

ARTICULATING TRUMPISM

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The liberal strategy of simply exposing Trump's lies, pointing to his preposterously unscripted oratory, and hoping to convey some sort of "truth" as antidote to his base misses the point. Trump's brand of populism has sutured "the people" to the interests of big capital.

STRATEGIC MENDACITY

From cable news stations to the *New York Times*, mainstream media criticism of Trump is rooted in exposing his administration's lies. In early February, White House adviser Kellyanne Conway appeared on CNN. Jake Tapper grew irate as she refused to admit to a number of deliberately crafted falsehoods: multiple references to a massacre that never actually happened, completely fabricated murder rates, Trump's claim that American media do not cover terror attacks, and countless others.

The following week at a press conference, Trump continued the pattern. He insisted that he won more electoral college votes than any president since Reagan. When a member of the press corps pointed out that this was patently untrue, and that Obama, Bush, and Clinton had all achieved higher counts, Trump played it off as a ridiculous criticism. As he continued to rehearse a number of obvious untruths, bloggers and journalists had a field day, tarring him as "high," "racist," and "batshit crazy." Here was a thin-skinned president who couldn't take routine criticism from cable news contributors, let alone a random assortment of celebrities. Obviously this would affect his approval rating.

This is the problem: these media outlets refuse to actually empathize with his supporters in the sense of attempting to inhabit their subject positions. The liberal academic response to Trump's election has been to promote books like Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land*. While this is hardly the fault of Hochschild, the tendency among academics and liberal intellectuals has been to misread her analysis of empathy as an injunction to communicate with Trump supporters, effectively convincing them that they have something like false consciousness. An alternative has been to anoint J. D. Vance, author of the memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*, as the pope of the rustbelt. But rather than actually trying to empathize with Trump's base, liberal cosmopolitans — precisely those figures they most detest — read these texts as novelties, exoticizing their subjects and refusing to understand the link between Trump's populist strategies and his consistent support in large sections of the country.

It is not *despite* Trump's lies that his supporters back him; we might go so far as to say it is because of them. What Trump's campaign has done in a matter of months is remarkable. The discourse of "fake news" emerged following the alleged Russian hacking scandal, in which dubious headlines were widely dis-

tributed on social media, frequently originating from Russian sources. This was of course nothing new. Clickbait from the likes of Infowars and Breitbart was an admitted source of information for Trump, whether it was his insistence that Obama was not an American citizen or his claims that Muslims in New York cheered the demolition of the Twin Towers on 9/11. But here's what's so remarkable: within weeks of the term "fake news" entering into popular usage, Trump's camp had already repackaged the term as the deceitful strategy of his adversaries. In other words, if the very concept was devised to describe potential Russian interference on Trump's behalf, he's completely transformed its meaning.

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Now "fake news" is primarily used to describe any media reports Trump doesn't like. When Democrats hear his bizarre rants against the media, they dismiss him as an irritable buffoon who isn't competent to govern. Their critique is largely couched in the framework of a rule-bound formalism tied to the Democrats' technocratic approach to politics. For the Democrats, the problem isn't that the DNC is rigid, anti-democratic, and out-of-touch; it's that Russians may've hacked our election. It's not that Jeff Sessions is a troglodyte racist; it's that he lied under oath. The official opposition appears more concerned with preserving some de-



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gree of decorum, not least of which is a presumed sanctity of the office, than they do with substantive political critiques of the Trumpist project. Indeed, there is nowhere for workers to turn at this point but into the arms of the populist wing of the GOP. Hillary Clinton disdainfully refused to visit union halls in key battleground states, seemingly unworried about the widespread perception that she was closer to Goldman Sachs and J P Morgan than the UAW or AFSCME.

Trump knows exactly what he's doing when he violates decorum, and this is where Democrats and the corporate media miss the point. When NPR interviewed a few Trump supporters following the most recent press conference, a 69 year-old Mississippi resident's response was representative: "I'm sick of them making up stories. You know, we're intelligent people. We can make up our own mind on whether they're telling the truth." So what's going on? In the press conference, Trump was quite clear: "The people get it [but] much of the media doesn't get it." Note the opposition of "people" to "media." He continued, "Unfortunately, much of the media in Washington, D.C., along with New York, Los Angeles in particular, speaks not for the people, but for the special interests and for those profiting off a very, very obviously broken system. The press has become so dishonest that if we don't talk about, we are doing a tremendous disservice to the American people."

Even if Trump is consistently caught fabricating various facts and statistics, his supporters view fact-construction as occurring in a field of power organized between two poles. On the one hand, "the people" are aligned with their representative Trump; on the other, "special interests" associated with major urban centers and most of the corporate media, the Democratic Party, and the establishment corners of the GOP continue to lie to "the people" in order to retain control. Given the mendacious presidencies of both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, as well as the apparent insincerity of Democratic candidates like Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, this isn't such a stretch. When a party that purports to represent the American working class spends decades championing unbridled trade liberalization, the charterization of the public school system, and the destruction of the social safety net, it's no wonder that critics of the status quo don't look to Democrats for an alternative. Hillary Clinton represented a cosmopolitan, city-dwelling business class seemingly more interested in giving speeches on Wall Street than meeting with unions in key battleground states. Her very comportment screamed elite and aloof, and the Democrats weren't deceiving anybody.

WHO ARE THE PEOPLE?

Meanwhile, Trump continued to take aim at the media, accusing them of distorting the truth. "But we're not going to let it happen," he remarked, "because I'm here again, to take my message straight to the people." Trump would bypass the established system, interpellating "the people" in the process. This is precisely the project that political theorist Ernesto Laclau described as populism. Populist strategy relies on what he called a "double articulation." First and foremost, populists construct a discourse around an antagonism between "the people" and what, borrowing from Poulantzas, he called "the power bloc."¹ As Trump's team would have it, this group includes Democrats and establishment Republicans, academics and cosmopolitan intellectuals, Wall Street, and the corporate media,

all coming together in the figure of “the swamp.” The next day he repeated the refrain, tweeting, “The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!”

“The people” isn’t equivalent to the category “voters” or “Americans.” Note Trump’s consistent strategy of denationalizing anybody who might oppose him. Obama is the most notorious example, of course, with his exclusion from “the people” through repeated allegations that his birth certificate was forged. Clinton is excluded by virtue of her presumed criminality. Her use of a private email server was no less secure than Trump’s holding of top secret meetings in the Mar-a-Lago dining room, but by repeatedly asserting that her actions were “crooked” and insisting that we — again, interpellating “the people” — “lock her up,” she too was excluded from this category.

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But the move is of course not limited to politicians. Entire categories are expelled from “the people” by rhetorically stripping them of their membership in the nation. This is why nationalism is so essential to Trumpism: the entire enterprise revolves around protecting the rightful space of the “the people,” which is of course an imagined national territory. If “the people” is read as equivalent to the nation, or at least occupying its territorial space,

the project of “making America great again” requires expelling “enemies of the people” from this territory. (Despite repeatedly using this phrase, Trump does not appear aware of its historical ties to Stalin.) Muslims are the most obvious example, collectively represented as a constituting a monolithic terrorist threat to the domestic sphere. From his campaign promise of a Muslim ban through the travel ban imposed on seven predominately Muslim nationalities, this is an active project of protecting a sanctified private life from imagined violent encroachment. Black crime and Black Lives Matter are likewise assimilated into a uniform figure, represented as an attack on police, who (*pace* Giuliani & co.) are themselves represented as a key preserve of American national power and as defenders of “the people” against domestic threats. This takes on spatial significance when Trump promises “the people” he will protect “our inner cities,” a phrase he deploys regularly, apparently unaware that city centers have seen a secular decline in violent crime since the turn of the millenium. Latinx are stripped of their membership in the nation, their ethno-racial identities transmuted into (inter)national ones. Trump’s attack on a Latino judge in Chicago made this quite clear: Latinx residents are to be associated with Mexico and Central America; the courtroom is an inviolable national space to be protected from this threat. Likewise, the shop floor must be fortified against the inauspicious encroachment of cheap labor from the South.

And what about queer and trans people? They pose a threat to national vitality on two levels. Most obviously we might understand this homophobia as a pro-national jingoism, preserving the twin sacred spaces of the bedroom and the bathroom from queer and trans people, respectively. But we might also think of this bigotry as an obsession with American masculinity. If male breadwinners' dignity and self-perceptions of masculinity were wounded as the rustbelt deindustrialized and as wages stagnated both absolutely and in relation to productivity, revivalist nationalism ("Make America Great Again") allowed the deliberate articulation of "the people's" collective feelings of self-worth to household economic fortunes. What Trump did for the people he did for the nation, for both of whom he promises to safeguard the sacred space of the home. In every case, these groups are denigrated not for their inherent inferiority (racism), but for the way they threaten a national space (nationalism), which in turn threatens household interests (class).

CAPITALIST ANTI-CAPITALISM

This is how Trump has consciously tried to resolve "the people"/power bloc antagonism, and quite successfully, I must add. As his critics continue to wring their hands over his falsehoods, certain that the latest *Washington Post* exposé will unmask him to his base, his reinscription of "fake news" as an elitist assault on "the people" has only gained him support. But Laclau wrote of populism as a *double* articulation. If the popular-democratic contradiction is discursively resolved, this is articulated to a second contradiction: class struggle. All political programs, Laclau insists, serve objective class interests. The key right-populist move is to resolve the popular-democratic contradiction without threatening the pockets of capital. And this is precisely what Trump has done. By the end of February, Bank of America stocks were up more than 40 percent from Election Day, with Goldman Sachs up 36 percent and Wells Fargo up 27 percent.

At the mid-February press conference, Trump declared, "We've issued a game-changing new rule that says for each one new regulation, two old regulations must be eliminated. Makes sense. Nobody's ever seen regulations like we have." Health, safety, environmental, and other workplace regulations are represented as "job killing" restrictions deviously implemented by representatives of the power bloc. In articulating the populist discourse of "the people" to the immediate interests of big capital, Trump has pulled off what the German historian Arthur Rosenberg called "a manoeuvre notoriously characteristic of populist nationalisms worldwide — namely, instigating a movement that serves the interests of big capital but *appears* anti-capitalist at public meetings."²

If we might think of a certain collective ire as resulting from both the 2008 crisis and from a more prolonged tendency toward deindustrialization, Trump's genius has been to redirect it from capital to the state, and more specifically, toward the figure of the professional politician. "I can't believe I'm saying I'm a politician, but I guess that's what I am now," Trump told the press corps. Collectively these politicians comprise "the swamp," working with their media henchmen against the collective interests of "the people." He can thus nominate an Exxon CEO for Secretary of State without upsetting his resolution of the popular-democratic contradiction, as he's defined the problem as emanating from state administrators rather than capital. Tillerson is an "outsider" in this concep-

tion. One appointment after another, from Betsy DeVos to the failed nomination of Andrew Puzder, abets big capital, without appearing to threaten the terms of Trump's populist arrangement.

Given this suturing of "the people" to the interests of big capital, the liberal strategy of simply exposing Trump's lies, pointing to his preposterously unscripted oratory, and hoping to convey some sort of "truth" as antidote to his base misses the point. For even if we were to win them over on this count — and we won't, but even if we were — the left has no alternative hegemonic project in which it might incorporate them. From the Clintons through Obama, the interests of workers have been disarticulated from any populist project, with Democrats primarily running in a mode negatively defined: Obama wasn't W, and Clinton wasn't a fascist. But what is the *positive* project of the Democratic Party? The very fact that it remains unclear whether any of the Republican contenders were closer to Wall Street than Clinton, or whether the latest wave of deportations is of Trump's innovation or is a holdover from Obama's policies, leaves a vast vacuum gaping from the center-right to the far left.

Indeed, it wouldn't be a stretch to pin some of the most egregious moments of deregulation, trade liberalization, and welfare retrenchment on the Democrats. We can envision populist Republicans demanding that a nominee be immediately ushered into office on behalf of "the people," but such an utterance from a Democrat would be unthinkable. In shutting down Obama's Supreme Court nominee, Republican politicians represented themselves as a grassroots movement; but when Democrats do likewise, they come off as inept, merely going through the motions. As Christian Parenti put it recently (2016) in a brilliant analysis of Trump's use of language, "Ultimately, the Democratic establishment brought this loss on themselves. They spurned and tried to sabotage Bernie Sanders and his class message.³ Trump took the Bernie-style populism, emptied it of real class politics, reduced it to a jumble of affective associations, and used it to beat-up the smug liberals of the professional managerial class. It worked." Without the Clintonism, there would be no Trumpism; without Corey Booker and Arne Duncan, there would be no Betsy DeVos.

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TRUMPISM AS DIRECT CONSEQUENCE OF CLINTONISM

Cognitive linguist George Lakoff (2016) gets the matter exactly wrong when he suggests that Democrats simply need to "give up identity politics," by which he explicitly means "women's issues, black issues, Latino issues." These are "human issues," he insists, taking the #AllLivesMatter line. Of course when he implores Democrats to address "poor whites" in the following sentence, he pretends that this doesn't constitute precisely the sort of identity politics he had just rejected. Whites in his account constitute universal subjects. Bill Clinton should be the model, Lakoff insists, as he "oozed empathy." In other words, the content of the politics is irrelevant to his strategy; the idea is to engage in a project of hegemony as deception.⁴

As he proceeds, he calls for Democrats to focus on "values" rather than "facts" and for unions to go on the offensive, pretending to know nothing about sixty years of business unionism, with comprador bureaucrats aligned with a party that has actively undermined working class interests since at least the 1970s.

While Lakoff may understand why Trump's rhetoric is effective, he hasn't a clue what might be effective in riposte. Trump's rise isn't solely attributable to his particular brand of charismatic authority. Trumpism is the direct consequence of Clintonism, and as such, to conceive of Clintonism as a resurgent strategy for the left at this point is to willfully ignore a quarter century of partisan politics in this country.

When the purportedly left-wing alternative hollows itself out to the point where we can no longer be certain that its chief politicians weren't key players in bringing about the present crisis, we have nothing left to which we can win Trump supporters over. Even if they were to realize that the guy is a capitalist Judas goat, where else would we send them? To quote the late anthropologist William Roseberry, the point of hegemonic language is not to solidify a shared ideology, but instead to construct "a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterized by domination."⁵ There's nothing in the Democratic program that even approaches this goal, and indeed, the party has actively undermined workers, people of color, queer and trans people, and women since before I was born. Carter brought us Reagan, Clinton brought us W, and Obama brought us Trump. Until Trump's liberal critics accept this fact, they'll either continue their righteous denunciations of his indecorous transgressions, or worse, simply repurpose his strategy for a hypothetical left divorced from the working class à la Lakoff.

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- 2 Rosenberg, Arthur. 2013 [1934]. "Fascism as a Mass-Movement." Pp. 19-96 in *Fascism: Essays on Europe and India*, edited by Jairus Banaji. New Delhi: Three Essays Collective.
- 3 Parenti, Christian. 2016. "Listening to Trump." Non-Site (available at: <http://nonsite.org/editorial/listening-to-trump>).
- 4 Lakoff, George. 2016. "Understanding Trump." Huffington Post (available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/george-lakoff/understanding-trump_b_11144938.html?1469216981).
- 5 Roseberry, William. 1994. "Hegemony and the Language of Contention." Pp. 355-66 in *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico*, edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent. Durham: Duke University Press.