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Born Into the Dark

Timothy Shenk

Movements discover their limits when they gain just enough power to get some of what they want. That's why the last year has been so tough on progressive Democrats. They came in hoping to crush the pandemic, clear a path beyond the wreckage of neoliberalism, and take major steps toward saving the planet from climate change. Instead, they gave a leftist tilt to a string of ad hoc responses that averted COVID-19 apocalypse without delivering structural change. It's tough to slay neo-fascism when you can't even raise the minimum wage, or to launch a political revolution with a paper-thin majority divided between sincere reformers and Washington swamp creatures laser-focused on slashing tax rates for the blue-state one percent. And with Republicans poised to retake Congress in the midterms, and the political class already turning its attention to 2024, the road only gets steeper from here. Which raises a question: what happens to progressives who give up on progress?

The problem isn't just about the frustrations of the last year. Yes, the headlines have turned into an eerie replay of the 1970s: inflation, rising crime rates, Afghanistan as the new Vietnam. But the day-to-day setbacks are part of a distinctive set of concerns that have been gathering strength over the last decade. There's the dwindling faith that millennials and zoomers will claw their way back to the economic security so many of their parents took for granted, along with the fraying of meaningful human relationships in the age of social media (and, maybe, recurring lockdowns). Plus the constant ticking of a doomsday clock as the planet heats up little by little. It adds up to the deepening conviction that progress itself is an illusion, that history is always ready to undo any temporary advances over humanity's natural state, where the strong do what they can and the weak do what they must.

In the face of all that, we have a caretaker presidency as a bridge to . . . what, exactly? For now, it seems like a Harris-Buttigieg ticket, or some other human counterpart to an "In This House We Believe" sign.

No wonder progressives aren't exactly chipper these days. For which, I suggest, readers of *Dissent* should be grateful. We're a tribe united by our recognition that pessimism of the intellect is the starting point for serious politics. Liberals have merely adopted the dark, but democratic socialism was born into it—born out of the realization that history wasn't going to deliver a ready-made