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## TRUMP'S AMERICA

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### Political Culture and National Identity

Edited by Liam Kennedy

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## Hegemonic Vistas: The Pseudo-Gramscian Right from the Powell Memorandum to the 'Flight 93 Election'

Frank Kelleter<sup>1</sup>

### *The hegemony you break may be your own*

In the spring of 2016, I attended a conference in New York. It was primary season. Hillary Clinton was set to win the state's Democratic contest and Republican frontrunner Donald Trump was so far ahead in his party's delegate count that only a miracle could 'prevent' him from prevailing. This word kept coming up in op-eds, conversations and (it was rumoured) Republican strategy meetings at the time. There was a sense of clear and present danger. 'Keep Calm' posters and gift cards were being sold in all the stores I went to that spring, or so it seemed.

Trump was going to win the Republican nomination. But he would not be president. This was the unanimous consensus among the American attendees of our conference dinner. A colleague from India and two Europeans (one from Italy, me from Germany) were not so sure. We argued that demagoguery was a powerful force, unpredictable and feverishly self-reinforcing. We cited – perhaps not in these exact words – the fallout of decades of neoliberal governance by nominally centre-left governments. We pointed to the absence of progressive economic visions that could appeal to the losers in a global trade regime so perfectly embodied by Hillary Clinton. Our hosts would have none of it. A Trump win was *mathematically impossible*. The demographics were against him. It was a brilliantly straightforward argument:

There simply were too many women and minority voters in the electorate. This made a Republican victory not just unlikely but unthinkable.

At the time, this forecast was anything but idiosyncratic. It was, you might say, a fact, supported by numbers, pundits and political scientists. That it turned out to be wrong (even after the appearance of the *Access Hollywood* tape one month before the election, which, according to the logic of demographic blocs, should have secured an overwhelming majority of the women's vote for Clinton) threw an entire socio-political class into existential crisis – worldwide, as befits such global assurances. It was not just that an election was lost (or two, if you count Brexit, or three or four and more, if you widen your geographical horizons), but *reality* itself had come undone. The unthinkable had happened. The impossible had not only turned out to be possible but had established itself as an inescapable actuality.

Of course, the all-pervasive sense of disbelief and incomprehension among centrist voters after 8 November 2016 only strengthened the conviction of Trump supporters that they represented a 'movement': a heretofore invisible political force, repressed by out-of-touch liberal elites but now reasserting itself, literally, with a vengeance. Since then, the worrisome intellectual disingenuousness of this argument has repeatedly been outweighed by its even more worrisome intuitive adequacy. A media establishment proud of its professionalism may find it easy to mock Kellyanne Conway's bizarre proclamation of 'alternative facts'.<sup>2</sup> But such ridicule makes it difficult to acknowledge that our fact-checking news media have always been involved in constructing and safeguarding a rather peculiar sense of reality – one that excludes alternatives not simply because they lack veracity but because they are inconsistent with ruling assumptions of the political economy in place. Three years into Trump's presidency, it has become all but impossible to articulate this state of affairs without risking Trumpian associations. Put differently, the liberal order has lost – and keeps losing – a battle over public meaning and public affect: a battle over what feels normal and what can reasonably be expected to happen in civic life.

As so often, then, it was not reality that broke down in November 2016 but its liberal organisation. (There is an article



to be written about how accurate many pre-election polls actually were, but how their raw data were spun into unambiguously confident predictions by reporters and commentators so predisposed. Or another one about the unending stream of competing post-election ‘explanations’, each working hard to align Trump’s dissonant victory with whatever the writer in question had always held to be true.) What is being dismantled amid this ongoing irritation, when systems of thought are forced to find themselves validated by their very abrogation, is *hegemony*. But mainstream news sources – and yes, there is such a thing as mainstreaming media – refuse to recognise themselves in that term, preferring instead a fantastic but increasingly self-defeating image of neutrality. Similarly, many centre-left voters – among them, to be sure, actually existing liberal elites and globetrotting intellectuals – are reluctant to address the election of Donald Trump as a populist upheaval because they have learned to think of popular challenges to hegemony as something liberating and righteous, certainly not as the vicious and oppressive handling of public opinion that defines the Trump White House and its army of trolls.

Even so, my tiny sample of academics at the 2016 conference dinner who thought that Trump could be elected (two Europeans) and probably would be elected (one Indian) soon expanded into a larger group of American sceptics when I met with friends of more radical leanings, many of them socialist, many non-white. Well versed in political vocabularies outside the United States, none of them identifies as ‘liberal’ (as far as I know). All of them expected Trump to win, one black colleague going so far as to say that the ensuing madness was none of his business because this would now be a civil war among white people. And so it happened that for American liberals – a predominantly white, urban, well-educated and high-earning class – the *New York Times*, of all newspapers, and CNN, of all channels, turned into symbols of embattled civic discourse, brave strongholds of political reporting in an age of counter-hegemonic advances so malicious they defied white, urban, well-educated belief. CNN. The *New York Times*. Difficult times indeed.

### *Stress and boredom in the ‘Age of Trump’*

Next came hyperventilation. Trump earned his own ‘age’ in urgent think pieces and quickly rewritten conference papers even before he was inaugurated. This, too, indicated a rupture in the structures of reality. Even today, many liberals refuse to speak or write Trump’s name, substituting it with silly synonyms or signs and numbers, as if the topmost task now were to preserve the integrity of a world of clean transactions temporarily disturbed by a vulgar visitor one better ignores. Can liberal politics save its composure by magical thinking, keeping itself pure from indecent annoyances by relegating them to another, semi-fictional realm of action? Shortly before the election, there was a theory floating around social media that Trump did not really want to win but that his candidacy was a marketing ploy for the one thing he truly desired: a television channel. As it turned out, he won and got all the channels.

We all live in Trump’s reality now. Unpleasant as this situation is, there can be little doubt that Trump’s presidency is already a ‘transformative’ one, as the coveted formula goes. Change, always touted in American election campaigns, has arrived at last – and it is not pretty. Nowhere is this clearer than in how the past itself has changed since November 2016. Suddenly, each history book, each art exhibition, each nineteenth-century Chinese novel is about the new American president or what he symbolises. If you doubt it, consult some post-election issues of the *New York Review of Books* – a flagship publication of American intellectualism – and count the articles that, no matter what their topic, felt a need to refer to the president-elect.

On the one hand, this feels like a genuine paradigm shift. On the other hand, the stressful spread of Trumpian realities, with their constant and contagious onslaught on established notions of political etiquette, oddly resembles liberalism’s own triumphant march through the centuries. What Pankaj Mishra, referring to the history of Western expansion, calls ‘the sheer velocity of a homogenizing globalization, which makes a settled . . . politics impossible while making violence unpredictable and ubiquitous’<sup>33</sup>



is intensified and accelerated, almost beyond recognition, by the spectacle of a rogue US president who wreaks havoc in the political imaginations of voters and office holders worldwide.

There is indeed an element of violence in the daily barrage of (typically aggressive) presidential tweets. Degree by degree, almost imperceptibly if not for their drastic results, these 'counterpunching' missives are pushing the limits of what can legitimately be said and legislated into a terrain of unregulated force, even brutality, while liberal institutions stand by helplessly, reduced to proclaiming that none of this is standard operating procedure. 'This is not normal!' has become a favourite meme among stressed-out onlookers, scandalised because nothing will produce a scandal anymore. Inciting public violence? Praising dictators? Apologising to neo-Nazis? Giving hush money to porn stars? Obstructing justice? Playing down the torture and dismemberment of a US-based journalist by Saudi security forces? We have reached a point where no conceivable misdemeanour or even crime by the president can be expected to have automatic or long-lasting consequences for his power or career. As the candidate himself put it in a statement that, by liberal standards, should have been enough to end his campaign but that really strengthened the very kind of 'loyalty' it was meant to illustrate, 'I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose any voters, okay?'<sup>4</sup>

No intellectual critique, no procedural complaint, appropriate or accurate as it may be, can ever hope to impinge on this crude and remarkably cruel insight. Historically, however, it is worth pointing out that Trump's appreciation of brute force is unusual for his office only in its lack of mannered propriety, not in its actual substance. This gives him a rhetorical advantage over his critics whenever he can point out – and often correctly so – that policies that cause outrage in liberal circles originated under President Obama. What is stressful about Trump's exhibitionistic display of American power is not so much that this power exists – or that it is grounded in military might and the will to use it – but how relentlessly it has taken over all available spaces of polite communication, where the nation used to be able to feel confident about itself even when addressing (or planning) its war crimes.

Perhaps the civil order of the Atlantic West encounters its own sinister double, its extreme but logical complement, in any such shameless display of authority by strength. In fact, the incessant repetition of shocking infringements – the steady increase in everyday acts of violence – is an old colonialist strategy, perfected by liberal powers in foreign countries to normalise the militarised rule of economic interest through sheer exhaustion. What Achille Mbembe has described as the 'cruel blunting'<sup>5</sup> of colonial subjectivities, who get habituated to ever higher body counts until their minds are bored into cynicism or made to break, is finally coming home, quite literally, to the centres of Western life.

Thus, when propagandists of the New Right gleefully diagnose a 'Trump derangement syndrome' among the old elites (sometimes followed by 'Trump emulation syndrome'), they are both correct and dishonest. They are correct because all kinds of respectable institutions are indeed struggling now for mental adaptation, and quite frequently, their anxious reactions reinforce the madness they are adapting to. But clearly there is also a good deal of dishonesty in Trumpian descriptions of centre-left insanity – made possible, in part, by the curious American history of the word 'liberalism' – because one thing the new nationalists usually prefer to gloss over is their own continuity with earlier forms of liberal rule, including the deep but affectively hidden links between right-wing populism and corporate capitalism (throwing into doubt the explanatory value of both terms and prompting many progressives, in turn, to proclaim Trump to be no populist at all but a puppet of invisible but strangely familiar forces).

This dialectic of stress and boredom – onslaught and exhaustion – threatens to turn interpretations of Trump into a symptom of Trumpism itself, and thus against one another. In this sense, the presidency of Donald Trump, as a phenomenon that appears to demand ever more innovative explanations, is perfectly aligned with the conditions of knowledge production in the age of neo-liberalism. The humanities, in particular, run into all sorts of problems when they confront this presidency – not because they are beholden to 'symptomatic' readings, as some literary scholars would like to claim, but because their deepest professional desire is for conceptual supersession.<sup>6</sup> Of course, it is always advisable



to avoid ideological automatism in scholarship – all the more so when examining a political situation that defies common sense. But in most historical inquiries, the object of study is connected to its exegesis in telling ways.<sup>7</sup> In the present case, both activities – studying Trump and studying Trump studies – illuminate how conceptual boredom can arise as an effect of power. The exasperation with which the word ‘neoliberalism’ is greeted in some academic circles is a case in point.<sup>8</sup> Arguably, this term addresses a fairly precise historical constellation, rigorously reconstructed and differentiated in a number of reliable investigations from various fields – and then ever less so in a comet tail of trendy applications and nitpicky scholasticisms. Since this happens to all successful concepts, one could simply relax and appeal for good practice. But the boredom and annoyance elicited by ‘neoliberalism’ are special in this regard, because this word’s repetitive career, its turn to an increasingly empty formula, indicates less a lack of originality on the part of those who use it than the stubborn persistence of the facts thus addressed. At issue here is not some deep epistemological flaw in critical thought but the frustrating futility of academic critique outside its own field of enunciation.

In this situation, one should be careful how one phrases one’s disappointments. It is not that political economy, historical materialism or environmental sciences have run out of steam, like machines finally winding down after a good market run, but their practical utility is being exhausted by potent realities that refuse to yield to their reflection. The recent surge of illiberal extremism therefore invites us to honour the productive wear and tear of concepts that our professional boredom would have us abandon despite their relevance in the lives of so many people (say, capitalism, racism, sexism).<sup>9</sup> Anything else means shifting the burden of transformation from the sphere of social violence to the sphere of its description. Perhaps it is time to ask to what degree the current tedium with powerful abstractions is shaped by the real powers that gave rise to these labels in the first place – and to what degree scholarly desires for innovative ‘post’-ness are motivated by the perseverance of those forces that all too flexibly refuse to truly change, to genuinely move ‘post’ themselves.

In other words, this is not a time for over-subtlety. Sometimes the most predictable explanations are the most plausible ones. Sometimes it is not in our interest to be interesting. This is an appeal neither for simplicity nor for common sense. Contemporary illiberalism’s continuity with liberal governance requires us to think of the relationship between two conflicting positions as something other than an opposition. It also requires us to steer clear of quick formulas that declare Trump to be a mere distraction from deeper conspiracies, or a useful tool of neoliberal elites, or a non-ideological autocrat building his brand, or the lesser evil to Mike Pence, his most likely successor at the moment. There is probably a grain of truth in each of these statements, but their expressive clout overshadows their descriptive accuracy by far.

So what has befallen the body politic? If symptoms are active parts of a disease rather than passive signs of it – and if diseases never just pass through an organism but always change it – and if a disease is a disease only from the point of view of a body injured by it – then the challenge of analysing present political pathologies ‘symptomatically’, in a constructive sense of the term, is to shift focus away from Donald J. Trump’s person and personality without losing sight of the unique agency exacted by both. The challenge is to depict structures and processes that can lay claim to objective existence while acknowledging their dependence on contingent subjects and constitutive subjectivities. The challenge is to reconstruct what we can call, for lack of a better term and without fetishising this one, Trumpism. Therefore, a bit of historical contextualisation is needed.

### *Of idiots and Gramscians*

The most comforting liberal account of Trump’s election sees it as the culmination of a larger ‘backlash’ against advances made in social policy since the late 1960s. According to this scenario, American conservatism (or what goes by this name) responds to the achievements of the civil rights and feminist movements with an ever more aggressive fantasy of socio-ethnic cohesion and stable gender norms. The relationship of left and right is cast here in



terms of a reaction of the latter against the former. This way of seeing things is comforting precisely because it assumes that American liberalism (or what goes by this name) has history itself on its side. The future will be progressive because the nation is always moving forward, temporary setbacks notwithstanding. By contrast, the armies of reaction may be strong but, ultimately, theirs is a desperate struggle. They can win battles but never the war.

Trust in the beneficial effects of demographic change is closely linked to this backlash narrative. Both outlooks conceive of political antagonisms chiefly in terms of cultural allegiances, and less in terms of socio-economic constellations, because the former model is fully compatible with meritocratic notions of individual or collective empowerment, resilience and uplift – indispensable cornerstones of the current (neo)liberal order. This should give us pause, because the selfsame dispositions are valued by many of the actors and agencies typically subsumed under the backlash label, most prominently the Republican Party (before and after Trump). In fact, what is called conservatism in the United States would be called, regarding its economic policies, liberalism almost anywhere else in the world. This considerably complicates the American backlash narrative. Evidently, the dichotomy of ‘progress’ versus ‘backlash’ makes sense within – and to – the social system that produced it, but once we step out of this alluring frame of reference, we notice that the scenario’s popularity (or its ostensible self-evidence) obscures deep alignments between opposing political forces in the United States. It also fails to account for the pace and comprehensiveness with which Trump has disrupted the spectrum of legitimate political standpoints within the Republican Party and elsewhere. This is not to say that Trump is an unprecedented innovator. On the contrary, his rise to power is inconceivable without his adopted party’s recent history. The issue here, therefore, is not to declare Trump unique nor to claim some dubious equivalence between American left-wing and American right-wing organisations, but to recognise their systemic codependence.

In doing so, it becomes important that current right-wing political styles in the United States regularly act and understand themselves as anti-establishment styles, whether they rail against some diffuse ‘liberal establishment’ or the GOP’s own ‘party

establishment’. The strictly pejorative function of the term ‘establishment’ in nominally conservative vocabularies is remarkable. It shows how deeply the American right is steeped in ideas of anti-centrism, anti-statism and the romance of the political outsider. Conservative storytelling is not much different from liberal storytelling in this regard. Both imaginaries are drawn to the figure of the marginalised provincial who fights an almost hopeless battle against the overwhelming force of entrenched interests. There is nothing surprising about the fact that Sarah Palin, in the first chapter of her 2010 memoir *America by Heart*, cites *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* as one of her favourite movies.<sup>10</sup> In the same year, Dick Armey and Matt Kibbe declared in the ‘Tea Party Manifesto’, ‘Let us be clear about one thing: The Tea Party movement is not seeking a junior partnership with the Republican Party, but a hostile takeover of it.’<sup>11</sup> Trump’s presidential campaign both built on and outbid such sensibilities, profitably aided by Steve Bannon’s frequent self-stylisation as a ‘street fighter’ waging a ‘war’ against the Republican establishment – any establishment.<sup>12</sup>

While such self-descriptions and self-performances can always be contradicted by actual policies, they are no mere façade to conceal vested interests in the status quo. Progressive analysts who have understood this point therefore tend to argue that the New Right is ‘appropriating’ strategies invented on the left – remaining, in that sense, a reactive force. And true, as Alain de Benoist’s use of Gramsci shows, there is a good deal of strategy involved in the right-wing embrace of select anarchist and Marxist concepts and techniques.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, these techniques and concepts shape thought, practice and feeling. They are not reducible to pure affect; nor are they passive intellectual containers that could be filled at will (as some leftist theorists have yet to learn in their attempts to ‘make useful’ Carl Schmitt or Martin Heidegger).<sup>14</sup> Since mental tools resemble their material counterparts in their lack of neutrality, they always have an impact on the when, if and how of their use.

The right’s Gramscian moment, then, is less about an instrumental appropriation of strategies than it is about a competitive employment of commitments. Seen in this fashion, the performative origins of the New Right are really contemporaneous with the



performative origins of its antagonist, the New Left. Quite genuinely, most conservative movements of the last fifty years have understood and experienced themselves as radical and rebellious movements. But while counter-hegemonic emotions on the left and on the right are organised by analogous habits of storytelling – such as the plot of the simple, sometimes simple-minded, maverick who takes on mighty hierarchies and evil empires – some narratives have been successfully branded as ‘progressive’ in the public mind. Hence the propensity of liberal discourses to recognise themselves in reassuring backlash and appropriation histories – and hence their inclination to keep a close watch over the ideological provenance of political keywords and explanatory frameworks.<sup>15</sup>

This is not to say that ‘extremes meet’ – or even that there are two such equivalent extremes that deviate from a healthy middle position of rational moderation. Rather, throughout the Western Atlantic world, multiple uprisings against globalised capitalist hegemony are currently taking place, and it is the hegemonic worldview itself, embattled but commanding, that channels them into self-aware and opposing factions. The ensuing conflicts and hostilities, though perhaps not inevitable, are certainly real. For example, a crucial difference between leftist and rightist dispositions concerns their respective understanding of defiant simplicity and anti-centrism. On the right, championship of ‘the people’ – that mythical subject of American politics – hardly ever takes the form of care or custodianship anymore, because these originally conservative attitudes have come to be associated with elite condescension. While left-wing populism tends to address socio-economic grievances through education (historical analysis, ideology critique, internationalism and so on) and organisation (collective bargaining, strikes, *operaismo* and the like), right-wing populism tends to communicate itself as the fierce self-expression of an identitarian will, often based in revanchism, vigilantism and conspiracy thinking. Thus, the naïve unpretentiousness of the provincial charmer who takes a moral case to Washington has been increasingly replaced in American conservative imaginaries by the belligerent determination of the no-nonsense avenger or, at long last, the spiteful stupidity of the reactionary simpleton who stages a deliberately trashy revolt against well-educated elitists

and patronising experts. Trump’s political appeal rests to a large degree on his ability to transform cartoonish inexperience and proud idiocy into the higher wisdom of gut feelings and sly intuition. Combining the hyperbolic willpower of the masculine fighter who always comes out on top with the punky DIY air of loser icons such as Pepe the Frog, Trump’s persona taps into a large countercultural repertoire of anti-establishment attitudes while channelling their socio-economic concerns into increasingly explicit expressions of chauvinism and racism.<sup>16</sup>

On closer inspection, this is nothing new. As Pankaj Mishra has shown, angry masculinist *ressentiment* is modernity’s constant companion. The current right-wing intellectual Jordan B. Peterson acknowledges as much by trying to provide a cure for it (albeit one that gets stuck in its own ideological obsessions, so that Peterson, himself a pretty tense guy underneath his sober attire of classical conservatism, doesn’t quite know what to do with all those agitated far-right-wingers in his audience except to deny their existence). In the United States, such ultra-modern anti-modernity has a long history, reaching back at least to the nativist liberalism of Democratic president Andrew Jackson, whose portrait hangs in Trump’s Oval Office. Because many of these supposedly reactive forces have been represented by consequential state actors and powerful national institutions, they are not easily filed under the ‘backlash’ label. Maybe the paranoid xenophobia of the Know Nothing Party or certain anti-immigration stances of the People’s Party can be written off as infelicitous setbacks in an overall history of democratisation. But once we consider the long Southern tradition of amalgamating anti-capitalist sentiments with anti-black legislation, and its refusal to stay Southern, or Democratic president Woodrow Wilson’s interpretation of the Civil War as a spiritual prelude to ‘Reunion’ ratified by white supremacy, it becomes difficult to subtract the nation’s history of social anger from its official narrative of progress.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the blueprint for Trumpism was provided, as several commentators have noted, by earlier presidential bids: Barry Goldwater’s Republican campaign in 1964, Democratic governor George Wallace’s four runs for president in the 1960s and 1970s, Richard Nixon’s ‘Southern



strategy' in 1968 and 1972, Ronald Reagan's victories in 1980 and 1984, and Pat Buchanan's challenges to President George H. W. Bush and Republican frontrunner Robert Dole in the 1992 and 1996 primaries.<sup>17</sup> Each of these campaigns was built on a platform that combined economic populism with racist invective, though in different degrees of explicitness and subtlety. George Wallace, in particular, translated the old Southern philosophy of states' rights into intense attacks on what he was among the first to call the 'Washington bureaucracy', adding to this bitter mix two more elements that have since become core ingredients of right-wing populism: protest against a totalitarian media establishment that manipulates public opinion (a typical countercultural theme) and strident calls for economic reforms for the working class (another standard concern of the 1960s and 1970s). Of course, what Wallace had in mind were measures that benefited 'hard-working Americans' while sidelining 'undeserving' elements. Without race being mentioned, this stuck close to the meritocratic consensus, but it was clear that Wallace's odd mixture of pro-labour and anti-New Deal sentiments was based on the assumption that workers were white and welfare recipients were not. It was President Reagan, then, who successfully nationalised this agenda, waging his war on (chiefly black) inner cities as a 'war on drugs' while defaming 'welfare queens' – thinly veiled code for single black mothers on state support who supposedly lived a luxurious life enabled by government programmes and taxes that redistributed money from the productive and labouring parts of society to its 'parasitical' members.<sup>18</sup> And according to meritocratic logic, these unproductive classes just happened to be predominantly non-white.

This is how 'the working class', both as a term and as a political force, was effectively neutralised, if not dismantled, through racialisation.<sup>19</sup> Ever since, the act of defining economic conditions as cultural conditions has become the preferred *divide-et-impera* strategy of neoliberal trade regimes.<sup>20</sup> In the American context, this intersection of right-wing populism and neoliberalism – confounding at first glance – is epitomised by Lewis F. Powell's notorious memorandum of 1971, 'Attack on [the] American Free Enterprise System', a corporate strategy paper with close ties to

the Republican Party. (Powell wrote it shortly before accepting his nomination, by Richard Nixon, to the US Supreme Court.) Sometimes discussed as the secret master-plan that established conservative supremacy in American politics, the Powell memorandum was certainly no such thing. Its influence on policy making was comparatively small, and from today's perspective, many of its proposals look surprisingly statist, indicating the lingering force of Keynesian thought at the time, even in the Republican Party.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, the memorandum perfectly expressed the right's desire for a new sense of ideological cohesion at the height of the countercultural movements. According to Powell, this could best be achieved through organised networks of public persuasion and influence. In this context, it is worth remembering that the political platform of neoliberalism had suffered recurring electoral defeats in American primaries and presidential campaigns before it triumphed spectacularly in the 1980s. This long history of setbacks, followed by a phoenix-like rise, attests to the ideological dedication of its supporters, kept alive through many a dry spell by interest groups, media agitators, corporate funding, think tanks and well-financed lobbyists.

The memorandum's rhetoric nicely exemplifies the New Right's emergent militancy and its counter-hegemonic self-understanding. Although Powell in 1971 still spoke in the respectable voice of a conservative mandarin – his language is a far cry from the demagogic fury of Donald Trump and his (social) media troops forty-five years later – the memorandum teems with excitingly rebellious keywords and provocative soundbites, asking for a 'political action program' and 'a more aggressive attitude' to promote the American 'enterprise system' (Powell's formula for neoliberal conservatism): 'Businessmen have not been trained or equipped to conduct guerrilla warfare with those who propagandize against the system, seeking insidiously and constantly to sabotage it . . . They have shown little stomach for hard-nose contest.'<sup>22</sup>

But businessmen should start with such combat tactics now, Powell holds, which is why they need to learn a lesson or two from the self-organised agitators of the New Left. In short, Powell suggests that radical activism must not be left to the civil rights movement. The memorandum dreams of a plan of action, a



long-term campaign, which will create a vanguard of revolutionaries leading the way for the larger public to follow, in this case by forging a cadre of charismatic speakers who shall infiltrate television programmes and universities. We need our own ACLU, Powell says, which wins court cases for us. Corporate America needs its own lobbying organisations, its own propaganda officers, and altogether 'more direct political action'.<sup>23</sup> If this is conservatism, it sounds suspiciously like a revolutionary movement starting its long march through the institutions.<sup>24</sup>

### *Why is there no conservatism in the United States?*

In 1971, Powell described his political position as anti-socialist and anti-totalitarian, but neoliberalism's goal at the time was really to roll back the social democratic welfare state, if need be by racial fear-mongering. After the triumph of this programme under Reagan, Bush and Clinton, the only political struggle left in national politics was between right-wing neoliberalism and left-wing neoliberalism. To understand how this spectacular flattening out of political options could be accompanied by an equally spectacular increase in partisan polarisation since the 1990s, it is useful to recognise the Gramscian dimension of the Powell memorandum and – indeed – the entire field of American 'conservatism' from Nixon to Trump.

Writing at the same time that Alain de Benoist assembled the philosophical foundations for '*la nouvelle droite*', Powell was convinced that the coming struggle would be waged as a culture war. His memorandum was not overly troubled by the anti-business attitudes of a few far-left radicals; Powell's real grievance concerned the criticism coming 'from perfectly respectable elements of society: from the college campus, the pulpit, the media, the intellectual and literary journals, the arts and sciences, and from politicians'.<sup>25</sup> Looking upon politics as a fight for mainstream opinion, the memorandum identified three battlefields on which the American culture war would be waged over the following decades. It was a prophetic list, comprising public education, legal and legislative practice, and popular media culture. Of these, Powell saw the campus as 'the single most dynamic source' of

'ideological warfare against the enterprise system'.<sup>26</sup> The right's complaint about 'tenured radicals' starts here. Powell's recommendation on this matter was for corporations to do exactly what labour and civil rights activists had done, that is, influence the composition of textbooks.

Then there are the news media. The memorandum features some of the earliest examples of conservative protest against liberal bias in political reporting. As a corrective, Powell advocated an ethos of 'balanced viewpoints', 'equal time' and fair 'representation'.<sup>27</sup> This intervention actually had some justification in 1971, but it would soon turn political debate into a fight of mere opinions, culminating in a situation in which all types of speech, including scientific arguments, appear as equally valid belief systems.<sup>28</sup>

As for law making, one word: lobbying. In no uncertain terms, Powell reminded American entrepreneurs that they had the means to get the best government that money can buy:

One should not postpone more direct political action, while awaiting the gradual change in public opinion to be effected through education and information. Business must learn the lesson, long ago learned by Labor and other self-interest groups. This is the lesson that political power is necessary; that such power must be assiduously [*sic*] cultivated; and that when necessary, it must be used aggressively and with determination – without embarrassment and without the reluctance which has been so characteristic of American business . . . There should not be the slightest hesitation to press vigorously in all political arenas for support of the enterprise system. Nor should there be reluctance to penalize politically those who oppose it.<sup>29</sup>

Needless to say, small government for big business is hardly a revolutionary programme, not in the most capitalist society on earth. Honouring the Marxist credentials of Gramsci's theory of hegemony, we might therefore want to speak of a *pseudo*-Gramscian right, keeping in mind that domination is always at its most compelling when it can pass for liberation. But it is also true that genuine anti-totalitarianism (many of neoliberalism's foundational thinkers in the United States were émigrés from European state tyrannies) and angry American populisms (merging political protest against bureaucratic elites, cultural protest against media



elites, and socio-economic protest against progressive elites that supposedly subsidise non-white laziness) provided fuel to new ideological commitments that came to haunt the liberal trade order in much the same way that Donald Trump came to haunt the Republican Party.

Thus, while Trump is certainly a divisive force within the GOP, his rise to power was prepared by at least two – partly contradictory – trends in the party's recent history: its growing neoliberal fascination with 'disruption' as a political action programme and its increasingly explicit flirtation with select forms of populist anger since the 1960s. Three more specific features of Republican party politics since the 1990s need to be placed in this larger matrix: (1) a dynamic of ideological one-upmanship within the party, fuelled by outside money and new partisan media platforms; (2) a pervasive siege mentality, which has encouraged increasingly strident attitudes of revanchism; and (3) the belief that the republic is engaged in an existential war against the hegemony of 'political correctness' and 'cultural Marxism'.

The first of these developments – ideological radicalisation – is closely connected to the deregulation of financial campaign contributions after the 2010 Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United vs FEC*. As Jane Mayer has shown, the resulting influx of immense sums of private money into party politics and elections has streamlined legislative initiatives that favour corporate interests in aggressive ways.<sup>30</sup> Conservative politicians who care about climate change or support ecological reforms stand no chance against the financial power of corporate billionaires like the Koch brothers, who will sponsor and even groom Republican challengers supporting their agenda in the next primary. It is true that the Koch brothers did not back Donald Trump in the 2016 primaries – and that Trump prided himself on being independent of outside money, vowing to 'drain the swamp' of corruption in Washington – but *Citizens United* has legalised a system of ideological blackmail that has eliminated virtually all (traditionally conservative) concerns for preservation and moderation from the GOP's legislative platform. Add to this the emergence of new and often equally well-funded partisan media channels after the deregulation of telecommunication and the reorganisation of the

Federal Communications Commission under Ronald Reagan, and it becomes clear why the general political drift within the Republican Party has been ever more radically to the right rather than to some desired centre, however imaginary.

At the level of media politics, this development has been accelerated by a self-reinforcing dynamic of ideological one-upmanship, which cannot rest content with the strategic partisanship of Rupert Murdoch's Fox News but escalates almost logically into the conspiracy-driven alarmism of conservative talk radio. But then even extremists like radio host Rush Limbaugh can be outdone, as Alex Jones and others have demonstrated with the sheer craziness of Internet platforms like Infowars (a Gramscian name if ever there was one). What a few decades ago would have been considered a problem on the lunatic fringe of American politics has come to occupy a central place in GOP law making – and not simply because Donald Trump is highly susceptible to suggestions by commentators such as Ann Coulter, Laura Ingraham and even Alex Jones, but because the extremism of partisan narrowcasting is mirrored now in Congress itself by organisations like the Freedom Caucus, a dedicated band of hardliners trying to enforce ideological purity in the party's agenda. Aided by a noisy swarm of social media activists, the Freedom Caucus and similar groups have vowed to monitor Republican officials in their every action and statement. Whoever strays from the desired course risks being labelled a RINO ('Republican in Name Only') or worse. As a result, the jobs of speaker of the House and Senate majority leader have become virtually impossible to perform well (or for long) within the GOP.

This institutional atrophy naturally invites demagogues and shameless power players. It also explains why even before Trump's ascent, large parts of the Republican Party thought that they were engaged, not merely in political controversies with the Democratic Party, but in an existential battle over the survival of the nation. As the conservative blogger Publius Decius Mus (really Michael Anton, who served on President Trump's National Security Council (NSC) until April 2018) put it in his influential contribution to the 2016 campaign, an essay called 'The Flight 93 Election', 'The republic is dying.'<sup>31</sup> In making this claim and by choosing this title, 'The Flight 93 Election' deftly branded



Trump's candidacy as a make-or-break moment for conservative resistance against an otherwise perennial liberal supremacy. Asking establishment Republicans to swallow their mannered reservations about Trump and to join him in charging the cockpit of the hijacked nation (just like the passengers of Flight 93 had done on 9/11), Anton characterised the unloved candidate as a necessary evil, a suitably blunt instrument to save the republic from the power grip of a crushing enemy.

'The Flight 93 Election' thus warned against 'a tsunami of leftism' that 'engulfs our every – literal and figurative – shore'. Interestingly, such statements are in full accordance with the standard narrative of American progress, but they invert its optimism into fear: 'The whole trend of the West is ever-leftward', Anton notes, specifying that conservatism in the United States has been 'losing ground for at least a century'.<sup>32</sup> When Anton's follow-up piece 'Restatement on Flight 93' added that Obama 'was able to overwhelm us with sheer demographics',<sup>33</sup> white indignation finally revealed itself as the paranoid underside of liberal hope. As if conjuring some gloomy double of the nation's canonised tale of meritocratic multiculturalism, Anton declared, 'Every four years the electorate becomes more unfavorable to Republican candidates, owing above all to mass immigration'.<sup>34</sup>

According to Anton, it follows that 'the deck is stacked overwhelmingly against us'<sup>35</sup> and every true Republican knows it. But while 'the base' – another near-mythical entity in Republican thought – is hungering for a good fight, the party 'establishment' has accepted cultural defeat. Since the 1960s, Anton claims, GOP leaders have been playing 'by the self-sabotaging rules the Left sets for them', effectively installing a 'bipartisan junta' in Washington.<sup>36</sup> In this logic, Trump's outsider status, his refusal to play by the rules, his willingness to break with precedents, indeed his ignorance of precedents, are not lamentable shortcomings but powerful assets in a campaign that speaks to its followers' pervasive feeling of being besieged, their sense of occupying the dirty underdog position in a fight against omnipotent and omnipresent forces of cultural authority. As NSC staffer Richard Higgins wrote in 'POTUS & Political Warfare', his infamous White House memo in May 2017 (an over-the-top strategy paper that got Higgins fired

at the request of the then national security advisor, General H. R. McMaster), 'This is not politics as usual but rather political *warfare* at an unprecedented level'.<sup>37</sup>

Recalling fascist theorist Carl Schmitt, Higgins defines politics here as a realm of existential and often fiercely territorial combat grounded in an elemental distinction between friend and enemy. In New Right circles, this Schmittian philosophy is regularly complemented – in Anton, in Higgins, in Bannon, in countless anecdotes and conspiracy theories circulating on alt-right platforms – by the idea that the ongoing struggle is a supremely cultural affair: a fight for endangered spaces and ways of living, a fight against the power of the distant and the foreign, a fight against hegemony.

Higgins's White House memo, for example, stresses that talk of 'political warfare' is anything but metaphoric. Rather, Higgins takes care to explain that he is using this term 'as understood by the Maoist insurgency model'.<sup>38</sup> Of course, militancy always goes well with a sense of victimisation, but what is remarkable about Trumpism – and what aligns this particular siege mentality with fascist examples – is how successfully the New American Right has managed to portray even positions of thoroughgoing power (most notably, commander-in-chief of the US military and highest executive office in the country) as oppositional, claiming that standpoints of undeniable privilege are beset by scheming and fanatical enemies. On the one hand, this is a self-fulfilling prophecy, drawing vindication from extreme reactions to the New Right's own extreme employment of force and intimidation. On the other hand, this is dangerous paranoia. 'POTUS & Political Warfare' imagines a broad cabal of anti-Trump forces, ranging from an illegitimate 'deep state' and the nation's own intelligence organisations to 'key international players' of 'the hard left', which are said to 'include the European Union, the UN, and the OSCE, the OIC and the International Muslim Brotherhood'.<sup>39</sup> In keeping with the pseudo-Gramscian impulses of right-wing populism, Higgins adds that the 'campaigns' of this unlikely group of allies 'operate through narratives'.<sup>40</sup>

Trumpism thus paints the picture of an American culture methodically infiltrated by what Higgins and others call 'Marxist memes'. These are said to undermine local lifestyles and even 'human nature'



itself.<sup>41</sup> Television programmes, corporate advertisements, Hollywood movies, bestselling novels and the humanities departments of American universities: all these sites of cultural production are now being subjected to a right-wing hermeneutics of suspicion that is structurally saturated with the tools of left-wing critique. Arguably, identitarian concerns are strong in both discursive fields, but the Trumpian variety typically lacks commitment to the kind of historical or systemic analysis that would allow for a realistic assessment of power relations in the first place.<sup>42</sup> As if Fox News, talk radio or the president's Twitter account did not exist, Michael Anton claims in 'The Flight 93 Election' that "conservative" media is a nullity, barely a whisper'. Given this conviction, it should not come as a surprise that American right-wingers remain completely unimpressed when film stars or media celebrities speak up against Trump. Rather than making them reconsider anything, this proves their worldview. As Higgins says about such 'attack narratives',

[They] are pervasive, full spectrum and institutionalized at all levels. They inform the entertainment industry from late night monologues, to situation comedies, to television series memes, to movie themes . . . The cultural Marxist narrative is fully deployed, pervasive, full spectrum and ongoing. Regarding the president, attacks have become a relentless 24/7 effort.<sup>43</sup>

Relying on such impressions of being marginalised, Trumpism channels all sorts of diffuse contrarian impulses – some of them justified, as anti-mainstream inclinations often are – into an attractively narrow but ultimately absurd political programme countering 'political correctness' and 'cultural Marxism'. While the first of these terms speaks to intuitions of paternalism that are then construed as acts of totalitarian censorship, the second term – a central component of current right-wing thought – comes with a fully fledged conspiracy theory attached. Coined by conservative publicist William Lind, 'cultural Marxism' claims rather concretely that the German immigrants of the Frankfurt School during and after World War II acted as intellectual double agents who systematically undermined American public institutions. In particular, they managed to instil Hollywood and other entertainment

industries with 'nihilism'.<sup>44</sup> (This explains Higgins's bizarre, almost comical, reference in his 2017 White House Memo to a long-forgotten text by Herbert Marcuse. Obviously, alt-right ideologues have yet to learn that their hostility to Horkheimer and Adorno is all but matched by the dominant assessment of this critical theory in Anglophone media studies departments.)

It would be easy to write off such silliness as fringe politics, but Higgins's dismissal from the NSC – or Steve Bannon's departure from the White House in August 2017, after he miscalculated his position in the movement – should not detract from the fact that the political ideology and the political style of Trumpism have practically taken over the Republican Party, eclipsing not only any residual notions of traditional conservatism there but also, and more significantly, the party's neocon and neoliberal wings.

### *Neofascism versus/and neoliberalism*

In the wake of 2016, numerous labelling anxieties have surfaced in the liberal blogosphere and some corners of academia. Trump's presidency must be unnerving for anyone who would like the world to correspond to the established (American) definitions of political keywords. One such keyword is 'populism'. Another is 'fascism'. Of course, anything can be compared to anything – and mere resemblance does not make an argument in political history. Let me stress, therefore, that when I use the term 'neofascism' to describe Trumpism, I do not mean to suggest – nor does anyone else who employs this term, as far as I can see – that 2016 was 1933 or that neoliberal America is Weimar Germany. Instead, I am following Karl Polanyi's argument that fascism is what happens when liberalism fails while no viable left-wing alternative is available.<sup>45</sup>

But first things first: neoliberalism. Let us assume that this weary name refers to a socio-economic belief system based on the idea that market solutions to social problems are always more efficient than political solutions. Over the past four decades, this axiom has resulted in a systematic shrinking of the public sector in Western societies and elsewhere, subjecting schools, hospitals, public transport, welfare structures and entire nations to harsh



austerity budgets that treat these institutions of communal life as if they were primarily run for profit – while corporate returns have exploded through deregulation. If we can agree that this describes, however roughly, our political economy since the late 1970s, we can immediately go on to say that neoliberalism – or ‘the Washington consensus’, as some have called it – is currently experiencing a most severe crisis. There is an undeniable sense of things going wrong. Of course, the fact that this realisation comes so late tells us something about neoliberalism’s tacit entanglement with culturalist and racist structures of exploitation. Only now, when the fear of poverty has reached a section of the population that thought it was naturally immune to it – the proverbial ‘middle class’ – are we beginning to see significant signs of mainstream discontent. Only now that poverty can no longer be safely identified with minorities who are habitually held responsible for their own economic troubles does the crisis become visible as a crisis at all.<sup>46</sup>

Put differently, this crisis is also a crisis of legitimacy. Trickle-down-philosophies are difficult to uphold when social immobility ceases to be a cultural trait of non-white people in the inner cities. In fact, large parts of white America are even facing the humiliating spectre of *downward* mobility, including a rural working class that has learned to think of itself, against all odds, as middle class. Meanwhile, many metropolitan professionals, including academics, intellectuals and people working in creative industries (so beloved by the neoliberal economy), have been comparatively untouched by the current crisis, despite increasing job precariousness in the cognitive sectors of the labour market.

This is another way of saying that ‘liberal elites’ do in fact exist and that they do in fact dominate large parts of cultural production. There are social classes – and entire countries, like Germany – that continue to profit from the globalisation of markets, but also from the attendant economic inequalities, reaping disproportionate wealth through trade imbalances and the power to dictate reforms and austerity measures elsewhere. For the longest time, this crisis-prone system has been rendered socially acceptable by two fundamental ideas: the belief that economic globalisation constitutes a form of social progress (stressing a

post-bourgeois pluralism of lifestyles and an often commodity-based multiculturalism over economic equity) and the widespread conviction that Western economies reward effort, talent and willpower with achievement and success (a ruling assumption of almost every American piece of entertainment). As David Graeber writes, ‘Whole societies have come to represent themselves as giant credentialized meritocracies, rather than systems of arbitrary extraction.’<sup>47</sup>

In other words, if there is a hegemonic ideology in the United States and throughout the Western world, it is certainly not a Marxist one. Meritocratic narratives rule supreme in American popular and political culture. They organise neoliberal imaginaries on both the right and the left. But it was the neoliberalisation of left-wing governance, in particular, that provided the current political economy with its fatal air of inevitability in the 1990s. If the memorable claim that the system is ‘without alternatives’ still sounds forceful today, this is because plausible alternatives have indeed been expunged almost completely from centre-left party platforms, newspapers and public spheres. And this is not Marxism but the exact opposite: It is the abandonment by traditional organisations of the left (Democratic Party, Labour Party, SPD, Parti socialiste etc.) of any practical programme of non-corporate economic internationalism, favouring instead a type of society that is nominally progressive and symbolically diverse but in reality ‘gentrified, overpriced, [and] under-resourced’, as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor puts it.<sup>48</sup>

How, then, could Donald Trump get as far as he did, despite demographics and ‘who we are’? When American liberals are struggling with this question, they would do well to look to more than the Electoral College or Russian interference (another reassuring tale: if the republic fails, it is because of foreign conspirators). They would do well to look to their own history. An important reason for Trump’s victory was that his campaign provided something that Hillary Clinton’s campaign could not provide without self-contradiction: a direct and stark response to the consequences of economic globalisation. It was a deeply reactionary response, channelling vague discontent and amorphous fears of loss into appeals to national entrenchment and



racial animosity. But Trump's mobilisation of what sociologist Donald Warren (already in 1976) called 'middle American radicalism'<sup>49</sup> could not be countered by any credible leftist critique of existing economic arrangements, not after the Democratic Party had thoroughly neoliberalised itself from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama.

Famously, when Margaret Thatcher was asked in 2002 what she considered her biggest achievement, she replied, 'Tony Blair and New Labour.'<sup>50</sup> Ronald Reagan might have said the same thing about the Democratic Party. In the 2016 campaign, Hillary Clinton's routine invocations of small-business optimism and the American can-do spirit rang false because such noble platitudes all too obviously conflicted with her public record. Clinton's policies, much like her husband's and so many policies of her party, have shaped America's socio-economic (dis)order in fundamental ways, including its investment in mass incarceration and radical welfare cuts, both of which mostly harm minorities while metropolitan elites can continue to see themselves as open to the world, value-driven and, yes, self-confidently correct in their acts of consumption, which they deem acts of politics.

Thus, when Donald Trump pointed out that Bernie Sanders's 2016 and 2020 campaigns have been methodically undermined by the Democratic establishment, the glee with which he referred to this situation highlighted his dishonesty as much as the credibility of the underlying intuition that the system is 'rigged'. Since the 1990s, progressive institutions, discourses and media have gone out of their way to sideline, ridicule or declare obsolete exactly the types of structural critique that (could have) predicted the current crisis. The erosion of materialist politics in a number of intellectual and public arenas, whether by high-theoretical boredom, liberal triumphalism or professional pragmatism – but always in the name of some 'realism' – has opened the floodgates for a politics of racial scapegoating and cultural resentment that particularly appeals to those victims of free-market extremism who have no other means to explain their socio-economic failures. In much the same fashion in which the destruction of the Black Panther Party by state violence in the 1970s set large parts of American minority protest on a path of ontological confirmation, so it was only

a matter of time before ever more American conservatives should come to explicitly embrace the white nationalism their party had tried to hold under strategic control while the Washington consensus still worked.

When the left goes neoliberal, the right goes neofascist. Of course, this is not an exclusively American phenomenon but part of a worldwide surge in embittered and often chauvinistic uprisings against neoliberal trade regimes. Some observers even speak of 'Global Trumpism' and an 'Authoritarian International'.<sup>51</sup> By contrast, President Obama epitomised his party's unacknowledged commitment to national exceptionalism when he characterised the results of the 2016 election in supremely American fashion as merely a 'zig' following a 'zag'.<sup>52</sup> However, Trump's victory is not some temporary aberration from one nation's regular course of history but rather the authentic face of something larger that Western liberalism has no plausible name for, because it concerns Western liberalism itself. Brexit – described by Jürgen Habermas as 'a victory for populism *over capitalism* in its country of origin'<sup>53</sup> – preceded the American election by only a few months. Since then, neofascist movements and parties have been gaining ground continuously within the very centres of globalised capitalism, staging unexpected revolts against the current economic order, but these are not the types of revolt that frequent-flyer progressives had in mind when they kept talking about social justice while marginalising trade unions and privatising public institutions.

Consider how Michael Anton's 'Restatement' inveighs against 'the Davoisie' and its 'rule by a transnational managerial class in conjunction with the administrative state'.<sup>54</sup> Behind the wild opportunism of Trumpian discourses there actually hides a remarkably coherent worldview, one of nonconformist provincialism and illiberal dissent. As Anton approvingly writes, 'On trade, globalization, and war, [Candidate] Trump is to the left (conventionally understood) not only of his own party, but of his Democratic opponent.'<sup>55</sup> Perhaps the same cannot be said about President Trump, but the fact remains that Trumpism, as a political philosophy, positions itself in diametric opposition to not just one but two core ideologies of the Republican Party. 'The Flight 93 Election' stresses this when Anton rhetorically asks whether it



is 'just a coincidence' that Republican Never-Trumpers 'happen to favor Invade the World, Invite the World'.<sup>56</sup> The first of these slogans refers, of course, to the party's neocon wing, the second to its neoliberals. And true, similar to Pat Buchanan, who was no friend of foreign invasions or transnational corporations, Trump breaks with Republican neocon and neoliberal orthodoxies alike. He criticises the Iraq War, is unenthusiastic about NATO, and has announced the withdrawal of American troops from Syria. He rails against American businesses that invest overseas, favours reindustrialisation and tariffs, and opposes – as do many on the left – international trade agreements like NAFTA and TPP. Significantly, these are long-held beliefs with Trump, not mere expediences for electioneering.

Despite its pronounced anti-intellectualism, then, Trumpism has attracted a number of intellectuals ('conventionally understood') who are hoping to organise their champion's rampant instincts and his orchestrations of popular fury into an avant-garde movement of political upheaval.<sup>57</sup> Doing so, these new masterminds of the far right tend to treat the president as a means to an end – a move that can be risky for their careers, as the case of Steve Bannon shows. Nevertheless, Bannon's speeches and interviews provide one of the most systematic accounts of Trumpism so far.<sup>58</sup> An enemy, like Michael Anton, of the neoliberal 'Davos class', Bannon insists that the 2016 campaign was all about a dedicated vanguard's 'takeover' of the Republican Party, followed by an even larger coup: the capture and dismantlement of 'the administrative state'. Thus, when Trump filled his administration with blatant non-experts – leaving liberals speechless – Bannon clarified that there was method to the madness: 'If you look at these Cabinet appointees, they were selected for a reason and that is . . . deconstruction.'<sup>59</sup>

On numerous occasions, Bannon has explained that the deconstruction of the administrative state is the first of three pillars of 'an entirely new political movement', which he labels 'economic nationalism' (a term meant to distance Trumpism from 'white nationalism', as if the movement's more unpalatable elements could be set aside as purely instrumental).<sup>60</sup> What Bannon has in mind is not so much the ongoing rollback of the New Deal

welfare state – an orthodox principle of Republican governance since Ronald Reagan – but the steady hollowing out of constitutional checks and balances in favour of authoritarian decision making. From this perspective, Trumpism is really about the subversion of basic governmental norms and practices.

The second pillar of Bannon's revolutionary programme is 'anti-globalism', understood as unilateralism underwritten by unmatched military power, and economic strength through self-sufficiency. This includes welfare measures for an industrial working class that is tacitly racialised as white (although Bannon maintains this need not be the case). As a third pillar, Bannon lists 'national security and sovereignty'.<sup>61</sup> This translates into a harsh anti-immigration stance: not because certain types of immigration – especially those promoted by neoliberal elites – exacerbate global inequalities but because the American polity is imagined now as a rigorously circumscribed space of cultural identity that needs to be walled off, literally, against contamination. Trump's border wall is no vanity project in this regard, but really an expression of existential dread. In fact, Bannon's insistence that a nation is territorially defined by its borders – a truism elevated in far-right circles to the status of a spiritual profundity – is often impossible to tell apart from an anxious fantasy of ethnic purity. After all, Michael Anton defines Trumpism in exactly these terms as 'no more importing poverty, crime, and alien cultures' and then goes on to include the nation's own Black Lives Matter movement among the 'inaneities' American patriots need to fight.<sup>62</sup>

There is a name for this type of insurrectionary populism and it is not conservatism. European history – which is in large part a history of capitalism dealing with its own consequences – provides some instructive examples of anti-establishment movements that have addressed national milieus worried about their socio-economic status and urged them to attribute their relative decline (actual or feared) to the advances supposedly made by other disadvantaged groups. One hundred years after Benito Mussolini founded the *Fasci italiani di combattimento* and one hundred years after the German November Revolution was smothered by the paramilitary *Freikorps*, it is a good time to remember that fascism has never simply been a failure of civic morality, or the result of



strange rulers appearing with dark intentions like celestial supervillains, despite countless Hollywood movies telling us so. Outside of liberal narratives, fascism has always been a fiercely expressive force, a distorted articulation of popular fear and anger, the brutal protest of stressed communities believing themselves both privileged with identity and under life-threatening attack from foreign conspirators and traitors at home.

### Conclusion

The election of Donald Trump and the concurrent rise of new styles of right-wing extremism are intertwined with self-aware but deliberately unsystematic and deeply affective revolts against transnational capitalism. Performing his campaign and his presidency as a 'movement', Trump has essentially promised to re-establish the lost primacy of the political over the economic, but the notion of 'the political' that underlies this promise seeks to subvert established norms and institutions of liberal democracy itself – while Trump's socio-economic policies maintain and intensify the worst effects of corporate-controlled governance. Thus, the slogan 'America First' can be understood by protest voters as declaring that the nation should 'have' an economy, not be run by one – but then its companion slogan, 'Make America Great Again', almost defiantly crude, appeals to notions of democracy obliquely grounded in white supremacy and male privilege.

The resulting (re)emergence and normalisation of fascist politics in the twenty-first century is not easily captured by the traditional explanatory models of leftist critique (describing fascism as an unadulterated form of capitalism) or by the strategic manoeuvres of established conservative institutions in the United States (hoping to functionalise the president and his constituency for evangelical, neoliberal or neoconservative policy missions). Both perspectives perceive something important about Trumpism – its entanglement with high finance and predator capitalism on the one hand, its continuity with a politics of felt dispossession and cultural revanchism on the other – but the distinctiveness of American neofascism only reveals itself when it is put in relation to, and simultaneously distinguished from, other and

earlier forms of right-wing politics in the United States. Within this larger historical field, Trumpism has surfaced at the height of neoliberal crisis as an emphatically revolutionary and at the same time intensely resentful movement, offering a political vision of national fortification deceptively inspired by countercultural figures of thought such as anti-statism; the valuation of 'community' over 'society'; and the advocacy of long marches, deep campaigns and even political violence to combat an overpowering cultural hegemony.

To understand the logic of this erratic but highly targeted force, it helps to pay attention to the systemic codependence of opposing political positions in the United States today. To do so is not to claim moral equivalency between the New Left and the Newest Right. Rather, it is to highlight the derivative nature of contemporary right-wing revolutionism, which addresses complexity by performing simplicity and rashness. This paradoxical combination of insurrectionary victimology with unsubtle assertions of entitlement – encouraging counter-hegemonic disruptions while accelerating existing structures of exploitation – accounts for much of global Trumpism's current popular appeal, that is, its easy reproducibility, its international adaptability and its stressful speed and reach in a digital-capitalist media ecology.<sup>63</sup>

### Notes

1. This essay is part of a larger project, possibly never to be finished, on brutality, triumphalism and liberal propriety.
2. 'Kellyanne Conway: Press Secretary Sean Spicer Gave "Alternative Facts"', *Meet the Press*, 22 January 2017, available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSrEEDQgFc8>> (accessed 20 January 2020).
3. Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (New York: Picador, 2017), 293.
4. 'Trump: I Could Shoot Somebody and Not Lose Voters', CNN, 23 January 2016, available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTACH1eVlaA>> (accessed 20 January 2020).
5. Achille Mbembe, *Politiques de l'inimitié* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016), 53. My translation of Mbembe's '*cruelle hébétude*'.
6. See Frank Kelleter, 'DISCIPLINE COOL. Notes, Quotes, Tweets, and Facebook Postings on the Study of American Self-Studies



- (Looking Forward Remix)', in Frank Kelleter and Alexander Starre (eds), *Projecting American Studies: Essays on Theory, Method, and Practice* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2018), 287–307.
7. See Frank Kelleter, *Serial Agencies: 'The Wire' and Its Readers* (Winchester: Zero, 2014).
  8. See Daniel Rodgers, 'The Uses and Abuses of "Neoliberalism"', *Dissent*, Winter 2018, <<https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/uses-and-abuses-neoliberalism-debate>> (accessed 20 January 2020).
  9. The following sentences are adapted from Kelleter, 'DISCIPLINE COOL', 298–9.
  10. Sarah Palin, *America by Heart: Reflections on Family, Faith, and Flag* (New York: Harper, 2010), 1.
  11. Dick Armev and Matt Kibbe, 'A Tea Party Manifesto', *Wall Street Journal*, 17 August 2010, <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704407804575425061553154540>> (accessed 20 January 2020).
  12. 'Breitbart's Bannon Declares War on the GOP', *60 Minutes*, 10 September 2017, <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/60-minutes-breitbart-steve-bannon-declares-war-on-the-gop>> (accessed 20 January 2020).
  13. See Alain de Benoist, *Les Idées à l'endroit* (Paris: Hallier, 1979).
  14. See Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt* (London: Verso, 1999); Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018).
  15. Consider all the think pieces explaining why the word 'populism' should not be used to describe Trumpian nationalism. Or consider all the poll-based articles trying to disprove economic accounts of Trump's election by pointing to the racial motives of well-to-do suburban voters. One of the most regrettable effects of Trump's election has been the wide acceptance and adoption by left-wing discourses of a typically right-wing strategy that contrasts class politics with identity politics. As a result, innumerable progressive debates after 2016 have been preoccupied with fruitless and misleading stand-offs between explanations highlighting 'neoliberalism' and explanations highlighting 'racism and sexism', as if these were competing alternatives.
  16. See Dale Beran, '4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump', *Medium*, 14 February 2017, <<https://www.medium.com/@DaleBeran/4chan-the-skeleton-key-to-the-rise-of-trump-624e7cb798cb>> (accessed 20 January 2020). On the affective dimension of alt-right discourses, see Simon Strick, 'Alt-Right-Affekte: Provokationen und

- Online-Taktiken', *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 19 (2018), 113–25. For an extensive infrastructural account of the alt-right, see David Neiwert, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump* (London: Verso, 2017). A less reliable but widely cited study of the alt-right is Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Winchester: Zero, 2017). Nagle's book has been criticised for 'both-sides-ism', for reducing American leftist positions to a rigid dichotomy between class politics and identity politics, for turning alt-right discourses into a registry of everything she finds wrong with left-wing discourses, and for bad editing and plagiarism. By contrast, Strick's work stresses the performative 'atmospherics' of right-wing online culture, which is based in feelings (rather than convictions) of nonconformity. According to Strick, this non-intellectual spirit of defiance effectively insulates acts of trolling (online and offline) from critical questioning. In fact, alt-right provocations feed on critique; they typically anticipate their own political or moral condemnation since such reactions fuel the alt-right's constitutive feeling of hegemonic suppression. Placing these tactics in the context of a larger political economy, however, one should be careful not to fall into the trap of affective fundamentalism. Regardless of a standard axiom in Deleuzian affect theory, which posits that certain 'intensities' precede social interaction, there is no reason to disconnect feeling from structure (economies, networks, ideas, ideologies etc.) in the study of right-wing history. Moreover, the specific case of alt-right online polemics does not provide a general model for other – and quite different – communicative strategies of the New Right, ranging from the rhetoric of political philosophy all the way to conspiracy thought. Nevertheless, a purely 'intellectual' approach to Trumpism is obviously deficient; the New Right is not properly understood without considering its manifold affective dimensions.
17. See John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016), 18–53. A pioneering study on this tradition, quoted by Judis, is Donald I. Warren, *The Radical Center: Middle Americans and the Politics of Alienation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976).
  18. See Rick Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).
  19. See Jefferson R. Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010).



20. On the culturalisation of poverty, see William J. Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Knopf, 1996).
21. For example, Powell proposed conducting his pro-business initiatives through the Chamber of Commerce. Movement Conservatism would soon follow a different path, more consistent with its philosophy of private initiative, enlisting think tanks and grassroots organisations. On Powell's memorandum as a central document of American neoliberalism, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 43; Kevin Doogan, *New Capitalism? The Transformation of Work* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 34.
22. Lewis F. Powell Jr, 'Confidential Memorandum: Attack on American Free Enterprise System', 23 August 1971, 8, available at <<https://scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=powellmemo>> (accessed 21 January 2020).
23. *Ibid.*, 25.
24. For the 'long march' comparison, see Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 40.
25. Powell, 'Confidential Memorandum', 2–3.
26. *Ibid.*, 12, 5.
27. *Ibid.*, 13, 17.
28. See Joan Walsh, 'The Right's Horrifying Edge: History Shows Surprising Pattern about Its Demise', *Salon*, 6 August 2014, <[https://www.salon.com/2014/08/05/rick\\_perlstein\\_presents\\_ronald\\_reagan\\_exorcist](https://www.salon.com/2014/08/05/rick_perlstein_presents_ronald_reagan_exorcist)> (accessed 21 January 2020).
29. Powell, 'Confidential Memorandum', 25–26, 30.
30. Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York: Doubleday, 2016).
31. Publius Decius Mus, 'The Flight 93 Election', *Claremont Review of Books*, 5 September 2016, <<https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/digital/the-flight-93-election>> (accessed 21 January 2020).
32. *Ibid.*
33. Publius Decius Mus, 'Restatement on Flight 93', *Claremont Review of Books*, 13 September 2016, <<https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/digital/restatement-on-flight-93>> (last accessed 21 January 2020).
34. *Ibid.*
35. Decius, 'The Flight 93 Election'.
36. *Ibid.*
37. 'POTUS & Political Warfare', May 2017, available at <<https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/3922874/Political-Warfare.pdf>> (accessed 21 January 2020); *my italics*.
38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. Compare Anton, possibly channelling Jordan Peterson: 'Our liberal left present reality and future direction is incompatible with human nature and must undermine society.' Concretely, Anton refers to 'the wars on "cis-genderism" – formerly known as "nature" – and on the supposed "white privilege" of broke hillbillies'. Decius, 'The Flight 93 Election'.
42. At present, the right's scientific field of choice seems to be evolutionary psychology, championed in its political implications most of all by Jordan Peterson (whose list of scientific questions that have been settled conclusively seems to exclude climate change).
43. 'POTUS & Political Warfare'.
44. William S. Lind, 'What Is Cultural Marxism?', Maryland Thursday Meeting (2008), <[marylandthursdaymeeting.com/Archives/SpecialWebDocuments/Cultural.Marxism.htm](http://marylandthursdaymeeting.com/Archives/SpecialWebDocuments/Cultural.Marxism.htm)> (accessed 21 January 2020).
45. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944).
46. Incidentally, this observation helps to dissolve the race-versus-class binary that has consumed so many liberal pundits since 2016. Voters do not have to experience real material decline to base their political decisions on (perceived or feared) socio-economic status threats. In fact, the expectation that people's economic politics are determined by their actual material situation presents a supremely neoliberal assumption to begin with, turning the individual voter into a *Homo oeconomicus*.
47. David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (New York: Melville House, 2015), 28.
48. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016), 217.
49. Warren, *The Radical Center*, 1. See also Judis, *The Populist Explosion*, 21.
50. Quoted in Judis, *The Populist Explosion*, 95.
51. See Mark Blyth, 'Global Trumpism: Why Trump's Victory Was 30 Years in the Making and Why It Won't Stop Here', *Foreign Affairs*, 15 November 2016, <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-11-15/global-trumpism>> (accessed 21 January 2020); Jürgen Habermas, 'Für eine demokratische Polarisierung: wie man dem Rechtspopulismus den Boden entzieht', *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, November 2016, 35–42; Christian Lammert and Boris Vormann, *Die Krise der Demokratie und wie wir sie überwinden* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2017).



52. 'Transcript: President Obama's Remarks on Donald Trump's Election', *Washington Post*, 9 November 2016, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/09/transcript-president-obamas-remarks-on-donald-trumps-election>> (accessed 21 January 2020).
53. Habermas, 'Für eine demokratische Polarisierung', 36; my italics.
54. Decius, 'Restatement on Flight 93'.
55. Decius, 'The Flight 93 Election'.
56. Ibid.
57. See new journals like Chris Buskirk's *American Greatness* (since summer 2016) and Julius Krein's quarterly *American Affairs* (since February 2017). However, one should not overestimate the philosophical ambitions of these more respectable outlets of contemporary right-wing thought – just as one should not divorce the affective activism of alt-right trolls from its constitutive ideas and ideological convictions. 'Intellectuals' like Ben Shapiro move easily from a register based in 'logic' (or performances thereof) to hyper-partisan social media agitation. Conversely, the demagogic opportunism of far-right gurus like Roger Stone – one of Trump's most colourful strategists and the missing link between the 2016 campaign and earlier Republican extremisms – is governed by deeply held political beliefs, many of which are shared, with local variations, by New Right movements across the globe.
58. See Joshua Green, *Devil's Bargain: Steve Bannon, Donald Trump, and the Storming of the Presidency* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017).
59. Tim Hains, 'Steve Bannon: Core of Trump's Platform is "Deconstruction of the Administrative State"', *RealClear Politics*, 23 February 2017, <[https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2017/02/23/stephen\\_bannon\\_pillar\\_of\\_trumps\\_platform\\_is\\_deconstruction\\_of\\_the\\_administrative\\_state.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2017/02/23/stephen_bannon_pillar_of_trumps_platform_is_deconstruction_of_the_administrative_state.html)> (accessed 21 January 2020).
60. Quoted in Michael Wolff, 'Ringside with Steve Bannon at Trump Tower as the President-Elect's Strategist Plots "an Entirely New Political Movement"', *Hollywood Reporter*, 18 November 2016, <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/stevebannon-trump-tower-interview-trumps-strategist-plots-new-political-movement-948747>> (accessed 21 January 2020).
61. Hains, 'Steve Bannon'.
62. Decius, 'The Flight 93 Election'.
63. I would like to thank my readers Maxi Albrecht, Dustin Breitenwischer, Susanne Krugmann, Jenna Krumminga, Kathleen Loock, Martin Lüthe, Annelot Prins, Simon Schleusener, Joscha Spoellmink, Maximilian Stobbe, Simon Strick and Maria Sulimma.

## Women Voters and Activists in Trump's America

*Melissa Deckman and Kelley M. Gardner*

Women's response to Donald Trump has been far more diverse than pundits and political observers often claim. The mainstream news media, for example, were shocked at how well Donald Trump performed in the 2016 presidential election with many women voters, particularly given his boorish, sexist behaviour, coupled with the leak of the infamous *Access Hollywood* tape in which Trump could be found bragging about his ability to sexually assault women because of his fame and wealth. At the same time, Trump's surprise victory also propelled many American women to engage in the politics of resistance, forming grassroots organisations to protest against his policies and inspiring a record number to run for political office for the first time in 2018.<sup>1</sup> A strong majority of women voters also helped the Democrats take back majority control of the US House of Representatives, with exit polls showing that roughly six out of ten women voters chose Democrats for Congress, nearly double the margin by which they voted Democrat in 2016.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter considers American women's response to Donald Trump and his presidency in three ways. First, it provides a brief overview of the women's vote in the 2016 presidential election, considering what sorts of women cast their ballots for Trump – and what sorts of women did not – highlighting how partisanship, race, class, religion and attitudes about gender, in particular, helped to shape women's voting choices. Second, it considers how American women rate Trump's performance as president two years into his term. Last, it considers how the Trump presidency