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Fast Capitalism is an academic journal with a political intent. We publish reviewed scholarship and essays about the impact of rapid information and communication technologies on self, society and culture in the 21ˢᵗ century. We do not pretend an absolute objectivity; the work we publish is written from the vantages of viewpoint. Our authors examine how heretofore distinct social institutions, such as work and family, education and entertainment, have blurred to the point of near identity in an accelerated, post-Fordist stage of capitalism. This makes it difficult for people to shield themselves from subordination and surveillance. The working day has expanded; there is little down time anymore. People can 'office' anywhere, using laptops and cells to stay in touch. But these invasive technologies that tether us to capital and control can also help us resist these tendencies. People use the Internet as a public sphere in which they express and enlighten themselves and organize others; women, especially, manage their families and nurture children from the job site and on the road, perhaps even 'familizing' traditionally patriarchal and bureaucratic work relations; information technologies afford connection, mitigate isolation, and even make way for social movements. We are convinced that the best way to study an accelerated media culture and its various political economies and existential meanings is dialectically, with nuance, avoiding sheer condemnation and ebullient celebration. We seek to shape these new technologies and social structures in democratic ways.

Contents

Fast Capitalism

* We invite contributions on these and related issues. Some papers will stick close to the ground of daily life and politics; others will ascend the heights of theory in order to get the big picture. The work we publish is both disciplinary and interdisciplinary, bridging the social sciences and humanities. Culture and capital are keywords. We are also interested in cities, the built environment and nature, and we encourage people who theorize space to submit their work.

About the Authors

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Steven Panageotou specializes in political economy and critical social theory. He researches the tension between democratic politics and capitalist economics in the United States, Greece, and Latin America. While he conducted the research for this article as an Assistant Professor at Arkansas State University, Steven will be an Assistant Professor of Political Economy at the College of Idaho in the Fall of 2020. He can be contacted at spanageo@gmail.com.

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Introduction to "This Is Not Normal"

David Arditi, Timothy W. Luke

As we prepared this issue of Fast Capitalism for publication, we could not foresee how incredibly "not normal" almost all public affairs in the United State things would become. After the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, the outrage about state-tolerated police violence against Black people turned to rage. Protests exploded with uncontained fury in scores of cities across the United States. When governors and mayors imposed curfews, many police officers took this as a signal to release their own rage on peaceful protestors, African Americans, and journalists. The palpable fear and anger among protestors only accentuated the extraordinary levels of this state executed violence. Protests against police brutality suddenly shifted on live television broadcasts into more police violence by more threatening tactical law enforcement personnel. Following three years of President Donald Trump stating that the news media are "enemy number one," it is not a big leap for the police to target journalists reporting on democratic protests with pepper spray, rubber bullets, tear gas, and flash bang grenades. Indeed...this is not normal.

In recent decades, Americans presidents have called for calm in the face of such egregious acts. Often these empty platitudes were enough deescalate the confrontations and relieve steam from the pressure cooker of partisan division. These rhetorical platitudes can be heard in messages from former presidents Barrack Obama and George W. Bush during the first weeks of June. The brutal murder of George Floyd in broad daylight on a Minneapolis street under the knee of a Minnesota policemen while three fellow officers stood by seemingly indifferent to Floyd's slow strangulation should have prompted an Oval Office address calling for a careful criminal inquest into such an injustice. Such empathy, integrity or respect, however, is not Trump's governing style. Instead, the President went golfing and tweeting. His tweets blamed "thugs" for the street violence and he alluded to for shooting protesters using a famous quote from racist Miami police Chief Walter Headley in 1967 and 1968 about his riot control philosophy: "when the looters start, the shooting starts."
This is not normal.

On a phone call with all 50 US governors, Trump called the governors "weak" and advocated that they use force against protesters (Costa, Seung Min Kim, and Josh Dawsey n.d.). In his tirade, which people on the call described as "unhinged," he claimed he would take military action by putting the joint chiefs of staff and the secretary of defense in charge. "You have to dominate. If you don't dominate, you're wasting your time. They're going to run over you. You're going to look like a bunch of jerks. You have to dominate," Trump decried (Burns 2020). His goal was to move beyond the slow militarization of urban police forces since the 1960s to the militarized occupation of American cities in 2020.
This is not normal.

U.S. Customs and Border Patrol personnel were redeployed to Washington, DC to get in on this action along with National Guard forces from ten states and various other federal police agencies. Some elements of these hastily mobilized new security forces invaded Washington, DC without any insignia of service or unit identification in violation of military codes of conduct or even regular badges showing what police force they represent (both requirements under DC law). These street-fighting storm trooper tactics are emblematic of brutal actions taken by authoritarian regimes across the world. For President Trump, domineering swagger is mandatory for showing "who's boss," but showing force against largely peaceful demonstrators exercising their rights of assembly and free speech reveals the twisted soul of an elected leader unworthy of having such authority in a democracy.
This is not normal.

Trump then took an unprecedented action for a photo-op to broadcast to his political base. At his direction, Attorney-General William Barr ordered federal security contingents to clear Lafayette Park in front of the White House. A mixed contingent of federal police and military forces attacked peaceful demonstrators before curfew after issuing perfunctory directives for them to disperse. They hit peaceful lawfully present protestors with tear gas and rubber bullet, forcing them back from the park with shields and horses. After the park was clear, Trump calmly walked across the street to St. John's Episcopal church to make a live broadcast holding a copy of the Bible to declare himself the agent of "Law and Order" and decry the protestor ultimately as terrorists. His aim was to cast himself in a moment of historic resolve against malign forces in a script that likened him to Winston Churchill in 1940 defying the blitz or George W Bush at the smoldering World Trade Center ruins after 9/11/2001. Instead, these strong-arm antics resembled a tin-horn demagogue hellbent on putting the unruly masses in their proper place of dehumanized domination.
This is not normal.

Ironically, in the weeks before Floyd's murder, Trump supporters protested "stay at home" orders to control the COVID-19 pandemic, committed violence against people wearing sterile masks for everyone's personal safety, and armed self-proclaimed militia groups stormed the Michigan State Capitol "to liberate" the people from the allegedly misguided leadership of the state's female Democratic governor. Trump's reaction to these putatively patriotic right-wing action groups protesting shelter-in-place orders was positive. Indeed, he too called for the end of shelter-in-place and face masks orders during a pandemic as mindless policies that were killing hundreds of thousands of American jobs and ruining his heroic recovery of jobs for the nation. Trump saw restrictions of movement for public health as unconstitutional, but he regarded protests against police violence as disorderly, illegal, and un-American.
This is not normal.

In a move reminiscent of the Nazi Party's irregular paramilitary "Brownshirts," the Trump-Pence campaign began selling camo "Keep America Great" (KAG) hats on their website. Trump wants to recast his followers as volunteers to serve as a "Trump Army." Such an invitation is exciting for many of his followers, since they already show up to many protests openly carrying firearms and wearing tactical field gear. His campaign states to the "Trump Army" that "YOU are the President's first line of defense when it comes to fighting off the Liberal MOB" (See Figure 1). Since his new federal police forces are often unmarked, there would be nothing to stop the "Trump Army" from showing up to assault protestors, because there would be no way to identify who might have "legitimate" authority. Of course, in Trump's own advertising of the camo KAG hats, Trump brazenly pretends to give his personal authority to these new partisans for "keeping America great." Such unlawful presumptions by the Trump/Pence Re-Election Campaign can be cynically dismissed as a wry amusing effort to market "his message" to his embattled political base. Yet, these values, practices, and ideas have contorted the Re-

publican Party in many states into dreadful caricatures that bears no resemblance to their once more progressive, egalitarian, and unifying visions of America's popular government. These paternalistic acts of ultranationalist oligarchy instead appear to be unconstitutional steps down a road that could lead the United States toward more openly authoritarian, if not fascist, modes of rule.

This is not normal…

David Arditi and Timothy Luke
6.6.2020

Figure 1. Email from Trump-Pence Campaign.

In writing the introduction to this special issue of <u>Fast Capitalism</u>, I am following Tarrant County, Texas' "Shelter-at-Home" order due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. When our call for a special issue entitled "This Is Not Normal" about the Trump era went out last year, we could never have predicted how extraordinarily abnormal our everyday life soon would become in 2020. However, the more fundamental changes in everyday life after the pandemic are not at issue here. Rather, President Donald J. Trump's handling of the pandemic's health crisis and its

ensuing economic crisis crisply highlights many of the common failures of his "not normal" style of governance. For months, President Trump decried the coronavirus as nothing but the Democratic party's new "hoax," most publicly at a February 28th rally at a time when more than a dozen Americans had already been diagnosed with the disease (Obeidallah 2020). To add insult to injury, he continued to oscillate between casting COVID-19 as a legitimate national threat and depicting it as something the Democrats and "the media" (minus Fox News, of course) had overblown. Even as Trump tried to shift to a more serious approach to coronavirus, he appointed Kayleigh McEnany, a known coronavirus-denier, as the new White House Press Secretary (Blake 2020). While our nearly nation-wide lockdown constitutes a moment of extreme abnormality, the Trump Administration's response to the current epidemic and economic crisis exemplifies the many ways in which the Trump presidency is not normal.

When we first made the call for this special issue, we saw the impeachment of Trump on the horizon, but we did not know that it would have much to do with Ukraine. At the time, America was entering full swing into a wild presidential election with considerable focus paid to the Mueller Report on Russia's interference in the 2016 election. I thought the clear evidence, and the attempted cover-up of the report by Attorney General William Barr was enough to impeach Trump. But times are not normal. Apparently, Special Counsel Robert Mueller did not generate gripping enough television to impeach the president, so Congress packed up for its August recess with little planning to convene the impeachment process. President Trump's use of spectacle (Kellner 2019) has altered most of the scripts for mass media democracy as a political game to reinvent as a 24x7 Twitter and television multi-media circus. No matter how damning and compelling any public information proves to be, if it does not provide good television, then it is rapidly rendered irrelevant.

Our initial call for contributions to this volume stated the following:

A popular refrain heard from citizens, journalists, and politicians in the news media describes Donald Trump's actions as "not normal." At the same time, there has been a consistent effort to normalize his actions in the Republican Party, the White House, and some media outlets as well as many social media streams. By July 2019, public discourse has reached the point that the President's tweets that four liberal, non-white congresswomen should "go back" to their own countries seems to many like ordinary common sense on another Sunday, and such comments do little to nothing to weaken his support among his Republican base. In turn, this "not normal" loss of basic civility between the White House, the Democratic majority in the House, and many ordinary citizens begins to look far more like an acceptable new normality as too many others in public life emulate him.

As 2020 approaches, Trump's new national order of "not normal" pushes further and further towards demagoguery, authoritarianism, and illegality. From his interview in which he said he "would like to hear" information from a foreign government to get dirt on political opponents to hinting that a win in 2020 could enable him to ignore the 25th amendment (i.e. the presidential term limit) to run again in 2024 and 2028. From creating the short-lived Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity to track down allegations of fraudulent voting in 2016 to saying that the Congressional hearings on the Mueller report to the Attorney General were treasonous high crimes against him and the nation underscores the growing authoritarian tendencies in the Trump White House. At the same time, Trump has used government agencies to slow the enforcement of legally enacted and longstanding regulatory policies. This selective "slo-mo governance" style increasingly atrophies and obstructs the government's everyday roles in everything from environmental protection to civil rights enforcement.

Since we made the call, Trump became the third president of the United States of America to be impeached and only the fourth to face impeachment hearings. In the spirit of "not normal,"

Republican senators took the astounding position in their hearings on the House's two counts of impeachable offenses that yes, what Trump did was wrong – he abused the Office of the Presidency to extort a foreign government (Ukraine) to release results of an investigation of his main political opponent. But Republican Senators, 1) claimed they could not get into overturning the will of the people; 2) argued Trump had the power as president to do so; therefore nothing here in this instance was illegal; and/or 3) the case of his fitness as president would be judged by the electorate on these and many other issues later in November 2020 election. Republican senators overwhelmingly voted to acquit Donald J. Trump of his impeachment charges with lone Republican Sen. Mitt Romney voting in favor of one article of impeachment.

In this special issue of Fast Capitalism, the contributors look at many dimensions of the Trump Administration to judge its abnormality against the larger canvas of America's democratic governance traditions. At times, Trump's actions appear outside the typical discursive frames of American politics, while at other times, his actions appear to be business-as-usual. The essays, then, emphasize both the continuities and discontinuities in the presidency of Donald J. Trump.

For Nancy Love, Donald Trump's seemingly erratic and egotistic governance style stresses "the art of the deal." She emphasizes, however, the ways in which such deal-making as decision-making has much in common with the brusque traditions of authoritarian rule in fascist regimes. In Steven Panageotou's analysis, President Trump's governing style becomes a continuous marketing campaign to develop and expand the appeal of his own personal and family corporate brand. According to Richard Holtzman, Trump's incredibly improvisational communicative style of recurrent rhetorical rips remake national governance into deinstitutionalized personal interventions almost always "on the run" and "off the cuff." Peter Ore and Andrew Davis contend in a similar vein that while Trump has increased the role of the executive branch of government, he has simultaneously disempowered the larger federal bureaucracy. While Donald Trump's never-ending political theatrics are often carnivalesque, Charles Thorpe's contribution carefully analyzes the various ways in which his carnival reflects the ragged realities of American national politics as it unfolds inside the beltway around D.C. Timothy W. Luke turns these often-decried "constitutional crises" that have repeatedly cropped up during Trump's presidency as a continuation of a deeper "Crisis Constitution" that has unfolded since the revelation of differently depraved abuses of authority during the Nixon presidency and the "New Republican Majority" the GOP forged during the deeply divisive 1968 and 1972 national campaigns for the White House. Far from being abnormal, Luke contends that Trump is a more unstable and dangerous continuation of the civic formulae behind the post-Nixon national political order. In Zachary Wheeler's analysis, Trump now governs both over and through the cruel collapse of neoliberalism. However, since the left and center cannot admit to the flawed failures of American neoliberalism, Trump exploits its flaws to create a new type of far-right neoliberal fascism. Sean Doody explores the growing importance of the "Intellectual Dark Web," a vast dumpster fire of ideological reactions where alt-right figures attempt to create intellectual reactionary forces to counter mainstream science and reason. Doody's account traces Trump's connection to this "intellectual" movement, although the President would admit his actions are being animated by such an intellectual turn. Cary Fraser argues that Trump's attempts to place more power in the presidency disrupts the Founders' purposeful establishment of a careful, if always contentious, balance of power between the three branches of government. The result is a dysfunctional government that might well succumb to the civic collapse the Founders' sought to avoid. Simon Orpana and Evan Mauro read Trump's new concoctions of "vile sovereignty" through the popular

movie "The Joker." They mobilize Foucault's concept "vile sovereignty" to examine how Trump's toxic masculinity is an attempt to create anxieties among the populace. David G. Embrick, J. Scott Carter, Cameron Lippard, and Bhoomi K. Thakore present the major characteristics of Trump's "not normal" presidency as a direct result of "whitelash" – "individual, institutional, and/or structural countermeasures against the dismantling of white supremacy or actions, real or imagined, that seek to remedy existing racial inequities." Viewed through this analytical lens, Trump's presidency is not so much an abnormality as the normal functioning of white supremacy and institutional racism, which, of course, continuously denies such social pathologies are "not normal" even as the "whitelash" underpinning his administration make them more and more common features of American government in the twenty-first century.

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The Art of the Deal, The Arts of Democracy: Trump, Dewey, and Democracy[1]

Nancy S. Love

> "I just want to build. After all, that's what I do best."
> --Donald Trump (1997)

> "A Trump building is like someone has planted a gold bar, instead of a flag, in unclaimed land."
> --Nick Hilton (2018)

> "A country is not a hotel, and it's not full."
> --Yo-Yo Ma (2019)

> "This is a land…uncharted waters, constitutionally."
> --Lindsay Graham (2019)

The Neoliberal Imaginary: Trump as Artist

> "I don't do it for the money. I've got enough, much more than I'll ever need. I do it to do it. Deals are my art form. Other people paint beautifully on canvas or write beautiful poetry. I like making deals, preferably big deals. That's how I get my kicks" (Trump 2015: 1).

Donald Trump's politics has been variously described as "neoliberal," "nationalist," "authoritarian," "populist," and even "fascist," and all of these descriptors are appropriate in some respects (Beinart 2016; Friedman 2017; McCarthy 2018; McWilliams 2016; Stanley 2019). In this article, I explore the linkages between Trump, neoliberalism, and fascism through what may seem an unlikely aspect of his politics, that is, his artistry as a candidate and now as the president. In elevating deal-making to an art form, Trump is not unique. Fascist leaders have long fancied themselves as artists and regarded politics as artistry.[2] In addition to political propaganda,[3] classical fascist leaders deployed the symbolic politics of architecture, film, music,[4] theater, and sculpture.[5] According to Susan Sontag, Leni Riefenstahl's films, especially Triumph of the Will, exemplify the major features of National Socialist aesthetics: "the ideal of life as art; the cult of beauty; the fetishism of courage; the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community; the repudiation of the intellect; the family of man (under the parenthood of leaders)" (1980:

95-96). Sontag claims that a deep longing for aspects of fascist aesthetics persists in the guise of romanticism among many liberal democrats. Their aesthetic desires can be seen "in such diverse modes of cultural dissidence and propaganda for new forms of community as the youth/rock culture, primal therapy, anti-psychiatry, Third World camp-following, and belief in the occult" (Sontag 1980: 96). She worries that liberal democrats often fail to "detect the fascist longings in their midst," partly because they tend to relegate aesthetics and politics to separate spheres, private and public, respectively (Sontag 1980: 96).

Sontag's argument is controversial given the institutional differences between liberal democratic and fascist regimes. Yet she makes crucial points about the continuities between the aesthetic politics of fascism and liberal democracy, including how art as propaganda can distract, fascinate, and mesmerize mass publics, and thereby "normalize" the otherwise unimaginable. In Democratic Artworks, Charles Hersch claims that the capacity of the arts to engage and educate democratic citizens by appealing to emotional and sensory, as well as cognitive experiences, is double-edged. The arts not only strengthen the bonds between citizens and democratic values but can also undermine them by engulfing the individual in the collective. Of Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will, Hersch writes, "Ironically, artworks may undermine democracy precisely because of their ability to create shared experience" (qtd. in Hersch 2018: 248).

Neoliberalism modulates these continuities between liberal and fascist aesthetics in important ways. In his defense of market freedoms, Milton Friedman famously said "the consistent liberal is not an anarchist." Classical liberals, like Friedman, rely on government institutions to establish and enforce "the rules of the game," create communication and transportation infrastructures, address "neighborhood effects," and care for those in need (2002: 34). Neoliberals place a greater emphasis on individual entrepreneurship and market freedoms, often earning them the label "economic libertarians." David Harvey defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (qtd. in Abu-Hamdi 2017:103). For neoliberals, every individual is a capitalist entrepreneur with equal access to free markets. According to Walter Benn Michaels (2011), when compared to classical liberalism, neoliberal capitalism, with its economic libertarianism, manifests "formlessness" and a "lack of grounding." Unlike classical liberalism's "rules of the game," neoliberalism is a "free-for-all." Nick Srnicek argues that the neoliberal combination of deregulated global markets and unregulated social media, in particular, creates a sense of chaos that many people find overwhelming. The neoliberal world (dis)order involves "a complexity that is too dense, too thick, too intense, too speedy, too fast for our brains to decipher" (Berardi, qtd. in Srnicek 2015). For many, the unfortunate result is "a deficiency in cognitive mapping" (Jameson, qtd. in Srnicek 2015). This deficiency arises even though neo- and classical liberals ultimately agree that individual successes or failures depend on rationality, industry, talent – and a bit of luck.

In his recent article, "Our Increasingly Fascist Public Discourse," Jason Stanley argues that Social Darwinism, repackaged as evolutionary biology or developmental psychology, provides the missing link between liberalism, neoliberalism, and fascism. To forge this link, one need only shift from individual to group struggles for racial and/or national survival and from individual to group successes based on racial and/or national character. Stanley analyzes the rhetoric in myths of racial and national superiority, specifically, linguistic constructions of "us" vs. "them," that shape the resurgent Eurocentrism of the American alt right. His analysis reveals how these

structural inequalities continue to undergird the superficial chaos of neoliberalism. As we will see, Trump deploys Social Darwinism to link neoliberalism, liberalism, and fascism, and he draws his Social Darwinism from the unlikely source Stanley identifies, economic libertarianism (2019).

The arts have long provided cognitive maps that helped individuals to order a chaotic world or to make sense of their inner and outer experiences. In <u>The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere</u> (1991), Jürgen Habermas famously argued that the literary public sphere helped create an engaged, informed citizenry capable of reflective judgment and, when necessary, democratic dissent. Yet today, many artists find it increasingly difficult to sustain the distance from capitalist markets necessary to resist rather than mirror neoliberal reality (Srnicek 2015; Elliott and Harkins 2013). Some scholars have argued that the aesthetic dimension that Herbert Marcuse, like Habermas, once regarded as a site of political resistance has all but succumbed to a one-dimensional neoliberal world (Lebow 2019).

Enter Donald Trump, who says, "deals are my art form." How does Trump's "art of the deal" mirror the superficial chaos and structural inequalities of neoliberalism? In the next three sections, I explore how Trump uses the "art of the deal" to create buildings, crowds, and walls. I argue that his "art of the deal" materializes and normalizes the aesthetics of neoliberal capitalism. I emphasize two of Trump's -- albeit ghostwritten -- early books because it is there that he told the American public "what he does" long before they elected him president. Regarding deal-making, Trump clearly identified his common denominator: "What I understand more than anything else is people. Deals are people, they are not deals, and if you don't have a deeper understanding of people and their motives, you can never become a great dealmaker (1997: 133)."

Trump as Artist: Dealing in Buildings

> "It's [Trump Tower atrium] larger than life, and walking through it is a transporting experience, almost as if you're in a wonderland"
> (Trump 2015: 175).

Before he assembled the crowds that chant "BUILD THAT WALL" and "SEND HER BACK," Trump was already building things. Expressing his frustration with bureaucratic processes for approving his construction projects, Trump wrote: "I just want to build. After all, that's what I do best" (2015: 345). Build he has – Trump Parc, Grand Hyatt Hotel, Trump Plaza Hotel, Trump Castle Hotel and Casino, Taj Mahal, Trump Marina, Trump Plaza of the Palm Beaches, and restorations of Grand Central Terminal, Wollman Skating Rink, 40 Wall Street, Mar-a-Lago – to mention only a few prominent examples in the contiguous United States. When discussing his buildings, Trump reiterates several key themes. They are big and dominate the skylines of Atlantic City and New York City. "The skyline of Atlantic City says TRUMP – just like the skyline of New York City says TRUMP" (2015: 27). They are beautiful and their splendor transports people into another reality. Of 40 Wall Street, Trump says, he was "mesmerized by its beauty and its splendor" and "Buildings like 40 Wall Street keep me going" and, of Mar-a-Lago, that "The house had a grandeur I didn't know existed – certainly not in the real world" (2015: 46, 62). Trump Tower atrium is "larger than life, and walking through it is a transporting experience, almost as if you're in a wonderland" (1997: 175). Trump also stresses that his buildings are to be enjoyed to bring people pleasure. Again, regarding Mar-a-Lago, he says, "I'm creating a masterpiece, something people can enjoy for years to come" (1997: 80).

Trump attributes the deal-making ability that helps him create buildings – and now public policies -- to his gut, his instincts, even his DNA, more than his intelligence. He says, "I buy buildings before I know what I'm going to do with them. It's my instinct, my sense, I know it's going to work out" (1997: 66). In his business and political deal-making, he resists established structures, saying "You can't be imaginative or entrepreneurial if you've got too much structure. I prefer to come to work each day and just see what develops" and "I'll wing it and things will work out" (2015: 1). He also refuses to become too attached to any particular deal: "I like to keep every option open in life" (2015: 293). With this approach, he underscores the chaos of neoliberal capitalism with its fluctuating global markets.

Like neoliberals, he has little patience with political-legal institutions, procedures, and regulations. As Trump relates the story of NYC's cost overruns and repeated delays in reconstructing Wollman Rink, it was "a simple, accessible drama about the contrast between governmental incompetence and the power of effective private enterprise" (2015: 317). Personal leadership was required to move beyond the legal restrictions hampering progress, and such leadership meant getting the job done through "sheer force of will," if necessary (2015: 316). By comparison, democratic processes are too fickle: "I couldn't believe that the government would allow deals to be made and then wipe them out. It's one thing to establish a new set of guidelines. It's another thing to say guess what, the rules you were playing by and basing already done deals on are dead" (1997: 10). Trump compares the dishonesty and disloyalty of public officials to gamblers, and he gives the latter higher marks: "Gamblers are honorable, in their own way – at least about gambling. When a deal is made, they usually abide by it" (1997: 32).

Of course, Trump's buildings ARE structures that shape interactions in public and private spaces in significant and lasting ways. In a neoliberal capitalist economy, which reduces many people to precarity, buildings can represent surrogate agency by influencing the environment of a community and providing speculators with profits, whether or not the project succeeds (Abu-Hamdi 2017). Beyond the needs they serve for their investors, residents, and visitors, the structures of Trump's buildings have characteristic features that symbolize a particular – white, male -- form of agency. They boast phallic designs, skyline renditions of Trump's personal credo: "Be strong, be firm, be fair. But, if someone tries to screw you, screw them back harder than they ever got screwed before" (1997: 228). On many Trump buildings, his name – TRUMP -- is displayed in large, gold, capital letters. The exterior windows of reflector glass on TRUMP Tower provide an endless mirror, a skyline reflecting pool worthy of Narcissus.[6] Extravagant interior décor associates patrons with the Trump family's glamorous lifestyle. In this neoliberal aesthetic, class, and other structural inequalities seemingly disappear: we are all entrepreneurs who could make deals if we only chose to do so (Michaels 2011).

In his autobiographies, Trump moves effortlessly between stories of beautiful buildings and beautiful women, including his wives and daughter. The lines between private and public, intimacy and community, subject and object are confused -- and confusing -- here. In Trump's neoliberal aesthetic, the public faces and spaces of buildings are dominated by clean, cold surfaces. Reflector glass fills its exterior windows and smooth marble covers their interior walls. Both surfaces make it difficult to tell what – really, who – is on the inside and the outside. Visitors are simultaneously included and excluded from the(ir) grandeur and splendor; Trump's greatness becomes theirs, but only by ambiguous association.

Aesthetic parallels emerge here with Trump's barely veiled sexual innuendos. In The Art of the Comeback, Trump follows his chapter on the Miss Universe pageant deal, "Master of the

Universe, How I Got the Beauty Pageant," with the chapter on "Trump Tower, Old Faithful," and then two chapters on "The Women In (and Out) of My Life" and "The Art of the Prenup: The Engagement Wring." In another chapter, "The Press and Other Germs," Trump writes about his fear of contamination and describes himself as a "germ freak," who (like Mussolini) hates shaking hands. Katie Johnson, who alleges that Trump raped her when she was a 13-year-old virgin, has related that no one at sex parties was permitted to touch Trump's penis without gloves (Mikkelson 2016). Yet, according to Stormy Daniels and Karen MacDougal, Trump refused protection for intercourse (CNN 2018a & b). Like Trump Tower, Trump protects his "edifice" from external contaminants; his buildings break the skyline like he penetrates women's bodies.

What ultimately seems most important here is that Trump's buildings are big and tall, a feature that George Will, who would later criticize Trump, once argued made him quintessentially American. Will wrote of Trump's plans to build the world's tallest building in NYC: "Donald Trump is not being reasonable. But, then, man does not live by reason alone, fortunately. Trump, who believes that excess can be a virtue, is as American as Manhattan's skyline, which **expresses the Republic's erupting energies**. He says the superskyscraper is necessary because it is unnecessary. He believes architectural exuberance is good for us [and] he may have a point. Brashness, zest and élan are part of this country's character" (qtd. in Trump, 2015: 341, emphasis mine)." The Trump crowds wearing "Make America Great" hats and shouting, "BUILD THAT WALL" and, more recently, "Keep America Great" hats and "SEND HER BACK" vicariously experience this "brashness, zest, and élan." They also reflect a specifically American brand of white supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal neoliberalism.

Trump as Artist: Dealing in Crowds

> "The crowds at my Rallies are far bigger than they have ever been before, including the 2016 election.
> Never an empty seat in these large venues, many thousands of people watching screens outside.
> Enthusiasm & Spirit is through the roof. SOMETHING BIG IS HAPPENING - WATCH!"
> (Trump 2018)

In <u>The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind</u>, Gustav Le Bon famously defines the "organized" or "psychological" crowd as "an agglomeration of men [that] presents new characteristics very different from those of the individuals composing it. The sentiments and ideas of all the persons in the gathering take one and the same direction, and their conscious personality vanishes. A collective mind is formed…" (2001: 13). For Le Bon, although crowds evoke so-called primitive sentiments, they cannot be reduced to primal hordes or updated tribes. In order to organize psychologically, modern crowds do not require physical proximity; shared influences – ideas, images, and leaders -- suffice.[7]

Electoral crowds, in particular, demonstrate the newfound democratic power of the people. Le Bon defines electoral crowds as "**collectivities** invested with the power of electing the holders of certain functions" (2001: 100-107; 101). Electoral collectivities are "heterogeneous crowds," because they form without regard to common features among their members. Further, their "action is confined to a single clearly determined matter, namely, to choosing between different candidates" (Le Bon 2001: 101). Although they are more than mere aggregations, electoral crowds do not display all of the qualities Le Bon associates with popular assemblies and protest movements. He writes: "of the characteristics peculiar to crowds, they [electoral crowds] display…

slight aptitude for reasoning, the absence of the critical spirit, irritability, credulity, and simplicity" (2001: 101).

According to Le Bon, the leader's prestige is crucial to create an electoral crowd. He writes that "personal prestige can only be replaced by that resulting from wealth. Talent and even genius are not elements of success of serious importance" (2001: 101). Le Bon claims that voters rarely choose a candidate from their own ranks, because such individuals lack prestige. Regarding prestige, Trump's promise to voters is to restore and sustain America's greatness, a quality he associates with business acumen and financial success – neoliberal values. Although white voters across economic classes supported Trump, he was particularly attractive to white working-class male voters. According to McAdam's, Trump offers them a compelling story of his – and American – greatness: "'Here's the way I work,' he [Trump] writes in <u>Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again</u>,…'I find the people who are the best in the world at what needs to be done, then I hire them to do it, and then I let them do it … but I always watch over them'" (qtd. in McAdams 2016). Trump presents himself to working-class white males as the boss whose investments provide good jobs and support the American economy. His red baseball cap symbolizes his ties to the white working-class; it portrays a leader who embodies, elevates, and employs them. However, such a political leader is also a product of the economic system and he, too, can easily be replaced (Lebow 2019). The media emphasis on Trump's individual achievements misses how his self-proclaimed business acumen typifies neoliberal values; it mistakes the symptom for cause (Lebow 2019).

Le Bon describes three additional techniques candidates deploy to gather support: affirmation, repetition, and contagion. As he puts it: 1)"**Affirmation** pure and simple, kept free of all reasoning and all proof, is one of the surest means of making an idea enter the mind of crowds"; 2)"the thing affirmed comes by **repetition** to fix itself in the mind in such a way that it is accepted in the end as a demonstrated truth"; 3)and, "when an affirmation has been sufficiently repeated and there is unanimity in this repetition….what is called a current of opinion is formed and the powerful mechanism of **contagion** intervenes" (2001: 72-73, emphasis mine). Together these techniques build the electoral constituency that can empower a candidate.

Trump's campaign strategies, especially online, deal in these techniques Le Bon identifies. First, affirmation: Trump's appeals to white working-class voters are a defense of the uninformed voter and a critique of policy experts (Sullivan 2016; Shafer and Wagner 2019). During the primary, Trump had 6.8 million Twitter followers, making him the most popular presidential candidate on Twitter (Lee 2016). He now has 55 million followers, though more than 60% of them may be fake, according to the software marketing firm SparkToro. This compares to estimates of 41.5% (Pence), 40.9% (Obama), and 33.7% (Warren) fake followers for other politicians (Campoy, 2018). Whatever the actual number, Trump's Tweets bypass and often directly attack quality media and detailed policy analyses (Habermas 2006). They also raise questions about the meaning – indeed, the very possibility – of factual knowledge. According to <u>PolitiFact</u>, Trump's mendacity is "extreme" even in an era when politicians are expected to lie. They report that only 5% of the claims made by Trump are true, 10% are mostly true, 14% are half true, 21% are mostly false, 35% are false, and 15% are 'pants on fire.' Combining the last three numbers shows that 71% of Trump's statements are mostly to flagrantly false (2019). "During the 2016 campaign, the corresponding figures for Ted Cruz, John Kasich, Bernie Sanders, and Hillary Clinton, respectively, were 66, 32, 31, and 29 percent" (McAdams 2016). <u>The Fact Checker</u> reports that through December 30, 2018 and the first 710 days of his presidency, Trump made 7,645 suspect

claims for an average of 39 false or misleading statements per day (Kessler, Rizzo, and Kelly 2018). Trump's falsehoods may be the least of it, though. In Harry Frankfurt's terms, Trump is not a liar, but a bullshiter (Frankfurt 2005). Bullshit makes reasoned arguments irrelevant, creating political chaos that undermines the very possibility of civic education. Another commentator writes, "Bullshit is legitimate in politics when everyone starts accepting that words uttered in political discourse do not matter anymore" (Sarajlic 2016). Not coincidentally, Trump supporters had the lowest education levels of any candidate's constituency with an unusually high number of high school dropouts (Masciotra 2016).

Second, repetition: online communication involves repeated exposure to "filter bubbles" or "your own personal, unique universe of information that you have online" (Pariser qtd. in Branstetter 2015). According to the PEW research center, political polarization has increased dramatically in the Internet era, especially since 2000. This is partly because "Websites that use algorithms and data-driven analytics aim to give you what you want politically just as Pandora and Netflix suggest music and movies you might like" (Branstetter 2015). Repetition also occurs when cable news, bloggers, and aggregators repost headline news. In April 2016, memorandum showed that Trump had the lead story 38% of the time, since declaring his candidacy. When GOP stories led the news, 68% of the time they were about Trump (Silver 2016). Those trends have continued since he was elected President (Patterson 2017). Trump "trolls" the media, making inflammatory statements to create the controversy that prompts clicks and coverage (Russell 2015). The media succumbs to Trump's trolls partly because political coverage already relies on the "horserace frames" and "status storylines" of neoliberal aesthetics (Reuning and Dietrich 2019).

Third, contagion: according to Dan McAdams (2016), "Trump appeals to an ancient fear of contagion, which analogizes out groups to parasites and poisons." Contagion is closely associated with authoritarian politics and involves mechanisms – name-calling, building walls, and, at its most extreme, practicing genocide -- to keep the good in and the bad out. In his Tweets, Trump engages in misogynist, racist name-calling: Crooked Hillary, Lyin' Ted, Crazy Bernie, Jeb Bushy, Pocahontas, and more recently, Quid Pro, Joe and Shifty Schiff.[8] Rhetoric replaces reasoned arguments here and creates a distorted reality. In 2016, when his supporters became violent at his rallies, Trump defended his "passionate" followers and offered to pay their legal fees for assault charges. As one commentator put it, "Even before he was a candidate, Trump displayed a rare gift for cultivating the dark power of a crowd" (Sullivan 2016). Recall his highly successful online "birther" campaign against Barack Obama in 2008. Then fast forward to Roger Stone's threat to "dox" 2016 GOP convention delegates by posting their addresses online. "Doxing" is a technique used to harass, shame, bully, and prompt vigilante justice. Many feared that Trump's online mob would take over the streets of Cleveland during the Republican National Convention. Fortunately, that was not the case. However, Trump supporters moved their Internet violence into the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, carrying Tiki torches and chanting "Jews will not replace us." Online and in person, Trump's slogans create "a sense of shared injury" that fuels anger, hatred, and violence among his supporters.

David Lebow compares Trump to a "rebellious punk rocker" and describes the alt-right as his "shock troops." In Lebow's words, "today, racial chauvinism, xenophobia, religious intolerance, and misogyny seem to the alt-right to bear an aura of artistic alienation" (2019: 392). He concludes that Trump's chaotic leadership promotes "agitators," "disruptive characters" who "challenge liberal democratic society through an illiberal aesthetic that releases repressed aggression" (Lebow 2019: 392). In this context, it is worth noting that Le Bon also associated crowds with "feminine,"

"child-like," and "savage" qualities, "such as impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, the absence of judgment and of the critical spirit, the exaggeration of the sentiments, and others besides" (2001: 16). Trump crowds not only exhibit this decline in civility, but also mirror the seeming chaos and underlying inequalities of neoliberal capitalism.

Trump as Artist: Dealing in Walls

> The Democrats are saying loud and clear that they do not want to build a Concrete Wall - but we are not building a Concrete Wall, we are building artistically designed steel slats, so that you can easily see through it . . . It will be beautiful and, at the same time, give our Country the security that our citizens deserve. It will go up fast and save us BILLIONS of dollars a month once completed!
>
> (Trump, qtd. in Karni and Stolbert 2019)

In Walled States, Waning Sovereignty (2017), Wendy Brown presciently featured photos of an existing steel slat wall without spikes on portions of the Mexican/US border. She also argued that globalization would prompt the building of more walls, including walls within walls, such as gated communities within settler states. Contemporary border wall projects differ from previous border walls because their supposed purpose is less to deter the armies or the armed missiles of other sovereign states than to stop the transnational flows of refugees and smugglers, drugs and guns, capital and terror. Border walls today mark the decline of sovereign nation-states and with them the Westphalian order, a decline produced by global "free" markets, universal human rights, and massive population movements. If national sovereignty is defined in Max Weber's terms, as "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of force within a given territory," then the felt need to build walled states symbolizes its continuing decline (1918: 78). These new walls also symbolize the increasing separation between sovereignty and the state or, more precisely, the dispersion of sovereign power to a variety of transnational actors. From this perspective, Trump's border wall fits well with his isolationist stance and tariff policies. As America's President-cum-CEO, he is defending the declining (white male) economic and political sovereignty of the West.

Political scientists, of course, have long known that state sovereignty requires more than government or administration. It also requires a vision of the national community (Jacobs, King, and Milkis 2019). According to Benedict Anderson, a nation-state is an "imagined community": it "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 2010: 6). That image includes the requirements that define who is and is not a citizen, whether by birthright, shared culture, or both. Even though a state may **claim** to defend universal values, such as equal rights, it cannot **be** universal in a world composed of other states. Often the "imagined community" of a nation-state contradicts and compromises its own principles of citizenship. For example, African-American slavery and Native American genocide undermined the principle of equal rights that American democracy claims to represent. When Donald Trump defends nationalism, the imagined community he and his supporters envision is a "white nation." As Adam Serwer (2017) puts it: "Americans act with the understanding that Trump's nationalism promises to restore traditional boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality. The nature of that same nationalism is to deny its essence, the better to salve the conscience and spare the soul."

Trump's plans to build a wall on the US/Mexico border should be seen in this larger historical

context. When he tweets "it will be beautiful and, at the same time, give our Country the security its citizens deserve," describes "a design of our Steel-Slat Barrier which is totally effective while at the same time beautiful," and insists that "this is not a 2000-mile concrete structure from sea-to-sea. These are steel barriers in high priority locations. Much of the border is already protected by natural barriers such as mountains and water," Trump is arguably engaged in projection (Trump 2018; Trump, qtd. in Karni and Stolbert 2019). He needs to build a spiked steel slat barrier to hold back his inner demons; it is a wall of defense against psychological abjection projected onto so-called illegal aliens from "s**hole countries." Trump's personal demons are also writ large on the American national psyche with its continued denials of racism, sexism, and xenophobia. John Dewey, whose alternative – and democratic -- aesthetic I discuss in the next section, claims that projection is never solely an act of the self; it is a collective phenomenon, a shared experience of a social environment. From this perspective, white working-class support for Trump reflects not only "economic distress," but also "white fragility" (Green and McElwee 2019). The latter describes the incapacity of many whites, especially white males, to have serious conversations about the history of racism and xenophobia in America.[9] When Trump crowds shout "BUILD THAT WALL" and "SEND HER BACK," they reinvoke the claims to white settler supremacy that undergird an imagined white America.

By eroding state sovereignty, neoliberal capitalism has made these efforts to (re)construct an imagined white nation more difficult in some respects. Democracies are – or should be -- governed by Constitutional principles, established institutions, and legal norms. The international system of nation-states also has formal properties, such as, international law and international organizations that deregulated global markets lack. The Internet is a similarly unregulated global space. Angela Nagle colorfully sums up the neoliberal blogosphere: "This culture is a blog with no posts and all comments" (qtd. in Lebow 2019: 392). From this perspective, the conspiracy theories that Trump creates to mobilize crowds and justify walls provide much-needed cognitive maps. By targeting "Others," Trump orders the chaos and reinforces the inequality of neoliberal capitalism. By closing the deal for the wall, Trump gives conspiracy-theory-as-cognitive-map material reality on the US/Mexico border. Its proposed "artistically designed steel slats" are a – symbolic and territorial -- masterpiece of white nationalism and neoliberal aesthetics.

Art, Deals, and Democracy

> "Works of art are the most intimate and energetic means of aiding individuals to share in the arts of living. Civilization is uncivil because human beings are divided into non-communicating sects, races, nations, castes, and cliques"
> (Dewey 1934: 336).

According to John Dewey, architecture is a shaping art: it "bends natural materials and forms of energy to serve some human desire." Dewey continues, "No other products exhibit stresses and strains, thrusts and counterthrusts, gravity, light, cohesion, on a scale at all comparable to the architectural" (1934: 239). He argues that "buildings, among all art objects, come the nearest to expressing the stability and endurance of existence" (Dewey 1934: 240). The "aesthetic values in architecture are peculiarly dependent upon the absorption of meaning drawn from collective human life" (Dewey 1934: 242). This absorption of meaning is not confined to architecture alone but shared by all art forms. "Art also renders men aware of their union with one another in origin

and destiny" (Dewey 1934: 282).

As we have seen, Trump uses neoliberal markets and social media to shape his buildings, crowds, and walls. As a candidate and now president, his deal-making on social media, especially Twitter, is arguably most striking. Many political experts and pundits have been blindsided by Trump's deal-making ability. One wonders why: internet technology may be new, but crowd psychology and aesthetic politics are not. Nearly a century ago, John Dewey and Walter Lippmann debated media influence on democratic publics (Schudson 2008; Crick 2009; Celmer 2014; DeCesare 2012).

In The Phantom Public, Walter Lippmann famously characterizes – and caricatures – democratic publics and electoral politics. He writes:

> But what in fact is an election? We call it an expression of the popular will. But is it? We go into a polling booth and mark a cross on a piece of paper for one of two, or perhaps three or four names. Have we expressed our thoughts on the public policy of the United States?.... The public does not select the candidate, write the platform, outline the policy any more than it builds the automobile or acts the play. It aligns itself for or against somebody who has offered himself, has made a promise, has produced a play, is selling an automobile. The action of a group as a group is the mobilization of the force it possesses (2015: 46-47).

According to Lippmann, the notion that majority rule is superior to other forms of political decision-making is a faint democratic echo of the divine right of kings. In fact, neither majorities nor kings speak with "the voice of God," though candidates may enhance their prestige by pretending otherwise. Lippmann argues that "the justification of majority rule….is to be found in the sheer necessity of finding a place in civilized society for the force which resides in the weight of numbers" (2015: 47).

For Lippmann, "the omnicompetent, sovereign citizen" is a "false ideal." While desirable in principle, voters will never be sufficiently engaged or informed to realize it (2015: 29). Stereotypes and symbols -- not principles – align democratic majorities behind "their" candidates. In Public Opinion, Lippmann claims that "systems of stereotypes" determine what voters see and who they are; stereotypes reinforce "our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights" (1945: 96). Because stereotypes are closely associated with individual and group identities, they are "highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them. They are **the fortress of our tradition**, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy" (1945: 96, emphasis mine). Effective political leaders "move a crowd" to align with a candidate by using symbols that represent familiar stereotypes. While stereotypes retain some cognitive meaning, albeit distorted and simplified, symbols "assemble emotions after they have been detached from their ideas" (2015: 37). Lippmann argues that "…where masses of people must cooperate in an uncertain and eruptive environment, it is usually necessary to secure unity and flexibility without real consent. The symbol does that" (2015: 238).

Anticipating critics of online "filter bubbles," Lippmann argues that print media – newspapers and magazines -- do little to counter stereotypes and symbols or to inform the voting public. Readers typically identify with particular news sources, and journalists follow their news organizations' established conventions. Long before Trump's post-factual politics, Lippmann challenged the perception that journalists uphold "objective standards." He distinguishes between what is "news" and what is true. The news has an episodic, partial quality; it is like a "searchlight" that illuminates passing events. Democratic institutions require a broader and steadier light source, or what Lippmann calls "an organized machinery of knowledge" (2015: 365). Professional experts

create this body of knowledge that leaders in finance, industry, and politics require. Democratic majorities cannot produce such knowledge, nor can it enlighten their leaders. According to Lippmann, "the force of public opinion is partisan, spasmodic, simple-minded, and external" (2015: 141). He concludes that "A false ideal of democracy can lead only to disillusionment and to meddlesome tyranny….The public must be put in its place, so that it may exercise its own powers, but no less and perhaps even more, so that each of us may live free of the trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd" (2015: 145).

In his commentary on Lippmann's Public Opinion, John Dewey concedes that Lippmann has "thrown into clearer relief than any other writer the fundamental difficulty of democracy" (1922: 286). However, Dewey draws a different conclusion. He argues that so fundamental a problem requires an even more fundamental solution:

> Democracy demands a more thoroughgoing education than the education of officials, administrators, and directors of industry. Because this fundamental general education is at once so necessary and so difficult of achievement, the enterprise of democracy is so challenging. To sidetrack it to the task of enlightenment of administrators and executives is to miss something of its range and its challenge (1922: 288).

In The Public and Its Problems, Dewey agrees with Lippmann that the "omnicompetent citizen" was an illusion perpetrated by earlier proponents of democracy (1954: 157-159). Democracy has so far failed to transform established customs, institutions, and practices. It has instead merely transferred power between classes.

Dewey maintained that the "physical tools of communication" already available in his day could renew the possibility of a more robust democracy (1954: 142). For Dewey, the public is more than a mere aggregation of voters; properly understood, voters represent the public and it acts through them. An informed voting public cannot be "mass-produced," but must instead be educated through communication with others in society (1954: 116). The purpose of education is never "mere majority rule"; it is how a majority becomes a majority and a society becomes a community (1954: 107). Dewey insists that "Till the Great Society is converted into a Great Community, the Public will remain in eclipse" (1954: 147).

According to Dewey, "Communication of the results of social inquiry is the same thing as the formation of public opinion…. For public opinion is judgment which is formed and entertained by those who constitute the public and is about public affairs" (1954: 177). How to improve the conditions for public debate so that democratic publics can emerge is the central problem that democracies face. Stereotypes and symbols that merely reinforce the status quo must be continually challenged by "free social inquiry" and the "art of communication." For Dewey, "The function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness" (1954: 183). Along with the press, "Artists have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception, and appreciation" (1954: 184).

I am not suggesting that Dewey, who also called for a new political economy, thought the arts alone could create the conditions for democratic self-determination. Instead, he raises the question of whether the arts can still foster sufficient distance from neoliberal realities for democratic publics to practice critical thinking and reflective judgment. The stunning success of Trump's neoliberal aesthetic has revealed the vulnerability of democratic publics to the cognitive maps that conspiracy theories provide. Yet on December 18, 2019, the US House of Representatives passed articles of impeachment that accuse President Trump of abuse of power

and obstruction of Congress. At this writing, it remains to be seen whether and, if so, when those articles of impeachment will be sent to the Senate for trial. Nancy Pelosi's decision as Speaker of the House to hold onto them until the Senate commits to a "fair process" that "would honor the Constitution" reaffirms the importance of legal institutions in democratic governance (qtd. in Faulders and Siegel 2019). The polls currently indicate that Trump's base remains steadfast despite his impeachment, or perhaps because of it.

Will the arts of democracy eventually prevail over Trump's art of the deal? The upcoming 2020 presidential race gives this question new urgency. It poses new risks of violent crowds and state surveillance becoming a new "normal" – a process compounded by space/time compression (Pariser 2012; Keen 2015; Coleman 2015). The neoliberal combination online of global information flows, expressive politics, and dispersed networks continues to undermine the collective agency of democratic publics. Jürgen Habermas addresses this last issue in "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research." Although he recognizes that the Internet has "reactivated the grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers," he now limits the "democratic merits" of the Internet to popular resistance to authoritarian regimes. In liberal democracies, "the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics." Online debates make positive contributions to public discourse only when they "crystallize around the focal points of the quality press." Habermas thinks this rarely occurs (2006; 2014). He also considers possible solutions to the pathologies of political communication today. He argues that democratic deliberation requires: 1) "a self-regulated media system"; 2) and "the right kind of feedback between mediated political communication and civil society" (Habermas 2006: 420). The first would prevent politicians from hijacking the media and, the second, would preclude media shifts in focus from political education to depoliticized entertainment. Only when these requirements are met will democratic publics be protected from politicians like Trump, who see "We, the People" as the(ir) next best deal.

Closing Thoughts Amidst Impeachment Prospects

In "The Search for a Purveyor of News: The Dewey/Lippmann Debate in an Internet Age," Nathan Crick argues that the most pressing question today is how best to facilitate critical thinking and reflective judgment, and whether these qualities are necessarily limited to experts or can be made accessible to a wider public (2009: 480). He argues that the Internet offers new spaces for experts and non-experts to experience the democratic effects of what Dewey broadly defines as "art": "…the blogosphere creates new opportunities for experts and citizens to interact in cooperative processes of inquiry, and… allows journalists and artists to generate more expansive creative networks while providing a new medium for aesthetic communication" (Crick 2009: 495). These opportunities have not been fully embraced for democratic purposes and have too often replicated neoliberal priorities of "corporate profits" and "individual expression" (2008: 495).

However, the Internet has served some democratic purposes, for example crowd-sourcing constitutions, mobilizing protest movements, and promoting global civil society (Shirky 2009; Chavez 2010; Bennett 2012; Gould 2014; Burgess and Keating 2016). In addition, democratic artworks continue to feature aesthetic alternatives that suggest different cognitive maps. In "The Smugglers: The Rationality of Political Satire in the 2014 Elections," Jamie Warner argues that

political satire smuggles in rational arguments that spoof the "infoenterpropagainment" that dominates the news today (Warner 2016). Warner analyzes comedy shows, specifically, Stephen Colbert 's The Colbert Report and The Late Show and Jon Stewart's The Daily Show. For my purposes here, Illma Gore's nude portrait of Donald Trump with a micropenis, entitled "Make America Great Again" and the public furor over it online may provide the best example of the power of political satire (Frank 2016). Viewing Gore's portrait, one could conclude that Trump's wall – like his towers and crowds – is a sexual fetish.[10] All too often, the "shock effect" of artwork like Gore's portrait, and the ensuing critical discussion, are necessary to bring an audience or a citizenry to their senses (Lara 2008).

Social media may provide as yet unrealized opportunities to build a democratic community through political communication (Umayasiri 2006; Surowiecki 2004). Although Dewey and Lippmann shared this ultimate goal, they proposed different ways to realize it. While Lippmannn relied on "the experts," Dewey had confidence that ordinary citizens could use the arts and popular culture to become adequately informed and engage critically with candidates and policies. The aesthetics of neoliberalism have also made this process more difficult by overwhelming many citizens, increasing political polarization, and reducing potential leaders to deal-makers. Today what democratic publics may need most are "bubble-bridging public intellectuals," that is, 21st-century renditions of Gramsci's organic intellectuals, who can foster the arts of democracy that Dewey envisioned (Gramsci 1999; Fraser 2017; O'Connor, 2019).

An exploration of the new aesthetic forms that could link such public intellectuals with ordinary citizens leads well beyond the scope of this article. In closing, for now, Marshall McLuhan famously said that "the message of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" (1994: 1). With Trump's campaign, presidency, and now impeachment, the online strategies are new, but the neoliberal messages -- buildings, crowds, walls -- are not. Instead, the conspiracy theories Trump creates as cognitive maps make the structural inequalities of capitalist, patriarchal, white supremacy "democracy" manifest. If George Will was correct about the "brashness, zest, and élan" of the American national character, we might hope that a Deweyan "art of organization of human activities" can still emerge to show that Trump's "art of the deal" is not normal. In these challenging times, Dewey can remind us that democracy is not a deal; it is a community in which all peoples "share in the arts of living" (Dewey, 1934: 336).

Endnotes

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2. In a 1926 speech, Benito Mussolini spoke of the complex relationship between art and politics: "That politics is an art there is no doubt…. Political like artistic creation is a slow elaboration and a sudden divination. At a certain moment the artist creates with inspiration, the politician with decision. Both work the material and the spirit…. In order to give wise laws to a people it is also necessary to be something of an artist" (qtd. in Falasca-Zamponi, 2000:15).

3. Hitler regarded propaganda as the most important political art. In Mein Kampf, he famously described the "the art of propaganda" as "understanding the emotional ideas of the great masses and finding, though a psychologically correct form, the way to the attention and thence to the heart of the broad masses." He added that "The receptivity of the great masses is very limited, their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous. In consequence of all these facts, all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan" (Hitler, 1971:61).

4. I have written elsewhere about the prominent role white power music plays in the current rise of white supremacy in western liberal democracies (Love 2016). Regarding Trump's musicality, in particular, Daniel Oore (2018) argues that he deploys lexical, kinesthetic, auditory, and most important mythic gestures continually to assemble, disassemble, and reassemble his presidential body as the body politic.

5. Sheldon Wolin (2008) distinguishes "classical fascism" with its principle of strong, hierarchical, and charismatic leadership from the "inverted totalitarianism" of today that turns elected leaders into corporate managers and citizens into consumers/clients of the neoliberal order.

6. Some psychologists argue that Trump's "grandiosity" typifies a narcissistic personality in his need to be the center of attention and win approval from others (McAdams 2016).

7. Unlike pre-industrial crowds, modern crowds have held the power to create, destroy, and shape governments, at least, since the American and French revolutions.

8. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_nicknames_used_by_Donald_Trump

9. In "Settler Fragility: Why Settler Privilege Is So Hard To Talk About" (2018), Dina Gilio Whitaker builds on Robin D'Angelo's earlier article to argue that "white supremacy is also at the root of settler fragility. The difference is that foreign invasion, dispossession of Indigenous lands, and genocide were based on (white) European religious and cultural supremacy as encoded in the doctrine of discovery, not racial supremacy. And, unlike other people of color who have made significant legal gains in the US political system, the nearly two-centuries-old doctrine of discovery is at the foundation of the legal system that still paternalistically determines Native lives and lands."

10. S E Cup suggested as much on "Unfiltered," January 26, 2019. Also, recall Stormy Daniels retort "Tiny" when Trump called her "Horseface," and the extended discussion of Trump's small hands during the 2016 campaign.

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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
January 11, 2018

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) <u>The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life</u> 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," "Lyin' 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 (Groden, 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 Trumps 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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Making It Up As He Goes: Trump's Improvisational Rhetoric and the Hyper-Rhetorical Presidency

Richard Holtzman

Introduction

President Donald Trump does not speak like a president. That is to say, he does not speak in ways that we have come to expect from presidents. The most striking characteristics of Trump's rhetoric are what he says and how he says it. The crudeness and cruelty of his language, his ceaseless hyperbolic bluster, and shameless narcissism, his consistent disregard for facts, all fall well outside the norms of modern presidential discourse. However, Trump disregards the norms of presidential communication in another significant way as well, by regularly speaking or tweeting off-the-cuff with seemingly little forethought or editorial input (see Baker 2017; Graham 2017; Jackson 2018; Tett 2016; Wemple 2018). As White House administrations institutionalized presidential speechwriting and strategic communications over the past century, meticulously-crafted rhetoric became the norm. Trump's improvisational rhetoric is the antithesis of the highly-professionalized, disciplined approach to political communication we have come to expect from the presidency. President Trump does not speak like a president because, more often than not, he is making it up as he goes.

The potential for interpreting Trump's rhetorical high-wire act is multi-dimensional. Politically, his penchant for improvising is celebrated as a badge of authenticity by supporters and seen by critics as a sign that he is unfit for office. Stylistically, the president's off-the-cuff approach can possess rare emotional potency one moment, then slip into utter incoherence the next. Psychologically, his ad hoc pronouncements have been portrayed as a strategic genius by some and pathological impulsivity by others. These and other dimensions offer intriguing avenues to better understand the meaning and significance of Trump's rhetorical tendencies. However, this essay takes the position that his reliance on improvisational rhetoric is more than a matter of politics, style, and psychology; it is a matter of governance.

Along with serving as a medium for political attacks, personal grievances, self-promotion, and miscellaneous nonsense, Trump regularly uses improvised communication to make important policy decisions. Banning transgender troops from serving in the U.S. military, declaring a national emergency at the U.S.-Mexico border, and withdrawing American forces from Syria, among other examples, were policy decisions publicly announced by the president without prior consultation or

RICHARD HOLTZMAN

communication with all relevant stakeholders, including foreign allies, key members of Congress, and administration policy advisors. In other cases, Trump made ad hoc statements about policy decisions that White House aides had to walk back or contort the truth to reverse, such as sending undocumented immigrants to sanctuary cities, a total shutdown of the southern border, and the possibility of bombing Iran's cultural sites. In both sets of cases, the president conflated rhetoric and governance, presenting his personal decision to tweet or speak as a policy action taken by the United States government.

It is tempting to discount the president's propensity for policy-oriented improvisational rhetoric as a Trump-specific phenomenon that will exit the White House with him. Perhaps, but the aberration of Trump's behavior should not blind us to the fact that the relationship between presidents and rhetoric has not been healthy for decades. While Trump's reliance on improvisation is new, rhetorical policymaking, and the tendency to collapse the distinction between rhetoric and governing are not anomalous features of the modern presidency. Instead, they are indicators of a distorted system of governance that Trump neither caused nor created, but rather has pushed to new extremes.

To illuminate the dynamics of a political order that has long normalized the "not normal," this essay develops the construct of the "hyper-rhetorical presidency" (DiIulio 2004, 2007). It does so by outlining four theses that situate presidential rhetoric within the broader landscape of contemporary American politics:

(1) The presidency is under relentless pressure to meet impossible expectations;
(2) The presidency does not possess the institutional capacity to effectively address these expectations;
(3) The presidency must maintain the perception of power and control; and
(4) In light of the three prior theses, presidents are incentivized to innovate ever-more hyper forms of presidential rhetorical behavior.

Taken together, these dynamics contextualize and explain Trump's reliance on improvisational rhetoric as a reflection of an increasingly distorted political order and dysfunctional system of governance.

To make this case, this essay first outlines the original "rhetorical presidency" construct, then turns to an articulation of the four theses that elucidate its contemporary **hyper** manifestation. This is followed by an exploration of Trump's rhetorical behavior, which presents a series of micro case studies that demonstrate his tendency toward improvisational rhetoric and offers insights into a contextual understanding of this phenomenon. The essay concludes with a discussion of the implications for governance brought about by a hyper-rhetorical president who makes it up as he goes.

The Relevance of the Rhetorical Presidency

Reflecting on his eight months as the Director of George W. Bush's White House Office of Faith-Based and Communities Initiatives, political scientist John J. DiIulio, Jr., explained that "on many occasions during my White House tenure…I found myself focusing on how what I was witnessing fortified or falsified this or that academic concept or theory about presidents and the presidency" (2003, 247). DiIulio "struggled for a dispassionate way to summarize what has happened, and to understand why" before ultimately concluding: "My best guide is The Rhetorical Presidency" (2007, 318).

According to Jeffrey K. Tulis, the construct of the "rhetorical presidency" represents "a change in the meaning of governance" (1987, 6) that "puts a premium on active and continuous presidential leadership of popular opinion" (1987, 18).[1] This amounts to a reinterpretation of the political order in which the constitutional principle of separation of powers and inter-branch policy deliberation are supplanted by a presidency-centered system and rhetoric that both amplifies and normalizes this distorted state of affairs. Tulis argues that this shift in understanding is traceable to the presidency of Woodrow Wilson, who regarded the "separation of powers [as] the central defect of American politics" because it impeded the executive's ability to effect change (1987, 119). Directly challenging the view of the Founders, Wilson argued that the legitimate source of presidential authority is not to be found in the Constitution, but rather in the general will of the American citizenry. Thus, it is requisite for presidents to "interpret" the popular will and act as its independent and singular representative in government, for "[t]here is but one national voice in the country and that is the voice of the President" (Wilson 1908, 202). This rhetorical responsibility involves speaking on behalf of public opinion, as well as shaping it; for, according to Wilson, the president serves as the "spokesman for the real sentiment and purpose of the country, by giving direction to opinion, by giving the country at once the information and the statement of policy which will enable it to form its judgments" (1908, 68).

Central to Tulis's normative concerns is that Wilson's doctrine of rhetorical leadership has not only become "a principle tool of presidential leadership," but normalized as a legitimate tool of governance (1987, 4). Accordingly, the idea that presidents not only will but **should** be practitioners of popular leadership is today "an unquestioned premise of our political culture"—its rhetorical character has come to be understood as the "essence of the modern presidency" (Tulis 1987, 4). This idea has framed our contemporary understanding of the office to the point that we can, in a very real sense, no longer conceptualize the American presidency without rhetoric. Yet, while Wilson's vision of the presidency as the unitary representative of the popular will may have saturated our political culture, the constitutional system of coequal branches created by the Framers still exists. The rhetorical presidency has simply been superimposed upon it. This amounts to a "second constitution;" that is, "a view of statecraft that is in tension with the original Constitution—indeed, is opposed to the Founders' understanding of the political system" (Tulis 1987, 17-18). The result is a convoluted political order in which the pathologies of "presidential democracy," which stands in direct opposition to the constitution and risks metastasizing into populist demagoguery, have come to overwhelm the American system of governance.

Tulis's argument is a valuable starting point for interpreting the meaning of Trump's rhetorical behavior because the construct pushes our view beyond the present obsession with the man himself. It likewise demands that we expand our analytical lens beyond the executive office as well; for, despite common assumptions, The Rhetorical Presidency is not primarily a study of presidential rhetoric, nor of the presidency.[2] Instead, "it describes a redefinition of constitutional government that places the presidency at the center of the political universe" (Crockett 2003, 469). In contrast to this presidency-centered perspective which holds sway in scholarship, media discourse, the public imagination, and in presidential rhetoric itself—a perspective Tulis dismisses as "institutional partisanship" (1987, 9-13)—The Rhetorical Presidency presents a normative argument about systemic problems within the broader American political order. The rhetorical character of the contemporary presidency both **represents** and **exacerbates** these systemic problems. Situating the presidential leadership of public opinion within this broader political order is critical; it illuminates the consequences of a presidency-centered perspective,

rather than normalizing and legitimating it. The rhetorical presidency construct, therefore, demands that we eschew interpreting Trump's rhetorical behavior in ways that further fetishize the presidency and this president in particular. Instead, it turns the focus to making sense of his reliance on improvisational rhetorical as a reflection of the contemporary political order, with the understanding that his behavior will, in turn, reinterpret, redefine, and further distort American politics in ways that will continue to be consequential after he leaves office.

Four Theses on the Hyper-Rhetorical Presidency

Two decades after its publication, DiIulio argued that "The Rhetorical Presidency has proven to be even better as a political-development crystal ball than it was as a rear-view mirror. […] Tulis was, if anything, righter than he knew concerning the presidency's possible future rhetorical characteristics" (2007, 317). While in the White House, DiIulio saw the intensification of the troubling conditions in contemporary governance that Tulis had identified. As a result, he ultimately determined that "Bush's administration is perhaps best understood as a hyper-rhetorical presidency," which he defined as "the rhetorical presidency on steroids" (2007, 318 DiIulio's bold).

DiIulio's 'insider case study' is the story of these pathologies of governance, their amplification, and his recognition that "the **hyper**-rhetorical presidency is now widely considered normal;" most devastatingly, within the White House itself (2007, 322). However, his only publication on the subject is a short essay that does not systematically outline the dynamics of the distorted political landscape represented by the notion of the hyper-rhetorical presidency, nor fully develop the construct itself.[3] DiIulio's argument has largely been ignored in scholarship on the presidency, garnering brief references but no in-depth considerations or attempts to apply his construct empirically.[4] The current challenge to make sense of Trump's rhetorical behavior is an invitation to revisit the critical insights of the hyper-rhetorical presidency and further develop DiIulio's construct.[5] To do so, this essay presents four theses that aim to articulate the dynamics of the broader political order that accompany and incentivize the hyper-rhetorical disposition of the contemporary American presidency.

Thesis 1: The presidency is under relentless pressure to meet impossible expectations

DiIulio characterizes the ethos of the hyper-rhetorical presidency as "the politics of having something to say about everything" (2004). In recent administrations, this has taken the form of the generally strategic, sometimes reflexive dissemination of a continuous stream of White House messaging through ubiquitous spokespeople, press releases, political surrogates, emails, social media posts, presidential speeches, statements, informal remarks, and press conferences (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011; Farnsworth 2018; Farnsworth and Lichter 2006; Kumar 2007). But what accounts for this ceaseless flow of presidential communication? From his perspective inside the administration, DiIulio identified the cause as the unyielding pressure to provide a presidency-obsessed media with content.[6] He explained that media is "demanding answers to things, political things, media things, global things, all day long" (2004). As a result, the reality is far from the agenda-setting-through-strategic-communications approach commonly discussed in the presidency scholarship.[7] Instead, presidential communications are largely driven by "happenstance, the bounce of chance, what's in the news…suddenly [the White House has] to

focus on that" (DiIulio 2004).

There seem to be no realistic alternatives to this state of affairs. If media inquire about the president's position on a significant foreign policy issue, such as North Korean nuclear weapons, the White House obviously has something to say. However, in today's media environment, even issues that are not directly relevant to presidential decision-making are expected to be addressed. If a self-driving Uber kills a pedestrian and the administration is asked about the president's position on specific regulations regarding self-driving vehicles, it is inconceivable for the White House to respond that he does not have one. No matter how obscure the issue, the administration is expected to speak to it and do so in a timely way. If it does not, then **that** becomes the story. Failing to do so would also cede valuable media space to the president's critics and, with it, the power to define the issue, and the president's silence, in politically advantageous ways (Dickerson 2018; Holtzman 2011). Nor can the White House take a few days to review facts and develop an informed policy position without appearing unprepared, out-of-touch, or simply unconcerned. The demands placed on the presidency by today's multi-platform, 24-hour media environment, in which several news cycles pass daily, are relentless (Cohen 2008).

What DiIulio does not discuss is that the relentless pressure to meet expectations is not only driven by media, but by American political culture. In scholarship on the presidency, "there is a general recognition…that modern presidents face a wide variety of public expectations… [which] shape how presidents are covered by the press as well as how they are perceived and evaluated by elites and the mass public" (Simon 2009, 136). Since the advent of the modern presidency during the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration, and the myriad administrative responsibilities that accompanied the expansion of the institution (Rossiter 1956), expectations have consistently followed a one-way trajectory toward the impossible (Vaughn and Mercieca 2014).

Along with the growth of institutional roles, two additional factors illustrate sources of expectations for the presidency. First, how Americans understand the presidency and what they expect from officeholders are "formed through political socialization and culture, news media, and media technologies" (Scacco and Coe 2017, 299). Research on political socialization indicates that narratives of American history, civic education, and popular culture create myths of past presidents and their heroics that result in idealized views of officeholders (Simon 2009; Greenstein 1975). Consequently, image-based expectations for how presidents should behave and what traits they should possess "are both high and exaggerated" (Simon 2009, 140). This heroic status is constructed through dramatic portrayals of past presidential accomplishments that do not accurately reflect the extent and limitations of presidential powers.

Additionally, presidents themselves are responsible for further-inflating both image-based and performance-based expectations by playing to them publicly, thereby creating a feedback loop that further exaggerates and exacerbates this untenable situation. The late Theodore J. Lowi explains, "since the rhetoric that flows from the office so magnifies the personal responsibility and so surrounds the power with mystique, it is only natural that the American people would produce or embrace myths about presidential government. The myths are validated and reinforced by popular treatments of the presidency (1985, 151). Portrayals of the office are also distorted by the perception of a presidency-centered political order and system of governance that accompanied the development of the rhetorical presidency. As a result of their reliance on the rhetorical leadership of public opinion, presidents exaggerate this perception and make policy promises that collide with the reality of the constraints in the original constitution (Tulis 1987; Crockett 2003). When combined with media demands, the pressure placed upon modern presidents by

these inflated expectations is relentless.

Thesis 2: The presidency does not possess the institutional capacity to effectively address these expectations

Modern presidents may be expected to have "something to say about everything," but the institutional capacity to do so—let alone to take meaningful policy action—simply does not exist. Recognizing the lack of capacity to address expanding responsibilities and meet growing expectations, FDR declared that "[t]he president's task has become impossible for me or any other man" (quoted in Dickerson 2017). Following the conclusion of the 1937 Brownlow Committee Report that "The President needs help," the Reorganization Act was passed in 1939, expanding the Executive Office of the President. As the power and responsibilities of the institution continued to grow, a once understaffed administration became overstaffed and presented new management problems. As John Dickerson explains in "The Hardest Job in the World," "… you might think that extra manpower would be a boon to an overextended president. But unlike a chief executive in the corporate world, a president can't delegate" (2018). As the president is ultimately responsible for every decision made by the administration, decision-making remained centralized in the West Wing.

As a result, the institutional apparatus of the administration cannot consider and address, even in the most superficial way, more than a few key issues at any one time. And as DiIulio explains, the decisions that need to be made are countless and varied:

> …the White House is always focused on something. There's always a couple of things that are sucking the air out of the room, that are consuming the Oval Office, that are driving the president's schedule… What's going on is there are a lot of things that presidents want, there are a lot of things that people who have influence with presidents want…that they cannot get even in the context of unified party government, because there's too much on his plate (2004).

He summed up this state of affairs as "sucking water out of a fire hydrant twenty-four hours a day" (2004). This was confirmed by Dan Bartlett, Bush's former Director of Communications, who explained that "we woke up every day behind. Every day was catch-up day" (quoted in Dickerson 2018).

The problem of limited capacity is not one specific to the Bush White House; it is an institutional problem that continued into the Obama administration. Jeh Johnson, who served as Obama's Secretary of Homeland Security, explained: "My definition of a good day was when more than half of the things on my schedule were things I planned versus things that were forced on me" (quoted in Dickerson 2018). Obama's chief counterterrorism adviser, Lisa Monaco, agreed that "[t]he urgent should not crowd out the important. But sometimes you don't get to the important. Your day is spent just trying to prioritize the urgent" (quoted in Dickerson 2018). As a result, the president's work is never done. "Every hour brings another demand, another obligation, another crisis" (Suri 2017, xvi). Falling well short of meeting the public expectation that presidents act as the nation's agenda-setter-in-chief, the "hyper-rhetorical presidency is one where they cannot control their [own] agenda" (DiIulio 2004).

Consequently, presidents cannot possibly address all issues. However, when a White House ignores a pressing issue, groups advocating for action and their elected representatives criticize the administration for its lack of concern and for cynically "playing politics" with the issue. For

DiIulio, this "politics as usual" explanation "would be a lot more comforting, in a sense, because it's sort of a politics we all understand" (2004). When it comes to policymaking, the reality of the lack of institutional capacity, as he witnessed it, is far more disconcerting. The presidency "cannot deliver anything resembling coherent policy formulation, legislative liaison, legislative politicking, bill passage, administrative politics, implementation, execution, performance oversight. It is impossible. It cannot be done. The institutional capacity does not exist" (DiIulio 2004).

While it must contend with outsized expectations for presidential performance, the limited capacity of the modern presidency means that it can often do little more than try to play "keep-up" with developing events, respond to critics, and attempt to maintain the appearance that everything is in control. As Lowi colorfully puts it, presidents "can only put out fires and smile above the ashes" (1985, 181).

Thesis 3: The presidency must maintain the perception of power and control

While expectations are impossible to meet, and the capacity to effectively do so does not exist, presidents have no option other than to pretend that they can play at this game and win. To do so, the White House must successfully manage and maintain the appearance of control at all times if it is to sustain political power. In the presidential democracy of contemporary American politics, "there is no power in the presidency if the public is not with him" (Murtha 2006). As a result, presidents are not powerful primarily because of Article II of the Constitution—it is the perception of power that empowers.[8] And the normalized image of the president as the center of the political order and singular representative of the American people is indeed a very real power, even if only sustained by public opinion built on perceptions. Therefore, it must be maintained.

Lowi argued that presidents need to keep and "maintain the initiative, or at least the appearance of the initiative" in order to cultivate "the reputation of power"—"The president is the Wizard of Oz. Appearances become everything" (1985, 138-139, 151). Constructing images of a presidency that is always "in control" strengthens the president's hand politically and in the policymaking arena by warding off potential criticisms and allowing for the favorable framing of events and agendas. As "the chief inventor and broker of the symbols of American politics" (Zarefsky 1986, 8), presidents are in a unique position to use rhetoric as a means to maintain this pretense of power. Through rhetorical posturing and relentless image control, presidents and their aides take every opportunity to publicly reinforce this portrayal.

The presidency also seeks to reinforce the popular myth of a presidency-centered system of governance by constantly staying "on offense" rhetorically. DiIulio points out that while few media sources follow the nuances of policymaking, "nearly everybody knows and reports whether the president has 'said something' about a given topic" (2003, 252). In today's noisy media landscape, the president saying something, anything, often matters more than what is said. The news cycle is so rapid that what the president said yesterday, let alone last week, will likely be displaced by what he says today, and possibly even forgotten. As such, in order to maintain the perception of control, the goal is to fill the space and keep the initiative (Scacco and Coe 2016).

However, according to Lowi: "The more the president holds to the initiative and keeps it personal, the more he reinforces the mythology that there actually exists in the White House a 'capacity to govern'" (1985, 151). Consequently, the constant effort to maintain this perception has transformed the Oval Office into a golden cage. By portraying the presidency as possessing an almost-omnipresent capacity for responsiveness and action, the White House further inflates

expectations for presidential performance. And while the presidency cannot accomplish in deed that which it continually trumpets in words, it has no choice but to feed this cycle.

Thesis 4: In light of the three prior theses, presidents are incentivized to innovate ever-more hyper forms of presidential rhetorical behavior

From this crucible of inflated expectations, the need to maintain perceptions, and the lack of institutional capacity to successfully manage either, emerges the incentive for presidents to turn to hyper forms of rhetorical behavior. And as the feedback loop continues and builds, what initially appeared to be innovative rhetorical strategies become institutionalized as defense mechanisms, fundamentally altering the structure of the presidency and further distorting the American political order and system of governance. Changes in presidential rhetorical behavior should therefore not be interpreted as distinct political instruments, but collectively as a developmental phenomenon. That is, each rhetorical innovation does not simply replace the previous one but rather is layered upon it.[9] This is done to meet the pressing demands of external expectations, as well as those self-created by the outsized portrayals of the office generated by past rhetorical innovations. In this way, like a spiral of addiction, growing within each rhetorical innovation is the need for its more-hyper replacement. A review of key rhetorical innovations over the past thirty years illuminates this process.

For decades, presidential communications have been professionalized and their processes of production formalized. Prior to reaching the ears or eyes of the American public, communications would regularly go through the hands of many authors, editors, and fact-checkers, and be reviewed for approval by various administrative departments and presidential aides (Collier 2018, 36). The development of formalized communications processes can be traced from the presidency of Woodrow Wilson, through the expansion of the White House during the FDR and Truman administrations, to the dominance of strategic communications offices in the George W. Bush and Obama presidencies. From this history, the one-directional development of this discipline is clear: "[T]he more power the presidency acquires, the more cautious presidents become when they speak" (Collier 2018, 204).

Strategic public relations are one of the more manageable aspects of the modern presidency. Far more challenging is negotiating with members of Congress, who are incentivized to represent the interests of those who get them elected. As a result, presidents must engage in the difficult tasks of persuasion and bargaining to pursue their policy goals (Neustadt 1960). During the Reagan administration, Samuel Kernell (1986) identified an innovation that aimed to pursue the administration's policy goals by going over the heads of those in Congress by using presidential rhetoric to persuade the people instead. "Going public," as he referred to it, "is a strategy whereby a president promotes himself and his policies in Washington by appealing to the American public for support," with the ultimate aim of pressuring Capitol Hill (Kernell 1986, 1). Empirical evidence suggests that this approach is unable to regularly move public opinion on policy issues in the administration's direction (Edwards 2003). Yet, all presidents since Reagan have continued to go public. Kernell explains that by "casting himself as the fount from which the answers to the nation's problems flow, such a president may raise public expectations to unrealistic heights" (1986, 45). Consequently, as they raise expectations for their own performance by going public, presidents, in turn, create the need for more radical means of maintaining the perception of presidential power and control.

Beginning in the Reagan administration, but reaching an apex during the Clinton administration, scholarship turned to explore the ways in which presidential rhetoric was increasingly being used on behalf of the "permanent campaign" (Blumenthal 1980; Edwards 2000). The permanent campaign involves using the tools of governing, image-making, and strategic calculation as a means to gain and hold popular support (Edwards 2000; Heclo 2000; Ornstein and Mann 2000). In essence, this involves going public for political, rather than a policy-oriented advantage. Like going public, the permanent campaign is more than a strategy—structurally, it has become "a permanent feature of the contemporary presidency" (Cook 2002, 762).

The normalization of going public and the permanent campaign demonstrate that rhetoric is more than an instrument; it is "increasingly is what the presidency is about" (Zarefsky 2004, 607). In other words, the modern presidency not only uses rhetoric, it is constituted by rhetoric. Building on Murray Edelman's claim that "language is the key creator of the social world people experience" (1988, 103), David Zarefsky maintains that rhetoric "defines political reality" (2004, 611).[10] To satisfy the need to portray the presidency as powerful and always in control, administrations increasingly turned to define reality through the rhetorical innovation of image management. Far from efforts to persuade Congress or the American people to support the president's policy agenda, the crafting of presidential image is a purely political undertaking. It is intended "to force the media to cover the pictures and narratives [the White House] provides" (Mayer 2004, 625), thereby attempting to turn its symbiotic relationship with the press to the president's advantage.

In his study of the image management of George W. Bush, Jeremy D. Mayer highlights the essential role of discipline in crafting strategic visual messages and designing sets that serve as backdrops for the president (2004). This aligns with DiIulio's observations about the Bush administration's constant struggle "to stay hyper-rhetorically 'on message' and 'on offense'" (2007, 321). Doing so and keeping the initiative by defining reality—and in particular, advantageously defining the president himself—was valued above all else. Playing to heroic expectations and pre-packaging dramatic content for media, the Bush White House delivered ready-made spectacles for public consumption. As Douglas Kellner explained at the time, in "today's infotainment society, entertainment and spectacle have entered into the domains of the economy, politics, society, and everyday life in important new ways" (2005, 62). Bruce Miroff developed this observation into the notion of the "presidency as spectacle," in which "the White House strives to present the president as a winning, indeed a spectacular, character" (2018, 231).

Just as each subsequent president adopted, professionalized, and innovated upon the rhetorical techniques relied upon by their predecessors (i.e., formalized speechwriting, going public, the permanent campaign, and image management), Kellner argues that it was Obama who mastered the art of "blending politics and performance in carefully orchestrated media spectacles" (2017, 76). And yet, the Obama White House still utilized an extensive, deliberate speechwriting process, along with the other rhetorical innovations. This is the developmental phenomenon of the hyper-rhetorical presidency: one rhetorical discipline layered upon the other, each more hyper than the last.

With these rhetorical innovations came a restructuring of the institution to meet the dynamic demands of the hyper-rhetorical presidency. In 1987, Tulis argued that the rhetorical presidency is organized to give "the president an increased ability to assess public opinion and to manipulate it." He expressed concern that the "speechwriting shop has become the institutional locus of policymaking in the White House, not merely an annex to policymaking." Consequently, "the

imperatives of rhetoric structure policy" (Tulis 1987, 185). Ten years later, DiIulio quipped that the hyper-rhetorical presidency "is organized (one might say personalized) to do this in its sleep" (2007, 323). Structurally, Bush's Executive Office of the President had "become openly organized and operated like a permanent political campaign headquarters" and, as a result, the "senior staff offices that matter most—speechwriting, communications, press secretary, and 'strategic initiatives'—completely overawe those more tethered to information gathering, policy analysis, and policy implementation" (DiIulio 2007, 322). The developmental phenomenon of turning to ever-more hyper forms of rhetorical behavior has fundamentally changed and continues to change, the institutional structure of the presidency.

When the structural emphasis on presidential communications supplants and even subsumes policy-oriented work, governance suffers. Far short of the research, deliberation, and compromise that goes into a thoughtful development of policy proposals, in the environment of the hyper-rhetorical presidency, "policy gets made (or un-made) on the rhetorical fly" (DiIulio 2007, 322). Under pressure to meet expectations and lacking the institutional capacity to do so, there is little incentive for engaging the process necessary for developing informed policies, let alone support accompanying legislation, for anything but the president's top priorities. Attempting to do so would require a great expenditure of limited presidential resources, such as time and political capital, and increase opportunities for very public failure. Instead, and in stark contrast to the strategic policy-orientation of going public, the primary objective of rhetoric in the age of the hyper-rhetorical presidency is to maintain perceptions of power and control. For Trump, this means making it up as he goes.

Trump's Improvisational Rhetoric

The Trump presidency is not the rhetorical presidency that Tulis illuminated more than three decades ago. Nor is it DiIulio's hyper-rhetorical presidency of the Bush era. Today, we are inundated with overwhelming levels of instant information, social media trolling, tweet storms, viral memes, fake news, alternative facts, deep fakes, image-based communication, and an average of nearly four connected devices per person. It is also an era of brutal partisan tribalism, colossal sums of special-interest cash, data scraping and the psychographic behavioral micro-targeting of voters, foreign influence, celebritized candidates, contested election results, and intense public frustration with the American system of governance. Consequently, the contemporary political order is arguably one of chaotic hyper-reality, orbiting around its nucleus, a chaotic hyper-rhetorical presidency.

Trump's version of the hyper-rhetorical presidency represents both continuity and change. He uses speechwriters, goes public, engages in the permanent campaign, practices image management, and is the "King of the Spectacle" (Kellner 2017, 76). What he has abandoned is the **discipline** that had been normalized by previous administrations. The historical trajectory of these rhetorical innovations proceeded along a linear path toward ever-more choreographed, deliberate, and constructed communication. Rather than following this trend toward more disciplined, institutionally-controlled messaging, Trump's rhetorical behavior obliterates it.

For example, cabinet meetings provide presidents with opportunities to construct advantageous spectacles that can be controlled and, therefore, stay on message. To do so, they may include props, such as the sign reading "CHAMPIONS" set behind Trump's head during an October 2019 cabinet meeting billed as a discussion of the administration's "successful rollback

of the abuses and the high cost of the bloated regulatory state." However, Trump's tendency toward improvisational rhetoric immediately sent the spectacle off message. It was described as a "71-minute affair that was part news conference, part stream-of-consciousness bragging and all about Trump" (Dawsey 2019). Without prompting in many cases, the president boasted about capturing ISIS combatants ("I'm the one who did the capturing"), dismissed the Constitution's "phony emoluments clause," attacked President Obama and House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff (D-Calif.), advertised his Trump Doral golf resort ("I'm very good at real estate"), bragged about filling arenas at political rallies ("I can set a world record for somebody without a guitar"), and made a number of false statements, all while his cabinet officials sat by silently, also serving as props (Dawsey 2019).

Trump's rhetoric is "neither deliberate nor cautious, and to an unusual degree, it appears to be impromptu, reactive, situational, and improvisational" (Jamieson and Taussig 2017, 621). As such, it represents a significant deviation from the trend toward ever-more disciplined, professionalized presidential communications. And yet, at the same time, this tendency to rely on improvisational rhetoric squarely aligns with the trend of presidents adopting ever-more hyper forms of communication, incentivized by the dynamics of a distorted political order that seemingly provides them with no other choice.

The following three micro case studies provide brief glimpses into Trump's use of policy-oriented improvisational rhetoric. As relevant examples maybe number in the hundreds, the few selected here are intended only to illustrate the phenomenon, rather than be comprehensive. And while the defining characteristics of Trump's rhetorical behavior can only be suggested by such a small sample, each case clearly illustrates the conflation of rhetoric and governance that is the signature of the hyper-rhetorical presidency.

Banning Transgender Troops from Service

In July 2017, Trump tweeted a decision to ban transgender troops from the U.S. military. Although he claimed that this decision was made "[a]fter consultation with my Generals and military experts" (Trump 2017), the Pentagon was caught by surprise as they had not been informed and an uncompleted policy review on the issue was in the works (Rucker and Parker 2018). Military officials were also unclear whether the tweet effectively served as an order, since it lacked specifics about implementation and the legal status of command-by-tweet has not been determined (Collier 2018, 37).

Pre-Midterm Election Tax Cut

In October 2018, in the lead-up to midterm elections, the president spent days tweeting teases about an imminent tax cut. Then, at a political rally in Houston for the re-election of Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), he announced: "We're going to be putting in a 10 percent tax cut for middle-income families. It's going to be put in next week. We've been working on it for a few months" (Trump 2018b). Neither administration officials nor members of Congress knew anything about a planned tax cut. Additionally, Congress, which would need to pass legislation to institute a tax cut, was out of session at the time of Trump's announcement and would remain so until after the election (Rucker and Parker 2018).

The Withdrawal of U.S. Troops from Syria

While as a candidate he campaigned against further American involvement in Middle East conflicts, in April 2017, Trump ordered a missile strike on Syria in retaliation for a chemical attack on Syrian civilians by President Bashar al-Assad. According to the White House, he did so after being moved emotionally by images of children who had been victims of the attack. Then, in March 2018, during a rambling speech in Ohio, ostensibly about infrastructure, Trump announced that "we'll be coming out of Syria, like, very soon. Let the other people take care of it now" (Trump 2018a). This took his national security and military advisors by surprise and the administration later issued statements clarifying that no timetable for the withdrawal had been set. When the president pushed to move on this withdrawal in December 2018, Secretary of Defense James Mattis resigned in protest and the policy decision was shelved. Then, in October 2019, at the prompting of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during a phone call, Trump announced by tweet that "it is time for us to get out of these ridiculous Endless Wars…and bring our soldiers home" (Trump 2019). His impromptu decision to withdraw as rapidly as possible once again took the military by surprise, resulting in American military materiel left behind and the abandoning of Kurdish allies to Turkish forces.

Why Improvisational Rhetoric?

As his presidency has disregarded norms in so many different ways, it is tempting to dismiss Trump's rhetorical behavior in these micro cases as a Trump-specific phenomenon. Certainly, his idiosyncrasies are part of the story. However, interpreting these examples of policy-oriented improvisational rhetoric in the context of the distorting dynamics of the hyper-rhetorical presidency offers broader insights into this "not normal" phenomenon. Like his immediate predecessors, Trump faces the relentless pressure of impossible expectations, his White House lacks the necessary institutional capacity to address these expectations, and his presidency needs to maintain the perception of power and control. As a result, he is incentivized to innovate hyper forms of presidential rhetorical behavior as a survival instinct. His reliance on improvisational rhetoric offers Trump a means to attempt to navigate these dynamics in three ways.

First, in the simplest sense, his improvisational rhetoric is able to fill space and attention that otherwise would be filled by political opponents and unfriendly media commentary. Steve Bannon, Trump's former chief strategist, reportedly refers to this tactic as "flood[ing] the zone with shit" (see Illing 2020). Media needs content and he provides it. His rhetoric falls far short of strategically-crafted speech intended to, say, go public; but it gets the president through the next news cycle. Previous presidencies have used rhetoric as placeholders to buy time while the administration frantically goes to work on policy details (Holtzman 2010). Trump's frequently-used rhetorical signature "we'll see" or "we'll see what happens" suggests the same is occurring behind-the-scenes in his White House; but the "details to follow" rarely materialize.[11] Instead, his improvisational rhetoric seems to be no more than talking for the sake of talking.

The ethos of the hyper-rhetorical presidency, according to DiIulio, is "the politics of having something to say about everything" (2004). To this, Trump has appended "…or about nothing." In defense of their argument that "presidential rhetoric is dead," Stephen John Hartnett and Jennifer Rose Mercieca point to the George W. Bush administration's efforts to "confuse public opinion, prevent citizen action, and frustrate citizen deliberation" by "marshaling ubiquitous

public chatter, waves of disinformation, and cascades of confusion-causing misdirection" (2007, 600). As a consequence, this rhetoric has "left the nation awash in white noise, literally drowning in communicative trash" (Hartnett and Mercieca 2007, 601).

Trump's improvisational rhetoric, while perhaps not strategically crafted to mystify like that of the Bush White House, has the same primary effect: the production of white noise and communicative trash. Importantly, it also contributes to the creation of a "ubiquitous presidency" that cultivates a "highly visible and nearly constant presence in both political and nonpolitical arenas of American life via engagement in a fragmented media environment" (Scacco and Coe 2016, 2). Even if the president is speaking or tweeting incoherent nonsense—flooding the zone with shit—doing so holds the initiative, keeps public and media attention, and continuously thrusts the presidency into the center of the American political order.

The second way in which the reliance on improvisational rhetoric helps Trump navigate the dynamics of the hyper-rhetorical presidency is that it is a behavior easy to practice. Unlike the onerous processes involved in professionalized speechwriting or the time, resources, skills, and expertise needed to effectively manage presidential images and spectacles, all Trump has to do is grab his phone. In this sense, it is a low-cost enterprise with considerable upside potential politically. Additionally, in a media-information environment in which truth is contested along partisan lines, there are few incentives for the president to maintain a relationship with facts or acquire an informed understanding of the issues about which he communicates. This lowers the costs even further. The ease of this rhetorical innovation renders the lack of institutional capacity faced by modern presidencies largely inconsequential. "The president needs help" is no longer true when he is relying on improvisational rhetoric.

Finally, Trump's improvisation has the effect of further personalizing the office, which is valuable currency in a presidential democracy. According to Lowi, the "personal" presidency "extends democratization by making himself more accessible—appearing to make himself more accessible—to the people" (1985, 152). Digital technology presents the presidency as more accessible than ever before (Scacco and Coe, 2016). His constant use of social media and unscripted, off-the-cuff style creates "the impression that Trump **says what he really thinks** (Jamieson and Taussig 2017, 622 authors' bold), thereby conveying a sense of authenticity. The hyper-personalization of Trump's presidency, brought about in part by his reliance on digital rhetorical improvisation, functions as a means of maintaining the perception of power and control, at least among his most intense supporters.

The Implications for Governance

Trump's policy-oriented improvisational rhetorical has a detrimental impact on the American system of governance. When the president improvises, the administration's policy officials are left to improvise as well, "scrambling to reverse-engineer policies to meet Trump's sudden public promises" (Rucker and Parker 2018). In the Trump presidency, members of the administration appear to do so reflexively, with little apparent concern for the relative rationality or potential outcomes of his pronouncements. For example, the Pentagon moved to create a "Space Force" after Trump's public comments mentioned it in March 2018; National Guard troops were dispatched to the U.S.-Mexico border after Trump, at an April 2018 photo opportunity with Baltic leaders, announced that he would be sending the military; and the Commerce Department planned for auto tariffs after Trump threatened, by tweet, to impose them on Canada, Japan, and

Europe in June 2018. The president consistently conflates rhetoric and governance by presenting his personal decisions to tweet or speak as policy actions taken by the United States government—and the United States government follows suit.

Rhetoric is not policy; and yet, the administration's policy apparatus is put into motion and guided by the whims of a president publicly communicating off-the-cuff. This lack of coherent policy process suggests organizational dysfunction within the White House (Pfiffner 2018, 164). This dysfunction is not simply the result of Trump's personal style of management and "disinclination toward formal organization" (Pfiffner 2018, 153). Instead, it is a structural consequence of eschewing the disciplined presidential communication processes that had been normalized for decades by previous administrations. Those processes included relevant parties from across the executive branch, which had the effect of uniting disparate elements of the administration. Additionally, in regard to its policy-oriented impact, former Bush counselor Karen Hughes explained that "[t]he process of writing the speech forces the policy decisions to be finalized" (quoted in Max 2001). Without such processes, the structure of the presidency is altered, perhaps beyond the current administration, and the capacity to produce coherent policy is compromised.

Tulis (1987) emphasized that the tendencies and incentives to favor rhetoric as a tool of presidential leadership were not only a matter of communication, but a matter of governance. The result of this distorted system of governance is the same as the result of Trump's reliance on improvisational rhetoric: policy incoherence. In describing the hyper-rhetorical presidency, DiIulio identified the Bush administration's "reflexive tendency to offer the presidential word as the policy deed" (2007, 319). The public's inclination to mistake speech as policy—in that "[w]hatever the president says is generally assumed to be the position of the executive branch and the policy of the United States government" (Collier 2018, 36)—is actively promoted by the presidency itself. Except, in the Trump presidency, tweets have come to replace speech and likewise "have been treated as policy by much of the nation, reflecting the degree to which whatever a president says is treated as policy—however he says it" (Collier 2018, 37). This state of affairs represents a country currently governed by "adhocracy" (Haass 2017),[12] which has been made devastatingly apparent by the president's erratic management of the Covid-19 crisis.

As previously acknowledged, there is little doubt that Trump's idiosyncrasies, and his impulsivity in particular, play a significant role in his reliance on improvisational rhetoric. However, a Trump-specific explanation is not the whole story. Instead, it is important to widen the lens and recognize how his aberrant style of governance is incentivized by the dynamics of a distorted political order organized around the hyper-rhetorical presidency. The four theses on the hyper-rhetorical presidency articulated in this essay are not insulated from one another or static; they are co-dependent and dynamic, further intensifying iteration after iteration. The current dysfunctional system of governance was dysfunctional when Trump inherited it. He will leave it more broken still and that brokenness will be normalized. The fundamental problem is not this president, it is systemic. Put another way, the fundamental problem is not that Trump improvises, but that the American polity abides it.

Postscript for Hopeful Possibility

In his Foreword to the second edition of <u>The Rhetorical Presidency</u>, Russell Muirhead references the hyper-rhetorical presidency construct and agrees that "DiIulio's point is amplified

by the presidency of Donald J. Trump," who has "refined and brought to a new extreme the elements of the rhetorical presidency" (2017, xiv). This raises questions of how extreme the rhetorical behavior of presidents can get and what systems of governance are possible in a political order organized around such a presidency.

Muirhead does not address these questions, but asserts that "Trump is the rhetorical presidency brought to its culmination, and perhaps to its breaking point" (2017, xv). This "breaking point," he suggests, would mean the overwhelming of constitutional restraints by presidential demagoguery (Muirhead 2017, xvi). But there is an alternative interpretation of how the rhetorical presidency, and its current hyper-rhetorical manifestation, could reach their breaking point. In identifying the pathology of the "personal presidency," Lowi argued that "the solution ultimately lies not in specific reforms…but in a mature awareness of the nature of the problem" (1985, xii). Perhaps Trump's rhetorical behavior is so radically "not normal" that it will finally jolt us awake, opening our eyes to how far down the road toward abnormality we have already traveled with the rhetorical presidency. And then, when the distorted American political order and its dysfunctional system of governance come into full focus, perhaps we will maturely choose to leave the rhetorical presidency behind and travel a better path.

Endnotes

1. Although fully developed by Tulis, for the original formulation of the "rhetorical presidency" thesis, see Ceaser, Thurow, Tulis, and Bessette 1981.

2. For more on common mis-readings of Tulis's rhetorical presidency construct, see Crockett 2003.

3. DiIulio is very clear about leaving the hyper-rhetorical presidency construct undeveloped and generally undefined: "Whether that concept can be refined to mean more than something like 'the rhetorical presidency on steroids'…I must leave to others" (2007, 318). Likewise, he leaves aside questions of where it came from, when it emerged, how to stop it, and so on. "What I can do, however, is briefly highlight some preliminary answers and offer suggestive examples from my own reading and experiences indicating why I think such questions about the hyper-rhetorical presidency merit further reflection and research" (2007, 319).

4. For examples of references to DiIulio's hyper-rhetorical presidency construct, see Basinger and Rottinghaus 2012; Holtzman 2010, 2011; Saldin 2011; Scacco and Coe 2016.

5. Three years before the publication of his essay, I conducted an extensive interview with DiIulio for my dissertation research, during which he discussed his nascent notion of the "hyper-rhetorical presidency." I am grateful to Professor DiIulio for introducing me to the idea and supporting my efforts to run with it.

6. Research on the relationship between the presidency and media is a robust subfield in the scholarship on the American presidency. For examples of some of the seminal contributions in this area, and in media politics more generally, see Cohen 2008, 2009; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011; Farnsworth 2018; Farnsworth and Lichter 2006; Graber and Dunaway 2017; Iyengar 2018; Kumar 2007.

7. For examples of some of the seminal contributions on presidents and agenda-setting, see Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Canes-Wrone 2001; Cohen 1995; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2004; Kingdon 1995.

8. This argument regarding the perception of presidential power has perhaps been made most succinctly by the late U.S. Representative John P. Murtha (D-PA): "You know it's an interesting thing when you think about presidents, you think of how powerful they are. The presidency is only a perception of power. There is no power in the presidency if the public is not with him. (…) So an awful lot of what happens…has something to do with the public relations and the public perception of what goes on" (2006).

9. This idea of rhetorical innovations as layered constructions of a developmental phenomenon is borrowed from an essay by Stephen Skowronek (2009), in which he addresses the development of presidential power. Particularly relevant is his notion that "constructions of [presidential] power superimpose themselves one on another, each implicated in the next" (2009, 2074). This developmental perspective mirrors that of Tulis, who uses similar imagery to explain how the "second constitution" of the rhetorical presidency does not displace but is instead superimposed upon the original Constitution.

10. Concerning the defining of political reality, Zarefsky explains: "The definition of the situation affects what counts as data for or against a proposal, highlights certain elements of the situation for use in arguments and obscures others, influences whether people will notice the situation and how they will handle it, describes causes and identifies remedies, and invites moral judgments about circumstances and individuals" (2004, 612).

11. For more on Trump's use of the phrases "we'll see" and "we'll see what happens," see Cillizza 2019; Keith 2017; Lucey and Thomas 2017; Nussbaum 2017.

12. "Adhocracy," according to Richard Haass, former State Department Director of Policy Planning and advisor to Secretary Colin Powell, is a style of governing that "favors the unstructured and at times downright chaotic" and "offers a sharp contrast to more formal styles of decision-making, in which participants with a legitimate stake in the outcome are included and others excluded; options are rigorously weighed in memos and then discussed at carefully run meetings; and those meetings in turn lead to decisions followed by clear assignments, closely monitored execution, and periodic review" (2017).

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The Frailty of the Strong Executive

Peter D. Ore, Andrew P. Davis

"The same mind that creates the Corporation in society creates the bureaucracy in the state."
(Marx 1843)

Introduction

In 2018, more countries became "less democratic" than "more democratic" for the first time since 1979 (Lührmann and Wilson 2018). This autocratization has been driven, in part, by a long-term deterioration of traditional democratic constraints on executive power in judicial and legislative bodies (Pérez-Liñán, Schmidt, and Vairo 2019). Not coincidentally, this occurred alongside the construction of a transnational capitalist economic system, engineered by financiers and underwritten by central banks (Block 1996). As this project neared its feverish peak in the late 1990s, Peter Evans worried that, while states were unlikely to be totally "eclipsed" as they compete to retain and cultivate corporate citizens, "meaner, more repressive ways of organizing the state's role [in the global political economy] will be accepted as the only way of avoiding the collapse of public institutions" (1997: 64).

Evans held out hope that broadening the discourse on the possibilities of state action could lead to a more "embedded" social democratic future. But ultimately, he deemed the lean, mean state the more likely outcome. With business elites as their core constituency, Politicians would be rewarded for "restructuring the state's role to activities essential for sustaining the profitability of transnational markets" (ibid: 85). This means repurposing or demolishing the redistributive mechanisms of the mid-century administrative state -- Evans notes health and education access, among others -- in favor of "essential business services and security (domestic and global)" (86). In the United States, reality has come to approximate this alternative, as the ongoing deconstruction of social welfare, dramatic expansion of domestic and international surveillance infrastructure, militarization of police, and opening of public space to private extraction become ever more deeply woven into social life.

Evans did not comment on the concrete organization of such a state, but it seems clear that its changing role and constituency would bring concomitant changes in its shape, size, and structure. In our view, in an era of untrammeled capitalism, we should expect the organizational form of the state to come to resemble the everyday despotism of the firm. In this sense, our argument is a logical extension of Michael Burawoy's (1979, 1985) insights about the relationship between large scale shifts in political economies and the politics of the shop floor. Indeed, since Jimmy Carter's 1978 Civil Service Reform Act, the U.S. Federal government has been reorganized in its

daily administrative structure to more effectively maintain the consent of its core constituents -- large corporations, investment banks, and the ultra-rich. Among other consequences of this process, which we describe in more detail below, is an increasing reliance on executive power, both as an independent branch of government and as an organizing principle. Tracing changes in the organization of the executive branch over this era, we read the Trump administration's unprecedented attacks on their own administrative capacity as a perverse consequence of a bipartisan, decades-long pursuit of an enterprise state.

From the perspective of enterprise state advocates, deliberative control over state bureaucracy is, at best, inefficient, and at worst, an unconscionable "politicization" of state functions. On the other hand, too much bureaucratic autonomy may reduce the state's sensitivity to the demands of private actors, themselves often executives of complex bureaucratic organizations ("job creators" requiring "government services"). The enterprise state, lean and mean, takes a third course between democracy and bureaucratic autonomy, one characterized by executive supremacy.

Ongoing neoliberal administrative reform has connected ever tighter circuits of information, decision-making power, and resources around ever smaller numbers of officials, ending finally with the Chief Executive of the United States. But this organizational form is inherently unstable. There are no real checks on Trump's authority to attack his own administration because a fundamental feature of executive power under neoliberalism is the privilege to check or contradict the (relatively autonomous) interests of the organization itself; indeed, this is the source of the executive's perceived efficiency.

After describing Trump's unprecedented attacks on the administrative state, we argue that he could not have been as successful or done so with impunity without a generation of neoliberal reforms in the executive branch. The enterprise state relies on executive control to protect policies favoring upwards redistribution from popular demands, discipline career bureaucrats, and, in general, help guarantee the state remains responsive to market hegemons. This "monocratic bureaucracy," we claim, is a deeply ingrained tendency of Liberal governance. Yet, in reaction to crises of overproduction, financial speculation, violent resistance, and ecological collapse over the last forty years, this tendency has hypertrophied into a core feature of the ruling superstructures of the United States political economy.

2. The Hollowing Out of Federal Administration Under Trump

The Trump administration is not normal. Among state bureaucrats, Marx writes, "the end of the state becomes [their] private end: a pursuit of higher posts, the building of a career." And, in the United States, this interest is often at odds with the particular policy agendas of presidents of either party. The first two presidential administrations of the 21st century, in particular, were fully aware that the independent material interest in state administration that is essential to bureaucracy also frustrates executive control over it. But G.W. Bush and Obama, and the two presidents before them, were far less willing to renounce careerists than Trump. Their administrative strategy, unlike Trump's, conceived of these paper-pushers as the circuits through which executive decisions become concrete action. For reasons we can only speculate about here, Trump and his allies are abnormal in that they have chosen not to exercise that power. They have chosen, instead, to compromise it.

The Trump administration has carried out its hostile takeover with two main tactics: antagonistic appointments and attrition. Perhaps most damaging, administrative positions of

public importance have been systematically and deliberately filled with individuals without the experience or training to take on the formal responsibilities of the position. Moreover, many of these nominations have centered on politicians, lawyers, and entertainers that have built careers as antagonists to the agencies they now lead. Texas Governor Rick Perry served as Secretary of Energy from 2017 to 2019 and oversaw the administration of U.S. nuclear power facilities, security, and billions of dollars in science and energy research, and was the first non-scientist to have this post on a permanent basis since 2005. Scott Pruitt, a serial litigant in suits against EPA as Oklahoma Attorney General, was initially chosen to lead the agency before being replaced by Andrew Wheeler, an oil and gas lobbyist. Eugene Scalia, son of the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, infamous for defending Wal-Mart in labor disputes, is now the Secretary of Labor. While this recalls tactics embraced by the Bush administration, even the pretense of pursuing effective bureaucratic leadership is gone under Trump, as these administrators pursue policies that deliberately obfuscate and contradict the legislative purpose of their bureaus.

Second, the administration has had a remarkable amount of turnover in important positions. As Figure 1 illustrates, the Trump administration's turnover among senior-level officials by year 3 is atypically high (81%) -- over 10% higher than even the Reagan administration at the same point (70%) (Dunn Tenpas 2019, Brookings 2020). In addition, this turnover is more meaningful than can be conveyed in a simple quantitative comparison of turnover among recent administrations at comparable points. Many important positions have seen serial turnover with officials being replaced three or more times, as described below in Figure 2.
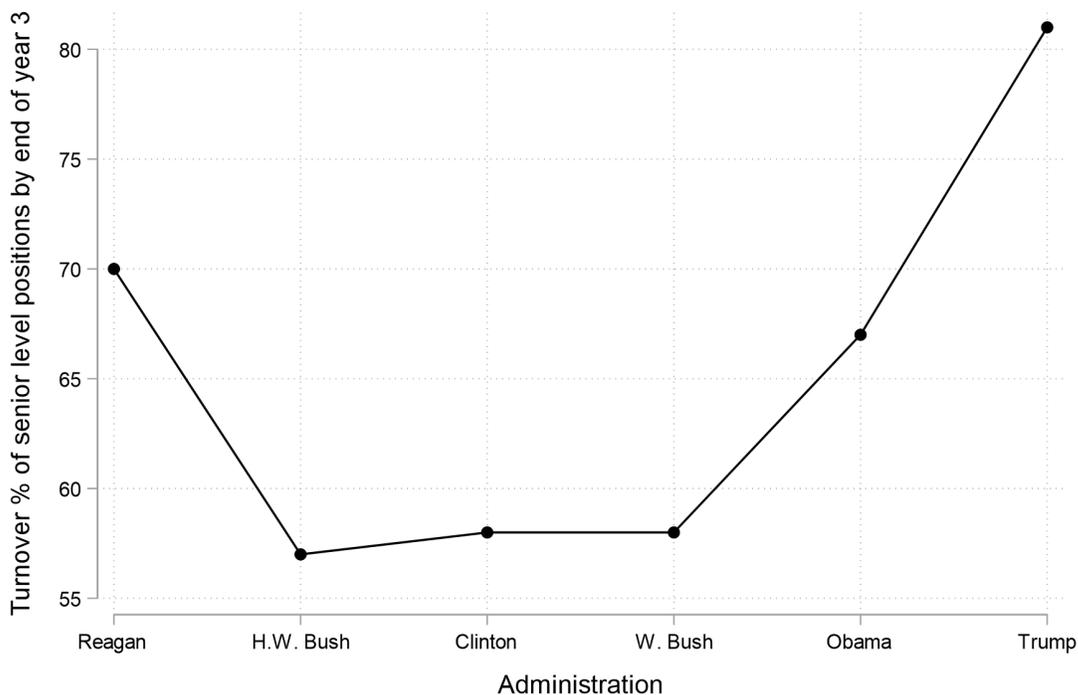
Figure 1. Plot of senior-level turnover in recent Presidential administrations

Source: Data are from Brookings report on "Tracking turnover in the Trump administration" https://www.brookings.edu/research/tracking-turnover-in-the-trump-administration/
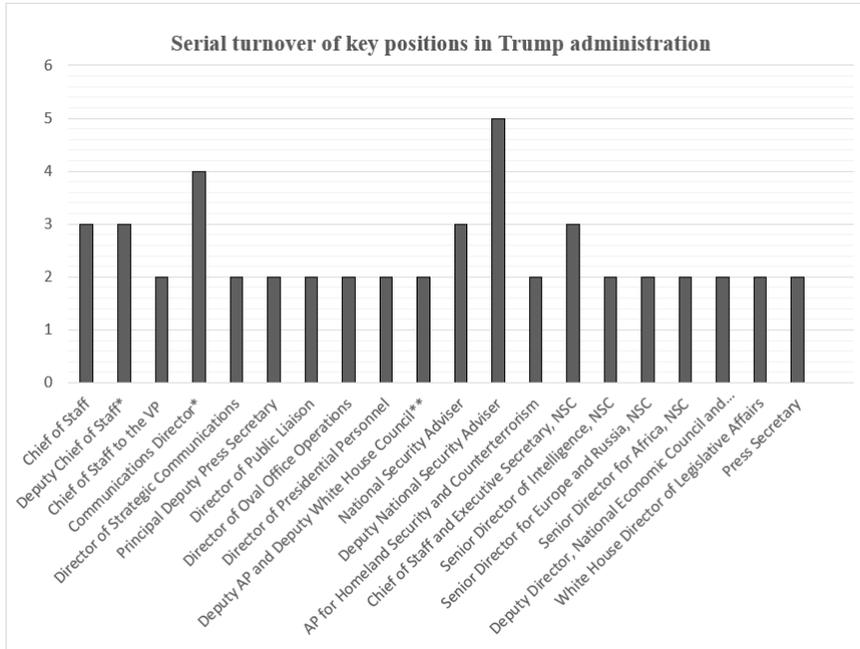
Figure 2. Serial turnover in the Trump administration (data source: Brookings)

Moreover, this attrition has not been matched by appointments of new personnel. For example, the administration has failed to staff important professional positions, notably in the U.S. Department of State. Needless to say, this level of turnover has significant impacts on the capacity of the state bureaucracy to function on a day-to-day basis, leading to significant administrative delays and well-publicized miscommunications.

Exacerbating the effects of antagonistic appointments and dramatic constriction of organizational capacity, the administration has replaced Senate-appointed posts with temporary "acting" positions that help the administration evade legislative oversight completely. Trump reportedly prefers acting positions to Senate-appointed posts as the former gives him the flexibility to quickly replace professional bureaucrats who might push back against his political agenda in favor of loyalists (USA Today 2019 https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/ 2019/07/12/ trump-administration-run-numerous-acting-and-temporary-leaders/1703198001/). High profile positions such as the Chief of Staff, Defense Secretary, Secretary of Homeland Security, U.N. Ambassador, FEMA administrator, and Director of the Office of Personnel Management, among many others, have recently or continue to be led by officials in "acting" roles, rather than Senate-appointed posts.

Rather than co-opting or neutralizing career bureaucrats, the Trump administration maintains control by channeling authority to loyal advisors and family members and ruthlessly weeding out dissent and rewarding those with a long history of loyalty. Brooking Institute data on turnover in the Trump administration indicates that a disproportionate number of individuals who changed positions due to being "promoted" were individuals who worked for the pre-2016 Trump Organization or Trump presidential campaign (Brookings 2020). The appointment of individuals with family and personal ties to important positions has led some observers to characterize the Trump administration as a patrimonial system of authority (Riley 2017), in stark contrast to the

Weberian "rationality" of enterprise governance. This has earned the Trump administration the loud criticism of leading theorists of the enterprise state.

Max Stier, president of the Partnership for Public Service, an important enterprise state advocacy group, has appeared in numerous news reports decrying the administration's tactics. In an interview for the New Yorker, Stier worried that the turnover and clientelism of the Trump administration represents a "resurgent spoils system. It is the breaking of an organization that was already under stress" (Osnos 2018). Brookings Institution fellow Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, who produced the widely used data analyses of Trump administration turnover (also cited above), wondered in an NPR interview why Trump-the-businessman doesn't understand the advantages of career bureaucrats, since, "In the private sector, corporations are all about how to retain their best people" (Naylor 2019). At the beginning of Trump's term, Stier warned that the executive branch is far more complex than the "family business" Trump is accustomed to running (Stier 2017). Trump's implicit response has been to transform the executive branch into a family business. Ironically, it is unlikely he could have gotten so far without decades of advocacy by Stier and his predecessors for a leaner, meaner, enterprise state.

Though much important analysis remains to be done, the Trump administration's motives are relatively clear. Deconstructing "the administrative state" has been a project of conservatives and business interests (including congressional Republicans) for a generation and more (e.g., Epstein 2008). And, despite supposedly robust American political institutions, legislative requirements, and clear threats to health and safety, there appear to be few, if any, bureaucratic or legal mechanisms to prevent his actions. With little mystery as to motive and means, then, we turn to an essential question: why is the contemporary American state so brittle? In short, our thesis is that, while Trump is not normal in his disinterest in co-opting the administrative capacity he inherited from his predecessors, his ability to contravene the letter and intent of the federal policy is intrinsic to the design of the enterprise state. The enterprise state, in turn, is an organizational form emerging as an element of elite reaction to the pressures described by Evans in 1997: heightened competition among states over transnational flows of people, money, and capital.

3. Beyond the Antinomy of Public and Private Administration

Liberal democracies are designed along the lines of Madison's phrase: "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition" (Madison, Federalist Paper 51). But stoking a multitude of potential political and social interests can make it difficult to get things done (Wolfe 1977). Indeed, ineffectiveness is seen as a major disadvantage of legislative bodies in the United States. For instance, despite the increasing levels of political polarization and ideological entrenchment, low levels of congressional approval are linked to Congressional gridlock (Newport 2018). Studies have found that public organizations in modern states have higher levels of formalization and standardization than private firms (Meyer 1979), although it is unclear whether formalization is related to the experience of red tape (Bozeman et al. 1992). More importantly, individuals perceive public institutions to be more inefficient and costly than private institutions.

Critics of bureaucratic theory have explored the irrationalities that arise from rational-legal bureaucracy. In the process of developing routine and impersonal decision-making structures, organizations dramatically increase the number of steps between decision and execution. "Red tape," or the regulatory checks that accompany processing decisions in institutions, can prevent the timely execution of tasks and engender a great deal of frustration (Merton 1940; Gouldner

1952; Thompson 1961; Kaufman 1977; Scott and Pandey 2000). While the problem of whether red tape disproportionately affects public institutional performance compared to private firms remains an empirical question, it seems clear that the public associates a greater deal of red tape to public institutions (Bozeman and Loveless 1987; Bozeman et al. 1992). This perception has been the ideological grounding for bureaucratic reform initiatives that have become hallmarks of the enterprise state (Chomsky 1969).

Self-identified libertarian and conservative critics, in particular, point to public bureaucracy as the source of this popular discontent. The discontent is justified, they argue, because the Federal bureaucracy has accumulated unaccountable and obscure political powers. And yet, for these critics, private bureaucracies, culled by the cruel but judicious hands of the market, are naturally superior entities that should either replace or be models for public administration. Unsurprisingly, the preference for private bureaucracy is particularly strong in business management scholarship, where the "visible hand" of corporate administration is elevated to a historical force for public welfare and economic development (paradigmatically, see Chandler 1977), while public administration is characterized as an inefficient (or pernicious) means of harnessing the (generally assumed) human instinct for utility maximization, resulting in "rentierism" and other "inefficiencies."

As Marx writes in his notes for a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, the antinomy of these institutions is superficial. Public and private bureaucracies are better understood as codependent in form and function, forming a dialectical ellipse as each type of human organization continuously reshapes the other. Marx observed that German industry "struggle[d] against the existence of its premises" in its opposition to state bureaucracy in the early 19th century. If anything, this observation applies more directly to the history of the American corporation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The modern corporation began as a splinter of the state and soon grew into a form of privatized sovereignty (Roy 1997). The modern administrative state, in turn, rose alongside and became a constitutive element of the monopoly stage of capitalism (Baran and Sweezy 1966). As we show in the following section, by the end of the Carter administration, the transformation to a neoliberal global economy was accompanied by a complementary reorganization of the American state.

At mid-century, industrial giants and the bureaus of the American state had grown up into grudging partners in the construction of a renewed global capitalism. In the United States, this troubled relationship between public and private administration was fueled by seemingly indomitable economic growth. As public and private administrative apparatuses grew formidably large and comprehensive, popular consent was secured through the internal labor markets and moral economies made possible by intergenerational relationships between management and workers (Burawoy 1979).

The organizational ideology of the midcentury American state, triggered by a Great Depression and deeply conditioned by wartime economic policy, can be summarized, albeit crudely, in the concept of command and control management. Reflecting the fordist premises of the era, command and control maintains a careful division between those responsible for concept and execution (Braverman 1974), enforcing a quasi-militaristic logistical structure on the organization of the state. Indeed, this logic could be read into much of the legislation of this era, as in many instances, the Federal government literally commanded and controlled industry. Examples include the price controls of WWII, the now much-publicized Defense Production Act of 1950, and the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. The basis of legitimacy for

such administration was in the simulated pluralism of congressional lawmaking, which was, in fact, deeply stratified along the lines of race, class, and gender (Katznelson 2005).

As readers of Fast Capitalism are well aware, this arrangement would not hold. As the rest of the world emerged from the ruins of imperialism and industrialized warfare, the material and ideological bases of the postwar American political economy began to erode away. The racially segmented class compromise of the era began to fall apart as the Civil Rights movement won expanded access to the New Deal welfare state in the Great Society programs of the 1960s (Quadagno 1994). By the 1970s, the rise in the rate of profit was stagnating in a swamp of global overproduction (Brenner 2003), and the global south had entered the world stage demanding a more just global political economy (Slobodian 2018). In reaction, economic and political elites struggled to direct the global political economy such that its environmental, social, and economic costs would be absorbed by workers, consumers, and citizens, rather than those at the levers of power (Harvey 2005, Domhoff 1967). The consequences of this movement towards a leaner, meaner state would come to be associated with its dominant political and economic theory: neoliberalism.

It is, perhaps, a marker of its success that the prevailing association with neoliberalism is "small government" when, in fact, its rise to global hegemony has been accompanied by an unprecedented expansion in both international (e.g., the World Trade Organization, founded in 1995) and national government administrative power. As a recent wave of scholarship on the history and theory of neoliberalism shows (Cooper 2017, Briebricher 2018, Slobodian 2018), neoliberal theorists and the elites who cited them were not so much interested in dismantling the administrative state as in repurposing it. Rather than the size of the Federal government or its programs, for our purposes, the key distinction between the neoliberal state and the Keynesian models that preceded it is a structural shift away from the bureaucratic autonomy required by command and control policies. It is worth emphasizing that, rather than a hollow or weak state, these elites recognized that a strong state was (and remains) necessary to insulate markets and private wealth from these threats (Biebricher 2018, Slobodian 2018).

In general, advocates of neoliberalism have accomplished this reorientation of the state by subordinating public bureaucracy to private bureaucratic forms and organizations. Without necessarily diminishing it (and often by substantially expanding it), the neoliberal model of governance disciplines bureaucratic power to a market logic by increasing public use of private contractors, competitive mechanisms for resource allocation, and evaluating performance based on "metrics" such as cost-benefits analysis, or "customer satisfaction" measures (e.g., Fountain 2016), among numerous other well-documented organizational forms and procedures. In practice, this has meant the corrosion of legislative control over government bureaucracy, especially as it pertains to basic elements of capitalist political economy -- the maintenance of markets in land, labor, and money (Somers and Block 2014).

This hegemonic shift preoccupies much of contemporary critical scholarship. Its characteristics and consequences need not be enumerated in greater detail here. For the purposes of this essay, we instead focus on sketching its consequences for the organization of the executive branch. These consequences sum, in our view, to the enterprise state, an increasingly salient organizational form in contemporary governments, and one that is uniquely vulnerable to hostile takeovers.

4. Enterprise State and Executive Power

Although the beginning of the neoliberal period is justifiably associated with Ronald Reagan, economic historians mark the famous "Volcker shocks," anti-inflationary measures taken by Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker in the last year of Carter's administration, as the endpoint of the Keynesian postwar economy (Kotz 2017). These constituted major structural shifts in the American economy that would reshape social life for a generation and more. Less often remarked upon were nearly simultaneous shifts in the concrete organization of the American state. After successfully campaigning on civil service reform in the wake of the Watergate scandal, the Carter administration undertook the first recognizably neoliberal organizational reforms of the executive branch itself with the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978. As in previous eras, new state and economic organizations were born from the same womb, enemy brothers set to reshape the political and economic landscape of the United States.

The Civil Service Reform Act self-consciously re-formed Federal administration in the image of corporate organization, implementing performance appraisal, merit pay, an erosion of employee appeal rights, and the tripartite division of the old US Civil Service Commission into a human resources department (The Office of Personnel Management), a Merits Systems Protection Board (MSPB), and the Federal Labor Relations Authority (FLRA) (Dempsey 1979). Perhaps the most consequential reform was the Senior Executive Service (SES), which had the explicit intention of disembedding career executive administrators from their agencies by granting them special privileges and new vulnerabilities.

The SES put a cap on executive salaries, implemented performance rewards, and privileged political appointees with the authority to move career executives to different bureaus and positions (Rosen 1981). The SES also shifted top executives' (and only top executives) rank out of their position and into their person, making them nominally independent of their function within an agency and valued on the basis of their personal qualifications -- a distinct "service" of the most senior bureaucrats in the executive branch, newly accountable to their superiors (typically political appointees) rather than their subordinates.

The act was largely opposed by Federal personnel (Lynn and Vaden 1979) but found strong support among business interests, including the Business Roundtable and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (Dempsey 1979). Former career administrators were particularly concerned that these reforms would undercut the independence of career bureaucrats since they made them newly vulnerable to the whim of political appointees (Rosen 1981). Others complained that these reforms naively took corporate models as the superior form of organization for government administration (Rosen 1978, Thayer 1978). Beyond their adoption of corporate "incentive structures" and institutional strategies for channeling and suppressing employee grievances (Edelman, Uggen, and Erlanger 1999), these reforms carried with them a new concept of leadership that has become a central characteristic of the enterprise state; a disembedded -- that is, systematically alienated from institutional context -- form of executive control that attempts to maximize both the independence of executives from the interests of their subordinates and their exposure to rewards and punishments for organizational performance.

These reforms and more like them would diffuse across time, space, and a global network of states (Lah and Perry 2008). Ten years after the Civil Service Reform Act was passed, the Brookings Institution and the American Enterprise Institute spearheaded a new reform initiative chaired by none other than Paul Volcker -- the National Commission on the Public Service (also

known as the "Volcker Commission"). Appalled that "too many of the best of the nation's senior executives are ready to leave government, and not enough of its most talented young people are willing to join," the Commission sought to make government service newly attractive by suggesting improvements to "quality and performance at the senior administrative and professional levels of the Federal government" (National Commission on the Public Service 1989: 1-2). Among other things, the Commission recommended across-the-board pay increases, but only with an equivalent level of employment cuts in areas "no longer serving the public interest," the number of political appointees, and executive bonuses. Stringency in executive bonuses, in particular, was supposed to guarantee bonuses were used as performance incentives, rather than "hidden pay raises."

Very few of the Commission's recommendations were met with substantive responses, though it seems to have had an impact on public discourse (Cleary and Nelson 1993). Exceptions include a significant pay increase in the years following the Volcker Commission report (Aberbach 1991). Later reforms under the Clinton administration would take up the theme of reducing the size of the executive branch and making executive administrators more autonomous from their agencies.

Under the leadership of Al Gore, the Clinton administration generated a series of reports and initiatives which echoed many of the Volcker commission's recommendations. Above all, Gore's analyses advocated the use of ``market dynamics" (Gore 1993), and various cost-cutting measures to produce a "Smaller, Better, Faster, Cheaper Government" (Gore 1995). Without going into too much detail, the main effects seem to have been a reduction in the Federal workforce and the further elaboration of the ideology and the organizational practices initiated by Carter's original reforms, especially the emphasis on disembedding executives from their bureaus. By the end of the Clinton administration, the number of executive branch employees had declined to fewer than 1800, far below the 2100-2200 range more characteristic of the 1970s and 1980s.

Throughout the 1990s, Federal spending had declined linearly with the number of executive branch personnel. This trend reversed course abruptly after 9/11, but the ratio of spending to raw organizational size had altered. Subsequent increases in Federal spending over the long war on terror and the 2008 financial crisis were paired with smaller increases in the number of executive branch employees, relative to previous years. By 2009, Federal spending had risen to unprecedented heights, but the number of employees had barely exceeded 1973 levels. Thus, the Bush and Obama years saw the layering of a mean state -- a massive surveillance and national police apparatus under the Homeland Security Office, paired with a historic bailout of financial interests -- over the lean state of the Clinton years. By the time Trump took office, the 21st-century enterprise state had come into full flower.

The overall effect of these forty years of organizational transformation has been to make the executive branch more sensitive to external control, just as the overall power and authority of the executive branch has reached unparalleled heights. The Senior Executive Service (SES), now intrinsic to the organization of the Federal government, has made the executive branch highly sensitive to regime shifts. Not only has the number of political appointees increased, the SES incentivizes career bureaucrats to act more like political appointees. Senior executives, whose career prospects have been detached from the intra-bureau ranking system, are encouraged to act independently from the interests and technical requirements of their bureaus. Moreover, executive bonuses are given on metrics of success, which are deeply conditioned by the political priorities of the current administration. Finally, Carter's original legislation enabled appointees to neutralize inconvenient senior bureaucrats by shuffling them into ignominious positions.

While some of the more important consequences may not have been intended (we doubt the elite politicians who crafted these reforms considered the possibility of a reality T.V. president), this form of organization was won through years of careful planning. Disembedding senior bureaucrats from their organizational context is an idea taken straight from the corporate world, where such measures are thought to increase executive flexibility and exposure to rewards and punishments for firm performance. Executives are supposed to be able to make intuitive decisions based on "signals," and their genius is supposedly validated (or not) by the blessings of the market. Corporate theorists view executive turnover as not necessarily a bad thing for firm performance, as new leadership is an important means of catalyzing creative destruction. The enterprise state is supposed to simulate this by exposing senior bureaucrats to the whims of political appointees and, ultimately, the President. It should be no surprise, then, when these reforms turn out to be the perfect set up for a hostile takeover.

In summary, the enterprise state is characterized by a concentration of political power in the executive branch and a reorganization of that branch along corporate lines. The reorganization involves a further centralization of power around the head of state, as bureaucratic leadership is disembedded from its organizational context and bound more closely to the head of state. In broad terms, this "monocratic" organizational structure has long been favored as "the most rational known means of exercising authority over human beings" (Weber 1978: 223). Indeed, for Weber, the only alternative to "monocratic bureaucracy" is "dilettantism" (ibid). Weber, the much-vaunted theorist of rational organization, thought only one entity could escape that iron cage -- the capitalist executive.

> Superior to bureaucracy in the knowledge of techniques and facts is only the capitalist entrepreneur, within his own sphere of interest. He is the only type who has been able to maintain at least relative immunity from subjection to the control of rational bureaucratic knowledge. In large-scale organizations, all others are inevitably subject to bureaucratic control, just as they have fallen under the dominance of precision machinery in the mass production of goods. (Weber 1978: 225)

Weber's estimation of the executive as the only true subject under capitalism is a common refrain in liberal theory. While Locke's definition of property is usually read as an interaction between labor and the soil, it is, in fact, the **direction** of labor -- servants, women, and children -- that constitutes the original act of appropriation in his <u>Second Treatise of Government</u>. Hayek, in his essay "The Use of Knowledge in Society," famously argues against centralized planning on the theory that, since individual sellers have special knowledge of local circumstances, only they can interpret the meaning of price signals. These theorists tend to emphasize the equality of sellers in the marketplace. But, as Marx reminds us, any expansion of enterprise implies a proportional expansion in the despotism of production. This is certainly implicit in any regime of private property. Our contention is that it also applies to capitalist public administration in the neoliberal era. The designers of the enterprise state did not foresee the disastrous future they would help create, but Trump's abnormal turn toward despotism was nonetheless made possible only through their reforms.

5. Conclusion

Seeking to repurpose the regulatory state developed through legislative enactments in the post-war era, administrative reformers have turned increasingly to an "enterprise" bureaucracy led by

disembedded executives. These reforms laid the groundwork for the abnormality of the Trump administration. Just as neoliberal policies caused widespread disenchantment with the American political establishment, executive administration has been significantly insulated from deliberative control. This has provided both the motive and the power for the Trump administration to undermine its own source of power in the executive branch. The Trump Administration's unprecedented dismantling of the administrative capacity of the executive, however unusual, is thus a predictable outcome of a generation's worth of neoliberal influence over the American state.

Capitalist democracies exist in an unstable system of contradictions and compensatory institutions. As one such compensatory institution, the enterprise state disembeds executive power as a way to address two fundamental contradictions of liberal democracy: how to maintain a regime of private despotism with a publicly funded state, and the state as both a necessary condition for markets and a threat to capitalist autonomy. As an extension of market logic to public administration, disembedded executives are more exposed to the preferences of the current administration and more capable of disrupting the organizations they oversee. This limits their capacity to implement or maintain legislative mandates, especially if they contradict the preferences of the President and their appointees, just as it enhances their ability to contradict the individual and collective interests of their subordinates. The neoliberal preference for a "monistic" state (Biebricher 2018) has been, to a significant degree, achieved through this identification of Federal administration with its Chief Executive Officers.

Trump, in his first term at least, represents an important development in economic and political liberalism, not a total break. But in Trump, we can see the outlines of a sinister new American liberalism, where the despotism of production is projected more fully onto the logic of government, and states are reconceived as enterprises bidding on a world market. These government enterprises would wield an unprecedented capacity for coercion, be ever more unified in the fickle will of a single personality, and be immunized to legislative intervention. As Peter Evans advised more than 20 years ago, we must get to work imagining alternative possibilities for state organization that improve the material conditions of survival while tipping the balance in favor of democracy.

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The Carnival King of Capital

Charles Thorpe

Introduction: The Carnival King

Brookings Institute writers Susan Hennessy and Benjamin Wittes complain that, while in the past, Presidents were expected to show certain standards of virtue and decency,

> Donald Trump's life and candidacy were an ongoing rejection of civic virtue…. From the earliest days of his campaign, he declared war on the traditional presidency's expectations of behavior. He was flagrant in his immorality, boasting of marital infidelity and belittling political opponents with lewd insults. He had constructed his entire professional identity around gold-plated excess and luxury and the branding of self. As a candidate, he remained unabashed in his greed and personal ambition; even his namesake charitable foundation was revealed to be merely a shell for self-dealing. He bragged that finding ways to avoid paying taxes made him "smart."…He never spoke of the presidential office other than as an extension of himself (Hennessey and Wittes, 2020: 6-7).

This description suggests that Trump represents a demoralization and deinstitutionalization of the role of President. Trump brings a condition of anomie to the Presidency, and this anomie is closely related to the trait of narcissism that Trump exhibits in spades (Merton, 1938; Frank, 2018).

Hennessey and Wittes encapsulate what Trump signifies when they write that "The overriding message of Trump's life and of his campaign was that kindness is weakness, manners are for wimps, and the public interest is for suckers" (Hennessey and Wittes 2020: 6-7). The rejection of rules, codes, and standards not only expresses Trump's extreme narcissism (Frank, 2018: 143) but also performs an incivility that is meaningful and attractive to his followers. As Henry Giroux writes, "Trump… showcased and appropriated 'incivility' in his public appearances as a mark of solidarity with many of his white male adherents." By doing so, "he tapped into their resentment and transformed their misery into a racist, bigoted, misogynist, and ultra-nationalist appeal to the darkest forces of authoritarianism." Trump's incivility, enacting his claim to be an outsider and a disrupter, "was a winning strategy" and a key aspect of his charismatic authority for his supporters (Giroux, 2018: 145). Trump pits his charisma against the bureaucratic order of "the deep state" and what his associate Steve Bannon calls "the administrative state" (Grossberg, 2018: 136-137). The representatives of the deep state and administrative state such as Hennessey (who went from the NSA to CNN and a senior fellowship at the Democratic Party-aligned think-tank, the Brookings Institution) oblige by following their part in the script, defending institutional tradition and established order and decrying Trump's abnormality. Trump's appearance of breaking with

the normal operations of Washington DC is part of the appeal for his supporters. The very incivility that establishment commentators like Hennessey and Wittes bemoan is central to what his supporters find attractive in his political persona. According to Lawrence Grossberg, "His performance of incivility is a political statement" (Grossberg, 2018: 12).

Elizaveta Gaufman suggests that Trump's performance of incivility is an expression of carnival and therein lies its political meaning and appeal. Carnival equalizes low culture and high culture; it is anti-elitist and populist, ridicules authority, and releases participants from everyday moral, legal, normative, sexual, and bodily repressions. "Carnival culture," she argues, "can thus be seen as a… counterpoint to the notion of 'civilizing' (**Zivilisierung**) in post-medieval Europe that seemingly internalized 'self-restraint' and increased the threshold for shame" (Gaufman, 2018: 412-41, quoting 413). The carnivalesque quality of Trump's performance is a key element in his populist appeal since it represents a claim to the position of the subaltern. According to Gaufman "The voice of the subaltern, as one emanating from the carnival square, and characterized by vulgar or coarse language, was particularly visible through Trump's rhetoric in general, his campaign's constant juxtapositions of the outsider versus the insider, and his #DrainTheSwamp narrative" (Gaufman, 2018: 421). In Trump, "carnival replaced normal politics" (Gaufman, 2018: 412). Trump's carnival is no longer a temporary suspension of norms but has become permanent, in the process undermining the stable normative basis of democracy. She writes, "a permanent carnival leads to norm decay" (Gaufman, 2018: 420).

To the extent that Gaufman treats Trump as indicative of any broader processes, she suggests that he emerges out of and reflects an "age of misinformation," with social media as the source of this (Gaufman, 2018: 411). This view closely aligns with the narrative of Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party, which has blamed the internet (and Russian conspiracy) for harming Hillary's popularity and election chances and which has used this as justification for promoting internet censorship by companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google (Damon, 2019). In this narrative, the defense of democracy against Trump's authoritarianism is equivalent to the defense of the prior existing political order, which is presented as normal, and to the defense of the mediation of information by the traditional establishment filters and gatekeepers such as The New York Times. Gaufman's critique of Trumpian carnival is the same as Hennessey and Wittes' condemnation of his undermining the civility and virtue of the office of the Presidency. These critiques present Trump as an aberration from an otherwise existing normality. In their assumption of the possibility of normalcy, such critiques miss the true meaning of Trump.

Trump represents the permanency of the carnival in a more profound way than Gaufman acknowledges. Rather than an individual aberration, Trump embodies a more general condition in which the dominant order **is** the suspension and reversal of order. In Trump, the carnival is transformed from an escape from rule into a means of rule. Trump is both the inversion of authority, the Carnival King, and the very incarnation of the return in late capitalism of the aristocratic and monarchical principle and the autocratic rule of entrenched privilege. Ann Norton writes,

> The power Trump knows is the power of kings…. Trump is the monarch of his business empire. He rules alone. He inherited wealth. His wealth, like that of more traditional kinglets, came from a family business founded in power over territory. He continues to hold territory, though his wealth may no longer flow primarily from that source. He intends to pass wealth and status on to the heirs of his body. His children are closest to the throne. His advisors serve at his pleasure. They are dismissed on a whim, often capriciously, and at his word alone: "You're fired." He values loyalty, but that loyalty runs only toward him. He expects

privileged access to the bodies of the women around him, the droit de seigneur, and he expects the women to regard these attentions as a distinction. There is no rule but his will (Norton 2017: 118).

Trump as Carnival King ridicules and scorns the normative order claimed to be represented and defended by the bureaucratic and administrative state. Trump as king represents pre-modern personalism and patronage. For example, Hans Bakker observes, "Trump himself is a kind of neo-patrimonial figure and there seem to be elements of prebendalism in his selection of members of his inner circle" (Bakker, 2017: 119).

As a monarchical and charismatic fascist autocrat, Trump asserts absolute license and refuses all boundaries to his will and action. This was evident in his boast during his campaign that he could "stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody" and it would not dent his support and in his conversation, caught on film, in which he claims that women will allow him to do whatever he wants with them: "It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything" (Trump, quoted in Soave, 2016).

This conveys not only his misogyny but also his monarchical, and also narcissistic and sociopathic, claim to absolute license, his rejection of any limits on his action or his ability to act out his desires. Philip Zimbardo and Rosemary Sword observe that Trump's "extreme present hedonism;… narcissism; and… bullying behavior… overlap… to create an impulsive, immature, incompetent person who, when in the position of ultimate power, easily slides into the role of tyrant, complete with family sitting at his proverbial 'ruling table'" (Zimbardo and Sword, 2017: 44). As an impeached President who continues to rule, and indeed emerged from the impeachment debacle even stronger, Trump has some justification for feeling himself to be above the law, which undoubtedly further inflates his narcissistic grandiosity (Frank, 2018: 146).

Trump is a grotesque and obscene tyrant, a real-life King Ubu (Simic, 2017). He embodies what Slavoj Žižek calls the "obscene superego" (Žižek, 2006: 55). Trump models, permits, and challenges his followers to reflect back aggressive masculinity. He goads them, are you a winner or a loser? Are you potent, or are you castrated? In October 2018, a man who groped a woman on an airline flight told arresting officers that "the president of the United States says it's OK to grab women by their private parts" (KHOU, 2018). This man understood the President to be communicating that women are symbolic objects, possession of which is the badge of male status. However, he appears not to have understood the limited scope of status: "**when you're a star** they let you do it" (emphasis added). Trump's message was, implicitly, "I can, you can't. I am a winner, you are a loser." Trump, as a star, and king, was asserting his being above conventional rules. The man arrested, in his own delusional narcissism and infantile identification with Trump, imagined that he too was Trump (because also male), that he too could do anything.

Stardom or celebrity is, in many ways, the contemporary equivalent of the aristocracy. Celebrities enact conspicuous consumption, and embody, as Guy Debord argued, a fantasy of total leisure (Debord, 1987, thesis 60). This means freedom from necessity, and therefore freedom from the banal, conventional, and normal constraints of everyday life. The celebrity occupies a world that transcends everyday life. So as he violates rules and overturns order, Trump does so from a privileged rather than subaltern position. Trump does not **sub**vert the rules but places himself **above** them. Trump embodies the merger of what Debord calls the "diffuse spectacle" of market capitalism with the "concentrated spectacle" of dictatorship; and, therefore, what Debord called the "integrated spectacle" (Debord, 1987: thesis 63; Debord, 1991: thesis V;

cf. Kellner, 2017b). Debord writes of the demand in authoritarian regimes (for example under Stalin, Mao, and Hitler) to identify with the ruler, such that "Everyone must identify magically with this absolute celebrity or disappear" (Debord, 1987: thesis 64). This is literally the case under such regimes, for example in North Korea where rituals of identification with the ruling dynasty are required under the threat of labor camp and death. For Trump's followers, it is true in a different way. Magical identification is motivated by the need to cling onto (the coattails of) power, and therefore significance, so as not to disappear into the powerlessness and chaos of capitalist society's alienated reality (cf. Lundskow, 2012; Langman, 2012: 63-64).

Trump's paradoxical carnival of power and privilege arises from and expresses the prevailing capitalist economic and class forces. Far from carnival overturning normality, Slavoj Žižek writes that in "today's 'late capitalism,' it is 'normal' life itself which, in a way, gets 'carnivalized,' with its constant self-revolutionizing, with its reversals, crises, reinventions… [C]ontemporary capitalism has already overcome the logic of totalizing normality and adopted the logic of the erratic excess" (Žižek, 2017: 25). While "counter-cultural carnivality" has been adopted by anti-capitalist protesters, the more protest adopts a subcultural style, the more it runs the risk of commercial cooptation (Miles, 2014: 83-84, quoting 83). One cannot counterpose carnivalesque disorder to a status quo normative order, because the market constantly disrupts and renders temporary any existing normality. Trump as Carnival King reflects Žižek's observation that "It is the reign of today's global capitalism which is the true Lord of Misrule" (Žižek, 2017: quoting 26, see also 20). Cometh the hour, cometh the man.

Trump is a particularly American type of carnivalesque: the carnival barker (Kellner, 2016: 22). Investigative journalist David Cay Johnston describes him as a "modern P. T. Barnum selling tickets to a modern variation of the Feejee mermaid" (Johnston, 2017). The carnival's inversion of the normal is here sold as a commodity. To truly understand Trump as a social phenomenon is to perceive Trump as a mirror reflection of a mirror reflection. Trump reflects back and uses the narcissism of a decadent bourgeois class that, propagated through mass media and advertising in a context in which global financialized capital has corroded social bonds, increasingly diffuses through, and pervades, the broader culture. The carnival attraction to which Trump is selling tickets is none other than himself. He is his own brand (Johnson, 2017: 147). The expansion of his ego is the expansion of his brand, and vice versa. It seems that his running for President may have been a guerilla-marketing use of mass media to add value to his brand. The charismatic personalism of his style of Presidency also follows from this: the Presidency is merged with his business empire, with his brand, and with himself. L'état, c'est moi. And indeed, the Trump administration's lawyers have followed the Bush administration in pushing the neo-monarchical theory of the unitary executive, effectively placing the President above the law. Johnston writes, "Trump would disrupt the process, not for the benefit of the United States of America, but for Trump" (Johnston, 2017: ix). The presidency becomes an extension, validation, and reinforcement of Trump's narcissism. Institutional structures (such as the separation of powers), law, and the public interest give way to nepotistic, personalist, autocracy operating without a plan in an impulsive, arbitrary, and chaotic way. State power and public life become correspondingly dysregulated.

Trump, Narcissism, and Carnivalized Consumerism

Trump's carnival reflects the cultural logic of post-Fordist or postmodern capitalism. How this is so is best understood in terms of Lauren Langman and Maureen Ryan's concept of "the

carnival character" as the prevailing form of social character in late capitalism. Langman and Ryan (2009) posit this as the successor to Erich Fromm's mid-twentieth century "marketing character." While the marketing character has by no means disappeared, there has been a further deepening of the commodification of selfhood. The self has been increasingly fragmented by the shifting and proliferating signs of consumer culture and by the declining stability of employment and autonomy at work (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 476-477). As a result, people increasingly construct their identities in the realm of consumerism and in an increasingly compressed and fragmented non-work time. Personal identity and sense of self is increasingly invested in "privatist hedonism" as an escape from pressurized, disempowered, and precarious post-Fordist work (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 477). In contrast with the mid-twentieth-century marketing character whose self-presentation was largely conformist with a degree of sanctioned deviance within a developing consumer culture, the carnival character reflects a further stage in consumerism's saturation of culture and its profound influence on the shaping of selfhood.

While post-Fordist work patterns and conditions made work a less meaningful basis for identification, post-Fordist variegated consumption, catering to a myriad of niche markets, offers opportunities for the construction of what Langman has called "shopping mall selfhood" in which "subjectivity… exists as an episodic series of moments of consumer-based micro-spectacles devoid of a central organizing principle" (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 477; Langman, 1992). The carnival character is a further development of this fragmentation of self within the kaleidoscopic hall of mirrors of the consumer spectacle. In contrast with Fordist mass consumption, the emphasis in post-Fordist or postmodern consumer culture is on the differentiation of self from the mass and so social conformity is discredited in favor of the narcissistic affirmation of the uniqueness of individual self. The commodification and marketing of non-conformity also expresses how consumer identities are constructed in opposition to the repressive codes of capitalist work. As a result, the cultural and social-psychological shift from the marketing character to the carnival character is heralded by an increasing valorization of transgression. Langman and Ryan write, "If the 'marketing character' sold him/her self as a commodity, the carnival character creates his/her identity through seemingly transgressive consumption in an ever-changing plurality of fusions and/or contradictory appearances" (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 472). But this transgression does not undermine or even oppose the dominant social order: "the carnival character may well find agency and fulfillment, but any 'repudiation' of dominant power structures of capital in its now global moment is at best a specious one" (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 490). Just as Bakhtin argued that medieval carnival functioned as a sanctioned outlet for social tensions, which ultimately served to maintain feudal order, Langman and Ryan suggest that the privatized transgressions of the carnival character reinforce post-Fordist capitalism by being escapist, depoliticizing and inextricably tied to consumerism which markets "the transgressive, the vulgar and hedonistic" (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 490). In this context, transgression no longer represents a challenge to capitalism, but rather supports it: "the carnivalesque as political protest has largely waned in the face of a transgressive popular culture-mediated product." As a result, "carnivalization as a cultural form serves a hegemonic function" (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 480).

What Langman and Ryan call consumerism's "carnivalized moment" (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 480) reflects a transition away from the form of mass consumerism that characterized the early postwar Fordist "bureaucratic society of controlled consumption" (Lefebvre, 1971: 68-109). Anthony Giddens emphasizes that the routinized practices and expectations of (Fordist) everyday life formed the basis of a shared social fabric and solution to ontological security in a modern

world which had weakened tradition (Giddens, 1981: 194; Giddens, 1985: 194-197; Thorpe and Jacobson, 2013; Thorpe, 2020). Especially with the development of mass consumerism in the context of Fordist economic growth in the first two decades after World War Two, a modest version of 'the American dream' became achievable for the mass of the population, including the working class, through mass consumption. A mass consumerist everyday life underpinned the political legitimacy of the state, in what Lizabeth Cohen calls a "consumers' republic" (Cohen, 2003; Langman and Ryan, 2009: 476). Mass consumerism as a principle of social integration was evident in Cold War "sociological propaganda" representing "the American way of life" as, according to Randal Marlin, was evident in "American films of the 1950s, with their stay-at-home mothers and businessmen fathers" (Marlin, 2002: 37). The shift from the marketing character to the carnival character corresponds to a shift from conformity to transgression, and to the growth of plutonomy that undermines the capacity for consumerism to create a shared culture. Citigroup reported on this development: "In a plutonomy there is no such animal as 'the U.S. consumer'… There are rich consumers… [and] [t]here are the rest" (Kapur, Macleod, and Singh, 2005: 2).

In this context of stark inequality, competitive conspicuous consumption becomes an imperative to distinguish oneself from "the rest." Consumerism is no longer the middle-class suburban conformism of "keeping up with the Joneses" but becomes the impossibility of "keeping up with Kardashians" (the title of a reality-television show about the super-rich family).[1] During the Great Depression, Robert K. Merton already perceived the dysregulating effects on society of the competitive possessive individualism of the American dream: "In societies such as our own, then, the pressure of prestige-bearing success tends to eliminate the effective social constraint over means employed to this end" (Merton, 1938: 681). Merton perceived the tendency in American society for the dominant value of material success to become an end in itself, for the achievement of which any means are seen as justified. He wrote, "The extreme emphasis upon the accumulation of wealth as a symbol of success in our own society militates against the completely effective control of institutionally regulated modes of acquiring a fortune. Fraud, corruption, vice, crime, in short, the entire catalogue of proscribed behavior, becomes increasingly common… " He pointed to the "process whereby the exaltation of the end generates a **literal demoralization**, i.e., deinstitutionalization of the means" (Merton, 1938: 675, emphasis in original; cf. Fevre, 2000). But what Merton regarded as institutional and cultural **strain** is a **contradiction** that has become under post-Fordist, financialized plutonomy a gaping chasm between a mass consumer culture which prescribes values for the whole society and the inequality that makes "success" a value available only to the few. Crucially, Merton pointed to the way in which anomie threatened to undermine the supports of ontological security in routinized everyday life:

> Insofar as one of the most general functions of social organization is to provide a basis for calculability and regularity of behavior, it is increasingly limited in effectiveness as these elements of the structure become dissociated. At the extreme, predictability virtually disappears and what may be properly termed cultural chaos or anomie intervenes (Merton, 1938: 682).

What Merton analyzed as institutional and cultural strain needs to be understood as structural contradiction systemically produced by capitalism, bound up with inequality and sharpened by globalization and financialization.

The tendency toward permanent anomie is not just American but common to all western societies and much of the world as a result of globalization (Passos, 2000). In their ethnography of the consumerist motivations of petty criminals in de-industrialized English towns and cities,

cultural criminologists Steve Hall, Simon Winlow and Craig Ancrum note that "In the vast majority of cases the lives of our respondents were dominated by the constant scramble to accumulate and display, and many had become enchanted by an idealized image of themselves that bore no relationship at all to the actual material and socio-political realities of their lives" (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008: 30). What drives their desperate attempts to grasp the symbolic consumerist accouterments of social status and their compulsive hedonism is a fundamental fragility of self in a social context lacking support for self-identity other than consumerism. The young men interviewed by Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum experience the social world they inhabit in their de-industrialized 'estates,' or housing projects, as one without solidarity, in which everyone is out for themselves and no one can be trusted. For them, "To be happy was to indulge, to buy, to squander, to be released from the normal restrictions of everyday life." The possibility of escape from drab non-identity was embodied in commodities sought after as "reflective mirrors of identity and distinction…. Merged imagos and ego ideals in a Lacanian fundamental narcissistic fantasy, which act as a means of temporarily confirming existence and identity" (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008: 49). The quest for status and identity does not take the path of rationalized work, which in a post-industrial context of extreme inequality, cultural saturation with expansive consumerist fantasy, and precarious low-paid 'McJobs,' ceases to offer a realistic path to socially recognized and rewarded success. Instead, their perspective is short-term, with rational calculation replaced with belief in chance (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008: 24-25, 53-58). But they would not hesitate to use violence to gain access to these fantasy objects and lifestyles. These young men instantiate a much more general combination of the decline of work as the basis for community and identity and the turn to transgressive, hedonistic consumption as the source of identity.

Consumerist identity is forged in the narcissistic search to differentiate oneself from the mass or the 'herd' that represents non-identity, the loss of self in undifferentiated being. The drive of consumerism is no longer to fit into a middle-class standard, but to stand out as unique in order to have an identity. Contemporary society traps the individual in a condition of infantile narcissism in which the individual escapes from "terror of helplessness and insignificance" through identification with consumerist symbols (Hall Winlow and Ancrum, 2008: 173). Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum write,

> The primary urge of the premature and helpless infant to preserve its physical integrity and narcissistic relationship to the other has been prolonged throughout the life-course and harnessed to the consumer economy… The emphasis on hedonism as the principal reward for work and the achievement of a socially distinct identity has over the past fifty years or so created a new form of super-ego, radically different from the one that prevailed in the traditional Symbolic Order, a super-ego that heaps guilt on the subject's failure to enjoy rather than her failure to abstain (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008: 209).

Weber interpreted Calvinist salvation anxiety as assuaged through making a fetish of self-control, work, and the accumulation of material wealth as signifiers of elect status and the certainty of salvation. In this way, the capitalist spirit made work and repression the basis of ontological security. But Weber suggested that, in a paradoxical turn, the signifier takes over from the signified so that the accumulation of material wealth requires no further justification. What Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum are portraying is the total inversion of the Calvinist solution to salvation anxiety, such that hedonistic and transgressive conspicuous consumption becomes the mark of distinction that functions to suppress inner dread. Life becomes present-oriented, lacking rational orientation toward the future or any connection to the past, becoming instead a

string of disconnected moments of hedonistic excess that serve as a temporary escape (see also Langman and Ryan, 2009: 481-482). Unlike the hoarding of the Protestant entrepreneur, there is in the social world that Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum depict, no possibility of rational accumulation as the path to the ends sought. As a result, there is a marked lack of economic realism. These young men wait for their lucky break and feel that they are at the mercy of fate (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008: 48, 79-80).

This derivation of distinction from conspicuous consumption and from transgression, signifying transcendence of the mundane order, appears as a **regression** from a rationalized modernity to a pre-Reformation feudalism and even further to the roots of feudalism in a barbarian culture of war and conquest. In sharp contrast with the Weberian "spirit of capitalism" centered in the self-discipline of a secularized Protestant work ethic, conspicuous consumption derives from the existence of a "leisure class," with a predatory relationship to productive society, that is distinguished by its exemption from toil and that asserts its superiority in contempt for work and in conspicuous transcendence of the realm of necessity (Veblen, 1979). Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum refer to Thorstein Veblen's theory of the conspicuous consumption of the leisure class as barbarian and aristocratic in origin. In this way, they suggest that conspicuous consumption is indicative and expressive of decivilizing tendencies in Norbert Elias's sense, or the breakdown of what Hall, Winlow and Ancrum more dialectically call modernity's "pseudo-pacification process" (Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum, 2008: 175, 211-217; Hall, 2000, 2007; Hall and Winlow, 2004; Ellis, 2019; Vaughan, 2003). The social prominence of conspicuous consumption, i.e., the visibility of "the practice of acquiring primarily for the purpose of display," works to disrupt "the fragile project of political solidarity" (Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum, 2005: 7). Indeed, the decline of a literate civil society, in an electronically-mediated consumer culture, may also be associated with a decivilizing process since it was civil society that, as Langman writes, "allowed the emergence of a 'civilized' political culture, distinct from, if not opposed to, dynastic regimes" (Langman, 2003: 176, see also 180-182, 186-187).

The idea of postmodernity as blending with pre-modernity in a retreat or escape from modernity is also implied by the return of the medieval phenomenon of carnival as a central feature of postmodern culture and formation of self. Langman and Ryan argue that the postmodern can be characterized as a "'cyberfeudalism,' a fusion of the most advanced technologies with the pre-modern carnival" (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 478; see also Braun, 2017; Grossberg, 2018: 113-142). Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum warn about the corrosive effect on solidarity of the spread throughout society of the barbarian values of the leisure class:

> [T]he new narcissistic aristocrats of the boardrooms and those of the sink estates revel in their ability to simply take what they need in the way of symbolic objects that can establish their distinguished identities without the ignominy of having to labour like those in the 'bovine herd' they imagine to exist below them (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008: 206).

The takeover of the culture by "the cult of barbarism – acquisitive individualism, narcissism and social distinction" has meant the end of the solidarity project of social democracy in what Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum call "the post-productivist, post-social capitalist economy" (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008: 198-204, quoting 204). This cultural shift corresponds with the effects of financialization in creating turbulence and unpredictability at all levels of life and in producing inequality not seen since at least before the reforms of the New Deal era, seeing the return of entrenched hereditary privilege (Picketty, 2014: 377-429; Picketty, 2020: 648-716; Bullough, 2019).

While being a billionaire embodiment of the corrupt new aristocracy, Trump also manages to be the Carnival King who mocks and symbolically challenges the powerful 'insiders.' It is telling that one path through which Trump came to public prominence was through decades of involvement as an investor in and promoter of the theatrical spectacle of WWF/WWE Wrestling. Trump's political carnival, for example, the way he whips up the emotions of the crowd at his campaign rallies, draws on the world of professional wrestling, even, according to Chauncey Devega, down to his "speech and cadence" (Devega, 2017; Nessen, 2016). According to Heather Bandenburg, "Trump has always been essentially a wrestling gimmick embodied in a real life person" (Bandenburg, 2016). Chris Hedges has written about professional wrestling as "stylized rituals" in which the caricatured personae adopted by the wrestlers dramatize, in fantastic parable form, the struggles of the working-class predominantly male audience. According to Hedges, in these matches, "The burden of real problems is transformed into fodder for a high-energy pantomime" (Hedges, 2009: 5). Trump is a character in this pantomime. His persona, as Devega insightfully observes, is drawn from "the heel" character in a wrestling bout who is the villain facing the heroic and sympathetic "face" (Devega, 2017). In contrast to the honorable "face":

> The heel will lie, cheat, dissemble, and do anything to win a match… Ultimately, he only cares about obtaining the object of his personal desire—this could be money, power, sex, glory, fame, the championship, or in some cases, just playing the role of a chaotic spoiler who lives to humiliate and brutalize the "good guys" (Devega, 2017).

Trump's political persona is the anti-hero. As the "heel" he exposes and humiliates the "good guys" of the Washington DC establishment, cultural elites, and the liberals, thereby channeling the **ressentiment** of, especially, lower-middle-class whites who feel left behind both economically and culturally (Langman and Lundskow, 2012; Langman, 2018; Lundskow, 2019; Kellner, 2017a). For Americans who cannot help but experience the disjunction between the rhetoric of both party establishments and the reality of their lives, "the heel" is exactly who they want to expose and ridicule the establishment's phony virtue. Trump makes no claim to virtue and this gives him an aura of authenticity. This could be seen during the Republican primary campaign in 2015 when he was asked about a remark he had made during an interview that "When you give, they do whatever the hell you want them to do." Trump replied, "You'd better believe it. If I ask them, if I need them, you know, most of the people on this stage I've given to, just so you understand, a lot of money." He continued, "I was a businessman. I give to everybody. When they call, I give. And you know what? When I need something from them, two years later, three years later, I call them, and they are there for me." He added, "And that's a broken system" (quoted in Fang, 2015). Trump appears at least candid as opposed to the craven politicians who accept such legalized bribes and, as the powerful businessman, becomes in this scenario a figure of admiration and identification while his rivals are belittled as underlings. Trump as "heel" is both the carnivalesque challenge to the dominant order who inverts its codes and a figure of power who fundamentally embodies the dominant order. In this way, Trump is both Carnival King, who mocks and inverts power, and a real king. Or, as Heather Bandenburg puts it in her article on Trump's wrestling background, "he has moved from pretend monster to real monster" (Bandenburg, 2016).

Trump's malignant narcissism means that he truly is "a monster," as Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez called him for his threatening the war crime of bombing Iranian cultural sites (quoted in Johnson, 2020; cf. Malkin, 2018: 58-59 Dodes, 2017; Gartner, 2017: 94-95). Erich Fromm, who coined the clinical term, emphasized the sadism and destructiveness of the malignant narcissist, who seeks

to preserve the self by crushing and even completely destroying what is outside the self. Fromm wrote of narcissism as a psychological solution to the terror of separateness:

> He can solve the problem by relating exclusively to himself (narcissism); then he becomes the world, and loves the world by "loving" himself… A last and malignant form of solving the problem (usually blended with extreme narcissism) is the craving to destroy all others. If no one exists outside of me, I need not fear others, nor need I relate myself to them. By destroying the world I am saved from being crushed by it (Fromm 1973: 262).

Malignant narcissism, and its corollary in necrophilia, is evident in Trump's threats to use nuclear weapons, bringing "fire and fury" in order to "totally destroy" North Korea or his statement that he could, if he wished, "kill 10 million people" in order to quickly win the Afghanistan war (Perera and Jones, 2019; cf. Fromm, 1973; Thorpe, 2016; Kellner, 2016; Kellner, 2018; Featherstone, 2016). Trump's malignant narcissistic fantasy that he is stronger and more powerful than anything else in the world, and has the power to destroy everything outside himself, is dangerously realized by his position as President, not only because he has the nuclear launch codes, but also when he imagines that he can as if by force of will, hold back the tide of coronavirus from America's shores. The pretend monster is a real monster.

The Trump presidency is a phenomenon of carnivalization. This does not necessarily mean that Trump himself is an instantiation of the carnival character. Fromm's character orientations are collective ideal types, not diagnostic categories for an individual. But one can point to affinities between these collective categories and categories of individual character. There is a correspondence between the carnival character and narcissism. Langman and Ryan write, "If the 'marketing orientation' was the social expression of aggressive phallic character, the 'carnival character' is underpinned by narcissistic pathologies" (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 480). It is narcissism, as will be discussed below, that is expressed in extreme and indeed malignant form in Trump. Trump also exhibits features of the marketing character: "The phallic aggressive personality is the person who expects to sell things to others, beginning with his/her self." And he also has an affinity with aspects of the hoarding orientation that was associated with Freud's conception of anal sadistic character (cf. Langman and Ryan, 2009: 475). Nevertheless, psychologists writing about Trump are in general agreement that extreme narcissism is the most profound and overarching characteristic of his psyche and character (Lee ed., 2017; Frank, 2018). One can, I think, understand Trump's narcissism as the core trait that motivates a phallic-aggressive orientation, persona, and behaviors and anal-sadistic passions and behaviors. The deep psychological need that these behaviors and self-presentations fulfill are narcissistic.

Fromm was prescient about the current "narcissism epidemic" when he wrote "If the modern age has been rightly called the age of anxiety, it is primarily because of this anxiety engendered by the lack of self" (Twenge and Campbell, 2009; Fromm, 1955: 204; cf. Derber, 2000). Trump shares with his followers' intense anxiety as a result of the lack of support for the formation of coherent selfhood. Psychoanalyst Justin A. Frank relays a description of Trump, in the White House, watching re-runs of himself in the reality-television show that was instrumental in establishing his public persona, <u>The Apprentice</u>. Frank writes, "Trump still needs the comfort of seeing himself made whole by a televised second skin, even if it reminds him that he doesn't feel that wholeness inside" (Frank, 2018: 150). Trump's solution, the construction of 'Donald Trump,' the persona as a brand, then becomes the solution of his followers, through projective identification.

The carnival offered by Trump's rallies and his political persona offers an outlet for many who appear on the surface to be antithetical to the carnival character, denouncing and pitting themselves against the prevailing hedonism. Much of his support comes from sections of society with authoritarian personalities (for example, right-wing evangelicals) that feel threatened and displaced by the proliferating fluidity of values and cultural forms in carnivalized late capitalism (cf. Langman and Ryan, 2009: 485, 488). In that way, Trump provides a kind of reactionary counter-carnival (cf. Lundskow, 2012). This inverted carnival fulfills the function that runs through all carnival: "The many hitherto denied pleasures of the obscene, the grotesque and vulgar are simulated resistances that in fact neutralize real contestation" (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 483). The pleasures of the perverse and obscene are very closely connected with authoritarianism, in a return of the repressed, which takes anal-sadistic and destructive form. It is likely that the evangelicals, whose leading figures are television hucksters and confidence men rather similar to Trump, and whose authoritarianism is underpinned by sadomasochistic and destructive passions, are attracted very much by the cruelty and destructiveness of their "imperfect vessel" (Stewart, 2018; cf. Blumenthal, 2009: 63-64; Hedges, 2007). Trump's authoritarian carnival fulfills psychological needs for his followers through their narcissistic projective identification with him and his anger and cruelty are very much part of his appeal (Smith and Hanley, 2018; Lundskow, 2012: 127-132).

Group Narcissism and Reality-Denial

The essential affinity between Trump and carnival capitalism lies in the escape from reality. Carnival fulfills the same function that Fromm identified in authoritarianism and conformity. It offers an escape from frightening feelings of powerlessness, insignificance, lostness, and chaos. Langman and Ryan argue that the postmodern carnival is a psychic retreat from an alienated public world into privatized hedonism (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 474, 477, 482-484). Trump's predominant psychological characteristic, narcissism, is also a psychic retreat from reality (Zimbardo and Sword, 2017: 26; Malkin, 2017: 56, 60, 62). A wide range of psychoanalytic thinkers have described narcissism as a defensive reaction. Fromm argues that narcissism is a form of escape from the existential dread of separateness and its resultant feelings of powerlessness and lostness (Fromm, 1973: 200-203; Fromm, 1964: 62-68; cf. Steiner, 1993: 43). What is known about Trump's childhood gives ample cause for Trump to develop narcissistic defenses. He has done so in extreme fashion to the point where it may well be called delusional (Frank, 2018: 143-147, 226-229).

Whereas the carnival character constructs their escape from reality in individualized and privatized leisure activities and consumption and in micro-communities or neo-tribes gathering through those activities, Trump has the wealth and power to inflate his narcissistic fantasy to global proportions, in the process carnivalizing the public sphere. Whereas for most people postmodern privatized carnival allows their narcissistic defenses, their grandiosity, illusion of being special, illusion of omnipotence, and magical thinking only in the private sphere of leisure, consumerism, or the desublimated other-world of cyberspace (cf. Thorpe, 2016; Langman, 2003: 184-185), Trump is able to realize his delusions of grandeur. The culture of consumerism and electronic media, which erodes self-control and "culturally based shame and bodily disciplines" (Langman, 2003: 185), is a culture in which a narcissistic figure like Trump can flourish.[2]

Trump is able to use his wealth and power to project his fantasy world into reality, colonizing reality. According to Lifton, "Trump creates his own extreme manipulation of reality. He insists that his spokesmen defend his false reality as normal. He then expects the rest of society to accept it – despite the lack of any evidence." Trump's reality is no less a fantasy for the fact that it has colonized reality. What results is "malignant normality" (Lifton, quoted in Sheehy, 2017: 79).

Trump has said that in his real estate business, "I play to people's fantasies" (quoted in McAdam, 2020: 31; Singer, 2017: 293). And those to whose fantasies he caters, who are keen to mirror and identify with Trump, reflect his fantasy back to him. Trump's own narcissistic grandiosity is thereby reinforced and further energized (cf. Malkin, 2017: 59). In this way, "Trump literally and figuratively speaks the language of the Republican base and is a hero (while simultaneously being a villain for the rest of the American public) whom they can live through by proxy" (Devega, 2017). As psychiatrist Thomas Singer writes,

> It seems clear that Trump's narcissism and his attacks on political correctness dovetail with deep needs in a significant portion of the American population to enhance their dwindling sense of place in America and of America's place in the world. Trump's narcissism can be seen as a perfect compensatory mirror for the narcissistic needs and injuries of those who support him (Singer, 2017: 284).

The narcissistic wounds suffered by Trump's followers are integrally related to the undermining by globalization of group-narcissistic nationalist fantasy.

Studs Terkel quotes a taxi driver in St. Louis defending the Vietnam War by saying, "We can't be a pitiful, helpless giant. We gotta show 'em we're number one." Terkel asked him, "Are you number one?," to which the taxi driver replied, "I'm number nuthin'" (Terkel, 2007: 32; also quoted in Fussell, 1992: 48). Ones and zeroes. To be, or not to be. To be nothing is death (cf. Becker, 1977). To feel oneself to be nothing is to have no narcissistic protection from chaos and death, to exist in terror (cf. Salzman, 2001) Fromm has described the compensatory psychological mechanism of group narcissism as operating with the (usually unconscious) thought "I am a part of the most wonderful group in the world. I, who in reality am a worm, become a giant through belonging to the group" (Fromm, 1973: 204; see also Fromm, 1964: 78-80). Group narcissism is a protective fantasy that supports the (to a degree, necessary) protective coating of narcissism around the individual. But the less connected to a social whole, the less secure is the individual in both their sense of material security and in the security and shelter that solidarity provides. The more fearful of exposure to the universe ('to the elements'), the more the individual needs to build up that protective coating. The fewer real supports for ontological security in the social world they inhabit daily, the more they need an artificial substitute.

Drugs and alcohol are a major palliative, fueling America's declining average life expectancy, a crucial indicator of the wellbeing of the society, through what epidemiologists have termed "deaths of despair." But another method is to find an ideal transcendental support for ontological security in fantasy. Religion is a well-established method of reality-denial (Freud, 2011; Berger, 1969; Varki and Brower, 2013). This ethereal opium thrives in the United States. Fundamentalist and evangelical Christianity, especially, is a major market in palliatives for social breakdown and individual despair (Hedges, 2018: 50-51; Blumental, 2009). However, especially in a predominantly Protestant country, and with the spread of new religions and a kind of spiritual consumerism, as well as the rise of agnosticism and atheism, the sacred canopy is not broad enough to encompass 'society,' despite the efforts of evangelical Christian fascists to subordinate society to their religious doctrine (Hedges, 2006). For that reason, the most powerful form of group narcissism, upon

which the individual can draw in support of ontological security, is nationalism. In modernity, nationalism is the form of group narcissism that corresponds with 'society.' There is a very close relationship between the nation-state and the genesis of the modern form of 'society' (Giddens, 1981, 1985; Gellner, 1983; Langman, 2003: 168, 177-178). It was through the nation-state that the bourgeoisie was able to create a solution to the Hobbesian problem of order that bourgeois relations themselves posed. Nationalism remains the fundamental bourgeois solution to the problem of order. Through what criminologists have called "the solidarity project" of social-democratic reformism, the solidaristic energies of the labor movement were coopted and attached to the building of the nation-state, which built up what Bourdieu has called "the left hand of the state," in a reconstitution of the social that Karl Polanyi calls "the double movement" (Reiner, 2012: 141; Bourdieu, 1998: 2; Polanyi, 1958).

American nationalism, while historically containing democratic content, developed in an extremely racialized way and the progressive elements deriving from the American Revolution stood in dialectical contradiction with the racist elements that legitimized genocide of the native population, slavery, and that continue to serve in the legitimizing of overseas empire (Wood, 1991; Drinnon, 1980; Langman and Lundskow, 2016). The United States, one could say, expressed in particularly acute form the contradiction between bourgeois liberal ideology and the material reality of the bourgeois economy. The construction of the 'other' to whom liberal protections and status did not apply allowed the construction a 'we' identity associated with a liberal conception of the negatively free individual. This dialectic can be seen in the history of restrictive racialized immigration policy and in the civil rights struggles by which African Americans laid claim to full citizenship and membership in the nation-state. The association of anti-Communism with 'Americanism' exemplified the use of nationalism to suppress class conflict. At the same time, the other side of the deal with nationalistically-oriented organized labor in the form of the AFL-CIO, was the legitimacy of the expectation of a certain standard of living associated with the category of 'middle-class.' In the mid-twentieth century, a certain standard of normalcy was constructed around an idealized middle-class style of life. National identity was constructed around a self-image of affluence and this self-image was racialized as white (thereby excluding a significant portion of those who might threaten this idealized 'we' by the reality of their poverty and obvious powerlessness). The whiteness of normalcy reflected the racial exclusions from the Keynesian-Fordist social compact, exclusions the contradictions of which were expressed in the civil rights struggle (Rose, 2014; Dudziak, 2000).

The collective narcissistic wound with which Trump's individual narcissism resonates, and which motivates projective identification with him among his predominantly white male supporters, has a great deal to do with the conflation between the Keynesian-Fordist compact and America's racialized nationalism. The loss of America as taken-for-grantedly, and semi-officially, 'the white man's country,' is conflated by his supporters with the loss of community and economic security as a result of the destruction of the Keynesian-Fordist compact. This coincided with the end of the Vietnam war without victory, the normalization of relations with China, the OPEC oil price shock, the rise of Japanese competition, etc., in other words, the decline of America's postwar dominance (Killen, 2006). It also coincided with the rise of the youth counterculture and sexual revolution and feminism, and the cultural transformation that tended away from authoritarianism (Langman, 1971). In the decades since the seventies, deindustrialization and the rise of information and services sectors have produced declining opportunities for so-called 'unskilled' manual workers, those without a college degree, and the end of the family wage. This

has taken away the economic supports for a version of industrial masculinity, which was, in itself, an important support for ontological security, in tandem with the ideology of the nuclear family (Faludi, 1999; Fraad, 2019; Langman and Lundskow, 2017: 241-244). At the same time, cultural shifts toward reflexive politicization of relationships, were underway that were particularly challenging for male heterosexual conceptions of self (Giddens, 1992; Langman and Lundskow, 2017: 245-258). Male anger about the loss of economic security has been conflated with these cultural and political changes and fueled conservative authoritarian backlash.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 penetrated the puffed up but already very fragile group narcissistic bubble which the American elite had inflated in the culture of the United States in the form of nationalist rhetoric and the promotion of a triumphalist, jingoistic, nationalistic belief system. The scab of nationalism was only thinly covering the narcissistic wound. The reopening of the narcissistic wound motivated an explosion of violent patriotism based on projective identification with the state (for example, in the form of 'the flag' and through the increasingly sacred institution of the military) and on paranoid-schizoid splitting and projection onto the foreign enemy (Stein, 1994: 1-19, 57-71; Clarke and Hoggett, 2004). In a collective act of cognitive dissonance, the blow suffered only served to reinforce the effort to preserve the fantastic narcissistic protective shell. It was, however, increasingly brittle. The Great Recession starting with the collapse of the housing market in 2007 served to undermine faith in the social-political ideology of the 'American dream' and a great gap has opened up between the youth and retirement-age generations which is not only a gap of values but of material security and belief in the prevailing legitimations. It is into this context that Trump stepped when he ran for President, offering particularly older white and male voters a magical hope that through identification with him they could restore a lost past, a fantasy in which they fetishistically associated ontological security with white cultural dominance and with American dominance of the world economically and militarily. This group-narcissistic function of military dominance also supports a physically brutal and psychologically rigid kind of masculinity (Langman and Lundskow, 2017: 167-188). The anger and sadism of Trump's followers may be understood as arising from wounded narcissism (cf. Smith, 2018). Authoritarian carnival salves the wound by creating a sense of power. George Lundskow writes about the authoritarian carnival of the Tea Party movement:

> willful ignorance combines with personal insecurity to create the main attraction of carnivalization—power. The power to say what is true and what is not, and more intensely, what is good and what is evil. The power to decide absolute right and wrong inherently bestows the ability to decide who is a real person and who isn't, who benefits and who suffers, who lives—and who dies (Lundskow, 2012: 131-132).

This power is real in the sense that the participation in what Lundskow (2019) has called the "carnivalized ethnonationalism" of Trump rallies, is participation in a real movement that really brought Trump to power and thereby enacts real violence and domination against its 'others', such as immigrants (cf. Giroux, 2011: 95-100). But it is also a spectacular and illusory power because the projective identification with Trump is an illusion. His supporters are not him. He is not them. He is a billionaire member of the super-rich whose project is the plundering of society and the state on behalf of that class of which he is a member.

Just as Trump is both Carnival King and a real king, he channels the anger generated by the narcissistic wound, and the sense of betrayal and broken promise, back into support for the very class and system responsible for that betrayal. Channeling fury with the technocratic liberalism blamed for the betrayal, Trumpian carnival took over a hollowed-out public sphere

and political process that had reduced itself to empty spectacle (Wolin, 2008; Mair, 2013; Kellner, 2016). Trump moved into a space vacated by the pre-existing "omni-crisis of the institutions" (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 197; see also Grossberg, 2018: 35), i.e. the decline of the legitimacy of **mediating** institutions. Into this institutional vacuum moves capital in its most predatory and parasitic form, assuming direct control of the state. As Lawrence Grossberg has said, what is taking place "**under the cover of chaos,**" or, I would say, equivalently, under the cover of carnival, is not only the takeover but the dismantling of the modern ('administrative') state by corporations and even the breakdown of the distinction between corporate and state power (Grossberg, 2018: 136-142).

Conclusion: The Carnival of Capital

With his business dealings in real estate and casinos, frequently operating in a grey zone between legitimate business and organized crime (Johnston, 2017), Trump is the embodiment of the new bubble economy, based on finance, insurance, and real estate, or FIRE. Trump University epitomized Trump's approach: it was an empty shell of hype (Zimbardo and Sword, 2017: 25-26; Johnston, 2017: 117-125). The rise of the FIRE economy has been continually intertwined with economic and social crisis. Indeed, as Naomi Klein has argued, we have entered a period of "disaster capitalism" which thrives off crises and shocks to make money and to intimidate electorates (Klein 2007: 168). These interconnected sectors have become dominant as manufacturing has declined. As Eric Janszen notes, the FIRE economy relies on inherently unstable and crisis-ridden asset price markets (Janszen, 2008: 40-41). As a result, FIRE depends on governmental and central bank action, effectively as the insurer of last resort, to prop up asset prices, as in the TARP bank bailout of 2008, the maintenance of low interest rates, and the trillions of dollars made available by Trump to the banks and corporations as a response to the coronavirus pandemic (Beams, 2011, 2020). Capital extracts public funds to prop itself up, while, under the rule of finance capital, the nation-state treats the national population as disposable, even expendable. Trump's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has combined acute concern for the reaction of the stock market, with indifference to the wellbeing of the population, evidenced by insufficient tests and slow and chaotic implementation of emergency measures (Newmyer, 2020; Kishore and North, 2020). The Trump administration's dismantling of the administrative state meant, for example, the ending, just two months before the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in China, of a pandemic early-warning program established by the U.S. Agency for International Development (Baumgaertner and Rainey, 2020).

The financialized bubble economy allows capital to, temporarily, float free from the long-term stagnation of the real economy and the long-term declining rate of profit. But this comes at the expense of economic stability. Financialization is symptomatic of deeper obstacles to profit-making in the labor process in the manufacture of commodities in which intense international competition under conditions of globalization combines with long-term stagnation (Foster and Magdoff, 2009; Harman 2009; Chesnais 2016; Kliman 2011; Brenner 2006). As it floats free from the real economy, capital severs its connection to any territory. Material production is itself de-territorialized as production can be moved globally and as supply chains extend globally. This allows capital to free itself from concern with the reproduction of any population.

Financial journalist Jeremy Warner writes in the right-wing Daily Telegraph in the U.K. that "from an entirely disinterested economic perspective, the COVID-19 might even prove mildly

beneficial in the long term by disproportionately culling elderly dependents" (Warner, 2020). This is not an aberrant comment but fits into an increasing tendency among the ruling class and its spokespeople to suggest that advances in medical care are creating an economic burden in the form of an aging population (Brown, 2012; Randall 2012, 2013, 2013a, 2017). Warner's "entirely disinterested economic perspective" is the perspective of capital, which is "entirely disinterested" in populations that are not a source of surplus-value. Trump's appointment, at the start of his administration, of the billionaire corporate raider and asset stripper, Carl Icahn, to an advisor position, lays bare the connection between Trump as a politician and the financialization processes that disorganize economic production and undermine society, for example closing down factories, firing workers, and closing hospitals because money can be more easily made elsewhere (Martin 2016; Martin, 2020; Cramer, 2020).

Capital demands that the state withdraw from the project of organizing national society, except externally through police coercion. Capital has relentlessly imposed dispossession and disposability within the United States as well as globally (Giroux 2003, 2006, 2012; Evans and Giroux, 2015: 45-74; Sassen, 2014; Beckett and Herbert, 2009). As financialized capital abandoned and rejected the Keynesian-Fordist welfarist project of societalization within the nation-state, the ruling class withdrew support from the mediating institutions and professions that had been responsible for the 'pattern maintenance' of integrative social order within the nation-state. In sharp contrast to mediation and societalization through the Keynesian state, the ruling class now turns the state into a more direct instrument of extraction from society, what James K. Galbraith (2009) calls a "Predator State." Intolerant of any concession to the human needs of the working class and with no stake left in social order apart from the barest maintenance of law to protect property, the ruling class increasingly asserts its power to rule directly. The Predator State means bailouts for the banks, coupled with debtors prison for the working class (ACLU, 2010; Brown, 2010).

Trump is a manifestation of the shift to direct rule by capital that began in the New York City bankruptcy of 1975 (Moore, 2010: 3). It took even more extreme form in the Detroit bankruptcy of 2013 in which Michigan Governor Rick Schnyder appointed corporate bankruptcy lawyer Kevin Orr as Emergency Manager with draconian powers to impose cuts and shut-offs in public services (White 2013). Flint, Michigan was also under emergency managers when it implemented the criminal decision to switch the water supply to the industrially polluted Flint River, resulting in mass lead poisoning (Huxtabook, 2016). The turn to direct rule by capital is illustrated by Hillary Clinton's ingratiating statement at a Goldman Sachs event that "You know, I would like to see more successful business people run for office. I really would like to see that because I do think, you know, you don't have to have 30 billion, but you have a certain level of freedom" (quoted in Carter 2016). The Democratic primaries of 2016 featured no less than two billionaire candidates in Tom Steyer and Michael Bloomberg. The billionaire President instantiates a broader impatience among the super-rich with the mediations of bourgeois democracy and a desire to rule directly. At the same time, the legalized bribery of campaign financing and lobbying practices in the U.S. assures ruling class control over the 'democratic' political process. For such reasons, Michael Hudson says that we have a "financialized democracy" which is equivalent to "oligarchy" (Hudson, 2010: 442; see also Gill 2019).

The ruling class's abandonment of mediating institutions and refusal and undoing of past social settlements is a response to the imperatives of global competition and the opportunities of globalization. The pressures of globalization have intensified rivalries between capitalist nation-

states and between the major imperialist powers (Saccarelli and Varadarajan, 2015: 206-217). And capital at the same time is able to escape the restrictions of national boundaries. Under these conditions, ruling classes are increasingly unwilling to allow any concessions through nation-states to secure the wellbeing of their populations. This is particularly true of the United States of America and the abandonment of populations, seen in New Orleans, Puerto Rico, and Flint, Michigan is now generalized to the whole population as a result of the criminally negligent failure of the U.S. government to prepare for COVID-19 pandemic. Chris Hedges writes, "The malaise that infects Americans is global. Hundreds of millions of people have been severed by modernity from traditions, beliefs, and rituals, as well as communal structures, which kept them rooted. They have been callously cast aside by capitalism as superfluous." (Hedges, 2018: 177) However, the particular predicament of the American working class is not that it has been severed from tradition, but that it has been cut off from **modernity**. What has become more and more apparent is that rather than substituting a new social settlement in place of the Keynesian-Fordist post-war compact, neoliberalism is fundamentally socially corrosive (Derber, 2013).

The hollowed-out state, a vehicle for corporate plunder, is a void. This void is personified in the narcissistic character of Donald Trump. Tony Schwartz, who ghostwrote the book, The Art of the Deal, that created Trump's public image, said that what struck him about the real Trump, not the fictional figure he created through his prose, was "his willingness to run over people, the gaudy, tacky, gigantic obsessions, the absolute lack of interest in anything beyond power and money." This was a man without interiority, driven "by an insatiable hunger for 'money, praise, and celebrity.'" Schwartz sees Donald Trump as "a living black hole" (quoted in Mayer 2016; see also Schwartz, 2017: 72). As the Carnival King of capital, Trump is the personal embodiment of anomie.

Endnotes

1. "Keeping Up with the Kardashians," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keeping_Up_with_the_Kardashians (accessed March 22, 2020).

2. On Trump's narcissistic defenses against shame, see Frank, 2018.

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The Social Crises, Political Conflicts and Cultural Contradictions of "Nixonland:" Tracing Constitutional Crisis in the USA from Nixon to Trump[*]

Timothy W. Luke

Many developments, like greater domestic turmoil, economic dislocation, social immobility, and political gridlock, suggest "the public" and "the private" are different domains with the US than they were decades ago in 1969 when President Nixon entered office. The constitutional state, as a theory and set of practices in the USA in the Nixon era was put under tremendous strains, and it seems clear that those pressures fractured it. After Vietnam, stagflation, Watergate, and the transitional Ford Administration, has it ever been the same? The Reagan-Bush assault on the New Deal and Great Society as well as the essentially permanent mobilization for war in the Middle East since 1991 all should force us to conduct a radical check-up of the body politic, and ask if The Constitution is, in fact, the nation's benchmark for foundational law. This paper argues that major political and cultural shifts within the USA, as it has faced these new challenges since the 1970s that have been both domestic and global in nature, suggest that its 1787 Constitution no longer organically underpins the nation's dominant modes of the governance, principles of sovereignty, or notions of political legitimacy, as they have been expressed since 1969 or 2001 in the larger New World Order organized in Washington, D.C.

Introduction

On November 9, 2016, millions of Americans were jolted by the astounding victory of Donald J. Trump over Hilary Clinton in a very close presidential election. Many asked what just happened, how could this be, where did this come from? This analysis suggests it began in unsettled battles still being waged from decades ago. On January 20, 1969, a member of the age cohort many regard as "The Greatest Generation," Richard M. Nixon took the oath of office as President of the United States.

Five years and 201 days later on August 9, 1974, he resigned to avoid a Senate trial on articles of impeachment from the House of Representatives after committing a series of acts that Congress

and many American citizens regarded as not faithfully executing his duties as President of the United States, namely, to "preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States." In the five decades since 1969, however, it is apparent that Nixon ironically fulfilled the prophetic observation he made in the second sentence of his First Inaugural Address: "Each moment in history is a fleeting time, precious and unique. But some stand out as moments of beginning, in which courses are set that shape decades or centuries" (Nixon, 1969).

During his fleeting moment in history, Nixon's years in the White House steered America down a different course, which has tested its body politic over the decades since 1968. Indeed, the divisive politics of his electoral campaign and presidency enabled the emergence of today's highly polarized, truly inegalitarian, and sullenly nationalist times in "The Trump Zone" (Luke, 2016) by inventing the dark political imaginaries of "Nixonland."

Given the open hostilities and boiling anxieties, which have wracked Nixonland since 1968, the USA has gradually failed as a superpower, after dreaming during brighter days of opening "A New Frontier" and "The Great Society" for all Americans in the Kennedy-Johnson era. The USA's largely GOP presidential administrations since 1968, despite brief respites under Carter, Clinton, and Obama, have failed, economically and politically, to cope with the tough challenges placed before three generations of Americans. After the relative triumphs of the New Deal and World War II, the "**Trente Glorieuses**" of general growth and prosperity after 1945 are barely remembered by many Americans, but that memory is charged indistinctly with "greatness." Back in everyday life, the darker gloom of the deadlocked armistice after war in Korea, racial conflicts still simmering from the civil rights movement, the Vietnam debacle, senseless Cold War struggles, the collapse of the USSR, the 9/11 attacks, endless wars in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and the economic dislocation of many small and great recessions coldly shadow most Americans, especially as they "shelter in place" during the global COVID-19 pandemic that burst forth during the 2020 lunar new year.

The allegorical notion of "Nixonland," then, is not just about one Republican president. Rather it tracks, as Perlstein (2001) argues, a turbulent on-going reconfiguration of social/political/cultural imaginaries animating America's body politic as it continues to grapple with the still potent knock-on effects of tremendous turmoil kicked up since the 1960s. These cultural conflicts, economic divisions, and social forces are greater than those that are usually reduced to today's alt-right "populism," but such smoldering conflicts are essential elements for the crisis-ridden workings of Donald J. Trump's electoral campaigns and presidential administration.

Sometimes envisioned as suburbia's "Silent Majority," other times regarded as "clingers to guns and God," and at other moments dismissed as "the Deplorables," these social forces are very much in play today as a base of the Trump administration. As that large "majority minority" of white, older, once moderate bloc of "the American people," they have been hounded continuously since the Carter years in a permanent political campaign to control the White House by the shape-shifting coalitions of would-be ruling elites. As the Cold War-era bipartisan establishment cracked during the lost wars in Southeast Asia (1965-1975) and largely fragmented in the lost wars in Southwest Asia (1990-2020), despite "winning the Cold War" against the Soviet Union during 1989-1991, a relative know-nothing petty billionaire like Trump could fill these civic voids by promising to "Make America Great Again." Such seismic social shifts must be considered to comprehend fully the USA's current degraded conditions from their origins in Nixonland. It is not the whole story, but the continuing constitutional crises Nixon's administration triggered are real. From first promising "peace with honor" in Vietnam, and starting a "war of choice" with the

1970 Cambodian invasion, launching the Watergate affair to crush his personal enemies, agreeing to nuclear parity over superiority to gain détente with Moscow, declaring a War on Drugs to police the nation's cities and underclass, and then declaring admiration for Communist China to geopolitically contain Moscow with Beijing, the conditions of "this is not normal" in the White House during 2020 become slightly more sensible by rethinking key events in Nixonland since 1970.

To map these troubling qualities, this study unfolds in six parts. After scanning the scenes on this stage in Section I, Section II probes the contradictions in the USA's constitutional order that many have seen leading "in the future" to "a constitutional crisis." Section III calls it like it is: this future opened decades ago, and that "constitutional" crisis already happened. Today, public affairs openly are shaped now by the workings of a new "Crisis Constitution." Section IV asks plainly "what Constitution" are we worried about--the one frozen in solemn print from 1787 or the one that has been evolving in moments of sustained panics and manic chaos since 1898? Section V maps the erosion of the 1787 Constitution in the crises reconstructing the USA from 1899 to 2019. And, Section VI explores how the spirit of democracy is being eroded under this Crisis Constitution and the defense of America's empire of bases.

I. The Birth of a New Nation: Nixonland

Ultimately, the sagas of Nixonland are about how the American electorate -- "the white majority" or "non-white minority," "the affluent society" or "the other America" -- whether from the "red" or "blue" states, has come to see the USA trapped "in a pitched battle between the forces of darkness and the forces of light" (Perlstein, 2009: xii) since 1968. The relatively moderate bi-partisan electorate that has accepted Harry S Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and John Fitzgerald Kennedy as presidents split apart during the years after JFK's assassination. Yet, one must recall how sharply contested Kennedy's vision of America was in 1961. In his only inaugural address, he made a provocative claim that had never was made good by "the Greatest Generation" of which he spoke: "the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans -- born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage -- and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world" (Kennedy, 1961).

How disciplined by a bitter peace, how unwilling to permit the undoing of human rights anywhere, and how committed to waging these struggles at home and abroad were Americans remain very contestable claims. By 1964, the electorate was divided deeply over which figure, program or party could represent its future best. Most citizens brushed off JFK's heroic declarations. Instead, many voters in both parties took to heart Senator Barry Goldwater's angry call to the 1964 Republican National Convention, asserting "that extremism in the defense of liberty is not vice," and "that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue" (Goldwater, 1964).

Whether it has been for Goldwater, Nixon, Reagan, a Bush, McCain or Trump, on the one hand, or Johnson, McGovern, Carter, Gore, Obama or a Clinton, on the other hand, "the voter" since 1964 increasingly has pulled the lever at the polls for her or his chosen candidate as ticket-splitting independents. Such voting trends by independents, who have much weaker or no ties to the national parties and Cold War-era bipartisan institutions that emerged after 1945 has grown stronger, in turn, for over five decades, since many voters believe that to do otherwise "seemed to

court civilizational chaos" (Perlstein, 2009: xiii). For over five decades, thanks to the institutional collapse of the Democratic party after its disastrous 1968 campaigns, and the GOP's mass media merchandising of President M. Nixon and Vice-President Spiro T. Agnew as slickly packaged upright moral alternatives to "the counter-culture" of the civil rights, anti-war, women's rights, and environmental movement policies tolerated by Hubert H. Humphrey in the Democratic Party, Nixon's reengineering of national campaign finance laws did change parties and elections.

Instead of organized groups of permanent partisans devoted to disciplined political debate, the national political parties morphed into endless fund-raisers, public and private monies supported televisual modes of campaigning rooted in mass consumer marketing of people as products in Nixonland. This cynical shift essentially also allowed the national political parties to declare themselves "independent" of their voters and elections by continuously soliciting campaign and PAC funds from anyone who would contribute at any time, energy, and money to them. The electorate's hope to avoid disruptive cultural, economic, political, and social crises largely came to naught after Vice-President Agnew and President Nixon respectively resigned from their elected offices under thick clouds of corruption, chaos, and criminality on October 10, 1973 and August 9, 1974.

Instead of Camelot, during Nixon's "precious and unique moments of beginning" still lit by JFK's "torch that passed" to "the Greatest Generation," America witnessed the emergence of Nixonland. Beset by Watergate, Billygate, Iran/Contragate, the Savings and Loan crisis, Whitewater, Monicagate, 9/11, Iraq's "missing" weapons of mass destruction, Abu Ghraib, the VA Hospital scandals, Hilary Clinton's e-mail fiascos, Benghazi, and the Obamacare feud along with so many other economic crashes, institutional failures, and cultural conflicts since 1968, many pundits sincerely opined "America was ready for a real change" in 2016. And, in a way, America got what it supposedly wanted.

Since January 2017, the USA has been led in a fashion by the Trump White House, which in the assessment of a former presidential Chief-of-State, General John F. Kelly, is occupied by "an idiot. It is pointless to try to convince him of anything. He's gone off the rails. We are in crazy town" (Woodward, 2018: 286). To see "the Trump Zone" developing out of "Nixonland" five decades later can be confirmed by noting other parallels. As statesmen, both Nixon and Trump campaigned under heavy clouds of dark suspicion: Nixon tainted by prior electoral losses plus his angry dark disposition, and Trump by his buffoonish "reality TV star" status with no prior service in political office. Like Trump in 2016, Nixon came into office under doubt as a minority president. Nixon, due to the third American Independent Party votes taken by George Wallace and Curtis LeMay, and Trump also due to a lower popular national vote but higher Electoral College count. Both presidents had GOP majorities in the House and Senate their first two years in office. Yet, after tense months of frantic activity at home and abroad to legitimize his mandate, Trump in 2018, like Nixon in 1970, suffered considerable losses in the following mid-term elections, losing leverage to work with some of his own party and with the revitalized Democratic opposition. In turn, both men immediately resented their electoral setbacks, seeing them as vicious efforts to discredit them personally, if not destroy them individually. These perceived and real attacks emboldened both presidents to mercilessly attack any perceived and real enemies to crush them first, even if it meant corrupting the daily operations of the White House and federal government.

Nixon, however, first effectively forged "a public language that promised mastery of the strange new angers, anxieties, and resentments wracking the nation in the 1960s" (Perlstein, 2009: xii), which became the new **lingua franca** of electoral and legislative life of the coming

decades as the never-ending stories of the 1960s continued in civic life. Thanks to Steve Bannon and Kelly Anne Conway, Trump refined this crude political vulgate as a "reality TV star" and wannabe politico to effectively channel many of Americans' fears about the post-9/11 world with its fruitless wars, economic dislocations, cultural apprehensions, and racial reactions into what Nixon's campaigns also reprocessed as "**voting** issues" (Perlstein, 2009: xii). The Trump team pushed back against the post-1991 New World Order of globalization, Silicon Valley innovation, multiculturalism, and establishment elitism that "the Clintons" allegedly had helped construct. This culture warfare was not unlike Nixon's sad desire to eclipse the telegenic glory of JFK's and Jackie's Camelot years after his humiliating loss in 1960.

Certainly, there are other factors at work in the current constitutional convulsions shrouded by the endless carnival side-show provided by Donald J. Trump's election as President of the United States on November 9, 2016. The known unknown roles, as the Mueller Report detailed, played by various foreign intelligence operatives, backroom lobbying in Ukraine, and questionable real estate deals at home and abroad helped to leverage the Trump organization's success with endless unpaid campaign publicity on the nightly news. In distorting public debate, the information warfare conducted by the Russian Federation against the Democratic Party, the Clinton campaign, and social media platforms in the USA during 2016 was only the tip of the iceberg. None of this was "normal," but neither were the paranoid "black bag" and "plumber" operations directed from the White House at the core of Watergate. These extraordinary 2016 events, along with many other scandals, which were only partially uncovered in the 2018-2019 House investigation, of the manipulative Ukrainian arms deal fiasco behind the two articles of Trump's impeachment in the House during 2019 clearly also are "not normal."

A. The Context of Current Chaos

Trump's strange desultory efforts to gain national attention as a political contender began in the 1990s, when he made more than one quixotic self-guided foray into partisan political candidacy with other mass media phenomena, like Jesse Ventura, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sarah Palin, during the turbulent years following Y2K. Ordinarily, such antics would have been dismissed, like Pat Paulson's repeated efforts to run for president from TV Sit-Com Land from the 1960s to 1990s as comedic. After the devastation of the Great Recession and the election of Barack Hussein Obama as President in 2008 and 2012, however, the electorate's mood had darkened. In turn, Donald J. Trump became a real contender to preside over the affairs of Nixonland.

In retrospect, Trump's erratic extremism, however, shaped his agenda to "Make America Great Again" at least since his attention-grabbing adherence to "the birther" movement's intense antipathy to Barack Obama since his election to the U.S. Senate, and then President of the United States. Unwilling to accept an African-American native from the state of Hawai'i, devotees of birtherism ran smear campaigns against Obama's Kenyan father, Peace Corps volunteer mother, and establishment liberal career. Trying to "out him" as an Alinsky radical, Islamic fundamentalist, academic Marxist, and, most importantly, a foreign alien whose allegedly bogus citizenship coupled with these other alleged suspect proclivities, birthers successfully focused some white voters' rage about a black president -- by transforming blatant racism into technicalities mired in immigration rules and residence laws -- in Trump's immoderate campaign to discredit Obama's legitimacy. How could such a person, especially an African-American, serve as an elected official in the nation's highest office? Once again one sees more of the bitter fruits of Barry Goldwater's

challenge to the American consensus five decades earlier (Perlstein, 2001) in his attacks on LBJ, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the Great Society, driven by what he boasted was only well-intentioned "extremism in defense of liberty."

While feigning complete loyalty to the USA, Bannon and Trump manipulated such anti-Obama extremism tirelessly. Their goals were obvious: to discredit the man, his political party, the electoral system, and ultimately the US Constitution, because Obama is black, "played by the rules," beat an American POW hero from the Vietnam War, and then became President. Despite the aura of good racial relations in America that circulates through the media, the Trump vote registers a still white majority nation-state reacting to on-going aftershocks of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Likewise, for much of Black America despite Obama's 2008 and 2012 victories, many conditions are just as bad as ever, or worse. From President George W. Bush's bungled recovery efforts in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast after Hurricanes Katrina and Wilma, the collapse of Detroit as a functioning city, rising inner-city black-on-black violence tolerated by often white-dominated governments, and the personal security issues behind the Black Lives Matter movement, it is clear things are not improving in the perpetually underemployed, more jobless, less wealthy, and deeply disrespected black communities across the country. Despite Trump's promises in his 2017 inaugural address, "this American carnage" has not stopped "right here and stops right now" (Trump, 2017). Instead, Steve Bannon, Kellyanne Conway, and Stephen Miller leveraged the same mean resentment among the Silent Majority, which Wallace and Nixon easily tapped in 1968 about Black America, to give the Trump administration real momentum in 2016 and after.

B. Crisis, Constitution, and Conflict

There are other structural challenges in the twenty-first century, which is increasingly illiberal, undemocratic and misgoverned, to the liberal democratic model of government, even though they have been proliferating for 50 years after JFK's failed misadventures at home and abroad ended in 1963. In many ways, the elections of 1964, 1966, 1968, 1970, and 1972 anticipate those of 2010, 20012, 2014, 2016, and 2018. Recognizing how close "Nixonland" is to the "Trump Zone" takes on new importance for any study of sovereignty and freedom in America. Despite much talk, most institutional efforts to enhance American democracy -- more party primaries, voter campaign financing, primary clustering contests, etc. -- since 1968 have not led to much success. Constitutional theory, modes of sovereignty, and collective choice construction should come into sharper focus, because Citizens United, dark money in elections, more PACs with narrow agendas, and new social media are fragmenting the civic workings of America's political processes.

A rhetorical dimension always runs through constitutional theory, because any constitution should present a people's self-understanding of its political identity. Yet, the spirit of many traditional narratives has been lost in Nixonland for five decades. Political representation, order, and legitimacy must involve more than literary, mythic or theological projects spinning up thin visions of national identity every two years to tickle the people's self-conceptions of their community, nationality and/or unity (Hartz, 1955; Huntington, 1968; and, Lowi, 1979). After the organized deceptions of the Nixon White House to contain the counter-culture, degrade the Democratic Party, and juice up the national economy, even these basic rhetorical necessities are ignored. Instead, tales of misdeeds from the hounding of Martin Luther King, Jr. by the

FBI to revolutionary delusions of the Weather Underground have spread the seeds of fugitive democracy, class conflict, inverted totalitarianism or imperial decline broadly since August 9, 1974. When Nixon flew away in Marine One from the White House South Lawn with a pardon in the offing and many other long national nightmares were not ending, they were waiting to begin. Here, then are a few spans in the "invisible bridge" from Nixon to Reagan to Trump (Perlstein, 2015).

The Founders sought to enable "the People of the United States" to create a more perfect union in 1787. "The People," of course, were then a small powerful minority of the population: white, male, propertied, with trades or a competence. They were divided by economic interests, urban/rural divisions, sectional competition, foreign origin, and religious conviction. In an imperfect manner, and with considerable violence, this union of thirteen states launched their rough-and-tumble struggles to govern.

In unending battles over race, class, faith, gender, and region, this state struggles to establish some measures of justice, insure a bit of domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote with difficulty the general welfare, and slowly secure some blessings of liberty for itself, always at the cost of other peoples, over 230 years of struggle. Nonetheless, the full scope of this posterity is still to be determined. Their document superseded the initial Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union adopted during 1777 and ratified in 1781, and propounded new principles of political representation, while wrestling with an evolving self-understanding of "The People's" identity. Even then, its governance unfolded in highly contested conditions of rule from the initial factional fights between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists in the 1790s to those between "red states" and "blue states" today since the 1990s.

After campaigning to attain "peace with honor" in Vietnam during 1968, Nixon expanded the Vietnamese war by invading Cambodia, hit North Vietnam with sustained aerial bombing, and set the stage for South Vietnam's collapse, which became a frantic withdrawal in panic under President Ford in 1975. What has enabled the government operatives of Nixonland to continue pursuing such military interventions, and remain engaged in a permanent low-intensity war for 50 years? Since the McKinley administration, years of peace for America have been the exception, and war is the norm. A volatile blend of not-peace/not-war has spliced together pitched battles during openly declared "war time" with tense alerts during "peace time" from the Spanish-American War through today's Global War on Terror. This is not what the 1787 Constitution was designed to promote and protect.

II. Domestic Tranquility Lost, Common Defense Above All

The prevailing view of the USA in 1991 was glowing: it had won the Cold War, which clicked into place during 1946-1947 around the world as the US/Soviet "special relationship" of 1941-1945 shattered. It had also successfully concluded "the Gulf War" against Iraq and liberated Kuwait from Baghdad's control after its backers in Moscow disappeared. For many, its everyday governance was effective, its constitutional order was solid, and its political culture generally tended toward democratic goals.

Still, a generation later, grim facts must be recalled. The Republic definitely has been at war since the turn of the twenty-first century in the wake of Islamic terrorist attack against the **USS Cole** on October 12, 2000 (during the very close George W. Bush versus Al Gore, Jr. presidential race) in Yemen's Aden Harbor by Al-Qaeda operatives. These Islamic terrorist offensives deepened

on 9/11/2001. Tallies made under the Obama Administration revealed American military units were engaged in combat, special missions and/or advising/training activities in 134 countries during 2015 (Turse, 2015). These deployments involve defensive occupations, open hostilities, or secret incursions from small stations located across the world. Such quasi-legal state actions clearly are the foreign entanglements The Founders warned America to avoid.

The two trends are quite contradictory. One must ask why establishing justice, promoting general welfare, and ensuring domestic tranquility of Nixonland in 2020 requires providing for the nation's common defense with a $700 billion budget and troops in 134 countries? Nixon's promise in 1968 to bring "Peace with Honor" in Vietnam brought about the shameful strategic defeat in 1973, 1974, 1975, following years of brutal technowar by a conscript army. After Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, the Pentagon ended the draft and went "professional" to recruit its servicemen and women, and then more high-tech to wage its permanent quasi-wars around the planet. Today's constitutional discourses about foreign policy and executive war powers appear to perpetuate the elaborate mystification of darker logics from Nixonland behind the bright sunny platitudes rehearsed over and over about "American Greatness" in the age of Trump. Four years after his election, Trump has weakened, mismanaged, and abused the nation's military capabilities around the world, but he has not pulled away from the material imperatives of this empire.

America's political culture, diplomatic practice, and legal constitution are at odds, and have been at least since 1890, because they mystify how the expansionist settler, military and entrepreneurial colonialism behind America's founding has continued to be perversely at work. Hence, the USA remains a nation at arms fighting countless enemies on many "new frontiers," still paying out on the promise made by JFK in his only Inaugural Address, "that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty" (Kennedy, 1961).

American democracy has been regarded as inseparable from liberalism (Hartz, 1955; Huntington, 1968), but this liberal culture has also proven impossible to disentangle from imperialism. The challenges of settling most of North America from 1776 to 1890 focused the energies of the original 13 independent American states (and 35 subsequent new states admitted to the Union from 1865 to 1912) in the cultural, economic, and political patterns of settler colonialism. These routines have not been left behind, or out, of everyday governance.

Manifest Destiny was the larger ethico-political design Americans regarded as a unique historic opportunity in 1789. As President Washington hinted at his first Inauguration in New York, asserting the new country "would never disregard the eternal rules of order and right, which Heaven itself has ordained. And since the preservation of the sacred fire of Liberty, and the destiny of the Republican Model of Government, are justly considered a deeply, perhaps as finally stated, on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people" (https//:www.archives.gov/exhibits/American_originals/inaugtx.html). Clearly, the experiment continues until today.

Ironically, a comparable world-historical opportunity was entrusted in 1989 in the hands of the American people, as "Die Mauer" was breached by East Berliners with the fragmentation of the Communist bloc, leaving the USA as the last great superpower still standing. The global hegemony the nation gained from 1898 to 1945, in fits and starts, was most militarily manifest in 1945. The job of realizing "the Republican form of government for all" has been fumbled, however, badly since George H. W. Bush's efforts to build his "New World Order" (Bacevich, 2020).

The putatively "short-term" emergency measures to police the "air-space" of the Middle East after America's mobilization to liberate in Kuwait during 1990-1991 afforded Washington rich material opportunities for a new type of quasi-colonizing hegemony through "no-fly zones," "democratic transition planning," and "market economy building" in failed states, rogue states, transitional states and other areas of "hybrid governance," across Southwest Asia. This defense imaginary, which is sustained by the Trump White House, has grown into today's strange patchwork empire of around 800 bases today in 134 countries (Vine, 2015).

This strategic opportunity was at first not a highlight of the Clinton years, despite its Bosnian and Somalian misadventures, but the rise of the more nationalist Republican agendas in the intensely contested 1994, 1996, 1998, and 2000 elections redirected the USA by the turn of the twenty-first century toward managing its uneasy world hegemony through this "empire of bases" (Johnson, 2005). Regrettably, the resolve behind this new American militarism has drawn more from **braggadocio** and **illusio** rather blood and iron.

III. The Constitutional Crisis Already Has Happened

In 2020, hard questions must be asked about America's political culture and legal order. Some see a constitutional crisis in the offing as the Trump White House is occupied by a tinhorn real estate mogul, who wants grandiose military parades in Washington to eclipse those of Bastille Day in Paris, a medieval-style wall running along the Mexican border from San Diego, CA to Brownsville, TX, and a new Space Force to militarize inter-planetary space. Instead of assuming that The Constitution of 1787 remains a written document still living in the hearts and minds of most American citizens, and guiding their elected officials in Washington, DC in 2020, what if something else happened?

During the Cold War America won, has it, in fact, lost its republican order to a security state, hybrid war, and global neoliberalism? And, is the full measure of today's degraded, disrupted, and dysfunctional civic condition revealed in new scripts, like the nascent, or occluded, new illiberal constitution being tweeted out daily since November 2016 by the Trump administration or Bernie Sanders' vainglorious calls for "a revolution" on his 2016 and 2020 campaign stump? Trump's two government shutdowns of 2017, 2018-2019 are not signs of "a constitutional crisis," they articulate instead the latest workings of a "Crisis Constitution" born from the Cold War and its aftermath, coming now into full bloom.

Most native-born American citizens would fail the basic United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) civics test given to new immigrants for naturalization. They are unable to explain the Bill of Rights and its protections beyond perhaps the NRA-subsidized awareness of everyone's Second Amendment freedoms. Many citizens do not get off the sofa to vote in most elections outside of presidential contest years; even then, turnout is usually weak. Since the election of Donald J. Trump as the forty-fifth President of the United States, cable network anchors and politicos at all levels of government from both major parties fret off-the-air and in public almost 24x7 about how this or that tweet from the White House will soon trigger "a constitutional crisis." They missed the memo: the Crisis Constitution already is in force.

This crisis was triggered decades ago under "progressives," like Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, who embraced extra-constitutional military adventures in the Philippines and Panama as well as during World War I. With Truman, Eisenhower, LBJ, Nixon, Carter and Reagan, disregard for constitutional constraints during the Cold War, the institutional implosion

was ready for George H. W. Bush as he and Bill Clinton failed to democratize and develop more of the former Soviet bloc. The new century -- under both George W. Bush and Barack Obama -- brought the eager imposition of ever-changing, open-ended, ad hoc writs of emergency action for military interventions and economic rescues. This pervasive "Crisis Constitution," then, has congealed more firmly from 9/11 through the Great Recession. It is hiding in plain sight in clouds of e-mails leading to bad decisions, hasty rationalizations in Oval Office addresses to the nation, and heavily redacted executive agency documents (Bacevich, 2011).

Executive branch "decision-makers" have given a more elusive direction, energy, and substance to the Crisis Constitution during this century, which operates as a thinly mystified deliberative dictatorship for executive overreach, legislative timidity, and judicial intrusion during both wartime and peacetime. Despite the new social freedom and group liberation "won in the streets by the people" from the 1960s to the 1990s, American political life since Y2K has become more unequal, illiberal, and oligarchical.

Since 1969-1970, the national budget has rarely been balanced. Moreover, new "off-budget spending" enacted the New Deal and Great Society has made a mockery of fiscal discipline by Congress and the President. Even though the twentieth century brought the costs of four wars, the Great Depression, and 1970s stagflation to the U.S. Treasury, the nation's sovereign debt was slightly less than $1 trillion in 1980 when President Reagan was elected. It was passing $23 trillion in February 2020 with the White House eagerly planning to add $2 to $5 trillion more debt by 2025 "to grow the economy" thanks to Congress rubber-stamping new tax reforms, government reorganizations, and new revenue schemes from Reagan to Trump.

 The sudden eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, however, forced President Trump to sign an immediate $2 trillion bailout measure in the Corona Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) on March 27, 2020 to prop up the US and world economies for 90 days. Already too little, too late, this emergency act surely will be only the first of many during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 to protect key industries, shelter vital infrastructure, and maintain small businesses. While the Senate, House, and the President tussled in the ill-conceived effort to impeach and convict Trump of the abuse of power and obstruction of Congress in January and February 2020, the clear signs of this nascent pandemic were plainly evident but downplayed in the White House. In turn, the desperate struggle against this "invisible enemy" is certain to add trillions more debt in the coming months to stave off a global economic depression.

The ever-shifting ad hoc provisos of this Crisis Constitution ignore the 1787 Constitution, openly allow black budgets, accept continuing budget resolutions, and tolerate off-budget trust funds in defiance of Articles I, II, and VI to fund the government by regular legislation. Even though the USA commands, controls, and communicates endlessly the force of the world's greatest military apparatus to defend "the Homeland," the winning electorate in 2016 still felt the need to build a "huge, beautiful, and impenetrable wall" along America's southern border from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. And, Mexico better pay to build this wall, because as 2019's books are closed, on February 2020 – on the eve of the 2020 stock market crash and global COVID-19 epidemic hitting the US -- the Republic's ordinary Federal debt was at least $23.4 trillion plus with $9 trillion more in agency debt (FHLB, GNMA, Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, etc.).

Deficit spending is a keystone of the Crisis Constitution whose governance is sustained by well-padded military budgets, non-discretionary sustained government transfer payments to retirees, the elderly, the poor, disabled, veterans, and federal pensioners, and a commitment to backstop the U.S. dollar as the world's main reserve and exchange currency markets through the

quasi-private Federal Reserve System. Under President Reagan, the USA made the transition from the world's largest creditor to its largest debtor nation around 1986 to sustain the emerging Crisis Constitution. It has never looked back for long, even though budget deficits were supplanted by small surpluses briefly from 1998 to 2001. Accounting for the nation's fiscal solvency at the White House and on Capitol Hill is a perpetual farce, particularly given how current Federal debt liabilities coupled with underfunded Social Security and Medicare pledges probably exceed $65-70 trillion, or slightly over three times the nation's 2019 GDP of $21 trillion (plus or minus a few billion).

The national security state took root in 1947, the hydrogen bomb became operational in 1952, the Soviet Union began unraveling in 1964, civic order itself went into eclipse in 1968, Nixon closed the gold window at the U.S. Treasury and imposed a 10 percent tariff on imported goods in 1971, America "did not come home" in 1972 with McGovern's failed campaign against the most corrupt presidency in the USA since Harding; and "morning never really came" for most Americans in the Reagan years (Perlstein, 2015). Fears of a constitutional crisis evoked by politicos and pundits during the Trump impeachment drama were groundless because the Crisis Constitution has held sway for decades, as the Senate's cursory dismissal of the House bills of impeachment underscored in February 2020. The TV spectacle of the entire proceedings never captured the public's imagination or ire. Indeed, many voters sullenly shrugged off the outcome as almost insignificant, given how their political identities have been shaped more by the authoritarian assumptions of the Crisis Constitution rather than the fragile parchments on permanent lock-down in the National Archives on Constitution Avenue in Washington, DC. True believers in The Founders can view that 1787 document there most days if the government in not shut-down because the deliberative dictatorship of experts has entombed them in bullet-proof glass, inert gas, and bomb-proof vaults that afford a daily performance for the Crisis Constitution as a **deus ex machina** of America's "Charters of Freedom." Since they are not fully in force, they need to be locked down in a secure vault overnight until their viewing by tourists lest they be entirely forgotten. Too few ever learn what The Articles of the Constitution say and mean, but the spectacles of their daily unveiling fascinate visitors eager to see their tax dollars put to good work preserving spectral traces of The Constitution in this edifying fashion.

Greater domestic turmoil, economic dislocation, social immobility, and political gridlock illustrate how "the public" and "the private" spheres are different in 2020 than they were even a generation ago in 1989. The nation's routinized militarism truly now came home with the USA PATRIOT Act and its successive revisions with their open allowance of deliberative authoritarian directives being thrown wildly around at supermax prisons, border detention centers, and torn social safety nets as defense of the homeland.

IV. What Constitution?

In the abstract, the rule of law, liberal education, economic development, and free elections have little chance for effective constitutional governance unless all eligible individual people known as "The People" practice and respect them. Likewise, this engagement must be in accord with the once more universal principles of enlightenment rationality by which this apparatus was propounded. From Russian bot farms skewing political debate on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to Citizens United global transnationals buying electoral influence in America, dysfunctional trends are disturbing how the USA's many peoples are "constituted" as "The People." The efforts

in several states during the Obama and Trump administrations to reorganize voter registration practices, change identity verification, gerrymander electoral districts, and abridge suffrage rights are another set of signs underscoring how the nature and structure of the popular mandate from a sovereign people to their elected officials to uphold The Constitution actually is not being scrupulously heeded.

The 1787 Constitution once might have expressed, even for Schmitt (2008: 59), "the people's self-understanding of its political identity." Yet, who are "The People"? What is their cultural tie to such political identity? How is this link being nurtured as a civic necessity? In actuality, are certain less civic-minded people in authority now mobilizing literary tropes, cultural myths, and increasingly theological visions to generate another dangerously unstable representations of endangerment to animate the Crisis Constitution through more paternalistic, plebiscitary, and predatory powers, aiming "To Make America Great Again"? And, by the same token, why are many individuals and groups who should constitute "The People" basically supporting these efforts?

On one level of symbolic representation, the USA is still an example of a liberal constitution in action, which conforms to Schmitt's notions (2008: 59) of having a constitution in "the absolute sense" inasmuch as one can find "the concrete, collective condition of political unity and social order of a particular state." This national state formed its identity around Manifest Destiny and functioned in some mutable sense as an expansive capitalist power in accord with "its soul, its concrete life, and its individual existence" (Schmitt, 2008: 59-60) at least since its1865 refounding. With its post-bellum state-as-constitution during The Reconstruction, the USA exemplifies "an actually present condition, a **status** of unity and order" (Schmitt, 2008: 60).

In a second sense, this richly nuanced status of unity and order also has served since the Gilded Age as "a special type of political order" to identify and justify "supremacy and subordination" (Schmitt, 2008: 60). Its dominant forms of governance resemble Hobbes' "**status mixtus**," fusing Bodin's popular state (**état populaire**) with Aquinas' democracy (**status popularis**), oligarchy (**status paucorum**), and aristocracy (**status optimatum**) in ways that Polybius imagined the mixed constitution might survive almost endlessly (Schmitt, 2008: 60). Yet, it does not prevent another bolder shadow order, like the Crisis Constitution, from coexisting within its dictates to assure its own endless survival with more than legitimate popular authority.

The third articulation of constitutionality in the USA, then, is captured in Schmitt's notions about the constitution equaling "the principle of the **dynamic emergence** of political **unity**, of the process of constantly renewed **formation** and **emergence** of this **unity** from a fundamental or ultimately effective **power** and **energy**. The state is understood not as something **existing**, resting statically, but as something emerging, as something always **arising** anew. . . out of various opposing interests, opinions, and aspirations" (Schmitt, 2008: 61) from ideologies, markets, and strategies to protect oligarchic groups at the heart of the nation's economy and society.

The scope and depth of these three emergent qualities since the Founding are anchored by the constitutional order's static characteristics, but they also express deep capacities for darker dynamic trends that are unstable, mutable or fluid: "an element of the becoming, though not actually a regulated procedure of "command" prescriptions and attributions" (Schmitt, 2008: 61). In this regard, what has been described as the "special providence" of the United States arguably has contained and channeled at least four distinct formulae, imaginaries or movements of such dynamism, which Walter Russell Mead describes as its four coexisting philosophies of "Hamiltonianism," "Wilsonianism," "Jeffersonianism," and "Jacksonianism" (Mead, 2004: 130-

131). Their uneasy, unchecked, and unbalanced mixtures are, in part, what fuels many deformations behind this current Crisis Constitution.

Trump's disdain for the post-Cold War consensus governments of Bush (41), Clinton, Bush (43), and Obama is rooted in his supporters' ultra-nationalist suspicions about how the world's sole remaining superpower governed its affairs after the collapse of the USSR. Since the Soviet threat disappeared in 1991, failed states, displaced populations, Islamic terrorism, technological innovation, economic dislocations, and illegal migrations all beset Washington's decision-makers during the 1990s and 2000s. The White House, however, did not then put "America First." Whether under Democrats or Republicans, the "America First" agenda, as H. Ross Perot, Patrick Buchanan, Jesse Ventura, and Newt Gingrich tried to articulate it during the 1990s, was dismissed as an unworthy domestic and foreign policy.

Regrettably for some, in the vapors of victory after the Cold War, the GOP establishment and the Project for a New American Century took their evangelizing mission of military incursions for nation-building a bridge too far as they imagined a New World Order in which, as Karl Rove quipped, "we're [the USA] an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality." This declaration implied certain "known unknowns" overseas would not constrain establishment Republicans, like Jim Baker, George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld, in their failed interventions in Mesopotamia and Afghanistan. Furthermore, they also triggered the rise at the home of even more peripheral known unknowns, like Sarah Palin, Donald J. Trump, Bernie Sanders, who were and Howard Schultz ready to "swift boat" the entire Washington establishment since 1989 for its failing vision and mismanagement of the New World Order as an empire.

V. Crumbling Constitutional Order

The architecture of the 1787 Constitution was developed to mobilize the wise checked-and-balanced designs for a separation of powers, as affirmed by Polybius, Machiavelli, Pufendorf, and Montesquieu. By creating institutional counter-weights against the overweening executive, legislative or judicial authority at the federal level as well as within each independent state in the federation, continuity, and conflict-management were maximized. Staggered terms for the executive and legislative authorities, along with open appointments to the judiciary, made factions more difficult to form and then thrive, even though political parties quickly emerged to serve as policy proponents, sectional coalitions, or class advocates. From 1776 to 1861, the American state was largely limited in power, and minimalist in its operation, leaving most governance to the states and counties.

The government plainly supported economic development and territorial expansion, but the engrained order of liberalism in civil society and markets gave local/regional authorities considerable latitude. The struggles over slave or free labor, territorial settlement, domestic manufacture or foreign imports, bank oversight, and monetary policy challenged all levels of government as the Union grew from 13 states to 33 from the 1780s to the 1850s. The outbreak of the Civil War forced the federal government to rethink its role in many dimensions of everyday public life to defeat the secessionist Confederate States of America in war, rebuild their governments under military occupation during Reconstruction, cope with the growth of new industries, and pacify the Trans-Mississippian West to admit another 15 of the lower 48 states into the Union from 1860 to 1912.

During the decades spanning the years until the end of World War II, elite managerialists

and bureaucratic mechanisms needed to operate a more capacious state apparatus gradually were constructed in a manner that pitted the urban and industrial cultures of the Gilded Age and Progressive Eras against the more rural and agricultural cultures of the Founders. By 1883, the Pendleton Act specified how such expert personnel at work at the Federal level would operate. As Michaels notes, "this legislation laid the groundwork for an independent, professional civil service capable of playing a central, rivalrous, and durable role in modern administrative governance" (2017: 70).

In the aftermath of the twentieth century's many bureaucratic exertions to fight World War I and II, control immigration more actively after the 1920s, organize a national income tax, establish a centralized quasi-statal monetary system, manage the economic recovery from the Great Depression, and respond to new geostrategic obligations after V-J Day, Congress essentially ratified the existence of a more powerful "service state" due to its indispensable engagement in everyday life with the Administrative Procedure Act (APA) of 1946.

As Justice Antonin Scalia observed, the APA became, like the Pendleton Act, a political game-changer inasmuch as it unfolded as a "superstatute" (Scalia, 1979: 346) that, in effect, materially supplemented The Constitution. With the acceptance of the Supreme Court and Attorney General, the Administrative Procedure Act evolved tacitly as a codicil to The Constitution by organizing, standardizing, and rationalizing agency regulations and rulings from within Washington itself by giving a Crisis Constitution room to operate. In the shaping of the rising security state, then, the APA opened new ranges of sovereign power to the degree that "rules are generally applicable statement of agency policy that have the force of law. They are, in appearance and effect, agency-made **laws**" (Michaels, 2017: 46), but their scope and impact are like The U.S. Constitution.

As Eskridge and Ferejohn assert, these superstatutes accord close to constitutional significance to certain new legislative actions, which transform the private and public understandings of legality, governance and order after considerable bipartisan debate and acceptance intergenerationally to accept as "normal." Certain aspects of this shift, once admired and accepted by many Democrats and Republicans alike, were President Nixon's Tory environmentalism and New Economic Policy in the 1970s (Eskridge and Ferejohn, 2010: 6-26). The textualist and originalist readings of the 1787 Constitution to oppose the Crisis Constitution's expansion of superstatute authority were articulated by the Rehnquist court after 1986, but this ideological outlook gained only some traction with the appointment of Justices Scalia, Thomas, Gorsuch, and Kavanaugh after 1988. Ironically, such originalist readers of The Constitution maintain illusions of continuity, while they endorse flexible initiatives to introduce new discontinuities.

Such ad hoc improvisations over many years across a wide spectrum of administrative agencies cannot be ignored. With the National Security Act (1947) creating the Defense Department and Central Intelligence Agency under President Truman, The Great Society legislative acts under President Johnson, and then successive rounds of new environmental, privacy, war-making, and workplace legislative actions during the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations, like the National Emergency Act of 1976, the APA comes into its own as an "organizing charter for the administrative state" (Sunstein and Vermeule, 46).

The USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 expressed another superstatute with its multi-pronged measures for enhancing border security, intensifying government surveillance powers, money-laundering countermeasures, loosening of legal impediments in terrorism investigations, supporting victims of terrorism, increasing shared information in critical infrastructure operation, hardening criminal procedures in terrorism cases, and enhancing intelligence community capabilities. Due

to its complex and comprehensive intrusions on ordinary civic freedoms, sunset provisions were embedded in the legislation, and modifications of several sections were made during the Bush (43) and Obama presidencies. Nonetheless, these legislative innovations were only refined and then basically rebranded in the USA FREEDOM Act of 2015 by President Obama.

Along with the Homeland Security Act of 2002 establishing the Department of Homeland Security with its realignments of multiple cabinet-level sub-agencies, intelligence community operations, and border security agencies, the immediate response to the "global war on terror" radically reconfigured the workings of the national security apparatus as well as imposed many new intrusive legislative measures on citizens and non-citizens alike with little congressional foresight, consideration or review under the Crisis Constitution. To have a permanent Homeland Security agency tacitly underscores how widely Washington's increasingly illiberal empire is mobilizing so many forces of homeland insecuritization against its global dominion over energy resources, high finance, world trade, and advanced technology (Hardt and Negri, 2000; and, Gonzales, 2018).

At the same time, however, the routine intelligence work of national security agencies tied to the Departments of Defense or Homeland Security has deflected attention from the CIA's more intrusive and sometimes effective covert interventions -- violent and nonviolent -- abroad. Those activities by such clandestine force are cynical but rational, not so much because it prevents the nation's adversaries from knowing what Washington decision-makers are doing but rather "to protect themselves from congressional scrutiny or from political bureaucratic rivals elsewhere within government" (Johnson, 2005: 10). Behind the veils of bureaucratic secrecy, one senses how the nation's institutional centers of gravity have shifted toward bellicose policy choices (Bacevich, 2013).

Largely unchecked executive actions are "an integral part of American militarism and the secrecy that accompanies it" (Johnson, 2005: 11). After Washington continued seeking the nation's Manifest Destiny for over a century by demanding exclusive sovereign power over as well as the territories of weaker powers (Hawaii, Columbia, Spain, Nicaragua, Japan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, etc.) via overt interventions, covert actions or open war (Johnson, 2008; Kinzer, 2007). Their larger logic evinces itself beyond the USA in the bases established by the War and Navy Departments in Guantanamo Bay, Pearl Harbor, Subic Bay, Alaska, Panama, Guam, the Marianas, Midway Island, before 1941 in "the empire of military bases" that sprang "up more or less undetected and that is today a geopolitical fact of life" (Johnson, 2005: 11).

These global networks of military installations today still constitute the operational foundation for what Bacevich (2011: 14) labels "the sacred trinity" of American geopolitics:

> An abiding conviction that the minimum essentials of international peace and order require the United States to maintain a **global military presence**, to configure its forces for **global power projection**, and to count for existing, or anticipated threats by relying on a policy of global **interventionism** (2011: 14).

In keeping with the Crisis Constitution politicians, statesmen, and thinkers, this triad of strategic services came to assure "The Project for The New American Century" organized around alliances and interests favorted by its neo-conservative leadership (Johnson, 2008). Their imperious aspirations, in turn, indeed became "the American credo," summoning "The United States--and the United States alone--to lead, save, liberate, and ultimately transform the world" (Bacevich, 2011: 12).

One can map the degradation of democracy in the concretization of an ethos, which emerged from the apparatuses and practices of the empire of bases, as it swung into action from the

"Vietnamization" of the failed Vietnamese war at the origins of Nixonland. Hence, one finds with Nixon and Kissinger through the decades to Trump and Pompeo, a strategy for "relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task" (Foucault: 1984: 39) for "a democratic empire" to tackle under the banners of "The Project for the New American Century" or "America First," whatever it takes to "Make America Great Again," like Trump's and Pompeo's program for the "Afghanization" of the failed war in Afghanistan against the Taliban since 2001.

Such fluid dynamics of authority pretend to challenge the passions of popular government; but, in actuality, they favor more managerialist discursive devices where flexible visions of "truth," or "a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements" (Foucault, 1980: 133) by experts can dissipate the ardor of popular solidarity. In the arid deliberations of America's guardians of global order, trust is granted to power/knowledge formations largely generated of, for, and by the professional-technical elites and their meritocratic oligarchy, who run the empire like "government contractors." Here, the Tenth Amendment to the 1787 Constitution, namely, that "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people" is turned on its head. The states typically appeal to Washington, DC for help, allowing federal agencies to do their work. In turn, the people's reserve powers are lost in panic, incapacity or confusion, which pushes them as democratic subjects to consign their sovereign power over to "the elites" and "the experts" to gain security over keeping freedom. Citizens, then, let those "who know best" decide, trust "the private sector" with its own capital, ideology, and technology, and then wait for policy process outcomes to maintain their collective stability, security, and sustainability.

VI. Conclusion: Democracy as Disorder

Exploring the unwritten rules of the Crisis Constitution, as this analysis asserts, is crucial. As America's contemporary scripts for governance, they uneasily co-exist with foundational principles of The Constitution in Trump's presidency. Working from within his own small spheres of relative insignificance grounded in reality television, real estate, and raw egoism, Trump appears unwittingly to be tripping across the philosophical trails to "a state of emergency" blazed by Carl Schmitt as he has sewn disorder since 2016. The first American death of COVID-19 happened February 29, 2020 in Washington state. On March 1, the USA was booming atop an 11 year-run of economic expansion with unemployment at a 50 year low of 3.5 percent, and Dow Jones Industrial Average close to an all-time high of 30,000. By March 31, 2020, COVID-19 deaths in the USA were over 6,000 with over 250,000 known cases of illness. In one month, 10 million people lost their jobs, the Dow Jones Industrial Average fell to 21,917, many businesses were shut, many airlines are fearing bankruptcy, and the end of this catastrophic event could not be accurately predicted -- many more weeks, a few months, perhaps a year are all plausible durations (Wall Street Journal, 2020). Strangely, however, as a would-be authoritarian strongman, Trump has let this crisis go to waste for him politically.

Despite of his pious pronouncements to the mass media about his ability to discharge the duties of his office faithfully as one of America's best presidents, Trump has proven himself to be ineffectual: the Herbert Hoover of the twenty-first century. Even worse, he questions, if

not repudiates, key elements of the universal secular rationality animating America's embedded political liberalism (Rawls, 2005), including its civic secularism, the rule of law, a free press, the primacy of rational deliberative discourse over irrational executive will, strong constitutional government, the legitimacy of scientific-technical expertise, and a contractarian vision of limited state power in civil society.

Madison accepted the reality of factions, conflicting interests, and endless maneuvering for greater advantage by all against others to create legislative outcomes because in the nation's political deliberations and debates key actors could hash out results, by and large, through reasoned arguments in accord with common cultural conventions. Even Schmitt recognized governance through democratic discussion springs from "shared convictions as premises, the willingness to be persuaded, independence of party ties, freedom from selfish interests" (Schmitt, 1988: 5). Many regard such disinterest as implausible, but these qualities "still officially belong to parliamentary constitutions, make quite clear that all specifically parliamentary arrangements are this particular concept of discussion" (Schmitt, 1988: 5). Trump, however, flouts these bare minimum standards of civic deportment with his dismissive nick-names, Twitter rants, incessant insults, and mistrust of seasoned public servants in a manner that reeks "this is not normal" with posturing self-centered bluster (Woodward, 2018).

Trump's presumptuous campaigning for re-election in 2020 since his 2016 victory also displays a deep disrespect for most regular parliamentary democratic precepts. During his first three years in office as President of the United States (POTUS), Trump has violated them on a daily basis, which culminated in the House vote to impeach him on two counts of the abuse of power -- enlisting foreign agents to aid his 2020 re-election campaign and obstructing Congress, before Christmas 2019. As David Axelrod, an Obama adviser, notes, "one way he's changed the institution is that most presidents see themselves as trustees of democracy. And where every president is irritated by the limitations of democracy on them, they all grudgingly accept it. He has not. He has waged war on the institutions of democracy from the beginning" (Baker, 2017: A1). His partisan efforts to delay the House impeachment investigation, and rig the Senate trial on impeachment during 2019 and 2020 to exonerate him as POTUS 45, simply underscore this cynicism.

The embedded wisdom of "the culture of a liberal society in America," as Hartz (1955, 3-34) defines it, and the separation and division of power at the core of the "Tudor polity" at the heart of American constitutionalism (Huntington, 1968: 93-139), and the cultural pay-off from "the last capitalist revolution" (Moore, 1967: 111-158), are institutional legacies that have anchored governance in the USA for centuries. Trump's ignorance of and/or contempt for these institutional practices and structures are another sign of his unawareness of the presidency as an institution.

Yet, his divisive political attacks have been tolerated for years by the larger Republican Party in its efforts to win the White House, which are more troubling. Trump incarnates this larger shift of most GOP partisans to regain, and then stay, in control at any cost since the Tea Party rebellion of 2009-2010, which many Republicans used to nurture dangerous antiliberal propensities among their constituents. That the extremely polarized 2016 electorate -- by a narrow margin in the Electoral College -- chose Trump over Hilary Clinton says something disturbing about "the incumbent GOP elites" as well as "the voters" in Nixonland today. The 1787 Constitution has firewalls against demagoguery and autocracy. Unfortunately, the Crisis Constitution -- in the hands of the wrong executive and corrupt partisans -- can be worked around in a manner that all

but eliminates almost all checks-and-balances through autocratic bullying, legislative slowdowns or dismissive neglect.

Arguably, the normalization of a permanent state of emergency at the core of the Crisis Constitution first became ordinary during the Truman administration, given Truman's unexpected inauguration in 1945 and activist use of executive power to end World War II, shift to a peacetime economy, deal with the onset of the Cold War, and foster a North Atlantic coalition to resist the USSR in Europe and Asia. Even though Congress passed, albeit with little effect, the National Emergencies Act of 1976 to limit how often and extensively these events might be evoked after Vietnam, the Crisis Constitution remains well-adapted to appeal to national emergency edicts and executive cultural imaginaries. Much of "the politics presidents make" (Skowronek, 1996) that Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson evoked during the darkest days of the Cold War comes from such "states of exception." Since 1968, the citizens of Nixonland almost need to hear these rallying cries in elections -- from Peace with Honor, a War on Drugs, Whip Inflation Now, Thermostat Control as Geopolitics, Star Wars (Anti-Missile Defense) plus Tear Down this Wall, a Thousand Points of Light, The Man from Hope, the New American Century, or Make America Great Again -- that echo through the decades from Nixon to Trump.

The patchy rules and regulations of anti-communism during the Cold War have been reformatted since 2001 in new "superstatutes," like the USA PATRIOT and USA FREEDOM Acts, putting the USA into new modes of permanent mobilization against unclear enemies for an uncertain length of time with an unending timeline subject to perfunctory periodic reauthorizations. To believe such extreme government actions were the most rational choices by informed strategic experts or the uncontested will of the people is gravely mistaken. Instead, the panic of 2001 allowed the broader American public to be "won over through an appeal to a propaganda apparatus whose maximum effect relies on and appeals to immediate interests and passions. The argument in a real sense that is characteristic for genuine discussion ceases . . . one may, therefore, assume as well known today that it is no longer a question of persuading one's opponent of the truth or justice of an opinion but rather of winning a majority in order to govern with it" (Schmitt, 1988: 7). Whether it is sleeper cells of ISIS terrorists or "the invisible enemy" of COVID-19, fake news, post-truth, and endless disinformation at the core of the Crisis Constitution enables inept chief executives, like Presidents Trump, to toss aside established policies and practices win the support of voters through panic and then rule through it (Landle, 2017: A1).

The deepest foundations for liberal order in the modern era once rested upon rational calculation by individuals to choose strict order over anarchic chaos in their everyday collective life. Left to their own devices, as Madison presumed, free rational agents always would push their own selfish agendas, disagree over how to manage collective goods, and disregard prior agreements when it suits their current aspirations. In the resulting chaos, basic social order would not shred into the tangled threads of a truly debased social order in which, as Hobbes would note, reason is ignored, authority is disdained, and freedom is abused.

In many respects, the U.S. Congress, like parliaments across post-WWI Europe Schmitt criticized, "itself appears a gigantic antechamber in front of the bureaus or committees of invisible rulers" (Schmitt, 1988: 7). Today in the USA, both national political parties are inclined to serve shifting oligarchic elite interests, and the courts openly to favor corporate private property agendas is dangerous, because the oligarchs behind them ignore "the interests of the poor, consumers of dangerous food and drugs, the elderly, traders on security markets and victims of unfair trade

practices" (Sunstein, 1987: 438). Unless they are eclipsed by a string of Trump's impetuous Tweets, surviving centers of technical expertise, administrative acumen, and bureaucratic judgment now fill the empty spaces of popular democratic deliberation in the nation's current crises, because citizens fail to act directly in their own constitutional interests (Orren and Skowronek, 2017; Kettl, 2009; and, Patterson, 2000).

The Trump administration's efforts to defy existing laws, degrade education, distort economic development, and diminish free elections illustrate how fully the nature and structure of the Crisis Constitution are accepted as normal practices in the nation's daily routines. In actuality, key people in authority, like Vice President Pence, White House official Stephen Miller, Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross or Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway are mobilizing cultural myths, and increasingly theological visions, to bolster retrograde nationalist logics to animate Trump's presidential program now "To Keep America Great." Yet, their most favored agents for advancing this agenda appear to be no longer appear to be "We, the People" but rather "We, the Corporations," which have enjoyed the new conditions of governance created around "the powers of freedom" (Rose, 1999) for business to get more tax cuts, market protection, and regulatory relief. The freedom to exercise this power, in turn, has recast the USA's industrial democracy with new characteristics that marginalize the majority of people who once constituted "The People" by reimagining corporations as persons, money as speech, wealth as rights, ideology as image, parties as syndicates, and government as spectacle.

To conclude, this analysis of America in "The Trump Zone" returned to Nixonland at its points of emergence during 1968-1974. It tracked how deformed notions of order came to build a different imperfect union with another sort of justice, an oppressive domestic tranquility, an unbridled approach to defense, a lessened general welfare, and an unequal blessing of liberty over five decades. To deliver on his promises to posterity, the White House under Trump essentially has tried to trigger, like Nixon after 1968, a reawakening in the United States of America to become "Great Again" when it ironically was, in so many ways already regarded as great. Regrettably and remarkably, it continues to fail, as the challenges of "the 50-state disaster" emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, and the feckless orders to the public "to shelter in place" amid a frozen global economy, still have not forced President Trump, and the few experts he has still working with him, actually to "do the right thing" after they have tried everything else to downplay, ignore or mismanage this devastating public health and national economic crisis.

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The Death of Neoliberal Realism?

Zachariah Wheeler

Introduction

Despite near-constant warnings about the unprecedented threat Donald Trump poses to stability in the US and the world—especially his assault on the bellwethers and norms of liberal democracy[1] — much of what he has done as president merely extends policies already in place under Barack Obama and his predecessors. His most substantive legislative accomplishment, The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, may have been a departure from the last administration's efforts to slowly reverse Bush era tax cuts, but it was nonetheless in-line with the Republican Party's most conventional policy goals. Many have determined, then, that Donald Trump's presidency represents an extension of the neoliberal status-quo, rather than a transformational force or an existential threat to the interests that have constricted public policy. As Robert Chernomas, Ian Hudson, and Mark Hudson assert, Trump's governance is, more than anything else, a "… continuation of almost four decades of neoliberal policies that have favored business at the expense of the US population" (Chernomas, Hudson, Hudson, 2019, p. 200).

Their analysis justifiably foregrounds the continuities between Trump's supposedly irregular rhetorical tendencies and the decades-old consensus around key policy areas. Relying on this legislative, technical understanding of neoliberalism, however, risks obfuscating how his political success is premised on meaningfully undermining central planks of that consensus' deeper authority. Rather than argue whether Trump's policies deviate from existing precedents in that sense, this paper considers how his appeal reveals weaknesses in the distinct forms of depoliticizing rationality that insulate neoliberalism's ideological presuppositions from public scrutiny. For while Trump may not be challenging the Republican Party's commitment to tax cuts and austerity; to some extent, his entire project rests on restoring a notion of contestability (and the legitimacy of such appeals) in political discourse. Although his rhetorical style and affect are dismissed by many as a form of insincere or empty populism, whatever its ideological content, Trump's appeal transgresses the status-quo's discursive limits. These boundaries, on how voters can be engaged, through what terms and on what conditions, are not superficial components of the existing political order, but are vital to how neoliberalism is replicated and naturalized over time by both parties.

Therefore, Trumpism may not destabilize the ideological fixtures of neoliberal policy, but it nevertheless has a more complicated relationship to the sense of **realism** that pervades popular

political thought and behavior more generally. To explore this connection, my analysis will isolate the features of these neoliberal tendencies and how Trump has (intentionally or otherwise) challenged their legitimacy. In this sense, Trump's effect on neoliberalism needs to be considered beyond the outright policy prescriptions of his administration. Rather, it must be read in context with how Trump's success drew upon and shaped the public's political imagination—that is, what voters imagined about the potentialities of political action—and how his surprising resonance challenges assumptions about its limits under neoliberalism. As such, Trumpism must be grounded in a more comprehensive understanding of neoliberalism, as a bi-partisan consensus that justifies certain forms of political speech, thought, and behavior while restricting others. Through this lens, my analysis examines Trump's (perhaps inadvertent) threat to neoliberalism by foregrounding how developments outside of his direct orbit (particularly on the left) have been shaped by his relatively aberrational rhetoric and its effect on dominant forms of political rationality in both parties. While some have drawn similar conclusions, describing Trump and the surge in support for left-populist candidates as variations of the same phenomenon, these interventions have usually been more concerned with attacking the credibility of either set of 'populist' tendencies than in exploring their political significance. This paper, then, is an attempt to bridge the divide between these divergent, but common responses—one that downplays Trump's effects on the status-quo by emphasizing the details of legislation and policy, and another that views Trumpism (exhibited by Trump himself or his supposed left-wing analogs) as a threatening source of change, but fails to acknowledge its political character, reducing it to a trans-ideological 'anti-establishment' reaction that rejects norms for the sake of it. This analysis offers an alternative to either characterization by reframing neoliberalism beyond its technical qualities and complicating the term 'populism' as its commonly used to describe Trump and those who are equated with him. Instead, it considers how the anomalous political appeals that have emerged out of the Trumpian moment are connected, not by ideology, but by their relationship to the breakdown in neoliberalism's symbolic authority.

Neoliberalism and "Capitalist Realism"

Beyond actual policies (from privatization to deregulation) and their outcomes, neoliberalism is about imposing fixed limits on politics in ways that situate existing rationalities as unconditional. To some extent, this learned sense of inevitability has a greater effect than any individual policy, because its disciplinary force acts as the precondition for the establishment and maintenance of the policies themselves. Put otherwise, neoliberalism is not only a legislative project, but an ideological and sociocultural one, that relies upon the dissolution of certain forms of consciousness, and the disciplining of discourse to a preselected range of framings and rationalities. As Margaret Thatcher infamously explained, "economics is the method, but the object is to change the soul." If neoliberalism can be understood as a response to the post-war Keynesian order, then one must account for how it deconstructs not only the regulatory and welfare state, but also the ideological infrastructure that helped create and sustain those institutions politically, socially, and culturally. Projects like the New Deal (and other post-war settlements) relied upon instigating a new popular consciousness and sociocultural conceptions of civic duty, the state, and the citizen. Like other paradigmatic shifts, it was as much a symbolic transformation as it was a legislative one. To roll it back, neoliberalism relies on a similar strategy, propagating new imaginaries—of meritocracy,

innovation, and self-invention— while obfuscating and foreclosing upon others.

This vision of neoliberalism, as a disciplinary, depoliticizing apparatus, rather than a set of economic policies, is best illustrated through Mark Fisher's diagnoses in <u>Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?</u>. Fisher asserts that neoliberalism's greatest achievement has been entrenching itself so deeply into our culture that we have effectively lost a conceptual language for imagining a world outside of its precepts and disciplinary limits. He asserts that neoliberal capitalism relies upon a "reflexive impudence" imposed on politics and culture by the necessity of "realism". Fisher's concept of capitalist realism isolates neoliberalism in ways that challenge a primarily legislative or legalistic understanding of its ideological goals. It functions socioculturally as a means of precluding alternatives to existing socioeconomic structures and conditions, naturalizing certain forms of life, while also guarding against political dispositions and expressions outside those amenable to this status quo. It is not only about changing the world but unmaking the means through which further change might be accomplished, and it does this through the regulation of political and cultural (as much as economic) sensibilities. Neoliberalism frames "ironic distance" as a prerequisite to "immunize us against the seduction of fanaticism." In Fisher's words, "lowering our expectations, we are told, is a small price to pay for being protected from terror and authoritarianism" (2009, p.4). Within this framework, capitalist realism is a "deflationary perspective" by which "any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion" (Fisher,2009, p.5).

The ideological and political sparring between the Bernie Sanders' and Hillary Clinton' primary campaigns made this realist tendency self-evident, for they revealed not only how central disciplinary rationality is to American politics but also how both parties rely on realism to strategically demobilize elements of their base. During the primary, policy differences on key issues were repeatedly framed by the Clinton campaign as a matter of "pragmatism" versus idealism. The basic premise, invented by the Clinton camp and replicated by the commentariat, was that Clinton's policies reflected the same spirit of Sanders' social-democratic vision but tempered by a sensible desire to "get things done." Sanders was framed not only as out of touch with reality but dangerously so. Although his positions on issues like single-payer healthcare and tuition-free public college were repeatedly framed as economically and politically unfeasible, these objections often characterized the changes to economic-political policy required as metrics of their own impossibility. If "the numbers" were not there, it was not because the tax revenue literally could not be raised, but that to do so would represent a bridge too far. Media commentators like think-tank president (and former Bain Capital portfolio manager) Avik Roy, for instance, stepped in to defend Clinton's limited reforms. Writing for Forbes, as their leading policy editor for healthcare, he rattled off numbers and percentages about increased spending, but rarely put these metrics into context, other than to suggest that the scale of the figures made the policy proposal a political "fantasy."[2]

Similar Critiques of the single-payer plan seemed to echo each other throughout the Democratic primary; they seemed to ask, "what, are we just going to **eliminate** private insurance"? Comparable questions have been raised throughout the 2020 primary debates, as critics of single-payer healthcare (and a number of other progressive reform items) present the scale of the change, rather than its substance, as the ultimate obstacle to its feasibility. The reform is foreclosed upon as a principle of its deviation from the very institutions that are altered. If one assumes the predominant features of the system in place are an inherent, immovable reality, as many of these critiques seem to, then any alternative becomes **unrealistic**. Not because there are serious

material obstacles to their success, but because they stray too far from the presuppositions of an entrenched ethico-political order. It is a regime of truth built to maintain what Frederick Jameson described as the "constitution of post-modernity" under late capitalism, "where everything now submits to the perpetual change of fashion and media image, that nothing can change any longer" (Jameson qtd in Fisher, 2009, p. 59).

Regardless of his policies once in office, Trump ran on an explicitly post-neoliberal platform that challenged key components of the status-quo's economic order. Furthermore, just as Sanders was challenged by Clinton, Trump was repeatedly decried as a dangerous populist, whose rhetoric failed to acknowledge the **self-evident** necessity of existing policies. In this sense, Trump's unpredicted political resonance may be meaningfully dissolving neoliberalism's dominance, or suggest that it has already partially dissolved—not because his administration is transitioning from the status quo, but because his improbable victories demonstrate that the ideological and discursive defenses Fisher describes (and Clinton successfully deployed against Sanders in 2016) may be more at risk than ever before. Since the 2008 fiscal crisis, the opposition has been slowly boiling across the right and left, in response to the conditions imposed by this disciplinary apparatus. While Sanders is the most celebrated critic of the neoliberal policies most implicated by 2008, Trump may have done more to undermine their authority. Clinton was able to secure the nomination from Sanders, effectively deploying capitalist realism throughout the debates and primaries, but her general election campaign against Trump (and its eventual result) revealed its possible limits politically. Despite her well-structured, technocratically superior policy proposals, and her attempts to weaponize the status-quo, Trump's (often incoherent) call for a multi-billion-dollar wall was more attractive to a sizable portion of voters. Calls for "great healthcare" seem to have resonated with some people morethan detailed policy papers. His political success was, in part, driven by opposition to the sort of impudent pragmatism Clinton represented. Similarly, although he lost the primary, Sanders' campaign has grown into an insurgency throughout the Democratic base, and after 2018, into the ranks of elected officials. Calls for single-payer, tuition-free college, and a "green new deal"—all of which would have been (or were) derided as politically untenable throughout the 2016 campaign— are gaining traction.

These shifts in American politics sit well outside the realm of what was considered plausible as late as 2015, but it is possible that they are evidence, not of a sudden disruption in the norm, but rather, a delayed recognition of the **norm's** fragility. In his lectures on Manet and the "symbolic revolution," Pierre Bourdieu uses the impressionist's work to demonstrate how our sense of reality is framed by hidden assumptions. The aesthetic conventions of gallery-style painting were so internalized within Western sensibilities that Manet's work represented an almost epistemological break—a sudden realization of all the hitherto invisible presuppositions defining the earlier works, and an acute awareness of their instability. This break is what Bourdieu calls a "symbolic revolution." These revolutions, Bourdieu claims, hide themselves. As he explains, "there is nothing more difficult to understand than what appears to go without saying, in so far as a symbolic revolution produces the very structures through which we perceive it" (1999, College du France). A successful symbolic revolution is only perceivable as it is happening; in other words, if it is successful, the new presuppositions it introduces will—like the old—be adopted as given. If Bourdieu is right, then once the assumptions of a given hegemonic rationality are **identifiable**, then its order has already begun to collapse, and the next symbolic revolution is upon us. The success Trump, Sanders, and others have had in penetrating the shell of neoliberal realism suggests something similar may be taking place. If Bourdieu's claim is taken seriously, then the very fact

that the Democratic Party establishment and their media surrogates are engaging platforms like Sanders' demonstrates the magnitude of the shift underway.

Populism or Politics?

In a 2018 Munk Debate, Steve Bannon and David Frum sparred over the motion that "the future of western politics is populist, not liberal." This debate came on the heels of more than two years of discourse surrounding 'populism', as a political tendency that supposedly contains within it Occupy Wall Street, Brexit, Trump, Sanders, the AFD, Corbyn, and the authoritarian government of Jair Balsonaro. Bannon, in his defense of populism, argues that: "it is not a question of whether populism is on the rise, or if populism is going to be the political future. The only question before us—is it going to be populist nationalism or populist socialism." At first, this proposition seems to align with much of what I have argued throughout this paper, that western politics is on the edge between two alternatives, represented broadly by left and right-wing responses to the failures of a 'neoliberal' consensus. The issue, though, is how the discussion is framed. Despite his attempt to subvert the status quo, by accepting the terms of the debate, and adopting 'populism' as a platform, Bannon provides an essential service to maintaining neoliberal realism. The very idea of populism, as it has been invoked in response to the events of the last decade, is a flat, negativistic one; it is anti-elitist, anti-status quo, and anti-establishment, but these descriptions negate its political substance.

Any alternative in opposition to the rationale of existing conditions is subsumed by the populist label. The term fundamentally depoliticizes the issues and figures it captures, by reducing attempts to mobilize opposing political futures as an inherently reactionary, contrarian, or plebian project. If Sanders invokes the "millionaires and billionaires" as political opponents of the working and middle class, his statement can be essentialized as 'anti-elitist,' rather than a legitimate politicization of the conflicting interests of different economic blocs. The status quo is naturalized, as all opposition is reducible to its form, rather than its content. To be in opposition is to be populist, whether one argues for limiting immigration or creating new taxes on wealth. The unifying feature seems to be direct appeals to voters' anger or their own sense of self-interest. What is described as populist may actually represent the reassertion of political contestation into presupposed, structural 'realities.'

As Wolfgang Streeck observes, populism describes any tendency or organization that rejects the "responsible politics" of neoliberalism. In other words, anything that asserts alternatives against a political rationality that presents itself as immovable. This polemical framing, as Streeck argues, allows the establishment to "avoid distinctions, so that Trump and Sanders, Farage and Corbyn, and in Germany, Petry and Wagenknecht can all be lumped together under the same heading" (2017, p.11). This results in a dynamic that obfuscates the alternatives and re-legitimates the logic of neoliberalism—that there is actually "no alternative" and the options on offer are dangerous illusions. Anything that falls outside of the endless expansion of capitalism, the ever-widening maw between the rich and the poor, and the subsumption of national or popular sovereignty to markets must be dismissed. The implication is that opponents to these processes are "cynics who promise 'the people' the 'simple solutions' they crave, even though they know that there are no alternatives to the complex solutions of the technocrats." (Streeck, 2017, p. 12) Trump and Sanders have both confronted and found some success in resisting this framework. Still, Streeck is right to point out the strategy of conflation, obfuscates the real distinctions between

these platforms, in a way that ultimately serves to reify established doctrines. The question is not whether the future of western politics is populist, as the Munk Debate's framing proposes, but whether the future will be **political** at all.

This dynamic was self-evident during the 2016 primary between Sanders and Clinton. Clinton repeatedly argued Sanders' policies were not "fiscally responsible," and that he should be "held accountable for whether or not the numbers add up." Clinton foreclosed upon single-payer healthcare, for instance, by citing a non-partisan analysis, arguing that Sanders' plan would add too much to the national debt. This one moment is representative of the deeper struggle identified by the scholars I have cited, between not just Clinton and Sanders, but "TINA[3]" realism and politics itself. Clinton insisted that "even after massive tax increases" Sanders' plan would add "as much as $15 trillion to the national debt". First, this statement presupposes that the national debt is necessarily a qualifying factor in healthcare policy—even though its relevance to economic stability and growth is contested among economists. This is more of an invocation of debt as an ethical-moral order, rather than a material or political impediment to changing policy. The possibility of sovereignty over the national debt is precluded from discussion by the premises of Clinton's neoliberal rationality. Second, even if one accepts Clinton's use of the national debt, she still presupposes what constitutes a "massive" tax increase, and that anything beyond that metric is an impossibility. The proposal is foreclosed upon by an unspoken refusal to consider either a rejection of debt's role in structuring policy or the changes necessary to accommodate the spending. In both cases, Clinton's response depoliticizes the issues; the question between a privatized health care system and a nationalized federal system is subservient to predetermined structural priori. Politics cannot be allowed to interfere with policy. By attempting to do so, Sanders is acting **irresponsibly**, or worse, is using **populist** appeals that promise the impossible.

These debates were not only a sign of new ideological divides in the Democratic party but also strong indicators of how Clinton and the Democratic establishment believed they could (or should) combat Donald Trump's populist appeals. The comparisons between Clinton and Trump's 2016 campaigns, then, provide some of the clearest demonstrations of capitalist realism's new inadequacy.

Clinton & Trump

Through this lens, Clinton's defeat in the 2016 election can be understood as a failure to be sufficiently political, that is, her seeming inability to mobilize support on the bases of contestable choices or their possibilities. Her platform was, fundamentally, rooted in the maintenance of the prevailing order, rather than any radical change. Her campaign repeatedly employed the disciplinary logic of neoliberal realism, warning against the unavoidable extremism and instability that Trump would unleash (Fisher). In order to characterize Trump as dangerous and maintain her adherence to political pragmatism, Clinton was forced to position herself as the safe and sane choice. This tethered her to an apolitical mode that could only appeal to voters through supposedly self-evident realism—a tempering of expectations to protect us from the perils of figures, like Trump, who promise too much (Streeck). At a time of extreme dissatisfaction, Clinton presented herself as the medicine the electorate had to take for its own good. She was not a representative of the voters, but of expertise, competency, and earned meritocratic status. One should vote for her; her surrogates seemed to say, because she has gotten better grades than everyone else in the class, and she deserves to be in charge. In a **Daily Show** segment, Michelle Wolf unwittingly described

the problem. As she argued in an appeal to Hillary, "you're not running to be everyone's friend, you're running to be the boss." If we don't vote for the "smart lady," Wolf argues, we will be "eating squirrel out of a hole in the ground." Although part of a comedy show, Wolf's sentiments accurately reflect how Clinton presented herself and was positioned rhetorically against Trump. This ideological appeal to professionalism and meritocracy framed Clinton as an unpopular, but necessary choice. She made herself into the practical embodiment of what Fisher's **Capitalist Realism** describes — a technocrat who disciplines the electorate into supporting her, through the structural logic, moral reason, and immovable reality of the established order. Her campaign was a sort of anti-politics, that tried to transform the election into a rationalized process divorced from the experiences, dispositions, or material conditions of the voters. As Wolf said, "shut the fuck up" and vote for the "smart lady"[4] (2016).

This ideological and rhetorical position restricted her ability to run as a **change candidate**, providing Trump almost no opposition to mobilizing the dissatisfaction of voters. At nearly every point in the race, her campaign emphasized continuity; "America's already great" she proclaimed. Unable to run on any appeal for change, she presented her candidacy, and her policy platform, as the inevitable conclusion of rational consideration; any alternative was characterized as unthinkable. During the debates with Trump, she did not frame her candidacy around an affirmative appeal to voters and did not rouse any sort of agonism. Her rhetoric seemed to confirm an outright refusal to frame any issue as a conflict between political positions, with attached interests for specific groups. This denied all agency to her supporters. Their votes were not vehicles for a political vision that would address their conditions. They were obligations, served up as recognition of her qualifications. The overwhelming message was: You cannot vote for Trump, and I am not Trump. It was a campaign rooted in TINA logic, attempting to confirm its own legitimacy through the foreclosure of political possibility, rather than presenting its own.

Meanwhile, Trump proclaimed, "I am your voice!" The message was clear to many; whereas Clinton represented an imposed rationalism—expertise removed from political contestation—Trump would say and do what everyone wanted. He would oppose the right people, violate orthodoxy, and, most importantly, demonstrate a willingness to propose alternatives to established policy. He transgressed neoliberal consensus from the left and the right, forcefully criticizing the Bush administration and the Iraq war, proposing new taxes on hedge fund managers, legal penalties for offshoring businesses, and injecting over a trillion dollars in federal infrastructure spending. He did this all while demonstrating an irreverence for the didacticism and moralizing of disconnected figures and institutions—the op-ed writers, the late-night comedy hosts, and the "experts" who had spent decades carefully explaining why everyone would have to accept less, for their own good. His signature issue, immigration, can be understood in these terms. Although these elements of his platform have been characterized by many as racist dog whistles, these appeals function according to a similar logic, in that they frame immigration as an economically disadvantageous phenomenon imposed on the country through an immovable rationality by those who are seen as insulated from its consequences. In an era of secular stagnation and downward mobility, Trump can frame immigration as a rejection of these foregone conclusions. Clinton's attachment to established socioeconomic positions makes her especially vulnerable to this move. She offers a poorer, less stable (culturally and economically), and less sovereign future as the necessary condition of a determined process. Trump interjects, he can show how "open borders" and the ethics of political correctness bludgeon the population into an economic and cultural future they did not choose.

Voting for him then, above all, is a reassertion of popular sovereignty; it is a refusal to allow imposed moral or economic doctrines to dictate the direction of the country. Trump can position himself as the only recourse besides subservience to disciplined expectations and slow economic decay, which in many post-industrial states, set in decades ago. This is not to suggest that Trump's vision convinced all those dissatisfied with the political-economic and ethical-moral discipline of neoliberalism, but it did not have to. Trump's success is, more accurately, Clinton's failure. What Trump demonstrates is that, in the wake of aporia (or in the midst of an interregnum), strict adherence to old presuppositions may not defeat more empowering political counter-appeals that engage voters and provide an affirmative, reflective vision of the present and future—regardless of their deviation from supposedly solid orthodoxies. Both candidates were almost universally unpopular, but whereas Clinton was incapable of undermining the political-economic order she was embedded within, or offer voters a sense of political agency in shaping what would be done or how, Trump was able to seize the moment, and rouse defiance. Ultimately, the turnout in 2016 was some of the lowest in the post-war era, and non-voters (most from "blue" states) outnumbered Trump voters in key swing contests (Enten, 2017[5]). Despite endless op-eds about rust-belt whites, more white democratic voters stayed home than switched to Trump. His victory was ensured, not because of the ascendant appeal of his racism or misogyny to "white working class" voters, but because he faced an opponent unwilling or unable to reconcile her attachment to neoliberalism with the necessary political action. Clinton's defeat demonstrates neoliberal realism's failing grasp over America's political consciousness. Furthermore, it reveals that any successful opposition to the far-right insurgency of Donald Trump (or several similar figures across the globe), will need to reembrace politics in ways that neoliberalism precludes.

The Professional-managerial Democrats and Neoliberalism in 2020

Continued debates on the Democratic side are one of the key demarcates of Trump's effect on neoliberalism's increasing visibility as an object of critique and contestation. Ultimately, the extent of Trump's challenges to neoliberalism may be best understood through the broader changes his success invites into politics more generally, not unlike how the Reaganite era helped catalyze the saliency of the 'Atari Democrats' and third-way politics. The establishment response to growing factionalism in the Democratic Party in the wake of Trump, then, may illustrate how neoliberalism's realist tendencies are being reformulated to counter their own supposedly "Trumpian" elements. Perhaps more importantly, the Democrat's efficacy in resisting these populist currents in their own party, compared to the Republican's failure to contain Trump during their primary or Clinton's performance in 2016 – suggests that elements of neoliberal rationality may have a deeper authority with the Democrats than is popularly understood. This has significant implications for how neoliberalism is ideologically classified moving forward; to some extent, ostensibly left-leaning parties like the Democrats may be less willing (or less able) to challenge neoliberalism's symbolic authority than right-populists such as Trump. In this sense, post-2016 conflicts in the Democratic Party are vital to clarifying Trumpism's relationship to capitalist realism, for they clarify the connections between neoliberalism's political necessities and specific, institutionalized class interests hitherto obscured by the supposed ideological commitments of the two parties.

In some ways, the 2020 Democratic race has been a mirror image of the Clinton-Sanders

contest. But most notably, unlike 2016, the principal struggle at times has been between supposed critics of neoliberalism—rather than a single critic and an establishment that hardly acknowledges the institution's existence. This, in and of itself, represents a transformative shift that may indicate that Trump's presidency has weakened the realism that was once so effective in denying Sanders' fervent attacks on neoliberal policy. There is now an implicit awareness of neoliberalism and a vague notion of what it means to oppose it. Pete Buttigieg was even confronted with the term directly, asked what he thought "neoliberalism" was and whether he supported it. He identified it as the consensus economic policy of the last several decades, and something the country must "replace with something better[6]." While the term has been common in academic discourse for decades, its use in popular political discourse, even in limited instances, suggests that Trump's time in office may be catalyzing the dissolution of its symbolic position. For as Bourdieu argues, its very presence as an object of discussion displaces its hegemonic certitude. However, Buttigieg's willingness to openly reject the term only suggests there is now some political advantage to opposing neoliberalism but complicates how one ideologically classifies the implicit substance of these signals. In a sense, neoliberals may slip away like **The Thing** (1982), simply taking on the form of concerned critics, making gestures to "something better" as they linger in the camp patiently.

It is still unclear whether opposition to neoliberalism rhetorically, or even through policy proposals, represents a comprehensive break with major components of the underlying ideology and its accompanying political rationalities. This seeming paradox is perhaps clearest when inspecting the discursive appeal and framing forwarded by Elizabeth Warren. The candidate presented a legislative agenda that seemed to push the Democratic Party further left than at any time since the 1960s, but as I have tried to show through my analysis, neoliberalism is defined as much by its presuppositions **about** politics as it is by the content of its policy proposals. In many ways, the former is a consequence of how neoliberalism has institutionalized certain assumptions about the role of the public relative to the careful management of educated, meritocratic experts. As left critics of modern liberalism have argued, this technocratic approach tends to decenter conflict, and in the process, embrace "solutions" that foreclose on the masses' ability to politically mobilize around their interests. It envisions politics not as a struggle for power, but as an exercise in problem-solving in which knowledge and deftness can resolve contradictions.

This tendency has, over time, created an embedded constituency of educated professionals scattered throughout think tanks, party offices, and top academic departments, most concentrated in the coastal cities that make up the country's political and economic core. Not only is Elizabeth Warren herself an ideal exemplar of this political class, but her most enthusiastic support rises from the ranks of white, college-educated professionals. Her campaign reflects this support in ways that replicate key components of Clinton's strategy in 2016, and the ideological presuppositions of neoliberalism more generally. Her candidacy, then, demonstrated that even a politics explicitly opposed to components of neoliberal economics can be firmly entrenched in elements of its disciplinary sensibilities, technical rationalities, and ideological presuppositions.

Perhaps any political order meaningfully outside of neoliberalism would have to (in some way) confront and displace the political centrality and dominance of this professional-managerial class (PMC). It should be unsurprising then that the major apparatuses controlled by the PMC invoked pragmatism to elevate Warren's campaign over Sander's, once again collapsing the relevant distinction between him and a more establishment candidate while insisting she had "more detailed plans" and will "get things done." In addition to a familiar appeal to expertise

and deserved meritocratic anointment, there werealso attempts to revive the disciplinary language of Clinton's 2016 campaign, castigating Sanders as sexist or as somehow inauthentically committed to social justice. In an MSNBC live- panel, for instance, Mimi Rocha explained that, when compared to Elizabeth Warren, Sanders was clearly a "not-pro-woman " candidate, also stating that she "can't identify what exactly it is" that informs these conclusions.[7] These discursive strategies are complementary since the moralist claims are as much implicit appeals to the affect and disposition of highly educated professionals as they are ideological critiques. We are told he is a disheveled, angry man who yells and irresponsibly appeals to groups whose sensibilities and prejudices are too dangerous to be treated seriously. By contrast, like Clinton, Warren and the other candidates appeal to what the professional-managerial class believes elevates them from those outside of their economic and sociocultural spaces—the uneducated, white working class, or the "deplorables."

Be it Warren's Harvard education and practiced social disposition, or Buttigieg's affinity for James Joyce, the differences drawn between Sanders and the rest of the primary field reflect the distinctions that the Democratic party's liberal professionals use to define themselves, usually in opposition to an image of the broader electorate. These attitudes are self-evident from the discourse that reverberated between prominent Warren supporters and members of the Democratic establishment. Figures like Tom Watson, a Democratic strategist and consultant, for instance, claims Bernie's movement employs "toxicity[8]" as a strategy because he supposedly enables attacks in online spaces by empowering groups and individuals outside of traditional currents of civil political discourse (Watson, 2019). This projection of disdain imagines the subject position of more marginal groups who are supposedly being defended vicariously, despite Sanders' disproportionate popularity with African American and Hispanic voters relative to Warren and the rest of the field, especially among younger voters and those without a college degree (Morning Consult, 2019).

While Sanders is popular with working-class white men, he is also popular with nearly every group with incomes lower than $100,000 a year; what this reveals is that the objections to Sander's political appeals from commentators like Watson, especially comparative allusions to Trump, are informed less by the racial or gender breakdown of his support than by its clear roots outside of the PMC. To these sensibilities, Trump and Sanders are offensive in similar ways because they speak to impulses and groups who are not meant to participate politically as active agents. The thought of a politically self-possessed working-class majority could seem threatening to a group whose cultural identity and social position—not to mention (in many cases) their income— are premised on the privileged authority granted by their professional and educational status to set the terms of political discussion. These discursive currents not only risk undermining the Democrats' position in 2020, but they replicate key components of neoliberalism's political culture and disciplinary impulses, especially a commitment to moral and economic individuation, meritocracy, and the subsequent dismissal of a myriad of undeserving classes. This places fixed limits on politics in ways that help preserve a status quo built around the rejection of common social goods and majoritarian democracy.

In this sense, Trump has helped meaningfully distinguish the contradictory interests implicit to the Democratic Party's status as both a working-class party that presented alternatives to the Republican's free-market platform and as a professional-class party, representing the interests and sensibilities of the smart, successful, and creative elite. Furthermore, it should be clear from Trump's victory how these unresolved divisions weaken the Democrats' chances in 2020, or even

beyond. The energy the Democratic establishment has mobilized to resist Bernie Sanders, and its relatively weak response to Trump, suggest his removal could even be a secondary priority. Consequently, the Democrats, despite being the only major, institutional opposition to Trump's right-wing populism, may be either incapable or unwilling to seize the possibilities opened up by neoliberalism's increasing disarray. Rather than preparing for the seeming breakdown of capitalist realism, they appear to have opted to mount a vigorous (and likely futile) defense. If they fail, as they did in 2016, Trump may further monopolize popular antagonisms to the status quo, contributing to a warranted sense that he is a legitimate threat to establishment interests, rather than a false-prophet. Perhaps the gravest possibility for opponents of this right-wing project is that Trump may have the greatest role in shaping the alternative that rises from neoliberalism's decline, and thus, in establishing a new symbolic reality that may last another political generation. It is often repeated that Trump's governance and what he has introduced into national politics is "not normal", but it may be soon, and who knows for how long.

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Reactionary Technopolitics: A Critical Sociohistorical Review

Sean T. Doody

Introduction

For many observers, Trump's steamrolling through the Republican Party establishment, his disregard for the institutionalized norms of political decorum, and his stunning defeat of Hillary Clinton seemingly came from nowhere, as if it were a "cataclysmic natural event we [were] powerless to prevent" (Kompridis 2006:247). And as the title of the symposium suggests, this cataclysm continues unfolding under Trumpian governance, a modality of rule highly abnormal for a representative democracy. While there are several abnormalities one could focus on in the Trump era, here I take aim at the disregard for truth and fact that haunts our present political moment. Donald Trump has made thousands of false statements—big and small—over the course of his presidency (Dale 2019). At the same time, Trump enjoys a 92% approval rating among his Republican base—a figure that was unbruised by his impeachment trial and has increased since his acquittal (Gallup 2020). Moreover, Trumpian phraseology hostile to the concept of truth— from "alternative facts" to "fake news"—are now part and parcel of political discourse. Yet, we did not get here because we were blindsided by a one-off Trumpian shock to the system. And contra certain political voices, defeating Trump will not mark a simple return to normalcy. Trump is, rather, the product of a decades-long process of right-wing political and ideological organizing across all social, political, and cultural fields from which a unique right-wing counter-sphere (cf. Major 2015) has emerged.

In this paper, I critically evaluate this counter-sphere through a focus on what I am calling **reactionary technopolitics**, or eclectic assemblages of media and communications technologies, political organizations, and hyper-partisan information networks through which right-wing political assemblies are forged, educated, and socialized. As David Neiwert (2017) argues, the political right in the United States occupies an ideological space he calls "Alt-America" (p. 31), or, in Lundskow's (2012) words, a "self-contained reality with rules independent of the truth beyond its boundaries" (p. 530). Within this space, as Jen Schradie (2019) observes, the political right speaks **their truth**, one that is antithetical to the so-called "mainstream," which includes everything from the popular press, to "politically correct" discourses, to social facts that challenge rightist worldviews. Powering this space are a series of technopolitical entities, from alternative news systems, to well-funded political associations, to informal technologically organized political

groupings, which constitute a unique right-wing media and political ecosystem existing in its own, autonomous, macrocosm insulated from non-rightist discourses, opinions, and criticisms (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018).

The theoretical backdrop to my analysis is what Jodi Dean (2019) eloquently captures in her articulation of the **decline in symbolic efficiency** characteristic of contemporary (digital) communicative capitalism: "the loss of shared symbols, of general ideas and norms, of a sense that we know what another means when they appeal to home, the common good, citizenship, the university, etc.…" (p. 332). Emanating from the decline in symbolic efficiency is the sense that our agreement on what constitutes authoritative knowledge about reality has been profoundly unsettled—a feeling we express "in everyday language when we say, 'everyone has their own definition.' There is not a shared meaning that one can invoke in a conflict or discussion" (Dean 2019:332). Submerged within the digital, we are now constantly circulating within de-differentiated information flows of breaking news content, memes, political editorializing, and status updates while concurrently being invited online to participate in the construction of our own curated avatars and personal narratives (cf. Agger 2016). Following logically from the decline in symbolic efficiency is an epistemic pessimism that undermines our confidence in the possibility of pursuing real, truthful knowledge, and with it, the spread of a systemic alienation where we feel the world moving along while we stay still. In other words, we experience social change as a "symptom of our powerlessness rather than as the product of our own agency" (Kompridis 2006:247). Worrell (2019) is therefore right to invoke Marx in describing our social condition as one in which "all that is solid melts into air," and to proclaim that "a new fatalism has enslaved us" (p. 49). While the decline in symbolic efficiency **normalizes** this sense of fatalism, it is **not normal**. It is a way of being and feeling that had to be learned and imposed through a historical social process—an important component of which is the subject of this paper.

Below, I outline a critical sociohistorical review of what I see to be the political right's chief contributions to the assault on truth and fact that is reaching its apex under Trumpian governance. I begin by setting the historical stage with a review of how the antidemocratic political project of the neoliberals became intertwined with the popular right-wing reaction against the civil rights, women's liberation, and anti-war movements. What came of this was a political association where free market libertarians formed necessary and effective alliances with social conservatives that materialized as a web of critical, consciousness-shaping political institutions—think tanks, radio and television broadcasts, faux grassroots political organizations, and so on. After providing this historical context, I move on to directly consider the effects of digitization on political reaction, focusing squarely on Trump and the alt-right, and placing the rise of the latter in relation to the cyber-libertarian idealism that has been with the internet since its inception. Guided by this utopian ethos, I show how virtual spaces were exploited by extreme supremacist political groupings. In the final section, I reflect on my argument and outline what I see to be three general—but by no means exhaustive nor mutually exclusive—tendencies: a Trumpian paleoconservative capturing of the Republican Party's base; the degeneracy of the core alt-right into white supremacist terrorism; and the emergence of an internet-powered, politically reactionary "intellectualism" epitomized by the so-called "Intellectual Dark Web" (IDW). I briefly explore what I see to be the chief political significance and cultural meaning of the IDW in our hyper-digital, post-alt-right historical moment, arguing that the felt intellectual authority of the group offers an important sense of objective, stable, and truthful knowledge in the present context of a decline in symbolic efficiency and informational de-differentiation. I conclude by reemphasizing the abnormality of

our present social juncture and offer brief summary remarks.

Before proceeding, I want to provide a guiding passage that I hope the reader will carry with them through the course of the paper. Corey Robin (2017) argues that political reaction is not a simple reflex; rather, it begins from a position of principle: "that some are fit, and thus ought, to rule others—and then recalibrates that principle in light of a democratic challenge from below" (p. 18). This is a general formula, meaning that both political reaction and the democratic challenge(s) it aims to negate are fungible forms whose substantive contents, discourses, and tactics are filled in differentially by history. An organized reactionary political assemblage provides "a meditation on…the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back" (Robin 2017:4). The power threatened could be that of "a landed estate or the privileges of white skin, the unquestioned authority of a husband or the untrammeled rights of a factory owner," but in all cases, political reaction **really does**, at the practical level of species-life, "speak to and for people who have lost something," however just that loss may be (Robin 2017:56). But even though reactionary discourses must speak to the material conditions and practical consciousness of a mass public to become an effective political force, the task is always the same: to "appeal to the mass without disrupting the power of elites, or, more precisely, to harness the energy of the mass in order to reinforce or restore the power of elites" (Robin 2017:52). This is the general formula of political reaction—appealing to the mass in order to **disenfranchise** the mass.

Revealing mass political reaction for what it is—**domination**, even as it takes on the form of the overwhelming will of the people—has long been the task of a substantive, critical reason (cf. Worrell 2019). Yet, with the decline of symbolic efficiency, the authority of reason itself—"once used to liquidate unjust domination"—is now "melting away" (Worrell 2019:4). I hope the reader will keep Worrell's (2019) insight in mind, as well as the passage from Robin (2017) quoted above, as they proceed to the analysis below.

The Historical March of the Right-Wing Media and Political Ecosystem

Prior to Trump, the alt-right, and generalized fear about the mass disinforming capacities of digital technologies, the far-right had already built vast and formidable political and information networks linking a significant slice of the public to an autonomous nexus of slanted opinion media and political organizations. Some of the earliest foundations for this right-wing media and political ecosystem are to be found in the political reaction to fascism and socialism in the first half of the twentieth century that would coalesce into what has come to be ubiquitously described as neoliberalism. Ray Kiely's (2017) illuminating study of Austrian School social theory and its relation to the rise of neoliberalism is instructive on this point. Kiely (2017) effectively situates what he calls, building on Brown (2015), the "de-democratization" project of neoliberalism within its historical emergence from the crisis period of the 1930s. As Kiely (2017) argues, the profound disdain towards collectivism threaded through the Austrians' political theory was entrenched as the authoritarian assemblages of fascism and Soviet communism rose to prominence. For Mises and Hayek, it was Bolshevism specifically that represented the worst, and inevitable, outcomes of collectivistic governance, both from an economic standpoint in terms of the impossible task of organizing economic calculation through state planning and centralization (cf. Phillips and Rozworski 2019), and from the standpoint of political liberty that sees in communist experiments the tyrannical consequences of states assuming responsibility for the administration of the private lives of citizens.

This led the Austrians to be dismissive of collectivism tout court, culminating in, as Kiely (2017) evidences in his analysis of Hayek's post-war writings, an unwariness towards democracy itself. Even as social democratic welfare states displaced fascism and fended off communism, the democratic procedures at their core were nevertheless interpreted as being an innately corruptible set of (collectivist) processes through which groups and individuals socialize their private interests and force their wills upon the rest of society in successive blows to individual liberty (Kiely 2017:733). Salvaging liberty from this collectivist onslaught meant, on the one hand, instituting a strict constitutional order with universal, and difficult to change, rules, and, on the other, relegating the exercise of collectivistic wills to an unfettered capitalist marketplace where a "spontaneous order" emerges through the supra-human coordination of people's infinite preferences by omniscient economic powers. The long struggle towards realizing such a "regime of liberty" (Kiely 2017:733) was inaugurated with the founding of the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) in 1947, an organization that began as a "closed, private members-only debating society" (Mirowski 2014:43), but which would ultimately transform into a crucial space for the construction of neoliberal hegemony.

At its first meeting, the MPS brought together a club of intellectuals committed to its anti-collectivist political project. This grouping would become the basis for the formation of what Mirowski (2014) calls the "Neoliberal Thought Collective" (NTC). Importantly, the NTC is not just a network of individuals, but also a "multilevel, multiphase, multisector approach to the building of political capacity to incubate, critique, and promulgate ideas" (Mirowski 2014:43). That is, it is also a **political strategy**, and one that has been remarkably successful at not only "monopolizing" the political and ideological terrain (Srnicek and Williams 2016:55) through its daunting network of think tanks, academic legitimators, university research centers, and policy houses (Leonard 2019; MacLean 2017), but also at building broad political coalitions with business interests and politicians who, taken together, provide crucial financial and practical support for the NTC (Major 2018; Wasserman 2019). Because the neoliberals were building a robust institutional edifice during the postwar period, they were in prime position to launch a political offensive when the postwar Keynesian consensus was thrust into a legitimacy crisis in the latter half of the twentieth-century (Harvey 2007; Major 2018).

Although the NTC was successful at seizing political and economic control, as Feldmann (2019) argues, politics is never "just a battle for power," but also a struggle over "collective representations and collective identity" (p. 81). Such collective representations form the basis for what Gould (1995) calls "mobilizing ideologies," or "conceptual, 'reduced form'" accounts of the world that identify the "types of social relations…crucial for understanding a set of grievances," and which in turn motivate political struggles to remedy those grievances (p. 16). But as MacLean (2017) observes, neoliberalism faces the problem that it is an elite movement for the capitalist class that could "never win majority support," and it has therefore long depended on subterfuge and esoteric networks to advance its politics (p. xxxiii). Yet, as neoliberalism began radically altering social relations in the twilight of the twentieth century, a popular conservative resurgence was already underway that generated the conditions for a historic alliance of the political right—an alliance from which a general, antigovernment mobilizing ideology would emerge that would foster effective political collaborations among different rightist factions.

This alliance was rooted in the vehement reaction to the civil rights, anti-war, and women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. What the political right saw in these movements was the corrosion of American tradition and the growth of a tyrannical activist government

extending special privileges to non-white, non-male communities under the banner of civil rights. Also inspired were Christian fundamentalists, who were revolting against the evils of the times— legalized abortion, birth control, feminism, and so on—by weaponizing their faith. As Major (2015) shows, in the height of this reaction, the political right turned against the mainstream media for their own ideological "counter-spheres." For these reactionaries, the mainstream media came to be seen as possessing an un-American liberal bias that offered sympathetic coverage to social justice movements while concurrently representing conservatives as ignorant, prejudiced, and socially and politically backwards. Consequently, as Nelson (2019) shows, these disaffected constituencies were redirected by major political players—especially those connected to the powerful Council for National Policy (CNP)—to alternative information feeds fueled by conservative radio stations, cable broadcasts, and partisan publications, while also being organized into a formidable, voting, political force through an array of elite-backed citizens' groups, issue-based advocacy campaigns, and get out the vote drives.[1]

In a strategic decision, the neoliberals would join forces with this blossoming popular reaction, but they had to reckon with its nationalist impulse, which was foremost concerned with defending "American tradition" against unwanted change. On the one hand, nationalism is often at odds with the formal libertarian economics undergirding neoliberalism, which tends to see national-sovereignty as only so many iron walls inhibiting the free flow of capital, contract, and liberty.[2] On the other hand, the capitalist market is idealized as something that is indifferent to the ascribed characteristics of any person or group, and which distributes wealth and poverty exclusively according to individual capacity. This contradiction was ultimately mediated by the mobilizing ideology of "big government"—a fungible, anti-statist category that can fruitfully be deployed by social conservatives **and** economic libertarians through its generalist discourse of "freedom, rights, and individual liberty" (Blee and Creasap 2010:273). This "fusionism" of far-right factions, unified by a plastic antigovernment message, became an essential means of justifying neoliberal economic doctrines, on the one hand, and fortifying a socially conservative, non-civil libertarian, political reaction, on the other (Mirowski 2014:39).[3]

With the convergence of right-wing factions, an imposing cache of political resources were made available for large-scale, and long-term, political organizing across multiple social fields and all levels of government (Renton 2019). Crucially, the right mastered the art of astroturf activism by funding, creating, and mobilizing its base into distributed networks of voluntary associations, campus groups, and other political assemblies (Meagher 2012:470). One of the most successful of these efforts is the infamous Americans for Prosperity (AFP), a Koch-backed venture that "has become a massive political-party-like operation" powered by a corps of permanent paid staff stretched across the country and an army of millions of volunteers (Hertel-Fernandez, Skocpol, and Sclar 2018:133). Formal political organizations like AFP greatly expanded the ideological and popular reach of the right, but so did a series of communications deregulations and anti-trust rollbacks largely instituted by the Reagan administration, such as the nullification of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, which liberated broadcasters from the mandate to provide proportionate air time for opposing viewpoints when covering controversial social and political topics. Such deregulations secured the rise of ultra-partisan media, paved the way for slanted news outlets like Fox News, and did so in the name of free speech and expressive liberty (Nelson 2019).

By the 1990s, a vast, right-wing media and political system were flourishing, but as people were increasingly drawn into the web, it was augmented by rightist digital outposts homesteading their own regions of cyberspace—first the likes of TownHall.com and news aggregators like the

<u>Drudge Report</u>, but then sites like <u>Breitbart</u>, <u>The Gateway Pundit</u>, and the informal channels of the alt-right. The nodes constituting this sprawling technopolitical network have come to coalesce into a clearly discernible, highly integrated, alternative media and political ecosystem operating in its own ideological universe. In their pathbreaking study of technopolitical information networks, Benkler et al. (2018) show that, while even far-left actors rely upon legacy outlets like the <u>New York Times</u> or <u>Washington Post</u> for their "reality check mechanisms," the right does not. Instead, the right is concentrated within isolated information feeds detached from virtually all non-rightist sources. Consequently, this right-wing ecosystem is extraordinarily self-referential, and its constituents are disproportionately exposed to targeted disinformation campaigns, lies, and what Benkler et al. (2018) describe as "anti-truth propaganda" (cf. Allcott and Gentzklow 2017; Meagher 2012; Neiwert 2017). It is unsurprising, then, that Donald Trump has been able to proficiently exploit this vast ecosystem over the course of his presidential tenure and two campaigns—especially in a period of immense digital pandemonium.

The Treacheries of Digitization

The digitization of communications was a boon for political reactionaries and a key factor in Donald Trump's success. Not only did digitization fortify the already existing right-wing media and political ecosystem, but it also created opportunities for the overtly supremacist fringe of the far-right to interject themselves into political deliberation, both directly and by proxy via Trump and his Twitter feed. Indeed, Trump's use of Twitter to "uncontestedly articulate" his political directives radically upended the norms of political communication by allowing him to bypass potentially argumentative interviewers or opponents who might otherwise hold him to account (Engesser et al. 2017:1110). At the same time, these disruptive communications empowered Trump to cultivate an authentic populist appeal through direct and unprocessed invectives that were highly attractive to the growing **alt-right**—i.e., the now infamous multiplicity of ideologies held together in common opposition to things like "feminism, Islam, the Black Lives Matter movement, political correctness…'globalism,' and establishment politics of both the left and the right" (Wendling 2018:3)—whom, like Trump, hold contempt for hegemonic political norms. To them, Trump communicates an unadulterated authenticity that accomplishes several political goals, as Fieschi (2019) observes:

> Authenticity is first and foremost a concept that allows for a politics rooted in instinct rather than reason. It is useful (1) to brand all others as hypocrites; (2) as a blanket excuse to speak one's mind in ways that are disruptive as possible, unbounded by received social and political norms; and (3) to make good on the populist claim that instinct and common sense trump reason and strategy (p. 36).

This guttural appeal contrasts the "unmediated natural intelligence or instinct of the people (who are authentic) with the acquired knowledge, book-learning, and (untrustworthy) sophistication of the elite" (Fieschi 2019:37). The authenticity of **the people** conveys the fact that their knowledge is closer to reality than the artificial **learned knowledge** of the university-educated, and by insinuation, biased liberals penning in the popular press in detached urban enclaves. By taking to Twitter to spout 280-word tirades, by boasting about "fake news" and the "failing <u>New York Times</u>," by promoting "alternative facts" and castigating the press for their elitism and counterfeit political correctness, Trump became a bullhorn for **true** Americans, appearing before them as a heroic and honest protagonist unafraid to go to blows with the

"establishment swamp."

Through Trump, the agents of the alt-right were able to conjure an image of themselves as an "aggrieved 'silent majority'" who have finally found a voice, power, and a platform from which to retaliate against a besieging global society (Tuters 2019:46). Unlike a nebulous establishment elite that is accused of selling out the American people to the forces of "globalization, multiculturalism and political correctness" (Kiely 2019:133), Trump articulates his own brand of paleoconservatism that promises to restore the dignity of ordinary Americans by embracing a discourse of economic nationalism, trade protectionism, and immigration restrictionism.[4] To the paleoconservative, we have long since entered a period of American decline: corporations are multinational entities indifferent towards the livelihood of American workers; the American family and its way of life is being eroded by homosexuality and gender equality; and a global agenda of multicultural egalitarianism is being enforced that fruitlessly compels culturally incompatible groups to live in community with one other as political equals (Worrell 1999). Against this, the "paleo" in paleoconservative implies the possibility of returning to an **original** way of life conforming with America's true republican tradition (Kiely 2019). Central to this paleo imaginary is the old notion of "producerism," or the drawing of distinctions between "good producers"—e.g., farmers, artisans, and main street entrepreneurs—and "evil parasites"—e.g., bankers and speculators (Lyons 2018:vii). In the modern version, it is the disenfranchised blue-collar manufacturing workers and the modest middle-class whose moral purity and social suffering can be contrasted with that of the decadence and exploitation of globalist elites, as well as that of "illegal" immigrants and the non-producing "underclass" of racialized welfare recipients (Hell and Steinmentz 2017; Kiely 2019; Worrell 1999). Trump's paleo promise to Make America Great Again energized those disaffected by globalization by promising a protectionist political economy at the level of world capitalism, on the one hand, but a purified sphere of restored domestic free-market capitalism, on the other. Trade deals would be renegotiated, tariffs strategically utilized, and the southern border would be fortified with a wall to lockout immigrants. America's productive apparatus would be put to work by and for Americans. The good producers would have their prestige restored, and the globalists would be dethroned.

For all its nationalistic and statist tinges, it is interesting that Trump's paleoconservative discourses resonated with a libertarian wing of the alt-right, specifically a paleolibertarian sect influenced by the Austrian economist and anarcho-capitalist theorist, Murray Rothbard. In a 1992 essay, Rothbard (1992) outlines a libertarian strategy propelled by a program of right-wing populism that does not simply spread "correct ideas"—what Rothbard calls the "Hayek" model in reference to the ideological work of the neoliberals discussed above—but also exposes the "corrupt ruling elites and how they benefit from the existing system, more specifically how they are ripping us off" (p. 8). In a conspicuously racialized invective, Rothbard's populist program calls for authoritarian usages of the state to "take back the streets" from "violent criminals," granting the police the power to administer "instant punishment," and putting "America first" by refusing to support "bums abroad"—a strange set of proposals for an anti-statist libertarian (Rothbard 1992:8-9).[5] Yet, as the preceding section discusses, and as Sandifer and Graham (2017) further show, this is representative of a broader trend of libertarians aligning themselves with strange bedfellows in the tactical pursuit of liberty. And while both the paleoconservative and paleolibertarian tendencies were historically fringe forces within the American right, from the late 1990s onward, they became popular with a "certain type of geek" and were ideologically nurtured online (Sandifer and Graham 2017:266). What ultimately ensued was the rise of a cyber-

libertarian idealism that would come to synthesize with more sinister supremacist tendencies, culminating in the alt-right.

The politics, aesthetics, and tactics of the alt-right become clearer when situating their sense of identity threat within the bifurcation of internet socialization that occurred as digital technologies matured and developed. Tuters (2019) insightfully shows how the alt-right has allegiance to what he describes as the "deep vernacular web," or niches of digital communities who "see themselves as an oppositional subculture tasked with keeping alive what they perceive to be the original spirit of the web" (p. 39). That "original spirit of the web" was one initially tethered to the cyber-libertarian idealism, so prevalent in the 1990s, which celebrated the new, liberating, cyber-millennium about to dawn on humankind—one that would elevate all of humanity to an internet-powered techno-utopia that would transcend the coercions of nation states and the oppressions of artificial social hierarchies by inviting all people online to participate as truly equal bodiless subjects on censorship-free platforms where each is, finally, really free to express themselves (Daniels 2015; Golumbia 2016). This authentic, original spirit is epitomized by John Perry Barlow's (1996) famous treatise, <u>A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace</u>, where he writes:

> Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone…You have no sovereignty where we gather…Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live. We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth. We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere, may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity (n.p.).

Of course, as the twenty-first century progressed, this optimistic image was banalized by the cynical realism of platform capitalism less interested in preserving these ideals, let alone in realizing their utopian political visions, than in massifying, monopolizing, and monetizing this emerging technological terrain (Srnicek 2017).

The mainstreaming of computer technologies and the creation of "normie" social media platforms that are accessible, intuitive, and a now naturalized feature of everyday life contrasts sharply with the historical cultures of the internet that were nurtured on BBS boards, Usenet hierarchies, and IRC channels, all of which were initially accessible only to those with at least a modicum of programming competency and computer access—engineers, software developers, technology firms, and the like (Bridle 2018; Bartlett 2016; Turner 2006). But as the internet opened-up and changed, those clinging to the "original spirit of the web" found themselves congregating in spaces like 4chan, subreddits, and, eventually, troll social media feeds—all of which would become what Wendling (2018) insightfully calls the "proto-institutions" of the alt-right. Early on, these sites were rendezvous points for nerds, geeks, and gamers to socialize, especially through hazing, humor, and irony in a continuation of the disruptive culture of "flaming" that was popular amongst the earliest denizens of the web (Bartlett 2016:26). Importantly, though, as Massanari (2017) argues, these were very male-centric spaces where a culture of "geek masculinity" flourished, characterized by, on the one hand, an embrace of certain elements of hypermasculinity that valorize "intellect over social or emotional [i.e., feminine] intelligence," while, on the other hand, rejecting hypermasculine traits like physical fitness while also invoking a self-deprecating humor surrounding a stereotypical geeky "awkwardness" (p. 332). This intellectual, yet also lighthearted and masculinist-nerd identity, would, especially by the 2010s, come crashing into other digital

groupings with alternative understandings of the political possibilities of digital communications and a radically different set of norms and values.

As the internet became a universal social resource, the different platforms populating it could be somewhat accurately categorized according to their political leanings. So, for example, platforms like Tumblr—and even Twitter (Wojick and Hughes 2019)—became associated with the left, and particularly, a left that is sensitive to issues of gender, race, privilege, and identity, and which uses the internet to create safe spaces for the discussion and exploration of these topics (Nagle 2017). Within these spaces, a form of activism was developed, which Jane (2016) describes as "digilantism," that tries to empower those injured by oppressive social relations by encouraging them to "call out" or "name and shame" their antagonists (p. 285). As Jane (2016) shows, much of this is targeted at the "e-bile" of misogynistic, racist, and violent verbal attacks and troll campaigns against women, people of color, and LGBTQ people online with the stated intent of holding abusers responsible for their actions and limiting the boundaries of acceptable speech to prevent future episodes of similar conduct. Yet, for those of the "deep vernacular web," this was a threatening, illiberal affront to the internet's original intent and libertarian promise. Even worse, this style of liberal censorship was seen as having become hegemonic, policing speech and expression not just online, but in domains ranging from video games (Massanari 2017), to films and popular culture (Lawson 2018), to the mainstream press (Gardiner 2018).

Curtis Yarvin, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, programmer, and neo-reactionary (NRx) alt-right progenitor, was instrumental in cultivating concerns about the tyranny of political correctness on his blog, Unqualified Reservations. Under the pseudonym Mencius Moldbug, Yarvin blogged prolifically about what he termed the "Cathedral," a modern day "progressive church" encompassing everything from the press, to the entertainment industry, to universities and beyond that came to constitute a hegemonic, cohesive, "priesthood of culture" (Woods 2019:53). Standing against the Cathedral is the aptly-named "Anti-Cathedral," or those willing to chat and write about "the previously unthinkable"—i.e., politically **incorrect** ideas—in order to shift the Overton Window (Wendling 2018:33). Similarly, the anti-globalization paleoconservative movement had introduced a homologous category, "cultural Marxism," as a way of framing progressive causes, from multiculturalism to affirmative action, "as foreign to the American way of life" (Woods 2019:40). The fusion of "cultural" with "Marxism" stems from a bizarre conspiracy theory that the Frankfurt School of critical theorists, through their critique of capitalism and its cultural forms in the United States, intended to subvert the nation's traditional values in order to pave the way for a repressive Marxist regime. The late Andrew Breitbart adhered to the conspiracy and amplified its reach through his right-wing news platform, Breitbart News. Presently, as Wendling (2018) observes, the term functions as a catch-all dismissal of any leftist discourses.

Ultimately, these two concepts would become significant political frames guiding alt-right theory and praxis in the spaces of the deep vernacular web. Consequently, Beran (2019) writes, these spaces came to be organized "much like Dante organized hell, in cascading layers of depravity" (p. 140). This polemical description is meant to convey not just that far-right extremists—like neo-Nazis and "race realists"—were hijacking the networks of the deep vernacular web, which they were, but also the way that disparaging and incendiary trolling through memes had come to dominate so much of these networks' cultural expressions in ways that led to, when paired with political content, ideological radicalization. Initially, such activity could be registered as an act of dissent, "doing it for the lulz" as it were, to protest the creeping censorship of digitally mediated speech in a vindication of cyber-libertarianism: no speech should ever be off-limits,

especially online. For many, this is precisely how they want to be perceived—not as **serious** racists/sexists/homophobes/etc., but simple trolls stirring banter to elicit an overreaction from progressives in order to demonstrate the latter's illiberalism. But memeing was also understood to be a significant means of genuine political socialization and education. There is even a term used for this process, self-anointed by the alt-right and its converts: red pilling. Red pilling, or taking the red pill, is the process through which one "unlearns" the social engineering of the Cathedral, or the cultural Marxists, or whomever the domineering powers might be (Kelly 2017:75).[6] And within these online spaces, which were long lacking a coherent political identity beyond a free speech absolutism epitomized by trolling (cf. Beran 2019; Nagle 2017), a profound opportunity presented itself for malevolent, and politically serious, elements to foment a disruptive political reaction.

Importantly, extreme right-wing hate groups joined the cyber-libertarians as some of the earliest adopters of internet-age technologies. BBS, Usenet, IRC, and the world wide web were all variously used by the Klan, neo-Nazis, and others as it became untenable for most of these groups to gather in-person given their advocacy for explicit violence (Levin 2002). Although many of these groups have different, and sometimes even conflictual, histories, much scholarship shows that, online, these groups began cross-fertilizing one another, referencing each other's websites, media, and content, and melting away boundaries (Adams and Roscigno 2005; Back 2002; Burris, Smith, and Strahm 2000). Online communities like Stormfront created crucial spaces for white nationalists of various stripes to debate, discuss, and educate one another (De Koster and Houtman 2008), further dissolving barriers between different reactionary tendencies, and helping to brew what Atton (2006) calls **liquid ideologies**, or systems of meaning "mobile enough to borrow from a variety of discourses in order to present their arguments" (p. 575). Those professing these liquid ideologies would seep out of the white supremacist web and become what Beran (2019) describes as a "neo-Nazi problem" for sites like 4chan, leading the latter to create a containment board in 2011 called /pol/—short for "politically incorrect"—to centralize these supremacists and limit their influence over the site (p. 123). The problem was, /pol/ would come to dominate the identity of 4chan, explode in popularity, and transform the image board into ground zero for alt-right politicking. From its depths, a "Great Meme War," guided by a belief in "meme magic"—the idea that hounding digital networks and social media feeds with politically inflammatory memes and media content could cause massive red pilling and "affect the course of history" (Wendling 2018:87)—was waged.

In 2015, Trump entered the political scene as the perfect meme candidate, and his presidential campaign and eventual victory seemed to corroborate the reality of meme magic. Not only did Trump speak and behave like the alt-right by, for example, peddling xenophobic and racist slurs—such as his characterizations of Mexicans as "criminals," "drug dealers," and "rapists"—but he also participated **directly** in the cultural practices of the alt-right, retweeting racist and anti-Semitic memes originating on 4chan and 8chan—including fake racist crime statistics from a fictional government agency (Wendling 2018)—and even hosting right-wing meme creators at the White House for a so-called "social media summit" in the summer of 2019 (Baca 2019). More recently, Trump trolled teenage environmental activist, Greta Thunberg, after she was named <u>Time's</u> 2019 Person of the Year, by authorizing his official campaign account to tweet a photoshopped image of his head plastered atop of Greta's on her featured <u>Time Magazine</u> cover (Osborne 2019). Like the alt-right and the deep vernacular web, Trump exudes authenticity. He is a real leader unafraid of violating the hegemonic politically correct norms of the Cathedral and the cultural Marxists,

and his insurgent victory appeared to vindicate the decadent political style of the alt-right and signal the dawn of a new political era. However, not long after Trump's election, internal fissures within the alt-right began splintering the movement apart. Realizing that they could actually win electorally, a faction of the alt-right—the so-called "alt-light" who, though they are contemptuous towards the establishment Republican Party and committed to Trump's economic nationalism, is also worried about violent hardliners within the ranks of the alt-right—struggled to distance themselves from the white supremacists, anti-Semites, and neo-Nazis associated with figureheads like Richard Spencer, much to the chagrin of the latter (Marantz 2019).

Nevertheless, in August of 2017, a "Unite the Right" rally was held in Charlottesville, Virginia that intended to rejuvenate the alt-right's political energy and demonstrate the group's solidarity. Ultimately, though, the neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and alt-righters who descended on the city would provoke clashes with counter-protesters, incite violence, and murder an anti-fascist activist, Heather Heyer. This was a considerable setback for the movement, and a year later, when alt-righters organized a second Unite the Right rally in Washington, DC, less than 30 participants showed, and they were outnumbered by hundreds of counter-protesters (Lopez 2018). At the same time, many alt-right figureheads have since been de-platformed, banned from social media, and removed from crowd-funding platforms like Patreon as demands to curb the spread of alt-right hate speech and violence intensified (Bowles 2018; Charity 2019). Wendling (2018) is right, therefore, to suggest that the alt-right is in a period of downfall. This is not to claim that the broader political reaction that the alt-right incited is somehow over with—far from it. But it is suggestive that, as the alt-right as we know it crumbles, different modalities of political reaction will fill the void that is left. The question becomes, then, what forms of reaction will take its place?

Post-Alt-Right Political Reaction: Intellectuals, Ascendant

As we enter the new decade, I think there are at least three noticeable, but by no means mutually exclusive, trends emerging from the historical trajectories examined in this paper. First, there is a hardening of Trumpian paleo influence among the Republican Party's base that has important implications for mainline conservatism. Here, we see a reactionary turn towards economic nationalism—at least discursively and ideologically—against the degeneration of democracy and material wellbeing under globalized neoliberalism (Boffo, Saad-Filho, and Fine 2018). With respect to the alt-right, it seems to have reached its logical conclusion by devolving to white supremacist terrorism. High profile events, such as the horrifying March 2019 slaughter of Christchurch, New Zealand's Muslim community, during which the terrorist posted a livestream of his rampage to the alt-right board 8chan, epitomize this threat. Recently, the FBI has warned that domestic white supremacist terrorism is on a troubling rise, and, after the El Paso terrorist attack last summer, the Department of Homeland Security conceded that white supremacists are a serious domestic terrorism threat (Dickson 2019; Perez 2019). Yet, there is also another trend quickly gaining influence in the post-Trump, post-alt-right, political and cultural landscape. What I am referring to is the rise of the so-called "Intellectual Dark Web" (IDW), a loose network of dissident academics, online influencers, and public intellectuals running the gamut from Jordan Peterson, to Ben Shapiro, to Dave Rubin, and beyond.

Not unlike many denizens of the alt-right, the IDW is fed up with what they perceive to be a repressive culture of political correctness that prohibits free and intellectually honest discussions about controversial topics (cf. Sikka 2019). Like the alt-right, the IDW lambasts the establishment,

especially the mainstream media, for engaging in what amounts to censorship by restricting the Overton Window of acceptable discourse in a capitulation to illiberal "social justice warriors." The term itself—Intellectual Dark Web—was coined by Eric Weinstein, the Managing Director of Peter Thiel's Thiel Capital, quasi-satirically. Nevertheless, the term stuck, becoming so effectual as to land the IDW a widely read profile by Bari Weiss in the New York Times. In the piece, Weiss (2018) describes the group, and its meaning, thusly:

> Here are some things you will hear when you sit down to dinner with the vanguard of the Intellectual Dark Web: There are fundamental differences between men and women. Free speech is under siege. Identity politics is a toxic ideology that is tearing American society apart. And we're in a dangerous place if these ideas are considered "dark"…A decade ago, [the members of the IDW argue], none of these observations would have been considered taboo. Today, people like them who dare venture into this "There Be Dragons" territory on the intellectual map have met with outrage and derision…It's a pattern that has become common in our new era of That Which Cannot be Said and it is the reason the Intellectual Dark Web…came to exist (n.p.).

From Weiss' (2018) summary, it is immediately apparent that the IDW is a straightforward reaction against the mainstreaming of certain leftist political sentiments, particularly around issues of gender, race, and privilege that have successfully affected popular discourses in recent years. To the IDW, contemporary progressivism adheres to an anti-rationalist social justice paradigm that pushes a fundamentalist social constructivism. This social constructivism, it is argued, is intellectually legitimated by postmodern philosophy, a school of thought accused of being generalized within the ranks of the left. Accordingly, postmodern subjectivism now shapes progressive common sense and annihilates objectivity in an irrational denial of what are, according to the IDW, basic scientific facts about gender, race, and other human differences.[7] The IDW, therefore, enters the field as a decidedly rational-scientific counterweight to the supposed irrational excesses of postmodernist left-liberal culture.

The centrality of rationalization to the IDW is epitomized by one of its most famous affiliates, Ben Shapiro. Shapiro routinely lambasts what he calls the "radical subjectivism" of the postmodern left, which, he argues, might make people "feel good" about their identities, but fails to provide "the common framework for a conversation," for, "if we can't agree on the facts, how are we going to have a conversation?" (quoted in Harris 2019). The "New Atheist" Sam Harris further drives the point home, saying, in a conversation with Shapiro, that "identity politics is so toxic, in my view. If identity is paramount, communication is impossible" (Harris 2019). Precisely because they are willing to have such conversations and level such criticisms, the IDW argues that neither they, nor truth itself, can get a fair trial in mainstream culture. They are therefore turning to YouTube, podcasts, and online publishing outlets like Quillette to construct their own alternative communication and information networks where free, unencumbered, and intellectually honest discussion can flourish without overbearing censorship.

However, as the nexus of media constituting the IDW came to cohere into a discernible form, the group was immediately embroiled in controversy. The Guardian (2018) responded to Weiss's (2018) New York Times piece by accusing the IDW of being the "thinking wing of the alt-right." Likewise, those studying the alt-right pointed out how IDW-affiliated influencers were platforming far-right extremists, such as when IDW YouTuber Dave Rubin interviewed Stefan Molyneux, an advocate of race realism, on his web series (Lewis 2018:12). Similarly, the willingness of some IDW affiliates to converse with far-right extremists under the banner of free speech compelled one IDW sympathizer to pen an editorial criticizing this practice (Young 2019).

Further, a recent piece in The Nation has criticized the IDW's popular e-magazine, Quillette, for repackaging things like discredited race science in a seemingly uncontroversial, "pseudo-intellectual form" (Minkowitz 2019), and other scholars, using big data metrics, have shown that the audience for IDW content overlaps with those consuming alt-right and alt-light content (Ribeiro et al. 2019). Left-wing political podcaster Michael Brooks (2020) therefore concludes that the IDW "promotoes narratives that either **naturalize** or **mythologize** historically contingent power relations" (p. 9). Nevertheless, the IDW strongly rejects the alt-right attribution, largely viewing it as a libelous smear. To this point, Skeptic Magazine recently published an online survey of a purposive sample of IDW members, concluding that the network is dominated by moderate liberals who are concerned about political extremism, free speech, and civil disagreement (Shermer, Saide, and McCaffree 2019). And, as Eric Weinstein (2018) opines on his YouTube channel, "the fact that [the IDW] can't be understood or reported for what it actually is, is in part what we wanted to show you. We wanted to show you the failure of the commentariat"—the latter being the gatekeepers of the mainstream press, cultural commentary, and political editorializing.

A similar disdain for the supposed unreliability of the mainstream is expressed in a video about the IDW by Dave Rubin, where he says that, "I believe almost nothing of real value is happening anywhere in the mainstream media," which, he argues, "masks their opinions as facts" instead of "arming you with real knowledge and new ideas" (The Rubin Report 2018). "Fortunately," Rubin continues, "thanks to YouTube, podcasting, and however else you get shows like this one, the mainstream media's stranglehold on information, which really is a stranglehold on your ability to think clearly about the issues of the day, is crumbling at an incredible rate" (The Rubin Report 2018). Interestingly, in 2019, Rubin announced a deal to bring his famed YouTube series to BlazeTV, a major paid subscription right-wing video streaming platform founded by Glenn Beck, citing "problems with [YouTube] over free speech" (Garcia 2019).[8] BlazeTV also houses the hugely popular online series Louder With Crowder hosted by conservative comedian and internet celebrity, Steven Crowder. Importantly, on a now-defunct, unofficial website for the IDW—a website IDW mainstays were seemingly aware of (Weiss 2018)—Crowder was identified as a member of the group, specifically its "critical darker web" variant.[9] Crowder's identification with the IDW was almost certainly tied to his hugely popular "Change My Mind" video series, a confrontational debate show where he goes to public spaces (generally college campuses), sets up a table, and invites the public (usually undergraduate students) to debate him on the issue of the day, which is printed on a large banner (e.g., "There are Only 2 Genders," "Socialism is Evil," and "Male Privilege is a Myth") along with the invitational tag line, "Change my mind!"

In one of his most popular videos, Crowder (2017) describes the premise of "Change My Mind" this way: "I go on the street…take one given topic, and I just listen to people, let them change my mind, we rationalize our positions, and it's usually really productive." Really, though, the show is based around baiting young progressives into filmed discussions where they are intellectually torn down by Crowder's well-rehearsed, prefabricated rebuttals that "rationally" dissect and lay bare the anti-reason of leftist political arguments. Likewise, one of the IDW's chief thought leaders, Ben Shapiro, has obtained internet fame from his viral videos of him similarly humiliating progressives in choreographed debates. These are public takedowns that are widely shared online, and which have even spawned a meme—destroying someone with "FACTS" and "LOGIC"—that grew out of the punctual stylization of the video titles—e.g., "Ben Shapiro DESTROYS Transgenderism And Pro-Abortion Arguments" and "Ben Shapiro NAILS Hate Speech and Censorship in 2 Minutes"—from Shapiro's official YouTube channel (cf. Burgis 2019;

Hughes 2018).[10] Shapiro is also the author of the hugely popular <u>How to Debate Leftists and Destroy Them: 11 Rules for Winning the Argument</u>, in which, in addition to teaching rightists how to "destroy" leftists in debates, he accuses the latter of variously having an "unearned sense of moral superiority," being "bullies," and being ideologically brainwashed by a detached university professoriate whom have not "had to work a real job" for most of their life (Shapiro 2014). Far less concerned with meaningfully engaging with their opponents, "rational" reactionaries like Shapiro and Crowder are focused on tearing down their adversaries in a humiliating defeat that symbolically reaffirms the intellectual triumph of the right while confirming the intellectual vacuity of the left.

As I make these observations, I am reminded of Adorno's (2005) all too prescient comments on "discussion" from his essay, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," particularly where he writes:

> …everywhere, discussion is called for…But discussion…has been completely ruined by **tactics**. What discussions could possibly produce, namely, decisions reached from a greater objectivity to the extent that intentions and arguments interpenetrate, does not interest those who automatically, and in completely inappropriate situations, call for discussion. Each of the hegemonic cliques **has prepared in advance** the results it desires. Discussion serves manipulation. **Every argument, untroubled by the question of whether it is sound, is geared to a purpose.** Whatever the opponent says is hardly perceived and then only so that formulaic clichés can be served up in retort (p. 269, emphasis added).

This is a crucial insight, and one that is all too relevant for our hyper-digital present. Within this context, the debate is not meant to honestly mediate sincere intellectual differences, all towards the pursuit of a reasoned consensus. Rather, its intent is to **prove** the irrationality or unworthiness of one's ideological opponents—and doing so **publicly**, before an audience. In the age of social media, this often means a virtual public, and an audience numbering in the millions. Ultimately, the soundness, the actual truthfulness, of one's argument is superfluous: what matters is its efficacy as a rationalized rhetorical weapon capable of crippling the Other, all without needing to **know** the Other's opinion beyond a formalization of its basic propositional structure—and even then just so that it can be knocked down. This turns argument, debate, and discussion into a functional political instrument, as Adorno (2005) further observes:

> Either these cliques want to make [the discussing opponent] into something usable by means of engineered discussion…or to **discredit them before their followers…The concept of discussion is cleverly twisted so that the opponent is supposed to let himself be convinced; this degrades discussion into a farce** (p. 269, emphasis added).

If the opponent cannot be persuaded to concede to their triumphant adversary, then they are meant to be discredited before their adversary's followers. The whole discussion is engineered to ensure the opponent meets defeat—either by a coerced concession, or by public humiliation.

While this style of weaponized rationalism was popular with certain segments of the alt-right (Flisfeder 2018; Sandifer and Graham 2017), I suspect it is going to play an increasingly important role in the hands of groups like the IDW in the coming years. It is also worth stating clearly that I believe there are enough differences between the IDW and the alt-right to warrant analytical distinction. Most notably, I think, is how the IDW aspires to appear as a **legitimate rational authority**: the IDW wants to be seen as serious and intellectually rigorous. Moreover, while I have highlighted the rightist pull of the IDW, many agents within the network want to appeal to a broad public by tapping into a growing malaise towards some leftist cultural practices and political

philosophies, like "call out culture," that are inciting backlash from those on both the right and left (Fisher 2013; Lester 2018; Nagle 2017). As reporting by Minkowitz (2019) suggests, the IDW is making progress towards this goal by recruiting influential liberals to opine in places like Quillette. The IDW is thus not a simple extension of the right-wing intelligentsia that has long since been opining in the popular press and news media. Likewise, while I have highlighted some of the IDW's leading personnel in this paper, the boundaries of the IDW are fuzzy, and there is evidence that among the consumers of IDW media, there is a sense that the network includes even amateur content creators committed to the IDW's stated commitments to rationalism, objectivity, and classical liberal values.[11] For these reasons, rushing to dismiss the IDW as a simple derivative of the alt-right or the right-wing intellectual establishment is an inadequate response. Doing so fails to consider what is genuinely novel about this group and how it differs in important ways from the alt-right and other political assemblages, while also obfuscating the sociohistorical and material conditions from which it emerged.

I think Jodi Dean (2010) captures a particularly trenchant set of social conditions at the heart of our hyper-communicative, digital present, and which are very relevant for assessing the significance of the IDW:

> [In communicative capitalism] everyone not only has a right to express an opinion, but each is positively enjoined to—vote, text, comment, share, blog. Constant communication is an obligation….In the setting of communicative capitalism [how] do we know whom to believe or trust? Suspicion or even uncertainty towards expertise **goes all the way down**…knowledge is now rejected as **nothing more than opinion**, and opinion which is necessarily limited, biased, and countered by others. **The ability to falsify is unlimited.** The lack of a capacity to know is the other side of the abundance of knowledge (p. 34–35, some emphasis added).

In internet-powered societies where human socialization is increasingly mediated by social media and totalizing digital technologies, the constant compulsion by these media to share one's opinion, speak their truths, and ceaselessly express themselves has fueled a profound epistemic skepticism that makes agreement on what constitutes truthful knowledge profoundly difficult. In the cacophony of the web, Person A, propounding expertise, promulgates a fact that contradicts Person B's experience; Person B then contradicts Person A by providing a contrary set of facts; Person A responds with yet another contradiction; and so on, **ad nauseum**—after all, there is always "another survey"—or other data—"done by another group or association, with whatever bias and whatever methodology, displacing whatever information one thought one had" (Dean 2010:28). At this juncture, the IDW represents an attempt to cut through the seeming nihilistic relativism that is a necessary byproduct of this unlimited capacity to falsify. Whatever its political biases and reactionary functions, to its adherents, the IDW is a comforting reassertion of the possibility of truth—of stable objectivity and fixed meaning **in spite of** the unsettling sense that we are trapped within a fractured, indeterminate social reality. By creating a space of order in an unordered world, the IDW provides its adherents with access to something that feels like sacred knowledge—truth itself.

Conclusion

Here, I have laid out what I hope is a synthetic, critical social history of reactionary technopolitics. The starting point for this inquiry was the premise that the assault on truth and

fact taking place under Trumpian governance is an abnormal state of affairs for a democratic society, but that it must be situated within the broader social setting of a decline in symbolic efficiency (Dean 2010, 2019). I then proceeded to illustrate the multifaceted ways that the political right contributed to the destabilization of factual and truthful authority through its construction of an autonomous political and media ecosystem powered by an eclectic nexus of information networks and political resources. Motivating that analysis were concerns about the authoritarian implications of a post-truth political order. But, of course, as Hannah Arendt (1972) writes in her seminal essay on the Pentagon Papers, "Lying in Politics," truthfulness "has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings" (p. 4). Even so, as she observes, the secrecy and lies surrounding the Vietnam War and the national security state were made accessible to the entire public in a damning exposé of government corruption, in no small part, Arendt emphasizes, to a fact seeking and truth-telling press (and, it ought to be added, a society presumed to be symbolically efficient and widely capable of agreeing on standards of truth). Yet, she questions whether that most essential political freedom—"the right to unmanipulated factual information without which all freedom of opinion becomes a cruel hoax" (Arendt 1972:45)—would, in the long-run, persist.

In one biting sentence, Worrell (2019) seems to affirm the negative: "If millions of people who are capable of rational thought not only act and think irrationally, but also revel in their irrational self-destruction, it is because the social ground of reality, truth, and reason has been eroded by social disorganization and opportunistic demagogues" (p. 54). This is not a normal state of affairs for a democratic society, whose ideals presume the sort of unmanipulated factual information Arendt sees as so central to substantive political freedom, and whose practical realization depends upon applying this information to the collective pursuit of—as C. Wright Mills ([1959] 2000) puts it—"reasoned moral choice" (p. 117). But with declining symbolic efficiency comes the declining authority of truth itself, threatening to leave us with "nothing more than power politics, rebellion, rationalizations, [and] propaganda" (Worrell 2019:9). With Trump and the alt-right, this threat makes itself conspicuous. But as I have shown, it was the convergence of several reactionary forces, many of which long preceded Trump and the alt-right, whose interlacing were essential in routing society towards our present conundrum.

I chose to focus on the IDW in the final section of the paper due to its attempts to assert itself as a truth-seeking authority amidst the decline in symbolic efficiency. It provides a way out of the relativist anguish of the historical present by postulating a realism in unrealistic times—a compelling offer in a moment of profound epistemic pessimism. Yet, it is one that risks legitimizing essentialist and inegalitarian political agendas by too comfortably finding common ground with an online ecosystem of reactionary "rationalists" who lump struggles for political equality "in with creationism as an absurd delusion, and claim to debunk feminism and other such ideas…using 'logic' and 'reason' and 'facts,' etc." (Sandifer and Graham 2017:282). Rationalistic rhetoric and historically decontextualized factual evidence have long been used to engage in the "rationalization of Othering," and therefore the justification of social inequality and political domination (Sakki and Pettersson 2016:162). This is because, as Arendt (1972) reminds us: "Factual truths are never compellingly true…Facts need testimony to be remembered and trustworthy witnesses to be established in order to find a secure dwelling place in the domain of human affairs" (p. 6). Compelling testimony thus establishes truthful authority. But now more than ever, there are a multiplicity of convincing yet divergent testimonies emanating from the same set of facts, and such testimonies can be used to establish truthful authorities that rationalize all sorts of

political conclusions—progressive or regressive (cf. Daniels 2009).

Worrell (2019) thus writes that it is the task of **disobedient radicals** to probe "the lines of authority" to discover "what is rational and what is bunkum" (p. 6). While skepticism towards authoritative truth claims now goes all the way down and our capacity to falsify any set of truth of claims with another set is seemingly infinite (Dean 2010), it is simply false that any explanation is as good as another and that we cannot find reasonable epistemic grounds from which to scrutinize and discriminate against competing explanations for social phenomena.[12] It is the task of disobedient radicals to find such ground amidst the flurry of surplus information vying for our attention and belief in our highly reactionary and hyper-digital historical present. As Bonefeld (2016) puts it, there "is only one reality, and that is the reality of the existent social relations" (p. 5). Not even the socially constructed world is infinitely pliable, and the reality of society as it is constituted at any historical juncture "puts limits on knowledge so that not all interpretations are equally plausible" (McCall 2005:1793). The efficacy of reactionary political struggles is dependent upon the mystification of the reality of the social relations in which we find ourselves. Slicing through this mystification presumes a critical realist orientation that places limits on the ontologically possible—and therefore theoretically reasonable—at any historical moment (cf. Bhaskar 2015). In the words of Marx ([1845] 2010):

> All social life is essentially **practical**. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice (p. 5).

Endnotes

1. An important component of this was what Nelson (2019) describes as a media drought throughout vast swaths of the country, especially in the latter half of the twentieth-century, as small local papers and radio stations were forced to close under the weight of financial pressure. The reactionary right stepped in, filling this void with a litany of biased media in what would prove to be a prescient political maneuver.

2. I say "formal" because the class of capital has wedded itself to a project of **repurposing**, not **disposing** of, the state to advance its political economic interests (Boggs 2012).

3. It is important to note that for some of the devout libertarians operating within this right-wing coalition, they will often disagree with the social conservatives on their traditionalist social norms. However, as Hertel-Fernandez et al. (2018) show, as a practical matter, the libertarians at the heart of the neoliberal enterprise nevertheless **do** find themselves allying with exactly these social conservatives in order to advance their economic interests. For example, while the Koch's strongly disapproved of Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential election, they nevertheless have found themselves hosting supporters of Trump at their biannual seminars (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2018:150).

4. The primary consideration here is on discourse and ideology. Whether or not Trump has been, in practice, a committed paleoconservativeis more nuanced (cf. Boffo et al. 2018; Kiely 2019; Matthews 2016).

5. In the same essay, Rothbard laments the political establishment's undermining of Klansmen David Duke's campaign for governor of Louisiana.

6. The red pill is a metaphor that comes from the film The Matrix, a reference to the scene where Neo is offered to the opportunity of taking a red or blue pill. The former will reveal to him the reality of the matrix; the latter will allow him to continue within it in blissful ignorance.

7. See, for example, Jordan Peterson's lecture on "Postmodern NeoMarxism: Diagnosis and Cure": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4c-jOdPTN8.

8. Even so, the show still airs on YouTube, but BlazeTV subscribers do get special perks like early access to streams.

9. While the site is no longer up and running, it is still accessible via the Way Back Machine: https://web.archive.org/web/20190525044439/http://intellectualdark.website/steven-crowder/. Other sites for the IDW have since popped up, including a social media platform for IDW fans (https://idw.community), as well as another unofficial informational page for the group (https://intellectualdarkweb.site/).

10. See the "Ben Shapiro Highlights" play list on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLX_rhFRRlAG5-1MA4JAe6dZmBBF9dIBEm.

11. For example, a recent master's thesis in philosophy criticizing "the ethics of compelled pronouns and the epistemology of 'me, too'" includes in its acknowledgements a nod to amateur content creators like Tim Pool—whose "independent, consistent, and honest journalism," the author writes, "provided me with insights into the culture war that claims rationality as its first victim," as well as to the famed YouTuber Carl Benjamin (better known as Sargon of Akkad) and his "relentless defense of classical liberal ideals" just before the author names the Intellectual Dark Web directly—those "who champion rational discourse above all else"—and thanks Jordan Peterson and Dave Rubin for their influence on the author's own intellectual development (Gustafson 2019:ix). Similarly, on the unofficial IDW social network site—https://idw.community—there are fan groups for Pool, Benjamin, and others, including Stefan Molyneux. This inclusion of amateurs and independent content creators differentiates the IDW from the establishment intelligentsia of both the right and left, while also, I'd argue, in agreement with Lewis (2018), endowing it with an authentic—even grassroots—energy and techno-youthful aesthetic.

12. Ironically, this is a point similarly emphasized by the IDW for radically different epistemic, ethical, and political purposes than those of interest to a critical sociology (see the video referenced in note 7 above).

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Donald J. Trump and the Politics of Democratic Dysfunction

Cary Fraser

On June 16, 2015, Donald Trump launched his Presidential campaign with great fanfare and his press conference presaged the vitriolic campaign that he subsequently conducted in pursuit of the Presidency. That announcement provided ample evidence of his durable capacity for the self-promotion that had defined his career as a national media personality with his own television show. Beyond the display of his talent for self-promotion, Trump emphasized two central campaign themes in his announcement – bigotry directed at Mexicans and other Latin American migrants; and, his open contempt for, and his willingness to disparage, the American political class in his speech.[1] The intemperate tone of his remarks reflected the observation of Richard Hofstadter:

> We are all sufferers from history, but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well.[2]

The day after Trump announced his candidacy, June 17, 2015, Dylan Roof killed the pastor and eight other members of the **Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church** in Charleston, South Carolina who were engaged in a mid-week Bible study session. Roof was apparently of the view that his actions would be able to trigger a race war.[3] In effect, Roof - like Trump - was "a double sufferer" – in the language of Hofstadter - and his profane fantasies resulted in the desecration of the sacred sanctuary that the church represented for members of the African American community in Charleston.

The coincidence of Trump's announcement and Roof's heinous crime were signals of an emerging crisis of the American political system. It was evident that racist and xenophobic rhetoric and racist-motivated violence had again moved to the center of American national politics and across generations. Roof's cold-blooded act of murder was both traumatic in the moment - and revelatory of the depth of racial hatred that has often found a safe harbor in American political culture. It was also a window into the imagination of a younger generation of Americans who have been influenced by the persistence of the ideology of white supremacy that has been a facet of American life and culture for several centuries.[4]

On the other hand, Trump's rhetoric defined the spirit of his Presidential campaign and his commitment to destabilizing the American political system. His campaign was thereafter systematically infused with currents from the basket of bigotry - racism, misogyny, religious discrimination, and xenophobia – that has contributed to the shaping of American social and

political life. The overt use of bigoted rhetoric - both heated and subtle; the deliberate provocation of an atmosphere of fear and anxiety around election campaigns; and threats of violence by and to political candidates have been recurrent features of American politics. Trump adopted that complex mix of intimidatory tactics allied with a vitriolic dose of misogyny articulated in the orchestrated chants of "lock her up" directed at his opponent, Hillary Clinton, during the rallies he organized over the course of his 2016 campaign.[5]

Trump's strategy in 2016 was also shaped by the contours of the electoral platforms adopted by Republican candidates since Richard Nixon's successful 1968 Presidential campaign. Nixon had embraced the "Southern strategy" through which the former Democratic/segregationist stalwarts from the South - Strom Thurmond, Jesse Helms, and their allies - switched their considerable popular support in the region to the Republican party.[6] For these Southern leaders, leaving the Democratic fold to join the ranks of the Republican party was a demonstration of their profound disappointment that arose from their disagreements with the Democratic Kennedy-Johnson administrations that had enacted major Civil Rights Legislation - including the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These reforms were designed to bring the Southern states into compliance with the efforts to move America away from the discredited "Jim Crow" regime, which had been institutionalized over the American landscape after the **Plessy v. Ferguson** decision of the Supreme Court in 1896. The Plessy decision opened the path to the diffusion of a culture of racial segregation and policies of political oppression directed at racial and ethnic minorities - underpinned by both random and organized violence that deprived minority voters of their voting and other citizenship rights.

In 1964, the Barry Goldwater campaign had provided an early signal of the Republican party's shift towards the Southern strategy in the Goldwater presidential campaign platform. In an astute commentary on the platform the New York Times adverted to the long-term significance of the Republican party's strategy in the 1964 campaign:

> In its fundamental rejection of progressive Republicanism, the Goldwater platform is neither forward-looking nor conservative. On the contrary, it gives a new and reactionary look to the G.O.P. It is ominously radical in its willingness to break with all that is good about the past, and it is dangerously reckless in its demand for measures that will exacerbate differences and conflicts at home and abroad.[7]

Nixon's strategic realignment of the Republican party in the 1968 campaign was the platform upon which Republicans pivoted to emerge as the champions of political, economic, social, and "racial" conservatism following the processes of political and constitutional reform that had gained ground after the Brown v. Board of Education in 1954. The strategy was also – in a more profound sense – a repudiation of the Eisenhower administration in which Nixon had served as Vice President. President Dwight Eisenhower in 1957 confronted a challenge from a Southern Governor, Orval Faubus in Arkansas when the latter attempted to derail the desegregation of the High School in Little Rock. Eisenhower sent troops to Arkansas to ensure that Faubus would accept the authority of the United States Supreme Court and its Brown v. the Board of Education decision of 1954. Eisenhower's action was a signal that he was prepared to endorse a gradual approach to implementing educational desegregation.

The Little Rock crisis was also an evocation of the memories of the American Civil War and Reconstruction when the Federal government sent troops into the South to protect African Americans from Confederate retribution. It was a decisive precedent that set the stage for Eisenhower and his successors to use military force to rout segregationist opposition to the

Brown decision. Just as important, Eisenhower's action occurred in the centennial year of the **Scott v. Sandford** decision of the United States Supreme Court which had stipulated that people of African descent were not considered as eligible citizenship under the American constitution. That decision was one of the catalysts for the eruption of the American Civil War in 1861.

In 1957, President Eisenhower also signed the Civil Rights bill passed by Congress which established the Civil Rights Division in the Justice Department. It was the first major federal Civil Rights legislation promulgated in the 20th century. The bill authorized federal officials to prosecute efforts by individuals who sought to deprive another citizen of his/her right to vote. In addition, the 1957 legislation established a six-member Civil Rights Commission to which was delegated the responsibility to investigate allegations of voter infringement. In effect, the Eisenhower administration had adopted a bipartisan approach at the federal level to the issue of civil rights - in collaboration with Democrats under the leadership of the Senate Majority leader, Lyndon B. Johnson. Further, in 1957, Vice President Nixon had attended the independence celebrations of Ghana and in a report to President Eisenhower on his trip to Africa, Nixon indicated that – "We cannot talk equality to the peoples of Africa and Asia and practice inequality in the United States."[8] In effect, in 1957, the Eisenhower administration was placing the authority of the Executive Branch behind the Supreme Court's unanimous decision in 1954 to articulate in constitutional terms the relationship between equal access to education and citizenship equality.

Eleven years later, the 1968 election campaign for the Presidency provided the opportunity and context for Richard Nixon to shift his ground. As the New York Times had anticipated in 1964, the Republican platform for the Goldwater campaign against President Lyndon Johnson had opened a major ideological rift within the Republican party which followed the defeat of Nelson Rockefeller from New York - the most prominent advocate for the Civil Rights struggle within the Republican party. Goldwater's triumph over Rockefeller represented a major shift in the center of gravity in the Republican party.[9] Thereafter, the Republican party's leadership (except for Trump in 2016) has been selected primarily from the American West which provided validation for Nixon's 1968 Southern strategy for the realignment of American politics.

In effect, in his 1964 campaign against Johnson, Goldwater had initiated the Republican efforts to court segregationist voters and other conservatives who were uncertain about and/or hostile to the Civil Rights movement.[10] Before the 1964 election, the domestic backlash against the Civil Rights struggle and political polarization had intensified amid the assassinations of Medgar Evers and President Kennedy in 1963. Later, the murder of Malcolm X in 1965 and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and presidential aspirant Robert Kennedy in 1968, deepened the levels of polarization that thereafter consumed American political life. Thus, by 1968, American politics was trapped in the vortex created by the escalating conflicts over efforts to move beyond the centuries-long tradition of human inequality that had sanctified the system of slavery, racist oppression, and the politics of compromised citizenship over the course of American history since 1776.

Nixon's victory had vindicated his decision to limit his enthusiasm and support for civil rights and the alliance with Southern segregationists that allowed the Republican party to win the White House.[11] The 1968 election thus represented the Republican party's shift from its status as the party of Abraham Lincoln to that of the party of Richard Nixon and the Southern strategy – a strategy that paid signal dividends in terms of the Republican electoral fortunes thereafter.

In 2016, Donald Trump strategically embraced both the Nixon Southern strategy of 1968 and the rhetoric of rage popularized by the anti-establishment segregationist Democrat George

Wallace who also ran for the Presidency in 1968 under the banner of his personal campaign vehicle - the American Independent Party.[12] Nixon's campaign strategy in 1968 had allowed him to split the Democratic party along regional lines and to limit the appeal of George Wallace's crude racist platform on the national stage. Trump's presidential campaign in 2016 was based upon the utilization of the rhetoric of political polarization and his targeting of the first African American President – Barack Obama - as the cause of "American decline." That critique allowed him to advance the claim that he should become the President who could "Make America Great Again" by embracing the legacies and rhetoric of both Richard Nixon of California and George Wallace of Alabama.

The Nixon-led Republican political realignment of 1968 was followed in the 1970s and 1980s by the emergence of the "Moral Majority" which included conservative Protestant and Catholic communities that moved to embrace the Republican party after the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision on abortion.[13] Further consolidation of the growing conservative movement was temporarily disrupted by the 1974 resignation of Nixon in response to the impeachment proceedings. However, Jimmy Carter's single term (1977-1981) was defined by the increasingly conservative tenor of American politics that would ultimately open political space for a reinvigorated Republican party. In 1980, Ronald Reagan emerged as the unifying figure around which these conservative communities - both religious and secular - coalesced to win the Presidential election in that year.[14]

The Reagan conservative "revolution" had arrived and one of its major priorities was a commitment to shrink and redefine the New Deal state that had emerged from the Great Depression and the Second World War under the leadership of the Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman led administrations. The key achievements of the New Deal state had included the expansion of the powers of the federal government to engineer a multi-decade program of sustained economic growth, the expansion of the national education system, and increasing innovation in agricultural, industrial, and commercial development.

Reagan and his colleagues were very interested in reversing some of the changes that had been introduced by the New Deal state, including limiting the power of labor unions which had become a powerful constituency within the Democratic party.[15] In effect, after almost five decades (1932-80) of Democratic domination of American politics the Reagan administration marked a Republican return to the pursuit of a politics of deference to oligarchic privilege that had defined America in the early 20th century. During that era, the Teapot Dome corruption scandal had rocked the Republican Warren G. Harding administration and, later in that decade, the Republican President Herbert Hoover had overseen the economic collapse that morphed into the Great Depression which led to two decades of Democratic administrations.

Dwight Eisenhower's two-term administration (1953-61) marked a brief revival of Republican fortunes. His tenure was defined by his moderate conservatism, his support for education and science as platforms for American economic and military innovation and dynamism during the Cold War era, and his public willingness to respect and champion the principles and precedents of American governance including respect for the courts.

Nixon's focus upon foreign policy and his partnership with Henry Kissinger which covered the negotiations to end the Vietnam War, the opening to China, the search for détente with the Soviet Union, and confronting the escalating tensions in the Middle East arising from the Palestinian turn to armed struggle and Israel's escalating conflicts with its Arab neighbors – had burnished his reputation during his Presidency. However, his evident lack of scruple triggered the Watergate scandal and his resignation in 1974 during his second term tarnished the Republican

brand. Despite his embrace of the Southern strategy, Nixon was careful to maintain a pragmatic stance on the need to remedy the historical disadvantages confronted by the African American community and was recognized as a key advocate for "affirmative action" as a policy to expand opportunities for American minorities.[16]

Given this checkered history of Republican politics over the course of the 20th century, Reagan presented himself as a symbol of Republican revival in 1980 and a champion of American conservatism in economic, political, and religious-cultural terms. In the 1980 campaign, Reagan traveled to Neshoba County, Mississippi to launch his campaign with a speech on "States Rights" in an area where three civil rights activists - James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Mickey Schwerner were slain by the Ku Klux Klan in 1964. Like his predecessor Richard Nixon, Reagan in 1980 sought to reassure voters that he embraced the Southern strategy as integral to the Republican national platform. In his re-election campaign in 1984, he again traveled to Mississippi to reassure the South that it would rise again.[17]

However, the Iran-Contra scandal and the investigations into the conduct of American foreign policy in the Persian Gulf and Central America brought an end to the illusion of Reagan's ability to ensure the uncontestable dominance of the Republican brand in American politics. Reagan's Vice President, George H.W. Bush, was elevated to the Presidency in the 1988 election in the wake of a virulently racist campaign - featuring "Willie Horton" - a convict who absconded and raped a woman – to cast his Democratic opponent Michael Dukakis as "soft-on-crime." The coded appeal to racist hysteria in the 1988 campaign reflected the increasingly virulent politics of polarization that had been set in train by the Nixon campaign in 1968 and embraced by Reagan in 1980 and 1984. The success of the Bush campaign in 1988 again demonstrated the political appeal of the coded appeals to fear of crime in the Southern strategy and again demonstrated its appeal as a default campaign strategy for the Republican party.[18]

In 2016, Donald Trump enthusiastically embraced the Southern strategy to regain the White House for the Republican party. His decision to launch his campaign as a Republican candidate for the Presidency was completely logical in the context of his history in real estate investments, which had included being investigated for housing discrimination in the 1970s. Given the Republican strategy of mobilizing race for electoral campaigns, Trump's personal history provided him with the bona fides needed to persuade the Republicans that his personal animosity and bigotry toward Barack Obama could be used to good effect in the 2016 campaign. Trump's efforts to disparage Barack Obama was, and is, reflective of the currents defined by both the appeal of racist and xenophobic sentiment in American life – and which stand at the core of the contemporary version of the Republican party.[19]

Those sentiments cannot be discounted from the calculus of Republicans who accepted Trump as the Presidential candidate in 2016. Mitch McConnell, the Senate Republican leader, who had publicly announced in 2009 that he would aspire to limit Obama to a single term as President had sent a very clear signal that he was deeply uncomfortable with the reality of an Obama presidency. McConnell had been elected to the U.S. Senate from Kentucky in 1984 - during the Reagan era - and his early political career was shaped by the Nixon-inspired realignment as well as his service in the Ford administration in the wake of Nixon's impeachment. In effect, McConnell's career can be considered as evidence of the durability of Nixon's political legacy.

As the current Senate Majority leader from Kentucky - a former slaveholding state - McConnell has evolved as a key player in maintaining the viability of the Southern strategy's role in building national Republican electoral coalitions. His role was magnified in recent months by

the control he demonstrated in ensuring that the trial that followed the impeachment of Donald Trump by the House of Representatives did not result in the removal of Trump from office. Trump's use of racist and xenophobic rhetoric in his Presidential campaign was acceptable to the Republican party. On the other hand, the Republican party's response to Representative Steve King, a Republican from Iowa who made a career of making blatantly racist statements, was to discourage him from remaining in Congress.[20]

For both McConnell and Trump, Obama's Presidency was, it would seem, a powerful indication of the growing appeal for a politics of diverse representation that could move American politics beyond Nixon's 1968 strategy that has helped to polarize American politics in recent decades. In that context, Trump's announcement of his candidacy in June 2015 may have provided McConnell and other Republicans with an opportunity to restore an alliance that had worked effectively in the cases of Nixon and Reagan – Trump as a non-Southern candidate for the Presidency willing to campaign using the inflammatory rhetoric that has informed the appeal and politics of American conservatism. Jeff Sessions from Alabama, who was the first sitting Senator to endorse Trump's presidential campaign, was selected as the Trump presidential campaign manager and that choice was a signal of Trump's embrace of the Southern strategy as a cornerstone of his campaign and his future administration.

Donald Trump's 2016 strategy thus followed the precedent adopted by his Republican predecessors – Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush – all of whom extolled Conservatism as a philosophy of governance while exploiting covert and overt appeals to racist tropes in American life which could help to pave the way to the Presidency. In effect, Donald Trump's victory in 2016 – after having won a minority of the popular vote but a majority within the Electoral College – was but another successful demonstration of the effectiveness of the Southern strategy as a path to the Presidency embraced by the Republican party since 1968.[21]

However, Trump's campaign illustrates another phase in an evolving multi-decade crisis at the core of American democratic culture and its institutions of governance. In 1954, the United States Supreme Court delivered a relatively rare unanimous decision – <u>Brown v. Board of Education</u> – which invalidated the legal justification of segregated public education and clearly spelled out the reasons for so doing by asserting:

> Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. <u>It is the very foundation of good citizenship.</u> Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.[22]

The Brown decision was a decisive refutation of the **separate but equal regime** that had emerged out of the Supreme Court's <u>Plessy v. Ferguson</u> decision (1896). The Plessy decision had asserted the disingenuous proposition that racial segregation in public transport was not unconstitutional since:

> Legislation is powerless to eradicate racial instincts or to abolish distinctions based upon physical differences,

and the attempt to do so can only result in accentuating the difficulties of the present situation. If the civil and political rights of both races be equal, one cannot be inferior to the other civilly or politically. If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them upon the same plane.[23]

The **Plessy** decision assumed that "social inferiority" – caste by another designation – was outside of the Constitution's commitment to equality of citizenship. In the unanimous 1954 **Brown** decision, the Supreme Court asserted the principle that equality of access to education offered the possibility of citizenship equality for disadvantaged groups within American society. In effect, the Supreme Court was both explicitly repudiating the Plessy v. Ferguson decision and articulating an intellectual strategy for invalidating notions of superior and inferior races within American life.

This radical proposition within the American context emerged in a post-1945 environment where the United States confronted the paradox that Justice Robert Jackson – a member of the US Supreme Court – had served as the Chief Prosecutor at the Nuremberg War Tribunal which had passed judgments upon Nazi war criminals who had engaged in genocide. In addition, Chief Justice Earl Warren, - prior to his appointment to the Supreme Court - had been instrumental in organizing the internment of people of Japanese descent in camps in the United States during the Second World War. Against the immediate backdrop of the wartime detention of Japanese-origin communities in the USA and the horror of the Holocaust inflicted upon Jewish and other ethnic communities in Europe, it was evident that the United States would face scrutiny over its treatment of its minority populations after the defeat of the Nazi regime.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the United States was also confronted by the report – An American Dilemma - on its domestic racial regime that had been compiled by a team led by the Swedish social scientist, Gunnar Myrdal. The report commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation was a comprehensive review of American race relations which painted a damning picture of the gap between the reality of compromised citizenship for African Americans and the official rhetoric of American championship of democracy in the struggle against the Nazi and other Fascist regimes. In his Foreword to the report, Frederick Keppel of the Carnegie Corporation stated:

> When the Trustees of the Carnegie Corporation asked for the preparation of this report in 1937, no one (except possibly Adolf Hitler) could have foreseen that it would be made public at a day when the place of the Negro in our American life would be the subject of greatly heightened interest in the United States, because of the social questions which the war has brought in its train both in our military and in our industrial life. It is a day, furthermore, when the eyes of men of all races the world over are turned upon us to see how the people of the most powerful of the United Nations are dealing at home with a major problem of race relations.[24]

Keppel clearly understood that the Second World War and the American quest for international leadership would be evaluated within the context of credible and serious changes in the American "Jim Crow" regime – given the Nazi regime's murderous propensities on the issue of "racial" and religious differences.

In sum, the Brown decision marked the opening of an effort - led by the Supreme Court - to chart a new course for American life and its political culture. It was a decisive break, both in jurisprudence and official rhetoric, with the politics of racial and citizenship inequality that had defined American life from its founding in the late eighteenth century. According to Judith Shklar:

> There is no notion more central in politics than citizenship, and none more variable in history or contested in theory. In America it has in principle always been democratic, but only in principle. From the first and most radical claims for freedom and political equality were played out in counterpoint to chattel slavery, the most extreme form of servitude, the consequences of which still haunt us. The equality of political rights, which is the first mark of American citizenship, was proclaimed in the accepted presence of its absolute denial. Its second mark, the overt rejection of hereditary privileges, was no easier to achieve in practice, and for the same reason. Slavery is an inherited condition.[25]

The Supreme Court in 1954 had asserted an intellectual quality of leadership that was a challenge to American political leaders.

In effect, the Court had cut the Gordian knot of compromised citizenship experienced by disadvantaged communities within the American body politic through the assertion of the centrality of education to "good citizenship." In light of the human costs and consequences of the American civil war which had resulted from the fundamental problem of governing a society - "half-slave, half-free" - the Supreme Court in 1954 demonstrated the courage that was absent in the other two branches of the political system. As a consequence, every President since Dwight Eisenhower has been expected to provide some level of leadership to move American society beyond its long-standing legacies of bigotry and the conundrum of citizenship inequality in a quasi-democratic polity.

Donald Trump has decisively broken with that post-1954 tradition. His 2016 campaign rhetoric and his subsequent approach to governance have both reflected a commitment to revitalizing the politics of citizenship inequality in American society. His willingness to publicly excoriate immigrants including Mexicans and Central Americans – as well as his targeted attacks on his Republican 2016 rivals Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz – has illustrated his efforts to stigmatize people of Hispanic origin who now represent the largest ethnic minority community in America. These tactics were reminiscent of the xenophobic sentiment that animated anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant sentiment in the mid-19th and early-20th century eras in American politics.

Trump also seems interested in retracing the footsteps of Woodrow Wilson, the Democratic President who worked assiduously to ensure the consolidation of the Jim Crow regime in the aftermath of the 1896 <u>Plessy v. Ferguson</u> decision by the Supreme Court. Wilson's enthusiasm for white supremacy was reflected in the White House screening of the film <u>The Birth of a Nation</u> – a film notorious for its role in legitimizing the anxieties and resentments of the post-Civil War South.[26] Wilson was born in Virginia in 1856 and grew up in the household where his father was a Presbyterian minister who served congregations in Georgia and South Carolina. He pursued an academic career and served as the President of Princeton University before being elected as Governor of New Jersey and became the President of the United States in 1913.

Wilson's enthusiasm for the film was undoubtedly a reflection of both his southern roots and his enthusiasm for the Jim Crow regime as a "Bourbon restoration" in the American context. However, his hosting of the film in the White House may have also been a gesture aimed at repudiating Theodore Roosevelt's invitation to the African- American notable Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House in 1901.[27]

In the twenty-first century, Trump demonstrated a profound hostility to the idea of an African-American President - Barack Obama in the White House – as another affirmation of "progress" in dealing with the tortuous politics of race in American society. Trump's anxiety about the issue was manifest during Obama's tenure and he remains profoundly conscious that Obama's Presidency will provide a benchmark for the evaluation of his own tenure as President.

Further, Trump's campaign and his tenure since assuming office in January 2017 – including his early efforts to block citizens from Islamic countries being admitted to the US – reflected the emphasis upon expanding his commitment to religious discrimination. In turn, his disparagement of the political class has been redirected specifically at the Democratic Party and the Republicans who have distanced themselves from his administration. As a consequence, Trump has consistently sought to erode the norms and traditions of constitutional governance that have evolved since the founding of the American state. In order to accomplish these goals, Trump has actively sought to expand the role and power of the Presidency in the American constitutional order and his actions have led to his impeachment – though the Republican-controlled Senate has been able to block any effort to have him removed from office.[28]

In sum, Trump has demonstrated a flawed understanding of the constitutional order that had been created by the very sophisticated thinkers who designed the framework of American governance as a federal republic. That system consists of the three branches of the federal government – the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary – and was designed to prevent the concentration of power in any single branch that could undermine the self-determination of the citizens. Further, the self-determination of citizens is expressed through regular elections for both the Executive and Legislative branches which impose accountability upon the "would-be rulers" through the electoral process. In effect, representative government required the empowerment of citizens as electors and members of the body politic who could serve as the ultimate mechanism for oversight of elected officials – including the President – through the conduct of regularly scheduled elections.

These fundamentals of governance in the American Republic have proven to be remarkably resilient - as both process and principles of governance - in the establishment and consolidation of the American experiment in representative government. Originally conceived as a system of limited representation with suffrage reserved for citizens endowed with the right to vote based upon property qualifications, the American republic has evolved from an oligarchic system to one based – in principle – on universal suffrage in the second half of the 20th century with the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The evolution of the American political system from **Oligarchy** to **Democracy** has never been smooth and – in the contemporary context – it has entered a period of dysfunction during which the contest of oligarchy versus democracy has been revived in its most fundamental forms under the Trump administration.

Trump's 2016 campaign and his electoral victory based upon the loss of the popular vote have informed his tenure since assuming office in January 2017. His early efforts at preventing citizens from Islamic countries from being admitted to the US expanded the realm of his commitment to bigotry on the grounds of religion. In turn, his disparagement of the political class has been redirected specifically at the Democratic party through his efforts to defy and dismiss Congressional oversight.[29] Trump has also sought to question the functioning of the courts and law enforcement agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation. These provocative steps have illustrated his systematic efforts to erode the norms and traditions of constitutional governance and the role of the Presidency in the American constitutional order. In effect, Trump has triggered a perception of American democracy as an increasingly dysfunctional system and has sought to expand his discretionary authority at the expense of the other branches of government - including the Courts.

It is arguable that – in the American experience - the politics of dysfunction serves as a precursor of intense struggles over the future of the society and the politics of representation

therein. It is also important to note that the redefinition of citizenship in American political life has been at the root of the periodic dysfunction that has continually reshaped American politics and society. The American Revolution had changed the status of the settlers in the British colonies – they had transformed themselves from **subjects** of the British monarchy into **citizens** of the American Republic. In the process of creating the new Republic, the founding generation had established the centrality of white male citizenship in the construction of the political order.

A powerful illustration of the consolidation of white male privilege is to be found in the correspondence between John Adams and his wife, Abigail Adams.

In 1776, Abigail Adams famously pleaded with her husband to:

> "Remember the Ladies" in drafting the nation's new code of laws. Warning him against putting "unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands" because "all Men would be tyrants if they could," she promised that American women would "not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation." John Adams replied by telling her thanks, but he preferred male privilege: "We know better than to repeal our masculine systems." The masculine systems established by the framers meant that women didn't get the vote until 1920, still earn a fraction of what men earn, and remain subject to a state asserting control over their bodies that it doesn't assert over male bodies.[30]

This validation of the "masculine systems" set the stage for a constitutional order that ensured white male privilege and entitlement to citizenship as a right. This initial refusal to establish the right of women to vote was confronted by the suffragette movement which mobilized women to organize petitions and protests to secure the passage of the 19th amendment to the American Constitution in 1920. That amendment established the democratic right of women to assert their citizenship rights by being empowered to exercise the franchise.

However, as the 2016 Presidential election demonstrated, the fierce opposition to Hilary Clinton's candidacy by the Republican party seems to have arisen, in part, from a desperate desire to prevent further challenges to the repeal of the "masculine - systems" about which John and Abigail Adams had debated. Clinton was the first female candidate for President from one of the major parties in America and it was evident that the tradition of white male privilege faced its greatest threat from her candidacy – especially since Barack Obama had shattered the idea that the Presidency was an exclusive white male privilege. Obama won two terms in office and provided a quality of leadership necessary to stabilize the economy after the reckless adventurism of the Republican administration of his predecessor, George W. Bush, whose tenure had paved the way to the most severe economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Obama's electoral successes and his policy accomplishments have opened the door for debates about the need to open the pathways to the Presidency for all Americans – without regard to race and gender.

However, his tenure had also produced a backlash among sections of the American population – including Donald Trump who has proven himself to be a persistent critic of Obama. The latter's electoral success has further eroded the "legitimacy" of the "white supremacist illusion" that has been a cornerstone of American politics. In a very perspicacious commentary about the possible future of the young republic Thomas Jefferson recognized that the legacies of history and its tradition of citizenship inequality would weigh heavily on its future. In his Notes on the State of Virginia (QUERY XIV, LAWS 1782), Jefferson had observed that:

> Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made ... will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the

other race. To these objections, which are political, may be added others, which are physical and moral.[31]

Jefferson's observation about the long-term consequences of slavery for American political life was very perceptive and his turn of phrase reflected the acute sense of psychological dislocation that had occurred in American culture through the practice of "racialized" slavery. That psychological dislocation has continued into the contemporary context of the 21st century. As a result, the election of Donald Trump as President in 2016 with the support of a Republican party dedicated to the politics of privilege and citizenship inequality has again brought to the fore a crisis of the American political order around the issues of race and citizenship.

Trump's campaign and his naked appeals to bigotry to win the presidential election were unleashed against the backdrop of the increasing diversification of immigrants - from Asia, Latin America, and Africa - moving into American society. The empowerment of new constituencies through the expansion of both voting rights and access to education that accompanied the Civil Rights struggle of the mid-20th century and the immigration reform of the 1960s has decisively shifted the trajectory of American society. Over the next several decades, the USA will face the unprecedented challenge of having to come to terms with the reality that it has a population that is so diverse that it may no longer be a white majority society.[32] Instead, it is likely to become a society of multiple minorities and the essentialism of the ethos of white supremacy that has hitherto defined American life will be a source of continued tensions among some groups – a development that Trump and his **eminence grise** – Steve Bannon – exploited to great effect in the 2016 campaign.

Simply put, the dark shadows of American patriarchy, religious bigotry, and white supremacist ideology and policies, have imposed a conundrum that has triggered dysfunction on several occasions across American history – the Civil War, the Jim Crow regime, anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiment, the Civil Rights Struggle, and a virulent culture of misogyny - in American life from its founding.

In August 2017, the white supremacist march and disturbances in Thomas Jefferson's "neighborhood" - Charlottesville, Virginia - was an ironic tribute to Jefferson's perceptiveness of the future of American race relations. In this context, Dylan Roof's premeditated murder of the black parishioners and their pastor in Charleston in 2015 was but a harbinger of the re-enactment of the profound tensions around the politics of white supremacy and citizenship that have animated American politics since the founding of the USA.

Trump's presidential campaign had exacerbated and exploited the Republican hostility to the Obama administration and its success in restoring a semblance of normality to American politics after the misadventures of the George W. Bush administration. Since his inauguration, Trump has employed a strategy of governance focused upon confrontation and partisan polarization in the effort to limit constitutional accountability in his exercise of the powers of the Presidency.[33] A crisis point has already been reached and Trump has been impeached by the House of Representatives which has a Democratic majority. Though the Republican Majority in the Senate has prevented his removal from office after a trial, it is evident that Trump remains a profound threat to both the American constitutional system and the tenuous stability of the wider international system.

Against this backdrop of domestic polarization and gratuitous confrontation at home and abroad, Trump's foreign policy agenda of "Making America Great Again" (MAGA) has given pause to European and NATO alliance partners, and produced a comic-opera suite of summits on the strategic dilemma posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile development programs.

Trump has also forced a confrontation on trade with China in a misguided effort to derail China's rise as a global power. Other policy choices, including the assassination of Qasem Soleimani - the brilliant Iranian strategist who forged a network of alliances that has reshaped the dynamics of the Persian Gulf and the Middle East - have become a catalyst for both short- and long-term instability in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. In brief, the Trump presidency has projected an image and has adopted policies that suggest both incoherence and instability at home and abroad.

In the 21st century, the Trump administration and the Republican party seems to be struggling mightily to find an ideological rationale for the legitimation of "white minority rule in the future." The emergence of an "apartheid-based" vision for a system of representative government has been implicit in the Republican gerrymandering of electoral representation since the 2010 elections – two years after the election of Barack Obama, the first African-American President.[34] The electoral victories of that year provided the Republicans with control over redistricting in the majority of states and also announced the arrival of the Tea Party movement as a reactionary force in the Republican party and the wider arena of American politics.

Trump's rhetoric and policies have also exacerbated a long-term predicament for American politics – a crisis of Presidential leadership. Every President since Lyndon Johnson has confronted crises (several self-inflicted) that have challenged the capacity of Presidents to accomplish their goals. Johnson stepped into the quagmire in Vietnam and lost the election of 1968. Nixon conspired his way into Watergate and was forced to leave the White House due to leaks from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Ford's truncated Presidency was marked by the unpopular pardon for Richard Nixon and the collapse of South Vietnam leading to a humiliating American withdrawal from that country. Carter was overcome by the Iranian Revolution that opened a new era in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and South Asia as Islamic radicalism revealed its latent power.

The Reagan administration collapsed under the weight of the Iran-Contra scandal that reflected the flawed strategies of containment in dealing with non-European revolutionary regimes – a lesson that had to re-learned after the failure in Vietnam. George H.W. Bush confronted the recession triggered by the collapse of the Savings and Loan Industry and a lack of sufficient charisma to overcome the challenge from Bill Clinton – despite leading a coalition of countries that reversed Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait. Bill Clinton's questionable judgment was revealed by the Rwanda genocide, his tentativeness in dealing with the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the patent absurdity of a President having an affair with a White House intern. George W. Bush was overcome by the decision to wage a War on Terror that exposed his lack of perspicacity in foreign affairs and poor strategic decision-making in launching two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Obama faced the rise of the insurgent Tea Party and the Republican party's adoption of its version of anti-Reconstruction politics in the wake of Obama's election. Further, the Obama administration's unfortunate decision to participate in the 2011 overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya replicated the mistakes of his predecessor in Iraq and contributed to the Republican campaign that derailed Hilary Clinton's Presidential bid against Donald Trump.

This multi-decade crisis arguably had its origins in the assassination of John Kennedy in November 1963 in the midst of the growing challenge to white supremacy in American life that was mounted by the civil rights movement.[35] The escalation of the Civil Rights struggle had occurred in a context where America was waging war in Vietnam. After his predecessor's assassination, President Lyndon Johnson - faced with a domestic crisis of civil rights - expanded

the war in Vietnam as a way of presenting himself as a decisive President in the 1964 Presidential campaign. The Civil Rights Act was passed on July 2, 1964 and the Gulf of Tonkin resolution supporting the Johnson administration's strategy of escalating the war was approved on August 7, 1964 – providing Johnson with the opportunities to demonstrate his command of both domestic politics and foreign policy in the months preceding the 1964 election. Johnson's use of foreign policy to advance domestic agendas was not singular as Richard Nixon resorted to a similar tactic in the 1968 election campaign when he sought to portray Lyndon Johnson as an ineffective President:

> And I say to you tonight that when respect for the United States of America falls so low that a fourth-rate military power, like North Korea, will seize an American naval vessel on the high seas, it is time for new leadership to restore respect for the United States of America. [Richard M. Nixon Presidential Nomination Acceptance Speech Republican National Convention Miami Beach, Florida August 8, 1968][36]

It is a profound irony that Donald Trump adopted as an early priority an initiative to devise a strategy for getting North Korea to dismantle its nuclear weapons program. This initiative has since been abandoned by North Korea – reflecting the reality that North Korea is no longer a fourth-rate military power and is quite capable of withstanding American pressures. However, the negotiations were effective as a distraction from the harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric and xenophobic policies adopted by Trump amidst his failure to get the Mexican government to agree to build "the wall"- as he had rhetorically advocated in his 2016 election campaign. Trump's diplomatic strategy towards North Korea has done little to create an image of a hero in the White House – especially in a context where Kennedy had been able to negotiate the withdrawal of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba in 1962.

Trump's embrace of anti-immigrant and racist rhetoric has become a defining characteristic of his term in office and his personal appeals to bigotry recall the temper of American politics prior to the outbreak of the American Civil War. The electoral campaign and his tenure in office thus far have derailed American politics and created an image - and a powerful current - of democratic dysfunction. He has revitalized the anger that has infused American debates around race, immigration, and unequal citizenship which, in turn, has informed agonizing periods of American political life – including the Civil War, the Jim Crow era, and the Civil Rights struggle.

In the contemporary context, it may be useful to return to the sagacity of Abraham Lincoln in a letter to Joshua Speed, dated August 24, 1855:

> I am not a Know-Nothing. That is certain. How could I be? How can anyone who abhors the oppression of negroes, be in favor or degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that "all men are created equal." We now practically read it "all men are created equal, except negroes" When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read "all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics." When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretence of loving liberty -- to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocracy [sic].[37]

Lincoln's letter preceded the Brown v. the Board of Education decision by almost a century and it signaled the intractable context within which the politics of xenophobia and racial oppression paved the way to the Civil War.

In effect, Trump, and the Republican legislators under the current leadership of Mitch McConnell of Kentucky have sought to push the boundaries of Republican legitimacy through

the "Southern strategy" that had been effectively deployed by Richard Nixon in the 1968 election. If Nixon had discarded the nomenclature of the Republicans as the party of Lincoln by embracing Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond in pursuit of the White House, the current Republican Party - under the leadership of Donald Trump and Mitch McConnell - has sought to refurbish the illusion of white supremacy as the culture of governance in American life. In a recent Washington Post column, the political scientist Angie Maxwell wrote:

> "Understanding the full range of the GOP's efforts in the South since Nixon clears up any confusion as to how Trump, a man whose personal life seems to violate every moral precept avowed by most Southern white conservatives, secured their unyielding allegiance. Trump has wielded the GOP's Southern playbook with precision: defending Confederate monuments, eulogizing Schlafly at her funeral and even hiring Reagan's Southern campaign manager, Paul Manafort. Trump, in many ways, is no anomaly. He is the very culmination of the GOP's long Southern strategy."[38]

The possibility of the polarization of American politics was anticipated by the founding generation of American leaders.[39] It is arguable that the contemporary politics of polarization under the Republican party has set the stage for a return to the policies of the pre-1954 era in the 21st century and to reverse the momentum towards genuine democracy that was promised by the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In 2013, the Supreme Court of the United States decided the case Shelby v. Holder and invalidated the federal oversight of states that had historically engaged in voter suppression. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 had established that practice to provide support for the right to vote as an index of citizenship equality.

As in the cases of Dred Scott v. Sandford and Plessy v. Ferguson, the Supreme Court in Shelby County v. Holder has reasserted, in effect, the practice and principle of compromised citizenship in American life as a constraint upon the politics of effective representation for disadvantaged communities in American life.[40]

In a pithy assessment of the decision, the journalist Vann Newkirk II wrote:

> Ignoring that deep racial disparities do still exist in every phase of voting, especially in the precincts formerly covered by the Voting Rights Act, Roberts's legal analysis boils down to the fact that preclearance was very effective in reversing disenfranchisement, so the country no longer needs it. In her dissent, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg pointed out the apparent paradox of that reasoning, writing that "throwing out preclearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet.[41]

QUO VADIS AMERICA?

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Who Wouldn't Get the Joke? Vile Sovereignty, Vanishing Mediators, and Trump

Simon Orpana, Evan Mauro

When trying to understand the rise to power of a demagogue whose swagger and popularity is only seemingly amplified by critique, perhaps a productive place to start is not with the individual, but in the shared, popular cultural landscape that captures a generalized mood. In the final scenes of the film <u>Joker</u> (2019), Joaquin Phoenix's character, Arthur Fleck, is committed to Arkham Asylum, where he maniacally laughs in the face of his psychiatrist (played by April Grace). Throughout the film, Fleck is afflicted by a mysterious condition that causes him to laugh excessively at socially inappropriate moments. In this scene, however, his symptom finds its content in the form of Fleck's accumulated insights into the hypocritical workings of power. Fleck's investigations into his own mother's history of madness has led him to suspect that he may be the bastard son of billionaire mayoral candidate Thomas Wayne. A trail of clues has raised the possibility that Fleck's mother's past institutionalization was used to cover over an affair Wayne had with her when she was working for him as a maid, and that the mother's seemingly mad obsession with writing letters to Wayne is grounded in a suppressed history of abuse and wrongful institutionalization. When Fleck breaks into laughter in front of the psychiatrist, she asks him, "What's so funny?" Fleck answers: "You wouldn't get the joke." He then murders her, off screen and limps away, his clownishly squeaking shoes leaving ominous, bloody footprints.

Though initially presented as an idiosyncratic psychological tick, Fleck's insuppressible laughter is ultimately revealed as the trace of hidden structures of privilege and social domination, indignities that Fleck is initially given to suffer subconsciously, as he is their very product. Fleck's gradual awakening to these realities transform him into the Joker, after he becomes disillusioned by the two surrogate father figures that sustain his hopes for recognition, in the form of T.V. talk show host Murray Franklin (Robert De Niro) and Thomas Wayne (Brett Cullen), who are symbolic of media and governing elites, respectively. The psychiatrist at the end of the film provides a third figure, representing biopolitical governance by trained experts whose power is grounded in their purporting to take care of populations. His mother's history, however, demonstrates to Fleck that such institutions' allegedly humanistic imperatives also secretly work in service of the privileged. When he laughs in the face of the psychiatrist, then, he does so from what the film presents as a position of superior knowledge into the social dynamics of power and corruption: the psychiatrist still believes "the system" is there to help people, but the Joker knows better.

Fleck's political "awakening" is complicated by the fact that the psychiatrist whom he dismisses and then kills is a black woman. Liberal audiences who might unblinkingly endorse the rough justice the Joker and his nascent followers dole out to figureheads of the white patriarchy, like Franklin and Wayne, could and should find pause with the final scenes of the film, where a disenfranchised and humiliated white man proves the "authenticity" of his vision by effectively telling a black woman that she doesn't understand systemic exploitation and corruption. This is offensive in a few immediate ways. Especially in the genre of the comic book action film, where recent attempts at progressive representational politics (Wonder Woman [2017], Black Panther [2018], Captain Marvel [2019]) have been praised critically, the film's curt disposal of a black woman in order that Fleck can self-actualize and metamorphose into the Joker raises critical alarm. And yet, the film is uncompromising on this point: the poignancy of Joker's vision consists in its rejection of both ensconced forms of white, patriarchal privilege and the seemingly more progressive "third way" identity politics that has allowed members of historically oppressed groups to gain access to positions of prestige and power.

If we recognize in the figure of the psychiatrist—both in her role, as the long arm of the carceral state in an age of austerity, and in her social position as a professional, authoritative black woman—echoes of the progressive neoliberal bloc that supported both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, then Fleck's dispatching of this figure marks him as representative of sections of the white, masculinist precariat whose distrust of contemporary, liberal democratic politics has helped propel the rise to power of populist figures like Donald Trump. And yet, disillusionment with the neoliberal moment extends well beyond the base of Trump supporters. Why, then, do we see these widespread discontents coagulating into support for atavistic demagogues whose popularity and power only seems to increase the more they flaunt the codes of decency, inclusion, and civic society? To the extent that the clownish performances of a figure like Trump seem strategically calculated to elicit outrage, liberal and leftist indignity only fuels the populist flames. At such an impasse, there is a risk that indulging in critical analysis of Trump, who seems to have successfully identified and exploited key weaknesses in the contemporary leftist discourse, will only buttress his support. Similarly, critiquing popular culture can seem ineffectual. Although we argue Joker has become a key cultural artifact of the Trump era, focusing debate around race and class, populism and taste, and spectacular violence, the film nevertheless also manufactures its own criticism, attracting the kinds of "engagement" that measures value in online mentions, interactions, and hot takes, and no longer in the esteem of key cultural tastemakers (Seymour 2019). For these reasons, it is a text that mediates our populist moment. Likewise in its relationships with its genre: as mentioned, the film upsets a tendency towards progressive representation in blockbuster, comic-book cinematic productions, and in so doing mirrors Trump's victory on the heels of the Obama presidency and the Clinton campaign, or what we will argue is a legitimation crisis of progressive neoliberalism.

Less palpably, the film seems to capture a dominant conjunction of public feelings today: Arthur Fleck evokes a mix of anxiety/insecurity at its breaking point (Dean 2020: 8-9) with an inchoate and often misdirected desire for revenge (Haiven 2017). As a structure of feeling in late neoliberal capitalism, these affective positions index specific class, race, and gender politics, which we explore below; but as Sara Ahmed (2014) teaches us, emotions are also performative, or social and cultural practices that produce specific outcomes. We want to examine the ways this film's insecure and vengeful subject is indicative of what has come to be known as a new populist moment in America and globally, but that we suggest is the reappearance of an older

and historically significant structure of sovereign power. Joker offers, in distilled and disguised form, a narrative expression of the genealogical strains of thwarted hope, historical compromise and roiling cynicism at work in the present moment. The current, carnivalesque mixture of disillusionment and buffoonery coupled with flagrant abuses of power points towards a structure that Michel Foucault identified, in the 1970s, as "vile sovereignty" and which helped smooth the transition to the biopolitically managed, petroleum-soaked consumer utopias of the post-World War Two era (2003b). With the fantasies of mobility and prosperity that informed the post-war period everywhere in dissolution or in flames, it is telling that this vile sovereignty should re-emerge in recent years in a more aggressive and startling form with figures like Trump.

We first articulated the biopolitical implications of the return of the figure of the vile sovereign in an examination of the florid political career of Rob Ford, the Mayor of Toronto from 2010 to 2014 (Orpana & Mauro 2013/2014). Our analysis of Ford focused on creeping authoritarianism and cruelty in his right-wing politics, coupled with a new invulnerability to criticism in this pseudo-populist politician who gained popularity by spectacularly provoking liberal disgust. Our article came on the heels of a wave of attempts to update Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire for the present, studying the reactionary petit-bourgeois politics and class realignments signified by the rise of political leaders like France's Nicholas Sarkozy (Badiou 2008) or the U.K.'s David Cameron (Seymour 2010). We used Foucault's concept of vile sovereignty to unpack the specific difference of Ford's mayoralty in Toronto, which anticipated Trump's rise in several respects, but especially in its complex and antagonistic relationship to progressive politics. In revisiting Foucault's theory today, we return to our conjunctural analysis (Gilbert 2019), tracing ephemera of the moment and longer historical trajectories, and outlining the historical dynamics through which vile sovereignty reappears at the moment of neoliberalism's legitimation crisis. We characterize the vile sovereign's antics as a "vanishing mediator" that provides a destabilizing smokescreen during what is actually a precarious moment in the struggle for maintaining hegemony. With the demise of what Nancy Fraser (2017) calls "progressive neoliberalism," or the aggressive privatization of socialized wealth under a veneer of selective gestures of inclusion, does the rise of figures like Trump constitute a perpetuation of neoliberalism by other means? Or, does it signal the emergence of a new mutation in the circuits of global capital? A key question raised by our analysis is whether the kinds of activist solidarity needed to address pressing, collective concerns such as global warming, for instance, will be able to move beyond the factious tensions exacerbated by a figure like Trump's brazen flaunting of the codes that regulate much of contemporary leftist culture. By positing contemporary vile sovereignty as a vanishing mediator, we mean to draw attention to the political potentials of our times for eliciting broad-based solidarity that could effect substantial, systemic change.

Vile Sovereignty and Genre

Throughout much of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, it was a driving ambition of Marvel comic book mogul Stan Lee for his company's properties to find mass audiences on television and the silver screen (Howe 2012). A large part of Marvel's popularity with readers lies in its ability to exploit a void left in the comics genre in the wake of the moral panic over purported links between comic books and juvenile delinquency in 1950s America. The creation of the Comics Code Authority in 1954 as a means for the industry to self-police had the effect of suppressing much of the horrific, graphic content of comics, but also of dampening their subversive potential

to provide an outsider's perspective on the norms of mid-century America.[1] Into this sanitized world of post-war superhero comics, Marvel injected strains of psychological complexity and social realism, capitalizing on a muted return of the repressed legacies of the field. It was not until the threshold of the neoliberal era, however, that the subversive appeal of horror comics found dramatic new purchase when this suppressed generic strain was reunited with the sanitized superhero by Marvel's competitor, D.C. Comics, in the rebranding of their popular Batman character as The Dark Knight.[2] When this bleaker, grittier strain of comics narrative hit the big screen in 1989, Tim Burton's <u>Batman</u> became the fifth-highest grossing film in history and opened the door for what has become one of the most popular and lucrative film genres of the new millennium (Pereira 2019).[3] Further, it is not Batman himself, but the dark comedy of Jack Nicholson's treatment of the Joker that provides the signature for this emergent mass cultural form, where nostalgia for a superficial distinction between "bad guys" and "good guys" is complicated by biting psychological, social and political nuance.

We can identify the hero/villain dichotomy as a residual strain of nostalgia, itself inflected by the post-World War Two era, where the moral ambiguities of America's vexing entanglements in the South Pacific, or of Britain's struggles with a declining empire, found compensatory relief in appeals to the popular heroes of a seemingly more noble and simplistic past. This tendency is evident in the surprise success of the James Bond film franchise towards the end of the sixties, a genre whose spectacular tropes would inform the subsequent blockbusters of the seventies and eighties. But it also illustrated by some of the first examples of fantasy and science fiction to breach American prime-time television, with the success of such shows as <u>The Six Million Dollar Man</u> or <u>The Incredible Hulk</u> in the 1970s (Orpana 2016). In the 1980s, the nostalgia of the 60s and 70s for what American T.V. producer Harve Bennett called "the kind of heroes that we had known during those frightening five years of World War Two" (qtd. in ibid., p 22) has been hollowed out and flattened into Michael Keaton's grimly stoic Batman, while Nicholson's Joker steals the show with his cynical insights into the underbelly of the American Dream. The Joker's more recent popularity tells us something important about the fate of that nostalgia for a stable moral universe. His vendetta against the forces of order embodied by Batman is an example of the desire for revenge that Max Haiven calls a dominant affective position today, "at once a symptom and a structure" (2017: 6) of financialized, neoliberal capitalism. Noting the danger in politicizing revenge, Haiven nevertheless argues that vengeance by those whom global capitalism abandons or exploits is historically justified and perhaps an inevitable structure of feeling today. As an icon of that desire for revenge, today's Joker is a condensation of political desires animating both the left and right.

This genealogical sketch identifies the contemporary Joker as the offspring of what Michel Foucault calls "vile sovereignty" (2003b: 11-38). Vile sovereignty is an entanglement of power, discourse and prestige that paradoxically increases the more it transgresses established norms and values. While he models his notion of vile sovereignty on historical and fictional sovereigns, illustrated best by the obscene and opportunistic Ubu Roi from Alfred Jarry's 1896 play,[4] Foucault is most interested in applying vile sovereignty to the postwar psychiatric profession. At the time, Foucault argues, the spurious and unsubstantiated opinions of psychiatrists were used in court to decide upon the legal fate of individuals—and, we should add, popular culture. Foucault's thesis is that the biased 'expert' opinions of psychiatric professionals about the supposed psychological character of the accused helped shift the legal system from a juridical emphasis on "crime and offence," to a greater focus on "irregular forms of conduct that were put forward as the crime's

cause and point of origin and the site at which it took shape," creating a "psychological and moral double" to the criminal act itself (2003b: 17). By introducing a psychologizing discourse into the justice system, the often ridiculous and arbitrary pronouncements made by psychiatrists in the role of vile sovereign helped mediate a shift to the disciplinary focus on social norms and populations that we can now recognize, thanks to Foucault's later work, as a key element of contemporary biopolitics.

As suggested above, the history of modern superhero comics was shaped by this kind of vile post-war sovereignty when, in the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, the testimony of professionals such as the German-American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham was used to draw a spurious link between comic books and crime (Howe 2012: 29-31).[5] In the character of the Joker, we thus encounter something like an inversion of the uncanny doubling described by Foucault, where the suppressed, somewhat 'criminal' history of a genre's appropriation as the vehicle for biopolitical governance erupts into the narrative world of comics itself and, after 1989, the Hollywood blockbuster. Perhaps these suppressed, generic origins are the reason for the Joker's postmodern shiftiness and appeal: he remains the trace of a moment when the bid for class domination in post-war America was forced into the risky position of revealing itself, and so required a supplemental decoy in the form of psychiatric quackery. As the product of a vile sovereignty inherent in post-war biopolitics, the Joker acts out the narrative of his suppressed origins repeatedly, in numerous different versions (Garneau 2015). However, only at this late hour, when a now residual form of biopolitics is in the process of mutating into something different, does the story of Fleck's transformation into the Joker allow us to fully fathom this older nightmare and its relation to the real-world vile sovereigns currently capturing public fascination.

A Tale of Two Compromises

Before turning to the contemporary political theatre, Arthur Fleck has a few more things to show us about vile sovereignty's relationship to the biopolitical landscape of late neoliberalism. On the one hand, the insight provided into the familial and social origins of his crimes allows us, the audience, to play the role of psychiatrist and to psychologize, understand and perhaps even forgive his behavior. And yet, it is the psychiatrist who is slain by Fleck at the end of the film, suggesting that the film's work of interpellation cannot end with a merely liberal, lenient and sympathetic interpretation of his career. Rather, in response to the portrait of vile sovereignty Fleck's life reveals, the film encourages us to become a clown-masked follower of the Joker ourselves. With that said, he is also the node where police and asylum both meet austerity, deinstitutionalization, and the subsequent failure of the American family to act as a substitute for a social safety net.

This short-circuit between critique and interpellation provides the key to understanding the mechanisms of vile sovereignty that have informed Donald Trump's career as the forty-fifth President of the United States. The ideological conceit at the heart of this structure exploits genuine resentment grounded in the failings and contradictions of "third way" liberal-democratic governance, especially amongst the precariously situated white, working-class. On this question, Chantal Mouffe has described Trump's rise as part of a broader populist moment, after third-way neoliberalism, in Western politics from Europe to North America. For Mouffe, populism reconstitutes political struggle as a battle between "the people" and a political elite. She acknowledges that the left sees the elite as a capitalist oligarchy, and the right sees it as

liberal governmentality that threatens some ethno-nationalist fantasy of "the people" with open borders, sanctuary cities, and racialized outsiders (Mouffe 2018: 22). For its part, Joker plays to both populist variants, positioning Fleck against a wealthy oligarch in Thomas Wayne, but also against state liberalism, in the moments of antagonism with state-appointed psychiatrists. There is nothing surprising in a Hollywood film hedging its politics, or blurring the distinctions between two political positions in order to appeal to as broad an audience as possible. Joker's blending of left and right populisms, though, mirrors Trump's 2016 campaign, in which a populist candidate was able to criticize liberal governmental overreach **as well as** corruption and oligarchy—Trump was able to articulate both left and right populist ideas—and use both to fence in his political opponents as antidemocratic neoliberals. However, rather than offer a genuine alternative to a faltering and disappointing system, Trump's mixture of institutional critique, plutocratic populism, nostalgia, racism and misogyny, all delivered from the seemingly outsider position of a dark horse candidate, simply deputizes select portions of the disenfranchised to pursue cynical abuses of power themselves. Joker aptly illustrates this indulgence in seductive instances of "acting out": Fleck is elevated to the status of a folk hero through his acts of violence against mainstream media (in the form of talk show host Murray Franklin), established governing elites (in Thomas Wayne), but also women in general (in his fantasy relationship with his neighbor and in murdering his mother). These figures are then combined, condensed, and given a racialized form in the final scenes of the film when he laughs in the face of and then murders the psychiatrist.

It is easy to identify in the political iconography of this scene the well-tested, conservative ploy of dividing a potentially revolutionary underclass against itself through differential modes of exploitation grounded in the reproduction of gendered and racialized stigmas. Fleck's comment that the psychiatrist "wouldn't get the joke" effectively asserts that someone doubly subjected to historical disfranchisement, a black woman, would not understand discrimination and humiliation grounded in systemic exploitation. By channeling the resentment of disenfranchised white workers against African Americans and women, Joker's revenge fantasy thwarts the kind of solidarity that could lead to substantial change. Complicating this reading, however, is a statement made by Fleck's social worker earlier in the film. Also, a black woman, the social worker is depicted as a victim of precarity herself, as spending cuts coupled with a rise in demand for social services make her job difficult and exhausting. Unlike the psychiatrist from the end of the film, the social worker is wise to the role she plays as part of a biopolitical system designed to manage and contain rather than alleviate hardship. Eventually, the program that allows Fleck to see her once a month is entirely defunded, and in their last meeting, she flatly tells Fleck that the system doesn't care about either of them. However, the potential for solidarity inherent in this critique is lost by the end of the film when the Joker merely dismisses the other state-assigned psychiatrist as a stooge, then kills her.

Despite the white, male rage this act endorses, placing an African American woman as the last of the film's stand-ins for 'the system' does provide a grim critique of what Nancy Fraser has described as "progressive neoliberalism" (2017). In Fraser's argument, in order to legitimate the neoliberal project of upwardly appropriating formerly socialized wealth in the name of "efficiency" and "free markets," an aggressive attack on the social state was coupled with superficial gestures towards inclusivity and social justice in the form of third-way identity politics. While eviscerating the wages, benefits, and securities that a shifting contingent of mostly white, American workers had secured at the start of the post World War Two era of prosperity, neoliberalism attempted to sustain a myth of middle-class mobility through the strategic enfranchisement of select

members of minority groups and the massive expansion of consumer debt. This latter strategy bottomed out in the sub-prime mortgage debacle of 2008, when the risky borrowing that allowed formerly excluded subjects to pursue middle-class dreams of suburban homeownership went sour, precipitating a meltdown of the global banking system. That this collapsed happened on the watch of America's first black president, who then sided with the financial class by offering the banks massive, federally-funded payouts, did not help bolster Obama's winning campaign message of hope for something different.

The steady erosion of progressive neoliberalism's promise for greater social mobility and inclusion helped create the space of cynical disillusionment that contemporary vile sovereignty exploits. This cynicism, however, is coupled with resentment from the decomposition of an older compromise made between the post World War Two labor movement and capital. If we are to read Joker as illustrating the ideological resurrection of vile sovereignty that has informed Trump's political career, the cynicism anchoring the film needs to be recognized as the product of two distinct historical compromises: one Fordist and one neoliberal. The first, between labor and capital, led to the thirty or so years of industrial prosperity for Western nations in the period immediately after World War Two. To achieve this, the workers' movement sacrificed the press towards the socialization of the means of production in exchange for a greater share of the socially produced surplus, which was strategically granted in a manner that reinforced old and new divisions within the working class along racialized and gendered lines. Unrest over this arrangement, in turn, helped set the conditions for the new social movements of the sixties and seventies. However, rather than precipitating the press towards an expanded socialist democracy, as many on the left hoped and expected, demands from subjects disenfranchised by the Fordist era were countered by a shift to the more aggressive and less nationalistically bound form of neoliberal capitalism that has gained traction over the past five decades. The first, Fordist compromise of workers, who were essentially bought out with better wages and an expanded definition of what it meant to be "white" in the post-war period, set the conditions for the second, neoliberal compromise, where a select few of those excluded in the Fordist era made material and political gains in exchange for their complicity in further dismantling the social state and widening rates of inequality. Rather than "floating all boats," the neoliberal economic expansion based on the financialization of debt created the illusion of prosperity and upward mobility for some, coupled with the generalization of precarity for most.

We have already identified the psychiatrist at the end of Joker as evoking contradictions inherent in progressive neoliberalism as Fraser describes it. As a stand-in for liberal ruling elites, she provides an easy focal point for white, male resentment harbored by former beneficiaries of the decomposing Fordist compromise. This revanchist ire is aimed at a contemporary identity politics that members of the increasingly embattled, white underclass perceive as a site of humiliation due, in part, to an inability or unwillingness to perform the kinds of signifiers of distinction that more educated but still precarious, liberal subjects are able to summon via education and upbringing. In the face of this mounting, generalized precarity, one of the great tragedies of the contemporary left is the mobilization of a discourse of "social justice" as a mode of distinction that compensates for reduced material opportunities amongst the educated middle class. As Jodi Melamed argues in Represent and Destroy, these superficial gestures towards inclusion and neoliberal multiculturalism serve the perverse function of maintaining obscene levels of racialized inequality. Though their origins are traceable to radical intellectual formations from the 1960s like Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies, the insurrectionary force of their representational politics

has been largely recuperated to a "woke" racial liberalism for the professional-managerial class, while they marginalize genuinely oppositional movements, and further undermine the building of solidarities that could provide friction to the rise of populism (Melamed 2011; Ferguson 2012). In the context of competition over limited resources, the policing of language and self-reflexivity about privilege becomes a strategy for occupying increasingly compressed spaces of respite.

This retreat into corporatist enclaves is a reaction to the failure of the social democratic movement to extend the post-war legacy of improved standards of living to those excluded from the Fordist moment: women, minorities, and anyone not conforming to the narrow ideals of the nuclear family. By co-opting the unrest expressed by these groups during the new social movements of the sixties and seventies, progressive neoliberalism effectively diverted a potentially revolutionary moment, placating dissident energies while simultaneously decimating the material supports to a more egalitarian society in the form of socialized wealth. This history helps us understand the ending of Joker. When Fleck-as-Joker faces the psychiatrist at the end of the film, we witness a condensed figure for the failed legacies of the first, Fordist compromise confronting a figure for the faltering legacies of the second, neoliberal compromise. The fact that the film presents this encounter as Fleck "speaking truth to power" is the ideological ruse, and the real joke the narrative is attempting to play on us as an audience. It is also the same divide-and-conquer strategy that Trump's Ubuesque performances are calculated to elicit and exploit.

A Biopolitical "Switch Point": Trump as Vanishing Mediator

For Foucault, the vile sovereign inhabits a zone of indistinction where "buffoonery and the function of the expert are one and the same" (2003b: 36). This double valence allows the Ubu to act as a "switch point" between institutional and discursive registers, whereby medical and judicial power becomes enmeshed (2003b: 35). Delivered during the Collège de France lectures of 1974-75, Foucault's portrait of the vile sovereign is part of his research into the intensification of societal control over bodies and souls that informed The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, first published in 1976 (1990). Though the figure of the Ubu does not appear in the latter work, the influential theory of biopower Foucault announces at the end of the book allows us to read the vile sovereign as key figure of contemporary biopolitical regimes. Crucially, while Foucault doesn't pursue the full implications of his articulation, the example of psychiatric buffoonery provides a figure whose job is to **establish** biopolitical governance while simultaneously **disguising** its ultimately partisan origins in the ongoing project of class domination. The Ubu thus veils a delicate and vulnerable moment in contemporary biopolitics: the ultimately groundless and arbitrary consolidation of the power to exercise power itself—not in an official recognized, democratic or political sense of the term, but in the Foucauldian sense of a new dispensation of norms, values and potentialities. Such moments require officious functionaries who are willing to sacrifice themselves on the altar of respectability, to negate themselves and play the fool, but in full seriousness, so that a new regime of norms, values and behaviors can establish its hold over the hearts and minds of the people.

Biopower grounds its legitimacy in the ability of expert administrators to provide for the health and well being of populations. Despite its orientation towards the "generalized good," the founding gesture of such a regime yet requires an ultimately arbitrary delineation between the protected population and those excluded from the life-sustaining apparatuses of the state. In Society Must be Defended, Foucault provides a genealogy of race discourse as one of the

key modalities by which biopolitical states distinguish between those who are "made to live" and "let" die (2003a: 241). In his development of Foucault's theory of biopolitics, Giorgio Agamben (1995) identifies the separation of vulnerable, disposable "bare life" from the protected bearer of rights constituting "political life" as the foundational gesture of biopolitics. <u>Abnormal</u> provides an important corollary insight into this operation: the production of expendable, fugitive bare life requires a figure of authority who can cover over the arbitrary nature of the terrible decision about who is made to live and who left to die. In Foucault's analysis of what we can now recognize as one of the sites of the emergence of biopolitics in the medicalization of judicial discourse, it is the "childish discourse" of the expert psychiatrist, deploying a "discourse of fear" rather than one of science, who sacrifices his professional stature and reason at the very moment he becomes a celebrated biopolitical instrument of the state (2003b: 36). We can see these biopolitical imperatives of vile sovereignty at work in what have become two of the signature moments of the Trump administration, bookends to his four-year term: a spectacularly revanchist tightening of borders and immigration, the opening gambit of his political campaign and his most consistent position throughout his presidency; and the bumbling, negligent, and deceptive state reaction to the coronavirus pandemic.

Trump has been ramping up security and arrests along the US-Mexican border since 2018, when he announced a "zero tolerance" policy against those crossing into the U.S. illegally, including asylum seekers. This is part of the larger, anti-immigration position that helped Trump win the 2016 election, and which included inflammatory rhetoric that deployed racialized stereotypes to justify xenophobic policies—an "end of the myth," following Greg Grandin, of American capitalism's boundless expansion, and a reassertion of borders and nativism (Grandin 2019: 10-11). A biopolitical valence is evident in Trump's public assertions of Mexican immigrants and asylum seekers as criminals, drug dealers and rapists,[6] the invective of which is reminiscent of the opportunistic characterizations of accused individuals made by the post-war psychiatrists cited by Foucault (2003b). Then as now, the net effect of figures in positions of power making sociologically unsupported pronouncements on people's "character" to justify an otherwise arbitrary decision on who is to be excluded from the life-sustaining ambit of the state reduces strategically selected subjects to the status of bare life described by Agamben.

However, despite the comparisons that we might be tempted to make between this kind of biopolitical strategy and the atrocities committed by Nazis against Jewish people and other minorities, the strategic intent of Trump's vile sovereignty differs significantly. While historic fascists mobilized the discourse of race and nation with the actual intent of creating a racially "pure" society, there is a cynical self-reflexivity to the way contemporary vile sovereignty strategically draws from these past formations. Granted, sections of Trump's base might genuinely believe in resurrected fantasies of white, patriarchal nationhood, but Trump's biopolitical performances merely mobilize this discourse in service of the further evisceration of the bureaucratic welfare state. It is in this dimension that Trump's enactment of vile sovereignty constitutes the perpetuation of neoliberalism by other means. The promise to make (white, masculinist) America "great again" is merely a means to the implicit end of liquidating the bureaucratic barriers to the upward appropriation of collective resources. A key question we must hold in mind is whether this tendency, once pushed past a certain, possibly immanent point, should even still be called "neoliberalism."

There are indicators that the class project of neoliberalism is passing into an august phase, where the valorization of capital has accelerated past "accumulation by dispossession," as David

Harvey (2003) has it, and into unstable, financialized investments in short term returns. We might call it the buyback era, as financial investment since Trump's election is overwhelmingly directed towards inflating stock prices rather than expanding productive activity (Brenner 2019); the most profitable companies create "platforms" for the collection of rent from the circulation of capital and not the production of new values (Srnicek 2018). Jodi Dean asks whether today's economic system might more properly be called "neo-feudal," as opposed to capitalist, typified by virtual and real spatial partitioning, and the collection of rents more commonly associated with medieval fiefdoms than the smooth, borderless world of productive capital flows imagined by late twentieth-century globalization theorists (2020: 2). This rentier capitalism has also entailed significant investment in energy futures—perhaps the key growth area in capital accumulation of the past decade (Malm 2016: 370)—and on oil and gas exploration across an uneven geography linking financial speculation, logistical networks, extraction sites, and points of consumption, all creating a planetary climate emergency (Arboleda 2020).

Who better to oversee the shift to rentier capitalism than a real estate president? Trump's background as a real estate dealmaker was key to his presidential run, and we can see this ethic shaping his administration. Turning white house staff positions and cabinet appointments into a revolving door of hirings and firings based on who is helping the Trump brand seems more like a real estate company's relationship to its agents than a functional political administration, and makes for fascinating political theatre. But outside the beltway, Trump is busy transforming American border and immigration policy around the idea of the country as a gated community. This is where his cynical white nationalist signaling—never quite organized enough to be called a political project or movement—comes to the surface. A key tenet of Trump's approach is border regulation and selective trade protectionism, both of which only make sense as the theatre of white nationalism: as Grandin argues, Trump's border wall is most potent as a virtual and unfinished project, a symbolic critique of America's racial heterogeneity, and one that Trump can rail against in perpetuity (2019: 8-9). Trump's vile sovereignty reflects the cranky self-importance of a bad landlord, wanting only to grant access to "the best people," making a great show of evicting critical reporters from press briefings, yelling "get him out of here" at rally protesters. Trump takes America's Puritan "city upon a hill" myth and transmutes it into the next gated golf club, the next downtown Trump tower, the next velvet roped investment opportunity. Rentier capitalism's upward accumulation of capital needs a form of social license or legitimacy, and Trump's strategy is to literalize the idea of rentierism, to perform it and embody it, and to forcibly exclude any dissent.

The disastrous fallout from this attempted feudalization of the socius becomes apparent each time a collective, biopolitical crisis exposes the ineffectuality of reactive, corporatist responses to mounting ecological pressures that transcend human borders. The evisceration of the social state, and the inability of private enterprise to truly address the void, has become painfully apparent each time a hurricane or natural disaster strikes the U.S. or its territories. Though it is still the early days of the crisis at the time of this writing, the Trump administration's response to the COVID-19 pandemic already promises to be a definitive site for the attempted consolidation of a newly authoritarian, biopolitical capitalism. Trump's response to the event has thus far betrayed the dizzying blizzard of hybridized, quick-fix half-measures, zigzagging contradictions and self-aggrandizing opportunism that we have been conditioned to expect, and that support our reading of vile sovereign as covering over a vulnerable, transitional moment in the maintenance of established power hierarchies. Highly prominent are the neoliberal strategies Naomi Klein

has called "disaster capitalism," in which moments of collective crisis are used to "push through policies that systematically deepen inequality, enrich elites, and undercut everyone else" (Solis 2020; Klein 2007). This is evident in Trump's turn to the private sector as a key player in responding to the pandemic, an action that follows upon protracted assaults on America's disease-response infrastructure.[7] Following Trump's mass dismissal of expertise and the erasure of institutional memory, his seizing control of the nation's productive capacity after a long period of neoliberal financialization will encourage stock market inflation without an accompanying expansion of production: an illusion of growth that might look good on paper, but actually siphons more public funds towards the banking class. Through all the bluster and bumbling in Trump's early response to the pandemic, clear themes have emerged: an indifference to principles of public health and to the widespread provision of virus testing and health care; a strictly performative consolidation of power, in the form of a national emergency declaration and the specter of wartime economic dirigisme, but this strictly to further enrich private health companies; a widely repudiated xenophobic nationalism that frames the virus as externally-sourced (i.e., Trump's racist use of the term "Chinese virus"); and intensified rounds of credit creation in order to support the financial sector and the stock market, the administration's demonstrable priority through this pandemic. Decisions about economic realities that govern who will be "made live and let die" have never been more vicious or more transparent. Calamitous as all of this is, it yet forms a continuum with sustained political trends of the past several decades. Whereas the "progressive neoliberalism" described by Fraser dismantled the social state under the guise of a superficially progressive cloak of "inclusion," Trump merely continues this project under the reversed polarity of shamelessly pursued, biopolitical **exclusion**. It is here that we might recognize Trump's vile sovereignty as a "switch point" of the kind described by Foucault (2003b: 35); while the post-war psychiatric sovereigns heralded the emergence of the disciplinary mechanisms buttressing the social state, the buffoonish, biopolitical strongmen of the Trump era herald its demise and potential transformation into something different.

Foucault tellingly describes this expert clown as "sheltered, protected, and even regarded as **sacred** by the entire institution and sword of justice" (2003b: 35, emphasis added). Unlike Agamben's **homo sacer**, who is completely and ultimately **arbitrarily** stripped of all protections, the vile sovereign is protected **because of** his demonstrated disqualification from the protocols of authority, law, and rationality. If bare life is the figure of the hunted fugitive, who cannot possibly deserve the banishment from all protections that biopolitics demands, then the vile sovereign is inextricably bound to her as the figure granted an **undeserved immunity from all persecution**. Such extravagant immunity can only truly be demonstrated if the subject who enjoys it explicitly and publicly flaunts the protocols of decorum, legality, and rationality that his office would normally demand. The zone of indistinction that the Ubu helps create and then inhabits by his actions is thus necessarily the site of a paradoxical performance by which power grounds itself through excessive transgression: in the full light of public scrutiny he must ritually and repeatedly debase himself in order to persist, and though he seems to be granted an uncanny immunity, there is often a steep price to be paid for such a career.

Firstly, this price consists of being alienated and set apart from his fellows. Of course, estrangement from the general run of humanity is the price exacted by all exceptional privilege, but the Ubu doubly refracts this estrangement in his separation from both larger humanity **and** the subset of the ruling class in service of whom his antics are performed. There is a ruse of history at work here insofar as the Ubu sees himself as the exceptional player who, due to his unique

abilities, is able to outflank the very establishment to whom he is, in reality, a kind of minion or lapdog. For the Ubu to properly perform his role, the knowledge of his actual, historical function must be hidden from the vile sovereign himself. Even if he begins his career with a kind of ironic detachment or reflexivity, this critical distance soon drops away as, intoxicated by a power that seemingly knows no limits, his actions push the drama towards its conclusion. Whatever form this may take, as a biopolitical "switch point," his exceptionality establishes new norms.

At work here is the logic of the vanishing mediator, of the extraordinary figure who, under the belief of recovering fidelity to a seemingly lost essentialism of the past, actually creates the conditions for the solidification of something new and unforeseen. Fredric Jameson (1973) first identified the vanishing mediator as a central, organizing idea of Max Weber's thought, in which Protestantism serves as a vanishing mediator between feudal and mercantile capitalist modes of production. Jameson posits that superstructural, cultural elements become mediators that, more than merely passively responding to infrastructural changes, help catalyze a transition between distinct historical epochs: "A vanishing mediator in the truest sense of the expression," writes Jameson, "serves as a bearer of change and of social transformation, only to be forgotten once that change has ratified the reality of the institutions" (1973: 80). The irony that fully emerges in hindsight is the manner in which a vanishing mediator, while unwittingly acting in service of an unforeseen future constellation, believes itself to be the champion and guardian of the very traditions whose demise and transformation it signals.

When vile sovereignty takes the form of a vanishing mediator, appeals are made to a fictitious former grandeur that, as a virtual entity, is always-already lost: nostalgia for what never truly existed covers over a destabilizing void, wherein future possibilities lie dormant and smothered by reactionary appeals to the past. With this distinction in mind, we can identify slogans such as "Make America Great Again" as similarly grounded in phantasmal nostalgia for a past that never was. Trump's vision of American greatness is an idealist fiction structuring the present moment, a pastoral mirage of an imagined era when Americans produced the same commodities they consumed and a burgeoning middle-class enjoyed improved standards of living. In reality, post-war prosperity was grounded in a number of factors, not least of which were workers' struggles of previous decades, which secured the post World War Two compromise between capital and labor. Facing an insurgent, disciplined, and activist workforce that had just returned from fighting Fascism abroad, American industrialists could afford to buy the pacification of labor with improved wages due to the relative global advantage enjoyed by American capital (and perpetuated by a series of ongoing military efforts). The new confinement of (middle-class) women to the reproductive sphere, and the postwar racial formation of whiteness to include historically racialized groups from southern and Eastern Europe, but redouble the exclusion of Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous people, were all part of the postwar settlement to which Trump's borrowed slogan refers.[8] It is to this tower of cards, now decimated by decades of neoliberal financialization, that Trump's selective nostalgia refers; his political career depends on his projecting the fantasy of being a neo-feudal, biopolitical "strong man" who, through personal skill and unorthodox methods, can tame and rationalize the global forces that his supporters blame for the waning of the Fordist dream.

If a vanishing mediator is always selectively backward-looking in this way, then what prospects are there for a future after Trump? What happens when he vanishes? Before turning to this question, one caveat needs to be addressed. A vanishing mediator must not be mistaken for the vanishing of mediation itself. It may be that there is a felt difference, a new directness, in our

imagined relationship to this vile sovereign, especially after neoliberalism's evisceration of the postwar settlement. As a project, neoliberalism has generalized precarity, undermined labor and environmental protections, and increased the number of people whose livelihoods are susceptible to market volatility.[9] Precarity and vulnerability, however, are more than economic, and express themselves on the terrain of identities: the mass feminist response to Trump's election, in the form of annual women's marches, indicate that electing a misogynist accused several times over of sexual assault is re-traumatizing to anyone exposed to rape culture and gender-based violence in its many forms. Likewise, re-traumatization might well be an increasingly generalized condition, as Trump's justice department turns a deaf ear to Black communities critical of state violence carried out by police, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement targets immigrant communities, continues to deport thousands, and violates human rights along an increasingly militarized southern border. The political has always been personal, but perhaps not quite so intimately felt as in recent years.

Nevertheless, this intimacy is not an indication that we are in an unmediated relationship with sovereign power, but rather that mediation has been displaced to another level, another configuration. Again, following Jameson's analysis of Weber, the cultural and superstructural dimensions of a social transformation need to be carefully attended to in any analysis of social and political transformation. Competing with the Fordist nostalgia on which Trump opportunistically built his candidacy, there has been, on the left, the political desire to do away with mediation as such, and to constitute a new populist historic bloc that will democratize the nation's institutions. We might take our lead from the dialectical transformation that culture takes under Srnicek's platform capitalism (2017), where the appearance of directness in online sociability and participation are nevertheless delivered on new software and hardware infrastructures, which have simply moved the question of mediation onto a new plane.[10] Or, returning a final time to Phillips's Joker, Fleck's rise as a reactionary populist hero at the end of the film is built on genuine grievances and injury, but his perception of his relationship with his oppressors is a political fantasy. He imagines a direct, unmediated relationship to an economic power with Thomas Wayne and cultural status with Murray Franklin. That imaginary relation to power is seductive—indeed, it is the film's ideological ruse, as we have argued—but by subscribing to it, as Fleck demonstrates, we become clowns, fighting ghosts from a badly-remembered past.

An Oily Background to Spectral Finance

Trump's political career is the product of a phantasmal investment of hope on the part of his supporters that is in line with his earlier, shadowy career as what Žižek calls a "purely virtual capitalist." Much like the fantastical promises of future dividends that encouraged the reckless investments leading to the sub-prime mortgage crisis, Trump's "cash 'net worth' is practically zero, or even negative, yet [he] is considered 'wealthy' because of the prospect of future profits" (2001: 42). Trump's erratic actions as President, his "keep them guessing" tactics and destabilizing influence can now be leveraged, within the ethereal world of financialization, to reap personal profits for his family holdings. The dreamlike realm inhabited by Trump and his supporters, where persistent abuses of power seem only to lead to greater status and success, are the inflection, in reality, of a different scene altogether. In much the same way dreams and fantasies disguise and displace much less glamorous realities, so too does the ethereal Fordist nostalgia summoned by Trump obscure a much more mundane, elemental scene that is the more likely source of the

economic uptick of U.S. fortunes over the past several years.

This has to do with the economy of oil, and specifically with changes in fracking technology that has made Texas' Permian Basin "arguably the hottest oil-and-gas play in the world," launching, for the first time in history, the U.S.'s accessible oil reserves past those of either Saudi Arabia or Russia (Wright 2017). An aerial view of this region courtesy of Google Maps reveals the landscape etched like a circuit board, so thoroughly has it been inscribed by the networks of access roads and "Christmas tree" valve posts used to inject fluid and remove oil from the ground in the fracking process.[11] The technological advances that have allowed for the exploitation of Texas' non-renewable oil and gas reserves dramatically reversed the fortunes of the U.S. oil industry, which in turn has buoyed the U.S. economy. We might also see the sudden availability of cheap, high-quality U.S. gas as one of the key, material underpinnings of the brand of Fordist nostalgia mobilized by Trump, with its fantasies of the return of American industrial prowess and personal mobility. As the slippery support to Trump's career, fossil fuels might thus be characterized as a dreaming substance that both propels and shapes the particular fantasies of race, gender, nation and prosperity buttressing contemporary vile sovereignty.

Following Cara Daggett, we can recognize the recent rise of authoritarian, white, patriarchal rule in Western nations as part of the "combustible convergence" forming in reaction to climate change and the pressure it puts on ways of life and modes of differential privilege that have been enabled by fossil fuels (2018: 29). At the same time, we should be cautious of "the tragic ethos demanded by global environmental justice" (ibid: 27) as a framing that might help encourage the reaction it critiques. So long as energy transition is posited as a loss of freedoms, rights, mobilities, it will likely continue to exacerbate the kinds of Fordist nostalgia—or would a better term be "petro-nostalgia" (ibid: 31)?—that buoys figures like Trump.[12] In facing these cultural undercurrents, it is up to artists, activists and scholars to articulate and imagine the coming changes in ways that make them enticing: how could energy transition be an opportunity for cultivating better relationships, lifestyles and societies? Imre Szeman and Jeff Diamanti (2017) challenge leftist practice to seize the opportunity. They describe the shift to mixed forms of energy as,

> the greatest social experiment in human history: a planned, plotted and predetermined shift from one kind of society—the petrocultures we inhabit today—to another. At Petrocultures [research group] we see this energy transition as an opportunity for a transition to the kind of society long imagined by the Left: collective, equitable and just in all of its practices and principles.

As leftists, we need to embrace our historical role as the caretakers of this utopian impulse, combining it with sober, even cynical analysis of current material and cultural conditions. If the connection between Trump's vile sovereignty and oil is correct, it also underpins his role as vanishing mediator to whatever social-political formation will emerge in the coming decades, as all of us grapple with the urgent need to transition to post-petroleum infrastructures and cultures. It is uncertain whether the capitalist mode of production can even survive a shift away from the massive surpluses of both wealth and energy provided by fossil fuels. This question is raised by Andreas Malm's (2016) research into the political-economic factors that lead to the rise of steam power as the key motor of the Industrial Revolution in Britain. Malm refutes ideologies of technological determinism and "progress" by showing how the shift to steam was effected primarily in order to facilitate the individual competition amongst industrialists over access to cheaper labor markets in large city centers. Similarly, without the potent and portable fuel source of petroleum, it is difficult to imagine how the networks of transportation facilitating capital's

global pursuit of discounted labor and production could possibly function (Malm 2016: 327-366).

Despite the promise of social transformation offered by the current need for a rapid energy transition, there is a danger of falling victim to new forms of vulgar materialism in the idea, for instance, that a change in energy infrastructures can guarantee a more egalitarian society simply by virtue of a technological shift from fossil fuels to renewables. Malm aids our thinking here by highlighting the key role the political economy plays in the energy transition. He points out that although renewables like solar power have the potential to put an end to energy scarcity, it is financialization itself that poses a barrier to such an infrastructural shift: "When the average stock is owned for a mere twenty-seconds, why would [financiers] underwrite a long-term project for exploiting the flow [of renewable energy] with little in the way of guaranteed revenues?" (2016: 381). A growing, interdisciplinary field of humanities focusing on the study of "petroculture" wagers that the factors that will determine the political and social characters of emergent energy regimes—whether they will be more democratic, egalitarian and participatory or much less so— are not primarily technological, but cultural, political and economic.[13] If the appearance of reactionary, populist leaders in the West is any indication, the potential for greater democratic and egalitarian energy systems, with all their messy complexities, seeming inefficiencies and challenges to the status quo, are currently being co-opted by authoritarian figures like Trump who can offer solutions that seem much more simple and direct. And, if our characterization of such figures as vanishing mediators is correct, these vile sovereigns could signal the rise of newly authoritarian forms of state capitalism, or they could be the spark that, in provoking widespread dissent, triggers an explosive shift to something altogether different.

At such a moment of indeterminacy, it is important for social practice to recall the lessons of past transitions, such as the emergence of neoliberalism. With the potentially revolutionary new social movements blossoming out of the fissures and contradictions of the Fordist compromise, many on the left who predicted the expansion of socialist democracy were surprised by the ability of neoliberal capitalism to co-opt the twin demands for enfranchisement of minorities and meaningful "self-actualization," while simultaneously dismantling the socialized structures that workers had fought a long, hard battle to secure. Activists mistook the rigidly paternalistic, hierarchical and state-enmeshed form of industrial capitalism to be definitive of capitalism as a whole, and were outflanked by neoliberalism's ability to deepen the marketization of society under the pretense of catering to individualized desires and identitarian niches. The contradictions inherent in Trump's performance of the biopolitical strong man are symptomatic of the ultimate failure of the globalized, neoliberal market to accommodate human flourishing in advanced, Western nations at even a basic level, let alone fulfilling higher, cultural needs. With the failure of both Fordist paternalism and the neoliberal individualization of risk and innovation, Trump gives us the worst of both worlds: in place of the welfare state bureaucracy with its plodding reliability we have the caprice of a childish autocrat whose boasts of "exceptional negotiation skills" are more realistically grounded in the chance exploitation of a resource that is destroying the planetary conditions for life.

Conclusion: Beyond Vile Sovereignty?

Leftists should resist the temptation to see the career of a figure like Trump as an opportunistic atrocity committed by an odious "vile sovereign" who needs only be replaced with a more palatable leader in order to return to some vestige of decent, democratic politics. To take comfort

in such reflections is to reiterate Trump's own displacement of structural issues onto corporeal subjects, the expulsion of whom spuriously promises to restore society. Agamben's figure of bare life resurfaces here as the hidden, unifying substance underpinning the biopolitical machinations of the vile sovereign. But our analysis exposes a further mineral dimension in that the biopolitical crisis works to obscure Trump's dependency on circumstantial developments in the American oil industry.

It is this dependency that most strongly reveals Trump's presidency as a vanishing mediator, insofar as his brand of white, masculinist nostalgia for a bygone age of industrial flourishing cannot outlive the pending, global transition from fossil fuels confronting us. While Trump's antics seem calculated to monopolize our attention with ever more scandalous offenses to propriety, accountability, and morality, we should pause to reflect on the extent to which such abuses might be distracting us from the more radical possibilities for change the current moment offers. Rather than scrambling to frame new responses to vile sovereignty in the faltering register of neoliberal pretenses to inclusivity and good governance, we should seize the moment of political opportunity signified by the vile sovereign, whose increasingly bizarre responses cover over a moment of great weakness, vulnerability and indeterminacy when global capitalism is in the process of sloughing its neoliberal skin.

What is to replace the neoliberal moment that now, itself, holds nostalgic appeal compared to the troubling uncertainties heralded by threshold figures like Trump? An emergent formation might already be intuited in new varieties of capitalism on the rise in Russia and China, where demands for democracy and freedom of speech are being quashed in the name of the damage such protests are allegedly causing to "the market." Figures like Trump can be viewed in the light of such developments as truly vanishing mediators: strong authoritarian men who, even as they mesmerize populations with their nostalgic visions of a "return to former greatness," are working in service of inhuman market forces that constitute the only authority our global community currently knows. The key question of our times is whether a new global coalition can be forged out of the fragmented, fractious, identitarian corporatisms that, in the wake of the dissolution of the third-way, neoliberal compromise, now seem bent on devouring **each other** rather than turning their collective energies towards resisting the globalized logics of capital. With the doomsday clock of ecological collapse ticking louder by the day, the pressing need for such a new collectivism should not be difficult to discern, if we can only avoid being baited and manipulated by clowns with bad hair who have ascended to seats of power that the failures of our watch have left exposed.

Endnotes

1. For the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency and the Comics Code Authority, see Lent et al. 1999; Nyberg 1994; Nyberg 2009.

2. The late 1980s is the consensus breakthrough for the Joker, though the character first appeared. Some credit the Joker's turn from gimmick villain to an icon of revenge in, of all years, 1973, with the story "The Joker's Five-Way Revenge" in Batman 251 (Reisman 2019). Surely coincidence, but 1973 is significant for global capitalism as the end of the Fordist expansion and a crisis in economic growth that has been deferred into the present: more details below.

3. Although it was not until the new millennium that Warner Bros. fully adopted the "Dark Knight" moniker with the Dark Knight Trilogy (2005 – 2012), the benchmark 1989 Batman film was heavily inspired by contemporary comic books that recast the story in grittier tones: The Killing Joke, by Alan Moore and Brian Bollard (1988) and The Dark Knight Returns by Frank Miller (1986). According to Forbes, Joker is the most profitable comic book film to date (Mendelson 2019).

4. The parallels between Trump and Jarry's odious patriarch have not been missed by contemporary artists. Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paula Vogel celebrated President's Day in 2018 by issuing a call for playwrights to produce a five-page sketch placing the Trump administration in the land of Ubu Roi (Steinkopf-Frank 208). Rosanna Hidyard has published a new and updated translation of Jarry's play, Ubu Trump (2017).

5. For a nuanced treatment of Fredric Wertham's career that challenges the portrait of his cultural conservatism, see Beaty (2005).

6. These remarks were made at Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech in June of 2015. For a full transcription, see: https://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/

7. The White House press conference on March 13, declaring a national emergency, is a case in point: Trump congratulated himself for closing off air travel to China a few weeks before, announced new federal money for private health providers to design a COVID-19 test, and avoided all questions about his disbanding of existing governmental health infrastructure, namely the White House's pandemic response team (The White House 2020).

8. As widely noted, the term was first used in Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign, and by several other politicians since.

9. Recent economic research into inequality is surveyed in the literature review "Economics After Neoliberalism" (Naidu, Rodrik, and Zucman 2019).

10. A longer research programme might compare this shift towards an unmediated relationship to the sovereign with cultural expressions equally impatient with mediation in various cultural forms: in literature, the rise of autofiction, but also of flarf poetry; the post-critical turn in the humanities; the renewal of attention in Deleuzian, new materialist, and phenomenological theories of human-natural entanglement; the resilience of reality-TV genres, and particularly the emergence of "realness" as a mode of self-fashioning and gender performance; podcasting over terrestrial radio; soundcloud mixtapes over blog-based music curation; documentary over news; and as mentioned above, narrowcasting channels, and the rise of platform-based social media.

11. The southeast corner of the New Mexico-Texas boarder points towards the centre of the Permian Basin region. This Google Map shows the thousands of pump heads that dot the landscape: https://www.google.com/maps/place/Texas,+USA/@31.7516006,-102.1764362,17304m/

12. Daggett notes her use of this term was borrowed from a conversation between Dominic Boyer, Cymene Howe and Timothy Mitchell on the podcast "Cultures of Energy," episode 57, 16 February 2017.

13. See, for starters, Szeman 2019; Szeman and Diamanti 2019; Bellamy and Diamanti 2018;

Szeman and Boyer 2017; Szeman, Wenzel and Yaeger 2017; Petrocultures Research Group 2016.

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"Capitalism, Racism, and Trumpism: Whitelash and the Politics of Oppression"

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Introduction

The rising tides of fascism, headwinds of neoliberalism, and persistence of racism in the United States as institutional, systemic, and part of a long history of oppression towards various groups has been well established. The bigger question is how we got to a point where overt manifestations of racism, sexism, faux democracy, and other forms of illegality and authoritarianism have once again become normalized. What does it mean when a sitting President claims that Mexican immigrants are rapists, criminals, and drug runners? What does it mean when a sitting President refuses to disclose his taxes to the American people, refuses to disclose whistleblower complaints—or worse, retweets the alleged name of his whistleblower—, or tries to act (or lie) as if there was nothing wrong about asking foreign leaders to investigate political opponents? What does it mean when the presumable leader of the "free world" not only downplays but significantly rebukes scientists and health practitioners on significant issues like climate change and, most recently, Covid-19—being sure to racialize the pandemic along the way? As such, how did we get to a point where we, collectively, are not as outraged as we reasonably should be?

In this paper, we argue that part of the explanation for the rise of, and loyalty to, Trumpism[1] lies in Donald Trump's ability to fuel "whitelash." It may be Trump's racial and political extremism that reinforces support among his base deepens the already established roots of white supremacy in U.S. society. His extremism has also encouraged Americans to return to overt racism as a way to create a "new normal" that sounds and performs like 1950's racial hatred. We define this whitelash as an individual, institutional, and/or structural countermeasures against the dismantling of white supremacy or actions, real or imagined, that seek to remedy existing racial inequities. Whitelash, we argue, is a reaction to challenges made to the white status quo; it is a reaction to growing diversity; it is a reaction against progressive changes (perceived or real) that would call out racism, question white privilege, or suggest racial equality is necessary to meet American ideals of fairness, in many of its forms. But whitelash is also inextricably linked to capitalism, class, and gender—as Trumpism exploits all to normalize oppression of working-class whites as well as people of color. That is, in line with intersectional arguments produced by notable scholars such as Oliver Cromwell Cox (1948), Angela Davis (1983), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), David Roediger 2007), and Patricia Hill Collins (2000) among others, we acknowledge that to understand the complex, and often seemingly contradictory, nuances of contemporary politics, we must move beyond

singular class, race, or gender explanations and take into account the fact that these systems of domination are intimately interconnected (Collins 2000).

In what follows, we first outline existing theoretical frameworks that inform this paper. Then, we sketch out our conceptualization of whitelash as a theoretical and intersectional framework for best understanding what seems to be a steadfast (if not slight increase at times) fidelity to Trumpism, despite Trump's consistent obfuscation and lies. We contend that while Trumpism and the accompanying whitelash are admittedly abnormal, unique, and readily apparent, often centered on misdirection and other forms of obfuscation, rash actions, and outright lies, the racial, gender, and class fear-mongering is not new. Whitelash has long been a driving force for public debate and policy decisions when it comes to other racialized issues in the United States. We then provide two prominent historical case studies highlighting the role of whitelash in the U.S.: immigration and affirmative action.

Theoretical Frameworks

Our paper is informed by contemporary racism scholars who understand racism systemically and structurally (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin 2010; Omi and Winant 1994), whereby racism has become less visible and overt primarily because of legal changes. This 'New Racism,' as Bonilla-Silva (2001) argues, has given rise to unique ways in which challenges against racial equality have manifested themselves. We are most influenced by scholars who argue for the importance of intersectional (Cox, 1948; Collins 2000) and interlevel (Ray 2019) frameworks that aim to understand the interconnectedness of systems of oppressions—that can better explain, for example, the steady rise and/or steadiness of Trumpism, in all its racist, sexist, and crass forms.

Racial Formations, Racialized Social Systems, and Systemic Racism

Michael Omi and Howard Winant, in their 1994 book, <u>Racial Formation in the United States</u>, highlighted the major role that the state plays in the creation, shaping, and reproduction of racial categories and racial identities. They contend that race is fluid, dynamic, and highly dependent on the politics of white supremacy at different times in U.S. history. Omi and Winant define racial formation as the process by which the forces mentioned above. Still, in particular, the state determines the racial order of society, to highlight the importance of racial categories and the meanings attached to them. How we come to understand ourselves and others, particularly concerning the racial identity and our sense of belonging (i.e., who belongs and who does not) are predicated on what Omi and Winant call "racial common sense" that helps us to understand our position in society.

In his 1997 article published in <u>American Sociological Review</u>, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (see also 2001) posits racism as a global phenomenon in which racialized social systems are hierarchically ordered, and people gain advantages and disadvantages depending on where they fit in the racial and social order. Bonilla-Silva intended to address the lack of a structural theory of racism that would highlight the practices and mechanisms the dominant race would put into place to secure and maintain their social standing at the top of the racial hierarchy. While the racialization of the world system is based on social, economic, political, and psychological relations of domination and subordination between groups at the top of the racial hierarchy and those below, Bonilla-Silva (1997: 470) does note that historically, "the racialization of social systems did not imply the

exclusion of other forms of oppression," and that "racialization occurred in social formations also structured by class and gender."

In his book, <u>Racist America: Roots, Realities, and Future Reparations</u>, Joe R. Feagin (2010) developed the concept of systemic racism to explain the condition of blacks in the U.S., in particular, to address the consistent and cumulative disadvantages of what it meant to be black in America. According to Feagin, systemic racism highlights structural, institutional, and historical forces that are unique to a country that was explicitly founded to oppress blacks and provide advantages to whites. Feagin argues that the deep roots of racism in U.S. society have resulted in societal and institutional racist practices, at all levels—economic, ideological, and political— that work to preserve white supremacy. White racial frames, according to Feagin, serve as the ideological arm of his systemic racism theory. This concept provides a broader understanding of racism that includes visual images, emotions, and language, for example, as legitimizing and maintaining white supremacy.

Finally, sociology scholars explicating racialized organizations are relatively new, in comparison to racism theorists who interrogate a better understanding of racism at the structural or societal levels. Nonetheless, many scholars have expressed and addressed the need for organizational understanding in race and ethnicity (Douglas et al. 2018; Moore 2008; Ray 2017, 2019; Saenz et al. 2007). The crux of such a call is predicated on the idea that while human agents shape organizational structures, actors are also shaped by the complex arrangements and practices of organizations (Saenz et al. 2007). In Wendy Leo Moore's (2008) book titled <u>Reproducing Racism: White Space, Elite Law Schools, and Racial Inequality</u>, she elucidated the processes by which elite law schools, as a gateway institution, serve to reinforce existing laws and practices that are bound in white supremacy (see also Embrick et al. 2019). More recently, Victor Ray (2017, 2019) contends that organizations are racialized and thus imbued with racial meanings that help shape organizational hierarchies and interactions.

With these arguments in mind, we apply the notions that racism is systematic, intentional, and ever-changing to ensure white superiority in America. Notably, we contend as other social scientists have postulated that racism in the U.S. is still abundant and pervasive in shaping the lives of all Americans and those who cross its borders. Moreover, we argue that structural racism continues to find ways to prop up white privilege and superiority despite the increase in diversity and cries for equality in 21st century America. Here, we reiterate the reality that racist ideologies inform institutional practices and policies that obstruct advances made against white supremacy, thus diluting any progress towards racial equity and equality in the past and present.

Intersecting and Interlevel Systems of Domination

When understanding how racialization reinforces racial attitudes, it is also essential to understand the role of intersecting identities. Many scholars, including bell hooks and Angela Davis, highlighted myriad ways in which women of color, particularly black women, face a heightened form of oppression. Kimberlée Crenshaw (1989) was the first to coin the term 'intersectionality.' As she states, intersectional experiences are higher than the sum of race and gender experiences. Certainly, we can add experiences of class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, citizenship, ability, and other marginalized identities.

Of the many contributions in the social sciences that have influenced how we should be thinking about the interconnectedness of multiple oppressions and systems of domination,

Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) acclaimed book, <u>Black Feminist Thought</u>, is near, if not at the top of the list. The book is more than an extension of Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality in its elaboration of what Collins describes as interlocking oppression—or the coextensive nature of racism, sexism, and classism. Further, Collins notes that oppression is systemically organized and arranged, and legitimized by the hegemonic domain. We all participate and are part of a larger matrix of domination that privileges the dominant groups, albeit differently depending on their various positions in society. Thus, white women can be members of an oppressed group while still taking political views deemed to be racist and anti-immigrant.

We also must recognize the intertwined relationships between the questions of racism and group social mobility. As argued by most racism scholars (see Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin 2010; Omi and Winant 1994), the American social construction of race and racism is about economic opportunities and securing these privileges for generations to come. Notably, the notion that being white in America equals better access to citizenship, voting, property ownership, better jobs, and better wages (see Gallagher 2008). While never stated directly, Herbert Blumer (1958) suggested that feelings of prejudice and the actions of discrimination by white Americans have primarily been predicted by their perceptions of what they think they economically deserve as white American citizens. He did argue that if whites felt that their group position (i.e., economic situation and social mobility) was threatened, then whites would lash out in prejudicial thoughts and discriminatory actions. Therefore, we believe it is important to note that when white Americans feel economically and politically threatened by various racial and ethnic groups, then whitelash has often been deployed to restore the social, economic, and political order of white dominance.

Whitelash

Our understanding of whitelash is predicated on the notion that white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy(ies) are part of the very fabric of American society; that racism, classism, and sexism are firmly embedded in its structural foundations. Expanding the term 'whitelash,' coined by CNN commentator Van Jones (see Grinapol 2016),[2] we define whitelash as individual, institutional, and structural countermeasures against the dismantling of white supremacy (as it intersects with other systems of domination) or actions, real or imagined, that seek to remedy existing racial inequities. We argue that whitelash is a reaction to challenges made against the white status quo as well as to growing racial diversity. It is also a systematic reaction to progressive changes that would call out racism, question white privilege, or suggest racial equality is necessary to meet American ideals of fairness and equal treatment. In a broader, sociological sense, whitelash is not just about confirming and reaffirming a dominant identity (although this is part of it); it is also about the fear of change in white superiority, whether it be imagined or real. That is, whitelash has less to do with white's opposition to issues such as immigration, for instance, and more about maintaining white domination in all avenues of life and reinforcing the pillars that hold up white supremacy despite growing efforts to at least question it. To that end, whitelash reflects the reactions of individuals and institutions in the more massive racialized social structure that have a possessive investment in whiteness (see Lipsitz 1998, 2011).

We further contend that whitelash occurs at different levels, including individual and institutional levels. Racialized institutional policies and practices that reinforce the status quo are forms of whitelash. These racial mechanisms (see Hughey et al. 2015) or racial projects (see Omi and Winant 1994) serve to at least maintain and solidify white supremacy. Similarly, ever-changing

racial ideologies that help folks to make sense of the current racial and social order, and that help them disregard or minimize racial fissures in society and reinforce white supremacy, are a type of backlash. We provide details below on the specifics of how we might think about whitelash at the structural, institutional, and individual levels.

Structural — We follow the lead of scholars such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Joe R. Feagin in understanding structural racism as embedded practices within a given society that are formalized and designed as normative societal behaviors that give unequal rewards to groups. Beginning with the erasure of indigenous groups (Glenn 2015), racism is deeply rooted in U.S. history (Feagin 2010), and its tentacles extend politically, economically, socially, and ideologically. Backlash emanates from many racial ideologies that exist in the U.S. racialized social system that serves to help whites (and some non-whites) make sense of their place in the racial, social order, including colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 1997; 2003; Burke 2019), white racial frame (Feagin 2010), diversity ideology (Embrick 2008, 2011, 2018; see also Berrey 2015), racial apathy (Forman and Lewis 2006), or blaming the victim—what Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields (2014) have labeled as 'racecraft.'

Institutional — Whitelash can occur as a result of real or perceived pressures that challenge existing institutional practices or seek to dismantle them. Similarly, whitelash can result in the creation of exclusive spaces that promote white supremacy. Organizational racial mechanisms include, but are not limited to, place, space, polities, programs, practices, methods, logic, or language (Ray 2019). Omi and Winant (2014 [1994]) noted that whites, through many social institutions, have systematically and diligently challenged any racial or ethnic progress towards equality since the U.S. Civil War. The shift to 'New Racism' also makes this shift much more covert and subtle within institutional frameworks (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2001, 2003).

Individual — At the individual level, we draw on Bonilla-Silva's (2019) advancement of racialized emotions as tied to collective movements that propel groups to react negatively to progressive changes or perceptions of impending or future change. This mechanism is powerful and has been subject to the majority of the work in the social sciences on persistent racism and discrimination. For example, since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, whites have increasingly minimized or ignored addressing racial inequalities over class inequalities, have favored laissez-faire explanations (Bobo et al. 1997; Bobo and Smith 1998) that blame minorities for their social standing, or have couched resistance to equality in terms of neoliberal thought of supporting equality for all and not just those viewed as disadvantaged (Carter et al. 2014). The latter has increased particularly since the 1980s, pushing for policy reform, for instance, that have racialized outcomes (Saito 2009). Even Herbert Blumer (1958) argued that prejudice and discrimination were fed not just by social changes that threatened white supremacy in America but by whites "feeling" like they are losing their grasp of what they think they deserve, including jobs, social welfare programs, public services, and their normative identities. Overall, these emotions have often focused on blaming racial and ethnic minorities, both foreign and domestic, for national issues concerning economic, political, and cultural shifts since the foundation of the United States.

Thus, we can identify peaks of whitelash that are systematic and consistent at many points in

U.S. history where the issue has centered on challenging the calls for the rights of non-whites and the reduction of racial/ethnic oppression, whether those issues be regarding economic, political, social, psychological, or even philosophical concerns. For instance, in the U.S., the Reconstruction Era was rife with the backlash against the emancipation of black slaves (Browne 2007). The same can be said with the rise of Jim Crow laws, redlining, anti-miscegenation laws, police brutality, increased non-white incarceration rates, etc. Centuries later, there is the reactionary backlash towards correcting mis-history regarding slavery in the U.S.—whether that correction is because the issue of slavery was an issue of racism and white supremacy and not solely an issue of states' rights; or whether the correction has to do with the ridiculous and factually incorrect perceptions that there were not many slave rebellions because blacks realized how great they had it as slaves. Related to the backlash against correcting U.S. history, there is also backlash toward the removal of monuments (e.g., Confederate statues) that celebrate or represent a nostalgic call back to days of overt legal racial oppression (Fortin 2017; O'Reilly 2017). With that being said, we present two detailed case studies of whitelash on immigration and affirmative action. In so doing, we tie whitelash historically to present day Trumpism. We then contend that Trump's brand of racism may be abnormal to an extent and thus further institutionalize existing racial mechanisms of white supremacy.

The Case of Immigration

The Ideologies that Shape the U.S. Immigration Debate

When it comes to the immigration debate in the United States, whitelash has depended on nativist ideology, which differentiates the native from the foreign (Galindo and Vigil 2006; Knobel 1996; Schrag 2010). Higham (1955:4) defined nativism as "intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e., 'un-American') connections." It is not surprising that scholars have noted that nativist views and actions often became more exclusory and hostile during times of national crisis such as economic downturns (i.e., the Great Depression), wars (or terrorist attacks), or sudden increases in visibility due to the size or concentration of immigrant populations (Galindo and Vigil 2006; Higham 1955; Perea 1997; Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Sánchez 1997). In Higham's (1955) examination of immigration from 1860 to 1925, he concluded that anti-immigrant sentiment and policies were undoubtedly shaped by a real or perceived challenge to native-born Americans' sense of loss concerning their economic, political, or cultural positions in the U.S. However, if the immigrants posed no economic, political, or cultural threat to native-born folks, then they tended to support immigration, regardless of race or ethnicity. Higham (1999) later on realized that by the 1960s, race and ethnicity had become a driving force of determining which groups of immigrants were considered as a threat to native-born resources with the rise of more non-white immigrants arriving to the U.S.

Sociologists Charles Jaret (1999) and Cameron Lippard (2011) support this notion that racial ideology matters in the debate of immigration in the U.S. Both scholars argued that the question of immigration today relies heavily on a racialized perception of non-white immigrants from Asia and Central and South America as problematic compared to "white" European stock. Also, the question of illegal and legal immigration was not new to U.S. immigration debates but became particularly magnified with more Asian and Latinx immigrants entering the U.S. after the 1960s. This seemingly new racialized approach to immigration was further exasperated with several

events, including various wars, economic recessions/depression, and, more recently, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the "Great Economic Recession" of 2008. These events, as well as several others, have pushed scholars to consider that race may be a significant variable in the discussion of immigration in the United States.

Scholars have argued that nativism and racism work together to not only determine who belongs in America but, most importantly, to protect and secure a White supremacist nation. As Higham (1999:384) later lamented at the end of his career, "Racism and nativism were different things, though often closely allied." Reflecting on recent anti-immigrant sentiment concerning Asians and Latinos, he also stated that, "We require no theory of 'new' nativism or 'new' racism to account for the trouble that today's concentrated immigration from abroad precipitates…" (Higham 1999: 388). Or, as Galindo and Vigil (2006: 426) argued, "racism and nativism intertwine during processes of nation-building when immigrants happen to also be people of colour." Therefore, 'racist nativism' in the U.S. has worked in several ways to prop up white supremacy and, in many insistences, allowed whites to protect white privilege and power in a growingly diverse United States. While Karl Marx reflected on worker alienation from the means of production, this indicates a racial alienation of sorts where whites feel alienated from valued resources (e.g., jobs) being unfairly taken by undeserving non-white immigrants. Below we provide several examples of how whitelash has happened at institutional and individual levels throughout history up to today to maintain white superiority.

Historical and Structural Roots of Whitelash against Immigration

Scholars have observed the connection between racist nativism, politics, and federal immigration laws that protect white supremacy in America (see Carter and Lippard 2015; Bernard 1998; Lippard 2011; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). In a review of American immigration laws from the colonial period to now, Bernard (1998) found that all posed most of their restrictions on foreign-born groups who were not from western and central European 'white stock.' Moreover, while non-white immigrants from Asia and Central and South America were not preferred, they were allowed to immigrate to the colonies and the newly formed United States if they represented a steady supply of cheap and able-bodied labor. This "cheap labor" caveat helped to usher in thousands of immigrants from Ireland (not considered white at the time – see Roediger 1991) and China and other East Asian countries to help with the settlement and economic expansion of the U.S. into its brutally-acquired western territories. For example, the Open Door Era from 1776 to 1881 invited any European (and white) settlers to become automatic citizens after living two years in the U.S. colonies and later on, states. This open-door policy favored Europeans from England, France, Germany, and other "white ancestry" locales but also encouraged non-white groups to immigrate who could serve as an abundant and cheaper labor source (i.e., Irish and Chinese immigrants). Interestingly, these federal immigration/naturalization policies were espoused mainly by scientists and politicians who supported eugenics and the notion of biological racism, often labeling those identified by the American public as "non-white" to be disease-ridden and genetically inferior (Higham 1955; Painter 2011). These new immigration/naturalization policies also had little to no provisions to explain ways in which Native Americans and Mexican citizens in the West (who were incorporated as citizens of the U.S. after the Mexican American War) would become naturalized Americans.

However, by 1881, the United States would abruptly change its policies on allowing non-

white immigrants to enter as a cheap labor source. A growing anti-immigrant campaign arose against Chinese and other Asian immigrants across Europe, and the U.S. is known as the "Yellow Peril." This ever increasing public concern focused on how Chinese immigrants were a particular threat to national security on multiple fronts concerning economics, politics, and public health (Tchen and Yeats 2014). However, the most consistent worry, mainly expressed by elite white Americans, was that Chinese immigrants were too economically successful in comparison to whites as entrepreneurs. By the 1880s, Chinese immigrants had struck it rich in American gold mines, opened thousands of small businesses across the U.S., and they were also taking working-class jobs from whites for less pay. Irish Catholic immigrants who were also seen as a "foreigner problem" at the time, banded together with white elites to blame Chinese immigrants as a national security problem because they were taking their jobs in many manual labor industries afforded to Irish immigrants (see Painter 2011; Steinberg 2001). More importantly, by aligning their political and economic interests with wealthy white Americans to suppress other immigrant groups and African Americans, Irish immigrants would be excluded from persecution and deportation as immigrants and be newly racialized as white.

After significant public outcry, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was made into law. It was one of the first racist immigration policies in American history that maintained white supremacy against a foreign-born population. The Act ordered that no new immigration be allowed from China, especially Chinese women who could increase birth rates of native-born Chinese children (Bernard 1998). This law also sparked the "Driving Out" period in which mostly working-class whites used mob violence to push out Chinese immigrants from their businesses and towns. For example, in 1885, white American miners in Rock Springs, Wyoming attacked and killed almost thirty Chinese immigrants who they saw as the cause of their unemployment. Other incidents included white Americans forcing Chinese families to move back into their established "Chinatowns," as well as restricting any business interactions between whites and Chinese and other Asian immigrant business owners (Tchen and Yeats 2014).

While the Chinese Exclusion Act would not be fully repealed until 1943, its impact, along with the white mob violence, effectively set Chinese immigrants and Americans back economically and politically for decades. This policy also opened the door to create even more restrictive federal immigration policies including full restrictions on "unfavorable" groups coming from many now-labeled "non-white" countries including most countries across Asia, Central and South America, and Africa, as well as some European countries like Italy (Bernard 1998). Also, by 1921 and after a world war, the U.S. decided that the best way to regulate their stock of immigrants coming into America was through restrictive quotas. The Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924 established that each country in the world would be assigned a pre-determined allotment as to the number of immigrants who could enter the country. Eight-two percent of these allotments were given to northern and western European countries (Bernard 1998). The quotas also went to states and racial and ethnic groups who were considered more "assimilable" to American life and culture, which severely limited immigrants coming from all of Asia and Africa, as well as most of Central and South America (Bernard 1998). Overall, these new federal immigration policies were created in the hopes that it would increase the "white" immigration from Europe, as well as would protect the economic and political interests of white "native" Americans.

While these new restrictive laws kept U.S. borders closed to much of the world's non-white populations, it would also make exceptions to the rules when cheap labor was needed. The bending of rules also subversively encouraged whitelash techniques when white America

wanted to remove immigrants when the public and economy demanded it. For example, during and shortly after World War II, Americans recognized they did not have enough cheap labor to keep up productions for war and created the Bracero Program to bring in cheap manual labor from Central America and particularly Mexico. This program continued to operate until 1964, bringing in primarily Mexican immigrant men to harvest crops. However, by the 1950s, American prosperity was at an all-time high, but Mexican immigrants and native-born citizens began to unionize and consider their economic worth in the U.S. (Koulish 2010). This move by Mexican laborers sparked concern and backlash from affluent white farmers and business owners who wanted to keep profits high and labor cheap. Through political connections, these concerns prompted another federal action called "Operation Wetback" in 1954. This operation was responsible for arresting and deporting close to 1.3 million Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans back to Mexico and, ultimately, curtailing farmworker unionization (Blakemore 2018). It also kept wages low even for working-class whites and African Americans (Blakemore 2018). Put simply, up until the 1960s; it was clear that U.S. immigration policies wanted certain groups that would establish and continue white dominance and privilege in America. There were also clear institutional and individual actions taken in response to the possibilities that whites, at the time, would lose economically and politically.

Whitelash and Latinx Immigration Today

Now, flash forward to late 20th and early 21st Century America. After the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, all quotas were eliminated, and immigration was once again opened up to all nationalities/groups, regardless of where they lived or their race or ethnicity. Particularly, these new "liberal" laws would allow for family reunification in which current naturalized, and native-born citizens could vouch for their family members to immigrate to the U.S. (Bernard 1998). While policy makers hoped this new policy would encourage more "white ethnic" migration to the U.S., it helped a "browning" of immigration trends (Lippard and Gallagher 2011; Massey 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). By the 1980s, Asian and Hispanic/Latinx immigration had significantly increased and surpassed all immigration records kept since the 1800s. Most immigrants came from Central America, China, and much of Southeast Asia due to America's involvement in global politics and economics in places like Vietnam and surrounding countries. Thus, the "new normal" was the liberalization and diversification in immigration for the U.S.

By 1986, President Ronald Reagan was persuaded by prominent business owners and public concerns to enact the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (Bernard 1998). Business owners were particularly having a problem with competing against companies who were hiring undocumented immigrants as labor. Thus, this law would be the first to focus on ways to fund and bolster support to find, detain, and remove undocumented immigrants, particularly coming from Central America and Mexico. It would also attempt to penalize companies who hired undocumented immigrants. Still, this provision was primarily eroded by debate and policies later passed that protected business in hiring undocumented immigrants. Reagan also gave amnesty and citizenship to around 2.7 million individuals in hopes they would become honest, tax-paying citizens (Alba and Nee 2003). However, these efforts did not slow down undocumented immigration because companies continued to hire undocumented immigrants with minimal agitation from the federal government.

Despite these efforts by Reagan and subsequent presidential administrations (i.e., Presidents

George H. Bush and Bill Clinton), economic and political tensions continued to rise across the U.S. Whitelash began to show up particularly in various states where the increase in non-white immigration was visible to the white public. For example, in 1994, California's Proposition Bill 187 attempted to curtail undocumented immigration to the state. It was an institutional reaction to some California conservative politicians who argued that "illegals" were abusing public services without paying local or state taxes. This uproar primarily focused on the Mexican immigrant population and attempted to identify all undocumented immigrants and prohibit "illegals" from using non-emergency health care, public education, and other services provided by the State of California (Calavita 2014). While the bill passed and was enacted, the U.S. Supreme Court eventually struck it down as unconstitutional and discriminatory for targeting Mexican immigrants, naturalized citizens, and native-born individuals.

However, the most prominent era of whitelash toward immigration came in 2001. Arguably, a perfect storm of factors arose in 2001 to send America and its white populations into a whitelash frenzy. First, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, began the era of restrictive policies focusing on protecting American interests and its people. The Patriot Act of 2001 created protections for the U.S. government to servile, detain and remove several immigrants and non-white individuals suspected of aiding or conducting terrorist acts. Also, it created the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which would dissolve the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service and create a new law enforcement agency called Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Second, the attacks came a significant economic downturn for the United States and the rest of the world by 2008. The "Great Recession" destroyed employment opportunities and retirements for many Americans, which would mean that even jobs primarily regulated to immigrants would be seen as a valuable resource to unemployed Americans. Finally, the broader push of non-white citizens and other marginalized groups for recognition and, at best, equality, sparked whitelash. Growing movements including but not limited to same-sex marriage, racialized police brutality, and the gender pay gap made many white Americans realize they were not the only ones suffering from the political and economic turmoil of the 21st Century, as well as that prejudice and discrimination was a significant concern for most non-white and marginalized Americans and immigrants. All of these factors came together and created what we would propose as the most significant whitelash movement against non-white immigration. This significant change in rhetoric and policy made a move to more liberal views towards immigration disappear and less than usual since the 1960s.

This new era of whitelash included several actions from local, state, and federal institutions to curtail non-white immigration from Central America. For instance, from 2001 to 2010, almost half of all U.S. states passed or attempted to pass anti-immigrant laws to reduce undocumented immigration to their states (Lippard and Gallagher 2011). An excellent example of this push can be seen with Arizona's State Bill 1070, which wanted to enforce federal immigration laws by encouraging local law enforcement throughout the state to ask for documentation of a person's legal status while in the United States (Lippard and Carter 2015). The U.S. Supreme Court contended that law enforcement would target individuals who "may look illegal" based on ethnic and racial stereotypes, and eventually struck the bill down.

Despite this Supreme Court decision, several other states across the U.S. enacted similar laws that looked to punish Latinx immigrants for interacting with public services or working with companies that paid them under the table as undocumented immigrants. The most famous state laws popped up in southern states, including Alabama and Georgia, which attempted to remove

undocumented immigrants from harvesting crops. However, local farmers and business owners in the state lobbied their state governments to remove these clauses because it would significantly deflate crop profits (Lippard and Gallagher 2011).

Local municipalities and counties also set up relationships with ICE to serve as deputies of federal immigration enforcement. For example, the ICE 287(g) Program has funneled federal monies into local law enforcement to train local law enforcement, add new positions, and build detention centers to assist in the war on immigration (see Arriaga 2020). These partnerships often allowed the targeting of Latinx immigrants and their families as suspects of being undocumented immigrants. This practice became evident when local law enforcement such as the Alamance County Sheriff's Department in North Carolina was federally prosecuted for racial profiling during routine traffic stops to locate and detain these immigrants (Arriaga 2020).

On the federal level, there has also been whitelash against immigration. Former President Barack Obama's administration was fundamental in pumping in more federal dollars to build up ICE and border patrol personnel to curtail illegal and legal immigration specifically from Central America. This effort led to some of the highest deportation rates in American history topping out at 5.3 million deportations from 2009 to 2016 (DHS 2016). President Donald Trump has also assisted in furthering whitelash against Latinx and Middle East immigrants. In 2017, Trump signed Executive Order 13769 to ban the immigration of Muslims to the U.S. from several countries including but not limited to Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and other Middle East countries to curtail terrorism in the U.S. President Trump also pushed for more federal funding or even foreign investment (i.e., that Mexico should pay for the wall) into building more walls and increasing CBP personnel on the southern American border to Mexico and the rest of Central America. He has also encouraged ICE and Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) to increase raids on industries hiring mostly immigrants (i.e., the raid of seven food-processing plants in Mississippi in 2019) and the separation of immigrant children from families to deter continued immigration to the U.S (Aguilera 2019; Gonzales 2019). He has also restricted or pulled federal funding from local municipalities and cities identified as "sanctuary cities" and pumped money and support into training Mexican immigration enforcement to align with American concerns (Vera 2019).

Of course, much of this whitelash, particularly against Mexican immigrants, has not been a new phenomenon within American history. As argued by sociologist Leo Chavez (2013), the "Latino threat" to white America has been a long-constructed racist nativist story reaching back to the Mexican American War. However, Chavez (2013) argues that the intensity of public support and the amount of federal dollars focused on the Latinx threat is at its highest in history. American media, business owners, and state and federal politicians have effectively spread misinformation about the impacts of immigration on the American public (see Bohon and MacPherson 2011). As infamously stated by President Trump, Latinx immigration to the U.S. has been characterized within the last five years as an immigrant horde made up of rapists, murderers, and drug dealers.

Scholars have demonstrated that whitelash trickles down even into the day-to-day lives of Americans and their interactions with immigrants. For instance, Lippard and Graham (2014) found that in the rural mountain towns of western North Carolina, Latinx immigrants and their families face moderate levels of discrimination and exclusion in receiving public services, including healthcare, attending public school, or interacting with local law enforcement. Other researchers have also noted this across the United States, where Latinxs are often stereotyped and mistreated as undocumented immigrants when accessing jobs, housing, and social services (see Lippard and Gallagher 2011; Marrow 2011; Massey 2008). Journalist Roberto Lovato (2008) coined the

term "Juan Crow" to explain southern state adoptions of discriminatory laws and condoning local discriminatory practices against Mexican immigrants as similar to racist situations African Americans faced during the Jim Crow Era.

Overall, whitelash has become the standard in the treatment of immigration today. Indeed, this was not a new trend since scholars have demonstrated that debates and decisions over immigration have long been rooted in protecting white supremacy. Institutions at various levels in American society have and continue today to play a significant part in creating laws to curtail and remove "foreigners" who threaten white supremacy from federal to local law interventions. However, what is abnormal, to a certain degree, is the outwardly hostile rhetoric by President Trump, the supposed leader of the free world, when describing immigrants attempting to enter the U.S. to obtain employment. Such racist frames indeed promote whitelash and make these times perilous for immigrants of color like we have never seen before.

The Case of Affirmative Action in Higher Education

We now turn our attention to another highly contested and racialized issue in the history of the U.S.: affirmative action. We argue that this policy may be one of the most prominent and well-documented cases of whitelash. This is not surprising given that affirmative action, as an ameliorative policy, is closely tied to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and attempts to promote diversity and redistribute resources away from whites to marginalized groups who have been excluded in the past. President John F. Kennedy supported equal opportunity of employment for minorities and restructured federal efforts to improve the social well being of African Americans and other marginalized groups. While earlier attempts by the federal government were made to alleviate the impact of racism and discrimination (see Kellough 2006 for full discussion), it was Executive Order 10925 of 1961, issued by President Kennedy, that was more proactive in the cause. This order required all federal contractors to take "affirmative action to ensure that applicants are treated equally" without regard to race, creed, color, or nationality. It is this order that first made mention of the idea of affirmative action. Relative to past governmental efforts to alleviate inequality and discrimination, this effort attempted to take concrete and meaningful steps to such ends (Carter and Lippard 2020; Carter, Lippard and Baird 2018).

The whitelash against affirmative action was immediate and swift. Former research director of the Institute for Democracy Studies Lee Cokorinos (2003:16) stated succinctly that, "For as long as there have been civil rights law, conservatives have been developing the arguments and instruments to reverse it." As such, we pose that a whitelash occurred against growing diversity and the so-called intrusion of the national government that sought to desegregate formerly white spaces and to redistribute resources against their wishes. As we will describe below, this whitelash has been a socio-historical process occurring at different levels and became more organized in the 1980s just as prominent U.S. institutions (e.g., higher education, businesses) were taking concerted ameliorative efforts to right old wrongs. Whitelash represents a long-standing push by whites (and some non-whites) and conservative elites who oppose growing diversity to eliminate policies meant to alleviate racial inequality; thus, there is a long-fought battle being waged against the "liberal agenda." Furthermore, control over politics and the media played a substantial role in reproducing narratives that argue against affirmative action, including blaming the victim that attacks the culture of marginalized groups and, concomitantly, making whites the ultimate victims of the policy.

The Ideological Roots of Whitelash towards Affirmative Action

Those fighting against affirmative action, whether it be elite actors, politicians or lawyers, tend to be unified on one front: ideological orientation. Accordingly, we argue that the ideology central to the whitelash against affirmative action is noteworthy for two fundamental reasons. One, arguments against policies such as affirmative action use a neoliberal frame. This perspective borrows racist tropes that condemn the policy for violating basic and cherished principles of justice and fairness. This is indeed true for affirmative action. One of the primary frames surrounding affirmative action is that such policies are unjust because education is about meritand entrance into institutions of higher education should be about hard work and effort (Carter and Lippard 2020; Carter, Lippard, and Baird 2019). Many of the arguments posed against affirmative action directly attack the culture of blacks and other marginalized groups. Often termed "blaming the victim," the frame of communication is commonly used to qualify anti-civil rights positions as it lays the problems squarely at the feet of groups suffering the most, who have issues with drugs or with work ethic.

Two, this ideology also reinforces alienation; in this case, it is whites who feel that they are deserving and that resources that they have earned are being taken away by underserving minority groups. While Marx referred to the alienation of the worker from production (lack of ownership of the means of production), alienation, as observed here, is racial alienation where whites feel alienated from the fruits of their labor. That is to say; our society is actively taking away rewards that should be connected to labor. Bobo and Hutchings (1996) defined racial alienation as a collectively shared grievance resulting from a perceived loss of valued resources. This a central frame in the arguments against affirmative action. Opponents express grave concern of reverse discrimination, where deserving candidates are being passed over by undeserving minorities who do not maintain the same work ethic and grades (Carter and Lippard 2020; Carter, Lippard, and Baird 2019). Fundamental to this notion is that of white victimization. Arguments that push reverse discrimination argue that society is more interested in diversity than it is about justice and fairness. In this light, whites are being left behind and punished for their skin color, an ironic twist given arguments made by civil rights icons such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Also central to this argument is that of threat (Carter and Lippard 2020). Social authorities fighting against affirmative action tend to infuse their arguments with a threat to ensure an emotional whitelash among whites who feel they are being abandoned. Carter and Lippard termed this multi-framing technique, Racialized Framing.

With this being said, scholars have argued that the fight against affirmative action is being led by just a few elite actors (mostly white) rather than a grassroots uprising. These elite actors are leading a charge to dismantle any civil rights initiative that attempts to promote the well-being of marginalized groups. Moreover, these groups are supporting ideological orientations (racism is a thing of the past; no more discrimination, the color of skin does not predict outcomes, etc.) and doing so at varying levels of society. How do they accomplish such a monumental task? These entities have gained influential positions in politics and prominent interest groups to ensure control. However, these groups have manipulated the masses, not only with affirmative action but with other issues as well, through access to media. Research indeed shows that social authorities often use media outlets (Entman 1997) to produce hostility toward the policy. Entman (1997:40) observed that the most prominent media frame to be one of competition, where affirmative action represented a "zero-sum conflict of interest between whites and blacks in

which only one group could win, and one must lose." Thus, whitelash is not only about changing policies and procedures, but it is also about changing the minds of the masses. Such dismantling of civil rights initiatives leads to the reproduction of inequality regardless of what is in the hearts and minds of everyday persons.

Historical and Structural Roots of Whitelash against Diversity in Higher Education

It is without a doubt that economics played a tremendous role in whites lashing out against affirmative action. However, the anti-affirmative action movement itself was led by a few well-connected and funded actors rather than a "groundswell" of organized opposition (Corkninos 2003). The names of these actors are synonymous with wealth and power in the U.S. and are considered the who's who of economic, social, and political power in the country. These names include Coors, DeVos, Scaife, and Hunt, to name a few. Scholars have posed that these wealthy few were empowered by in-roads made by conservative politicians against civil rights initiatives that began in the 1980s (Moore 2018). Three factors were instrumental in the fight against affirmative action. First, the Reagan Administration promoted a color-blind perspective toward civil rights initiatives that vilified a common sense understanding of racial inequality and persistent discrimination (Moore 2018; Cokorinos 2003). Second, this color-blind perspective played out in the legislative agenda and was promoted by members (termed "permanent revolution" by Cokorinos) of the Reagan Administration, who opposed civil rights initiatives. Finally, this "permanent revolution" was instrumental in the inputting anti-civil rights advocates in positions of power (e.g., the federal judiciary, well-funded advocacy groups) to have an impact politically, legally, and in the media.

While anti-civil rights advocates made pushes in the 1960s and 1970s, the election of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s marked a transition. President Reagan and his administration brought with it a notable anti-civil rights orientation. While this perspective is problematic given the persistent issues with racism and discrimination, it was the infusion of anti-civil rights operatives into the Reagan administration that provided the bite behind the bark. For example, Reagan enlisted Jay Parker, an African American with a clear anti-affirmative-action perspective, as the head of his Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) transition team (Cokorinos 2003; Moore 2018). Before serving under Reagan, Parker used his company, International Public Affairs Consultant, Inc., to drive South African apartheid propaganda (Cokorinos 2003). Parker was instrumental in enlisting key young "operatives" in the fight against civil rights initiatives, including Ed Meese, William French Smith, and Ted Olson. In turn, Meece and Parker worked to fill Reagin's Justice Department with young conservatives, including members of the conservative Federalist Society (Lee Liberman Otis, Steven Calabresi, and Michael Carnin) as well as members of conservative advocacy organizations (e.g., Michael Carvin from the Center for Individual Rights). Meece and Parker were also instrumental in bringing in Linda Chavez (staff director at the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights) and Clarence Thomas (chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission), both of which maintained color-blind orientations toward key civil rights initiatives (especially affirmative action).

Clint Bolick, an assistant of Clarence Thomas, may have had the most significant impact on the anti-civil rights movement. Bolick laid the framework for the way elites would fight these initiatives through advocacy groups (Cokorinos 2003). He posed that groups with interest should use politics, media, and courts to attack affirmative action. This blueprint seems to be still working

today. Advocacy groups (think tanks in particular) have been quite active in fighting affirmative action on all three fronts (Carter and Lippard 2020). Some of these groups include the American Civil Rights Institute, Center for Equal Opportunity, Center for Individual Rights, Institute for Justice, and the Civil Rights Practice Groups of the Federalist Society. This counter conservative movement has also resulted in legal organizations entering the fight. Some of these groups have been instrumental in the fight against affirmative action in particular, including the Pacific Legal Foundation, Southeastern Legal Foundation, and the Mountain State Legal Foundation. These groups used legal briefs to fight against the policy in the last two affirmative-action U.S. Supreme Court cases (Fisher v. The University of Texas at Austin and Gratz/Grutter v. Bollinger).

Carter and Lippard (2020) found that think tanks, in particular, are prominent entities in arguing against affirmative action at the level of the Supreme Court. They describe the insidious role of think tanks in the political process. As opposed to specific interest groups who often attempt to use their economic prowess to protect the rights of their members, think tanks are not. Like special interest groups, think tanks are dependent on funding; thus, they turn to policy advocacy. Three socio-political factors make these groups useful in this process. One, elite individuals and groups can interject themselves in the U.S. political scene because it is an open and complex system where a war of ideas is ongoing. Two, party polarization has resulted in the inclusion of interest groups. Finally, the rise in cable and 24-hour network news channels (e.g., CNN, FOX, MSNBC) has created a niche for political experts. Accordingly, elite actors and think tanks can use their resources and the media to advocate for a particular position.

In summary, the Reagan era brought great harm to civil rights initiatives like affirmative action and reflected a grave example of whitelash against diversity. Reagan's clear color-blind plan led to the infusion of anti-civil rights political and judicial appointments that challenge any implementation of favorable policies. However, this administration also enabled a host of elite citizens, political and wealthy, to attempt to affect policy via different avenues, including advocacy groups. It is not surprising then that the number of advocacy groups that challenge various civil rights-related policies grew from around 20 in 1975 to over 200 by 1990 (Cokorinos 2003). The result of such intervention is that the Equal Protection Clause (that promises all citizens equal protection under the law) of the 14th Amendment became a color-blind mechanism that ignored the history of oppression of marginalized groups and persistent discrimination while simultaneously casting whites as victims (Carter and Lippard 2020).

This anti-civil-rights and anti-diversity movement did not end with Reagan. George H. Bush had key conservative appointments detrimental to affirmative action, including the successful nomination of Clarence Thomas to the U.S. Supreme Court. This nomination is particularly harmful to the civil rights cause because not only did Thomas hold a color-blind orientation, but he replaced civil rights stalwart, Justice Thurgood Marshall. Thomas has supported the banning of affirmative action in the last two Supreme Court cases (Fisher and Gratz/Grutter). This anti-civil rights push was also carried out by Presidents George W. Bush and Donald Trump. It was President George W. Bush who came out strongly against affirmative action (referring to it as a quota system) in the Gratz and Grutter v. Bollinger cases in 2003. While President Obama, a Democrat President, never expressed strong support for affirmative action during the Fisher v. The University of Texas at Austin cases (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011), his support seems glowing when compared to that of Donald Trump, who was elected President in 2016. Trump expressed disdain for the policy and, in leaked documents produced by the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice, pushed for applicants that would prosecute cases of race-based

discrimination in college admissions. Trump has also enlisted conservatives in his administration that maintain anti-civil rights orientations. For instance, his first Attorney General, Jeffrey Sessions, blames the flow of immigration for American job loss and increases welfare dependency. Sessions also expressed disdain for the Defense of Marriage Act and the Voting Rights Act (Sessions 2015). William Barr, another appointee for Attorney General under President Trump, supports the ban of asylum seekers and expanding border detention centers, including those that separate the children from their parents (Waheed and Tashman 2019).

At the state level, the political winds are also shifting against civil rights initiatives like affirmative action. Eight states have banned the use of affirmative action (that is, the use of race in decisions) in admissions particularly at public colleges and universities: California (1996), Washington (1998), Florida (1999), Michigan (2006), Nebraska (2008), Arizona (2010), New Hampshire (2011) and Oklahoma (2012). Colorado came close to doing the same, but the initiative to amend the state's constitution did not pass. In 1996, the state of California banned affirmative action via the passage of Proposition 209. Soon after, in 1998 and 1999, the states of Washington and Florida also voted to ban the use of affirmative action at colleges and universities (Initiative 200 and One Florida, respectively). With that being said, it is clear that the fight against affirmative action reflects a broader whitelash, where whites (and some non-whites) are attempting to push back against growing diversity and the idea of losing valued resources (e.g., seats and elite universities) to an undeserving group.

Discussion

Given the racial nature of these debates and the incendiary rhetoric used by Trump about these issues, media, and political pundits have raised concern that racism is still alive and well. Social science scholars studying prejudice, however, have not been surprised by such rhetoric and have noted that the resurgence of overt manifestations of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other "isms" is not necessarily new within the American context. These "isms' have at best only been symbolically or marginally addressed within American life, and whatever feeble attempts have only scratched the surface of these major societal injustices. Moreover, despite these efforts, the status quo of white affluence among men, in particular, has been propped up publicly and privately behind the scenes of supposed change during the Obama administration moving forward to Trump's America (see Omi and Winant 2014 [1994]).

Social scientists have described the growing but "silent" disgruntlement of white America since the 1960s. For example, Gallup Polls (see Gallagher 2008) have demonstrated that the majority of white Americans believe that racism is a thing of the past. It has had less of an effect on the life outcomes of non-white Americans since the 1960s. These polls also noted that whites believe that they are the new target of racism, where non-white groups get an advantage due to their skin color in public programs, including access to welfare and college entry. Moreover, white Americans have begun to consider the issue of immigration as a real challenge to their job security, economic prosperity, and safety from terrorism. As argued by sociologist Herbert Blumer (1958), whites perceive that their economic, political and social group position in America is threatened by ever-growing non-white populations, despite few personal experiences and overwhelming amounts of research to suggest otherwise. Thus, they feel significant threats to their economic and political livelihoods, which has led to events of whitelash to restore order to their access to privilege that has included but is not limited to markers of social mobility such as citizenship,

access to higher education, and first access to jobs and wages.

Since the 1980s, white Americans have also tended to suggest that, within any given situation, race or racism is not the problem in any sort of discrimination or mistreatment (Bobo et al. 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2003; Feagin 2010). Instead, a majority of whites have suggested that race had nothing to do with unequal treatment toward non-whites, and respect for authority and cultural depravity were keys to continued strife for many non-whites. These neoliberal arguments have come up repeatedly when discussing police brutality (e.g., Black Lives Matter v. All Lives Matter or Blue Lives Matter; see Embrick 2015a, 2015b, 2016), issues concerning Mexican immigration (see Chavez 2013; Golash-Boza 2012; Lippard 2011; 2015), and during discussions of the failure of public schools (i.e., school choice issues) (see Kozol 1991; 2005). While such reproach of overt racism is commendable and speaks to changing norms in the U.S., it also highlights the need to spread a new definition of racism. Moreover, it speaks to the alarming realities that with the abnormalities of the Trump regime may come not only the maintaining of status quo white supremacy but real throwbacks to Jim Crow racialized policies and practices.

Conclusions

The lack of insight expressed by whites has been linked to the problem of "whiteness;" the idea that many whites do not see the privileges provided to them by being associated with the white "race" while concomitantly ignoring the lack of privilege granted to marginalized groups based on their racial classification. Some scholars have attempted to situate whites into the broader societal context of white supremacy (Fredrickson 1982) or racialized social systems (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2001, 2003). For example, the 2003 book, <u>Whiteout: The Continuing Significance of Racism</u>, edited by Ashley "Woody" Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, represents one of the earlier attempts by sociologists to show how white racial attitudes have led to efforts to challenge debates concerning race in the U.S as a matter of social inequality and a charge for social movements. But, how might we best understand structural racism, whiteness, and white attitudes in the Trump Era? And are current racial attitudes and actions just old perfume in new bottles, or does the abnormal racial and political extremism of Trumpism much more alarming to those of us hoping for racial progress and equality?

Old Perfume in a New Bottle?

One the one hand, based on our arguments, we see the Trumpian calls for border walls, Muslim bans, and a return to an America that was "great" during the racially segregated-1950s as not new but, in fact, well-established tactics of white supremacy. While this article only has room to provide two examples of whitelash, the actual list of ideologies, events, and people involved with reinforcing white supremacy in the U.S. is almost endless and daunting. Scholars examining the impacts of President Trump and his policies on race relations and social justice efforts will need to consider how backlash is key to keeping the racial status quo in check and ongoing. More importantly, scholars will need to tie together how whitelash can be legitimately argued as "necessary and normal procedures for Americans" to secure power, wealth, and privilege for white Americans despite minority cries for equal access.

Indeed, we contend that racism is but one way in which dominant groups in American society hold on to their dominance. As noted by Susan Faludi (1991), the backlash against women's rights

has been pervasive in holding back and shaping gender equality in the U.S. This argument would also be evident in discussions on how equality has been stymied for other important movements by deploying backlash tactics in America. The simple point here is that scholars must note the moments in which ideologies, institutions, and individuals rally to strike at chances of social change towards equality. These moments of backlash, or when it comes to racism—whitelash, have been and will continue to be mobilized to secure privilege in its most hegemonic forms. As such, ideologies, as well as broader structural barriers (e.g., organizational policies and procedures) that shut down change and movement to equality, should be the focus on research as we move forward. It should also be noted that these persistent and discriminatory ideologies should not be normal in a country founded on democracy and individual freedoms.

This is NOT Normal!

There are very few who would argue that Trump is a typical "business as usual" conservative U.S. President. Trump's hardheadedness and consistent refusals to tell the truth, for example, are examples of how he deviates from past Presidents. So too makes his demand for total Trump loyalty, regardless of what crimes, misdemeanors, or breaking of basic social or moral norms further set him apart, however, many would argue not for the better. The abnormality of the Trump regime exacerbates whitelash, further deepening racial roots in a society historically rife with white supremacist notions and practices. For instance, one oddity that stands out consistently is Trump's vendetta toward Obama policies or most things currently or historically associated with his predecessor. It is noteworthy that during his time in office, Trump has consistently rolled back liberal public policies and laws to promote diversity put in place by Obama, perhaps indicative of Trump and his voting base's hatred toward people of color, but most likely a reflection of his and others white supremacist attitudes and understanding of the racial and social order. In essence, this reflects Trump's constant vigilance in erasing any legacies of Obama that would thwart white males supposed rightful position at the top of society's echelon.

Trump's abnormal fixation on Obama (as well as Hillary Clinton) is a guiding motivator that fuels anger and hatred among his base, but also in U.S. society, in general. The result is not just the lack of questioning by the public to Trump's racist regime, but a buy-in by many constituents who believe these racist actions and politics to be okay and justified. We can see this in the silence that followed Trump's announcement of his "Deal of the Century Plan" to bring peace to the Israeli/Palestinian conflicts, yet failed to include Palestinian voices in the deliberations. We can see this pattern in Trump's refusal to deracialize the Covid-19 pandemic, choosing instead to refer to the virus as the Wuhan (or Chinese) virus. It is also noteworthy that, in the face of statistics suggesting that non-whites are more likely to die from complications due to the coronavirus, this administration continues to back away from any real public policies aimed at medically and financially helping the patients and their families. As such, the Trump era can be seen as abnormal in that he departs from traditional political norms in ways that are racialized, and that could further promote a broader whitelash against change and the cause of white supremacy. Most importantly, Trump's rhetoric and policies depart and destroy the liberalization of America that was started in the 1960s but now has become almost a dream today.

Endnotes

1. While there are a few definitions of Trumpism, most notably the use of the term as urban slang, we define it here as the philosophy, politics, and language used by President Donald Trump.

2. In response to the surprising result of Trump's win in the election, Jones' remarks reflected a general sentiment of some people—that Trump's victory was fueled, in some part, by a backlash against the perception of a changing country that would aim to promote more diversity. Moreover, it was a backlash against the election of a Black President.

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