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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Trump's America: Political Culture and National Identity by Liam Kennedy

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Institution for Transnational American Studies. It also anticipates Mita Banerjee's eloquent celebration of Obama's "kaleidoscopic vision of difference" in the collection's final essay (161). When reading the chapters cumulatively, one can observe in them a tendency to characterize all forms of transnational cultural contact as ultimately positive, productive encounters between equal parties. Several of the collected essays consider how the collision of previously separate traditions can produce new concepts and discourses. Less attention is paid to the problem of whether asymmetries in the geopolitical power of the nations involved might result in the marginalization of forms of knowledge and culture which may be less suited or open to interchange. None of the essays collected in this book offer an apologia for US imperialism, neoliberal economic policies, or cultural globalization. But one might expect Transnational American Studies, as it continues to develop, to provide a more comprehensive assessment of both the benefits and the risks implicit in transcultural relationships.

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Trump's America: Political Culture and National Identity by Liam Kennedy (ed.). Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2020. 369 pages.

Trump's America is a collection of fourteen essays on the impact of Donald Trump's presidency on US politics, foreign relations and identity. Editor Liam Kennedy assembled contributions from fifteen established and senior American Studies scholars. They engage in an important attempt to understand the significance of a subject that will continue to weigh on the political, cultural, social and economic life of the United States and the world at large. Like any contemporary analysis of its subject, a collection such this one inevitably leaves the reader with many more open-ended questions than answers. However, every unanswered problem offers valuable material for reflection within and without academic research; for example, how to contain and shift the

immediate evolution of US populism. The book is also a timely effort in restoring critical objectivity into a matter that has animated the last four years with an emotionally-charged global debate.

The essays are divided into three thematic sections under the titles “Paradigm Shift,” “Foreign Policy and Global Relations,” and “Identity Politics and the Politics of Spectacle.” The first part deals with the aversion to liberal ideals, processes, and rhetoric in Trump’s politics. The second explores the dramatic disruption of diplomatic customs, liberal internationalism, and democracy promotion abroad. The final part reflects on the effects of Trump’s presidency on cultural phenomena as diverse as hybrid media (Alizera Hajihosseini), plutocratic post-feminism (Diane Negra), satire (Liam Kennedy), and spectacularization of politics into what we now call a post-truth, disinforming reality (Scott Lucas).

The last section is the least cohesive in the book, given its wide range of subjects. Nonetheless, it contains one of the most compelling essays by Hamilton Carroll, examining J. D. Vance’s memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*. This bestselling book (now made into a film by Ron Howard) is described here as an open tribute to American neoliberal ethics. Carroll explains how *Hillbilly Elegy* is a work steeped in the myth of meritocracy, the disdain for social welfare and the stereotype of the undeserving poor. For the author, Vance’s work is not the sociology of Trump’s forgotten white voters as depicted by both the right and the left, who enthusiastically saluted the book as the one text that could explain the rise of Trump to millions of stunned Americans in the aftermath of the 2016 elections. This convergence of opinions, according to Carroll, is troublesome, as it demonstrates the existence of widespread and largely unquestioned beliefs about rural poverty and social mobility, that perpetuate the myth that just rewards await any and every hard-working and ambitious American.

The essay that stands out in this collection is Frank Kelleter’s long piece, in the first part of the book, on the hegemonic position that the right has gained in US and Western political culture. The contribution is an illuminating consideration of the transformation of the US right (in its “new-, far-, and alt-” manifestations) as a political phenomenon that has appropriated language, practices and theories of the revolutionary

left and counterculture in order to create its own resistance and then hegemony. Kelleter delves into the intellectual evolution of US conservatism of the past fifty years, using Lewis F. Powell's 1971 memorandum "Attack on American Free Enterprise System" as its founding document, to contend that Trump is the latest product of this historical process; a product of a long process of creating a new hegemony which is not liberating and righteous—as popular upheavals are meant to be according to the left narrative—but is rather "a vicious and oppressive handling of public opinion" (74). Hence, Trump's victory is not some temporary aberration from just US history but is in fact "the authentic face of something larger that Western Liberalism has no plausible name for, because it concerns Western liberalism itself" (97). The author suggests that the name of the kind of "insurrectionary populism" behind Trump is not conservatism but "neofascism," as it subverts liberal democracy's norms and traditions and intensifies economic exploitation through corporate-controlled governance.

Like Kelleter, most of the authors conclude that Trump does not represent a rupture with (or an anomaly in) US history, despite the opposite common perception that stems from both liberal voters' shock after the election outcome of 2016 and the President's self-mythology as a great history changer. Among the contributors who discuss continuity between Trump and America's past Donald Pease indicates how Andrew Jackson in the 1820s was the precursor of Trump's illiberal democracy; David Ryan sees the "hostile revisionist power" that took the Oval office in 2016 as extending the US's history of "expansion, subjugation and slaughter"; while Penny Von Eschen, who examines the geopolitical evolution that followed the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in the early 1990s, argues the President's "autocratic rejection of norms of diplomacy abroad and compromise at home were long in the making and well established" (197).

Other common motifs are whiteness and nativism (Donald Pease, Frank Kelleter, Melissa Deckman and Kelley Gardner, Jack Thompson, Hamilton Carroll); the crisis of capitalism and neoliberalism (Frank Kelleter, Penny Von Eschen, Stephen Shapiro, David Ryan); Trump's reality distortion (Donald Pease, Patrick McGreevy, Liam Kennedy, Diane Negra, Scott Lucas); and women's vote and activism (Melissa

Deckman and Kelley Gardner, Alizera Hajihosseini, Diane Negra). Authors can be loosely grouped into optimists (Shapiro, Deckman/Gardner, McGreevy, Thompson, Lilli) who, despite all odds, manage to envision positive outcomes for the future of democracy, and pessimists (Pease, Kelleter, Ryan, Negra) who articulate a gloomy picture of things to come. Among the optimists, in the second part of the book, Eugenio Lilli believes that American rhetoric promoting democracy abroad will always prevail over politicians who don't believe in it. His essay on the enduring legacy of Wilsonianism in US foreign policy demonstrates how one president cannot dissipate or change longstanding US democratic institutions and traditions. This is the hopeful consideration that we are left with at the beginning of a new presidency. According to Lilli only a "significant shift in the values associated with US national identity" can truly diminish the US's external promotion of democracy (238). One might wonder whether, confronted with the support of 47 percent of voters for Trump in the 2020 elections, we are already witnessing that value shift.

The volume, published in August 2020, does not cover any aspect related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as it went to press when the outbreak of coronavirus had just begun, as a note on page 128 briefly indicates.

In sum, this book is an essential first step towards what one day might become Trump or Trumpism Studies, namely a scholarly explanation of the most overwhelming political experience of our times. This book elucidates the questions and areas of inquiry likely to be affected by the passage of Trump in the White House and the widespread dissemination of Trumpism. *Trump's America* offers worthy early analysis of the damaging legacy of Trump's illiberal democracy and a testament to the relevance of cross-disciplinary American Studies in producing meaning from the complexity of the United States and, as Kennedy and Shapiro suggest, asking the right kind of questions "to begin the daunting task of creating a new cultural hegemony."

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