

## **Introduction**

### **Philip E. Steinberg**

In the weeks leading up to the 2016 US presidential election, *Political Geography* received two unsolicited guest editorials opining on the surging popularity of Donald Trump and, more broadly, the movement that he represented. In one editorial, Banu Gökariksel and Sara Smith associated the Trump phenomenon with the reassertion of a masculinist politics wherein the violent, white, male body is seen as the normative political figure. In the other, Sam Page and Jason Dittmer also focused on the embodied nature of Trump's popularity, but they locate this in a complicated system in which oppositional tendencies also have momentum, and thus they end their editorial with a fairly optimistic assertion about the ways in which the openings made possible by Trump might lead to a counter-revolution of sorts, wherein the antinomies that increasingly characterise politics in the United States (and elsewhere) are overthrown.

After the election, we received two more unsolicited guest editorials reflecting on the topic. In one, Alan Ingram paired the Trump election with Brexit referendum that had been held five months earlier, and places both within an analytical framework inspired by the Deleuzian concept of the 'machine'. In the second editorial, Natalie Koch took a step back from the election to avert her gaze away from Trump and toward the ways in which critical pundits and scholars were understanding Trump as bringing 'authoritarianism' to the United States. While Koch did not necessarily disagree with the analysis of Trump's rule as 'authoritarian' she noted how surprise about his popularity was rooted in a lingering American exceptionalism that clouded the analysis of the left and well as the right.

Now, in January 2018, we are one year into the Trump presidency, and a reassessment is in order. To that end, *Political Geography* has asked the authors of the four editorials to revisit their pieces from 2016 and 2017, and reflect on their thoughts, as well as the points

raised in the first set of editorials by their colleagues. The reflections make for difficult reading. Gökariksel and Smith find that the masculinist politics identified in their 2016 editorial has continued unabated. Koch locates her previous critique of American exceptionalism within a more thorough-reaching critique of American liberalism. Page and Dittmer acknowledge that they were wrong in predicting Trump's defeat. Perhaps the most optimistic contribution to this intervention set is by Ingram, who stresses that the damages done by populist movements in both the US and the UK have been limited by forces that limit their leaders' efficacy. Even this, however, is but a partial victory. As Ingram concludes, "While it is welcome that worst case scenarios have so far been avoided, this is an inadequate critical or political standard." The jury is out on whether *Political Geography* readers and authors can affect significant political change in a difficult intellectual environment. However, with (most likely) three more years to go in the Trump presidency, we hope that discussions like this one can help us develop critical and political standards that are adequate to the task.

## **Mea culpa**

### **Sam Page and Jason Dittmer**

Boy, did we get it wrong. In our previous editorial (Page and Dittmer 2016) we asserted that Trump would not win the election. Other predictions – such as our hope that the rise and eventual fall of Trump would provide an opportunity to reconfigure the sclerotic political gridlock that has come to characterize U.S. politics – seem increasingly distant. In the first half of this commentary we revisit these claims, armed with both hindsight and knowledge of the 2017 Trump Administration, to see how racial affects help to explain Trump's failure to dislodge the deadlock of U.S. politics. In the second half, we turn to Deleuze and Guattari's

concept of the ‘war machine’ (2004) to explain how Candidate Trump has struggled to perform as President Trump and to extract some hope for the future from the current crisis.

The first claim to revisit is our argument that the #NeverTrump movement (and related affects) would cut across and reconfigure the deep partisan divides that beset the United States. This has not occurred, or at least not to the extent we envisioned. Polls indicate that Trump maintains high levels of Republican support (in one poll in October 2017, it was down to 67% from 80% in March), and extremely low levels of support among Democrats (Hart 2017), as his administration replicates, and potentially advances, the politics of division.

Thus, despite emphasizing the racist underpinnings of Trump’s candidacy, we underestimated the degree to which the Republican Party had become a proxy for white supremacy. In contrast, Smith and Gökariksel (2016, 80) foresaw the racist violence of the KKK and neo-Confederate groups’ Charlottesville uprising, as well as Trump’s intervention into the Kaepernick/Black Lives Matter protests, just to name two of Trump’s efforts to rub salt in the open wound of American racism:

Trump is [a] revival of nationalist tendencies and white supremacy that is an integral part of US history through the erasure of native people, slavery, and the Jim Crow era, as well as through the scapegoating of Othered workers in the Chinese Exclusion Act and the paranoia of enemies within that led to the Japanese internment.

Ta-Nehisi Coates (2017, np) takes this line of argument further, claiming that Trump is the ‘first white president’, his presidency predicated on eradicating all evidence of the Obama years:

To Trump, whiteness is neither notional nor symbolic but is the very core of his power. In this, Trump is not singular. But whereas his forebears carried whiteness like

an ancestral talisman, Trump cracked the glowing amulet open, releasing its eldritch energies.

Indeed, observation of Trump's administration indicates how the populism embodied and performed is a specifically *white* populism. We anticipated that this would take the form of a dissonance machine, one that would increasingly alienate the majority of Americans. However, while 'independent voters' have largely turned against Trump (recent polls give him a 55% *disapproval* rate), elected Republicans have, for the most part, found a way to hitch their interests to the Trump machine despite the often-wide ideological gulf between them. As Coates (2017) says, not all Trump voters are white supremacists but they were all okay with casting a vote for one. The result is a Republican Party that has lined up behind a candidate espousing white supremacy, finally making overt a partisan divide on racial equality as a goal (rather than on the means of achieving it).

Our focus on Trump's embodied performance has aged comparatively well because it frequently appears that he never stopped campaigning or started governing. We wrote then that, like many populist leaders, Trump simultaneously tries to embody both ordinariness and extraordinariness. He is a natural performer in this regard. Note the following, from an August 2017 Trump rally in Phoenix:

Now, you know, I was a good student. I always hear about the elite. You know, the elite. They're elite? I went to better schools than they did. I was a better student than they were. I live in a bigger, more beautiful apartment, and I live in the White House, too, which is really great. (*Time* 2017, np)

This quote, one of many such boasts, illustrates the simultaneous distancing-from and grasping-for elite status that underlies many of his political performances. In the following

sentence he goes further: ‘I think – you know what? I think we’re the elites. They’re not the elites’ (*Time* 2017, np). In this one moment, he has explicitly recounted how he bears the markers of the elite (extraordinary) but is simultaneously not of them. Instead, he and the (ordinary) audience are the elite. Coates, again, sees Trump’s insecurity about status as core to his whiteness and populist affect: ‘It is as if the white tribe united in demonstration to say, “If a black man can be president, then any white man—no matter how fallen—can be president,”’ (Coates 2017, np). Trump’s fundamental ineptness, his moral, ethical, and political crassness, is key to the dynamics that maintain him as a subject within the complex assemblages of the U.S. state and the broader political field. It animates and enrages the opposition, which only affirms his supporters’ belief that he ‘speaks for them’ and that they have little in common with elites, liberals, Fake News, etc. Nevertheless, it does not hold that just because Trump has not yet driven ‘the affective politics of confrontation and division to a limit point in the US’ (Page and Dittmer 2016, 77) that he will not yet do so. Indeed, his fundamental ineptness indicates this potential.

In his editorial on issues of Atlanticism that arise from the events of Trump’s election and Brexit, Alan Ingram (2017: 92) argues that ‘In a number of ways, the new right war machine appears poised to rework the American state apparatus.’ Yet, the theory indicates that while it might do this there are also potential consequences for the war machine and its leader.

The war machine is a particular understanding of relations of power between state and non-state bodies. The war machine is an always changing (becoming), rhizomatic, non-state assemblage that is at war with the state. The state, by contrast, has always existed: it came into being ‘quite perfect, quite complete’, and is ‘defined by the perpetuation or conservation of organs of power’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 418, 416). They are of different logics, and in the end the state will prevail, changing itself as well as the war machine as it consumes it.

By again turning to Coates (2017, np), we can see the emergence of the war machine in Trump's campaign: 'Trump's share of the white vote was similar to Mitt Romney's in 2012. But [...] Trump secured his support by running against his party's leadership, against accepted campaign orthodoxy, and against all notions of decency.' This has continued into his Presidency.

Instead of being driven by political ideology, the Trump assemblage territorializes around media spectacles and political 'wins'. This produces a rhizomatic and unpredictable form, most clearly in the infamous 4am tweets that contradict official statements given in a press conference. Similarly, his comments about North Korea facing 'fire and fury', and a speech to NATO, were improvised (Zelney et al 2017; Shugerman 2017). Finally, Trump's debt ceiling deal with the Democrats, after being snubbed by Congressional Republicans on health care, again, presents as a dissonance machine, as it reportedly shocked the GOP.

The struggle of the war machine to become the state is made apparent in the (in)stability of Trump's administration. Deleuze and Guattari (2004, 413; their italics) emphasize that '*The State has no war machine of its own; it can only appropriate one in the form of a military institution, one that will continually cause it problems.*' Trump's administration struggles to pass laws, enforce Muslim bans, and staff the White House. At the time of writing, of the 601 government roles that require Senate confirmation, 302 had no appointee from the White House, including such crucial roles as the Ambassador to South Korea. Smith and Gould (2017, np) record that in the first seven months of his administration, 'more than a dozen prominent executive branch employees were unexpectedly ousted, had to resign, or quickly change jobs.' This includes the loss of both chief strategist Steve Bannon, and communications director Anthony Scaramucci, who lasted ten days in the job.

The war machine also emphasizes the inevitable victory of the state. In our last editorial, we pointed towards the evolution from Bush's 'evangelical-capitalist resonance machine' (Connolly 2008) to what we termed the Trump white-male dissonance machine. It is now clear that Trump has brought the evangelicals into assemblage with the neo-Nazis. There are, however, cracks in the seams, as is evident in Trump's uneasy relationship with capital, witnessed in the disbanding of the American Manufacturing Council in the aftermath of Trump's reaction to the neo-Nazi murder in Charlottesville.

This has some serious implications for how Trump's presidency may play out, both in the immediate term, and the long run. Deleuze and Guattari (2004, 414-415; their emphasis) theorise that it is:

the destiny of the war machine, when the State triumphs, to be caught in [an] alternative: either to be nothing more than the disciplined, military organ of the State apparatus, *or to turn against itself*, to become a double suicide machine for a solitary man or a solitary woman.

This suggests some potential futures for both Trump and the US state. We may be seeing the Trump war machine being captured by the state, as Trump's team accommodates to state procedures in order to get policies implemented. This may also mean that white supremacy becomes more acceptable in the day-to-day running of state. The ongoing electoral success of members advocating white supremacy does not seem far-fetched anymore when considering both recent domestic and international elections.

Another prospect is the metaphorical suicide of Trump and the destruction of his war machine. This could take the form of Trump somehow settling down and becoming more statesman-like, however unlikely that seems. Or, the result of the war machine's efforts could be the opposite of that to which they aspire, as their aggressive pursuit may still

deterritorialise voters. Deleuze and Guattari (2004: 416) write that the war machine's leader is 'more like a leader or a star than a man of power and is always in danger of being disavowed, abandoned by his people'. This machine is not specifically wedded to Trump (Coppins 2017), and it may eventually turn its attention elsewhere, leaving Trump a mere 'solitary man'. Moreover, the machine itself has not yet become part of the state and it still may be destroyed: either by the state mechanisms, or by itself. After this year, if we have learned anything it is to be careful about predictions.

### **Tiny hands, tiki torches: Embodied white male supremacy and its politics of exclusion**

**Banu Gökarıksel and Sara Smith**

Returning to our editorial on the rise of Trump from before the 2016 election is eerie. We saw in the rise of his embodied white masculinist performance a profound and dangerous threat: that Trump's celebratory performance of white masculinity and his promises to Make America Great Again signaled an agenda that would reverse the gains women, non-whites, immigrants, Muslims, and LGBTQ activists had made towards social justice and inclusion. Building on feminist geopolitics that locates state-making and geopolitical strategy in the body and in intimate aspects of life (e.g. Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Fluri, 2009; Gökarıksel, 2012; Massaro & Williams, 2013; Smith, 2011), we analyzed how Trump had made his own body and other bodies central to his campaign and politics. We were also concerned that such a performance would embolden white nationalists and strengthen the legacy of anti-Black racism, settler colonialism, and xenophobia on which the country was built. In the summer of 2016, just before the election, we wrote:

We see Trump's rhetoric and performance of white masculinity as formative of a *fascist body politics* that seeks to preserve white male supremacy. Trump uses the gendered, racialized body as a proxy for the nation and locates threats

to the nation in non-white and non-male bodies embodying deep-seated fears of 'white decline' and threatened borders (Gökarıksel & Smith, 2016, p. 79).

One year later a crowd of men in khaki pants and white polo shirts and wielding tiki torches descended on Charlottesville, Virginia. The scene managed to be deeply sickening and profoundly absurd. Their Nazi chants, "You will not replace us, Jews will not replace us," put bluntly what the president hinted at in his persistent fearmongering on immigration, terrorism, and racial justice activism. The ostensible reason for the rally was to protest the planned removal of a statue in memory of the Confederate General Robert E. Lee from the grounds of the University of Virginia, and thereby to make a claim as to which America to remember and how to remember it. The organizers of the "Unite the Right" rally boasted that they had organized the largest white nationalist gathering in decades. The main organizer, Jason Kessler, dismissed Heather Heyer, the 31-year-old woman who was killed by a Nazi sympathizer who allegedly plowed a car into a group of counterprotesters, with a tweet (since deleted) that read "Heather Heyer was a fat, disgusting Communist. Communists have killed 94 million. Looks like it was payback time," which linked to a Daily Stormer article that disparaged Heyer (Phillips, 2017). This message resonates with the fear and hatred of women's bodies in the flesh that Spackman (1996) and Theweleit (1987) have identified as an underlying theme in the development of fascist masculinities, and it echoes Trump's well-known strategy of discrediting women. While this public show of power by Nazi sympathizers and KKK might be the most striking and disturbing confirmation that we were correct to be worried about emboldening white male nationalism, there are many other, perhaps less apparent ones as well.

Reflecting back on our original editorial, we still find the deployment of feminist theories to be crucial in piecing together the unsurprising mystery of Trump's election and the promise of an exclusionary body politics that set the stage for a scene of white masculine heroism: by

gesticulating wildly toward all manner of threats (Muslim refugees! Mexican rapists! (Black) Thugs! Bleeding women!), he positioned himself as the embodiment of white masculine resurgence, enacted what Page and Dittmer (2016) have called a “white-male dissonance machine,” and blithely evaded the obvious questions: could a millionaire with a history of not paying workers save the (white) working class? In the year since, the dissonance has become only more uncanny as not only Trump but his entire family and team took the stage in epic performances of whiteness. While Melania resentfully performed the sad captive queen, speaking out about bullying seemingly without irony (Thompson, 2017), Ivanka embraced a hyperwhite, class-oblivious, and depoliticized feminism-lite (Filipovic, 2017). Forming a cabinet that is reportedly the most white and male first cabinet since Reagan (Lee, 2017), the new president surrounded himself with a motley crew of white nationalists, most prominently Steve Bannon of Breitbart News (known for its conspiracy theories, fiery rhetoric, and a mix of populism, economic nationalism, anti-same-sex-marriage activism, and alt-right views) and Stephen Miller (who made a name for himself in his response to the 2006 Duke lacrosse-team rape scandal (Cohan, 2017)), high ranking generals and top level executives cherry-picked from the largest American companies (such as Rex Tillerson of Exxon-Mobil and Anthony Scaramucci of Goldman Sachs) along with seasoned politicians known for their conservatism, such as Jeff Sessions and Mike Pence. Trump immediately got to work. As if ticking off a checklist, he started to sign a series of executive orders, presidential memoranda, or proclamations that restrict the rights of women, Native Americans, immigrants, and Muslims, usually surrounded by a white male-dominated crowd that cheered him on.

Trump’s first action seemed like a direct response to thousands of women who had gathered in Washington DC and other cities across the world to protest his presidency the day after inauguration: a “global gag rule” on the discussion of abortion as a family planning option by US funded nongovernmental organizations working abroad (January 23), followed

by continuing attempts to defund Planned Parenthood and a new rule that allows any employer to deny coverage of birth control (October 6) (Kodjak, 2017). Next were the approval of oil pipeline expansions that threaten Native American nations' sovereignty and well-being (January 24), steps towards a concrete wall along US-Mexico border, forceful crackdown on "illegal" immigrants, a threat to withdraw federal funding from "sanctuary cities" (January 25), and finally, setting in motion the end of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program that shielded from deportation undocumented immigrants who had been brought to the US as children (September 5). Trump signed a chaotic "Muslim ban" that barred or suspended travel and immigration originally from only Muslim-majority countries (January 27 and March 6). After multiple legal challenges and issues of stays by courts, the administration later revised this ban to cover citizens from Chad, Iran, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Syria and Yemen and some government officials from Venezuela (September 24). The White House turned its gaze on the military with a directive that banned transgender recruits, citing national security concerns (August 25). Undergirding this directive is the presumption that the qualities that the nation needs to be secure could exist only in CIS-gender bodies and that trans people not only do not have what it takes to protect the nation but they are a threat to the nation itself. When we approach these actions together, it becomes clear that they are part of an aggressively defensive strategy that aims to signal a strong position against perceived 'white decline' and to protect a threatened white hetero- and cis-masculinity. Elsewhere we have termed the feverish and fantastical renderings of demographic change "demographic fever dreams" (Smith 2017): such demographic fever dreams drive exclusionary body politics, stick in the mind, and generate affective and emotional responses precluding rational thought. Deportation, bans, walls, and internal violence—all measures of exclusion – seem to be justified for returning America to its

supposed past greatness when it was crystal clear who was on top. Together they mark national territory as white, cis-male, and at least nominally Christian.

In our original editorial we argued that feminist theories of embodied politics were central to understanding the rise of Trump. With a year of hindsight, we stand by this assessment. In particular, we would like to stress two points.

First, Trump's embrace of a particular pre-scripted and theatrical role as the (supposedly) straight-talking man with no patience for "political correctness," and his rage at those who speak back to him (particularly women, people of color, and immigrants) is a means of embodying a revanchist white masculinity promising to set things right, to return to a supposed proper order. This is a form of embodied politics in which the individual anger and frustration of those who both *are* and *feel* disenfranchised can vest their hope in an authority figure who blames a catalogue of others (immigrants, Black people, women, transgender people) for their predicament and then takes action. The clearest demographic indicators of Trump support were whiteness across economic class, gender, and levels of education (Rogers, 2016; Tyson & Maniam, 2016).

Second, we want to reiterate our point that the flurry of anxiety, liberal panic, and other responses to Trump risk a revisionist history that sees Trump as an aberration or an unfortunate accident. This belies the ways that Trump is a more colorful example of the country's foundations in exclusionary violence and the centering of heroic white masculinity (as savior to vulnerable and pure white femininity) as a means to write a script justifying conquest, exclusion, hardened borders, and gendered, racialized, and xenophobic policies. As Koch (2017, p. 145) writes, the panic about "authoritarianism coming to America" from Africa, the Middle East, and other 'backward' places implies that "there [ever] was some more "pure" state of democracy that is presently under assault by Trump and his supporters." There never was. As Anderson (2016) has eloquently argued, *White Rage* against the

advancement of minorities, particularly Black people, has been a driving feature in the United States, however, it has usually operated quietly, through policies of school zoning, the war on drugs, and red-lining. Here, panic seems to emerge around the visibility of this rage, rather than on the tacit ways that it has been structuring our lives.

How to respond? As we have argued elsewhere (Gökarıksel & Smith, 2017), we applaud emergent coalitions of people of color, immigrants, and feminists taking an intersectional approach (and of course, these inadequate categories are too simplistic and also converge). We wish to warn against the kinds of smug comfort feminism (Silva, 2017) that papers over differences with a too-easy set of rhetorical moves. Cries that “we are all immigrants,” trans-phobic, pussy-centric calls to unity are now and have always been inadequate to deal with the very real, painful, and messy divides that we face.

Masha Gessen’s (2016) lessons on surviving in an autocracy provides helpful starting places, telling us to “believe the autocrat,” avoid new normalcies, maintain outrage, refuse to compromise, and remember the future. When Trump’s performances of white masculine power take center stage, this is an instance in which we ought to believe what he is telling us, and not view it as a distraction, but as a window into the policies unfurling and itself *as* a means of shifting politics and policies on the ground. By performing white masculinity as strongman autocrat, the policy has been made, and our politics of daily interaction have shifted. At the same time, we cannot allow ourselves to view this as an aberration, but rather as a newly strategized tactic that moves from tacit complicity into open avowal of white masculinity. The politics of liberal panic and shock signal that the best we can hope for is a return to the status quo (e.g., Obama’s era), and an affirmation that we were on the right path until the 2016 election took us on a sudden detour. This is a misunderstanding of history and the present.

A recent special issue in *Gender, Place and Culture* (Moss & Madrell, 2017) lays out many of the inherent complexities of this potential forward movement: that it might reinscribe hegemonic and CIS-gendered femininity (Boothroyd et al., 2017), or exclude women of color (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017), but might also enact new and promising forms of coalitional *and* agonistic politics (Moss & Madrell, 2017). There is the potential for a foundational break with status quo politics in this moment of heightened attention to historical inequities and the intersections of race, gender, and socioeconomic class in this country's history and present. Where Trump's exclusionary embodied politics has attempted to drive us toward fixed and hardened identities set in opposition, a feminist approach that understands our identities to be both rooted in experience but also contingent, relational, and possibly transformative can help forge a new path toward a politics based on an ethics of listening to each other and acting together.

### **Brexit and Trump one year on: reterritorializing the West?**

**Alan Ingram**

A year ago (Ingram 2017), I considered how the UK referendum result for 'Brexit', the election of Donald Trump as US President and the growing salience of fascist politics pointed towards a deterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 2004) of Atlanticism and of the liberal idea of the West that emerged out of the Second World War. In this intervention, I reflect on subsequent events and the broader issues they raise, particularly in light of a series of further commentaries, reports and books by liberal writers, politicians and analysts contemplating the West's actual or possible decline (e.g. Bunde *et al.* 2017; Emmott 2017; Garton Ash 2017; Luce 2017).

Recent liberal accounts of the West have tended to be enunciated via reference to Enlightenment values, democracy and markets, the twentieth century defeat of fascism and

communism and collective defence via the Atlanticist alliance between North America and Western Europe. Critical writers meanwhile have long highlighted how the liberal geopolitical idea of the West necessitates a correlative forgetting or disavowal of the episodes and forms of violence that have enabled it to come into being and which enable it to continue (e.g. Mazower 1999; Losurdo 2014). The movements for Brexit and for the election of Trump are radical not just in the way that they seek to undermine existing liberal institutions and norms, but also in terms of how they embrace forms of sovereignty, violence and domination that liberal accounts would disavow and critical ones challenge. Given the multiple ways in which the Brexit vote and election of Trump are intertwined, it is useful to consider them together. Linking them with liberal ideas of 'the West' and Deleuze and Guattari's ideas on fascism further offers a way of reflecting upon the dimensions and stakes of the current moment.

During the US presidential election campaign, Trump alarmed alliance members by criticizing NATO (a central pillar of the West as geopolitical entity), declaring it to be obsolete and suggesting that the US would not necessarily come to the defence of members who, in his view, were not 'paying their bills', thus seeming to invalidate the organization's main premise (Calamur 2016). In office, however, Trump has been forced to reverse his position, declaring, 'I said it was obsolete; it's no longer obsolete' after a meeting with Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (BBC News 2017). There has been no grand geopolitical bargain with Russia along the lines advocated by Trump advisers, and while, during the campaign Trump had floated the idea of an improved relationship with Russia, as President he has extended existing sanctions imposed in response to the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and agreed to have his power to vary them reduced. Russian Prime Minister Dmitrii Medvedev subsequently wrote that '[t]he hope that our relations with the new American administration would improve is finished' (Rampton and Zengerle 2017).

The acceptance across the British political class of the Brexit vote as a legitimate expression of political will, meanwhile, appears to have had the effect of increasing the cohesion of the EU27 and strengthening its bargaining position, for the time being at least, while key Conservative Party supporters of Brexit, though they hold ministerial posts following the 2017 General Election, face opposition from colleagues and form part of a weak coalition government. Having called a snap election with the aim of increasing her majority and strengthening her ability to negotiate Brexit (which she had voted against) Prime Minister Theresa May in fact lost seats and was forced to conclude an unpopular coalition agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party. While the Labour Party is also split on Brexit and the party failed to win the election, it has undergone a revival under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, and the Conservative government is consequently less able to pursue the kinds of deregulationist policies favoured by Brexiteers.

Just as Trump has proven himself utterly incapable of governing, the lack of substance, vision and strategy among leading Conservative Brexiteers has been starkly exposed. Though they would appear to have gained temporary control of the state, neither Trump nor the Brexiteers have yet been able to convert this into political success in terms of their most radical goals. Multiple investigations into Russian attempts to influence the presidential election and whether the Trump campaign assisted them, as well as into associated financial crimes, may further limit Trump's room for manoeuvre and could conceivably still result in his departure from office (aspects of the Brexit campaign are also under investigation by the UK electoral commission). Republican figures reportedly anticipate reverses in the November 2018 mid-term elections and expect impeachment proceedings in the event of Democratic control of the House of Representatives (Murray 2017). Apprehension of the scale of potential economic damage flowing from the prospect of Brexit may foster a situation in which it cannot proceed (Evans-Pritchard 2017).

In late 2016 it appeared that the votes for Brexit and Trump might translate into a wave of success for far right parties across Western states, and debates on the nature of authoritarianism, totalitarianism and fascism have returned (e.g. Snyder 2017). But though the continued encroachment of far right parties and ideas into the political mainstream continues in a number of countries, Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom failed to take power in the Netherlands general election and Marine le Pen failed to win the French presidential election. The statement by a le Pen advisor (Philipott 2016) on the evening of Trump's victory that '[t]heir world is collapsing; ours is being built' has failed to be borne out, so far at least.

In their plateau on micropolitics and segmentarity, Deleuze and Guattari (2004: 229-255) recognise that fascism needs to be analyzed on the 'molecular' level of individual and group desires as well as on the macropolitical level of political events, that certain kinds of machines could assemble fascist desires, and that danger grows when they begin to resonate together. As they argue, fascism should be understood in terms of an orientation towards destruction, abolition, nihilism and suicide; fascism points towards absolute deterritorialization. Yet they also ask, '[h]ow could movements of deterritorialization and processes of reterritorialization not be relative, always connected, caught up in one another' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 11)? While growing resonances across the various outgrowths of the fascist rhizome may have been dampened deterritorialization and reterritorialization are neither symmetrical nor dialectically related, nor does their inter-relation result in synthesis: things may break out into transformative events at any moment.

While we might highlight the ways in which both Trump and Brexit have encountered limits and elicited opposition, then, there are serious grounds to question the optimism of one prominent liberal commentator, who wrote:

[s]o long as Trump does not go to war with North Korea, or some equivalent folly, the United States could yet emerge from four years of a ghastly presidency with both its democracy and its international reputation battered, but not damaged beyond repair. British democracy too is working in its funny old parliamentary way, producing a real chance that we Brits can recover in time from the madness of the thing, to make either a very soft Brexit or – as we should – an exit from Brexit. (Garton Ash 2017)

First, as far as Trump is concerned, although a tight circle of advisers apparently strive to manage his behaviour on a daily basis, and while diplomacy apparently continues with North Korea, the fact that the key positions of Chief of Staff, National Security Adviser and Secretary of Defense are held by retired or serving generals highlights the renewed militarization of government at the highest levels at a time when overseas military strikes and deployments are being significantly expanded with little scrutiny, and while diplomacy has been eviscerated. Second, Trump also continues to represent, endorse and enact white supremacy and a toxic form of masculinity, equivocating over white supremacist violence and offering disproportionate criticism of black people and women, fuelled, apparently, by a compulsion to negate the record of his black predecessor (Coates 2017). Third, further light has been thrown on the ways in which political technologies developed in counter-insurgency and propaganda campaigns outside the West were used in concert with new data sciences and the exploitation of social media platforms to influence both votes (Cadwalladr 2017). While the British Labour Party made far better use of social media than the Conservatives in the 2017 British general election, and although manipulation of public discourse and sentiment is by no means absent from the political history of the West, the cutting-edge propaganda technologies that are at the disposal of unaccountable billionaires and closely affiliated with military and intelligence interests raise fundamental new questions for the idea of a democratic public sphere. Fourth, myriad scandals have further revealed the extent to which

the super-rich and their offspring, in the US and well beyond, have been able to create wide legal and behavioural latitude for themselves through an array of lawyers, fixers and functionaries and the use of offshore jurisdictions.

While it is welcome that worst case scenarios have so far been avoided, this is an inadequate critical or political standard. Brexit and the Trump presidency have been accompanied by an intensification of the social and political warfare that already harms millions of people on a daily basis and which will continue even if they are curtailed, something that liberal commentators tend to recognise only fleetingly.

### **Trump, 1 year later: Three myths of liberalism exposed**

**Natalie Koch**

In writing my commentary for *Political Geography* earlier this year (Koch, 2017), I sought to critique the script about “authoritarianism coming to America,” which proliferated during Donald Trump’s candidacy and his subsequent election. I argued that by treating authoritarianism as foreign to American political practice – and soil – this script is best understood as a geopolitical identity narrative reinforcing the myth of American exceptionalism. The notion that the United States possesses exemplary liberal credentials is a nationalist vision, less fact than aspirational fiction about who “we” are and what “we” should value as US citizens. The othering of authoritarian practice is fundamental to this nationalist vision, premised on the ideals of liberalism. These ideals have been challenged in new and striking ways since Trump has haphazardly tried to assume the presidential helm. Indeed, these challenges have left many of America’s devout liberals thoroughly bewildered. In this short contribution, I want to suggest that this bewilderment is the result of a systematic failure of America’s left to understand liberal ideology as ideology. To illustrate, I will consider three fundamental myths of liberalism, which many in the US have (mis)taken for

basic truths. The myths themselves are not new, but they are central to liberal ideology. What *is* new is the scope, intensity, and public nature with which they have been exposed on the national stage.

The first myth of liberalism recently laid bare in US public discourse is that *liberal subjects are rational subjects*. With early roots in a form of *laissez-faire* economic logic applied to political systems, liberalism has always been tied to the idealized notion of a rational subject acting in his or her “interest.” Michel Foucault (2008) traces the rise and spread of this governmental logic in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, arguing that what characterizes liberal rationality is how to model government “on the rational behavior of those who are governed” (p. 312). Instead of seeking governmental legitimacy in a truth-claim, such as divine right, liberal ideology takes a different tack: “That is to say, one no longer tries to peg government to the truth; one tries to peg government to rationality” (Foucault, 2008, p. 311). This history is significant because the idea of a rational actor is so thoroughly taken for granted by liberals today that it is hard for most to conceive of it as a social construction, let alone a tool of government.

The liberal romance for rational subjects has been profoundly shaken by the apparent crisis of liberalism unfolding in the United States (among other avowedly liberal countries of the world). Rationality itself has been publicly called into question as Trump and his supporters (as well as a slew of other groups pre-dating his rise) have so openly and brazenly assaulted the tenets of science-based reasoning. Exemplified in rhetorical claims to “alternative facts,” the xenophobic fantasies conjured by white supremacists at the Charlottesville protests, and the non-stop vitriol espoused by right-wing opinionators and their social media devotees and bots alike, US liberals have been stunned by the fact that their compatriots so obviously lack a commitment to truth, reason, or utilitarian ideals – a commitment many naively thought was shared by all American citizens. Yet as I have long

noticed in watching the right-wing media permeate the televisions and radios of members of my own family, beginning with the rise of Fox News in the late 1990s, these outlets have always appealed to emotion, rather than reason. Diverse as these groups may be, they share no romance for rational subjects.

Cultivating anti-rationalist subjects is much older than Fox News and its social media-based progeny; it is a staple of illiberal government. Similarly, nationalisms and many other political identity narratives have a long history of appealing to emotion rather than reason. In his effort to define some of the main elements of a generalized “ur-fascism,” Umberto Eco (1995) explains that such cases of irrationalism depend on “the cult of action for action’s sake. Action being beautiful in itself, it must be taken before, or without, any previous reflection. Thinking is a form of emasculation.” For American liberals who truly value reason – and thinking! – what they are now experiencing is not an objective political crisis as such, but an ideological crisis whereby the foundational tenet of all citizens being rational actors has been challenged. Yet many critics on the left seem to be woefully unaware of the extent of the problem, of the fundamentally mythical nature of people being *a priori* rational subjects. This is especially apparent in the fact that liberal responses to the hate provoked by Trump and his followers nonetheless consistently appeal to truth, reason, and utilitarianism. Liberals look on in disbelief as their responses to the president’s lies and spiteful politics fall on deaf ears. Again based on my own experiences of dealing with individuals afflicted by this rhetoric, one cannot argue with emotion – let alone when a common commitment to reason-based argumentation is absent.

Since Trump’s inauguration, this challenge has become more apparent to liberal critics, who are starting to recognize the liberal myth of rational subjects for what it is. I suspect that this shift is only partly precipitated by current political affairs in the wake of Trump’s election, but also reflects a generational shift. Contemporary liberal ideology in the

US is largely tied to post-World War II identity narratives of American exceptionalism. Since that time, political commentators and ordinary citizens alike have mistaken the hegemony of liberal ideology for the actual reach of citizens' commitment to its tenets and values. Yet the apparent hegemony of reason-based and utilitarian civic norms in the world's "liberal democracies" are exactly that: apparent. As I suggested in my previous commentary, "we" have never been so liberal. The exposure of liberalism's myth of rationality has unsettled many people in the United States – and rightly so. But where does this leave us? Is the liberal fantasy of the rational actor bound to be illusory? I would suggest that the issue is more a problem of being able to recognize political ideology for what it is: governing through reason is an aspirational discourse that is the engine of liberalism's telos. This means that if liberals want their political project to succeed, they must work to *craft* rational subjects, rather than assuming them to be the natural product of America's (fictively "exceptional") social and political milieu.

This leads me to the second myth of liberalism that has been publicly exposed since Trump's rise: *that limits on freedom are attacks on liberalism*. In theorizing liberalism, Foucault (2008) defines it as a governmental logic that works *through* freedom. Like its quintessential rational subjects, liberalism must also manufacture these freedoms. They do not exist in some natural state to be harnessed by governments. This means that liberal ideology is not the acceptance of freedom, but rather a *producer* of freedoms (Foucault, 2008, p. 65). Once conjured, these freedoms become liberalism's *raison d'être*, as they need to be managed and organized – as do "the conditions in which one can be free" (Foucault, 2008, p. 64). The paradoxical result is that "at the heart of this liberal practice is an always different and mobile problematic relationship between the production of freedom and that which in the production of freedom risks limiting and destroying it" (Foucault, 2008, p. 64). In brief, acts of (de)limiting certain freedoms are not attacks on liberalism, but are foundational to the very

nature of liberal ideology. This is important because many people imagine liberalism to exist in some abstract “marketplace of ideas,” in competition with other ideologies like communism or fascism, which are butting up against and threatening its freedoms. Rather, the vision of freedom under siege is *internal* to liberalism: it is its motivating drama.

This theoretical starting point helps to explain why so many on America’s left are now finding themselves in the uncomfortable position of advocating restrictions on certain freedoms. In response to the onslaught of hate speech launched to a new level by Trump’s demagoguery, combined with actual and latent violence (both resulting from and preceding his presidency), many Americans are increasingly prepared to impose restrictions on various forms of free speech. As Timur Kuran (1995) shows in his foundational book on preference falsification, to allow complete freedom of expression would require “exemplary tolerance,” which is when:

no one would ever seek punitive actions against others for their political views. By this account, to show tolerance is to object to an idea about objecting to its expression. [...] Perfectly tolerant individuals would not even frown at a speaker promoting the most repulsive ideas. They might, of course, express reservations and offer alternatives. Tolerance is not apathy, indifference, or diffidence. What it requires is acceptance of the principle that no political end, however noble, justifies the suppression of an idea. (Kuran 1995, 97)

Although many Americans like to believe the nationalist script about the country’s exceptional track-record for promoting free speech, it does not imply that citizens are actually committed to any form of “exemplary tolerance.” As Kuran argues, and as many other social scientists confirm, even in liberal democratic states, few people “are perfectly tolerant. Most

people exhibit a readiness to censor views that are unexceptional even within their own communities” (Kuran, 1995, p. 97). While I like to think of myself as an advocate of tolerance, I am acutely aware of the social and political risks of allowing forms of hate speech, fear-mongering, and barefaced lies to go unchecked. So, again, where does this leave us?

If we take seriously Foucault’s argument about the liberal art of government as manufacturing, managing, and organizing freedom, the myth that limits on freedom are attacks on liberalism becomes easier to expose. Limiting free speech, for example in the form of removing racist-inspired statuary or refusing to permit a white-supremacist rally, is not anti-liberal. Debating how, when, where, and for whom certain freedoms can be enjoyed, as I have already noted, is the very *raison d’être* of liberalism. Furthermore, as Kuran argues, because of the diffuse forces of social stigma, there is nothing essential to liberal democracy that prevents individuals from being penalized for advocating certain ideas. What sets liberal regimes apart from illiberal regimes is instead that the former simply tend to restrict “the menu of possible penalties” (Kuran, 1995, p. 85). Whereas nondemocratic regimes usually have recourse to physical, economic, and social penalties, liberal regimes “worthy of the name” tend to restrict the scope of such sanctions for those expressing radical ideas (Kuran, 1995, p. 85). However configured in practice, this is to suggest that there is an important difference between a government that *limits* forms of public expression and one that *punishes* it.

Finally, the third myth of liberalism that has been shaken to its core since the beginning of the Trump administration is that *being politically engaged is not only the duty of liberal subjects, but the apex of their self-fulfillment*. Arguably more so than the right, the left in America has a long-running romance with political engagement that constantly affirms this ideal. I have often found this perplexing because the left tends to be far more attuned to the

challenges of those deprived of financial and social resources. And as many on the left are well aware – and perhaps more so today than in the recent past – doing activist work demands substantial time and financial resources that puts it out of reach for many. Being politically engaged and informed is also emotionally taxing. Many in the US who consider themselves to be good liberal subjects may have been loosely aware of this before the Trump presidency, but have since been hit with the full force of emotional exhaustion in simply trying to keep up with the day's news and each new crisis.

This calculated chaos may be one of the Trump administration's few strategic "successes" thus far – not only has it kept the left in a constant state of apoplexy (to the delight of that amorphous creature, the Trump Base), but it has riddled them with tremendous guilt. This guilt is a liberal guilt. It is rooted in liberalism's idealization of the informed and engaged citizen who should derive fulfillment, if not pleasure, from assuming this subject position. Lacking the time and emotional resources to keep up with every new political onslaught, many critically-minded Americans feel demoralized and personally ashamed for not being able to do more, for not being "sufficiently" politically engaged. The problem is an old one, of course (as most are). In any political system, liberal or otherwise, public discourse is always limited: "An infinite number of human concerns are candidates for becoming political issues. A small minority actually do. Political discourse focuses on a few concerns at a time, treating the rest as nonissues" (Kuran, 1995, p. 46; see also Schattschneider, 1960).

Political theorists have long stressed the importance of setting the political playing field – what does or does not become a political issue – but the challenge today is that as people become more globally networked, "this rise in social interdependence has not been matched by a commensurate improvement in our cognitive faculties" (Kuran, 1995, p. 98). Many Americans today may have broader awareness of various political issues thanks to internet resources and social media platforms, but this does not mean that people are better

equipped to process everything that is theoretically only one click away – let alone act on it. In the mainstream public discourse, US liberals have thus tended to focus on a select set of issues. But since Trump has come to office, they have found that their capacity to engage on all their important causes has been completely obliterated. Of course, many people are still energized to fight back, but others are increasingly finding themselves in the same situation as many citizens in authoritarian regimes – where political withdrawal becomes a coping strategy. This too brings along another layer of liberal guilt, insofar as people feel that they are shirking their civic duty, even if it is a very immediate (and, dare I say, rational) response to prioritizing one's mental health, wellbeing, and personal commitments.

I have observed this logic of self-preservation in diverse authoritarian states, which I have studied over the years. The people I have encountered in places like Kazakhstan, the UAE, or Russia are well aware that *selective* political engagement is just as powerful as (if not more powerful than) trying to turn oneself into the archetype of the hyper-engaged, thoroughly-informed liberal subject. For them, this can often be quite dangerous, but ultimately, I believe it is more an issue of practicality: everyone has limited resources to engage and they must carefully consider the trade-offs to be made. This realization is starting to come to America. As those on the left have personally encountered the challenges of their romance for political engagement, there is an increasing space for individuals to accept that being a “good citizen” requires critically assessing where one's actions can actually be impactful. Centrally, this is not just a question of the topical scope of one's activism, but one with a different temporal horizon for differently-positioned individuals. Although every new headline appears to be a crisis, the narrative of urgency brings us perilously close to the fascist “cult of action for action's sake” (Eco, 1995). If liberal ideology is to prevail in the United States, resisting this liberal guilt and thinking strategically may well be the most important tasks ahead.

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