“A Troll at the Bridge”: Trump, Trumpism, and White Identity Politics

written by Francis Shor | March 3, 2018

The rise and rule of Donald Trump embodies much that is disturbingly new from his almost daily narcissistic rants on Twitter to his overt racist, misogynist, and xenophobic public pronouncements. On the other hand, there are historic roots to many of the positions articulated by Trump during his presidential campaign and adopted during his presidency.

Thus, as argued by Naomi Klein, “Trump is not a rupture at all, but rather a culmination – the logical end point – of a great many dangerous stories our culture has been telling for a very long time. That greed is good. That the market rules. That money is what matters in life. That white men are better than the rest. That the natural world is there for us to pillage. That the vulnerable deserve their fate and the one percent deserve their golden towers. That anything public or commonly held is sinister and not worth protecting. That we are surrounded by danger and should only look after our own.”[1]

It is these “dangerous stories” anchored in material conditions and ideological orientations that constitute the phenomenon known as Trumpism. In order to illuminate further the contexts out of which Trumpism emerged I want to highlight several overlapping domains from the socio-economic to the socio-cultural to the socio-psychological. Then, I will consider how these domains informed Trumpism as an electoral and governmental project, especially, but not exclusively, as a representation of white identity politics. Finally, I will assess the forms of resistance that have challenged Trumpism and what the future of democracy might be given the persistence of white supremacy.

One cannot separate Trumpism from the reign of the neoliberal order that has marked capitalism in the United States and around the world since the 1970’s. This rendering of neoliberalism follows the insights of Thomas Piketty on the growth of inequality inherent in contemporary global capital and David Harvey on how capital, through a variety of fixes, has continued to accumulate through dispossession. Citing the “unholy alliance between state powers and the predatory aspects of finance capitalism,” Harvey identifies this variant of neoliberalism as “vulture capitalism.”[2] Further intrinsic to neoliberalism are those policies that are particularly, although not exclusively, embedded in the Republican political project since the Reaganism and now “accelerated” by the Trump presidency: “deregulating restrictions on corporate power, cutting taxes for the rich, expanding the military, privatizing public education, suppressing civil liberties, waging a war against dissent, treating Black communities as war zones, and dismantling all public goods.”[3]

Another mechanism in the “dismantling all public goods” is the way in which vulture capitalism has imposed forced bankruptcy on cities, such as Detroit, and countries, such as Greece. By seizing public assets, vulture capitalism rewards those financial institutions that hide behind the ideological cloak of “market fundamentalism.” In turn, this hollowing out of public treasuries by private enterprises further exacerbates the income inequality that is a trademark of contemporary capital.

Such inequality has a profound impact beyond just the socio-economic domain. According to Sasha Abramsky, "the more unequal our society becomes, the more common understandings…cease to function. At a certain point the bonds of empathy collapse, to be replaced by suspicion and fear."[4]

Before exploring more in depth the suspicion and fear that demarcate the socio-psychological domain, I want to underscore how the socio-economic order of neoliberalism bleeds into the socio-cultural domain. In its "obsession with commodities, productivity, and disposability" neoliberalism engenders "consumerist logics that travel far beyond shopping centers and the workplace and find their way into personal relationships…Human values of kindness, love, compassion, and the need for communion with others are eventually reduced to mere afterthoughts in the wake of our market driven culture."[5] In commenting on the popularity of "reality" television series like "Survivor" that foreground the devaluation of "trust, compassion and mercy," Zygmunt Bauman opines that "if you are not tougher and less scrupulous than all the others, you will be done in by them, with or without remorse."[6]

This social Darwinist code of ethics (if, indeed, one can call it ethics) certainly was at the root of Donald Trump's television personality on the reality show, "The Apprentice." Having built his "reputation on insults, humiliations, and a discourse of provocation and hate," Trump translated his cultural capital achieved through television into political capital during the Republican primaries and beyond.[7] As part of a media culture and the Society of the Spectacle, television, in particular, has lent itself to the trivialization and corruption of discourse censured by media critics like Neil Postman and Thomas Frank. Television and social media have become breeding grounds for what Henry Giroux calls "civil illiteracy" which "mistakes opinion for informed arguments, (and) erases collective memory." Giroux notes that the election of Trump "is a case study in how politics has been emptied of any viable meaning and civic illiteracy has been normalized…His victory makes clear that ignorance rather than reason, emotion rather than informed judgment, and the threat of violence rather than critical exchange appear to have more currency in the age of civic collapse."[8]

On another level, as Cornel West contends, there is a critical link between Trump's victory and prior connections of both the Republican and Democratic Party establishments to an "imperialist meltdown." While Trump is a "sign of our spiritual bankruptcy – all spectacle and no substance, all narcissism and no empathy, all appetite and greed and no wisdom and maturity, his triumph flows from the implosion of a Republican party establishment beholden to big money, big military and big scapegoating of vulnerable peoples of color, LGBTQ peoples, immigrants, Muslims, and women.…It also flows from a Democratic party establishment beholden to big money, big military, and the clever deployment of peoples of color, LGBTQ peoples, immigrants, Muslims, and women to hide and conceal the lies and crimes of neoliberal policies here and abroad; and from a corporate media establishment that aided and abetted Trump owing to high profits and revenues."[9]

Another factor for Trumpism within the socio-cultural domain is anti-intellectualism. While anti-intellectualism has been part of US culture for some time, as historian Richard Hofstadter discussed in his classic work of the 1950's, Anti-intellectualism in American Life, more recent analyses of its persistence, especially among religious fundamentalist, bears out the connections between Trumpism and the new wave of anti-intellectualism.[10] Even in the face of Trump's clear disdain for the supposed tenets of religious fundamentalism, it is not surprising that he garnered 81% of the evangelical vote in the 2016 presidential election. Furthermore, as public education has been eroded and diminished by the neoliberal state and religious fundamentalists, the antipathy to education, especially at the college level, has grown. A recent Pew research poll indicates that only 36% of Republicans believe that colleges "do more good than harm."

Of course, there is a significant class cultural component to this antagonism to college education and the role of elite professionals. While the costs for many working class families for high education

has become prohibitive, the belief in the value of such education has diminished. Moreover, as Joan Williams and Arlie Hochschild remind us in their studies of the white working class, the cultural wars, stoked by right-wing media and politicians, take aim not at the financial elite but at supposed arrogant professionals who disparage and talk down to white workers.[11]

As the hidden injuries and humiliations built into the class cultural system have taken their toll on significant segments of the white working class, the increase of fear, anger, and resentment have opened up the political space for demagogues like Trump. "Primed to fear a long list of despised 'others' by endless exposure to sensational cable television news reports, to social media, and to talk radio, a critical mass of voters in such an anxious age will throw their lot in with demagogic figures who pander to their anxieties."[12] This socio-psychological domain is especially awash with racial resentments that have been nurtured by politicians and pundits since the so-called age of racial backlash under Nixon and revamped in the so-called post-racial age of Obama. As argued by Henry Giroux: "In an age of armed ignorance, racism is back both as a spectacle and as a driving force of American politics and has once again come to life as a result of a racist populist discourse that leaves nothing hidden in its blitzkrieg of rhetorical hate, bigotry, and invective."[13]

Of course, the long trajectory of racism, nativism, and xenophobia in American politics almost guarantees demagogic appeals, especially during times of economic and social dislocation. Indeed, tracing those persistent currents back into the nineteenth century, as historians like David Roediger, Alexander Saxton, and Ronald Takaki, among others, have done, invariably raises questions about historically-constructed racial identities. While seemingly invisible for much of its history, given its normalized hegemonic rule, white racial identity has become more visible as it has assumed a more "aggrieved" posture. According to Mike King: "Aggrieved whiteness is a white identity politics aimed at maintaining white socio-political hegemony through challenging efforts to combat actual material racial inequality, while supporting heavily racialized investments in policing, prisons, and the military, and positing a narrative of antiwhite racial oppression loosely rooted in an assortment of racialized threats."[14]

White identity politics is, thus, a historical and social construct that is oppressive when premised, either consciously or unconsciously, on race-based hierarchies of power mediated, in turn, by class, gender, sexuality, geographic, and national identity privileges. Further, as noted by Ruth Frankenberg, "whiteness as a site of privilege is not absolute but rather cross-cut by a range of other axes of relative advantage or subordination; these do not erase or render irrelevant race privilege but rather inflect or modify it."[15] Unlike the representations of white supremacist hate groups, like the KKK and neo-Nazis, "white identity politics is packaged much more decorously and clearly part of mainstream opinion."[16] On the other hand, while Trump's appeal to white identity politics clearly contained white supremacist tropes, not all of those who voted for Trump did so out of a sharing of that white supremacy.

Certainly, in attempting to account for Trump's electoral appeals to the white working class, one is confronted with a number of contradictions. When one considers the loss of manufacturing jobs, especially in small manufacturing towns of the Rustbelt, it is not surprising that in their desperation, significant numbers of white workers voted for Trump in the 2016 presidential election. From the perspective of one analyst: "A generation of working-class stagnation and political decline (deunionization, deindustrialization, social service cuts, shifting the tax burden of the rich and onto the better paid segments of the working class) has symbiotically coincided with a nativist white politics of cacerality and class hatred for the racialized poor who have been hit the hardest by these political-economic shifts."[17] Furthermore, "disenchanted by… a political and economic culture of exploitative greed and gridlock," these white working class, Rustbelt voters were responsive to Trump's denunciations of unfair trade deals, like NAFTA and the TPP, and corporate and Washington corruption.[18] The white nationalist mythology embedded in these campaign promises,

especially under the slogan of “making America great again” also was compensatory for the loss of economic and political status at the local, national, and international level. Although racial resentment was a major factor in Trump’s electoral victory, for many white workers their “quest for recognition in the context of their downward mobility” was also key.[19]

On the other hand, the vast majority of Trump voters, coming from suburban and rural locations, were either upper middle class, self-employed, or non-unionized workers. Furthermore, according to the Pew Research Center, Trump’s advantage among those whites without a college degree was almost forty percentage points, the largest margin since the 1980 exit polls. While Trump’s faux populism resonated with some of these voters, others, having bought into the constant Republican attacks on public sector workers, consisting of large numbers of women and people of color, constituted the white majority of men and women who gave Trump his electoral, but not popular vote, victory. This white majority was aided by years of elaborate voting restrictions that purged African-Americans and Latinos and erected strict and repressive voter ID laws. In Wisconsin, alone, a state won by Trump by around 23,000 votes, an estimated 200,000 voters were purged from the election rolls.[20] Added to the purges and disenfranchisement of ex-felons of color, fewer blacks and more whites comprised the 2016 electorate.[21]

Once Trump became president, he lost little time in enacting a reactionary Republican agenda. That reactionary agenda, cultivated over decades and represented by Trump’s Vice President, Mike Pence, was immediately evident in a number of executive orders signed by Trump. Among these was the re-institution of the so-called “gag rule” which eliminated any funding for international agencies and NGO’s that include among their family services abortion, even if only as an option. According to the World Health Organization the prior funding policy saved an estimated 289,000 women from pregnancy or childbirth related ills. One NGO dealing with family planning projected that the loss of income would result in 2.1 million unsafe abortions. Another example of this misogyny can be found in Trump’s effort to eliminate the Violence Against Women programs in the Department of Justice. Programs ranging from funding for local rape crisis centers to the National Domestic Violence Hotline to educational seminars on sexual assault have been demolished by an executive order, promoted and supported by the Attorney General, Jefferson Sessions III, and a Republican-dominated Congress.

What Trump has also undertaken with the termination of the TPP and the re-negotiating of NAFTA suggests an opportunistic populist posturing, albeit within the confines of his white nationalist agenda. Meeting with certain labor leaders from the building trades for discussions about infrastructure investment suggests that he may be following Nixon’s gambit with construction workers as a way to drive a wedge into the white working class. Indeed, with much of labor still wedded to the fossil fuel economy, Trump can further co-opt this sector with continuing support for the Keystone pipeline and other projects like his fantasy of a massive wall along the border with Mexico.

Of course, embedded in the reference to the wall is a white supremacist appeal to stopping so-called illegal immigration, especially of Latinos attempting to escape from dire economic circumstances and/or massive violence. While Trump is a catalyst for and conveyor of such white supremacy, that ideology may not be explicitly shared by those who voted for him. However, the sense of “aggrieved whiteness” that informs many whites who mistakenly believe that jobs are being stolen away by Latino immigrants does feed the demands for border “security.” In addition, Trump’s Islamophobia, shared by many in the right-wing Republican base, has been particularly evident in all of the attempted bans on refugees coming from predominantly Islamic countries. On the other hand, a much smaller percentage of that base and Republican Party elites share Trump’s apologies for neo-Nazi attacks in Charlottesville for which he was almost universally rebuked.

Nonetheless, when one considers the composition of Trump's Cabinet, consisting of billionaires, militarists, and know-nothings, there is little that separates Trump's politics and policies from all of the constituencies of the Republican Party. From vulture capitalists like Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin and Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross to the militarists like Secretary of Defense "Mad Dog" Mattis and Homeland Security Chief John Kelly to fossil fuel advocates like Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and EPA Secretary Scott Pruitt to religious fundamentalists like Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and HEW Secretary Ben Carson, the Trump Cabinet touches all of the bases of the reactionary Republican agenda. Indeed, as pointed out by Naomi Klein, the Cabinet is representative of the "political and economic project" of Trumpism in government: "the deconstruction of the regulatory state; a full-bore attack on the welfare state and social services (rationalized in part through bellicose racial fearmongering and attacks on women for exercising their rights); the unleashing of domestic fossil fuel frenzy (which requires the sweeping aside of climate science and the gagging of large parts of the government bureaucracy); and a civilizational war against immigrants and "radical Islamic terrorism" (with expanding domestic and foreign theaters)."[22]

Throughout his first year in office, Trump has used the aptly named "bully pulpit," greatly expanded through the deployment of Twitter, to mobilize racial and class resentments of his shrinking base. In particular, Trump's public denunciations of protesting NFL players, led by ex-Forty-Niner's quarterback, Colin Kaepernick, targets a league of well-paid mostly African-American players (estimated to be at seventy percent). Trump rarely misses an opportunity to launch either racially-coded or explicit racial verbal assaults on people of color, whether those in the Black Lives Matter movement or dark-skinned immigrants, in the case of the latter, in particular, forwarding outrageous white supremacist conspiracy theories. The most recent egregious racist remark is Trump's reference in a meeting with lawmakers to Haiti and certain African countries as "shitholes."[23]

Certainly, Trump's deviation into bizarre white supremacist tropes only resonates with a hard-core racist right wing. Moreover, as Mike Davis argues, "Trumpism, whatever its temporary successes cannot unify millennials economic distress with that of older white workers because it counterposes geriatric white privilege as the touchstone of all its policies…The real opportunity for transformational political change belongs to the Sanderistas but only to the extent that they remain rebels against the neoliberal Democratic establishment and support the resistance in the streets."[24] The resistance in the streets has been impressive from Trump's opening day in office when millions around the country, led by a revitalized women's movement, marched in massive numbers in Washington, DC and cities around the country. Following these demonstrations, many then poured into airports protesting Trump's travel bans and onto the frozen fields around Standing Rock. Emerging from all of these mobilizations were the outlines of multi-racial alliances, building on other movements like BLM, that have challenged Trump, if not yet Trumpism.

Nonetheless, there still remains the problem of white identity politics, in either its explicit or implicit form. As noted by Joel Olson, "Today there is still the white problem – its expectations, its power, its solidarity, its imagination. Even after the civil rights movement, whiteness stands at the path to a more democratic society like a troll at the bridge. The political task…is to chase the troll away, not to ignore it or invite it to the multicultural table."[25] Unless or until white identity politics is confronted head-on, little can be expected from a resistance that shies away from the troll at the bridge.

---

[1] Naomi Klein, *No is not Enough: Resisting Trump's Shock Politics and Winning the World we Need* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 257-8.

[2] David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 136. For Harvey's analysis of "accumulation by dispossession," see *ibid*., 137-82. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[3] Henry A. Giroux, *The Public in Peril: Trump and the Menace of American Authoritarianism* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 9.

[4] Sasha Abramsky, *Jumping at Shadows: The Triumph of Fear and the End of the American Dream* (New York: Nation Books, 2017), 202.

[5] Ejike Obinene, "Ideas? The Debate Over Cornel West's Critique of Ta-Nehisi Coates," *Truthout*, January 4, 2018
http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/43100-too-terrified-to-enter-an-arena-of-ideas-the-debate-over-cornel-west-s-critique-of-ta-nehisi-coates

[6] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 88-9.

[7] Giroux, *The Public in Peril,* 151-2.

[8] *Ibid*., 197 & 90.

[9] Cornel West, "America is Spiritually Bankrupt. We Must Fight Back." *The Guardian*, January 14, 2018
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/14/america-is-spiritually-bankrupt-we-must-fight-back-together

[10] See Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: Vintage, 2009).

[11] Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016); and Joan C. Williams, *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017).

[12] Abramsky, *Jumping at Shadows*, 15. See also, Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 316.

[13] Giroux, *The Public in Peril*, 142-3. For an exploration of the contradictions of post-racial politics in the Obama era that locates the longer political history of racism, see Desmond S. King and Rogers M. Smith, *Still a House Divided: Race and Politics in Obama's America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Thomas J. Sugrue, *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). For an inclusive overview of racism in the United States, see Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations*,

third ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014). For an in-depth analysis of the expansion of white racial resentments during and after the Obama presidency, see Michael Tesler, *Post-Racial or Most-Racial: Race and Politics in the Obama Era* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016). On the links between Obama's neoliberalism and Trump's neo-fascism, see West, "America is Spiritually Bankrupt."

[14] Mike King, "Aggrieved Whiteness: White Identity Politics and Modern American Racial Formation," *Abolition Journal*, May 4, 2017 https://abolitionjournal.org/aggrieved-whiteness-white-identity-politics-and-modern-american-racial-formation

[15] Ruth Frankenberg, *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 76. On the historic "privileging" of white identity politics, see Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005); and George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment of Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

[16] Ashley Jardina, "White Identity Politics Isn't Just About White Supremacy," *Washington Post,* August 16, 2017.

[17] King, "Aggrieved Whiteness."

[18] Justin Gest, *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 191. For the most developed critical analysis of Trump's appeal to white workers, see Mike Davis, "The Great God Trump and the White Working Class," *Jacobin*, February 7, 2017. Also, see Caroline Freund, "The Working Class's Role in Trump's Election," *Vox*, June 1, 2017.

[19] Michele Lamont, et. al. "Trump's Electoral Speeches and His Appeal to the American White Working Class," *The British Journal of Sociology*, 68 (November 2017), 153-80. Also, see Glenn Perusek, "Class, Race, and Political Strategy in the Rust Belt," *Stansbury Forum,* May 30, 2017. http://stansburyforum.com/class-race-and-political-strategy-in-the-rust-belt

[20] Ari Berman, "Rigged: How Voter Suppression Threw Wisconsin to Trump," *Mother Jones* (Nov/Dec 2017) < http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/10/voter-suppression-wisconsin-election-2016>

[21] Bernard Fraga, *et. al.,* "Why Did Trump Win?," *Washington Post*, May 8, 2017 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/05/08/why-did-trump-win-more-whites-and-fewer-blacks-than-normal-actually-voted/?utm_term=.fae50adcc591

[22] Klein, *No is Not Enough,* 5-6. For additional comments on Trump's Cabinet, see Giroux, *The Public in Peril*, 182-5.

[23] Karine Jean-Pierre, "Trump's Racism," *Common Dreams,* January 12, 2018 https://www.commondreams.org/views/2018/01/12/problem-isnt-just-trumps-racist-its-he-keeps-acting-his-racism For the historical roots and contemporary expressions of the white supremacist xenophobia embraced by Trump, see Jane Coaston, "The Scary Ideology Behind Trump's Immigration Instincts," *Vox*, January 18, 2018 https://www.vox.com/2018/1/18/16897358/racism-donald-trump-immigration

[24] Davis, "The Great God Trump and the White Working Class."

[25] Joel Olsen, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 37.