

# The United States of Trump Corp.: The ‘Not Normal/New Normal’ Governing Style of a Personal Brand

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“I created maybe the greatest brand.” President Donald J. Trump  
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There was a tectonic shift in governance when Donald Trump assumed the office of the President of the United States. Countless journalists, politicians, and social scientists are writing on this rupture with the past and detailing the long list of ‘not normal’ actions routinely committed by the President who flagrantly flouts liberal democratic norms and values that past presidents at least appeared to uphold. What these comments amount to are diagnoses of “Trump’s methodology,” or what we call Trump’s governing style, which defies just about every single expectation that citizens have of the President (Herbert, McCrisken, Wroe, 2019:3). What is not normal is that Trump’s governing style “has been one of violating norms; the social expectations that guide appropriate behavior for actors in a given context” (Havercroft et al. 2018:3). In this case, these expectations are those citizens have of the President in the world’s oldest purportedly democratic nation-state.

Conventional interpretations characterize President Trump’s ‘not normal’ governing style as one or a combination of the following traits—narcissistic, ethno-nationalist, authoritarian, and neoliberal. These governing styles are seen as means to achieve four distinct but overlapping ends—self-adulation, white supremacy, an authoritarian state, and a neoliberal utopia. For these commentators, while these goals do not necessarily deviate from the Republican political playbook, what is not normal is that Trump is so open and extreme in advancing these goals while holding no pretense to care about democratic decorum.

From a different angle, however, these interpretations focus on the most ordinary aspects of Trump and neglect to consider what is truly novel about his governing style because their interpretations are based on traditional political theories of governance and power. These accounts position Trump’s governing style as exceptional but tend to ignore that the aforementioned

means and ends are actually quite normal in the history of U.S. presidents. While Trump certainly exhibits extremely narcissistic, ethno-nationalist, authoritarian, and neoliberal behavior, he is not the first president to act in these ways.

As a personality trait, narcissism is a common feature of U.S. presidents, from George Washington to George W. Bush (Deluga, 1997; Watts, et al., 2013). Moreover, Trump follows a long legacy of ethno-nationalist and bigoted American presidents that stretches back to the slave-owning presidents of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, and Andrew Jackson (Gordon-Reed, 2018; Manza and Crowley, 2018) and continues under different garb in the “new racism” characteristic of contemporary presidencies, including Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama (Bonilla-Silva, 2018:20). His “America First” foreign policy position is also not unique and has been compared to the isolationism of President Jackson and the unilateralism of President George W. Bush (Olsen, 2019:9). Moreover, warning signs of authoritarianism precede Donald Trump insofar as, first, Nixon, Johnson, and Reagan also fabricated lies and attacked journalists (Lachmann, 2019), and second, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, governing in the shadow of the “state of exception” following 9/11, justified a concentration of power within the Executive branch to make war, torture, and surveil citizens (Sherwood, 2018). Finally, neoliberal policies that privilege corporate interests and roll back social welfare programs have been a mainstay of all Republican and Democratic presidents since Reagan (Harvey, 2005; Lachmann, 2019; Wolin, 2008). None of this is to normalize anti-liberal democratic behavior; only to recognize the deep history of these traits in past presidential governing styles. According to mainstream interpretations, the novelty of Trump is that he appears to be unencumbered by the weight of the office, which constrained past presidents to hide their intentions beneath a veneer of democratic decorum. Yet, far from solidifying an extremist agenda, what Trump has actually accomplished while in office has been quite ordinary and has conventionally aligned with the policies of past Republican presidents (Herbert, et al., 2019; Lachmann, 2019; Pierson, 2017; Renton, 2019).

What is truly ‘not normal’ and entirely novel in the history of U.S. presidents is that for the first time, a **personal** brand, which traditionally inhabits the economic and cultural spheres, has been elected to hold the highest political office in the nation. While other presidents have certainly developed **political** brands with symbolic exchange value that are associated with their name and image, such as Obama with the iconic Hope poster by Shepard Fairey, the political brand is distinct from the personal brand in that the personal brand is a free-floating signifier that is not tethered to the signified content of a specific cultural sphere. Because the political brand is tied to political signifieds, it cannot easily attach and detach itself from the political sphere without potentially damaging its political value, whereas the personal brand can just as easily attach itself to politics as it can cheap consumer goods or group behaviors. As it constantly reinvents itself as a multiplicity of identities, the personal brand employs the logic of technical reproduction in a Benjaminian sense to muddy its spatio-temporal history and dissolve the sense that there is an original authentic self somewhere underneath the brand image that can ever be nailed down to a specific signified. The personal brand, therefore, is far more malleable and plastic in its uses and applications than the political brand.

Trump is not simply a celebrity/businessman-turned-politician, the likes of which we have seen before in politicians like Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Rather, Trump the person is inherently tied to Trump the personal brand, and the governing style of President Trump follows the market-oriented logic of personal brands. As a transnational personal brand-

turned-politician, President Trump is using his office not to govern in the interest of the state and citizenry, but instead, he governs to promote his personal brand and maximize symbolic capital as he captures the collective consciousness of the entire planet. Along the way, Trump has remade governance to model the logic found in Reality TV, not the logic of traditional theories of governance. The main flaw in mainstream accounts of Trump's governing style is that they neglect to seriously consider at the outset that Trump's governing style is innately connected to his personal brand empire and the tactics he uses to govern resemble those of the personal brand.

A growing number of social scientists are paying attention to branding in politics and the ways in which President Trump is a personal brand; however, these accounts restrict their analyses to the market aspects of this phenomenon and neglect its political dimensions. We learn how Trump revolutionized political marketing through social media to promote his personal brand in order to connect with the electorate and ultimately win the presidency (Billard, 2018; Billard and Moran, 2019; Cosgrove, 2018; Hearn, 2016; Mihajlovic, et al., 2017; Pérez-Curiel, 2019; Tracey, 2017). This growing body of literature informs the discourse of personal brand governance but does not venture beyond the framework of political marketing. By contrast, ours is a project of political economy, and we consider the governing logic of a personal brand and the implications of having a personal brand as President on the state and democracy.

We proceed by first examining the evolution of branding in the United States from its origins in consumer branding and corporate branding through personal branding. We focus particularly on the logic of personal brands, how they are distinct from both family corporations and celebrity spokespeople, and the specific tactics used in President Trump's personal brand governing style. In the second section, we review conventional interpretations of Trump's governing style by constructing four ideal types found in the existing literature—narcissism, ethno-nationalism, authoritarianism, and neoliberalism. We then venture beyond these accounts by constructing a new theory of personal brand governance and analyzing how Trump the Personal Brand has fundamentally altered statecraft in the 21st century. We conclude by offering a perspective on what Trump the Personal Brand means for a democratic society.

## **The Evolution of Branding: From Consumer Brands to Personal Brands**

The practice of branding has existed for thousands of years as a way to demonstrate ownership of organisms, usually slaves, prisoners, or livestock, by burning signs onto their skins (Bastos and Levy, 2012). However, when one thinks of branding today, one tends to think of logos, not branding irons. The origins of modern branding arose in the United States at the turn of the 20th century as giant corporations in all major industries competed against each other to control their respective markets (Prechel, 2000). Corporations faced a dilemma in attracting consumers to buy their products when the techniques of mass production created within industries virtually indistinguishable commodities. Corporations resorted to building brands around consumer items in order to create unique looks that distinguished generic commodities from their competitors, thereby boosting their appeal among consumers. The first modern brands originated in everyday household consumer commodities like soap, jam, toothpaste, washing powder, breakfast cereals, soup, pickles, sugar, and flour (Klein, 2000). The era of consumer branding had arrived.

Branding is semiotic sorcery, as the brand image creates an intangible aura, a halo effect, that raises the price of the material product and by implication the share price of the corporation, by adding a symbolic value through the logo, packaging, and advertising. Drawing from both art

and science, brand managers in the early 20th century designed aesthetically appealing logos and brand images intended to resonate on a deep emotional level with consumers, depicted mainly as housewives at this time, in order to create affective attachments between consumers and products that would be so ingrained as to compel habitual purchasing. At this stage, brand and commodity were synonymous, like in the case of Spic’N’Span, which was a branding gimmick so successful that the saying is still associated with cleanliness itself, created around a fairly ordinary household cleaner made by the Whistle Bottling Company in 1926 and sold primarily to housewives (Bastos and Levy, 2012; Olins, 2012).

Business environments grew increasingly complex towards the middle of the 20th century in the United States and in other industrialized economies catalyzing a major transformation in both branding and the way workers related to themselves and each other. Stimulated by a growing postwar economy, a “Consumer Revolution” boomed as corporate bureaucracies amassed colossal organizational structures with multiple divisions, layers of management, and myriad shareholders to generate the productive capacity necessary to meet the demand of consumers (Bastos and Levy, 2012:355; Prechel, 2000). The underlying premise of branding—the imperative to cultivate deep emotional ties to evoke a sense of trust and recognition—diffused throughout society as it became key to the success of not only corporations but also their employees, managers, and executives who sought to make positive impressions as they found themselves locked into constant business dealings with a variety of audiences ranging from bosses and co-workers to consumers and shareholders.

A product of these times, Erving Goffman’s ([1956] 1959) The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life captured the necessity by which all actors throughout society, but especially workers, were being shaped more and more by the abstract forces of branding, even if he did not refer to it as such. Goffman emphasized the performative aspect of social life within corporate bureaucracies that envelop each individual like a straightjacket. Presaging the age of surveillance, Goffman described the stage upon which actors perform and judge the performances of other actors in a real-time play from which there is no escape while in the presence of others, and increasingly with virtual performances, even when one is alone. Goffman’s gift to the business world was his concept of “impression management” ([1956] 1959:208), which denotes the imperative for all actors to manipulate how they are perceived by others by controlling the information they communicate in their performances in order to achieve goals. In business-speak, impression management is equivalent to brand management insofar as the key to controlling one’s presentation of self is to cultivate a brand image through which an audience can develop an emotional attachment. This brand image need not represent the truth of the person; rather, the brand image is a projection manipulated by the person in order to achieve desired ends, regardless of who the person actually is or thinks.

With the intensification of globalization and the proliferation of new media avenues in the 1970s and 1980s, corporations became increasingly attuned to the necessity of managing their impressions by presenting unified and consistent depictions of their corporate selves to a diverse array of public stakeholders (Olins, 2012). The tradition of branding particular commodities could not suffice for corporations hungry to control more market share and preempt against undesirable oversight. Instead, corporations opted for a new method of branding, which branded no particular products at all. Rather, corporations began to impress themselves in the minds of consumers and the public more broadly by dissociating their brands from consumer items entirely and re-centering them around corporations themselves.

Corporate branding became a tool to humanize corporations so that consumers and the public could more easily form emotional attachments to what were, in reality, impersonal bureaucracies. Brand managers breathed life into corporations by cultivating corporate personalities that connected their ‘souls’ to values and maxims intended to resonate deeply in the minds of consumers in order to solidify relations of trust and brand loyalty (Bastos and Levy, 2012). They jettisoned rigid advertisements detailing the facts about products and opted instead to advertise their corporate identities through emotional appeals that brand managers call “corporate storytelling,” which facilitated reputation building by communicating the firm’s vision to the public (Spear and Roper, 2013:491).

By the 1990s, a new breed of corporations focused more on the practice of branding their corporate ethos than manufacturing any product at all. The real value was in producing a corporate brand identity that could be packaged and sold to consumers to boost the price of generic commodities that were now manufactured under exploitative labor arrangements existing within the matrix of global commodity chains. Nike is the quintessential corporate brand that produces nothing but a brand. Their actual business operations are outsourced to factories across the world that generate a variety of products ranging from shoes to clothing, water bottles, bags, and other accessories. What Nike produces is the brand image—the Nike swoosh and the ‘just do it’ slogan, which can add value to any product (Klein, 2000).

The personal brand is the logical extension of the corporate brand, but here what is branded is not a product or corporate ethos. Rather, the personal brand revolves around a specific figurehead who creates a brand identity by “turning oneself into a product—in effect, engaging in self-commodification” (Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney, 2005:319). What is commodified is not the actual person, which would be impossible in its entirety, but “the enduring perception of the person” (Montoya, 2002:8). In other words, a personal brand intentionally highlights, and even exaggerates, certain aspects of their personality, skills, and values in order to create a coherent personal brand identity that will resonate with the audience at a deep emotional level and evoke in their minds a favorable sense of trust and recognition. As is the case with impression management, the personal brand is you, but not necessarily the real you; rather, it is the image you want others to have of you. Appearances are paramount, but if the brand strays too far from the authenticity of one’s self, the brand will fail under the weight of its lies.

Successful personal branding is incumbent on emphasizing what is unique about one’s self and what distinguishes one’s business model from competitors. Personal branding is about emotion and style, as in the pop of a business card, not rationality and substance, as in the actual business operations. Of course, there must be some service or product to sell, however, personal branding gurus instruct individuals to not “sell the steak, sell the sizzle” (Peters, 1997). Above all else, a successful personal brand exudes the image of power and wields its power to shape the behavior of consumers to purchase whatever the personal brand is selling. However, the association with the personal brand can be fleeting; a successful personal brand must repeat its brand image consistently and continuously in order to embed itself into the minds of its audiences to achieve lasting impact (Montoya, 2002; Montoya and Vandehey, 2009; Peters, 1997).

Personal branding gurus like Peters and Montoya regard their art as an imperative for all workers in an age of employment precarity and the Internet. Even more, they argue that every individual already has a personal brand and has no choice but to manage it, similar to how Goffman declared that all individuals in modern societies were actors on a stage and had no choice but to manage their presentations of self. Personal branding is entirely about impression

management and managing the personal brand image in front of the public eye. These personal branding gurus instruct everyone to take control over their brand or be controlled by what others make of it (Kaputa, 2010; Montoya, 2002; Montoya and Vandehey, 2009; Peters, 1997).

This individualistic approach to self-commodification has an elective affinity with neoliberal discourses hegemonic since the 1980s (Brown, 2015; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009; Gershon, 2016; Sugarman, 2015). Personal branding puts a positive spin on the precarious reality experienced by neoliberal subjects who must demonstrate the potential to create value as the only way to survive within the context of an eroding social safety net and stigma against ‘takers.’ The message is clear: one cannot rely on corporations and certainly not on the government; one must demonstrate human capital or perish. A vast literature and industry exist today to assist individuals yearning to refashion their selves as products and seeking to uncover their unique selling points in order to be entrepreneurs or sell themselves to employers (Gershon, 2016; Lair, et al., 2005). If corporate branding humanizes the corporation, then personal branding corporatizes the human and encourages individuals to think of themselves in market terms, thereby fusing person and commodity into a single and inseparable post-human entity. Marshall McLuhan’s ([1964] 1994:7) observation that “the medium is the message” is today anthropomorphized in the case of personal branding as the “person is the product” (Nicolino, 2001:154).

Anyone pursuing success in any industry, from journalists, bloggers, politicians, celebrities, influencers, job-seekers, professionals, and even academics, must play this game or face being sidelined to the margins. But, personal branding is not only ubiquitous within industries; the logic has migrated into the cultural sphere more broadly. The precondition for this activity was the emergence of 24/7 social media and the millions and billions of users worldwide who spend exorbitant amounts of time in these virtual streams instantaneously sharing content and interacting. Personal brands thrive in these networked ecosystems and can take advantage of the ease by which content is generated and shared. An innumerable number of individuals in the United States and worldwide are behaving like personal brands and seeking to create themselves as “micro-celebrities” (Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2016)—ordinary people seeking to penetrate the collective consciousness of society by spamming social media feeds with their personal brands and basking in the glory of shares, likes, retweets, and comments about one’s brand. In some cases, these micro-personal brands may seek to convert their influence and recognition into economic capital by being paid by corporate brands to endorse certain commodities, also known as being an influencer. Or, they may not seek economic capital at all or only secondarily, and instead, sell their brands for the sheer narcissistic pleasure of garnering attention, which we refer to as symbolic capital, as their brand images are shared across social media platforms, and they revel in the gratification of one’s self-being consumed by others (Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2016). No doubt, a generation of humans are maturing today in modern societies intrinsically understanding the logic of personal branding and voluntarily engaging in self-promotion from a very young age.

Mega-celebrities have demonstrated the most success in creating personal brands with global recognition, including Oprah Winfrey, Kim Kardashian, and Donald Trump. These are individuals who have leveraged their personalities into corporate empires, which differentiates them from both influencers who build personal brands in order to sell other brands’ products and micro-celebrities who simply sell themselves on social media for the satisfaction derived through symbolic exchange. Celebrity personal brands have only existed in the post-Fordist global economy and should not be confused with the longstanding phenomenon of branding corporations with family

names. In earlier periods of capitalism, corporate ownership was strongly associated with the family, including the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, Carnegie Steel Company, J. P. Morgan and Company, and Ford Motor Company (Bell, 1960). Even to this day, examples abound, such as Koch Industries and Wynn Resorts. But, these family corporations differ from celebrity personal brands in the nature of their business activity. Family corporations specialize in selling specific products and services. When one hears J. P. Morgan, one immediately associates the name with banking services. Ford = automobiles, Koch Industries = petrochemicals, and Wynn Resorts = Las Vegas casinos. The parent companies may produce other products and services through a chain of subsidiaries, but each company's corporate branding is directly tied to the production of a limited range of commodities and services. While family corporations excel at establishing long term recognition in particular industries, they cannot easily change their products. J. P. Morgan, perhaps one of the United States' oldest and most recognized family corporate brands, has never ventured out of their primary specialization in banking services. It remains to be seen if a family corporation like J. P. Morgan could pivot business models and begin to sell everyday consumer commodities like deodorant or soda.

Unlike family corporations that specialize in producing particular products and services, personal brands thrive in the neoliberal global economy where commodities and services are broken down into their simplest components and produced in generic factories and offices across the globe. Celebrity personal brands engage in no production at all and can sell any product or service, no matter how far removed the product or service is from the attributes of the person. The consumer is purchasing the product because of the halo effect emanating from the intangible aura orbiting the personal brand, not because of the actual qualities of the product at all. Despite being sentenced to jail for five months for securities fraud and obstruction of justice, the Martha Stewart brand is so powerful today that it fully recovered from her stint in jail, and Martha is not only selling customers their favorite cooking accessories but also products that have nothing to do with her debut in the kitchen, including furniture, Christmas trees, and office supplies.

The celebrity personal brand should also not be confused with the celebrity spokesperson, both of which share a similar logic, that of the halo effect, but are fundamentally distinct in substance. From the early days of modern branding to today, it has been commonplace for corporations to leach star power by paying celebrities to endorse their products (Marchand, 1985). But, this requires the celebrity spokesperson to already have amassed a stockpile of symbolic capital and recognition from which they must draw to bestow their halo onto the product. As a consequence, the celebrity spokesperson spends their symbolic capital to direct attention to the product, thereby depleting this resource, while accumulating economic capital in the form of payment for the endorsement. The flames emanating from celebrity spokespeople burn bright but short, as in the case of Michael Jordan whose spot in the media limelight was intense but relatively brief. A staple feature in corporate advertisements throughout the 1990s, like Nike's famous Air Jordan sneakers, and even Hollywood itself, as in the case of Space Jam, Michael Jordan remains immensely rich from leveraging his celebrity image to generate money and is today the third richest African American in the United States. However, his star power has all but disappeared in the 21st century and his celebrity image is bankrupt. Moreover, celebrity endorsements tend to only work when the product has some affinity with the authentic personality of the celebrity, which tends to limit the number of associations down to a single product or a limited few (Kahle and Homer, 1985; Kamins and Gupta, 1994), as in the case of George Foreman's association with the Foreman Grill or Michael Jordan's association with basketball merchandise. The consumer,

at the end of the day, is buying a product; the celebrity spokesperson's role is merely functional insofar as it is used to direct the attention of the consumer to it.

The relationship is reversed in the case of the celebrity personal brand because the consumer is buying the personal brand first, not the actual product. The product is simply a conduit through which the buyer can consume more of the personal brand. As a consequence, each purchase does not deplete their reserves of symbolic capital but contributes to their amassing of it. The more their branded products sell, the bigger their personal brand gets, permitting them to slap their label on ever more products in a centrifugal force through which the personal brand expands. Also, unlike the celebrity spokesperson, the celebrity personal brand need not worry about limiting their endorsements to products that can be directly associated with the traits of the personality behind the personal brand. When one thinks of Oprah, one may immediately think of her media empire ranging from the Oprah Winfrey Network to O Magazine. But, does one also think of creamy butternut squash soup? Beginning in 2017, Oprah partnered with Kraft Heinz Company to launch a series of refrigerated comfort foods stocked in supermarkets across the nation and branded "O That's Good!" (Disis, 2017).

Donald J. Trump stands as not only one of the earliest and most enduring personal brands, but also perhaps the most evolved personal brand in existence today as he has ventured beyond the confines of the market and culture into the very heart of politics itself—a feat no previous personal brand has ever accomplished. Of course, politicians, at least since the dawn of social media, have adopted the logic of branding, insofar as they realize the advantages derived from building brand images around their selves and their campaigns in order to cement emotional connections with voters. Politicians in this mold, such as Barak Obama and Hilary Clinton, use their political brand images to boost their political capital in order to solidify support to win elections and pass legislation through establishment politics. However, they are not personal brands who seek symbolic capital, at least not primarily, nor have they fused their personalities with transnational corporate empires. By contrast, Trump is a personal brand-turned-politician whose brand image is dedicated towards augmenting his symbolic capital first, which may or may not be exchanged for political goals in the traditional political process. It is in this sense that while many politicians are resorting to political branding, they are qualitatively different in substance from Trump, whose personal brand image is paramount and his political office is merely a means to boost his personal brand empire.

After inheriting his father's eponymous family corporation, the Trump Organization, in the 1970s, Donald proceeded to merge the business empire with his personal brand and redefine the core competency of the business. Rather than focus exclusively on real estate development, the Trump Organization's new product would be Donald Trump himself. He accomplished this by expanding the company's business operations into hundreds of business ventures that span the globe. While Trump has never manufactured a single product, he has slapped his Trump brand on a diverse array of products, none of which precisely cohere together, ranging from buildings, casinos, golf courses, and an airline to steaks, bottled water, vodka, and even a "university" (Kivisto, 2018:119). Although most have ended in complete failure, each business venture has expanded Trump's symbolic reach into the collective consciousness of consumers worldwide. It was this name recognition, combined with his celebrity image, that provided him with the foundation from which he ran his electoral campaign for president.

Trump's latest business venture has been to stamp the U.S. government with his personal brand and import the logic of the personal brand into the presidency. Trump now utilizes the



same tactics personal brands use to capture market space to govern the nation. We will review how Trump governs as a personal brand in the following three areas—his use of branding, his staging of spectacles through social media, and his privileging of style over substance.

The first thing Trump did when he began his presidential campaign was to brand his candidacy, as well as the Republican Party more broadly, through his revitalization of Reagan's 1980 campaign slogan "Let's Make America Great Again" that is designed to resonate with conservative voters on a deep emotional level through a form of right-wing populism that extols "nationalism, traditional values, keeping the country safe and a strong economy" (Cosgrove, 2018:54-55). Moreover, Trump takes advantage of not only branding his presidency but also branding others, like "Little Marco," "Lyn' Ted," and "Crooked Hillary" (Tracey 2017:530), in ways that boost Trump's appeal while denigrating his rivals. Trump's branding also extends to branding events with his own personal stamp. We have seen Trump's Peace Talks™ starring Kim Jong Un, Trump's Trade Diplomacy™ featuring North America, Europe, and China, Trump's Greatest Economy in American History!™, Trump's Immigration Control™ brought to you by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Trump's "Witch-Hunt" Impeachment™, Trump's "Open For Business" COVID-19 Response™, and possibly one day, Trump's World War™. This has permitted the President to be featured on the front page of news almost daily, which keeps the eyes of the world glued to the Trump Brand.

President Trump is a master in staging a never-ending series of spectacles through social media that both constitutes his core mode of governance and satisfies the personal brand mandate to consistently and continuously repeat one's brand image in order to cement oneself into the collective consciousness of society. These spectacles are really opportunities for Trump to stamp his brand onto an ever-greater series of political events and sell his brand in ways that no human has ever done before. To do so, Trump unleashes his inner-WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) persona where he acts like a typical wrestling "heel" in performing excessively masculine displays of boasting, antagonizing, playing the victim, and acting outlandishly in order to manipulate emotions to the extent of intentionally spurring hatred; in short, by acting as a villain everybody loves to hate (DeVega, 2016; Edison, 2017). These spectacles permit Trump to capture the gaze of the masses while he disrupts conventional media narratives and jams the airways and the virtual streams with the Trump Brand. In addition, President Trump holds a ceaseless series of political rallies to generate collective effervescence among his supporters, which they experience while in the presence of the Trump Brand. All of this has generated an unprecedented amount of media exposure, both positive and negative, for Donald Trump, which has resulted in him capturing the mindspace of people all over the world. As a result, there is no person on earth who is discussed or held under the microscope to the degree of Trump.

Finally, Trump is the first postmodern president to privilege the drama of governing style over the substance of actually governing. Like his corporate brand that does not produce, President Trump does not actually govern in the traditional sense. Instead, Trump conjures spectacles to substitute for the hard work of diplomacy, deliberation, and compromise. To stage these spectacles, Trump can rely on no one but himself, which is why he prefers to issue unilateral Executive Orders rather than work with Congress. Most of these actions, however, have been primarily symbolic and superfluous, as they have not moved policies significantly, and Trump could obtain the same results simply "with a phone call" (Bierman, 2019). Rather than seek to dramatically overhaul policies, Trump's issuing Executive Orders are geared towards showmanship and the simulation of governing. In the absence of directing the political machinery himself, in

true personal brand fashion, he has outsourced policy-making to Republicans, which is why the results of his presidency so far, except for in the area of protectionism, have been nearly identical to the traditional Republican platform (Herbert et al., 2019). Free from the burden that governing imposes on the President to be consistent with one's agenda, Trump's rhetoric and the content of Presidential activities have been erratic, scandalous, and contradictory.

## **Trump the Narcissist, Ethno-Nationalist, Authoritarian, Neoliberal**

Donald Trump's presidency is unique in being the first in U.S. history to govern using the tactics of a personal brand. However, mainstream accounts of President Trump's governing style elide considering this and instead favor traditional interpretations that ground Trump as an extreme representation of anti-liberal democratic trends. In this section, we briefly review these theorizations of Trump's governing style and construct them as ideal types—Trump the Narcissist, Ethno-Nationalist, Authoritarian, and Neoliberal.

### **Trump the Narcissist**

One common way mainstream accounts explain President Trump's governing style is to view it as a function of his deranged mental state. These diagnoses of his psychological disorders, however, remain speculative as Trump has never submitted to an independent mental health examination and his White House physician has claimed Trump scored perfectly on his cognitive evaluation (Shear and Altman, 2018). Nonetheless, a growing list of mental health experts (see Lee, 2019) are raising the alarm that Trump's governing style manifests signs of a diverse array of mental pathologies, some of which include narcissistic personality disorder and malignant narcissism (Malkin, 2019; Gartner, 2019), extreme present hedonism and paranoia (Zimbardo and Sword, 2019), sociopathy (Dodes, 2019), and delusional disorder (Tansey, 2019). The extent of Trump's mental derangement is such that he purportedly lives not in 'reality' but in a **reality** he wishes to see. Consequently, Trump dissociates from the real and constructs a substitute reality grounded in "alternative facts" that serves his narcissistic desires (Bradner, 2017). The common theme of these diagnoses is that Trump has an all-encompassing drive to feel special and governs to satisfy this urge. It is said that Trump cannot feel empathy and is predisposed to lie and abuse people in the service of building a cult of personality.

Mental health experts warn that Trump's drive to feel special combined with his empathetic impotence and presentist disposition means that Trump is a political opportunist who is ready to divert attention away from social needs and refocus it back on himself, which makes him a volatile and dangerous leader who "has blood on his hands" (Sachs, 2019:xxi). For example, instead of preparing a comprehensive plan to resolve the natural disaster in Puerto Rico caused by Hurricane Maria, he reportedly was "tweeting about football players" giving "the impression... of a massively self-centered individual who can't bring himself to focus on other people's needs, even when that's the core of his job" (Krugman, 2017). When reports emerged that the death toll rose to an estimated 5,000, he visited FEMA on June 6, 2018 to speak about hurricane preparedness in the United States, but he only briefly mentioned Puerto Rico or hurricane response at all. Instead, he digressed into a speech about how much money he saved negotiating airline prices for Air Force One, how his endorsements helped candidates win their primary elections, and how well the economy is doing thanks to his actions (Holmes, 2018). In these depictions of Trump, and this

instance is only one example of a common pattern, the hard work of governing is secondary to his supreme goal of protecting his fragile self-esteem, which comes at the cost of thousands of lives who were neglected in this humanitarian disaster.

## **Trump the Ethno-Nationalist**

Mainstream accounts frequently position President Trump as an ethno-nationalist leader who is stoking the flames of a cultural “whitelash” (Kellner, 2017:43) and employing “ethnically, racially, and culturally exclusionary understandings of American identity widespread in U.S. society” (Bonikowski, 2019: 113). This is evident in his channeling of bigoted white middle- and working-class status insecurities and hate against what he constructs as undeserving racial and ethnic minorities (Bobo, 2017; Davis, 2017; Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado, 2017; Shafer, 2017). Trump the Ethno-Nationalist extends into the areas of gender and sexuality, as he also seeks to privilege the forces of patriarchy and heteronormativity (Risman, 2018). Trump advanced this agenda when he revoked the Fair Pay and Safe Workplaces order on March 27, 2017 (Schulte, 2017), allowed the Violence Against Women Act to expire in December 2018 (Thayer, 2019), and spearheaded an effort to ban transgendered individuals from serving in the military (The Editorial Board, 2018). A cursory glance at Trump’s cabinet and administration, which is overwhelmingly white and male (Lowrey and Johnson, 2018), lends additional empirical support for this ideal type, which holds that Trump’s supreme goal in office is to solidify the white and patriarchal supremacy of structural racism and sexism in American national policy.

Regarding this mode of Trumpian governance, the journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates (2017) argued in *The Atlantic* that “[i]t is often said that Trump has no real ideology, which is not true—his ideology is white supremacy, in all its truculent and sanctimonious power.” For Coates, Trump’s entire governing strategy boils down to one intense crusade to destroy Obama’s legacy. Within his first year in office, Trump used 17 executive actions, 96 cabinet-level agency decisions, 14 Congressional Review Acts, and 3 new pieces of legislation to repeal Obama’s policy actions (Eilperin and Cameron, 2017).

Trump’s ethno-nationalist governing style combines elements of white ethnic sovereignty with anti-globalization, protectionist, and nationalistic discourses, which are captured in his ‘America first’ agenda that positions United States sovereignty as compromised by enemies both foreign and domestic and seeks to take back control of the country for white Americans (Olsen, 2019; Ziv, Graham, and Cao, 2019). Trump’s ethno-nationalism runs counter to the inclusionary principles of liberal democracy and the multilateral global world order. This governing strategy has translated into concrete policy actions, including an executive order for the so-called “Muslim ban” that barred entry into the United States for people coming from seven Muslim-majority countries (Romero, 2018:39). Trump also cracked down on illegal immigration by signing executive orders to build a wall on the USA-Mexico border, doubling the number of Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers at the border, and making it easier to detain and deport undocumented immigrants, which has led to thousands of family separations, detention in camps, and deaths of migrant children at the hand of Border Patrol agents (Dickerson, 2018; Heyer, 2018; Nixon, 2018; Romero, 2018). Railing against international trade and environmental justice deals, Trump moved the dial closer to his vision of economic and political nationalism when he withdrew from the Transpacific Partnership, the Iran Nuclear deal, and the Paris Climate Accord (Stiglitz, 2018; Ziv, Graham, and Cao, 2019). Notably, each of these were key policy platforms of Barack

Obama's presidency, which means that withdrawing from them achieved for Trump both a move towards his vision of nationalism and multiple feathers in his cap for rebuking Obama's legacy.

## **Trump the Authoritarian**

Waving the warning flag of an emergent crisis of democracy, a growing chorus of observers depict President Trump as an authoritarian leader whose governing style is fundamentally opposed to the maintenance of democratic norms and institutions (Hirsh, 2019; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Because Trump has demonstrated not only a cruelty and disregard for the rights of 'others,' but also a self-aggrandizing vision that he alone can fix the United States' problems, commentators often depict Trump's authoritarianism as synergistic with his ethno-nationalism and narcissistic personality (Langman, 2018; Kellner, 2016, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). In some of these accounts, Trump hides his authoritarian dispositions beneath a mask of populist rhetoric that permits the aspiring dictator to destroy the foundations of liberal democracy while appearing to be the sole representative of the people against corrupt politicians and evil outsiders (De La Torre, 2018; Kellner, 2017; Langman, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). In other accounts, Trump's governing style is positioned on a knife-edge that threatens to lead to fascism and represents the greatest danger to liberal democracy that the United States has ever seen (Albright, 2018; Foster, 2017; Robinson, 2017).

Trump the Authoritarian exhibits three classic governing strategies "by which elected authoritarians seek to consolidate power: capturing the referees, sidelining the key players, and rewriting the rules to tilt the playing field against opponents" (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018:95). First, Trump has verbally attacked any legal authority that sought to challenge or limit his power, including federal courts and judges, the intelligence community, the national security apparatus, and ethics agencies. And, in violation of the limitations placed on presidential power, Trump reportedly pressured the acting FBI Director James Comey to pledge his loyalty and drop the investigation into his associates' Russian ties (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Trump's White House also intervened at the FBI to limit the scope of an investigation into Associate Justice Brett Kavanaugh's behavior after credible accusations of sexual assault were leveled at him during the confirmation process (Woolf, 2018).

Second, Trump, mostly through his daily use of Twitter that permits the authoritarian a direct and unmediated line of communication to his supporters, has bullied at least 551 people, places, and things, including key political and economic actors in the United States and across the globe, as well as Special Counsel leader Robert Mueller, who was in charge of investigating the Trump campaign's ties to Russia, and Greta Thunberg, a 16-year old environmental activist (Jackson, 2019; Lee and Quealy, 2018). Moreover, Trump has sought to purge any dissenters from within his administration by firing them, including Sally Yates, Rex Tillerson, Andrew McCabe, and many others, and then hiring sycophants that will follow his orders (Sullivan, 2018).

Finally, Trump the Authoritarian has been attempting to shore up his political power by rewriting the rules of electoral democracy to favor his interests. Trump has called for eliminating the Senatorial filibuster, thereby strengthening the power of Republicans against the Democratic minority. Moreover, as Trump has fanned the flames of conspiracy theory by baselessly claiming that millions of people have voted illegally, he created the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity whose veiled objective is voter suppression (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018), although they found no evidence to back his claims (Gardner, 2018).

But, it is the most spectacular of Trump's political scandals that reveals the extent of his antipathy for the rule of law and the norms of liberal democracy. The House of Representatives impeached President Trump on December 18, 2019 for abusing the power of the presidency by seeking to leverage U.S. aid to Ukraine in exchange for digging up political dirt on Trump's rival Joe Biden and then obstructing Congress' investigation into this abuse of power by withholding documents and refusing to comply with congressional subpoenas related to this inquiry—a feat by which no U.S. president has ever before attempted (Beavers and Lillis, 2019).

## **| Trump the Neoliberal**

Finally, mainstream accounts depict Trump as a neoliberal kleptocrat using his position of political power to rule in the interest of the capitalist class and his corporate empire more personally. Naomi Klein (2017:3) interprets the first billionaire president's governing style to be motivated to achieve a single goal— “all-out war on the public sphere and the public interest... In their place will be unfettered power and freedom for corporations.” For Klein, Trump the Neoliberal has spearheaded a naked corporate takeover of the political sphere. Corporations are no longer relying on politicians to do their bidding; now they command the key positions of political power themselves. Their agenda comes straight from the corporate playbook of neoliberal policies—liberalize markets, roll back regulation, legislate tax cuts, drop social protections, and unleash fossil fuels. Look no further than Trump's cabinet that reads like a veritable corporate dream team and is the richest cabinet ever sworn into office in modern history (Gee, 2018). Even more, it appears that to be part of Trump's administration, one must prove their commitment to looting their public domain (Kellner, 2017).

Trump's plan to Make the 1% Great Again has proceeded smoothly, sometimes even with the assistance of Democrats. Early in his presidency, Trump signed three Executive Orders to begin the review and rollback process of Dodd-Frank, which was passed by Obama in 2010 to prevent future financial instability, the likes of which precipitated the 2008 financial crisis (Lane, 2017). These executive orders translated into concrete legislative action as Congress, assisted by fifty Democrats, passed a partial repeal of Dodd-Frank that Trump signed into law (Pramuk, 2018). But, Trump gave the biggest gift to the 1% when he passed a major tax law that slashes both individual tax rates, especially for wealthy elites, and corporate tax rates, which has translated for corporations into a savings of \$300 billion in the first three quarters of 2018 and an estimated \$1.64 trillion over the next ten years (Gandal, 2018).

Trump is not only governing on behalf of the richest segment of America. Trump, the Neoliberal Kleptocrat, has also retained ownership over his business empire and is profiting off the presidency by capitalizing on the value of the Trump name. Trump's biggest moneymaker is real estate, some of which he directly owns like Mar-a-Lago and the Trump International Hotel in Washington D.C. Following his election, Trump doubled the price of a Mar-a-Lago membership from \$100,000 to \$200,000 and has used membership as a means of governance including having three members effectively managing the Department of Veterans Affairs from behind the scenes (Arnsdorf, 2018) and nominating four members for ambassadorships (Levin, 2018). Moreover, in the first three years of his presidency, Trump's businesses have collected almost \$20 million in payments from federal political committees, mostly from conservative and Trump-related campaign groups, which vastly outweighs the paltry \$239,000 his businesses collected from these same revenue sources from 2008 to 2016 (Center for Responsive Politics, 2020). In addition,

while the exact dollar amount is unknown, 130 foreign government officials from 72 countries have visited and spent money at Trump properties (Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington 2020). All of this suggests that Trump has personally profited from politicians, both domestic and foreign, seeking to curry favor from the president. Most of Trump's real estate deals, however, simply consist of Trump leasing his name to developers (Klein, 2017). Since he assumed office, foreign governments have granted Trump 65 trademark deals while hundreds more are pending in dozens of governments, as the line between Trump the Man and Trump the Corporation blur (Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington 2020; Mangan and Setty 2019).

## **Statecraft as Personal Branding: Toward a Theory of Trump's Governance**

We do not disagree that Trump demonstrates the psychological tendency of narcissism and the political tendencies of authoritarianism, ethno-nationalism, and neoliberalism in the building blocks he uses for his mode of governance. But we do challenge the assumption that the political ends traditionally associated with these means are foundational to Trump's statecraft or that any one of the ideologies associated with these frameworks provides a sufficient sociological understanding of the not normal/new normal of Trumpian governance. Rather, we argue that Trump's ruling style sacrificed traditional strategies of governance and opted instead to use a purely tactical postmodern pastiche of these tendencies in a recombinant fashion to achieve ends that differ and diverge from those of the conventional state. As we argue below, this style of political action most closely aligns with the logic of the personal brand. As such, we cannot separate an analysis of Trump the Man from Trump the Brand, meaning that psychological and political analyses that fail to approach the Trumpian mode of governance from a sociological perspective rooted in political economy will fail to fully account for how this mode diverges from and reconstitutes what passes today as the new "normal" in American statecraft.

In conventional and orthodox frameworks, the state has the power of violence, the force of law, and the revenues from taxation at its disposal to achieve its goals (Nelson, 2006). While at one level those goals—the welfare of the citizens and the maintenance of social order, economic growth and development, military preparedness, etc.—are the subject of debate (Barrow, 1993, 2016; Hay, Lister and Marsh, 2006), what they have in common is that they are all ultimately directed toward the long-term viability and survival of the state itself. Conventionally, therefore, the state is both a means and an end. For Trump, however, the full force of atemporal and presentist exceptionalism infuses his mode of governance as he treats the state as a means that is finally liberated from the necessity of its loftiest end: the historical continuation of itself, held together by the glue of ideological narrative and material presence. Free from the weight of the dead generations of statesmen and women who crafted this history and unmoved by the inept zombie politicians who cannot fathom why their words have lost the power and meaning they once had, Trump has forged a new normal for the American state based on a strategy of governance that is rooted in the logic of the personal brand, in which things like ideological narrative and material presence are fully malleable and plastic means that only have value in the atemporal present. Under this model, Trump is able to guide the state toward alternative ends.

By atemporal and presentist exceptionalism, we are referring to a core tendency of the logic of capital to make the past wither away while simultaneously foreclosing the future, thereby atemporalizing the present. Modern societies who opt to be guided by the logic of capital allow

that logic to control them rather than engage in strategic thinking that would set the relationship between humanity and capital right side up (Marx and Engels, [1848] 1969; Marx, [1867] 1990). Controlled by capital, rather than controlling capital, the modern state increasingly abandons its role as the long-term strategist of society and preoccupies itself in the role of a managerial tactician who can no longer plan and act but rather is compelled to constantly react. Similar to how the corporation is increasingly organized around short-term planning that prioritizes the profit of today over and above long-term concerns, such as environmental degradation, the finite supply of material resources, and social and human wellbeing, the state has also increasingly disengaged itself from the concerns of the future. As Virilio ([1977] 2006, [1984] 2012, [1990] 2000) and Harvey (1990) have theorized, albeit from differing perspectives, the effect of this is a spatiotemporal compression, in which both history and future are sacrificed to whatever demands are made by a present that is happening faster and faster.

In the system of capital, those who maximize this presentist attitude and best reflect that logic in their actions are rewarded and praised as the exceptional masters of this reality, while those who insist that the past and the future possess more than abstract value are at such odds with the system that it prioritizes their removal from the system. By infusing politics with this aspect of the logic of capital, the idea that political capital can accumulate over time and be spent while engaging in the democratic practices of deliberation, compromise, and strategic planning is drastically devalued. If this lesson was not made fully visible in the neoliberal era of American politics, then Trump's ascendancy to the American presidency has driven this point home.

Because Trump was an outsider candidate who flip-flopped between parties and lacked a store of political capital upon which he could draw—something previous presidents had at their disposal—the traditional strategies based in conventional establishment politics could not be relied upon in his statecraft. Since Trump could not spend what he did not possess, there were two problems that had to be immediately addressed to make his mode of governance functional upon assuming the office. The first was to devalue and render impotent the stores of political capital accumulated by the political establishment, something he prioritized in his campaign. If the old normal was maintained, then this form of capital could pose an existential threat to the Trumpian state and be wielded against the administration. This was no less true for the opposition party Democrats than it was for Republicans who had a number of self-declared 'Never Trumpers' in their midst. The second was that Trump's mode of governance required a new normal to replace the outmoded (or, at least, inaccessible to Trump) framework of accumulation and exchange of political power. As such, the top priority of Trump's governance was to remold the state and its apparatuses by shifting the valorization from the traditional source of political capital—that which is accumulated through establishment politics—to a form of capital that Trump not only could access, but one in which he possessed a competitive advantage in its accrual—that of symbolic capital, which Trump had stockpiled in spades as a result of his legacy as a personal brand.

Neither the Democrats nor the Republicans sufficiently recognized that Trump was operating according to a different logic than the politics to which they were accustomed. While they were focused on Trump the Man, an incompetent and bigoted buffoon who according to their materialist rules had no shot at winning the White House, Trump the Brand was infusing politics with a new source of power that he knew how to successfully wield. When they tried to generate and trade upon their own symbolic capital, gained from their political brands, they approached it from a strategic standpoint and failed spectacularly, not recognizing that a tactical approach was

largely responsible for Trump's success as a personal brand. Memorable examples of this include Hillary Clinton's Twitter campaign attempting to equate herself with Latina grandmothers, which sparked a backlash from young Latinas who responded with #notmyabuela (Rogers, 2015). Rather than self-parody and fire out a bombardment of new attempts to change the discourse by tapping into the circulatory power of social media for symbolic exchange, Clinton wasted her symbolic capital by misunderstanding how to wield it. As a result, this initiative was seen as a strategic failure for the Clinton campaign, and they failed to sufficiently counter the backlash, choosing instead to try and quietly end the campaign in embarrassment. On the Republican side there was the even cringier attempt by Marco Rubio to enter the ring of symbolic exchange and counter Trump's dubbing of the senator as Little Marco. Rubio awkwardly fired back with a sexual innuendo about Trump's small hands, leading to a media first in a presidential campaign when CNN ran the headline: "Donald Trump defends size of penis" (Krieg, 2016). Again, rather than respond using a tactical approach suited to this form of symbolic exchange, Rubio fumbled his symbolic capital and wasted it by falling back on the rules of political strategy to which his image was tethered, so he quickly offered an apology to Trump (Tani, 2016). Not possessing an image that was anchored to any one political strategy, Trump was under no such constraints and could continue the assault on his competition with hardly any impact from the expected backlash or the suffering of any significantly negative consequences; if anything, drunk on the power of his symbolic capital, his source of power grew the more extreme and unhinged he became. The failure of Trump's political adversaries to successfully enter the arena of symbolic exchange and understand these rules only strengthened the Trumpian position and increased his symbolic capital.

Shifting the forms of value, Trump took the concept of political capital and exploited it at the symbolic level because symbolic capital is where his greatest source of power originates. While we have explained the political necessity for Candidate Trump to find a way to replace the political value system of exchange so that he could become President Trump, we are not, however, suggesting that his obsession with symbolic capital is in any way new to him; it began long before his presidential campaign.

For as long as he has been in the public eye, Trump has obsessed over the symbolic value of money and engaged in an overt campaign of "conspicuous consumption" to attach himself to its sign (Veblen, [1899] 2007:49). This fixation with promoting an image of wealth is well documented. Regine Mahaux's portraits of the Trump family in their New York residence famously showcased the gaudy draping of everything in gold, recalling the aristocratic residences of pre-guillotine France. The irony is that while, as of 2019, Forbes ranks Trump as the 715th richest person in the world and the 275th in the United States, The Washington Post (Greenberg, 2018) reported that Trump lied about his net worth to get on the list. This could be why Trump has been so vigorous in appealing courts, all the way up to the Supreme Court, to bar the release of his tax returns, which would either confirm or deny how wealthy he really is (Williams, 2019). Despite the fact that Trump is one of the wealthiest Americans by any measure, placement on the Forbes list is so symbolically valuable for Trump that if his returns were to call the material reality of his billionaire status into question, even if he were still worth several hundred million dollars, the symbolic capital of his inclusion on the list would be tainted. This ultimately is of greater import to Trump the Brand than the real dollar value of his net worth is to Trump the Man. The fact that, according to best estimates from the available data, Trump's net worth in terms of financial capital has stayed relatively flat in office (Nasiripour and Melby, 2019) while his



net worth in terms of symbolic capital has drastically risen underlines this point.

As a businessman and Reality TV personality, Trump's career and reputation owes itself far less to his success in the realm of financial capital, and far more to his success in the realm of symbolic capital. While Trump works to promote the image of a wealthy man and attaches the Trump name to signs of luxury, his fast food snacking, too-long-tie wearing, foul-mouthed demeanor all betray the historical signs of money, which ironically boosts his symbolic capital with the lower class and working poor. Each building broadcasting the Trump name, video clip of him saying "you're fired," and infomercialesque Trump product combined has netted Trump less economic capital than it has symbolic capital. If Trump's priority was to make money, he would have been far better off abandoning his forays into personal branding gimmicks and instead simply invested his inherited wealth into index funds (Grodén, 2015). The reality is that the Trump Organization has never been more than a moderately successful American conglomerate, with a reputation of not paying on its contracts, using the courts to strongarm small businesses, and six of its companies have famously filed for bankruptcy (Kivisto, 2018). Although the Trump brand does not conjure an instant image of financial success for many and that many of the products were far less than advertised, the company has been remarkably successful in terms of spreading and amplifying Trump as a personal brand for the purpose of accumulating symbolic capital. Since Donald took operational control of the Trump Organization from his father, Fred, it has operated primarily as an extension of Trump the Brand rather than a finely-tuned money-making machine. It was only able to focus on growing Trump's personal brand because it is a private company that does not have to answer to shareholders whose goals would not be furthered by this operational logic.

A core distinction between the personal brand and the corporate brand is the measure of what constitutes profit. While economic capital is the traditional profit measure that corporate branding seeks to increase, the personal brand is only secondarily oriented to that end. Its primary measure of success is in the accumulation of symbolic forms of capital. Although most scholars turn to Bourdieu ([1979] 1984; [1983] 1986) as the de facto authority on the concept of symbolic capital, he largely interpreted symbolic sources of capital (such as social and cultural capital) in terms of their material exchange power, writing that:

it has to be posited...that economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital and that these transformed, disguised forms of economic capital, never entirely reducible to that definition, produce their most specific effects only to the extent that they conceal (not least from their possessors) the fact that economic capital is at their root, in other words – but only in the last analysis – at the root of their effects. ([1983] 1986)

Because the core of his focus was on how these forms of capital related to class and how they could be converted into economic capital, from that materialist perspective it made sense that economic capital is the root of these symbolic forms, but this ignored how even economic capital had at that time begun to evolve beyond its material roots. While Trump certainly trades on his symbolic capital to enhance his economic capital, the evidence again points to this being a secondary goal of Trump's actions. In fact, if Trump were to be solely preoccupied with increasing his stock of economic capital, then assuming the office of the presidency has hindered this goal as the office has placed far more constraints and scrutiny on his and the Trump Organization's economic activities than would have been the case if he had simply remained a private citizen. Moreover, it is highly improbable, given the realities of the capitalist world market today and the

real estate focus as the only profitable aspect of the Trump Organization, that it could brand and sell a product that could ever compete with the true titans of global wealth. Even if Forbes' estimates of Trump's wealth are accurate, his wealth is orders of magnitude beneath the hordes of wealth resting in the hands of Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and the other billionaires atop the Forbes list. Were the primary focus of developing a personal brand to trade upon that symbolic capital for economic capital, then assuming the office of the U.S. presidency has likely harmed Trump's financial ambitions; however, if we see symbolic capital as primarily about taking up space in people's minds, then Trump's political career has catapulted him to a success he never could have achieved without it.

Where Trump can compete with these neo-aristocrats, who have hoarded the extracted wealth of modern society and used capitalism to exploit the masses for personal gain, is in terms of their symbolic capital, and this is where the personal brand and its use as a mode of governance comes into play. If he cannot be the wealthiest economically, he can be the wealthiest symbolically; one whose sign is inescapable, as it has become, by becoming historically entwined with the U.S. presidency. Again, it is clear that Trump already possessed a larger amount of symbolic capital prior to his presidential campaign than many other billionaires who do not function as personal brands, but the presidency has greatly enhanced it. For example, even with their vast economic wealth, billionaires Tom Steyer and Michael Bloomberg, who function more like family corporations that specialize in a single industry, in this case finance, struggled to make much of an impact in the 2020 Democratic primaries and ultimately dropped out of the race. Similarly, many of the world's wealthiest actively try to keep a low public profile and limit their exposure in terms of symbolic capital because they operate according to a more conventional strategic logic based on material assumptions about the source of growth for their economic capital. Steve Jobs was a notable exception to this rule, as is Elon Musk, both of whom developed their personal brands to run alongside their corporate brands (Anderson, 2013). What unites these examples with Trump is key to understanding how this symbolic capital functions and leads us to the core claim of our argument that so many have struggled to grasp when attempting to make sense of the Trumpian mode of governance. If we take Trump, Jobs, and Musk as examples, their symbolic capital cannot be measured in terms of a value system rooted in a materialist logic of exchange.

Trump, Jobs, and Musk all cultivated their personal brands in a way in which the accumulation of their symbolic capital was agnostic to whether their actions constructed either a positive or a negative image of their brand. From the corporate brand standpoint, following this logic can be harmful since the end goal is to increase economic capital, and a negative image can harm consumer confidence leading to decreased sales. Case in point, Steve Jobs' reputation in the 1980s became so tarnished by his behavior that he was forced out of Apple and the company struggled for the better part of a decade to rebuild its image before he was allowed back at the reigns, and by then, the material conditions of the industry were more suitable to his image. Similarly, Musk's behavior is often erratic for a CEO and his companies' stocks have not been immune from a litany of his behaviors, such as smoking marijuana on camera or publicly calling a British man involved in the rescue of people trapped in a Thai cave a "pedo guy." However, while these bad behaviors certainly lost Jobs and Musk some short-term economic wins, they had the long-term effect of increasing their symbolic capital and their successes. Likewise, as we illustrated above, Trump's consistently contradictory mode of governance which relies on deploying tactics associated with ethno-nationalism, authoritarianism, and neoliberalism, while simultaneously countering those ends, produces a remarkably alienating effect on the one hand, while simultaneously producing

a functional new normal in American statecraft. Trump's compulsive contradictions function as Reality TV drama. While they garner negative press and provide fodder for the opposition to attack Trump as hypocritical, the underlying point is that each contradiction generates media coverage as journalists and pundits hang on his every word and try to decipher the underlying meaning of his contradictory actions. As a result, while Trump's symbolic capital is at an all-time high, the image of America as a nation-state is at an all-time low (Wike, et al., 2018).

What is the point of collecting symbolic capital if it is not to convert it into economic capital or to strengthen the image and global standing of the state? On the one hand, it fulfills the narcissistic function of increasing the valuation of the self and of reveling in self-adulation. On the other hand, it still possesses the capability of being exchanged for material and economic privileges. After all, Trump certainly used his symbolic capital to advance his political goals and win the presidency. However, where does he go from here? How can it translate into a successful form of governance? Again, we have to recognize that the traditional goals of the state are no longer those of this mode of governance. Statecraft as personal branding can only function on the basis of a social nihilism. Under the aegis of this atemporal logic, Trump's statecraft must be directed toward extending the present for as long as he can because failure to do so is to lose the symbolic capital he has accumulated. What this means is that the only way that Trump can maintain the ecstasy of producing and exchanging the level of symbolic capital he now enjoys is to hold onto the presidency for as long as possible because the loss of the presidency will mean the loss of the many opportunities it now affords him to put his symbolic capital in circulation within our collective consciousness. In this sense, Trump's governance often appears authoritarian, especially as he bucked the law and publicly tampered with his impeachment trial, because the moment he relinquishes the presidency the symbolic capital that he gets by means of his symbiosis with the office will evaporate. Once Trump won the White House he had accomplished the height of where the exchange of symbolic capital can take someone in the modern world system, barring the dismantling of the nation-state system and the return to the model of the emperor-kings, except in terms of it being exchanged for more of itself. This is the logical endpoint of the personal brand: a victim of its own success, it can only be traded for more of itself and everything is sacrificed as it all becomes a means to that end.

Several years before Bourdieu theorized the various forms of symbolic capital and ascribed them to an economic basis, Baudrillard had already explained the logic of this mode of symbolic exchange that Trump is practicing. Under the logic of capital, the sign is no longer bound to the real; it is freed and released into a state of pure circulation in which the imaginary and the real collide. What this means is that symbolic capital exchanges itself for itself. It is a self-referential form of capital that is no longer produced externally from the real material conditions; rather, it is produced by the discourse itself. "When production achieves this circularity and turns in on itself, it loses every objective determination" (Baudrillard [1976] 2012:16). We might know and recognize how harmful it is to the future of the state to engage in this circulation of Trump's symbolic capital, but even those who are disgusted by him are addicted to the ecstasy of this exchange, which is so pervasive that we ourselves are touched by it. As we write this paper seeking to explain Trump's governing style and illustrating its destructive potential, we must acknowledge that we are also playing into Trump's hand by extending his symbolic capital merely by writing about him. This is similar to how Democrats opposition to Trump still functions to generate media coverage on Trump and focus the attention on him, thereby extending his symbolic reach.

Trump intuitively understands this game and manipulates it to his own ends. Trump's

governance through the generation of spectacle is the trading floor upon which he invests his symbolic capital itching to feel the rush of its growth like a gambler who has lost any connection to the value of money and is simply enjoying the ecstasy of the pure exchange of money for itself (Baudrillard [1983] 2008). Baudrillard, however, calls this a fatal strategy because it can only increase in the speed of circulation until it is detached of all rational ends. Therefore, in terms of statecraft, it is as much a fatal strategy for the state as it is for its citizens, even if it is by far the most tactically successful campaign of a personal brand in history.

We can apply this logic to interpret the entirety of the Trump presidency and better understand his style of governance beyond what we have examined above, but in conclusion, we want to highlight two particular examples that have stretched his presidency and which touch back on the earlier addressed claims as to his tendency toward ethno-nationalism and neoliberalism. The first relates to how he has managed the construction of the proposed wall along the Southern border of the United States and the second relates to how he has managed the trade war with China.

The border wall was one of Trump's signature campaign promises and talk of his "big beautiful wall" still sparks cheers at his rallies. Three years on, however, the wall has turned out to have very little material value even as Trump still leeches symbolic value from it. Failing to secure funding for the wall while the Republicans controlled both branches of Congress appears less as failure and more as an intentional plan to keep the wall in a state of limbo so that it can continue to serve as a reserve of symbolic capital. Hilary Parsons Dick (2019) brilliantly summarized how Trump has stretched out this process to maximize the spectacle and increase his brand image:

central to Trump's rise to the presidency has been his existing skill and material infrastructure for producing spectacles and their associated brands (see Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram, 2016). Trump often refers to this professional background, particularly his experience in real estate development, when discussing the wall: it will be such a beautiful and effective wall because it will be a Trump Wall™. He has furthered this branding through a series of actions ripe for mass-mediated coverage. In 2017, Trump ordered the Department of Homeland Security to procure eight wall prototypes, which are now on display at the San Diego–Tijuana border. In March 2018, Trump made a much-covered stop at the prototype display in order to "pick the right one," this despite the fact that he has yet to get funding for the wall. (p. 181)

Since then he has picked a wall design and won a Supreme Court case reappropriating national defense funds for its partial construction. What has been accomplished by the wall efforts so far undermines any rational argument that it is being done for reasons of material security and not for symbolic purposes. Smugglers have already found a way to cut through the wall with "a popular cordless household tool" that costs under a \$100 (Miroff, 2019), replicas of the wall have been scaled, and new construction is still largely on hold as repairs and replacements of existing sections take priority. If Trump's end goal was to further the material cause of ethno-nationalism with his statecraft, then securing complete funding and building a wall that actually serves the purpose it is supposed to would have to take priority; instead he has used the wall to increase his symbolic capital and increase his brand presence.

The trade war with China presents a similarly contradictory set of data in which the actions Trump has taken do not appear to align with the stated end goals. The very idea of fighting a trade war calls into question the assertion that Trump is operating as a neoliberal, insofar as neoliberalism is an ideological belief in free-market enterprise. Nonetheless, Trump's trade war began on assertions that China was 'not playing fair' because they were not following the institutional rules orchestrated by the transnational neoliberal regime. However, the data tells us that

China used its 'developing nation' status when joining the World Trade Organisation in 2001 to make fewer commitments to remove trade barriers than would have been the case for a developed country. China has high tariffs, provides state subsidies, has high regulatory barriers for foreign companies, manipulates its currency, suppresses wages, and infringes on intellectual property. The WTO has failed to hold China to account for this unsavoury behaviour. (Lesh, 2018:56)

All of which suggests that China had simply worked the loopholes in these institutional rules to their advantage, no different than the tactics Trump claimed any smart person would do to avoid paying taxes. Rather than work to close the loopholes within the WTO framework, thereby supporting a global neoliberal regime of free trade, Trump has instead hollowed out the WTO's system for dealing with trade disputes (Johnson, 2019). Taking matters into his own hand, Trump has spun the traditional economic approaches of increasing protectionism in slow economic times and decreasing it in times of economic growth on its head (Irwin, 2019).

The effect, however, has been the exact opposite of Trump's stated goal of equalizing the trade deficit with China and increasing the overall level of trade between these countries. For example,

In the first eight months of this year [2019], China's exports to the United States dropped by just under four percent compared with the same period in the previous year, but U.S. exports to China shrank much more, by nearly 24 percent. Instead of narrowing the trade gap, the tariffs have coincided with a widening of the U.S. trade deficit with China: by nearly 12 percent in 2018 (to \$420 billion) and by about another eight percent in the first eight months of this year. (Shan, 2019:100-101)

Instead of getting China to stop what he claimed as trade abuses, Trump has used the opportunity to institute the same policies that he accused China of, such as subsidizing major agricultural losses and placing high tariffs on goods, both of which are covered by the American taxpayers. If the stated end goal is to make things better for American business interests, then even if we have to look at this sideways to see it as neoliberalism gone awry or even just more of the same kleptocratic corporate first policies of American economics, then the results do not speak to those ends. Economists and businesses agree that this trade war is not accomplishing the stated goals (Colvin, 2019; Stiglitz, 2018) and a massive report by the Harvard Business School concludes that the data is damning for the U.S. economy (Porter, et al., 2019). So again, we must ask, if Trump is not securing the ends, why is he engaging in these means? In terms of symbolic exchange and the growth of symbolic capital for Trump the Brand, this trade war is a success. Despite all the material evidence pointing to the contrary, Wall Street has jumped at every point of this symbolic exchange. Trump's major weapon with the trade deal is that he only needs to say it is coming to an end to achieve the desired reaction, and he has used this tactic numerous times despite the claims having no material basis.

This Trumpian mode of statecraft demands our attention because it threatens to undermine the foundation of the state by amplifying the use of its power, not only in ways that run contrary to the morals of most who ascribe to a humanist vision of the world, but also in a way which presents the state as a wholly inept institution. Threatened and incompetent, the state is increasingly vulnerable to attack, but the problems we face in the world are such that the state is the only institution available to us today with the resources to adequately address our planetary problems. By recognizing how the state is being used to manipulate symbolic exchange and trade on symbolic capital for the purposes of increasing the collective consciousness of Trump the Brand, this should warn us to be on the lookout for less obvious forms of this social manipulation

and provide us with the tools needed to identify this fatal logic and counter these shortsighted tactics with socially conscious strategies aimed at our collective long-term survival and wellbeing.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we demonstrated why it is necessary to take Trump seriously when he promised that his presidency would disrupt the political establishment. His approach to governance has accomplished just that, however, in ways that are different from the conventional interpretations. To illustrate the limitations of these mainstream accounts, we cataloged the various interpretations of Trump's governing style in terms of four ideal types—Trump the Narcissist, Ethno-Nationalist, Authoritarian, and Neoliberal. Each of these accounts, in turn, falls short from explaining the totality of Trump's governing style because they ignore how the postmodern pastiche of tactics used by the president undercuts the means and ends attributed to Trump through these frameworks. By contrast, we construct the foundation for a new theory of governance that is grounded in Trump's duality as both President and Personal Brand. We then considered how Trump's approach to governance has fundamentally altered statecraft insofar as his position as President permits Trump to hold the state hostage and leverage its power to serve his personal end of accumulating symbolic capital.

This new normal is not normal in terms of statecraft because it has abandoned the traditional ends associated with the governance of the state. It fully embraces reactionary thinking by completing the shift from long-term strategic thinking to short-term tactical thinking in terms of the actions taken by the president and the state he represents. This undermines the power that the state can wield in service of social welfare and public good because the problems modern society must confront today are precisely those that require strategic thinking and long-term planning. Governing as a personal brand, therefore, appears to have a very short shelf life because it cannibalizes the state as it feeds off of it to increase symbolic capital.

Is President Trump's personal brand of governance a one-time wonder, or does it presage a new era of democratic politics infused with the logic of the personal brand? One thing to consider is the way symbolic capital is passed down. Unlike the transfer and inheritance of economic capital, symbolic capital is heavily taxed by the collective consciousness when it is transferred from the one who accumulated it to a successor. As such, it seems unlikely that others could easily follow in Trump's footsteps and adopt this mode of governance, at least in the United States; however, in other nation states that have not yet gone down this road, it is highly likely that upstart reactionaries will attempt to copy this model. Even with the talk of the Trump family becoming a political dynasty, Trump the Man is so indistinguishable from Trump the Brand, that even Don Jr., his closest familial clone, appears as nothing more than a parody of his father.

Rather than attempt to fully speculate on the logical end of this mode of governance, we conclude by sketching the relationship between democracy and personal brand governance. On the one hand, because President Trump is using and abusing the state to serve his self-interested goals of expanding his symbolic capital, we agree with conventional interpretations that view Trump as a grave threat to democracy. On the other hand, our analysis also highlights that Trump is adept at manipulating the present structure of the U.S. democracy to achieve his own ends, and therefore, at least for now relies on democracy. That Trump won the election despite most conventional wisdom predicting a landslide victory for Clinton highlights how mainstream understandings of democracy and Trump are often wrongheaded. Rather, Trump's history as a personal brand

has permitted him to accumulate economic capital and symbolic capital, both of which are the two most potent forms of political power that anyone can wield in the current political system and both of which Trump has accumulated on a scale that dwarfs any of his political rivals. As a result, Trump not only had the money to self-finance parts of his campaign, but also the brand power that immediately generated a wealth of money from donors, and even more importantly, he deployed spectacles that resulted in more than \$5.9 billion in free media advertising for his 2016 election bid (Sultan, 2017). Since the moment he became president, Trump the Brand was campaigning for his second term, such that before the Democratic primaries for the 2020 election even took shape, he had already amassed more money than any previous presidential candidate at that point in the campaign (Ye Hee Lee and Narayanswamy, 2019). Moreover, his symbolic capital is riding global highs as the world, transfixed by the bumbles and fumbles of the American response to the COVID-19 pandemic, watches him. This means that the logic of the personal brand is highly commensurate with, and at the same time very destructive of, the existing structure of the U.S. democratic system. And yet, a political system that is most responsive to economic and symbolic power can hardly be called “democratic” at all.

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