

“The world is wobbling here”

Succession Season 3: The American elite lurches towards fascist conspiracy

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Series created by Jesse Armstrong

The first six episodes of Season 3 of *Succession*—the Emmy-winning HBO television series—draw a chilling portrait of an American ruling elite lurching towards fascist conspiracy. Essentially tragic-comic in tone and sensibility, the latest season of the show is sharp, funny and continues to resonate with a broad audience for its portrayal of the Murdoch-like Roy family and its global news conglomerate.

The show is created and led by the immensely talented Jesse Armstrong (*In the Loop*, *Peep Show*, *Veep*), who has collaborated extensively with the cast and writers of the show. In an interview several years ago, Armstrong spoke of what inspired him: “We thought of famous media families like the Hearsts, to modern-day Redstone, John Malone, Robert Fitz of Comcast, Murdoch, and Robert and Rebekah Mercer, who founded Breitbart. Lots of real-life moguls.”

In another interview with the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) last year, Armstrong added, “I first approached it from a sort of political, sociological viewpoint ... how the hell have we got to this position in American and British politics?”

Over three seasons, *Succession* has explored this problem through the conflicts, scandals and family dynamics of the tyrannical media mogul Logan Roy (played powerfully by the 75-year old Brian Cox), who runs the global media and entertainment corporation Waystar RoyCo.

At the heart of the show’s conflict, with shades of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, is whether the aging Logan—who suffers heart and other physical ailments, incipient senility and more—will step down and hand power to one of his children or to one of his top executives, all of whom scheme ferociously against each other for the position.

As the power struggle in the family and its boardroom unfolds, Logan faces a growing scandal over his role in the cover-up of heinous crimes—assaults on workers, sexual abuse scandals and murders—committed by Waystar’s cruise division. Various characters in the family and the executive leadership bear responsibility to one extent or another.

The aging tycoon recognizes, however, that he must act decisively in response to the eruption of the crisis exposed by his son Kendall Roy (Jeremy Strong) at the conclusion of Season 2. “I’m stuck in quicksand,” Logan screams in response to the supposed incompetence of everyone around him. “My family has disappeared. The world is wobbling here. I’m losing juice. The sky is falling. So when I say

something, it f*cking happens. *We have to act on the world. The f*cking world. We have to act.*”

The coronation of a fascist

The third season dramatizes the manner in which Logan “acts,” but now the company’s machinations intersect with Waystar’s conspiratorial plotting in the political sphere. Logan ends up crowning a fascist headed for the White House at a hotel room during the Future Freedom Summit, much like the real-life Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC).

American television and artistic life has reached a remarkable moment when fascism and Hitler can be openly referred to and the reality of US political life so sharply delineated. A mirror is held up to contemporary existence here, even as the corporate media and the Democrats cover up the conspiracies of Donald Trump and his fascist collaborators who continue to intrigue after the failed January 6 insurrection.

Episode 6 of Season 3 (“What It Takes”) is perhaps the most chilling episode yet. It lays bare the backroom filthiness that dominates American “democracy,” as the Logan family members plot to “anoint” a fascistic US presidential candidate named Jerry Mencken (Justin Kirk), in the mold of a Trump, or any of the other leading architects of the January 6 coup. Perhaps the darkest line comes from Roman Roy (Kieran Culkin), the degenerate and cynical jokester of the family, ever-hedging his position and making overtures to the most right-wing forces. He says to Mencken at one point, “Fascists are kind of cool... but not really. So, is that, like, a problem, a thing?”

Shiobhan “Shiv” Roy (Sarah Snook), another of the Roy siblings, is also part of the Machiavellian, anti-democratic maneuvers to pick the next president, although she is somewhat shocked at how far Roman and her father will go in the “coronation” of Mencken. She comments to Roman, “I’m not saying it’s going to be the full Third Reich, but I am genuinely concerned that we could slide into a... into a... a Russian Berlusconi Brazilian f*ck pile.”

Shiv, who wants to take over as CEO from her father, is a former “progressive” political aspirant who tries, in *Succession*’s first season, to burnish her political credentials through the presidential campaign of Gil Eavis (Eric Bogossian), a Bernie Sanders-like figure. Her real

motives, including her desire to gain her father's approval like the rest of her siblings, become increasingly clear as the show progresses. Shiv's relationship with her husband, Tom Wambsgans (Matthew Macfadyen), is chilling and tragic, with money and power lurking nearby in the shadows.

The farce of identity politics

Shiv's transformation from a fake "progressive" and "woke" feminist type in Season 1 to her role in covering up Waystar's cruise scandals, along with her sharp right-wing turn in accommodating the Republican candidates in the current season, is powerfully developed. Roman mocks her presence at the Future Freedom Summit, "We'll get our white cis male stank all over you."

Identity politics and its real social and political role are exposed and derided to varying degrees in the show. Like the rest of the family, Shiv has no principles. She helps cover up the sexual assault scandals to maneuver her way to the president's position at Waystar, despite her "feminist" credentials. Fabulously wealthy, she lives like the rest of the family in opulent penthouses and mansions with her buffoonish husband Tom, both of them self-centered opportunists. Roman reminds her when she raises concerns about fascism, "You have a trophy husband and several fur coats. I think you're gonna be fine."

Roman's ideas for programming on the family's ATN television network run toward adapting identity politics to the goals of the far right: "Give me some straight-shot Blacks and Latinos. Deep-state conspiracy hour but with, like, a f*cking wink, you know? Funny."

Kendall Roy, Logan's second son, who has tried to usurp his father's position and failed devastatingly, comments about his father at one point in Season 3, "He's a central player in a rotten cabal that has basically eaten the heart out of American democracy." But Kendall's own character is both ludicrous and tragic. Like Shiv, he attempts to be a more "woke" version of his father, a more enlightened capitalist who wants to "f*ck the patriarchy." In reality, he has his own entirely selfish aims.

Freighted with delusions of grandeur, which various characters rightly mock, Kendall seeks to take Logan down. It is a cat-and-mouse game in part with horrific consequences. For most of the second season, Kendall is a broken shell of a human, but he manages to stage one final act of rebellion.

There are echoes of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in *Succession*. As Fitzgerald notes of his wealthy characters, "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made." Kendall and the rest of his family smash people and each other up and retreat into their money as well. At one point in the second season, Kendall refers to himself as a "techno Gatsby," half-imitating the idiotic mores of billionaire "woke tech bros."

Both the series' creator Jesse Armstrong and Jeremy Strong have referred in interviews to the influence of Fitzgerald's works, which help shape the show's writing, including the writer's collections of essay, *The Crack-Up*, published after his death in 1940. Strong referred in an interview to Fitzgerald's portrait of a mental breakdown as inspiring his own remarkable treatment of Kendall.

As noted above, there are *King Lear* intimations of *Lear* series. In Shakespeare's work, an aging ruler gives up power and territory to two of his daughters, while excluding a third, ultimately setting off a tragic civil war that results in enormous suffering and destruction. Cox has played *Lear* and brings that experience to bear on his role as the despotic Roy. Various comic scenes hint at Shakespearean subplots, such as those between Tom Wambsgans and Greg Hirsch (played hilariously by Nicholas Braun), whose fates are tied together and who face the possibility of jail time for their roles in covering up the company's misdeeds.

Reflecting on *Lear* and the parallels of the Roys to the present situation with the American oligarchs like Trump, Cox told HBO in a podcast interview, "You're reflecting on reality. ... Shakespeare describes it brilliantly as holding the mirror up to nature. And so that's what you do. You hold that mirror up to nature in all its horribleness."

On the same HBO podcast and in other interviews, the cerebral Strong spoke about his own artistic influences, from actor Laurence Olivier's appeal for "theatrical courage" to Ezra Pound, Balzac, Rilke and Fitzgerald, and about comparisons between Kendall's situation and Shakespeare's Hamlet ("'The readiness is all.' My dad is dead to me and it is my turn ... how am I going to wield that power?").

Strong added in the interview, "I feel a deep sense of responsibility. Rilke said that all great art is a product of having been in danger. The way I understand that is to be part of and serve something that has the chance to be real art. ... It's about what the artist is willing to give to this. How much are they wagering on themselves? How much are they endangering themselves? I guess I feel that if I'm not doing that, I'm not going far enough. It's a lot to ask someone to sit down and watch something. When I watch a piece of work, I can feel when an actor is really committed to it."

In another remarkable interview with the *New York Times*, Cox (a self-professed socialist) noted, "The Roys suffer a great deal from a different kind of want, which is the want of having too much as opposed to not having. That, in Logan Roy's case, is a compulsive thing. He continues to define himself by that wealth, and he can't get out of it, and his children add to the confusion because they are entitled. But the other thing is, I'm not a capitalist."

One is reminded of the passage in the *Communist Manifesto*, "The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation." This is certainly true for the Roys and their hangers-on. At various points the conflict within the family and the boardroom takes on Marx's characterization of capitalist competition as "a fight among hostile brothers."

Treachery, power, abuse, corruption, backstabbing, betrayals and outright fascist conspiracy are portrayed powerfully and sharply criticized and satirized in *Succession*. These are terrible people, who belong to an American ruling class circling the drain. The acting, directing, cinematography and Nicholas Britell's chilling, haunting score are all remarkable. The writers and actors especially have taken their roles and their commitment to artistic truth very seriously.



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