin after 9, 11 or whatever. It's a very cheap way to feel like you are rejecting something or rebelling something against something, or being defiant in some way. It's a very childish form of defiance, right? And you know, this was something I learned very early on.

I cut my activist teeth being mentored within Positive Force, which was this body in DC that sort of mobilized DC's punk history and punk scene as a sort of funnel to get people and young enthusiastic people into community organizing. And the guy that kind of steers that ship is this old veteran of the DC punk scene named Mark Anderson. And one time I interviewed him and he said something really profound, which was that, you know, learning to say no to things is really important at some point in people's lives, like usually adolescents, it's important to learn how to say no to things. And even, as he put it, to learn how to say fuck you to things. And he was like, but a politics of negation only gets you so far because it's a politics of what one doesn't do. And he was talking specifically about like straight edge and veganism and all these things, right? Of like, straight edge is a politics of negation. He said, what matters is when you start making decisions about what you're willing to say yes to.

That's where the rubber meets the road. That's where it gets consequential. What am I willing to say yes to? What am I willing to show up for? What am I willing to engage with? And this is where, like, solidarity work happens. This is where anti racist work starts to happen. And things like that, right? Where it's like, I'm going to say yes to doing what's asked of me in this moment. And I think that's the distinction right now. Operative in Covid, right, is that there's the juvenile Politics of negation. It's like, f*ck you, I'm not going to wear a mask, fuck you, I'm not going to get the vaccine, whatever. And then there is this politics of the affirmative, of people being like, I care about the people around me, I care about the vulnerable. And so, I'm going to take this step, I'm going to put on a mask. I'm going to make this sacrifice in solidarity with and in support of people who do not have my immediate experience, right? Who have a different experience from me. And I'm going to do this because it doesn't matter if it affects me, right? And it's about how it affects all of us.

And a key part of this is neoliberal ideology. Like neoliberalism has conditioned people to think of themselves in one of two ways, as consumers or as investors. And you see this in the way that people talk about their lives, like, oh, I'm investing in my peace of mind, I'm investing in myself. I'm blah, blah, blah,

blah. And you know, and the presumption of that vocabulary is that there is a return on that investment. It's not about like; I'm cultivating a self for the sole purpose of cultivating myself and being a person in the world with rich interests and rich relationships and things that I care about. It's because something's going to come back to me for doing this. It's going to affect me and consumption the same way. Like, they think about their identities in terms of what they consume. They think about their identities in terms of what they take in, what content they're engaged with, what they're watching on TV, whatever. This is how they understand themselves as in terms of the things that they consume.

And when you think about yourself strictly in terms of being a consumer or an investor, you stop thinking about your relationships to other people except in terms of how those relationships constitute investments that have some return for you. And you don't think about what meaning it has for your community or the people around you. And so, everybody has been conditioned by this logic in the United States for so long that now they're like, well, I'm a reasonably healthy guy, I don't need to get the vaccine, I'm not worried about it. And it's like, dude, like, it's not about you. You could be next to some immunocompromised person on the bus and fucking kill them. You could kill some 4-year old's only parent. There are serious fucking consequences about this that have nothing to do with a risk that you yourself are taking. And I think as a culture and as a society, we have been deconditioned to take these things seriously. And it's precisely why racial antagonisms and white supremacy have proliferated and metastasized for so long is it's just like, well, it's not happening to me, so fuck them.

And that's what's happening now. Except now it's killed, you know, three quarters of a million people and massively disrupted the economy. And what's interesting now is that because of the worker shortage that this has produced and the ways that this expansion experience has deeply alienated and disillusioned people now you have like so many this very second. How many strikes are happening right now? Like, you know, like it's really funny. Like I saw a meme like two days ago where it was like, capitalists, nobody wants to work anymore. And then it's like, workers, and they're like, scarcity increases, like, increases the value of a commodity and the capital's like, wait a minute. So, like, that's the moment that we're in, right, where there's this like massive disruption happening. And it feels really bleak. I got to say, it feels really bleak.

But at the same time, it felt really bleak before Occupy. I did not see Occupy happening. And I don't think we would have the sort of foundational class consciousness that is driving a lot of these strikes, if not but for Occupy. Like, that was the thing that kicked the door in and allowed us to talk about class in a way that really took off and had traction. And so, there's an element of optimism there. But in this moment, you're seeing that sort of like tension between people organizing around and gravitating around and sort of consolidating around this nostalgia for some previous utopia that we have been led astray from. And that's the fascist sort of expression. And we could have had much fewer people dead if not but for fascist obstruction to a sort of collective care and solidarity for people's well-being.

Matt Bowles: What's been so striking for me is the amount of global wealth inequality that contextualizes all of that. Can you share a little bit about that? Because you've spent the last couple years in Thailand.

Joshua Stephens: Yeah, Thailand is, in my experience, a sort of mashup of a mafia state and something on the order of Saudi light. And it is 100% run by insane levels of wealth. The sort of fuck your money we associate with like Dubai. And the mentality, particularly in Bangkok, more than half of Thailand's population lives in and around Bangkok. And you've seen it because you've been there. It's built in this way that if you have enough money, you can just live higher up. So, you're out of the smog. You are not taking the bus with the open windows and the open doors. You're on the skytrain, or you live in the penthouse, or you

go to the shopping center that has 21 floors. The wealthy can just sort of ascend and be above all the chaos and the toxicity and the flooding and like all these other sorts of things. And so, the dystopia of wealth disparities is just so visibly stark. It's really kind of shocking.

And they're about to reopen the country to vaccinated foreign tourists. And the case that is being made is like, well, one out of every six jobs in this country is connected to tourism. And people are dying and committing suicide and they're desperate and whatever. And they can't go any longer without business. They can't go any longer without money. And it's like, yeah, and you guys also have the richest fucking monarchy in the world. Maybe none of these people ever had to suffer this much. Maybe everybody could have been taken care of, except that this guy's wealth is unparalleled in the world. That's the reality on the ground. And I think it's an extreme expression of, of what any of us sees anywhere else.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk a little bit about the uprising in Thailand and sort of contextualize within the political system and the monarchy and talk a little bit about the protester demands and sort of the historical institutional context for what's been going on over the last couple years, especially if people haven't really been paying attention to it.

Joshua Stephens: Well, I mean, how would people pay attention to it, right? Because the reality is that Thailand is the United States sole anti-communist ally in the region and has been since the beginning of the Cold War. And so, the American relationship with Thailand is not meaningfully distinct from the American relationship with Latin America. Since the Cold War, it has been propping up authoritarian and brutal regimes the entire time and using Thailand as a sort of base of operations for interventions in Vietnam and Laos and Cambodia, all these sorts of things. Prior to the pandemic, Bangkok was the most visited place on the planet. And the origin of that tourism industry was U.S. troop R&R during the Vietnam War. Like, literally, there are hotels in Bangkok still called Florida and Miami and California and stuff, because when troops went on leave from their tour of duty. They were given the option of, I think it was somewhere in Australia, Hong Kong or Thailand. And they would get, if they took Thailand, they would get flown in and dropped off and give it a per diem.

And then they just had to fend for themselves for like six days. And what the Thais realized was, well, if we name our hotel after some place that they've heard of, they'll come to us. And those hotels still exist. The tourism industry, I mean, people like to talk about how like the sex industry and the sex trade and stuff is a result of this. But like it's not just that the entire tourism industry is the result of U.S. interventions in Southeast Asia and basically providing a base of operations for that. Bangkok was the CIA's operation base in Southeast Asia for a long fucking time. When in 2000, I think it was 2006, when the story broke in Washington Post about the torture sites, the CIA black sites. Three countries were mentioned, Ukraine, Poland and Thailand. And right after the U.S. opened those black sites, dissidents started disappearing because the Thais saw like, well, if the U.S. can rend people and disappear them, why can't we? And so, you started to see people being abducted off the streets. Bangkok was described by a number of human rights observers as a hunting ground for dissidents.

Prior to that, dissidents from Laos and Cambodia and stuff would go to Bangkok to take refuge and like flee persecution. And suddenly it was a hunting ground. And then you had these dissidents being exiled, like going into exile, going into hiding in foreign countries and because they can't get out legitimately, right? Like, so they have to flee through God knows what clandestine means and then they disappear. And then months later they show up floating in the fucking Mekong or someone dredges them off the bottom of the Mekong with their stomach full of concrete because Thailand has these fucking hit squads that they're

sending out into the neighboring countries to hunt these people down. And one of these people was this guy, one I think is how his name is pronounced. He was a Thai dissident. He had gone into exile in Cambodia. He was living in Phnom Penh. And while on the phone with his sister and on CCTV camera he, a van rolled up and masked guys just took him off the street mid phone conversation and he has never been heard from again. And people went to the Thai government and said like, yo, a Thai national disappeared on foreign soil. Are you guys going to do anything? Like, are you going to do an investigation? Are you going to ask the Cambodians what the fuck is going on? And they were like, yeah, we can't really do anything.

And this was building up at the beginning of 2020 when I was kind of passing through Thailand and people were beginning to start to talk about this because he had just disappeared. And they were having protests and Covid hit and people kind of stepped back from things to sort of take care of each other and ameliorate the impact of the pandemic. And then once Thailand got it under control, you know, starting in March, basically there were zero new cases. And the emergency decree was still in place banning gatherings. But by May, I think I know the first big demonstration was in June, and people had three demands. One was stop harassing activists, Stop harassing dissidents. Another was dissolved parliament. Reason being, the current government in Thailand are the people who staged a military coup, I think it was, back in 2014. And they basically laundered their rule through rigged elections because they created a constitutional system in which the prime minister is voted into office by the Senate and he has to get 350 votes in order to be elected. And they stacked the Senate with 275 people handpicked by the military.

So, there's this sort of paternalistic mechanism within Thailand's democracy, and it basically provides a fig leaf of sort of democratic rule and elections. But, like, opposition parties are routinely outlawed. People are charged with ridiculous shit in order to force them out of office and out of politics, all this stuff. So, people were like, dissolve the parliament and rewrite the constitution. Yeah, it was rewriting the constitution, dissolve parliament, stop harassing activists. They gave them two weeks, and they said, you have two weeks to meet these demands. And of course, the government was like, we're not even hearing this. What was interesting about this was in the U.S. if we were doing something like American activists were doing something like this, typically it would be like, we want you guys to defund the police. And then when congress doesn't defund the police, they're like, okay, well we got to do something else. The Thais didn't do it like that. They knew that nobody was going to do what they were asking for. And they had like seven phases of escalation locked and loaded for when that deadline came.

And so that deadline came, and then a student group staged a demonstration on a university campus. And they were like, now we're going to have 10 demands. And one of those demands is the third rail. We want the monarchy reformed. And I mean, it's a relatively modest demand. What they want is basically what England has, right? Like, they want a monarchy that is sort of like accountable to civil society, right? Like, they're not trying to abolish it. They're not trying to exploit, appropriate it, not trying to prosecute these people for any of the monstrous shit that they've done. They just want what England has. But they did this, and it fucking set the country on fire. Like, people were losing it, could not believe that people were touching that third rail. So, another student group announced a rally. And the proctor of the university was just like, he went to the group and he said, if you guys are going to talk about the monarchy, I'm going to lock the gates and you're not even going to be able to get on campus. And they said, okay, well, if you do that, we're going to take the gates off the hinges and enter anyway. And by the way, we're now moving that rally up by two hours so you have less time to plan. And we're going to make an 11th demand, which is your job.

And so, at every turn, they have just been prepared to escalate things and escalate things and escalate things, and they have been brilliant in strategizing how to find the regime's pain points, how to find the economy's pain points. And over the course of the year, eight months in Thailand last year, where there were no new Covid cases, so people were really fucking shit up and really getting into it. They arrested some people that they saw as leaders of the protest and helicoptered them up to Chiang Mai and were holding them in a facility there. And 140 people tried to storm the prison to take them out. I mean, the shit that was happening was insane and nobody was hearing about it.

And meanwhile, you know, like, January comes, the coup happens in Myanmar, and everybody's like, Myanmar, Myanmar, Myanmar, Myanmar. Which, like, fair enough, like, that shit is fucked up and monstrous and people should care about it. But also, like, everything that people were upset about in Myanmar was happening in Thailand. And now very little has been published about this or reported about this. But now, you know, the country's about to reopen to foreign tourism again. And I guarantee you there's going to be a massive PR push. There's going to be story after story after story after story about Thailand. And nobody's going to be talking about the fact that people are facing multiple lifetimes in prison for giving speeches about the monarchy like crazy.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk a little bit about the role of skateboarding culture and the role of class dynamics in this uprising and some of those nuances. And also at the more macro level, what do you see as sort of the generational political shifts among young people in Thailand with regard to reverence for the monarchy and things of that nature overall coming out of this?

Joshua Stephens: Yeah, I think there are two things there, I mean, that I think are probably familiar to a number of people who don't know about Thailand. But as with, say, January 25th in Egypt, the refrain that you often heard about that was that like, oh, this, this revolution was led by sort of middle-class students, young people. Like there was a particular sort of class element there. And the same is true of a lot of these protests. There's like a middle-class element and an upper-class sort of element. And part of what accounts for this generational shift is that wealthy ties send their kids abroad to be educated. And sometimes that's even for like secondary school, but really frequently for university. So, you think of like these young people who have grown up in this incredibly stratified, incredibly conservative, military fetishizing, most coup prone place on the planet.

They go to England to study, or they go to the United States to study, or they go to Germany to study and they start reading [Benedict Anderson](#), they start reading [David Graeber](#), they start reading like all these people who are completely just upending their gaze on the world and they're coming back, having a complete perspective shift. They're getting access to pedagogy and political history and critical theory and all these sorts of things. And a lot of this too is like queer stuff. Like queer people are at the fucking center of this uprising in a big way. And not for nothing that like, what we understand to be trans people have been part of Thai society for centuries. Like, the fluidity of sex and identity in Thailand is a whole other sport. It's a completely different thing. And it's the stigma and whatnot that we sort of feel like we have to push back against and stuff doesn't look the same there. You know, you go to like a hip cafe in central Bangkok, chances are you're going to be waited on by a trans person. And these kids are coming back and they're like, yo, I'm having none of this, right?

And so, they're kind of the tip of the spear in a lot of these organizations that are. There are a number of different organizations that are kind of in alliance with one another that are carrying out these protests and they have different sort of constituencies and different politics and different degrees of sort of roots in prior

historical movements. Some of them don't have any roots in prior historical moments. They're just really new formations. And then what you have happening for the last few months is that these kids who come out of these working-class parts of Bangkok, many of whom go to what are basically trade schools, like technical schools. And these technical schools, I don't know what to use as an American reference point for people outside of the United States who grew up around football and soccer. They have some reference point for understanding what ultras are, but what Americans understand to be like soccer hooligans, I guess. But these kids that go to these trade schools, they sort of aggregate and organize like ultras, loyal to their specific school.

And they have this sort of like internecine gang warfare between them. And when they started showing up to the protests, my girlfriend at the time was like, you're not allowed to go to that protest because these guys shoot each other. And, like, there's no way to know what will happen. And what actually wound up happening was that these guys dropped their antagonisms and their beefs and became the sort of security apparatus for the protests. They were the ones in, like, motorcycle helmets and riot gear and stuff, who were on the front lines taking the water cannons and the tear gas and protecting people. And now they're the ones fighting the cops every night at the intersection that leads to the prime minister's residence, because they don't feel like anybody is responding to the protests effectively. There's not really been a whole lot of forward movement in their minds. And as the COVID crisis has deepened, their lives have gotten more and more austere and desperate.

And so now you have these nightly clashes between these working-class kids and police in this neighborhood called Din Dang. And they've been torching these police outposts that exist at intersections and stuff. And, I mean, it could very likely spread to other working-class neighborhoods. Like, they have torched police kiosks in different parts of the city and stuff. And some of the people participating that are skateboarders, because as with a lot of skate culture around the world, there's this relationship with hip hop culture and street culture and these sorts of elements. And skateboard culture in Thailand does have roots in. That does have roots in graffiti culture, street art, hip hop, all these sorts of things. And that's part of the class composition of this other element now.

So, there were skateboarders at some of the other, like, bigger, more middle-class kind of protests, but now you see these kids being pulled by Vespas on skateboards with guys shooting fireworks at cops and stuff. That is, I think, a really fascinating turn that now you see the class composition of resistance to the state in Thailand taking a turn away. Because I think that was perhaps a valid critique of what happened in Egypt, right? Was that like it didn't take much for Sisi to swoop in and prey on the anxieties and desperation of working class and poor people when there was this middle-class element that led this revolution, right? Because they could almost pit them against each other. The same thing has kind of been potentially at play in Thailand, but now you see working class kids joining in and coming in and saying like, our lives aren't going to get any better. So, like, we no longer have anything to lose.

Matt Bowles: All right, we are going to pause there and call that the end of part two to Please be sure to tune in next week for the conclusion of my interview with Joshua Stevens. Good night, everybody.