

Trump's Temerism

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The night of the penultimate presidential debate I was at a screening of the Brazilian film *Aquarius*, which tells the story of a woman fighting a corrupt development company to remain in her apartment building. During the Q&A session with the director and force-of-nature actress Sonia Braga, a handful of demonstrators stood up, silently, holding “Fora Temer” signs to protest the government that has illegally installed itself in Brazil. Within sixty seconds Lincoln Center had the NYPD to escort them out, against Braga’s objections, and the Q&A continued with police watching from the edges of aisles.



Brazil’s illegal government, led by interim president Michel Temer, was able to impose itself on the country through a wave of discontent stemming from two things: 1) legitimate anger about the massive corruption of the ruling parties, which is endemic, but for which the Workers Party and its leader Dilma Rousseff was especially scapegoated; and 2) the racist conflation of official corruption with perceived “special benefits” given to black people, the poor, and the marginal under Workers Party governments. The media and judicial system helped oil the putchists’ plot by using their respective powers to investigate, jail, and denounce wrongdoers along baldly partisan lines.

Scandalously, President Temer has admitted that he and his cronies impeached Rousseff because they disagreed with her economic program; this is entirely separate from the formal charges for which she was removed, but apparently this thin veneer of legalism is no longer necessary for the new government to complete its aims.

Viewers of the debate I skipped for *Aquarius* witnessed quite a Temer-ism coming from the Republican Party candidate. Donald Trump, speaking on national television, promised to jail Hillary Clinton if elected, throwing a juicy piece of red meat to his most hardcore supporters. In the next debate he pushed this line, asserting that the election is “rigged” and refusing to say whether he would accept the results if he loses.

There is one key difference between Trump and Temer: Temer has the unanimous backing of domestic and international capitalists. Trump has their near-unanimous revulsion.

Yet the narratives of corruption they peddle and the antidotes they prescribe are strikingly similar.

In Brazil, members of the self-installed government are themselves implicated in corruption and are using their newfound power to push legislation that would protect them from the serious charges that could be leveled against them. If they had only mobilized anger against official corruption they would have made themselves into victims. But very wisely they managed to tie grievances around corruption and economic dysfunction to the “threat” posed by the lower and browner sections of Brazilian society. Policies like affirmative action for Brazil’s black and indigenous populations instituted under the Workers Party were sold in the right-wing narrative as a symptom of the PT’s corruption and clientelism, in the same family as vote buying. The Right took an anxious middle class, worried about Brazil’s status in a globalized economy, and turned their ire towards the PT as the official representative of the working class. Racial resentment, and misogyny toward the easier target of Dilma Rousseff, was helpful for creating the political and social frenzy needed to unseat a

democratically elected president who has never been convicted of corruption.

In the United States, there is some kernel of (distorted) truth to Trump's charges.

It's clear that Hillary Clinton, like the PT, has behaved unethically and without transparency. It's possible that she's abused her and her husband's office to further private ends, especially related to their foundation. She is unapologetically linked to some most notoriously shady foreign policy ventures of the United States. And she's a standard-bearer for a bipartisan political establishment that's used decades of dirty tricks, from gerrymandering to voter disenfranchisement to ballot restrictions, to effectively remove average voters from decision-making and create mafia-like one-party strangleholds on local politics from district to district.

But the "Jail Hillary" movement isn't just about that. It's nearly inextricable from the Birther movement; it's been nourished on years of paranoia about creeping Sharia law and Obama's secret ISIS ties; and, like a dog who refuses to let go of the stray chicken bone it found in the gutter, still cultivates resentful fantasies about Reagan's "welfare queens" eating lobster dinners, having too many children, and shucking-and-jiving their way into Harvard under the Democratic Party's largesse.

As Charlie Post writes, "The Bush and Obama administrations' bailouts of banks, the auto industry, and some homeowners was the catalyst for the radicalization of the Republican electorate. The Tea Party began as an alliance between a grassroots rebellion of older, white, suburban small businesspeople, professionals and managers, and elements of the capitalist class. The middle-class ranks of the Tea Party railed against 'corporate welfare' and 'bailouts for undeserving' homeowners, in particular people of color who held sub-prime mortgages."

That groundswell, led by Koch-funded politicians all too happy to redirect anger over the bailouts towards black people attempting to keep their homes, became the basis for the Trump campaign.

This politics gestures to the real corruption and indifference to ordinary peoples' lives that characterizes the political establishment, while suggesting that that establishment's strings are held by the poorest and most marginalized of society.

The reason why Temer is now in charge of the fifth largest economy in the world while Trump is undergoing the most fantastic political implosion in the world is because Trump veered off the Koch brothers' script. He spoke against free trade. He advocated a radical anti-immigrant stance that would endanger capitalists' access to a precarious low-wage workforce. He displayed a general irreverence for the foreign-policy priorities of every major section of capital.

The GOP establishment is invested in Trump's meltdown and it's likely we'll see a raft of apologetics and platitudes about preserving American democracy from conservative figures in the coming days, just as we've been subjected to vales of crocodile tears over Trumpian "hate." But they don't actually want to banish either the racial resentment or authoritarian tendencies of his base. They just want them as junior partners to a more skilled, and loyal, leadership, just as Temer maintains the fascist demagogue Jair Bolsonaro as a junior partner of his project.

The Democratic Party, on the other hand, is incapable of responding to this politics. It will continue to insist that all the charges against HRC are baseless, strawmen for the GOP's misogyny. This is half true; some of the accusations are substantive, though the misogyny is inescapable. But denial will only feed voters' perceptions that a powerful establishment is lined up to protect their own and that the system is rigged against them. When Hillary Clinton enters the Oval Office, the conspiracy theorists will get to work disseminating narratives about how the election was stolen. The politics of

“Jail Hillary” are one of resentment that thrive, rather than subside, under conditions of rejection and defeat.

What they dissolve under is serious class-based politics; one that invests the white working class in a social-democratic platform that addresses their needs *alongside* those of people of color and immigrants. Many people argue that poor whites are so irrational that they would pass this up to preserve the racial status quo. This is based on little evidence since no one, save Bernie Sanders, and especially not the Democratic Party, has actually tried to reach red-state whites with such a program in over half a decade. Such people have given up on politics at the ground level; they are terrified to mount a grassroots counter-insurgency against the Right’s claim on this constituency and deferential to a wonkish Beltway mode of winning elections that involves lots of redistricting, narrowing of voting bases, and polling predictions.

The Left needs to make this intervention not to protect Hillary Rodham Clinton or because we care so much about white workers’ feelings, but because this election has awakened a section of the radical right to the idea of using the levers of state power to exact political revenge. At the moment this sentiment is in the hands of an incompetent, and doomed, campaign. But it could be in the hands of an American Temer.