On the Question of Truth in the Era of Trump

Faith Agostinone-Wilson (Ed.)

On the Question of Truth in the Era of Trump

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Edited by

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CONTENTS

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MIKE COLE

FOREWORD

The (Not so) Strange Rise of Donald J. Trump

INTRODUCTION

> In the early hours of the morning on November 9, 2016, the unthinkable became reality—a ruthless, sociopathic, racist, misogynist, disabilist, climate change denying real estate mogul and reality TV star became the first billionaire president of the United States of America. (Cole, 2019, p. 1)

This was my initial response to the election of America's forty-fifth president. I want to take the opportunity in this Foreword to sketch the political, economic and ideological backdrop to the ascendancy and resilience of Donald J. Trump in order to set the context for the chapters in Faith Agostinone-Wilson's admirable and much-needed edited collection.

Valerie Scatamburlo-D'Annibale (2019) has provided a useful summary of ongoing analyses of what contributed to the election victory of Trump. I have not addressed all of Scatamburlo-D'Annibale's contributory factors and have also adapted the order in which she lists them, so that they slot into the purpose, structure, presentation and flow of my own narrative. The statistics in this Foreword, unless otherwise stated, were gathered in May/June 2019.

As Scatamburlo-D'Annibale (2019) puts it, more than two years "after Donald Trump's ascendancy to the White House, post-mortems of the 2016 American election continue to explore the factors that propelled him to office" (p. 69). Some factors are specific to the actual campaign and election, while others contributed to Trump's victory, but by their very nature, are more enduring. Here I will restrict my attention to the latter, beginning with what I believe to be supplementary factors and concluding with what I consider to be the primary contributing factor: the crisis in neoliberalism and the rise of right-wing populism.

SOME SUPPLEMENTARY FACTORS

First, Christian Fuchs (2018a) reveals the harmful role that social media plays in facilitating the rise of authoritarianism in the US. In his words, the "age of authoritarian capitalism is the age of social media, big data and fake news" (Fuchs, 2018b, para. 3). Trump has a constantly growing 60.5 million followers on Twitter,

25.4 million on Facebook and 13 million on Instagram. The result, Fuchs (2018b) argues, of the combination of authoritarian capitalism and capitalist "social" media is the decline of the public sphere and democracy. This is all exacerbated by the far-right. The alt-right, in particular, has made massive use of social media to spread its essentially anti-democratic and fascist world views, encompassing rampant antisemitism and other racist tropes, as well as misogyny and disablism (see Cole, 2019, pp. 52–77). The alt-right has also been a prominent street movement. However, it should be pointed out that Antifa has been very successful since Trump's election in challenging the alt-right, and in curtailing its ability to promote its fascist message (see Cole, 2019, pp. 91–94).

In addition, the mainstream media enabled Trump's rise by lavishing attention on his every utterance (Pickard, 2016), often conveyed via Twitter, and continues to do so. Trump knows full well how to get the media's attention and how to manipulate it (Klein, 2018). dana boyd (self-styled lower case), founder and president of Data and Society, a research institute, explains how the manipulation process works. Media manipulators:

- Create spectacle, using social media to get news media coverage.
- Frame the spectacle through phrases that drive new audiences to find your frames through search engines.
- Become a "digital martyr" to help radicalize others (Klein, 2018, para. 7).

Klein (2018) shows how this works with Trump. First, he uses Twitter to create spectacle on social media, deploying "catchy and unusual frames" ("FAKE NEWS! the true Enemy of the People") that sympathizers can search for to find supporting evidence or fellow loyalists" (para. 26). He then makes use of the media's aggrieved or simply truth-telling reaction to paint himself as a victim of endless media bias ("90 percent of the coverage of everything this president does is negative"):

> The media then reacts in the only way that makes any sense given the situation: We cover Trump's statements as outrageous and aberrant; we make clear where he's lied or given succor to violent paranoiacs; we fret over the future of the free press. And then Trump and his loyalists point to our overwhelmingly negative coverage and say, "See? Told you they were the opposition party." (para. 27)

"Trump, in other words," Klein (2018) concludes, "manipulates the media using the same tactics as a run-of-the-mill alt-right troll, and for much the same reason" (para. 29). Trump wants to encourage the media to fight him so that he gets more coverage. This, in turn, shows how biased they are against him, thus driving attention "to the things he's saying, to the conspiracies he's popularizing, and to himself" (para. 31). "The problem is," Klein concludes, is that "Donald Trump isn't your run-of-the-mill troll. He's the president of the United States of America" (para. 33).

Quoting Kelly Wilz (2016), Scatamburlo-D'Annibale (2019) secondly refers to "deep-rooted misogyny that worked against Hillary Clinton" (p. 70). Fast-forward

three years and Trump's ongoing sexism and misogyny and their societal effects persist unabated (e.g. Cohen, 2018; Cole, 2019, pp. 16–17). At the time of writing, there is developing a major backlash against abortion rights. As Sarah Bates (2019) explains, the United States is "a dangerous place to be a woman" (para. 1). Since Trump's inauguration, an onslaught of laws has chipped away at abortion rights, with twenty-one states "hostile" or "very hostile" to abortion rights (BBC News, 2019), the plan being to reverse Roe v Wade that made abortion a legal right in 1973 and has been under attack from the right-wing ever since (Bates, 2019). As Bates points out, while abortion attacks did not begin with Trump, it is no surprise that Trump who boasts of sexually assaulting women and who has said that women who have abortions should get "some form of punishment" has overseen these attacks on a women's right to choose. Hannah Thomas-Peter (2019), US correspondent for Sky News believes that abortion might "become the social issue that defines America's elections in 2020" (para. 1).

Third, Scatamburlo-D'Annibale (2019, p. 70) refers to the "backlash against Barack Obama, sedimented racism and the demonization of diversity as a public good" (Major, Blodorn & Blascovich, 2016; Shafer, 2017). At this point, we should be reminded that the country that we now know as the United States of America has always been a racist configuration. Racism perhaps began in 1492 when Christopher Columbus, looking for a new trade route to India, landed in the "New World" by mistake. Following his misinterpretation, Indigenous Americans then faced, like enslaved Africans who arrived in the late 1500s, centuries of institutional racism, underpinned by a white supremacist belief system that racialized the great civilisations of the First Nations and of Africa, respectively as "savages" and "negroes." When Mexico become independent from Spain after the 1821 revolution, Latinx peoples were also subject to colonization, exploitation, racialization and racist oppression. Exploitation racialization and racist oppression has been continuous to the present day (for a comprehensive analysis of the various manifestations of racism in the US from the arrival of Columbus up to the immediate pre-Trump era, see Cole, 2016, pp. 87–133).

Under Trump, racism has plummeted to new depths. In addition to augmenting his hatred and disgust of people who are not white, both verbally and by policy initiatives, Trump's aim is to appease his white racist supporters, as well as, as we shall see, his fascist followers in the alt-right. Trump's racism has impacted on a wide constituency, including Muslims, Native Americans, on Black Americans and Latinx Americans (see Cole, 2019, pp. 25–37 for a detailed analysis). Most infamous is Trump's obsession with "the Wall" and his vicious anti-immigration policies. For example, between December 2018 and May, 2019, five children died in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody (Diaz, 2019) As Norisa Diaz (2019) puts it:

The tragic deaths of the five children underscore the brutality of the prison detention camps and xenophobic anti-immigrant policies celebrated by the Trump administration. At a campaign rally earlier this month in Panama City,

Florida, President Donald Trump joked and laughed when one supporter called out that agents should just "shoot" migrants. Life is indeed cheap at the border. (para. 4)

Fourth, there is Scatamburlo-D'Annibale's (2019) own focus: "how Trump capitalized on the right's decades-long crusade against 'political correctness' (PC)" (p. 70). Throughout his campaign, she reminds us, "Trump derided PC, blaming it for a vast array of perceived social ills while concomitantly deploying anti-PC rhetoric—to inoculate his own racism and sexism from criticism" (p. 70). His supporters celebrated this as "telling it like it is" (p. 70). Trump, she went on, "positioned himself as a culture warrior rather than a politician" and one of his campaign's distinguishing characteristics was "giving the finger to 'political correctness in the name of freedom of expression" (Williams, 2016, p. 3, cited in Scatamburlo-D'Annibale's, 2019, pp. 70–71).

THE CRISIS IN NEOLIBERALISM AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM

I now turn to what I consider the overriding determinant of Trump's rise and resilience. As Scatamburlo-D'Annibale (2019) argues, many of the above explanations for the ascendancy of Trump "are, undoubtedly, intertwined and compelling" (p. 70). However, it is her first listed factor that I want to concentrate on here: "the spread of right-wing populism in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis that also culminated in Brexit in Europe" (p. 70; see also: Kagarlitsky, 2017; Tufts & Thomas, 2017). In order to do so, I begin with the crisis in neoliberalism.

There is broad agreement that the neoliberal world order and the free-trade globalization that the United States has pioneered since the end of the Cold War is in crisis. This general acknowledgement incorporates a growing realisation by the ruling class that neoliberalism is not working for capitalists as it should be. As Tom Bramble (2018) puts it:

That neoliberalism in the West is in crisis is widely accepted across the political spectrum and is a topic that features regularly in the leading international press and in discussions at the highest levels of the ruling class and their advisers at forums and institutions such as Davos, the IMF, OECD, World Bank and the World Economic Forum. (para. 1)

However, whereas the ruling class refer to a crisis in the "liberal international order" (e.g. Wolf, 2018), for Marxists (e.g. Davidson, 2013; Plavšić, 2017; Bramble, 2018) the crisis in neoliberalism is a crisis in neoliberal capitalism itself. As Bramble (2018) puts it, "the crisis has multiple elements, political, economic, social and imperial, which arise out of the organic workings of the capitalist system" (para. 2). "The various elements," he goes on, "are not superimposed on the system from outside but are the contemporary forms that capitalist crisis in the West takes in the early twenty-first

century," a particular feature being the nexus between its economic and political facets. The crisis, he goes on, is indicated by two major developments (para. 2).

Inequality, Popular Discontent, and Distrust of Elites

First, there is popular discontent with the austerity and inequality that neoliberalism has produced. The most visible indicator is wealth inequality, as revealed for example by the Forbes magazine list of the nation's 400 richest. In 2018, the three men topping the list—Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, Microsoft founder Bill Gates, and investor Warren Buffett—held combined fortunes worth more than the total wealth of the poorest half of Americans, while the richest 5 per cent of Americans were shown to own two-thirds of the wealth (Inequality. Org., 2018).

Moreover, as Bernie Sanders (2019) explains, while "Donald Trump tells us the US economy is "absolutely booming," the "strongest we've ever had" and 'the greatest in the history of America,'" he is right that the economy could not be better for the top 1% and for corporate America in general (para. 1). For average workers, on the other hand, between January 2018 and January 2019, wages were up just $9.11 a week after adjusting for inflation. At the same time, "the price of healthcare, prescription drugs, housing, childcare and a college education continue to go through the roof" (para. 11). Moreover, workers' tax cuts end in 2025.

The blatant success of neoliberalism to skew the wealth of the world more and more in favor of the super-rich has led to deep skepticism, as has the ongoing relentless pursuit of US imperialism (e.g. Cole, 2017, pp. 141–144). As Graeme Wood (2017) puts it, in reflecting on the way in which modern media gives both popular access to world events and serves to mystify the global processes of capital accumulation, and in the process, alienates the populace, rendering angry people open to right-wing extremism:

> The world may be no more complicated now than it was in the past, but exposure to more aspects of it has proved disorienting to many Americans. Far-off wars and economies determine, or seem to determine, the fates o more and more people. Government has grown so complicated and abstract that people have come to doubt its abstractions altogether, and swap them for the comforting, visceral truths of power and identity. (para. 70)

The crisis is the direct result of decades of unbridled neoliberal capitalism, to which masses of people have become estranged, and that has led to seething discontent, rage, and frustration in large part directed at the established political elite. The great recession of 2008–2013, triggered by the 2007/2008 financial crisis, has also had an enduring ideological impact:

> Everything that the politicians and economists and bankers had told their populations for two decades about the superiority of free markets turned out to be false. Free markets, it appeared, were responsible instead for the devastation

of the world economy. The blatant white-collar crime revealed in the most respectable banks only added to the ideological turmoil. No longer could the ruling class just dismiss critics of the 'free market' as throwbacks to an old and superseded order. For the first time, criticisms of the neoliberal order were published on a regular basis in the leading organs of the world's press. (Bramble, 2018, para. 18)

Resurgence of Nationalism and Asymmetric Imperialism

Second, in addition to popular discontent and distrust of elites, we are witnessing a growing realisation by the ruling class that the neoliberal economic revolution has run its course and that US hegemony is at risk from a new rival, China (Bramble, 2018). This necessitated a resurgence of nationalism and protectionism, and, in the persona of Trump, a phony appeal to white workers. While Hillary Clinton and the rest of her establishment politicians tried to hide their hard-line neoliberal capitalist agenda "under the banner of equality, justice and prosperity for all" (McLaren, 2018, personal correspondence) it was Donald Trump who seized the opportunity to pursue the vote of the dispossessed. He did this by cynically claiming to come to the rescue of the poor white workers in the rust belt, created by the onward march of the fourth industrial revolution: (see the Afterword to this volume), who refused to vote for the establishment figure Clinton and provided a groundswell of support for her populist opponent. For a full analysis of those who voted for Trump, see BBC News (2016). Trump promised to Make America Great Again and to create a decent future for the forgotten white working class by putting the US first. His unexpected victory also emboldened, energized, and served to bring a degree of legitimacy to the fascist alt-right (see Cole, 2019, pp. 47–77).

While Trump retains certain neoliberal policies at home (deregulation, privatization, and permanent tax cuts for the wealthy; those for the working class expire in 2025), his international policies represent a significant shift away from global "free trade" and can be seen as attempting to retreat from the post-Cold War grand strategy of the United States overseeing the international free-trade regime, in favor of economic nationalism. Trump's nationalism is epitomised by his scrapping of Obama's Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement. This would have been the largest regional trade accord in history, setting new terms for trade and business investment among the United States and 11 other Pacific Rim nations (Australia, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, Vietnam, Chile, Brunei, Singapore and New Zealand) "a far-flung group with an annual gross domestic product of nearly $28 trillion" representing "roughly 40 percent of global G.D.P. and one-third of world trade" (Granville, 2017, para. 1). As Granville explains,

the agreement, a hallmark of the Obama administration, became a flashpoint in the United States presidential campaign, where it was opposed by the nominees

of both major parties as a symbol of failed globalism and the loss of United States jobs overseas. (para. 2)

Rising international tensions, especially between the United States, China, and Russia, fill the daily headlines (Granville, 2017). Smith (2019) refers to "a new period of imperialism," in which the "unipolar world order based on the dominance of the United States, which has been eroding for some time, has been replaced by an asymmetric multipolar world order" (para. 2).

TRUMP'S FASCISTIC BRAND OF NATIONALISM

The ruling class historically calls out fascism in times of capitalist crisis, and Trump's particular brand of nationalism resonates with Michael Mann's (2004) elucidation of nationalism, one of five fascism-associated key terms drawn from his understanding of its actual existence in six European countries: Italy, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Romania and Spain in the post-World War 1 era. Mann makes five observations about fascist nationalism. First, he argues that "fascists had a deep and populist commitment to an 'organic' or 'integral' nation," with an "unusually strong sense of its 'enemies,'" both in other countries and at home (p. 13). Second, fascists had "a very low tolerance of ethnic or cultural diversity, since this would subvert the organic, integral unity of the nation" (p. 13). Third, aggression against "enemies" supposedly threatening this organic unity is the source of fascism's extremism. Fourth, "race" is an ascribed characteristic, something we are born with and keep until we die. Fifth, fascists have a vision of the rebirth of an ancient nation, adapted to modern times. To this I would add that fascism is against internationalism in all its forms, and, once in power, fascists attempt to centralize authority under a dictatorship and to promote belligerent nationalism, with only one party allowed and all others crushed.

Relating these features to Trump, we can say with confidence that he has a deep and populist commitment to an integral nation and an "unusually strong sense of its enemies" both at home and abroad. This includes "aggression against them." Trump also has a very low tolerance of ethnic or cultural diversity—seen as a threat to the integral unity of the nation. I also suspect that he believes that "race" is an ascribed characteristic. At home, his multifaceted racist rhetoric and policy agenda is well documented (e.g. Cole, 2019).

Overseas, the combative megalomaniacal Trump fits perfectly into this new period of imperialism. Trump's transactional approach to foreign affairs means that he will regularly verbally attack, abuse and threaten other nations and their leaders, while also attempting (often simultaneously) to make deals that he feels are in his best interests and those of capitalists operating on US soil. It should be underlined here that, demagogic appeals to labor aside, Trump's populism is not aimed at benefiting American workers, although, of course, providing jobs boosts his electoral appeal:

his program is intended to restore the competitive position of American capital, particularly manufacturing capital, against its rivals (Smith, 2019).

With respect to dictatorship, Trump shows no signs of actually banning other political parties at home, although it should be stressed that he is prepared to shutdown government in an attempt to get his own way, as he did in December, 2018, over Democrats' opposition to his $5 billion border wall funding request. Moreover, earlier that year (in May 2018), he "joked" about having a longer stint in office than is allotted by the Constitution: "[u]nless they give me an extension for the presidency, which I don't think the fake news media would be too happy about" (Reese, 2018, para. 2). As Reese points out, "Trump really loves this joke! During [an earlier meeting with donors], Trump commented that China's president Xi Jingping has been given the title 'president for life'" (para. 4). Trump then added, "I think it's great. Maybe we'll want to give that a shot someday" (para. 4). More recently (in May, 2019) he retweeted conservative religious leader Jerry Falwell Jr., who had said the president should have two years added to his first term "as pay back for time stolen by this corrupt failed coup," a reference to Special Counsel Robert Mueller's lengthy investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election (Corbett, 2019, para. 1).

As Corbett points out:

> Trump then went on a tweet storm of his own, arguing that "they have stolen two years of my (our) Presidency." In a follow up tweet, the president added, "The Witch Hunt is over but we will never forget." Despite the tremendous success that I have had as President, including perhaps the greatest ECONOMY and most successful first two years of any President in history, they have stolen two years of my (our) Presidency (Collusion Delusion) that we will never be able to get back. (para. 3)

The previous month (April, 2019) he had also "joked" about extending his presidency, after receiving an award at an event for the Wounded Warrior Project, held the same day Mueller's report was released to the public:

> Well, this is really beautiful. This will find a permanent place, at least for six years, in the Oval Office. Is that okay? I was going to joke, General, and say at least for 10 or 14 years, but we would cause bedlam if I said that, so we'll say six. (Corbett, 2019, paras. 8–9)

That he is indeed serious about a possible dictatorship is further revealed in an interview with Democratic House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi in *The New York Times*. Pelosi said she didn't trust Trump to respect the results of the upcoming election if he lost, unless a Democratic candidate won by an overwhelming majority (Corbett, 2019). Finally, Michael Cohen, the president's former personal lawyer of 10 years, stated to the House oversight committee early 2019 that he worries "there will never be a peaceful transition of power" if Trump loses in 2020 (Corbett, 2019, para. 15).

Despite these and other similarities with classical fascism (see Cole, 2019, pp. 8–24), whether Trump can accurately be described as (neo-) fascist has been the subject of much debate. My own view is that it is factually more appropriate to refer to him as "fascistic," in that he leans towards fascism, is open to certain fascist ideas, defends fascists on the ground, and is perhaps ready to discuss fascism in private, or adopt one or more fascist policies in public given the right set of political and economic circumstances.

As for the present, if one ideological endeavour dominates the presidency of the fascistic Trump, it is his ongoing attempt to normalise American racism that in turn also serves to enable and empower the far-right, most notably the alt-right. Twitter is now viewed as the platform with the most Nazis on it (apart from perhaps 8chan) (Feldman, 2019) while the use by the alt-right of YouTube is now as important for the video-sharing website as music (Bergen, 2019; Feldman, 2019). During Trump's state visit to the UK in June, 2019, London Labour May Sadiq Khan described him as the "poster boy of the far-right movement around the world" (Stubley, 2019, para. 1). Later that month, as if to verify Khan's remark, Trump kicked off the 2020 presidential campaign with a fascistic rally, where the unchallenged leader to the Republican Party "appeared to be bidding for the role of *Führer* rather than seeking to win a majority of votes in a democratic election" (Martin, 2019, para. 3). Martin describes the event:

> In a typically meandering and incoherent presentation, riddled with lies, exaggerations and vicious slanders, Trump vilified immigrants, attacked the media (whose reporters at the rally he denounced repeatedly, prompting catcalls and threats from his supporters), and denounced the Democratic Party, which he described as "radical," "un-American," "socialist," "extreme," "depraved" and guilty of "the greatest betrayal of the American middle class, and, frankly, American life." (para. 4)

Martin (2019) goes on, "When he said, at one point, 'Our Radical Democrat opponents are driven by hatred, prejudice and rage,' he was clearly engaged in projection" (para. 5). Moreover, he spent much of his speech re-fighting the 2016 election, rehashing attacks on Hillary Clinton and encouraging chants of "lock her up" from the crowd. He concluded with the following assertion, reminiscent of classical fascism: "We are one movement, one people, one family and one glorious nation under God" (para. 6). More generally, the Trump agenda, as witnessed in the chapters of this book, depends on the denial of the existence of "truth" which for Trumpism reads, as Faith Agostinone-Wilson argues in the Introduction, "truth that doesn't privilege nationalist, white, patriarchal capitalism."

TRUMP'S DENIAL OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Trump's denial of climate change possibly surpasses even fascism in its potential consequences for humankind. Also, on his UK state visit, after denying that he had

called Meghan Markle, "nasty"; claiming that the large anti-Trump demonstration, widely reported with media footage and within Trump's earshot, was "fake news"; and stating that Theresa May was probably a better negotiator than him, he moved on to some earth-shattering (literally) fake news. In an interview with his friend, Piers Morgan on ITV, Trump revealed that he had informed Prince Charles, a passionate advocate of action on climate-change, that the US "right now has among the cleanest climates there are based on all statistics, and it's even getting better because I agree with that we want the best water, the cleanest water" (Harvey, 2019, para. 1).

Environment correspondent for *The Guardian*, Fiona Harvey (2019) reminds us of the reality of US damage to the ecosystem, by focusing on eight serious issues. First, despite his claim to Morgan, Trump's recent actions on water have been an attempt to roll back decades of progress. For example, in December 2019, Trump announced plans to undo or weaken federal rules that protect millions of acres of wetlands and thousands of miles of streams from pesticide run-off (the movement of water and any contaminants across the soil surface) and other pollutants.

Second, there are greenhouse gas emissions, of which the US is the biggest emitter, after China, with Climate Action Tracker (2019) estimating that the US will not meet the carbon reduction targets of 26–28% that were set by Obama below 2005 levels by 2025.

Third, Harvey (2019) notes that, as a result of fracking, the US is one of the world's biggest gas producers, with about half of its oil coming from this production method. This requires the blasting of dense shale rock with water, sand and chemicals to release the tiny bubbles of fossil fuel trapped inside, and comes at a cost, since the vast water requirements are draining some areas dry. Moreover, pollutants near fracking sites include heavy metals, chemicals that disrupt hormones, and particulates (matter in the form of minute separate particles). The effects range from memory and learning difficulties to behavioural problems. An additional contributor to climate change is leaks of "fugitive" methane.

Fourth, the US fossil fuel industry is seeking new grounds for exploration—among them, the pristine Alaskan wilderness, with drilling in the Alaskan wildlife reserve a key Trump policy.

Fifth, the Trump administration has loosened regulations on fuel efficiency, already less stringent than in many other countries, for cars and vans. It is feared this will increase greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution.

Seventh, we have Trump's notorious denial of climate change. As a result, according to a YouGov poll in collaboration with *The Guardian* (Milman & Harvey, 2019), the US has some of the highest rates of climate change denial in the world.

Seventh, and related to this is Trump's infamous decision to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement of 2015 which, although it doesn't take effect until after the next presidential election, has emboldened other countries considering withdrawal, notably Brazil, and has increased the influence of the fossil fuel lobbyists.

Finally, Harvey refers to the rolling back of Obama-era measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from power plants that threatens air pollution as coal-fired

power stations will be able to spew out toxins once more. I return to the fundamental issue of climate change and the other themes of this Foreword in the Afterword to this book.

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FAITH AGOSTINONE-WILSON

INTRODUCTION

ABSTRACT

The US left, such as it is, has shown itself inadequate to the task of confronting right wing ideologies, which have only intensified since the election, culminating in the white supremacist Unite the Right torch rally at Charlottesville in August 2017 and on a larger scale, the mosque shootings in New Zealand in March 2019. Whether underestimating Trump by downplaying his seriousness during the primaries, trivializing the concerns of women and minorities as "identity politics," or rushing to prioritize the free speech rights of fascists over the targets of their speech, the left has found themselves unable to use its traditional arsenal of evidence, rational discourse, and appeals to diversity of viewpoints. With Trump we see immediately the limits of depoliticized celebrations of relativism used as resistance, unmoored from any specific allegiance or ideological vision. What has essentially happened is that the right wing has effectively borrowed the language of the left, taking advantage of the loopholes of classical liberalism. This chapter provides an overview of key issues taken up by subsequent authors of the text.

Keywords: Trump, truth, fake news, US elections, media, social media, liberalism

Those of us inside academia were stunned in disbelief as we watched the election returns on the evening of November 8, 2016. What was formerly not within the realm of possibility was quickly and violently transformed into a toxic 'new normal' as Donald Trump won the Electoral College by a combination of marginal leads in a handful of states, totaling roughly 100,000 votes. This on top of a steady 18-month campaign of the most virulent racist, sexist, homophobic, ablest, and xenophobic discourse from Trump and his supporters, who immediately, if not paranoiacally, expected everyone to engage in a major project of forgetting, in order to comply and "respect" him as the president post-election.

Most disappointingly, the US left, such as it is, has shown itself inadequate to the task of confronting right wing ideologies, which have only intensified since the election, culminating in the white supremacist Unite the Right torch rally at Charlottesville in August 2017 and on a larger scale, the mosque shootings in New Zealand in March 2019. Whether underestimating Trump by downplaying his seriousness during the primaries (see Cillizza, 2015), trivializing the concerns of

women and minorities as "identity politics" (Lillia, 2016), or rushing to prioritize the free speech rights of fascists over the targets of their speech, the left has found themselves unable to use its traditional arsenal of evidence, rational discourse, and appeals to diversity of viewpoints (Dahlberg, 2010). Instead, when there is an open forum on social media and websites, they are quickly overrun by right wing talking points, as *Popular Science* magazine found when they had to shut off their comments feature as a protective measure against the damaging effects of anti-climate change perspectives (LeBarre, 2013).

The lack of site moderators willing to move past the libertarian, individualized "hands off" philosophy of online spaces means that speech of Trump supporters is able to reach the heights of irrationality, racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia without being significantly challenged, partly because people are tired of having to essentially start over spending endless time explaining basic concepts such as sexism in the workplace being unacceptable. Indeed, studies of online spaces have shown that sites that enforce basic communication protocol, such as a zero-tolerance policy for racism or active roles of moderators, encourage participation in the discussion (Lampe, Zube, Lee, Park, & Johnston, 2014).

With Trump we see immediately the limits of depoliticized celebrations of relativism used as resistance, unmoored from any specific allegiance or ideological vision. What has essentially happened is that the right wing has effectively borrowed the language of the left, taking advantage of the loopholes of classical liberalism, as Nagel (2017) explains regarding the brief fame of Milo Yiannopoulos:

> The most recent rise of the online right is evidence of the triumph of the identity politics of the right and of the co-opting of 60s left styles of transgression and counterculture. The libertinism, individualism, bourgeois bohemianism, postmodern irony and ultimately the nihilism that the left was once accused of by the right actually characterized the movement to which Milo belonged. (p. 57)

However, as we have quickly found out, political resistance to the right is not just a matter of playful use of signs and symbols or discourse alone and has to be fought directly and in solidarity. Witness the threat of health care being removed from 24 million people, for example (Krugman, 2017). At this point, it is clear that Trump and his supporters have not just deployed relativism as a form of strategy, but have fully weaponized it against their perceived enemies: women, immigrants, minorities, LGBTQ people along with educational and journalistic institutions. While Trump "remains closer to the sensibilities of Yiannopoulos and the trolling online right than he does to conservatism," his hit-and-miss policy statements align quite nicely with traditional right-wing republicans (lower taxes, tax breaks for companies to create jobs, anti-abortion, etc.) who show no sign of dropping their associations with him (Nagel, 2017, p. 59).

Part of what makes truth in the era of Trump so troublesome is that Trump himself has no specific, coherent worldview to critique, or, as Klein (2017) puts

it, "Trumpism's biggest problem, by far, is that its namesake doesn't believe in it" (para. 8). Even with the incompetence of the Bush administration, there were clear tenets of neoconservatism with its combined vision of imperialist interventionism and Christo-capitalist religious right morality that could be successfully critiqued, most forcefully by Chalmers Johnson (2004, 2005, 2008) in his "blowback trilogy."

Instead, Trump—arguably America's most secular president to date (despite his attempt to show his pious religiosity by quoting from "Two Corinthians")—has made several disjointed statements regarding the need for US foreign policy to be more isolationist (while the Trump brand remains quite global) while having multiple marriages, numerous affairs, and sexual harassment/assault incidents. There is not one aspect of Trump that isn't contradictory; thus, the difficulty in pinning him down. Even more disturbingly, it could be as Sefla (2017) suggests, "difficult to distinguish its [Trump administration] initiatives between what is audacious and what reflects simple incompetence" (p. 3).

This is along the lines of what Pomerantzev and Weiss (2014) call "the menace of unreality" where no one advances a coherent ideology unless it is suits one's immediate interest. Their report, written prior to the election of Trump, highlights remarkable similarities between Putin and Trump's use of the media and "alternative facts":

> Russia combines Soviet-era "whataboutism" and Chekist "active measures" with a wised-up, postmodern smirk that says that everything is a sham. Where the Soviets once co-opted and repurposed concepts such as "democracy," "human rights" and "sovereignty" to mask their opposites, the Putinists use them playfully to suggest that not even the West really believes in them...all liberalism is cant, and anyone can be bought. (p. 5)

Trump and his supporters refuse critical realism, the notion that truth can be pinned down or that there are established, structural facts outside of own knowledge or admission of them (see Bhaskar & Callinicos, 2003). Instead, truth is on the move, endlessly and purposefully diverted as part of a winner take all mindset. Any aspect of truth "sitting still" or consensus on the most minimal of facts cannot be tolerated, as with Trump's insistence that his inauguration numbers were smaller than Obama's or that he won New Hampshire, both easily verifiable. As Kilgore (2017) remarks about Team Trump, "it has done such a good job of convincing its political base that all criticism is maliciously partisan" (para. 3).

By making truth a simple matter of what you want something to mean at that particular time, tied to who is in power, a form of "truth is on our side" mentality takes hold. In the many cases of Trump supporters getting into email conflicts at work or videotaped rants at the mall, the perpetrators justify their actions by referring to Trump having done or said it. We also have the problem of intention and the after-effects of relativism to contend with. While Trump himself and his followers might not have an ideological core, associated white supremacist and misogynistic Internet-based movements DO have a clear political vision, and have started to move

from the screen to the streets, as witnessed by the rise in hate crimes (Okeowo, 2016). A recent example of this was displayed on August 12, 2017, where a Unite the Right rally was held with younger, Brietbart-following white supremacists wielding torches to defend confederate statues, resulting in the death of a counter-protestor who was deliberately hit with a car.

As investigations into the Trump administration's connections with Russia intensify, the tactics of anti-truth include first denying such a thing as truth exists (read: truth that doesn't privilege nationalist, white, patriarchal capitalism), followed by claims of a "fake media" out to get Trump, concluding with endorsing subversion of the rule of law and bare minimum notions of right and wrong in order steamroll over others to get what you want. In this way the anti-truth project is a major time and energy suck. Instead of spending intellectual energy and financial resources addressing the oncoming and very real environmental crisis, we are constantly entering rabbit holes of relativism, allowing the capitalist class time to extract more profit from an outdated fossil fuel industry because we have to prioritize covering "both sides."

Truth is also subverted by erasing the position of minorities, women and LGBTQ people in making Trump and his supporters the victims. Even though they enjoy relative privilege starting with Trump and his team being part of the top 1% of income earners all the way to the core base who makes $75,000+ median household income (Silver, 2016), the discourse hammers home belligerent victim and martyrdom status to dodge criticism. The victim status is usually invoked when the conversation starts to get dicey and the truth begins to stand in place or stack up.

Trump's followers associate the media, educational institutions, liberals and elites (more specifically *liberal* elites) with a frightening, enforced multicultural future which represents a massive, final displacement of the "real American." The "real American" is a hybrid persona representing white, rural/suburban, protestant, straight males (and female supporters, so long as they remain loyal) who occupy a disappearing landscape of industrial labor and small business owners. These are the *authentic* workers, ones Trump was able to mobilize to win the electoral college by resurrecting the Nixonian language of resentment against the gains of the Civil Rights movement (Bouie, 2014).

The media follows suit by its endless feature stories asking why the benighted and long-suffering Trump supporters voted the way they did (see Lillia, 2016). In these stories, a rhetorical template is used, where first a small-town setting is described, including the depopulated downtown and abandoned factories (sometimes with accompanying photographs). Then, individuals are interviewed, and most of the sentiments include some "illegal alien" or "welfare cheat" being responsible for the dire condition of the town and the people in it. The accounts are stacked with the myths of the "real American worker," reinforcing and in many cases empathizing with those interviewed, despite their overtly racist statements. None of these articles acknowledge that the working class is fast becoming young, urban, minority, and female (Wilson, 2016). It is also notable that very few articles are written about

Clinton supporters, asking them how *they* feel about Trump's policies, despite their candidate having won the popular vote by 3 million. Those grievances do not appear to matter.

For those who see the anti-truth project as just another in a series of conservative revivals, the intensity and irrationality of its current incarnation should be a source of concern. Once laughed off the Internet, flat earth proponents now have a hearing, since even empirical science is now apparently one viewpoint among many (Dure, 2016). The very fact that flat earth, anti-vaccination, and anti-climate science supporters even get a place in the debate provides the illusion that science is what you make it to be. All the better if the ruling class can benefit, such as the fossil fuel industry. And when challenged, anti-science movements pull a leftist strategy of pointing out evidence where science has been on the wrong side of history, like the eugenics movement (which many conservatives would support today) to create uncertainty about science itself.

Jones (2015) articulates four kinds of truths that teachers shape in the classroom by their pedagogy and curriculum. The first are factual truths, addressing basic-level knowledge that is readily verifiable. Second are systematic truths, which have to do with disciplinary knowledge surrounding subjects such as science, history, and art, among others. Third are moral truths, including how we relate to and treat other people. Finally, the fourth and most important are creating the conditions to cultivate subjective truths, or "what students themselves take up as true—what they take to be true about themselves, about others, and about the world in general" (p. 112). The arrival of Trumpism has violated these truths on a grand scale. Therefore, the authors of this edited text seek to explore the many aspects of truth in the era of Trump.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Our multi-faceted examination of truth in the era of Trump begins with Chapter 2, "Endless Babbling and the Contradictory Nature of Truth in the Rise of Trump," and Austin Pickup's connection of Trump's rhetorical strategies to that of the athuroglossos, or endless babbler. In this case, rather than being just the figure of a fool, the endless babbler represents a major disruptive threat to democracy, and not for positive reasons, such as challenging the status quo or defense of human rights. Additionally, Pickup points out that Trump's weaponizing of relativism has posed challenges to anti-foundational philosophies such as postmodernism. He asserts that academics can still embrace relativism without supporting Trumpism.

Chapter 3, "Post-Truth in the Age of Trump: Ideology from Right to Left after Althusser," finds Jones Irwin examining how both the Left and the Right question truth, but with different aims in mind. Drawing on the scholarship of Althusser and other Marxian thinkers, Irwin poses a difficult question: "Can the Left jettison a concept of "truth" for "post-truth" politics or, rather, does contemporary politics require a reintroduction and reassessment of the questions of epistemology and of the concept of truth?" In the process of answering this question, Irwin demonstrates

that ideology, rather than being fixed and transcendent, is a constantly negotiated process.

In Chapter 4, "Twitter and Trumpism: Epistemological Concerns in the Post-Truth Era," Eric Sheffield takes up the discussion of Trump's wielding of Twitter and how this affects what we think of as truth-telling. The structural features of Twitter itself, from its construction to its distribution, exacerbate the erosion of a shared notion of truth in the service of social justice. Sheffield concludes that, "such a technology bastardizes pragmatic truth to the point of extraordinary danger and limits or eliminates any true meaning making, pragmatically or otherwise."

I take aim at the flawed media messaging around Trump's (along with other right-wing populist victories) in Chapter 5, "The Populist Masquerade of Attributing Trump's Win to 'Economic Anxiety' among White Voters." I pose several dialectical questions that challenge the economic anxiety narrative, namely why now is there this sudden interest in the white, male rural voter as emblematic of the authentic working class? My goal in this chapter is to de-center the existing racialized notion of a "real" working class by taking on the created truths within the media and political punditry that insist on using colorblind racism in furthering their discourse.

Religion as a powerful form of ideology messaging is the topic of Chapter 6, "The Gospel According to White Christian Nationalism: Religion, Race, and Nation in the Trump Era" by Jeremy Godwin. Evangelical support for Trump represents one of the major ironies to emerge since the 2016 election. Godwin breaks down how this support operates through generating alternative narratives, backed by the power of religious belief and unquestioning adherence to the authority of the figure of Trump.

In Chapter 7, "White Stupidification and the Need for Dialectical Thought in the Age of Trump," Daniel Rubin directly confronts racism as an impediment to truth. Leading up to and since Trump's election, minority student populations have felt the biggest negative effects of such racism. Outlining these impacts of Trumpism in K-12 and postsecondary education, Rubin mounts an important defense of dialectical thinking. He stresses the necessity of teachers to introduce critical inquiry into the classroom and provides the readers with examples of how to do so.

To conclude our analysis of the nature of truth in the era of Trump, Mike Cole presents an urgent call regarding climate change—perhaps the most consequential issue where truth is involved. It is hoped that this book will continue a much-needed conversation that leads to direct action in the saving of our planet.

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AUSTIN PICKUP

2. ENDLESS BABBLING AND THE CONTRADICTORY NATURE OF TRUTH IN THE RISE OF TRUMP

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how the rhetoric within the Trump campaign, and subsequent administration, has epitomized a dangerous understanding of truth-telling within a modern democratic context. During the administration itself, Trump's own reactions to the events in Charlottesville revealed a relativistic sense of truth and values with his "many sides" comments. These examples illustrate a larger contradiction within the Trump regime of "telling it like it is" and rejecting "political correctness" (speaking truth, in other words) through baseless claims on immigration, climate change, voter fraud, and many other issues, while at the same time retreating to relativism when caught in moral and epistemological crises. Using Foucault's analysis of truth-telling in ancient Greece, I suggest that Trump represents an *athuroglossos*, or an endless babbler, who poses dangers to the ethical exchange of truth within democratic dialogue. Such an analysis also has important implications for the role of truth and truth-telling within social discourse and analysis, especially among researchers working from anti-foundational paradigms that may wish to clarify relational accounts of truth and contrast them with the baseless claims to truth currently espoused by Trump & co.

Keywords: Trump, truth, politics, US elections, philosophy, media

INTRODUCTION

One of the difficulties of writing about and during an ongoing presidential administration is the shifting nature of current events and the emergence of new and multi-layered episodes which occur alongside the development of writing. Over the past week since I have sat down to fashion an introduction to this chapter, multiple events have occurred that I would have liked to include in my analysis of the Trump administration and its relation to truth-telling, which will be the central focus of this chapter. For example, in the midst of the government shutdown over Trump's US-Mexico border wall, members of the administration continued to parrot the notion that the border is a consistent access point for terrorists. White House Press Secretary

Sarah Huckabee Sanders claimed that approximately 4,000 terrorists had entered the United States through the Mexico border in 2018, despite US Customs and Border Patrol data indicating that only six people in question had been apprehended over a six-month time period (Miller, 2019).

The next week, during a CNN interview on January 16, 2019, Trump's lawyer Rudy Giuliani argued, "I never said there was no collusion between the campaign, or people in the campaign. I said the President of the United States" (Cillizza, 2019, para. 6). Anyone that has even casually followed the administration's reaction to the ongoing Robert Mueller investigation into the Trump campaign could see that this was a change of tune. In addition to Giuliani contradicting his own statements about collusion on previous occasions, the *Washington Post* reported that Trump and the White House had denied collusion between the campaign and Russia more than 140 times, or about every two-and-a-half days (Bump, 2019).

This illustrates some of the difficulties of analyzing the goings-on of a current presidential administration—especially one as scandal-ridden as Trump's—as there always seems to be a new bombshell report waiting the next day. This should come as no real surprise, as the episodes I have described here ultimately come down to outright lying or concealing truth and Trump has consistently been found wanting in terms of making truth claims by independent fact-checking organizations. *Politifact*, for example, has found, of the over 600 claims that they have analyzed by Donald Trump, that 70% have been "mostly false" or worse (they've found only 4% to be straightforwardly "True"). In fact, Trump has twice won *Politifact's* Lie of the Year and was the subject of a top 10 falsehoods of 2018 article, in part, due to his "unabashed battle with facts" and that "Pundits and historians say the president's dismissal of objective information... is so frequent and intense that he stands apart from his predecessors" (Sanders, 2018, paras. 3–4).

However, a direct analysis of the blatant lies thrown out by Trump and his supporters is not the intended focus of this chapter. Rather, this chapter will focus on the contradictory nature of truth that seems to be evident among Trump, his allies, and the political Right overall. Despite the incessant falsehoods that have been par for the course since the beginning of the Trump campaign in 2015, part of Trump's appeal to his base and overall political success has been in positioning himself as a "truth-teller," in contrast to the perceived political correctness of the cultural Left. On the other hand, it has been interesting to note the consistent retreat to relativism on the part of Trump and his supporters when the weight of counter-evidence is too strong to be flatly denied. Though there are many examples that could be used to introduce the contradictory ways in which "truth-telling" was invoked by Trump and his supporters during the 2016 election campaign, I will focus on two related to national security and crime as a way of introducing the main argument of this chapter.

In the wake of the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, where 49 people were killed by professed ISIL supporter Omar Mateen, Donald Trump gave a speech on national security in New Hampshire on June 13, 2016. During this speech, Trump

emphasized points that would later be the crux of his travel ban on majority Muslim countries. Much of the speech focused on the perceived weakness of then President Barack Obama's administration and Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton concerning terrorism. For example, Trump said that Clinton, "repeatedly refused to say the words 'radical Islam,' until I challenged her yesterday to say the words…However, Hillary Clinton…still has no clue what Radical Islam is, and won't speak honestly about what it is" (Trump, 2016a, paras. 48–49).

The first thing to notice here is that Trump assumes the truth of his position regarding terrorism and positions detractors as, not those that disagree with the truth of his premise, but those that are trying to conceal the truth for some ulterior motive. Trump was quick to suggest that the real reason Clinton, Obama, and others would not utter this unspoken truth was "political correctness." On multiple occasions, Trump derided opponents for wanting to maintain political correctness over hard-line policies aimed at Muslim nations in the name of national security. He argued that "the current politically correct response cripples our ability to talk and think and act clearly" (para. 20) and that Obama, Clinton, and others "have put political correctness above common sense" (para. 57).

Though I will analyze the concept of "political correctness" in more detail later in the chapter, two things are important to understand here. First, it is clear from this context that Trump presents political correctness as a technique of concealing or inhibiting the utterance of truth. Second, Trump does not appeal to evidence to support his assertions, or even engage the stated positions of his opponents, but essentially offers his position as a "common sense" truth that even those desiring political correctness know to be true, but simply want to conceal. It is at this moment that Trump presents himself as a "truth-teller," fearlessly uttering truths that are self-evident, but that many in power want to hide. He explained, "If we want to protect the quality of life for all Americans…then we need to tell the truth about Radical Islam…We need to tell the truth, also, about how Radical Islam is coming to our shores" (paras. 37–38). As I will explain more fully later in the chapter, Trump here taps into a decades-long tactic of the political Right of equating inclusive attitudes toward minority groups with an overly sensitive, PC culture. Within this rhetoric, truth holds a positive, objective, and nearly unassailable form which those on the political Right must purvey against the rising tide of liberals and multicultural Leftists who would mask it.

What also became clear during the 2016 campaign was that Trump and his supporters, while holding to the position of "truth-telling" described above, simultaneously positioned truth as relativistic and outside the scope of critical analysis. This commonly occurred in the 2016 election cycle when the truth-telling narratives spun by Trump and Republican supporters were faced with the weight of counter-evidence. Another example concerning crime and national security is instructive here. At his nomination acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in July 2016, Trump emphasized that violent crime was taking hold across America and that he would enforce tougher strategies to stop its rise. He used

the word "violence" or "crime" 18 times and the phrase "law and order" 4 times during the speech. Importantly, he did not specifically appeal to any recorded crime rates or governmental data to support his narrative, but the experiences of Americans feeling the brunt of this violence. He explained:

> Americans watching this address tonight have seen the recent images of violence in our streets and the chaos in our communities. Many have witnessed this violence personally, some have even been its victims. I have a message for all of you: the crime and violence that today afflicts our nation will soon come to an end. (Trump, 2016b, paras. 4–5)

News media outlets quickly suggested that Trump's speech hyperbolized the situation in America and painted an inaccurate narrative concerning violent crime. During an interview with Newt Gingrich after the speech, CNN anchor Alisyn Camerota argued this point by explaining that violent crime had been consistently on the decline in America, thus undermining the premise of Trump's proposed "law and order" strategies. Gingrich's response illustrated a relativist position that, as I will discuss later, would become increasingly prevalent among the Trump administration when faced with overwhelming counter-evidence. In response to Camerota's insistence that FBI statistics showed the decline of violent crime throughout the United States, Gingrich said, "The average American, I will bet you this morning, does not think crime is down, does not think they are safer" (Camerota & Gingrich, 2016, para. 14). After Camerota responded that "we are safer, and it is down" (para. 15), Gingrich exclaimed, "No, that's your view" (para. 16). In furthering this relativist position on the truth of the matter at hand, Gingrich went on to explain that the emphasis on responding to violent crime in America appealed to the subjective experiences of people, rather than firm empirical evidence. He explained, "The current view is that liberals have a whole set of statistics which theoretically may be right, but it's not where human beings are" (para. 18) and "As a political candidate, I'll go with how people feel and I'll let you go with the theoreticians" (para. 21).

The preceding examples illustrate the main focus of this chapter which suggests that "truth" itself is held in contradiction for Trump, his allies, and many popular pundits of the political Right. While Trump suggests the unassailable truth of his claims one day, he and others supporting him may turn around and offer relativist positions, equating personal belief with documented evidence, to buttress them the next. Importantly, the retreat to relativism in the face of firm counter-evidence has the function of shutting down an engaged and relational dialogue with the truth. Dialogically, it seems that this retreat serves to enhance an "I have mine, you have yours" worldview concerning truth that is meant to end conversation and bring the debate on competing truth claims to a stalemate.

In the rest of this chapter, I will analyze this contradiction by first illustrating Trump's supposed identity as a truth-teller, suggesting that he is the one willing to speak openly and honestly about truths that those in power would wish to hide.

Next, I will further illustrate the numerous ways in which Trump and supporters have retreated to relativism to maintain their narratives amidst both epistemological and moral crises. I would also like to connect this contradictory positionality to trends on the political Right as a whole. This is an interesting layer concerning the relationship between power, ideology, and truth as moral/epistemological relativism has consistently been a charge against the academic Left by those on the political Right and, yet, it is now being regularly weaponized by the leading figure of Right politics. After establishing these points, I will turn to Foucault's analysis of *parrhesia*, or frank speech, to interpret this contradiction in truth-telling. Through this particular lens, I argue that Trump is not a truth-teller, but an *athuroglossos*, or what Foucault describes as an "endless babbler," who presents particular dangers for ethical dialogue due to such a person's lack of relation to truth.

After this investigation into Trump and truth-telling, I will conclude by considering the implications of what is happening here for social inquiry. Many important forms of social inquiry operate from anti-foundational paradigms that problematize the notions of objective truth, the relation between truth and power, and the importance of subjective experience in the construction of truth claims. However, these social science paradigms, which have been legitimized within the academy through decades of refined debate across a variety of disciplines, stand in contrast to the haphazard and irresponsible ways in which truth-telling is being invoked by Trump and his supporters. This, I believe, is an important distinction to be made considering the epistemological backlash against Trump and his callous handling of truth.

While important, this backlash may problematically conflate Trump's (dis) engagement with truth with well-established academic perspectives that have made important contributions to our collective understanding of the social world. I will suggest that what Trump is doing has little to do with these important paradigms and presents an opportunity for researchers influenced by such traditions to clarify their meaning. In short, Trump's endless babbling indicates a reckless and authoritarian dismissal of truth aimed at re-entrenching a hegemonic past, while anti-foundational paradigms of social inquiry invoke a relational understanding of truth which allow us to think otherwise in the formation of a more ethical future.

TRUMP AS TRUTH-TELLER

On June 16, 2015, after ceremoniously descending his escalator at Trump Tower in New York City, Donald Trump announced his candidacy for President of the United States. This announcement was followed by an approximately 45-minute speech which included many of the talking points that would characterize his contentious campaign and subsequent administration. After introductory salutations and formalities, Trump began the speech like he has done with so many others by painting a picture of crisis that has befallen the United States. "Our country is in serious trouble," he began, before quickly turning attention to the supposed threats of illegal immigration and Islamic terrorism. It is at this point that Trump uttered

the now infamous words which have perhaps most associated his rise with a new era of racism and xenophobia in political discourse. He argued, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best... They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists" (Trump, 2015, para. 9). In a faltering attempt to soften some of this rhetoric, he added, "And some, I assume, are good people" (para. 9).

In reality, Trump's cornerstone assertion that "some" undocumented immigrants are law-abiding people while most are violent criminals is the exact opposite of sociological evidence. Research conducted since Trump's presidential run has found his claims on violent crime committed by undocumented immigrants to be dubious at best (Farley, 2018) and flatly wrong at worst (Ingraham, 2018), with undocumented immigrants committing crimes at lower rates than native-born citizens. And, yet, Trump maintained a position as truth-teller here by appealing to supposed popular sentiment rather than anything resembling objective fact. He continued by stating, "But I speak to border guards and they tell us what we're getting. And it only makes common sense. It only makes common sense" (Trump, 2015, para. 10).

By stating that his narratives about violence and illegal immigration were "common sense," Trump suggested that what he claimed was, indeed, true and that this was more or less self-evident. "Real Americans" knew what was going on in a way that superseded anything that career politicians and Washington insiders could offer. Fashioning himself as a populist, Trump continued to appeal to "common sense," especially when taken to task over views that were perceived as inflammatory or racist. This was clearly illustrated by Trump's public statements concerning Gonzalo Curiel, a US District Judge of Mexican descent who oversaw a class-action lawsuit against Trump University, a for-profit educational institution accused of defrauding students. Claiming that Curiel had treated him and Trump University unfairly throughout the legal proceedings, Trump argued that the judge could not be impartial due to his Mexican heritage. The suggestion that race should be considered when determining judicial impartiality was found so egregious that even political supporters, such as Mitch McConnell and Paul Ryan, disagreed with and labelled it as racist.

In response to those who pressed the matter, Trump made it clear that what he was claiming should be so obvious that there was no need to appeal to critical scrutiny or engage in dialogue about American traditions and values. He said, "I'm not talking about tradition, I'm talking about common sense... You know, we have to stop being so politically correct in this country" (Trump, as cited in Yuhas, 2016, para. 12). We see here again that Trump maintained his position as a truth-teller by appealing to common sense, yet added another layer that would become commonplace throughout his campaign by arguing that "political correctness" lay at the heart of much of the opposition against him.

By continually charging his opponents of being "politically correct," Trump indicated important assumptions about his status as a truth-teller. First, he firmly

entrenched himself as someone who was willing to speak truths that were not culturally acceptable, but that were nonetheless true and in need of being said. Second, he could frame political opponents as enemies who wanted to, not genuinely disagree, but intentionally conceal the truth of his claims to further an ulterior agenda. This intentional move served to distract from the unassailable and self-evident truth (i.e. common sense) of things like the dangers of undocumented, Hispanic immigrants. These elements were clearly illustrated throughout Trump's presidential candidacy. After NBC ended its business relationship with him by no longer broadcasting his co-owned Miss USA and Miss Universe pageants due to his comments on Mexican immigrants, Trump charged NBC with being politically correct.

By contrast, Trump situated himself as a courageous truth-teller specifically because he was willing to utter the things that everyone knew to be true, but that the "politically correct" were trying to conceal. He responded to NBC by calling them weak and unwilling to "stand behind people that tell it like it is, as unpleasant as that may be" (as quoted in Neate & Stafford, 2015, para. 6). Similarly, during a Republican primary debate in 2015, moderator Megyn Kelly confronted Trump on his consistent derogatory remarks toward women. Kelly said, "You once told a contestant that it would be a pretty picture to see her on her knees. Does that sound like the temperament of a man we should elect as president?" (as quoted in Hains, 2015, paras. 7–8). Trump responded, "The big problem this country has is being politically correct. I've been challenged by so many people and I don't frankly have time for total political correctness. And to be honest with you, this country doesn't have time either" (para. 10).

It is difficult to understand Trump's rise without considering his truth-telling status in the eyes of his supporters. By appealing to common sense and fighting political correctness, Trump positioned himself as an outsider who would take on establishment politics through speaking truths that political insiders would rather conceal. An incisive article by Weigel (2016), published just after Trump's election, indicates both what was happening in the discourse around political correctness and how much of Trump's appeal centered around his truth-telling. Concerning political correctness, she writes:

> If you say that something is *technically* correct, you are suggesting that it is wrong...However, to say that a statement is *politically* correct hints at something more insidious. Namely, that the speaker is acting in bad faith. He or she has ulterior motives, and is hiding the truth in order to advance an agenda or to signal moral superiority. To say that someone is being "politically correct" discredits them twice. First, they are wrong. Second, and more damningly, they know it. (para. 13)

By identifying opponents as being politically correct, Trump could simultaneously position them as intentionally concealing truth while concretizing his status as a truth-teller among his base, all while evading questions about the empirical or moral legitimacy of his claims. Weigel (2016) argues that this position as fearless truth-teller

made Trump popular among his base even more than specific agenda items. She explains, "Fans praised the *way* Trump talked much more often than they mentioned his policy proposals. He tells it like it is, they said. He speaks his mind. He is not politically correct" (para. 9). This analysis of Trump's rise is further supported by Fisher (2016), who suggests that Trump found success by pitting himself against the dominant cultural establishment, thereby becoming the "authentic" candidate. Central to this authenticity was the act of truth-telling. He writes:

> This idea of Trump being the authentic, anti-elitist truth-teller was a critical component to his success. In all states with primary exit polls, Donald Trump overwhelmingly won the support of voters who said the top candidate quality was to "tell it like it is." (p. 744)

It is clear that Trump fashioned himself as an anti-establishment candidate who appealed to common sense and was willing to speak the truths that political correctness would not allow. That his ability to "tell it like it is" ran contrary to how it actually *is* did not seem to matter to most of his supporters and this has spilled over into his presidency. And it is in this misalignment that there is a particularly interesting contradiction happening within the overall political landscape concerning both truth and the act of truth-telling. As Weigel (2016) explains, Trump's anti-PC rhetoric continued a decades-long tactic of the political Right of attempting to delegitimize multiculturalism and identity politics, especially in its perceived growth on college campuses and among humanities disciplines.

Beginning in the 1980s, a growing cultural conservative movement took aim at the supposed rising tide of liberals and Leftists in American higher education. Authors such as Allan Bloom, Roger Kimball, Dinesh D'Souza, and David Horowitz all made arguments that college campuses were being overrun by radical professors aimed at politicizing rational discourse and subjecting legitimate academic study to spurious analyses of race and gender. Though Weigel explains that few of these authors emphasized the idea of "political correctness," their arguments became mainstream as they began to be "regularly cited in the flood of anti-PC articles that appeared in venues such as the New York Times and Newsweek" (para. 32).

What is interesting to note is that this conservative outcry regularly championed notions of objective truth. In fact, some especially bemoaned the growing influence of postmodern/post-structural theories which questioned such notions and supposedly undermined traditional western values (Kimball, 1990; Sokal & Bricmont, 1997). This outcry has never really gone away, as many organizations and talking heads of the Right continue to make similar claims regarding higher education and its perceived influence on society at large today. For example, the National Association of Scholars, a conservative advocacy group focusing on education, lists "denial of the possibility of truth and disinterestedness" as one of its many concerns about higher education and positively lists the "disinterested pursuit of truth" as one of its core intellectual standards (National Association of Scholars, 2019). This comes alongside other conservative talking points wrapped up in anti-PC rhetoric such

as the decline of the study of Western Civilization, an overemphasis on issues of minority groups, and the exclusion of conservative ideas.

In addition to specific organizations, individual conservative commentators, such as Ann Coulter and Milo Yiannopoulos, have regularly spoken against the supposed liberal and politically correct climate of college campuses over the past few years, sometimes sparking public outcry or campus protests. One commentator who has become increasingly popular among young conservatives is Ben Shapiro. Shapiro offers a particularly interesting case here as he regularly places truth at the forefront of his speeches, even emphasizing the phrase "facts over feelings" to suggest that, for example, the objective reality of biological sex should overrule any personal experience of gender.

I bring up these examples of conservative ideology to illustrate the historical priority given to notions of facts and truth even within the growing rhetoric against political correctness. Going back to the example of Shapiro, in an almost comically ironic statement summarizing one of Shapiro's speeches at the Conservative Political Action Conference, a *Fox News* article wrote, "Conservative commentator Ben Shapiro on Thursday told activists that the 'era of political correctness is over' in the age of Donald Trump as president, while encouraging conservatives to fight liberalism with the 'truth'" (Pappas, 2018, para. 1).

What this analysis indicates is that much of Trump's appeal came with his status as a truth-teller, tapping into decades-old conservative narratives about resisting political correctness against liberals and political insiders. Again, this sets up an interesting contradiction for Trump and the political Right as a whole as, not only has Trump often been found to play loosely with facts, but he and his supporters often evade questions of empirical fact or moral truth by reverting to something the political Right has staunchly stood against (at least, in word): namely, relativism. In the next section, I will illustrate how Trump and his supporters have consistently reflected a relativist stance toward truth when confronted with counter-evidence or when caught in moral crises.

TRUMP AS RELATIVIST

As ardently as Trump positioned himself as an authentic truth-teller, he and his supporters have just as quickly slid into relativism in efforts to support ongoing political narratives or to evade the empirical and/or moral basis of his claims. This is crucially different than when Trump has insisted that things which are false are actually true or vice versa. For the most part, his incessant accusations of "fake news" toward media outlets that report unflattering headlines about him have still challenged the factual basis of those reports. Here, Trump is still (at least, in word) committed to an objectivist standpoint, debating the truth of a given set of facts and claims.

This section will focus on those moments when it is clear that Trump and others have had enough of "truth" in any objective sense and, instead, defend themselves

from a relativist standpoint. The examples discussed here illustrate how truth is a contradiction for Trump, as truth-telling has been a central feature of his rise, even while he consistently expresses no firm commitment to truth when it seems to run against his purposes. Given what was said previously about the historical emphasis on objective truth among cultural conservative ideologues, especially regarding anti-PC narratives, this also represents a contradiction for the political Right. The leading figure of the political Right is now regularly weaponizing relativism and is even said to have ushered in a new "post-truth" era at the same time that conservatives parrot notions of "facts over feelings" on college campuses and on mainstream media outlets. Whether or not it makes sense to associate Trump with "post"-truth paradigms is something I will take up in later sections. Here, I will turn to several episodes that will juxtapose Trump the relativist with Trump the truth-teller.

The *Access Hollywood* tape was initially thought to represent a watershed moment in the 2016 presidential election. Two days before the second presidential debate between Trump and Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton, the *Washington Post* ran a story revealing a taped conversation between Trump and television host Billy Bush in which Trump bragged about his sexual advances toward women. Among the many vulgar comments made by Trump were his suggestions that he could assault women based on his celebrity. He said, "I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything…Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything" (Trump, 2016c, paras. 18–20). The content of the tape was the main initial topic of conversation at the presidential debate on October 9, 2016 and questions were posed to both Trump and Clinton about what the tape conveyed.

Though Trump suggested that he never did the things he said, he did not deny the accuracy of the tape or that he used the words that were reported. Importantly, however, Trump's "apology" attempted to relativize the morality of his sexual predation and assault. He bantered back and forth with Clinton about his statements not being as bad as former president Bill Clinton's sexual assault allegations and who owed whom an apology. However, where Trump's relativism was most clearly seen was in response to Anderson Cooper's direct question about if he understood that his statements represented sexual assault. An extended quote here is illustrative. Trump responded:

> I don't think you understood what was said. This was locker room talk. I am not proud of it. I apologize to my family, I apologized to the American people. Certainly, I am not proud of it. But this is locker room talk. You know, when we have a world where you have ISIS chopping off heads, where you have them, frankly, drowning people in steel cages, where you have wars and horrible, horrible sights all over and you have so many bad things happening, this is like medieval times. We haven't seen anything like this. The carnage all over the world and they look and they see, can you imagine the people that are frankly doing so well against us with ISIS and they look at our country and see what's

going on. Yes, I am very embarrassed by it and I hate it, but it's locker room talk and it's one of those things. (Trump, 2016d, para. 9)

In his response, Trump uttered the phrase "locker room talk" four times, suggesting that what he said, while not something to be necessarily proud of, was defensible so long as it occurred amongst like-minded individuals in a closed-off setting. This illustrates Trump's relativist stance as he seems to be arguing that revelling about sexual assault is acceptable depending upon the context. The above excerpt also illustrates that Trump defended his words by alluding to the relative weight of all wrongdoing. In bringing up ISIS, he tried to deflect attention away from his shortcomings rather than accept the truth of them and address them head-on. The "it wasn't as bad as X" defense again indicated Trump's willingness to engage in moral relativism when the truth of the situation could not be denied.

Trump's comments were resolutely condemned, even by members of the Republican Party, though most retained their endorsement of him. However, even within these condemnations, some continued to relativize the moral indefensibility of sexual assault through various rhetorical tactics. One particularly interesting reaction was that of Ben Carson, the current Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. Carson followed in Trump's example by labelling the comments "locker room talk" and even said that those concerned with the comments should "call it whatever you need to call it to make it feel good to you" (as cited in Nelson, 2016, para. 10). In the same interview, Carson suggested that the problem with Trump's comments were, perhaps, that they were not uttered enough and that society had become overly sensitive.

Responding to CNN anchor Brianna Keilar, Carson said, "As I was growing up, people were always trying to talk about their sexual conquests, and trying to make themselves appear, you know, like the don, you know, Casanova…I'm surprised you haven't heard that. I really am" (Nelson, 2016, para. 2). This is an interesting case among the wider scope of Trump's supporters and the political Right overall, as Carson is a devout Christian and, perhaps, more than any other candidate made his religious faith central to his political campaign. Evangelical Christians are not typically ones to espouse relativism or to equivocate on the morality of sexual sins. Thus, while moral relativism became an important tool for Trump, it has also caught up other conservative pundits into a contradictory web.

In the end, the *Access Hollywood* episode did not turn out to be the watershed moment in the campaign many thought, as Trump won the presidency on November 8, 2016. Despite winning office, Trump's victory ranked 46th out of 58 total electoral college margins in US history, while he lost the popular vote and entered the White House with historically low approval numbers. As a result, Trump has continually engaged false narratives of a "landslide" victory and offered debunked claims of voter fraud that cost him the popular vote in order to support his image as a popular president. These narratives have been found to be factually incorrect, but Trump and his allies have also engaged in relativist accounts in order to push back against these empirical realities.

Perhaps the most well-known of these instances was the discourse surrounding attendance figures at Trump's inauguration ceremony. On January 21, 2017, at his first press briefing, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer took aim at what the Trump administration claimed were inaccurate media portrayals of the inauguration. Citing false information about rapid transit ridership in Washington, DC on inauguration day and the use of white ground coverings that gave the appearance of smaller numbers, Spicer said, "This was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration—period—both in person and around the globe" (as quoted in Cilliza, 2017, para. 7). The next day, counselor to the president Kellyanne Conway, was pressed on the false statements made by Spicer in an interview on NBC's *Meet the Press.* When host Chuck Todd asked Conway why the White House strategy would be to have Spicer relate such falsehoods in his first public address, Conway responded, "Don't be so overly dramatic about it, Chuck. You're saying it's a falsehood, and they're giving—our press secretary, Sean Spicer, gave alternative facts to that" (as quoted in Blake, 2017, para. 4).

The "alternative facts" utterance was swiftly criticized in mainstream media outlets and even within popular culture as an unrestricted assault on objective truth and an attempt to relativize baseless narratives as equally valid. Celebrities such as Dan Rather, Robert De Niro, and Steven Spielberg expressed their concern with this narrative, with Spielberg stating, "We are in a fight and it's a fight not just about alternative facts but it's a fight for the objective truth" (as quoted in Patterson, 2018, para. 8). Importantly, the "alternative facts" mantra was not a direct engagement with truth and falsity, but a suggestion that different understandings of empirical facts are equally plausible.

Speaking of Conway's public relations strategy, Nuzzi (2017) explains how "alternative facts" was ultimately offered in view of Trump's base. She writes:

> When Conway refuses to give in about crowd size, what she's doing is establishing the terms of future debate in the administration and casting some epistemological doubt on anything she is being asked about. There is an element of true-believer-ness in many of these confrontations, probably, but it also makes for exceptionally shrewd strategy, especially given how little the White House believes its real supporters trust Conway's interlocutors rather than the voice of the Trump administration itself. (para. 47)

The appeal to his base of support, often referred to as "the people" writ large, is another way that Trump and supporters have relativized empirical claims foundational to their political narratives. This was clearly illustrated during the campaign in the Newt Gingrich interview at the Republican Convention documented earlier. Trump himself has also regularly engaged in such posturing.

For example, in an ABC News interview with David Muir, Trump was repeatedly asked about his debunked claim that there was rampant voter fraud during the 2016 election and that millions of votes from dead people or undocumented immigrants cost him the popular vote. Without providing any factual evidence of his claims

(and, in fact, being contradicted when Muir noted that the author of the Pew report that Trump had been citing said there was no evidence of voter fraud), Trump tried to maintain this narrative by appealing to the beliefs of those who agreed with him. He said, "Let me just tell you, you know what's important, millions of people agree with me…The people that voted for me—lots of people are saying they saw these things happen" (Muir & Trump, 2017, paras. 77–78).

When Muir followed this up by asking if it was dangerous to talk about millions of illegal votes without presenting evidence, Trump responded, "Not at all because many people feel the same way I do" (para. 94). This illustrates Trump's seamless transition from truth-teller to relativist, as in the course of a few questions, he moved from basing his claims in empirical fact to what his supporters believed to be true. Further, this transition occurred once he could no longer resolutely deny the facts on objective grounds.

The previous examples illustrate a retreat to relativism when faced with the inability to deny empirical facts. However, Trump has also engaged in relativism when faced with moral crises, such as the Charlottesville attack in the summer of 2017. On August 12, 2017, in reaction to the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA, violence erupted between protesters and counter-protesters. This culminated with James Alex Fields, Jr. driving his car into a crowd of counter-protestors, killing one and injuring approximately 30 others. Trump's initial reaction seemed to draw a moral equivalency between the protesters, who were comprised of white supremacist, neo-Confederate, and neo-Nazi groups, and the counter-protestors. He said, "We condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides, on many sides" (as quoted in Rascoe, 2018, para. 11).

After members of his own party called on Trump to denounce the specific hate groups involved in the violence, he did call out the KKK, neo-Nazis, and white supremacists at a statement at the White House. However, the next day, at a press conference in Trump Tower, Trump seemed to walk back to his original "both sides" comment. When he was pressed about the "alt Right" factions involved in the attacks, Trump again maintained that both openly racist protestors and anti-racist counter-protestors were equally to blame. He responded:

> what about the alt-left that came charging at, as you say the alt-right? Do they have any semblance of guilt?…I will tell you something…you had a group on one side that was bad, and you had a group on the other side that was also very violent. And nobody wants to say that, but I'll say it right now. (as quoted in Jennings & Stevenson, 2017, paras. 40–42)

Rather than take the opportunity to distance himself from past accusations of racism and the openly racist groups that reportedly endorsed him, Trump again retreated to a relativist stance, arguing that racist and anti-racist factions could be viewed on the same moral footing insofar as violence was involved. Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan summed up Trump's Charlottesville response by saying, "It sounded

more like a moral equivocation or at the very least moral ambiguity when we need extreme moral clarity" (as quoted in Rascoe, 2018, para. 22).

These examples illustrate a consistent pattern of Trump and his supporters offering relativist positions in the face of empirical facts or moral quandaries that present a danger to their espoused political narratives. Despite this, Trump has continued to embrace his role as a truth-teller who will courageously "tell it like it is" in the face of social opposition. It is not surprising, for example, that Trump would double down on his Charlottesville remarks by re-invoking this status, saying, "And nobody wants to say that, but I'll say it right now." What do we make of the contradictory stance toward truth that is regularly exhibited by Trump and his allies? Perhaps, Trump has ushered in, or is at least representative of, a new "post-truth" era. Or, perhaps, Trump is the outcome of a postmodern society that has dispensed with notions of objective truth or established fact (Ernst, 2017; Heer, 2017). In the next part of this chapter, I will argue that these assertions give Trump too much credit. Turning to one of the foremost thinkers associated with postmodern thought, Michel Foucault, and his analysis of truth-telling, I argue that Trump has no real relation to truth at all.

FOUCAULT AND TRUTH-TELLING

Though Foucault is often associated with problematizing notions of truth and illustrating how truth and knowledge are entangled within systems of power, he turned toward a more direct investigation of truth in his final years. Specifically, he analysed the practice of truth-telling by examining the ancient Greek concept of *parrhesia*. Foucault's analysis of the more positive potential of truth-telling practices stands in stark contrast with his more critical approaches to power/knowledge in his larger body of work. I will address this seeming incongruity in the context of the implications of the rise of Trump for anti-foundational social science paradigms later on.

For now, I want to use Foucault's examination of truth-telling to provide a framework for making sense of Trump's identity as a truth-teller. On the surface, Trump presents himself as a courageous truth-teller and seems to abide by several of the features of ancient Greek concepts of *parrhesia*. However, by digging a bit further into Foucault's description, we can see that Trump holds little regard for truth at all and, in fact, poses serious dangers for ethical engagement with truth in a democracy.

First, it is important to define the key terms and characteristics associated with Foucault's investigation into truth-telling. Foucault (2001) focuses on the practice of truth-telling by concentrating on the appearance of the word *parrhesia* and its development within ancient Greek texts. He says that the common English translation of the word is "free speech," as it denoted the ability of a citizen to participate in truth-telling as part of their activity within the *polis*. However, *parrhesia* does not simply mean the ability to say anything, but has an important relation to truth.

The *parrhesiastes*, or the one using their free speech, Foucault explains, is "the one who speaks the truth" (p. 11). Furthermore, *parrhesia* carries the connotation of laying truths bare in dialogue with another. The truth-teller does not hold back, but courageously expresses all the relevant truths that are possessed so that the audience will hear and understand. Foucault writes, "The one who uses *parrhesia*, the *parrhesiastes*, is someone who says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse" (p. 12).

However, for one to truly engage in truth-telling, at least two additional characteristics are needed. First, the speaker must incur some sort of risk or personal danger by telling the truth. In a description that Trump would perhaps embrace, Foucault writes, "If, in a political debate, an orator risks losing his popularity because his opinions are contrary to the majority's opinion, or his opinions may usher in a political scandal, he uses *parrhesia*" (p. 16). Second, the truth-teller speaks the truth to critique the listener and out of a sense of duty to make things better for those to whom he speaks. "To criticize… a sovereign is an act of *parrhesia*… insofar as it is a duty towards the city to help the king to better himself as a sovereign" (p. 19), Foucault explains. *Parrhesia*, then, refers to the act of engaging another in dialogue through speaking truths that are risky to the speaker so that they will improve the life, behavior, or moral character of the listener.

At the outset, there are several elements of Foucault's description of *parrhesia* that seem to connect with Trump's identity as a truth-teller. First, the idea that the truth-teller speaks frankly about a given situation and "says everything he has in mind" (Foucault, 2001, p. 12) would accurately depict Trump's political discourse. In fashioning himself as a political outsider, Trump continually suggested that he would say what needed to be said and would not devolve into political speak, or intentionally hide what he thought for political posturing. In fact, Trump mocked the formalities of "acting presidential" on numerous occasions at campaign rallies.

Secondly, part of Trump's status as a truth-teller involved taking the perceived risk of standing up to the political elite and "telling it like it is" regardless of the political consequences. Consider his response to NBC discontinuing its relationship with him or his suggestion that there was violence on both sides during the Charlottesville rallies. He said that NBC was unwilling to stand behind people like him that told the truth "as unpleasant as that may be" and that "nobody wants to say that, but I'll say it right now" in regards to Charlottesville. Conversely, by "telling it like it is" in spite of possible political consequences, Trump could also suggest that his opponents were not authentic truth-tellers, as they intentionally tried to conceal the truth to maintain political correctness.

Finally, it might also be appropriate to suggest that Trump has couched his truth-telling within narratives of duty and the betterment of society at large. Consider his statement that "If we want to protect the quality of life for all Americans…then we need to tell the truth about Radical Islam" (Trump, 2016, para. 37) in his New Hampshire speech after the Pulse nightclub shooting. As I am writing this chapter,

Trump has been embroiled in a government shutdown over funding for a border wall that he claims is needed to prevent a moral and humanitarian crisis concerning trafficking and illegal immigration. More directly, his "Make America Great Again" slogan implies that his frank speech is in service of turning the societal direction of the country around and that, to do this, harsh truths need to be said.

While the preceding characteristics might seem to illustrate Trump's status as truth-teller, digging a bit deeper into Foucault's (2001) examination indicates something much more heinous. Foucault explains that there are both positive and negative senses of *parrhesia* and that, though someone who is described in the negative sense may exhibit some of the qualities of the *parrhesiastes*, they nonetheless hold other qualities that reveal their more nefarious character. In relating the different uses of *parrhesia* in ancient Greek texts, Foucault comes across several instances of the word being used in its pejorative sense. He takes the time to lay out the qualities of the pejorative *parrhesiastes* because this person is the sort of speaker "who is so harmful for a democracy" (p. 62).

The first characteristic of such a person is that they are an *athuroglossos*, which refers to someone who is an "endless babbler, who cannot keep quiet, and is prone to say whatever comes to mind" (Foucault, 2001, p. 63). This is different than a truth-teller who willfully chooses to speak everything he has in mind for the good of the listener. The endless babbler *cannot* keep his mouth shut or even distinguish the circumstances where "speech is required from those where one ought to remain silent" (p. 63). Furthermore, Foucault explains that this person appears strong, but is only strong in his bold arrogance and not in his reasoning or ability to speak the truth. The endless babbler is defined by "putting his confidence in bluster" (p. 65) and "is not confident in his ability to formulate articulate discourse, but only in his ability to generate an emotional reaction from his audience by his strong and loud voice" (p. 66).

With this added layer of truth-telling in its pejorative sense, we have a clearer picture through which to understand Trump's status. Given his penchant for incessant and, at times, incoherent Tweeting, his boisterous campaign rallies, or his inability to discern what things should not be said (e.g. his mocking of a reporter with a disability), it is easy to understand Trump more accurately as an *athuroglossos*, or endless babbler. As opposed to the *parrhesiastes*, Trump is unable to keep his mouth shut and puts confidence in blusterous oratory meant to rile up his base. But there is a deeper element of Foucault's (2001) analysis that indicates, not only Trump's babbling, but also his lack of relation to truth at all. In addition to the traits already described, Foucault explains that what designates *parrhesia* in its pejorative sense "is that it lacks *mathesis*…learning or wisdom" (p. 66).

Certainly, this could be applied to the, by now, incalculable situations in which Trump has babbled on about anything from voter fraud, to immigration, to climate change without adequate learning on the topic. And, given the consistent retreat to relativism on the part of Trump and his allies when faced with empirical counter-evidence or moral crises, we can also say that Trump has no real concern for the

truth at all. Consider what Foucault has to say here. He writes, "As Plutarch notes, when you are *athuroglossos* you have no regard for the value of *logos*, for rational discourse as a means of gaining access to truth" (p. 64). As I mentioned previously, the function of the relativism that Trump employs and that, perhaps, is taking hold among the political Right is to shut down any form of rational discourse or relation to truth in favor of an epistemological stalemate.

What Foucault's (2001) analysis reveals is a lens that helps fashion a better understanding of Trump's identity as a supposed truth-teller. Despite the fact that Trump's political rise was in large part due to his claim to be a truth-teller, upon closer examination of his pronouncements and conduct, along with the theoretical framework offered by Foucault, it is better to understand Trump as an imposter truth-teller. Rather than an intentional and honest dialogic engagement with truth for the betterment of others, Trump endlessly babbles on without discernment or wisdom in order to stoke emotional reactions from his base and promote his established narratives. Perhaps more importantly, by understanding Trump's embrace of relativism, it is clear that when push comes to shove and it is time to get to the "truth" of the matter, Trump and supporters often disengage from any rational discourse, favoring bombast and individual beliefs over a responsible engagement with truth.

To conclude, I consider the implications of both the rise of Trump, and the supposed "post-truth" era that his rise symbolizes, for social inquiry, especially that which is influenced by anti-foundational paradigms such as postmodernism. These important theoretical perspectives also problematize notions of objective truth but, unfortunately in my view, have been simplistically associated with the kinds of relativism that Trump seems to embrace. The conclusion of this chapter questions this connection and suggests that the "post-truth" era presents an opportunity for social inquirers influenced by such paradigms to clarify their relation to truth and how this can be productively used for imagining a better world.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS OF TRUMP, 'POST-TRUTH,' AND SOCIAL INQUIRY

A personal experience from a course I teach in qualitative research in education will help to begin this concluding section of the chapter. Before I teach about the more practical matters of qualitative research, such as data collection and analysis, I try to establish a theoretical basis out of which these practices emerge and make sense. The discussion of different social science paradigms, then, becomes an important aspect of teaching, not only qualitative research, but social inquiry as a whole, as the practices and approaches researchers use are influenced by epistemological assumptions about truth. Paradigms such as social constructionism, interpretivism, and postmodern/structuralism have been highly influential in the field of qualitative research for the past several decades. Though these have important differences and distinctions, each paradigm does call into question notions of "objective" truth, critiques the idea that what can be known is universal and necessarily separate

from the experiences of the knower, and investigates how truth is caught up within systems of power.

On one evening, after an introductory discussion of some of these paradigms and how they have been influential within qualitative inquiry, I asked students what thoughts came to mind. One student raised his hand and asked if what I just covered was applicable to something like climate change. I asked him to explain what he meant a little further and he responded with something to the effect of, "You hear some people say that climate change is an established scientific fact and other people say that it's not... is this just a matter of interpretation or a construction of power?" Given that I approach teaching these paradigms from the perspective of *social* science research, I was a bit unprepared for this question that hit on a topic in the natural sciences. I used this as part of my response, attempting to explain how such perspectives would be more interested in how "truth" is constructed within social relations, while not denying the empirical realities of many things, especially within the natural world.

Not entirely satisfied with my answer, I reflected later about how epistemological assumptions of these important paradigms could be taken to problematic conclusions (e.g. that things like climate change, if people commit voter fraud, or if Hillary Clinton was secretly running a human trafficking ring out of a Washington, D.C. pizzeria are all just a matter of subjective interpretation) or caught up within hegemonic narratives. Consider, for example, how Trump's use of relativism has been used to justify draconian immigration policies and law-and-order strategies. The numbers may indicate that undocumented immigration and violent crime have been precipitously dropping for years, but Trump and his supporters "feel" that it is a crisis, so the push for policies that harm the well-being of historically marginalized groups continues.

Trump's contradictory relationship with truth (and other iterations of this phenomenon in global politics) has led to a more mainstream epistemological discussion. For example, the Oxford Dictionary word of the year in 2016 was "post-truth," defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" ("Word of the Year," 2016). It was chosen primarily due to the proliferation of the term in mainstream coverage and political discourse during the 2016 election. Within the epistemological backlash against the rise of post-truth politics, some mainstream writers have tied Trump's rise to ideas fashioned decades ago by the academic Left, especially postmodernism.

For example, in an attempt to turn the fault of Trump's rise back on the Left, Ernst (2017) writes in the conservative outlet *The Federalist* that Trump has turned postmodernism against itself. He explains that Trump is the result of a cultural turn toward postmodernism with its presumption "that all truth is relative, morality is subjective, and therefore all of our individually preferred 'narratives' that give our lives meaning are equally true and worthy of validation" (para. 13). In a similar fashion, Heer (2017), writing in *The New Republic*, suggests that in an era where

"simulacra is indistinguishable from reality," Trump "seems like the perfect manifestation of postmodernism" (para. 5). Also, Edsall (2018), in a *New York Times* op-ed indicates the prevalence of the idea within both the political Right and Left that Trump's post-truth politics is the product of, or is in some way connected to, postmodern philosophy.

Given this mainstream connection between Trump's post-truth politics and postmodern thought, it is important to consider the legitimacy of this claim, especially given the renewed emphasis on objective truth in the backlash against Trump. I argue that what Trump and his supporters espouse in regards to truth has little to do with important paradigms such as postmodernism. While this may be obvious to academics who understand the epistemological nuances of such "post" paradigms, this is not as clear to mainstream audiences, as my classroom example and illustrations from popular media indicate. The conflation of Trump's brand of post-truth politics with anti-foundational perspectives like postmodernism is dangerous as it allows ideas within these paradigms to be co-opted into hegemonic narratives and undermines the productive potential of such theories for re-shaping the present in view of a more just future.

Within the critique of post-truth politics, and its subsequent conflation with postmodernism among the aforementioned writers, the denial of objective truth stands out as a consistent claim. Though this seems to be evident among Trump's relativist accounts of the potential for "alternative facts" with regard to numbers of inauguration attendees or the suggestion that feelings about violent crime rates are equivalent to actual crime rates via Newt Gingrich's CNN interview, this is not exactly the way that postmodern theorists handle the idea of objectivity.

For example, in the context of the National Research Council's *Scientific Research in Education* report, which openly claimed to reject postmodernism because of its supposed denial of objective knowledge, St. Pierre (2002) responded by saying, "it is not that a postmodernist (if anyone should claim that label) would reject reality or objectivity... rather, a postmodernist would say these concepts are situated rather than universal because they are understood differently within different epistemologies" (p. 25). The important distinction here is that narratives of "objective truth" are made objects of analysis to consider how they function to preserve arrangements of power. For St. Pierre and others in this early 21st century example within educational research, the concern was that the federal government was endorsing a methodologically conservative *scientism* that had been long-debated in the social sciences, but was parading around as the unassailable, objective "truth" of research practices. This relation to objectivity is categorically different than Trump and other's implication that disputed and debunked empirical facts should be given equal weight.

Going back to Edsall's (2018) *New York Times* op-ed, several academics were asked about their view of the similarities between Trump and postmodern thought. To distinguish postmodern critiques of objectivity from Trump's brand of post-truth politics, Todd May, professor of philosophy at Clemson University, drawing

inspiration from Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition*, explained, "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives" (para. 13). Importantly, this skepticism of the objectivity of grand narratives can still maintain the established truth of empirical facts. In the same article, Yale English professor David Bromwich explains, "academic skepticism about objective truth doesn't as a rule deny that we can know the fact of the matter—e.g. the answer to the question 'How many German troops crossed bridges over the Rhine on March 7, 1936?" (para. 27). What this skepticism is directed against, he says, is "the assumption that any particular interpretation of the facts should be trusted as quite reliable" (para. 28).

This should make it clear that the critiques of objective truth as articulated in postmodernism (and other anti-foundational paradigms) are distinct from how Trump and his allies have used relativism to hold personal beliefs on par with empirically verified facts. Drawing upon Nietzsche to explain that scientists and philosophers should be shocked at post-truth politics, Higgins (2016) explains that while Nietzsche denied that moral interpretations are unconditionally true, "this does not mean there is no truth. Even when he claims that our truths amount to our 'irrefutable errors,' he is pointing to the exaggerated clarity of abstractions by comparison with empirical reality" (p. 9). Thus, the relativist response to empirical realities often espoused by Trump and his supporters runs counter to the broader critique of meta-narratives and interpretations as objective truth within strands of philosophical thinking.

Of course, a potential hole here is that the critique of interpretations, especially moral interpretations, as objective truth, might support instances where Trump has drawn moral equivalencies between different interpretations. It might be argued that Trump's "both sides" claim regarding Charlottesville, for example, is as morally justifiable as any interpretation of the facts of what happened in that event. While I will not try to suggest that this is not a potential pitfall of anti-foundational approaches, I will argue that different "post" theorists are interested in untangling how different truth claims are extensions of arrangements of power. The productive potential of Trump's claim that we should turn our attention to anti-racist counter-protestors, rather than white supremacists and Nazis, would be a pertinent question in this frame. Drawing upon Foucault, Garry Gutting, professor of philosophy at Notre Dame, explains that postmodern thinkers do accept objective truth, but "They point out… that practices and institutions *claiming* to be based on scientific truths often turn out to seek power as much or more than truth… For Foucault, Trump… would be an extreme example of what serious postmodernism opposes" (as quoted in Edsall, 2018, para. 23).

As was discussed earlier via Foucault's (2001) analysis of *parrhesia*, an *athuroglossos*, or endless babbler, ultimately has no real concern for a rational discourse about truth. It might be argued that Trump relativizes the moral standing of different groups to maintain unjust political arrangements and extend hegemonic narratives, rather than to honestly engage in discourse about a moral society. The lack of relation to truth exhibited by Trump, using truth narratives primarily as an instrument of power, indicates two final ways in which Trump's post-truth politics

have little to do with anti-foundational paradigms such as postmodernism. First, despite work that often takes aim at what purports to be "objective truth," those engaging postmodernism, and other paradigms, maintain a commitment to present empirical realities. Second, the productive potential of this line of inquiry is that it disrupts interpretations and narratives about our present realities to open up new and imaginative futures.

Simpson (2012) articulates this relational engagement to truth nicely in his summary of Foucault's analysis of truth. Though Foucault embraces the idea of "fiction" as a way to re-interpret the present and newly imagine future possibilities, Simpson underscores that such a stance still requires a commitment to the present. He writes that truth "is that which has effects in the present, while 'fiction' is that which accurately reflects the present while having effects in the future" (p. 105). Importantly, this is not a made-up present, but a new understanding and re-interpretation of the way things really are in the present to open up new spaces and transform relations with the world. Simpson continues, "Fiction thus has both a diagnostic function—it must be loyal to the present state of affairs—while also carrying a hermeneutic function—it is an alternative narrative interpretation of the present that has potential effects in the future" (p. 105). Notice how Trump's post-truth politics do almost the exact opposite of what Simpson describes about Foucault's work on truth. Trump and his supporters actually create fictions about the present in order to go backward to an imagined past ("Make America Great Again," with all of its racial coding).

The preceding discussion illustrates the incongruity between post-truth politics, as represented by Trump, and anti-foundational paradigms of social inquiry, represented in part by postmodernism, while highlighting the dangers of the former and productive potential of the latter. Given the simplistic associations between the two that has become a part of mainstream discourse in the backlash against post-truth politics, this is an important distinction to be made for researchers that would like to impart the importance of these paradigms, especially as they help to chart out ways of thinking otherwise in an increasingly volatile political present. As Foucault helps us understand, "truth" is a dangerous concept, one that is presently being utilized by an imposter truth-teller to reinforce and re-invoke mechanisms of power. On the other hand, truth can be a productive site of resistance to modify existing power relations, but it must have both a commitment to present circumstances, while also engaging a relational dialogue with how the present and future may be (re) interpreted for a more just world.

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JONES IRWIN

3. POST-TRUTH IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

Ideology from Right to Left after Fascism and Althusser

ABSTRACT

While liberal conceptions form the bedrock of politics in bourgeois democracies, it has been argued in recent times that we are seeing the emergence of threats to such liberalism, most especially from the emergence of a "new right" or "alt-right" discourse and politics. Whether identified with the rise of Trumpist politics in the US or a pro-Brexit politics in the UK, the respective movements are also characterised as representing a change in how we understand the relation between discourse and ideology and thus a change in how we conceptualise the "political." Here, the designation of "post-truth" has come to symbolise this supposedly new approach to politics and ideology. For the purposes of this essay, I will explore two such instances of "post-truth" across the political spectrum. In the case of right-wing discourse, I will focus on the attempt of Italian fascism in the mid-twentieth century. Rather than being a simplistic or knee-jerk authoritarianism, we will see how fascism can rather be interpreted as quite a complex and somewhat self-contradictory political and philosophical phenomenon. With regard to left-wing critique, I will look at how Althusser (developing Marx's insights), and what becomes known as Althusserianism, sets up a very complex architectonic of truth.

Keywords: Trump, Althusser, Marx, alt-right, discourse, ideology, truth, fascism, authoritarianism

INTRODUCTION

While liberal conceptions form the bedrock of politics in bourgeois democracies (Donald & Hall, 1986a), it has been argued in recent times that we are seeing the emergence of threats to such liberalism, most especially from the emergence of a "new right" or "alt-right" discourse and politics. Whether identified with the rise of Trumpist politics in the US or a pro-Brexit politics in the UK, the respective movements are also characterised as representing a change in how we understand the relation between discourse and ideology and thus a change in how we conceptualise the "political" (Muddle, 2019). Here, the designation of "post-truth" has come to symbolise this supposedly new approach to politics and ideology.

While there is some cogency in this hermeneutic of the current political situation, I will argue in this chapter that the relation between a "post-truth" discourse and politics cannot be exclusively identified with right-wing politics and, moreover, that neither is it anything new. Rather, in the first case, the critique of "truth" or the critique of "ideology" is also very much characteristic of left-wing discourse. Second, on both right and left, this critique of truth has significant historical antecedents. For the original Marxist formulation, for example, "truth" is a dependent variable on social relations; that is, "ideas arise from social relations, not the other way around" (Donald & Hall, 1986c, p. xv). Etienne Balibar (2007), the French neo-Marxist theorist, describes this as akin to a Copernican revolution in philosophy's self-understanding.

While the early Marx starts out in a very philosophical mode, his mid-to-late work signifies a critique of philosophy's self-understanding as a kind of master discipline (very much in contradistinction to Hegel's idealism). Instead, Marx re-inscribes the discipline of philosophy in a process of life much greater than human thought, which determines or at least conditions what philosophy and philosophers are capable of. Some commentators might even question whether we are any longer in the space of philosophy proper post-Marx, others may say this is a refreshing renewal of the philosophical self-identity. The most obvious instance of this paradigm revolution is in Marx's text *Theses on Feuerbach* (Marx, 1992a), where he outlines that whereas previous philosophy had primarily sought to interpret the world, that the point is "rather to change it" (p. 423). In this, Marxism is already a "post-truth" ideology in itself, as epistemology is seen as a derivative philosophical discipline to politics. Knowledge must be secondary to *praxis*.

For the purposes of this essay, I will explore two such instances of "post-truth" across the political spectrum. In the case of right-wing discourse, I will focus on the attempt of Italian fascism to "step outside the context of liberal democracy" in the mid-twentieth century (Donald & Hall, 1986, p. vii). Rather than being a simplistic or knee-jerk authoritarianism, we will see how fascism can rather be interpreted as quite a complex and somewhat self-contradictory political and philosophical phenomenon. With regard to left-wing critique, I will look at how Althusser (developing Marx's insights), and what becomes known as Althusserianism, sets up a very complex architectonic of truth. Here, for example, the relation between Althusser's Marxism and his avowal of psychoanalysis becomes important (Althusser, 1994; Montag, 2013; Jameson, 2001). Significantly, this hybrid of Marxism and psychoanalysis has been continued in later years, most notably by the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis. Slavoj Žižek refers to his own work as an "orthodox Lacanianism" (Žižek, 2014). As his compatriot in Ljubljana, Mladen Dolar, has observed, this was because Lacan "took it further than any other like thinker…brought philosophy to its ultimate conclusion" (Dolar, 2014, p. 25). Again, there is a certain atmosphere of the 'post-philosophical' about this claim.

On both Right and Left, then, there are significant examples of a post-truth discourse. In each instance, these are set up very much in opposition to a liberal consensus

and this critique is both political and epistemological. What this demonstrates is the intimately *complicit* or inter-dependent space of much ideology, however seemingly opposed. Donald and Hall (1986c) speak of ideology as indicating

> The frameworks of thought which are used in society to explain, figure out, make sense or to give meaning to the social and political world. Such ideas do not occur in social thought one by one in an isolated form. They contract links with one another. (p. ix)

POST-TRUTH, FASCISM, AND SUBJECTIVITY

Certainly, one can trace a very strong connection between the political emergence of Fascism and the discourse of "post-truth." Here, we can take the specific example of Italian fascism in the mid-twentieth century (Mercer, 1986). One of the first points that Mercer outlines as fundamental in his important analysis of fascism is that often a "generalised image of fascism takes for granted a binary view of politics in which all policies or strategies can be identified as belonging ultimately on the right, on the left or in the centre" (p. 208). Instead, the example of Italian fascism, at least for Mercer, points to a different conclusion: "what begins to emerge is a rather strange and indeterminate political beast. It is certainly one that does not quite fit into the received categories of left and right" (p. 209). For Mercer, there is a certain abiding caricatural identification of fascism with authoritarian and totalitarian societies (ruled by diktat and jackboot). However understandable such identifications are in the context of good historical reasons and experience, they tend to exclusively interpret fascism as an ideology based on "coercion." However, this one-sided interpretation of fascism is not borne out by a closer analysis where a more complex (if no less disturbing) reality of this ideology emerges.

The question of authority in fascism is most realistically seen not as simply coercive but rather as bound up in a complex relationship to the 'consent' of the people or the masses. What this controversial understanding also allows is for fascism not to be seen as simply some kind of once off or aberrant distortion. If, as Sartre (1989) said in *Existentialism and Humanism* (just after the Holocaust), we really want to make sure that fascism never happens again then we must face up to its attractiveness and relative longevity as a regime in certain political and social contexts. Mercer (1986), for example, notes that in Italy fascism was dominant for more than twenty years and asks the pertinent question: "How was Italian Fascism able to generate consent to its existence? That means looking at the basis of this consent in a form of mass politics operating across a wide range of political, cultural and economic terrains" (p. 209).

So as to properly understand this phenomenon on the Right, Mercer (1986) argues cogently that we need to jettison overly-simplistic readings of fascism and instead explore three main dimensions of its populist appeal which have been neglected; first, its "relative political indeterminacy," second, its "ability to generate consent

to its existence and duration" and third, the "complexity" of its cultural make-up (p. 209). Taken together, these different interpretative strands offer a reinterpretation of Rightist discourse and politics both in itself but, for our purposes, most significantly in relation to Leftist politics. Here in both instances of Right and Left, we can argue that the conception of 'post-truth' is central but in crucially different ways.

We noted at the beginning of the essay how, while liberal conceptions form the bedrock of politics in bourgeois democracies (Donald & Hall, 1986a), it has been argued in recent times that we are seeing the emergence of threats to such liberalism, most especially from the emergence of a "new right" or "alt-right" discourse and politics. Such threats to liberal democracy are nothing new, however, and it is instructive that our specific example of Italian fascism also emerges in the context of a threat to liberalism. Here, there is a "crisis of Italian liberal democracy" in the twentieth century. Victoria de Grazia (1986), consistent with Mercer's (1986) analysis and diagnostic of ideology, provides a deep analysis of how fascism emerges in precisely such a context in Italy, and of how such Rightist ideology seeks to give credence to a vision of a "unified and unifying national culture" which liberal democracy lacks (p. 240). In this context, for de Grazia, fascism as a movement and as an ideology also shows a degree of flexibility and of sophistication. On the one side, it lays claim more obviously to a certain traditionalism and traditional culture as a "mode of imparting fascism's conservative social ideals to a mass public" (p. 241). On the other hand, however, and consistent with Mercer's (1986) thesis of a certain "political indeterminacy," there is the capacity in the movement and ideology of fascism to also take on a certain kind of contemporary "eclecticism," willing to espouse *avant-garde* ideas or art for its our purposes where necessary.

Given our topic, we might say that this eclecticism of fascism in Italy tallies with the conception of "post-truth" which was described at the beginning of the chapter. Rather than being a movement based on distinct principles or values, Italian fascism is chameleon-like in its ability to change its perspective or downplay the need for any fixed ideological position as such. From an epistemological perspective, there is little to develop here—the question of knowledge ("how can I know?") becomes a subservient one to expedient political and pragmatic ends of power and persuasion. In this, there is a paradoxical connection or affinity to the disavowal of epistemology which is described in relation to Marx and Marxism in the introduction. While so different in direction and vision, these examples of Right and Left here share a suspicion and a downplaying of epistemological or "truth" concerns; they inhabit or cultivate a space rather of "post-truth."

De Grazia (1986) describes how this disavowal of epistemology and truth, of value as such, eventually becomes a fatal problem for Italian fascism: "The fundamental eclecticism… although an advantage in attracting a socially diversified audience, proved in the end highly disadvantageous in sustaining its support" (p. 251). The attitudes it fostered in Italy—passivity, ignorance, evasion—while helpful to generate a certain kind of uncritical enthusiasm or conformism with the regime, faltered when historical events required more agency on an individual level,

or more criticality or genuine knowledge on the part of the citizenry. Let us now look at how another distinctive failure also emerges about thirty years later in Europe in May '68, with particular relevance to a discussion of "post-truth," not on the Right but on the Left.

SOME PROBLEMS OF 'TRUTH' ON THE LEFT WITH ALTHUSSER

The traditional conception in classical Marxism of the "critique of ideology" undergoes significant transformations under the conditions of late twentieth century capitalism (Althusser, 1994). The case of Louis Althusser's Marxism is an important paradigm instance, as Althusserianism comes to have a powerful status in Leftist discourse in France up until 1968 (Montag, 2013). The schisms which result from '68 within the ranks of Althusserianism, as well as the retrospective (and vehement) critique of the previous understanding of "ideology," have significant implications for our discussion of "post-truth." Here, we can focus on the question, "what does the concept of truth mean on the Left?" and also how the conception of "post-truth" might be understood from a Leftist perspective? Here we see significant differences from the Rightist or Fascist discourse but also some surprising affinities.

Another aspect of this problem is worth noting here. As Gramsci (1986) showed, what matters most significantly about ideologies is that they "organise human masses and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle etc." (Donald & Hall, 1986c, p. xiii). This is because ideology is not simply a matter for philosophy but also more importantly it connects to the ways in which these ideas or "truths" become "organic," by being absorbed into the structure of common sense and common practice in more everyday material life.[1] This is also precisely, for Gramsci (1986), "why philosophy cannot be divorced from politics" (p. 19).

This powerful and seminal Gramscian insight is developed by Althusser in his own, original way. For Althusser (also drawing on the insights of psychoanalysis), ideology "works on us to a large extent *unconsciously*" (Donald & Hall, 1986c, p. xvii). Although Althusser does introduce a concept of the "subject" or "subjectivity," what is crucial about his concept of ideology is that this subject is positioned or "recruited" by ideology to a great extent unconsciously. This is referred to by some later thinkers (see Žižek, 1994) as Althusser's "subjectless structure." Ideology acts or functions in such a way that it "recruits" subjects among the individuals (Althusser, 1994). In Althusser's own language, it is a "process without a subject" (Althusser, 2001; Jameson, 2001). What is important to understand here is that Althusser is seeking to critique what he regards as misleading humanist interpretations of Marx and instead, to re-found Marxism on a more scientific basis which refuses to overestimate the independence of human agency from capitalist ideology (Kearney, 1986). It develops Gramsci's (1986) argument that such ideological action or "conduct" is "not independent and autonomous but submissive and subordinate" (p. 19). Here again, we can draw the conclusion that epistemology (and consequently a philosophical

concept of "truth") is no longer regarded as an independent phenomenon but as, in an important sense, superseded by the wider "process." Truth becomes derivative— thus we are in a "post-truth" space of understanding and politics.

Nonetheless, any history of Althusserian Marxism and ideology-critique must take account of its paradigmatic failure, associated with the events of May '68. Just as Italian fascism fails as De Grazia (1986) describes due to its overemphasis on passivity and its downplaying of epistemology, so too in a different way this version of Leftist "post-truth" underestimates a certain kind of "knowledge of the people." One of the May '68 posters infamously asked the searching question, "Et Après?" ("what afterwards?"), foregrounding what Kristin Ross (2002) has referred to as the "afterlives of '68" (p. 5). One of the most significant strands of this afterlife was to develop, in philosophical terms, with a strong move against a certain version of orthodox Marxism in France and the critique of Althusser was the paradigm instance (Althusser, 1994). Althusserianism had come to stand for a particular version of communism made to look elitist and out of touch by the sudden emergence of the May events from below.

Even if as we have seen that Althusserianism ultimately fails in May '68, this reading of ideology and a critique of subjectivity is also helpful in understanding the emergence of very different oppositional forms of politics. For example, Ernesto Laclau (the Argentine Marxist) develops Althusser's theory to show how it can also be employed to understand the emergence of fascist ideology (Laclau, 1977). Moreover, some of the central concepts of such Fascistic or Rightist ideology, such as the "people" or "democracy," are shared by emergent forms of Leftist discourse. Laclau's discussion from the late 1970s is interestingly prescient with regard to the problematic of "populism" as it has emerged more recently in world politics and which is discussed below. This is what Donald and Hall (1986) refer to as "the process of ideological struggle and contestation—the practices by which ideologies are articulated and disarticulated to different social, political and class positions in society" (p. xx).

But if we can see the interconnectedness of much ideology on opposite sides of the political spectrum (a fact often denied by more sectarian and defensive readings), nonetheless there still remains the open question of what ideology critique can learn from such complicities. Especially on the Left, this is a moot question. Stuart Hall's work on ideology takes up this question directly, and with no defensiveness. We could perhaps take Tariq Ali's (2013) avowal of Bensaid's activism as a rallying cry for such a renewed (less naive) Leftism: "to help create a non-dogmatic, non-religious, non-bullshit Marxism" (p. xi). But could such a vision relate to the critique of ideology? In his essay *The Problem of Ideology: Marxism Without Guarantees*, Hall (1996a) delineates how theoretical and epistemological reform is required:

> I want to identify the most telling weaknesses and limitations in the classical Marxist formulations about ideology; and to assess what has been gained, what

deserves to be lost and what needs to be retained—and perhaps rethought—in the lights of the critiques. (p. 28)

Whither the critique of ideology in contemporary times? Can the Left jettison a concept of "truth" for "post-truth" politics or, rather, does contemporary politics require a reintroduction and reassessment of the questions of epistemology and of the concept of "truth?" In exactly this key, from a Leftist perspective (albeit heterodox) Slavoj Žižek (1994b) asks the ultimate question of the efficacy of "truth" and "epistemology":

Consequently, with reference to today's state of epistemological reflection, is not the notion of ideology self-defeating? So why should we cling to a notion with such obviously outdated epistemological implications (the relationship of "representation" to thought and reality etc.). (p. 3)

As we will see below, Žižek wants to air a radical scepticism about ideology-critique, based on specific failures of the Left, but crucially he also wants to continue to defend a conception of ideology and truth. Moreover, for Žižek, such epistemological matters remain at the heart of the possibility of radical democratic struggles in the contemporary world. As Laclau (1989) notes in his Preface to one of Žižek's (1989) earlier texts, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, "[Žižek]…has been one of the principal reference points of the so-called "Slovenia Spring"—that is to say, the democratisation campaigns that have taken place in recent years" (p. xi).

RECENT TENSIONS WITH POPULISM AND THE QUESTION OF TRUTH RIGHT AND LEFT

Insofar as aspects of the emergent "Alt-Right" have been electorally successful, the argument has been made by some commentators that the Left must take account of such "populism." That is, the Left should borrow some aspects from the discourse of the Right, for example in relation to questions of restricting immigration. Other commentators argue the contrary point, for example that "copying the Populist Right won't save the Left." This latter line of thinking is the argument of Cas Muddle (2019) in a recent important article entitled *How to Save Social Democracy*. For Muddle, while centre-left parties have been losing ground for two decades, nonetheless, from a Leftist perspective, pandering to the populist Right cannot be the solution.

The argument here has significant parallels with our previous discussion. Many of the arguments used by those on the Left regarding electoral success are not what we might call epistemological arguments. They are rather strategic or tactical. This dramatic shift in rhetoric is part of a larger panic over how to halt the spread of right-wing populism across the west in recent years. Some academics now even go so far as to openly defend white identity politics. Here, we can make a connection with Mercer's (1986) thesis concerning fascism in Italy of a certain "political indeterminacy," the capacity in the movement and ideology of fascism to also take

on a certain kind of contemporary "eclecticism" (with a view to rhetoric and political or electoral success). This eclecticism of fascism in Italy tallies with the conception of "post-truth" but so too Muddle's (2019) argument suggests does the strategic mimicry of the Right by recent Leftist thought. Rather than being a movement based on distinct principles or values, there is a danger that Leftism (just as with Italian fascism) becomes chameleon-like in its ability to change its perspective or downplay the need for any fixed ideological position as such. From an epistemological perspective, there is little to develop here—the question of knowledge ("how can I know?") becomes a subservient one to expedient political and pragmatic ends of power and persuasion.

We should also remember how De Grazia (1986) describes how this disavowal of epistemology and truth, of value as such, eventually becomes a fatal problem for Italian fascism: "The fundamental eclecticism…although an advantage in attracting a socially diversified audience, proved in the end highly disadvantageous in sustaining its support" (p. 251). The attitudes it fostered in Italy—passivity, ignorance, evasion—while helpful to generate a certain kind of uncritical enthusiasm or conformism with the regime faltered when historical events required more agency on an individual level, or more criticality or genuine knowledge on the part of the citizenry. Muddle (2019) seems to be suggesting an analogous problem for the Left and its ideology. The misconceptions of populist right voters have had seriously negative consequences for Left political parties, because they have led many social democratic parties to pursue failed strategies against the populist Right. In this very misconception, the value of truth (or the related foundation of epistemology) has been jettisoned in favour of tactical or short-term electoral efficacy or at least the supposed possibilities of the latter.

What, therefore, might be the proposed solution? For Muddle (2019), the argument is that the Left needs to rethink its whole approach and vision for ideology and thus the relation between the political and the question of values: "The key to reviving the fortunes of social democracy is to embrace its fundamental ideas and policies—egalitarianism, social justice, solidarity, the right to social protection and a comprehensive welfare state" (p. 10). The problem here, then, is not simply a strategic or tactical one, an argument which seems to bring us away from the more radical and sceptical implications of some of the Leftist critique of ideology we saw earlier. If the critique of ideology leads to the critique of philosophy and epistemology per se, there seems to be a very real danger that the clear values distinctions between Left and Right ideology become blurred: "Neoliberalism is not just an economic system but also an ideology… Social democrats need to challenge these neoliberal assumptions, and re-establish their own ideas of egalitarianism and solidarity as the new common sense" (p. 11).

However, this is not Žižek's conclusion—it is rather framed as a question. Significantly, in the seminal collection on ideology which he edits, *Mapping Ideology* (Žižek, 1994a), his final answer to the question of whether "the notion of

ideology is self-defeating?" is that ideology for all its faults retains a pertinence and a necessity for the Left discourse and epistemology:

> Although there is no clear line of demarcation which separates ideology from reality, although ideology is already at work in everything we experience as "reality," we must none the less maintain the tension that keeps the critique of ideology alive. (Žižek, 1994b, p. 17)

EPILOGUE

One of the key reference points for this essay has been the conception of ideology as not simply some abstract philosophy but rather the process by which such ideas occur in social thought and how they become embedded (for good or ill) in social practices. These ideologies thus do not exist "one by one in an isolated form. They contract links with one another" (Donald & Hall, 1986c, p. ix). We have explored how, despite significant differences and opposition, some aspects of the "post-truth" discourse can be shared by Left and Right politics and ideologies. This can be a somewhat disquieting realisation on the Left, especially as specific values of the Left (such as solidarity, community, subjectivity) can be seen as also embedded in Rightist discourses. Nonetheless, we shouldn't lose sight also of the very significant differences and disagreements with regard to both the theory and the operationalisation of these concepts across the political spectrum. These differences become more stark when we foreground that question of 'how to save social democracy?' (Muddle, 2019).

Mercer's (1986) three-pronged diagnostic of Rightist or fascist ideology demonstrates the challenge which political ideology presents for traditional concepts of epistemology or of ethics. Crucially, the first characteristic of "relative political indeterminacy" (p. 209) can be seen as undermining the supposed connection between political values and truth claims. By eschewing any determination of fixed political values or "truths," fascism becomes more able to adapt to the populist demands of pre-war Europe. This very indeterminacy is also linked to the success of fascism in "generating consent." As Muddle (2019) has argued strongly, as well as a historical lesson, this latter case is also a contemporary lesson for the Left. The contemporary Left also comes worrying close to being identifiable with regards to Mercer's (1986) three characteristics of a "post-truth" Fascism. In seeking to generate consent to its "existence and duration" in the context of a rise of populism Right wing politics, the Left has also embraced an analogous "political indeterminacy."

While this call to ideological arms is wholly understandable and very persuasive in the current climate, we should also stand back to take some stock of our philosophical dilemmas within the scene of interpretation. Here we can return to the insights of one of the most prescient of Left theorists, Stuart Hall (1996a):

> I want to identify the most telling weaknesses and limitations in the classical Marxist formulations about ideology; and to assess what has been gained, what

deserves to be lost, and what needs to be retained—and perhaps rethought—in the light of the critiques. (p. 25)

If we are to apply this understanding of Hall back to Muddle's (2019) call to arms, we might say that first of all, before re-asserting the truths of the Left ideology, there may well need to be a recognition of failures and of weaknesses in this very tradition of truth, politics and epistemology. We already mentioned above the failure of Althusserianism in the May '68 period and its aftermath, with regard to an underestimation of the agency of the people and indeed of the individual and of subjectivity. In this, we can say ironically, that Left Althusserianism had failed precisely (not like Fascism because of its "political indeterminacy") but precisely because of its extreme political and ideological determinism.

This is exactly where Hall (1996a) takes up the challenge of recognising the failures of the Left, whilst also being clear on the radical divergence between Left and Right philosophy. If the Left fails or has failed in the paradigmatic political past, the answer should not be to ape the recent emergent success of the Right. Instead of a labour of "perpetual deconstruction," his essay points to a "modest work of reconstruction—without, I hope, being too defaced by ritual orthodoxy" (p. 31). We might consequently refer to Hall's reconstructive project politically and philosophically as a kind of heterodox Marxism or Leftism. As with Žižek, this is a political project rooted in the symbiosis between theory and practice, the claims of truth and the claims of history. In Slovenia, with its move away from the regimes of the Former Yugoslavia, this more nuanced approach to ideology and critique could inspire a whole new generation of social and radically democratic movements of people and citizenry (Irwin & Motoh, 2014).

Here, as Žižek (1994b) tells us, there are still very much (all the more so) matters of truth to fight for and to fight over, despite the appearances to the very contrary:

Although there is no clear line of demarcation which separates ideology from reality, although ideology is already at work in everything we experience as "reality," we must none the less maintain the tension that keeps the critique of ideology alive. (p. 17)

For Hall (1996a), this very critique of ideology rooted in a residual and radical claim to truth, can only be sustained if Leftism acknowledges a more unstable and ambiguous terrain than it has been used to historically. In the first case, Hall argues that, "we have to acknowledge the real indeterminacy of the political—the level which condenses all the other levels of practice and secures their functioning in a particular system of power" (p. 45). As we noted above, this indeterminate aspect of the Left can be seen to bring it dangerously close to comparisons with the "political indeterminacy" of both historical fascism and contemporary versions of Rightist ideology.

But there is a second level to Hall's (1996a) analysis which also sets the scene for the later ideology critique of both Žižek and Laclau. If this relative openness

or relative indeterminacy is necessary to Marxism as a theory of the contemporary world (and its irreducible complexity and surprise), nonetheless there must also be a dimension of "determinacy" to Marxism and Leftism in the current moment. This is for Hall "a determinacy without guaranteed closures" (p. 45); it must be understood as a determinacy "in terms of the setting of limits, the establishment of parameters, the defining of the space of operations, the concrete conditions of existence, the "givenness" of social practices, rather than in terms of the absolute predictability of particular outcomes" (p. 45). This we can say is a certain double movement of the Left, theoretically and practically.

This re-envisioning of the Left and its Marxist discourse and ideology critique allows the critique of contemporary society to vehemently reject and oppose in a coherent manner the emergence of new Rightist ideology and movements. All too often, as Muddle (2019) notes, the Left has rather (in a destructive manner) retrospectively sought to ape and borrow from such a Right ideology. Instead the Left needs to renew its traditional epistemological and philosophical foundations, arguing (as Hall has) for a certain level of determination (what Althusser called "scientific Marxism") while at the same time leaving room for the emergence of new concepts and ideas. Here, we thereby become capable once more of engaging and confronting new and often acute historical realities and crises facing us, while also maintaining the claim on being able to grasp something of the "truth" (yes the "truth") of these very moments.

NOTE

[1] "Philosophy in general does not in fact exist. Various philosophies or conceptions of the world exist, and one always makes a choice between them. How is this choice made? Is it merely an intellectual event, or is it something more complex? And is it not frequently the case that there is a contradiction between one's intellectual choice and one's mode of conduct?" (Gramsci, 1986, p. 19).

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ERIC C. SHEFFIELD

4. TWITTER AND TRUMPISM

Epistemological Concerns in the Post-Truth Era

ABSTRACT

This chapter takes up a discussion of President Donald Trump's use of Twitter and its impact on truth-telling and truth claims via an analysis of the revolutionary idea of pragmatic truth as proposed by William James and Neil Postman's understanding of technology's impact on meaning making. James' argument is contained in this brief but eloquent phrase in his lectures on Pragmatism: "Truth happens to an idea." That is, truths of and in the world are not pre-existing, anti rem, ready-made (as both idealists, rationalists, and even realists would have us believe); rather, truth develops in relationship to human context and human need. Or, as James says it, truth is determined by its practical or "cash value." Following this discussion, the chapter turns its attention to technology and Neil Postman's theory of its impact on meaning making as presented most completely in his book, Amusing ourselves to death. Postman's argument will be turned on Donald Trump's favorite social media "advancement," Twitter. What happens to the truth understood pragmatically when it is presented in a character-limited technology which, as all technologies do, has a built-in/inherent ideology? The chapter concludes that such a technology bastardizes pragmatic truth to the point of extraordinary danger and limits or eliminates any true meaning making, pragmatically or otherwise.

Keywords: William James, pragmatism, trump, Twitter, technology, social medial, philosophy

INTRODUCTION: "EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOG"

In the first nine months of his presidency, Trump made 1,318 false or misleading claims, an average of five a day. But in the seven weeks leading up the midterm elections, the president made 1,419 false or misleading claims—an average of 30 a day. (Kessler, Rizzo, & Kelly, 2018, para. 2).

In recently reading Michael Apple's (2018) book, *The Struggle for Democracy in Education: Lessons from Social Realities,* I was reminded of an often-used phrase in left-leaning—democratically thick—critiques of everything neoliberal and/

or neoconservative: epistemological fog. As Apple and others are wont to remind us (and rightly so), epistemological fog results from both directly purposeful and indirectly non-purposeful "endeavors" to confuse the public as to what is factual, meaningful, and true. The truth might indeed set us free, hence the desire among those in power and those who advocate for thinner versions of democracy to directly and purposefully create a thick fog of epistemological confusion via "alternative facts," the naturalization of relativism, or shamelessly "poisoning the well" of voracity. On this last point, Alexander George (2017) writes:

> We do not assess whether a claim is reasonable simply by thinking about that claim in isolation. Usually, we relate the claim to a body of beliefs we already hold. Relative to that corpus of accepted beliefs, we decide whether the new claim is a reasonable one to make. Given this feature of reasoning, one sees how our very capacity to assess claims can be radically undermined if one poisons the body of beliefs relative to which we normally judge matters. If we don't know which of our background beliefs to trust, then how can we appeal to them in deciding whether to believe a new claim? And since that is usually the only way of deciding these matters, such a poisoning of the wells of belief leaves us powerless to make any further decisions about what to believe...
> It is damaging to be fed falsehoods or to be outright lied to, but it is utterly debilitating to be deprived of the resources by which to sort fact from fiction. (para. 4).

There is incredible import in the epistemological reminders Apple (2018), George (2017), and numerous others provide their readers and the general public given this (circa 2019) political moment. In fact, given today's political "goings on," conceptions of truth and even Truth itself, are, it seems, in danger of being eroded into nothingness. Maybe we *are* headed to a post-truth era (or, as some claim, are already there).

In this chapter I focus on the more indirect covert attacks on Truth and truth claims rather than frontal attacks from specific groups or individuals with clearly developed political purposes (American Legislative Exchange Council, Koch Brothers, Heritage Foundation, Brookings Institution, Cato Institute, etc.). More particularly, I am interested in pondering the potential and actual impact that the social media platform Twitter has on contemporary modes of political discourse. The argument presented in this chapter is that Twitter's underlying structure inherently and therefore necessarily "epistemologically fogs" any and every political discourse.

Like all media, Twitter has an underlying ideology concerning the nature of discourse itself and it is crucially important to understand the impact of that underlying ideology. Given its place as the most broadly popular form of political "dialogue" today, what I argue below is that the well of discourse can be nothing but poisoned by Twitter's use. My analysis on this count is sourced in an argument made some decades ago by social critic Neil Postman (1986/2006) in his visionary

book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business.* Before getting to the specifics of my core argument, a brief discussion of voracity itself seems in order.

A WORD ABOUT TRUTH…AND TRUTH

William James famously suggested that the core endeavor of American Philosophy was and is to address the question, *Is Life Worth Living?* James (1895) himself answered this question with a resounding, *Maybe*, noting: "It depends on the liver" (p. 1). (I assume he was referring to the individual person, not the organ that rids the body of illicit toxins…then again….) In fact, it might be argued that the question of life's worth has been, and remains, the essential catalyst for religious, spiritual, psychological, and philosophical undertakings throughout human history. More particularly—and more relevant to the goal of this chapter—the general matter of life's worth has been directly connected to finding or creating meaning within the continual uncertainty of human experience… in religious, spiritual, psychological, and philosophical musings and connected practices.

And, given this search for meaning, it should come as no surprise that contentious disagreements over the nature of truth run throughout the history of these disciplinary endeavors. I begin this necessarily brief discussion of the nature of truth by pointing to one of the more historically important philosophical forks in the road; and, I begin with William James because he stood at that fork in the road and chose what turned out to be a revolutionary path—one that was met with a great degree of religious, spiritual, psychological, and philosophical resistance.

James' beautiful philosophical prose on the nature of truth and the adjudication of truth claims provides depth and experiential context to an idea first suggested by James' friend and colleague, the logician Charles Sanders Pierce. That idea is that truth does not come as a ready-made, ante-rem, pre-established, un-effected trait that adheres "in" things and ideas that are true and is lacking "in" things and ideas that are not-true. Or, as James (2019/1907) simply and beautifully put it, truth isn't inherent in ideas; rather, "Truth Happens to an idea" (p. 102). Readers of this chapter who are even somewhat familiar with the history of philosophy probably already realize that James' contention marks a revolutionary paradigm shift—Kuhnian-like in its impact—and one that shook traditional philosophical thought to its very core.

For those readers who are less than familiar with this history, suffice it to say here that this pragmatic understanding of voracity flew in the face of a millennium of abstractionist philosophical thought. That millennia of thought was marked by, as John Dewey (1929) suggested, a quest for certainty that could only be realized if truth itself was seen as universally static. This philosophical shift toward what James called radical empiricism, also came with a torrent of protest from realist, rationalist, and idealist philosophers of great merit.

In one of his better-known anecdotes (among many) exemplifying the pragmatic method of adjudicating truth claims, James (2019/1907) tells the story of a camping trip wherein he comes upon some fellow campers in a heated philosophical debate concerning, of all things, a squirrel. To paraphrase James, the setting included a squirrel, let's call him Donald, who was clinging to one side of a tree and a human observer, let's call her Nancy, who stood on the opposite side. As Nancy circled the tree in an attempt to see Donald, he continually circled around as well thereby preventing Nancy from ever catching site of him. As James explains it, the heated debate among the campers concerned the following question: does the woman (Nancy) go around the squirrel (Donald) or not? Nancy moves around the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel (Donald) is on the tree; but does she go around Donald?

The debate had mostly subsided by the time James stumbled upon it, half the campers suggesting that yes, absolutely the human circled the squirrel and the other half vehemently protesting that of course she did not circle the squirrel. Given that James had "stumbled upon" the heated discussion and therefore might provide something of an unbiased opinion on the matter, the campers asked him to settle the debate once and for all. His response:

> Which party is right, depends on what you *practically mean* by "going round" the squirrel. If you mean passing from the north of him to the east, then to the south, then to the west, and then to the north of him again, obviously the [wo]man does go round him, for [s]he occupies these successive positions. But if on the contrary you mean being first in front of him, then on the right of him, then behind him, then on his left, and finally in front again, it is quite as obvious the [wo]man fails to go round him, for by the compensating movements the squirrel makes, he keeps his belly turned towards the [wo]man all the time, and his back turned away. Make the distinction, and there is no occasion for any farther dispute. You are both right and both wrong according as you conceive the verb "to go round" in one practical fashion or the other. (pp. 29–30)

In other words, for James and the philosophy of pragmatism, truth is never permanently fixed and unmalleable, but is largely dependent on the experiential facts of the moment and on the experiential moment's direct relation to the ideas under consideration. Given this experiential dependence, truth is ever shifting and potentially multiple depending on the particular factors of actual lived situations. And, capital "T" truths—those seen as universally fixed for all time and all places—are ultimately untenable. I expect this idea of "small-t" truth's impermanence and even more so of "capital T" Truth's potential impermanence creates a severe challenge to the standing beliefs of those reading this chapter. It certainly is an instance of severely "difficult knowledge" as Deb Britzman (2003) calls such matters—particularly in light of our Western, Platonically-sourced, Judeo-Christian tradition—and may call out in the hearts and minds of readers an emotionally "difficult problem" in the Deweyan sense.

I am also quite sure that at this point in my discussion, you, the reader, are probably scratching your head and wondering "what the heck do squirrels and trees have to do with Twitter's impact on political discourse?" I ask that you adopt for just a moment pragmatism's conception of voracity and keep the following in mind (a summary of sorts) as I move more firmly into my promised analysis of Twitter: 1) truth is not a pre-existing unchanging trait that adheres in things and in ideas-about-things simply to be discovered by close examination. 2) Rather, "Truth happens to an idea" and this "happening" is dependent upon human conception and human construction in light of the facts of a situation and upon how ideas are impacted by those actual facts. 3) The tenuous nature of truth claims, therefore, makes facts themselves a key component of truth construction and of adjudicating truth claims—the well can in fact be easily poisoned when truth is seen for what it is—tenuous, potentially multiple, and dependent on clear factual knowledge. William James himself described the pragmatic method as radical empiricism. 4) Finally, though these matters have historically been part and parcel of religious, spiritual, psychological, and philosophical debates (and remain so), when it comes to putting truths into practice (particularly in democratic contexts) it is political discourse that wins the day. If political discourse is poisoned in any way, practices based on "alternative facts" rather than reasoned understandings of what is and is not true becomes a clear, present, and practical danger... even within thinner understandings of democracy.

THE MEDIUM IS THE METAPHOR

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. (Postman, 1986/2006, p. xix)

Though I am by no means an advocate of the cultural literacy movement launched by E.D. Hirsch, Allan Bloom, and others, I do find value in spending some time with good and even great books, particularly those that seemingly rise from the dead to speak directly to our contemporary time period—those visionary books presenting ideas that were simply too far ahead of their own time to be completely grasped when initially published. Two such tomes, directly referred to by Neil Postman in the quote above, are George Orwell's (2017/1949) *1984* and Aldous Huxley's (2006/1932) *Brave New World*. As the reader can see above, Postman (1986/2006) himself feared Huxley's nightmare over Orwell's, though I suspect both speak to us today in different ways, but with equal horror. Given what has transpired in the time since Postman penned those words, and were he still alive today, I expect he'd

suggest that both hold important warnings for today's political context. Postman's quote comes in the Foreword of *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and partially lays the groundwork for his ensuing argument.

Amusing Ourselves to Death was first published in 1986. In the more recent edition published in 2006, Postman's son (who penned a new introduction) reminds us of the goings on in 1985: the population of the US was 240 million; top rated television shows on the Nielson scale included *Dynasty* and *Dallas*; MTV and cable television were only a few years old; the Macintosh computer was having its first birthday; and Ronald Reagan—whose devastating policies appear ironically humane given our present moment—was leader of the free world. Needless to say, the technological changes in the relatively short time since *Amusing Ourselves to Death* was first published are quite staggering.

I had just started graduate school in 1986 studying philosophy at the University of Florida and participating in such events as divest from South Africa protests on campus. I also remember quite vividly being asked by a professor that year to write a reflective piece on the following question: if it were ever invented, what would I think about carrying a phone around that was small enough to fit in my pocket. (I, of course, couldn't fathom such a ridiculous idea!) The publication of Postman's second edition (2006) had George W. Bush in the White House (do we miss him yet?); the US military had, in 2003, invaded Iraq to find those pesky weapons of mass destruction and to avenge the 9/11 attack (as we know in hindsight, this invasion was based on what we now call "alternative facts" though in 2006 we still simply called them lies). *Myspace* had come on the scene in 2003; *Facebook* in 2004; *YouTube* in 2005; and, ironically enough, *Twitter* itself was founded the same year that this 20th anniversary edition was published—2006. Additionally, reality TV was reaching its apex and one of the more popular shows in that genre of TV in 2006: *The Apprentice*.

And so, finally, to Postman's (1986/2006) analysis of media and media's role in partially constructing for us our understanding of existence and then communicating that understanding to others. To paraphrase, the argument presented in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is that each different form of communication media that is created (smoke signals; print media; the telegraph; the television—his focus at that time; Facebook; Twitter, etc.) has underlying it, inherently, by virtue of its structure and use, a set of ideas—an inherent ideology—and each inherent, structural ideology dictates in large part how knowledge, truth, and meaning making are conceived of, constructed, and communicated. As technologies of communication shift so do our essential notions as to what is meaningful, worth knowing, and true. He writes:

> Its value [Postman's argument] such as it is, resides in the directness of its perspective, which has its origins in observations made 2300 years ago by Plato. It is an argument that fixes its attention on the forms of human conversation, and postulates that how we are obliged to conduct such conversations will have the strongest possible influence on what ideas we can conveniently express. And what ideas are convenient to express inevitably become the important

content of a culture. I use the word conversation metaphorically to refer not only to speech but to all techniques and technologies that permit people of a particular culture to exchange messages. In this sense, all culture is a conversation or, more precisely, a corporation of conversations, conducted in a variety of symbolic modes. Our attention here is on how forms of public discourse regulate and even dictate what kind of content can issue from such forms. (p. 6)

Postman goes on to note his awareness that the position outlined above might read as a simple addendum to Marshall McLuhan's (1964) argument that "the medium is the message." However, Postman's (1986/2006) purpose goes well beyond a simple amendment of McLuhan, and focuses attention away from the medium/message conflation and toward seeing communication mediums as deeply influential metaphors:

A message denotes a specific, concrete statement about the world. But the forms of our media, including the symbols through which they permit conversation, do not make such statements. They are rather like metaphors, working by unobtrusive but powerful implication to enforce their special definitions of reality. Whether we are experiencing the world through the lens of speech or the printed word or the television camera, our media-metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, color it, argue a case for what the world is like. (p. 10)

There is much more that might be said (and has been said) about the impact that metaphors have on how we individually and collectively view the world (Pepper, 1942).

One such matter on this count that Postman (1986/2006) himself ponders is "resonance" as explained originally by Northrup Frye (1981). A fully worthwhile discussion here is not possible. However, and briefly, Frye suggests that resonance is that through which particular statements obtain universal meaning—when "statements" are understood broadly. As an example, the story of Hamlet has "resonated" such that it has become a broadly understood metaphor for those who hesitate to act. And "resonance" is generated by way of metaphor. For Postman's (1986/2006) purposes, resonance is an important matter to investigate for,

Every medium of communication, I am claiming, has resonance, for resonance is metaphor writ large. Whatever the original and limited context of its use may have been, a medium has the power to fly far beyond that context into new and unexpected ones. Because of the way it directs us to organize our minds and integrate our experience of the world, it imposes itself on our consciousness and social institutions in myriad forms. It sometimes has the power to become implicated in our concepts of piety, or goodness, or beauty. And it is always implicated in the ways we define and regulate our ideas of truth. (p. 18)

I return to this below.

TELEVISION AS METAPHOR

Though the present discussion is directed at Twitter, I do think it worthwhile to take a moment to briefly see what comes of Postman's (1986/2006) suggestion that media structures express a set of ideologies—ideologies that speak to the nature of knowledge, meaning, and truth. Generationally speaking, television is probably the most universally familiar mode of communication and works well as a test case for Postman's analysis—a test case that might make the Twitter analysis a bit easier to envision. Assuming for a moment that he is correct, what notions of knowledge, truth, and communications of meaningful ideas underly televisions workings?

Before addressing this question, I will agree with Postman (1986/2006) on one caveat he provides: neither Postman himself—nor I—am concerned about what media provides in terms of meaningless pleasure-oriented communication. Postman writes: "I am arguing that a television-based epistemology pollutes public communication and its surrounding landscape, not that it pollutes everything" (p. 28). He goes on to note television's capacity to provide "comfort" and "pleasure" as well as a means to create a "theater for the masses" and "arouse sentiment" concerning unethical wars (Vietnam) and dangerous ideologies (racism). The question, epistemologically speaking, is how and the degree to which media such as television and twitter poison public discourse via the creation of epistemological fog.

On Postman's (1986/2006) count, television's structure (and all communication technologies) forces human discourse in particular directions and in so doing simultaneously shifts our notions of what counts as knowledge and what is ultimately discerned as true. In terms of television, Postman notes directly or alludes indirectly to the following underlying structural and metaphorical matters television communicates about the nature of knowledge and truth, where television communication is: (1) based on images rather than text; (2) passive rather than active; (3) distant and lacks context; (4) disrupted and fragmented rather than connected and complete; (5) disembodied; and, (6) meant to entertain rather than fully inform.

Again, and assuming for a moment that Postman (1986/2006) is on to something important here, I suspect the reader can begin to see the impact of television's structure and therefore its metaphorical directing of how meaning is made and how truth is adjudicated within public discourse contexts. In brief, televised public discourse (such as news or political debates) distracts the viewer from textually oriented argument and toward images. One might consider the relative pounding that then presidential candidate Richard Nixon suffered not because of his ideas, but because of his televised appearance on stage sweating profusely. And, the great success of John F. Kennedy in that debate was in large part not so much about ideas but in his image attractiveness.

The reader might ponder the most recent televised debates and their image-based impact on the 2016 election. A second message that television's metaphor communicates is that meaning making is a receptive passive process rather than a dialogical active process. Television does not allow the viewer to prod, to question,

or to provide alternative perspectives to what is provided on the screen. Viewers are told what to believe without recourse to dialogical response.

Additionally, television communication makes it metaphorically clear that knowledge and truth are to be understood and determined without a full understanding of context. Television is temporally restrictive and simultaneously fleeting: whatever short time can be provided to any single discussion is fragmented at best as well-timed commercial breaks ("and now this" as Postman titles one of his chapters) break up any meaningful reporting or idea presentation that might have been accomplished. Another matter that initially seems antithetical to the metaphor of image over text is that television is experientially disembodied. This is connected to the notion that television cannot be dialogically interactive. Though there may be a "person" there explaining the news of the day, that person is completely separated from the viewer in both time and space. Finally, and this is Postman's big picture point: television's metaphor suggests that all crucial matters of human belief might best be seen as mere entertainment equal to messages found in soap operas or sporting events. Confusing entertainment with essential human matters of knowledge, truth, and belief is certainly (intended or not) a mechanism that creates epistemological fog as outlined above.

TWITTER AS METAPHOR

Before turning Postman's (1986/2006) analysis squarely on Twitter itself, a reminder and another caveat are in order. First the reminder: I am not concerned here with cultural "conversation" (to use Postman's terminology) that is akin to small talk or announcements. "Tweeting out" the announcement of, say, a meeting at work, or the birth of a child, or a reminder that a course assignment due date is looming are not in and of themselves dangerous to epistemological matters nor conceptions of what is and is not true/True. Such widespread and harmless sharing of communications as these is potentially valuable to human interaction.

I am instead, to follow Postman, concerned about when Twitter tirades rise to the level of public and political discourse as they have in recent years. The additional caveat is that I am not focused here on the sharing of images and video links via Twitter feeds—they certainly carry different epistemological concerns similar to those connected to television's image orientation and lack of context or that found in other communication media such as Facebook. These contexts are problematic for a variety of other reasons as was seen in a recent Twitter sharing of a video showing a group of students allegedly "staring down" a group of Native Americans in Washington, D.C. I am focused here, instead, on Tweets-as-text.

What I believe Postman's (1986/2006) media analysis of Twitter as metaphor can allow us to see is that Twitter's underlying inherent ideology—its metaphorical underpinning—holds that the endeavors of adjudicating truth and making meaning, in a word its epistemological understanding, is: (1) incredibly brief; (2) severely disembodied; (3) oriented to surface understanding rather than depth

of understanding; (4) monologic rather than dialogic; (5) prone to incendiary ad hominem reaction rather than reflective thoughtfulness; and (6) ultimately about entertainment…as well.

The most crucially important matter for me in the above list is the inherent underlying notion that political/public discourse can be carried on in a context that allows for only 280 characters (characters, not words—280 words would be bad enough) per tirade. I use the term tirade here not only as a reflection of what Tweets typically entail in the public sphere today, but to indicate that only tirades are possible within such a limited space when it comes to political discourse. Certainly, Tweets mark a return to text (relative to television, for example); however, it is text so limited that it can do nothing other than to epistemologically fog any and all understanding. Postman (1986/2006) himself notes in his discussion of image versus textual presentation, that text is frozen in time thereby allowing for meaningful and ongoing discussion and analysis. Freezing tweets in time yields no such ongoing discussion and analysis as there can be nothing of substance to analyze in such a severely limited monologic space. This limit is also the genesis of other Twitter based epistemological concerns.

The additional and crucial concerns that grow out of Twitter's built-in character limit are that public and political discourse is metaphorically about simple matters needing no in-depth analysis. Tweets are also severely disembodied as the human targets of the tirades are not standing in front of the Tweeter. This disembodied-ness allows for reactive, incendiary ad hominem name calling to rule public discourse—which, of course, is not "discourse" at all (as a friend of mine recently remarked, it is easier to call someone a derogatory name when they aren't standing in front of you). Even when a "dialectical response" does come in reaction to a Tweet, it too is limited to what was first tweeted out and also limited to a 280-character potential response. Twitter, it seems, is inherently designed to create epistemological fog rather than in-depth and truthful making of meaning that, in the political sphere, might lead to sound policy. Is it any wonder that such sound policy is seemingly non-existent in our Twitter poisoned wells of public discourse? And, finally, this all points to a core Postman point: Twitter, like television, is a human invention that might very well allow us to amuse ourselves to death.

Here, I want to remind the reader of the notion of "resonance" outlined earlier. Twitter certainly resonates matters in all the ways Postman suggests—especially so given its place in contemporary public discourse. However, it also seems to resonate in ways that neither Frye (1981) nor Postman (1986/2006) could have ever imagined. Beyond what might be an organic metaphorical generation of resonance via communication media, our brave new technological world has found a way to create resonance more quickly and in a dangerously covert manner: algorithms. It was recently reported that in Twitter's case (remembering that all social media has come to rely on algorithms) their new algorithms seem to be contributing to the growth of incendiary, ad hominem public "discourse" (Dorsey, 2019). It is maybe no surprise given the underlying ideological/structural requirements of Twitter as

outlined above. The question becomes, what does Twitter do in its resonation of Truth/truth in public discourse.

TWITTER AND TRUTH

Before concluding with some thoughts as to whether we might do anything to push back on Twitter's influence (the "doing" demand of pragmatism), I want to take just a bit of time to connect more closely Twitter's impact on truth/Truth as conceived by William James (1907/2019) and taken up earlier in this chapter. In the early pages of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman (1986/2006) writes, "Truth, like time itself, is a product of a conversation man has with himself about and through the techniques of communication he has invented" (p. 24). One of the charges faced by James and other pragmatist philosophers of merit is that of relativism. That is, if truth/Truth does not adhere ready-made in objects and ideas about those objects to be discovered (most often by disregarding actual lived experience as distractive to the endeavor), the idealists argue, then anything might be deemed "true."

What I want to make clear on this count is that Pragmatism's notion of truth "happening to ideas" is that it happens just as Postman (1986/2006) says: through ongoing conversation about human experiential matters. And, that conversation is tied directly to experiential facts—the well is, or should be, kept free of poisoning if we rely on verifiable facts and ideas that might grow from those facts. And as Alexander George (2017) notes above, facts are best understood via disciplinary experts whose knowledge can be carefully considered in light of what we already know. Hence the moniker rightfully attached to pragmatism by William James: radical empiricism.

Given the metaphorical character of Twitter's structure as to what constitutes truth and knowledge, "facts" are at best simply hints at something further and at worst completely unverifiable, when expressed through Twitter's incredibly restrictive requirements. It is a medium that squashes conversation when conversation is understood in any meaningful sense. And, again, assuming for a moment that Postman (1986/2006) is onto something, a squashed conversation will result in a squashed understanding of what is or is not true/True. In fact, Twitter causes important information to be lost in irrelevancy—much as Huxley (1932/2006) feared would be the case. And, in the case of Huxley, these problems were the result of technological advancement much like communication advancements we are experiencing today.

In a *Washington Post* article from late 2018 (and quoted at the outset of this chapter), it was reported that according to the Fact Checker database, Donald Trump had expressed nearly 7,000 untruths in his presidency—almost entirely on Twitter. This should come as no surprise given the metaphorical underpinnings that has Twitter directing our—or at least his—epistemological understandings. Twitter is built for precisely this kind of cultural "conversation." William James' (1907/2019) point was not that adjudicating truth claims and making meaning is a simple matter; in fact, the pragmatist conception of truth requires careful deliberation, trust of experts, time

and space to ponder, sometimes difficult and direct engagement with other human beings, and deep reflection how ideas might be connected to just and good action. To do so requires fighting through epistemological fog by thinking and speaking with depth and with the goal of understanding all matters of connected experience deeply. I suppose it is telling that one of the more respected spaces where facts are presented and thoughtful opinions are dialogically expressed has launched a media campaign to defend truth/Truth itself. The New York Times recently rolled out this defense of truth/Truth noting that such endeavors require "rigor," "perseverance," and is "worth defending." Whew…I expect James, Huxley, and Postman are spinning in their graves. I could never have predicted as little as ten years ago that truth/Truth as a human ideal would ever need defending as an ideal.

WHAT WE GONNA DO?

I mentioned earlier John Dewey's (1910) idea of an experiential "felt difficulty." Twitter is both emblematic of a general ambivalence toward truth/Truth and is, at the same time, complicit in the creation of this ambivalence. To use a technical term, it scares the bejeebers out of me. In another of Postman's (1996) visionary books, *The End of Education*, he suggests that we had, and certainly have, rationalized technological advancement to the point of making it an unquestionable good. That is, if an invention is deemed a technological advancement, questions as to its implications go un-challenged. Long before Postman was writing, the philosopher Gunther Anders (1956) noted that though we used to not be able to imagine what we might create, we now can't imagine what we've created. He was referring to the atomic bomb; Postman (1996) was referring to communication technologies. I'm not sure which is worse: the immediate demise of the human race by blowing ourselves up, or the slow and sure destruction of the human soul—a soul sourced in truth—and meaning-making—by way of technologies that reduce our intellectual activity and our emotional reaction down to 280-character long tweets at a time.

Here's the rub: Anders and Postman are, I believe, exactly right. And, once a technological horse is out of its proverbial barn, it is nearly impossible to wrangle it back in. You may have noticed that we are still worrying about who has and doesn't have the atomic bomb (and we are mostly Tweeting about it). But I do have a wish list on this count: (1) I wish schools would incorporate a staunch critical analysis of technology generally and communication media particularly into coursework. (2) I wish present and future educators would be exposed to such authors as William James, Aldous Huxley, and Neil Postman (among an endless number of others). (3) I wish politicians would quit poisoning the well of reason by quitting Twitter altogether. (4) I wish we would all spend more time in direct dialogue with others rather than utilizing social media platforms, particularly Twitter, to make hit and run incendiary attacks on one another. (5) I wish Donald Trump would go away. Of course, you know the proverb about wishing in one hand and which hand fills up more quickly.

I began this chapter noting concerns about the indirect creation of epistemological fog and the poisoning of the well of reason—both seem to be inherent results of Twitter's underlying epistemological ideology, intentioned or not. The fog and the poisoned well are results of ridiculous notions most completely held in the idea of "alternative facts." I will leave you with a final suggestion as to a source of food for thought. Watch the rather horrible film *Idiocracy*. *Idiocracy* is a generally bad film depicting a possible dystopian future. Certainly, a bad film…then again…

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FAITH AGOSTINONE-WILSON

5. THE POPULIST MASQUERADE OF ATTRIBUTING TRUMP'S WIN TO "ECONOMIC ANXIETY" AMONG WHITE VOTERS

ABSTRACT

The most disheartening outcome of the election was the profound disregard for racism as a key factor motivating Trump supporters, from leftist and liberal commentators and academics who then found themselves slammed upside the head with reality. Among the most flawed race-free analyses is the "economic anxiety" thesis: that people voted for Trump not because of racism, but because they were deep down "worried about the economy." The economic anxiety thesis is often attached to recommendations for liberal politicians to move away from identity discourse and only emphasize issues that white voters will respond to, though this is couched in universal terms as part of a whitewashing project. This chapter critiques the received truth of the economic anxiety thesis from a classical Marxist perspective, dialectically examines its origins in the work of Thomas Frank and David Brooks, and posit how it serves to normalize white supremacist discourse and the current administration's personnel and policies.

Keywords: Trump, US elections, Marx, white supremacy, racism, populism, economics, media, liberalism, conservatism, working class

INTRODUCTION

The election of Donald Trump was undoubtedly a traumatic event on a national (some would say global) scale, promising grim outcomes for vulnerable groups who had been the perpetual targets of his racist, sexist, and xenophobic campaign trail rhetoric. In one of the rare political blog posts focusing on the perceptions of Hillary Clinton voters, Weida (2017) noted that the term "frightened" appeared in most open-ended survey responses about their reactions to the election:

> It's not just the threat to democracy the authoritarian approach this administration has taken poses. It's the legitimate risks friends and family face from racial profiling, loss of healthcare, and the increasingly violent, hateful rhetoric once confined to the fringes that has elbowed its way into the White House. (para. 23)

One of the most disappointing outcomes of the election was the profound failure of the imagination on the part of the Left (Ansara, 2016; Faulkner, 2016), from Marxists to the progressive wing to centrist liberals, starting with their assumptions that Trump's win wasn't possible or that Clinton "would have been just as bad." But the most common expression of this utter naivete from prominent liberals in the aftermath of the election was in the form of sympathy for *Trump supporters*, to the point of berating Democrats for their apparent focus on "identity politics" instead of economics (Matthews, 2016). Indeed, the media often overlooked the fact that Clinton won by three million more votes—votes which included minorities, women, and LGBTQ people—in favor of endless editorials about how to reach out to white Trump voters (Lerner, 2017; Pierce, 2017, Weida, 2017).

As Gopnik (2016) characterized the Trump coverage leading up to the election, "a weird kind of pity arose, directed not so much at him (he supplies his own self-pity) as at his supporters, on the premise that their existence somehow makes him a champion for the dispossessed" (para. 1). Some examples of this editorializing that Lerner (2017) summarizes included popular social commentator/comedian Jon Stewart who in a *CBS This Morning* interview with Charlie Rose, insisted that liberals were hypocritical for treating Trump supporters as a monolithic group, since they normally insist on respecting diversity (Bradley, 2016). Celebrity travel chef Anthony Bourdain and even Bernie Sanders himself invoked the well-worn tropes of "political correctness" and "out of touch east coast liberals" as factors alienating Trump voters (Berlatsky, 2016; Friedman, 2017). Faulkner (2016) noted similar commentary in the British press surrounding Brexit voters.

From a dialectical materialist perspective, there is nothing unusual about this phenomenon in that it shows the limitations of classical liberalism as a political solution to confronting growing authoritarian populism and fascism. In fact, as Sedlillo (2017) explains, "a favorite talking point of the liberal is the common economic pain and social alienation of fascists" while in reality, "the pain of fascist vigilantes is irrelevant to the conversation concerning the threat of fascist vigilante culture and organization" (para. 5). Yet this hasn't stopped the insistence in the media on sympathetic analysis of the Trump voter, analysis which manages to be simultaneously economic AND color-blind.

Young (2016) identifies this as "the emergence of a new sub-genre of discourse and literature solely comprised of white people attempting to explain Trump's win without saying the words "race" or "racism" (para. 1). Serwer (2017) recounted his experiences interviewing Trump supporters, where he found them "combining an insistence that discriminatory policies were necessary with vehement denials that his policies would discriminate and absolute outrage that the question would even be asked" (para. 22).

This discursive sleight of hand is all the more remarkable considering how whiteness was THE determining factor behind Trump's win. There is no way to deny it. As Coates (2017) reminds us, Trump won whites across a range of economic sectors, from 14 points for households making an income of $100,000 or more to

28 points for $50,000–$99,999 to 20 points for white households making less than $50,000 (para. 13). Moreover, "Trump's dominance among whites across class lines is of a piece with his larger dominance across nearly every white demographic" where white women selected Trump over Clinton by +9 points and white men by +31 points (para. 13).

College educated white people chose Trump by +3 points and non-degree holding whites by +37 points (Coates, 2017, para. 13). Whites of all age-ranges went for Trump, with the 45–65 range showing the strongest support of +28 points over Clinton. Even regionally whites went for Trump, whether from the Sun Belt, upper Midwest, or East Coast. Coats concludes, "if you tallied the popular vote of only white America to derive 2016 electoral votes, Trump would have defeated Clinton 389 to 81, with the remaining 68 votes either a toss-up or unknown" (para. 13). So, the persistent meme of refusing to consider race in favor of "economics" as a major factor of the 2016 election is worth examining, if not for its sheer audacity.

Even if fascism and white supremacy weren't the stated motivations of ALL Trump supporters, it has to be faced that as a group they were at the *very least* willing to throw their support behind a candidate who openly used racism, sexism, and xenophobia as part of his campaign message (Coates, 2017). Facing this reality requires an analytical strategy beyond a crude, reductionist discussion of class into something deeper and darker, as Mason (2016) captured in his reaction to the election results:

> Donald Trump has won the presidency—not because of the "white working class," but because millions of middle-class and educated US citizens reached into their soul and found there, after all its conceits were stripped away, a grinning white supremacist. (para. 2)

Roediger's (2017) Marxist analysis of the white working class emphasizes the many ways that the ruling class has utilized race since slavery as a means to erode the solidarity necessary to overcome capitalism. Coupled with color-blind discourse hostile to any mention of race, "the economy" becomes a way to talk about the results of the 2016 election without ever having to mention race or even critique capitalism, often by invoking the specter of the "good old days." As Fletcher (2016) correctly notes about Trump supporters, "This segment of the white population was looking in terror at the erosion of the American Dream, but they were looking at it through the prism of race" (p. 11).

This chapter will first present an overview of the faux populist *economic anxiety thesis*, or the received truth that Trump won the election because of concerns about the economy and not so much about race or gender. Next, the evolution of this line of thinking will be traced from the international crisis of capitalism in the early 70s to today as it moved from originally being associated with conservatives to now the liberal punditry. A Marxian critique of key claims of the economic anxiety thesis will outline major problems with its core message. Finally, the chapter will conclude with an examination of the social and historical conditions leading to "economic anxiety"

appearing as a major media framework (the dialectical "why now" question) as well as how to create a better analytical path forward to stop authoritarian populism and fascism.

ECONOMIC ANXIETY THESIS

Loosely defined, the economic anxiety thesis is the quasi-populist sounding notion that fears about the economy and falling living standards are what propelled mostly white, low-income and working-class Trump supporters to vote for him. Some versions of this thesis allow that race or gender could potentially be a motivating factor behind that vote, but it is immediately subordinated to class rather than treated as an integral aspect of economic thinking on the part of Trump supporters. The ubiquitous and vague nature of the thesis has even led to social media users weaponizing the term in biting and ironic ways:

> Today, "economic anxiety" is a running joke on Twitter, brandished widely whenever Trump rallies descend into group therapy sessions for people experiencing racial panic. The idea is to mock the lengths politicians, centrist pundits, and others will go—out of a sense of timidity or in the spirit of generosity—to pretend economic insecurity and other pocketbook factors explain the Trump phenomenon in its entirety. (Buetler, 2017, para. 4)

There are three key characteristics of the economic anxiety thesis that will be introduced here: its narrative of downward mobility, how it downplays racism and sexism as contributing causes, and its critique-avoidant aspects (stopping short of naming capitalism, racism, sexism, xenophobia or homophobia). All three of these characteristics work together to inscribe the conservative white working class as "authentic Americans" whose needs must be prioritized at the expense of others.

Narrative of Downward Mobility

First and foremost, the economic anxiety thesis is a narrative of downward mobility, captured most effectively in Ehrenreich's (1990) *Fear of Falling: The Inner-Life of the Middle-Class*. White households that once held "the American Dream"— advantages of home ownership, low-to-no debts, single-earner (usually male), livable wage jobs with health benefits and savings to pass on to their children—are now facing the erosion of all of these within a time-span of less than 70 years:

> Here's what has gone wrong: hard work and a good education used to be a sure bet for upward mobility in the US—at least among some groups of people. Americans born in the 1940s had a 90% chance of doing better economically than their parents did—but those born in the 1980s have only 50/50 odds of doing so. As the dread has faded, however, its effects have not. Several elements of normal psychology combine to keep many across the economic

spectrum convinced that the rich and the poor deserve what they get—with exceptions made, of course, mainly for oneself. (Szalavitz, 2017, paras. 6–7)

Indeed, there HAS been a downward mobility for the working class stemming from the crisis of capitalism in the early 1970s as global markets were sought for necessary expansion, monetarily and militarily speaking (Smith, 2017; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2002). Though capitalism has always been a global project, a massive shift in production occurred in the early 1970s, with domestic factories relocating to countries with few labor protections and a cheaper workforce. This has had a decades-long ripple effect with the parallel growth of "big box" retailers gutting the economic infrastructure of smaller towns, bringing with it low-wage and part-time-no-benefits work. Sefla (2017) connects these events, along with the 2007 recession and its austerity-ridden solutions, to the popularity of Trump's economic nationalism.

The desperation of workers who have noticed the effects of capitalism is immediately channeled into racialized discourse, making racism "no mere epiphenomenon of a determinant social process, but a fundamental component of that process" (McClaren & Farahmandpur, 2002, p. 53). In particular, the massive changes in the workforce over the past 40 years—demographically, by sector, and by credentials required—has created a scarcity of livable wage work that capitalists and politicians like Trump have been able to exploit:

> Donald Trump's rise as a candidate has been built upon support from people who are often white, male, and without college degrees... They also feel their financial situation is not what they thought it would be when they were younger, and think their current lot in life is a function of circumstances beyond their control. In short, it's a group ripe to hear a power fantasy about how life can be made "great again" and things can be the way they should be, if only we'd do some things in the worst possible ways. (Doctor RJ, 2016, para. 3)

Essentially, the downward mobility narrative incorporates aspects of reality, but it leaves out an analysis of how racism is an integral part of capitalism. This leaves only a wistful form of nostalgia, which will inevitably fail to deliver.

Downplays Racism and Sexism

While the economic anxiety thesis acknowledges the impacts of decades of intensified neoliberalism since the early 1970s, it is also characterized by an overall downplaying of racism and sexism as interconnected with capitalism. For example, Lilla (2017), while addressing diversity, somehow manages to blame the Democratic Party for alienating white male voters by supporting laws and policies protecting various minority groups, supposedly taking attention off of economics in the process. As Young (2016) summarizes Lilla's analysis,

instead of just acknowledging that white fear about impending diversity is what swung the election, he acknowledges it... *and then blames the diversity. Its ultimately our fault.* And *"our"* in this context is *"literally anyone who isn't a protestant White male"* (para. 5)

The downplaying of racism and sexism has a long history as part of the push for post-racial and post-feminist discourse in both liberal and conservative camps, something explored later in this chapter. Regarding race, we can see this ahistorical framing in the debate over the appropriateness of displaying the confederate flag on government property. Proponents of the confederate flag have argued since Reconstruction that the flag doesn't *actually* represent slavery, and more recently, assert that it isn't a symbol of racism but instead "pride" or "southern heritage" (Thomas, 2017). This reading of the flag conveniently leaves out its deliberate symbolic revival in the 1950s and 60s as a reaction against the civil rights movement. When viewed through a post-racial lens, the flag becomes decoupled from its past, because "racism no longer exists." Those opposing the flag are overreacting, or at minimum, not allowing free speech.

Coates (2017) pinpoints the post-racialization that has led to the power of the economic anxiety thesis:

> The scope of Trump's commitment to whiteness is matched only by the depth of popular disbelief in the power of whiteness. We are now being told that support for Trump's "Muslim ban," his scapegoating of immigrants, his defenses of police brutality are somehow the natural outgrowth of the cultural and economic gap between Lena Dunham's America and Jeff Foxworthy's. The collective verdict holds that the Democratic Party lost its way when it abandoned everyday economic issues like job creation for the softer fare of social justice. (para. 7)

Therefore, the economic anxiety thesis continues this post-racialization of political discourse, using pseudo-populist appeals as ideological cover.

Critique-Avoidant

Ultimately, proponents of the economic anxiety thesis never allow themselves to directly critique capitalism. Much like downplaying racism and sexism, "Contemporary pro-capitalist ideology betrays a remarkable amnesia about capitalism itself... it denies everything that hints at the historically specific limits of the capitalist mode of production" (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2002, p. 38). Instead, there are nostalgic calls for that less rapacious, cozy form of capitalism that was safely contained after the New Deal through the 1960s: "Mesmerized by the scent of money we willfully ignore the ramifications of capitalism's current capital flight... we want to believe all of this will soon pass, leaving us once again curled up beside the glowing hearth of the American Dream" (p. 61).

When combined with post-racial and post-feminist discourse, nostalgic appeals to capitalism's kinder days totally overlooks the historical (and current) situations shaping the black working class (Martin, Horton & Booker, 2015) or women's experiences with sexual harassment and gender discrimination in the workforce (Baker, 2007; Rowland, 2004) during the so-called "golden era" of prosperity. Instead, there is an insistence in the economic anxiety thesis that things can be restored to how they once were (with just a touch of job retraining), if only the Democrats would stop catering to identity politics and focus on "real" issues.

Ironically, many of the populist appeals that Trump utilized during the campaign, such as promises to "build the wall," deport "illegals" or stop Muslims immigrating to the US, were facilitated by the Democrats' refusal to take a hard stance against racism and xenophobia. Far from being mired in identity politics, it was the Democrats' *lack* of decisive action on immigration, for example, that essentially paved the way for much of the GOP's recent actions such as the Muslim travel ban. Chacon (2017) explains how the Obama administration's failure to defend amnesty across the board (in hindsight nearly impossible to do with an oppositional GOP in the House and Senate) enabled the Tea Party to mobilize "anti-immigrant sentiment in greater numbers to the polls in 2010 and 2012, helping to pave the way for the ascendency of the Republican Party and Trump in 2016 on a reactionary and racist platform of attacking immigrants once again" (p. 34).

ORIGINS

Political discourse disseminated through the blogosphere and cable news takes as a matter of course, accusatory categorizations like "political correctness," "out-of-touch elites," "latte liberals," "avocado and toast millennials" among other hastily constructed sociological groupings. While right wing populists have always utilized similar tropes to distinguish themselves from "the establishment" (Berlet & Lyons, 2016), a key difference is *where* these talking points are currently originating from. In the past, conservative pundits primarily employed these discursive strategies. Now it is the liberal and even progressive commentators who have assumed accusatory terminologies as their own, or, as Lerner (2017) puts it, "doing Republicans' rhetorical dirty work for them" (para. 4) despite the lack of accuracy of these concepts to begin with.

The purpose of this section is twofold. First, it will briefly trace the development of the economic anxiety thesis, from the early 1970s to the present. At the same time, it will track the shift of accusatory populist argument coming from mostly conservative authors/pundits to now primarily liberal/progressive ones. These eras can be roughly organized according to date ranges: Era A (Mid-70s-Early 80s), Era B (Mid 80s-Mid-2000s), and Era C (Mid-2000s-present). As this section is meant to simply orient the reader to political antecedents of the economic anxiety thesis, it is not by any means a comprehensive historical analysis.

Era A: Mid-70s-Early 80s

The hallmarks of this era's discourse concerning key antecedents of the economic anxiety thesis include the media's construction of the "Reagan Democrat," purported backlash against the "excesses" of the 1960s, and electoral carryover of Nixon's Silent Majority/Law & Order base, probably best characterized by the statement, "I didn't leave the party, it left me." Though these notions continue to be readily accepted as given sociological fact, Bouie's (2014) analysis of key shifts in working class white voting patterns indicate that it wasn't so much the Democratic Party failing to support the working class as working-class whites seeing the Democrats as favoring black Americans, period. Bouie lays out how liberal economic reforms of the 1960s, such as Medicare, benefitted white families but this was overlooked as whites placed blame on the Democrats for tolerating urban unrest. One of the key conflicts to emerge out of this period was the reactionary coalition of working and middle-class whites regarding mandated busing and desegregation (Delmont, 2016).

At the same time as the Democrats were navigating their major electoral gamble of supporting civil rights laws and policies in the 1960s, and losing white votes to the Republican Party in the process, middle-class and more affluent liberals were shaping the Democratic Party. As Bray (2017) explains,

> Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s a discourse of the working class as undermined by its own supposed affluence... coalesced and became the legitimating narrative for the increasing control of liberal professionals over the Democratic party and its policy priorities...Ironically, this shift occurred at the same time as a large influx of African Americans and women into unions and unionization struggles, as a result of the civil rights and feminist struggles. (para. 16)

Bray points out that it was the 1972 McGovern campaign that was the first to perform better with middle-class workers than the traditional industrial blue-collar constituency. Major unions such as the AFL-CIO refused to endorse McGovern because they "saw him as a sell-out to identity politics" rather than advancing a core economic message (Nagel, 2017, para. 61). Much of this attitude was represented in the "Archie Bunker Hardhat" stereotype, based on the popular character from the 1970s TV sitcom *All in the Family* (Allen, 2008). Archie, who loaded trucks and was later promoted to dock foreman, vehemently derided liberalism in all forms, supported Nixon, and comfortably used racist epithets.

The racialization of economics embodied in characters like Archie reflected the crisis of capitalism in the early 1970s, the decline of unions and leftist organizing, and the onset of neoliberalism. As the white working class began to see a drop in their standard of living, they cast a resentful eye toward minorities who they perceived were making minor gains, a form of zero-sum thinking also applied to growing hatred toward organized labor (Bouie, 2014; Tanenhaus, 2017). These historical events tie directly to the political situation today:

The emaciation of Rust Belt organized labor left white workers in states like Michigan and Wisconsin politically adrift. The structure once provided by unions and similar communitarian institutions was superseded by another, more primal bond: white identity. It wasn't until the 2016 that the full consequences of this transformation became apparent, because no modern Republican candidate had fully exploited it before Trump. But on November 8, white Rust Belt workers surged to the polls and delivered the candidate of white populism an historic victory. (Resnikoff, 2017, para. 48)

The early 1970s created the conditions for the talking point of the "out of touch" liberal elite that would come to dominate the 1990s, cementing the image of the working class as Republican, religious, and white.

Era B: 90s-Mid-2000s

The most enduring concepts from this era of the culture wars and construction of whiteness include the "liberal elite," David Brooks' (2001) "latte liberals" meme, the pervasiveness of "political correctness," and "reverse racism" (Pinucs, 2003; Daniels, 2017). During this era, a key shift in political discourse was the concept of victimization being applied to whites who were portrayed as helpless against an onslaught of multiculturalism—they are the hidden victims who have legitimate grievances. A series of Supreme Court rulings in the 1990s on cases that challenged affirmative action were "appropriated by white nationalists and used to promote a white sense of racial grievance" (Swain, 2002, p. 270). Extending the notions from the 1970s of the Democrats defending minorities over deserving whites, pundits further shaped the going meme of Republicans being the ones embracing the image of embattled-outsider-authentic-worker-status. In essence, they manage to pull off a rhetorical "switcheroo" across social and economic fronts.

In what is best described as a market populist movement (Frank, 2001), publications begin to muddy the waters about who is or isn't the ruling elite. Stanley & Danko's (1998) bestseller *The Millionaire Next Door* presented the wealthy as a less threatening, folksy crowd who lived a thrifty existence, buying cheap watches and ordinary cars, making them "just like you and me." Instead, it is the *liberals* who are the ones putting on pretentious airs, as Brooks (2001) claims in another bestseller from the era, *Bobos in Paradise*. In one of many similar verbose passages, Brooks bemoans that former hippies are now the ones in charge, infiltrating all walks of life, up to and including sleeping in the beds that were once owned by the old rich:

The educated elites have even taken over professions that used to be working class. The days of the hard-working blue-collar journalist, for example, are gone forever...Political parties, which were once run by immigrant hacks, are now dominated by communications analysts with Ph.Ds. If you drive around the old suburbs and follow the collarless-shirt bohemians home from their

organic fruit stands, you notice they have literally moved into the houses of the old stockbroker elite. (p. 39)

The ease at which these lines of thought took hold was only facilitated by the Democrats becoming further associated with neoliberal globalization, in particular the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) under President Clinton (Chomsky, 1999). Political candidates such as Ross Perot used this to bolster the image of liberals as hypocritical, pretending to support workers while the entire effort was a charade. Media messaging hammered home that the real champion of workers—white workers in particular—was the GOP, as well as wealthy businessmen, hallmarks of an authoritarian populist coalition (Frank, 2001).

During the Clinton administration, Democrats attempted to retain relevancy in the face of growing conservative power by straddling the rickety fence of third way policies, such as cracking down on the "excesses" of the welfare state, in order to win approval of white working-class voters while not alienating a multicultural coalition too much. Racism, as envisioned by Third Way Democrats, becomes a privatized pathology, not a historically shaped one (Bray, 2017). Berlet and Lyons (2016) outline the precarity of such a strategy:

> Centrist-extremist theory fosters a dangerous complacency about mainstream politics and institutions. It has been used to rally support for moderate versions of oppressive politics—for example, to attack Republicans and bolster the Democratic Party, even as Democratic leaders embrace traditionally right-wing positions. In addition, because it logically relies on government crackdowns to protect us from "irrational zealots," centrist-extremist theory fuels the growth of state repression, and can serve as a rationale for aiding repressive government surveillance operations. (p. 20)

As the Bush administration approached, it become increasingly common to see liberal pundits adopting centrist-extremist discourse and analysis both to critique Democrats for being too soft on crime while desperately reaching out to white voters who had moved to the Republican side, in order to maintain some degree of electoral power.

Era C: Mid 2000s-Present

After the electoral college victory of Bush in 2000 and the failure of Democrats to prevent his re-election in 2004, conservatism became solidified in the publics' mind as a working-class, not middle—or upper-class movement. During this era, the bulk of critiques were aimed at the Democratic Party, by liberals themselves, such as Frank (2005). More recent bestselling pundits like Vance (2016) and Lilla (2017) continued to build on the faux populist analysis of Frank (2005) by claiming that the white working class was being left behind in favor of an intensified focus on minority and women's issues, or "identity politics." In their view, the fault lay with liberals'

insistence on addressing the diversity of the working class rather than sticking with a racial and gender-neutral conception of economics. Bernie Sanders also relied heavily on this meme during the primaries, to the detriment of his campaign (Lopez & McGhee, 2016).

Carnes and Lupu (2017) and Muldoon (2016) note how the press repeated the populist messaging that Trump was swept into office by working and lower-class whites, not the middle-class which was actually the most intensely supportive wing of his base. Trump supporters were portrayed as authentic and colorful in a "small town" kind of way, within journalists' earlier coverage of his rallies, representing a neglected working-class. Nagel (2017) commented on this rhetorical sleight of hand that was dominating the media during the Trump campaign:

> Although the idea that ordinary people feel alienated by political correctness was not uncommon in right-wing rhetoric, there was also quite a remarkable shift from a subcultural elitism to a sudden proletarian righteousness, or even a bit of noblesse oblige, as though the right had been making Thomas Frank's argument all along. In reality, they had been making pro-inequality, misanthropic, economically elitist arguments for natural hierarchy all along. (p. 101)

As an example, Nagel points out how former Alt-right hero Milo Yiannopoulous embraced a sudden change in direction after the election of Trump, from wearing a "stop being poor" T-shirt to making speaking tours where he talked about the white working class.

At the same time that liberals were critiquing the Democratic Party and leftism in general (while leaving the right wing relatively untouched), it was *conservative* pundits who were aiming their attacks directly at lower income whites. Muldoon (2016) summarizes the content of articles from 20 conservative pundits in an "Against Trump" theme issue published by *The National Review* where scapegoating language usually reserved for minorities was deployed in full force against poor whites, chiding them for their support of Trump:

> Usually, this kind of naked ruling-class cruelty comes out in response to outbreaks of struggle, when workers are forcing their humanity into the face of the rulers. In this case, it's the Republican Party's internal crisis—which Trump didn't create, but skillfully exploits—that is forcing the brazenness of their entitlement into the light. (para. 29)

Examples of the theme issue's hit pieces included "mainstream" conservatives charging poor whites with relying on welfare instead of self-reliance, perceiving themselves as willfully uneducated victims looking for a savior or strong father figure, and the usual hand-wringing about the decline of the family and virtues— again, ignoring the fact that a significant portion of Trump's base was affluent and middle-class. As Muldoon concluded, "It's an attitude necessary for any ruling class

towards those it exploits: *You're at the bottom because you deserve to be there. It's not the system, it's you*" (para. 23).

KEY TENETS

There are four major claims presented within the economic anxiety thesis. Even when not directly stated or verbatim, they are integrated within the overall discourse, starting with pundits and distributed rapidly through social media:

Economic Fears Drove the Trump Vote in reaction to poverty, debt, job loss, decline of living standards, or worries about immigrants taking jobs. The majority of the hard-core Trump support is coming from poor and working-class whites. This is the heart of the economic anxiety thesis and is taken at face value. The assumption behind this claim is that even egregious acts of racism are in reality fears about the economy, not *actual* racism.

Out of Touch Urban Liberals Cause Resentment working in tandem with minorities (who have made major economic and educational gains) to keep white workers down. As part of the economic anxiety narrative, liberalism is to blame for its insistence on extending political representation to minority groups as well as a general set of off-putting behaviors ranging from drinking Starbucks coffee in cups that don't mention Christmas to support for same-sex marriage (Hamilton, 2016; Forsetti, 2016). Trump supporters have nowhere else to turn electorally and are compelled to support reactionary candidates as a result.

The [White] Working Class is Ignored in favor of "identity politics" or globalization. By liberals addressing issues such as contraception coverage or transgender rights in the workplace, they are automatically leaving behind the plight of the white working class because these are not economic, but fringe issues. Even worse, these identity-centered issues are slights against deeply held religious beliefs, further compelling Trump supporters to vote the way they do. However, it is important to stress that this is in no way an indication of racism or sexism on the part of Trump voters. As a way to avoid alienating these voters, Democrats need to steer clear of identity-laden, fringe issues and present a color-blind economic message. The gist of this claim is that if not for liberal snobbery, Trump supporters would fairly stampede over each other to endorse social democratic policies in the voting booth, such as represented by Bernie Sanders (Bray, 2017; Hamilton, 2016; Matthews, 2016, Demeter, 2016).

There is an Authentic Working Class that presents its existence alone as a critique of elites, without having to use race or gender messaging. That this authentic working class happens to be, by default, white, primarily male, rural, Christian, heterosexual and less-educated is beside the point (Kellner, 2017; Young, 2016). That is *still* no indication that any of this is about racism. Certain fields, such as industrial manufacturing, small business owners, and resource extraction (coal mining in particular) are the "real" jobs, holdovers from an era when America was great; the rest being globalization-based neoliberal or government knowledge workers that are overly catered to by the Democratic Party (Bray, 2017).

FLAWS

In this section, the key claims of the economic anxiety thesis outlined above are addressed, with a focus on major flaws of these claims. Because these claims often overlap, the flaws are not critiqued in turn, but across the claims. The critiques include: (1) the most intense support for Trump coming from the middle-class, not the working class as often purported, (2) economic precarity is not a sufficient factor to drive voters to support reactionary candidates across the board; (3) Trump support is a reaction against globalization as xenophobically constructed, not as corporately defined as is asserted; (4) the Democratic and Republican parties are not "both alike," as clearly evidenced by their party platforms toward workers; likewise Trump supporters do not embrace socially democratic policies as touted by the Sanders campaign; and (5) perhaps the strongest critique of the economic anxiety thesis are the authoritarian words and actions of Trump supporters themselves.

Most Intense Trump Support is Middle-to-Upper Class

More than any other assumption, the economic anxiety thesis relies on the concept of a majority of Trump supporters having low household incomes, suffering job losses, and having experienced a decline in living standards and household income. However, post-election data paints an entirely different picture, locating the core of Trump support in the upper-middle class and better-off segments of the working class, along with the usual affluent households (Bray, 2017; Fletcher, 2016; Matthews, 2016; McClaren, 2016; Myerson, 2017).

A majority of Trump voters were those with annual household incomes ranging between $50,000 to $200,000, the most support coming from the $50,000–$99,000 range (Carnes & Lupu, 2017, para. 6; Foster, 2017, para. 2). In particular, the $72,000 median household income group displayed the strongest support for Trump and his policies (Myerson, 2017, para. 3). As Fletcher (2016) concluded about the 2016 election, "this was a movement driven by those who are actually doing fairly well but are despairing because the American Dream that they embraced no longer seems to work for white people" (p. 10).

Not coincidentally, this is the same base that has historically supported and continues to support fascist movements:

> Hitler also drew on a minority of the working class, disproportionately represented by more privileged blue-collar workers. But the great bulk of his support came from the lower middle class or petty bourgeoisie, representing a staunchly anti-working class, racist, and anti-establishment outlook— which nevertheless aligned itself with capital. Hitler also received backing from devout Protestants, rural voters, disabled veterans, and older voters or pensioners. (Foster, 2017, para. 4)

These individuals are typically better off than other members of the working-class, may be self-employed/small business owners, home owners, and have retirement accounts, positioning themselves just enough to have a degree of investment in Trump's vision (Bray, 2017; Myerson, 2017; Post, 2017). In particular are those Trump supporters who are relatively well-off members of the working-class who do not have a college degree, such as 20% of whites who voted for Trump with household incomes of $100,000 or more with 60% of whites without postsecondary degrees being in the top half of income distribution overall (Carnes & Lupu, 2017, para. 13). In short, Trump's base has been the base of the Republican Party since the Reagan era: "politically and socially conservative older, white middle-class voters" (Post, 2017, p. 37). This was the same demographic in support of Brexit, with education level being a key factor associated with a Leave vote (Stone, 2017).

However, it is also important to note that a significant number of Trump voters *were* well-educated, including the 45% of women possessing a college education who voted for him (McClaren, 2016, para. 13). While it is also the case that over 70% of those who voted for Trump didn't have post-secondary degrees, nearly the same number of all republicans don't have such degrees, which is not far from the national average (Carnes & Lupu, 2017, para. 7). Therefore, Trump's base is on educational par with that of any Republican politician currently in office, not an unusual phenomenon. In sum, "One can argue that this is one of the biggest examples of white privilege in the country's history, where the demographic who would be least impacted by xenophobic policies voted for them out of perceived self-interest" (Doctor RJ, 2016, para. 11).

Economic Precarity Does Not Automatically Lead to Conservative Voting

Contained within the economic anxiety thesis is the implication that voters are automatically driven to support right wing candidates by poverty and job loss, not by racism, sexism, or homophobia. Probably the most obvious flaw to this simplistic assumption are the voting patterns of minorities, who consistently show support for liberal policies and candidates even though indicators of poverty are highly associated with being a member of a minority group:

> If anyone should be angered by the devastation wreaked by the financial sector and a government that declined to prosecute the perpetrators, it is African Americans—the housing crisis was one of the primary drivers in the past 20 years of the wealth gap between black families and the rest of the country. But the cultural condescension toward and economic anxiety of black people is not news. (Coates, 2017, para. 30)

Even in cases where minority voters express support for personally conservative views, such as those motivated by religiosity (same-sex marriage, abortion) they still tend to vote for liberal candidates (Doherty & Weisel, 2015). Thompson (2017)

reported that 52% of voters of all races who selected the economy as the most important issue voted for Clinton over Trump by double digits (para. 5). Yet despite this historically strong support, right after the 2016 election, liberal pundits were insisting that "identity politics" and support for a diverse Democratic Party was to blame for electoral losses. Instead, the answer required focusing on the economic problems of the "forgotten" white voter who, out of options, had turned to Trump for redress. That Trump just happened to brandish racist and sexist sentiments in his rallies, Tweets, and public appearances was purely coincidental.

Part of this liberal quest to target white, working-class voters has to do with the net loss of votes that were traditionally in the Democratic Party coalition. For example, compared to the 2012 election, Republicans gained 335,000 voters with annual household incomes less than $50,000 (Kilibarda & Roithmayr, 2016, para. 4). Democrats lost over 1 million voters in this income category along with voters in the upper middle-class bracket (household incomes of $50,00–$100,000) (para. 4). Minority voter turnout was also reduced by 11.5% compared to 2012 (para. 6). Kilibarda and Roithmayr speculate that voter ID laws could have impacted those numbers, particularly from poorer districts. Another factor impacting elections in the United States is the Electoral College, which underrepresents larger, urban populations while overrepresenting rural ones:

> This electoral system provides advantages to candidates like Donald Trump who appeal to rural voters, deploying anti-establishment populism that plays on fears and resentments toward elites, urban and multicultural populations, and the West and East coast more liberal populations and regions. (Kellner, 2017, p. 65)

Keeping these factors in mind, Kilibarda and Roithmayr (2016) recommend that rather than outreach to working-class Trump supporters at the expense of minority voters, the Democratic Party should "should spend its energy figuring out why Democrats lost millions of voters to some other candidate or to abstention," especially since exit polls don't tend to ask people about why they chose not to vote (para. 8). With Trump and the GOP now in power, a major priority must be protecting the working class as a whole from racial profiling, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids/deportation, attacks on LGBTQ rights, and retaining the social safety net (Weida, 2017). Resnikoff (2017) asserts that a primary goal of white nationalists is the elimination of a diverse, democratic state and seeking a compromise with this movement only aids in this goal. Therefore, "people of color, women, LGBT people, and members of other marginalized groups are not a liability to the resistance against Trump; they are its leaders" (para. 65).

At this point it should be clear that the *worst* thing for Democratic Party leaders to do would be to use time and resources attempting to reach Trump supporters. As Lerner (2017) points out, Clinton won the popular vote, which was primarily a working-class vote, for one of the more progressive worker platforms in a generation. Viewed in this light, economic anxiety provides ideological cover for the racism and

sexism of the Trump vote, many of whom will be the least harmed by the policies his administration is enacting: "The assertion that you owe a debt of understanding to the people who embraced Trump is a distraction meant to dissipate your energy. Save your compassion for the people he is gonna hurt" (paras. 8–9).

Trump Support is a Reaction against Immigration, not "Globalization"

One of the key aspects of the economic anxiety thesis is that Trump supporters somehow, underneath it all, are taking a principled stand against globalization and neoliberalism. They just lack the more nuanced class-based language to engage with others. However, it is critical to make the distinction that the core of their opposition to globalization is *xenophobically* conceptualized rather than in reaction to neoliberal capitalism:

> The election was a referendum on globalization and demographics; it was not a referendum on neoliberalism: it is critical to appreciate that trump's appeal to whites was around their fear of the multiple implications of globalization... trump focused on the symptoms inherent in neo-liberal globalization, such as job loss, but his was not a critique of neo-liberalism. (Fletcher, 2016, p. 10)

What we are dealing with is an opposition to globalization that is derived from *nationalist* ideology, *not* a critique of capitalism (Beachamp, 2016). The absurdity of liberals and some leftists who view Trump supporters as deep-down being opposed to corporate globalization would be akin to asserting that Trump supporters opposed Obama due to his neoliberal policies, not his skin color.

The outcome of the 2016 Brexit referendum offers some important parallels to the United States. Specifically, the rise of far right and fascist movements in reaction to immigration are a *global, nationalist* phenomenon, with the bulk of the organizing against globalization coming from the Right, *not* the Left (Faulkner, 2016; Fletcher, 2016; Kellner, 2017). While there was also a left-leave or Lexit campaign in support of abandoning the European Union (EU), its relevance couldn't compare to the rationale for a Brexit vote overwhelmingly coming from the leaders of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), who used anti-immigrant language similar to Trump's campaign rhetoric.

Brexit support also drew from the same groups of less affluent, middle-class and affluent voters motivated by the decline of "traditional" British values more so than economics (Beauchamp, 2016). The sheer irrationality of the xenophobic decision-making of voters culminated in post-election survey results indicating that nearly 62% of Leave voters agreed that "significant economic damage would be a price worth paying for bringing Britain out of the EU" and close to 40% acknowledging that if they or their family members lost jobs due to Brexit, that leaving would *still* be worth it (Dworkin, 2017, para. 4).

Further eroding the claim that economic fears coincide with proximity to immigrants, only 2% of US counties reported both high numbers of Trump voters and

immigrants from Mexico (Misra, 2016, para. 4). Instead, most Trump supporters live in majority white neighborhoods located at a significant geographic and economic distance from the very groups they are supposed to be threatened by. However, this in no way interferes with their persistent goal of mass deportation of immigrants, despite such a move severely challenging the profits of capitalists in the agriculture and service industries (Post, 2016). As McClaren (2016), clarifies,

> Their fear was not mainly the corporate takeover of their lives, but the erosion of the "American Dream," the dream of a society where white people would *de facto* be assured of the economic security to which they feel entitled because of their race and providential history... After all, these were the "first beneficiaries" of the middle class, those who most assiduously seek a scapegoat for their flagging hope for their families. (para. 14)

Other manifestations of hostility toward immigrants and minorities include accusations of voter fraud, especially after Obama's election in 2008 and 2012, resulting in voter ID laws, purging voter rolls, and gerrymandering (Anderson, 2017). Mason (2016) concludes that a major aspect of Trump's rise to power was the expanding subtext that each time he said "build a wall," it automatically translated to the unstated promise of imposing white supremacy on black Americans in addition to Latinos/as.

Issues Starkly Differ by Party Platform

One of the more enduring beliefs associated with the economic anxiety thesis is that "both parties are the same"—therefore, neglected white male workers have been disaffected and turn to the party that promises to meet their needs. Aside from prompting the question: if both sides are the same, then why do they consistently pick the more right-wing one, "both side-ism" falls short in its assumption that Trump supporters would, in the absence of the centrist Democratic Party, fully embrace socialist policies (Davidson, 2017). This was a key theme of the Bernie Sanders campaign, who made outreach to the white working class a priority, while downplaying racism or sexism.

A quick glance at the 2016 Democratic and Republican Party platforms should dispel all myths about both sides being the same. Whether talking about abortion, health care, marriage equality, taxes, education or other key social services, the differences could not be more starkly apparent (see Democrat and Republican Platforms Comparison, n.d.). Contrary to the assertions that the Clinton campaign "ignored" working-class issues, for a centrist Democratic Party candidate, she clearly articulated specific policies related to jobs, more so than Trump's campaign who used "jobs" as a conduit for blaming immigrants and coastal elites (Thompson, 2017; Thorton, 2016). Further, despite Trump's promises to protect Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid during the campaign, he immediately endorsed health care

"revisions" such as repealing the Affordable Care Act, that would have hit his least well-off supporters who depend most on these programs (Brownstein, 2017).

Yet how to account for Trump's enduring support from this base? Coates (2017) maintains that what Trump supporters oppose isn't so much the Republicans' targeting popular social programs, as long as *their* benefits are left intact. This requires intense perceptual management on the part of the GOP, by framing social spending as "wasteful" all the while cutting those very programs that their constituents rely upon (Thomas, 2017). A specific strategy involves racializing programs such as welfare and Medicaid as being abusers of the system, while white workers are the ones who deserve it, paired with promoting cultural conservatism in the form of pro-gun laws, anti-abortion legislation, Muslim bans or anti-LGBTQ signing statements (Brownstein, 2017). This form of solidarity erosion has a long history:

> America's original sin has thereby created an enormous hurdle to organizing black and white workers together. In order to do so, white workers must be convinced to give up one form of privilege—the one that's offered by the myth of racial superiority—in order to struggle alongside black workers. Solidarity, as a result, has been a monumental challenge, and white racism has often won the day. (Myerson, 2017, para. 12)

Paired with racism is the enduring perception of Trump supporters that they are the ones being victimized more so than other populations, "who get all the help," a form of zero-sum thinking (Forscher & Kteily, 2017; McEwan, 2017; Thorton, 2016). Therefore, solutions benefitting all workers aren't as important as a restoration of their hierarchy, however illusory. Republicans continue to successfully play upon fears of the Trump base as a way to get by with their real agenda of assaulting the social safety net, as Brownstein (2017) explains:

> Trump and his advisers see cultural confrontation as a vaccine against the risk his voters may recoil from these efforts to squeeze programs they rely upon. And in fact, unease about the cultural and demographic changes reshaping modern American society is virtually certain to continue binding many older and blue-collar whites to the Republican Party. (para. 16)

Even the usually successful outcome of having something happen to one personally in order to see the benefits of shared social institutions doesn't pan out, because often reactionary individuals don't see themselves as being part of the same group in that same situation; they are exceptional (Bouie, 2014).

For example, Stein (2016) reported on a televised forum with Trump supporters held by Bernie Sanders after the 2016 election. At first, the audience was with Sanders' statements against NAFTA and big money in politics, but as soon as he shifted to specific democratic socialist policies, the applause died down, to say the least. This exchange where Chris Hayes asked an audience member about her reaction to free college tuition is quite illuminating:

MOSER: That's the moment I stopped listening to anything coming out of your [Sanders] mouth. Because who is going to pay for it? Why don't you address how college tuition has skyrocketed 6,000 percent since the 1980s? You can't have an industry where you have a seniority level where once you're past a certain level they are unable to fire you. No other industry has that type of protection. That needs to go. SANDERS: No, I don't think tenure needs to go. But here is the point: Tuition has gone up a lot—not 6,000 percent, but a lot… Here is the very simple issue: In the United States of America, do you think all young people, regardless of their income, should get a college education? Or should that only benefit the upper and middle classes? MOSER: I believe the way the United States works today, where every single human being in the United States has the *opportunity* to go to college—I do not believe it is a right. I don't think I should be expected to pay not only for my education and my children's, but someone else's as well. (paras. 15–16)

Note how Moser blames the rise in tuition rates not to the state-level reduction in funding for higher education, growth in administrative payroll or other aspects of privatization, but on the system of tenure. Further digging a trench, she goes on to support the status quo belief in bootstrapism (that anyone can succeed), and a total rejection of the concept of the democratic commons.

Trump supporters echo similar views in their conceptualizations of health care, as The Intellectualist (2016) found in a series of interviews. One supporter argued, "They can go to the emergency room for a headache… they're going to the doctor for pills, and that's what they're on" (para. 15). Another immediately recounted how poor families were unfairly receiving toys and clothing from charities during Christmas: "They're not the ones who need help. They're the ones getting the welfare and food stamps. I'm the one who is the working poor" (para. 15).

Still another supporter agreed that Medicaid was a sound program, but it had too many people on the rolls who "don't want to work" (para. 16). When the interviewer reminded her that she herself had earlier mentioned being jobless and on Medicaid due to her husband currently receiving cancer treatments, she quickly distanced herself from "those people": "Oh, no," she said quickly. "I worked my whole life, so I know I paid into it. I just felt like it was a time that I needed it. That's what the system is set up for" (Intellectualist, 2016, para. 19).

Bouie (2014) notes that working-class whites living closer to poor people, especially since the 2008 recession, has only increased their self-segregation on both policy and more personal, psychological levels: "It doesn't matter that working-class tax rates are relatively low, and that anti-poverty programs are a small part of the federal budget. What matters is that *they* pay taxes but don't get the same kind of benefits" (para. 13). Because the Democratic Party has been associated with minorities, it is de-facto connected with social programs abused by undeserving people. In particular, slogans like "Make America Great Again" are cultural messages masquerading as economic ones, promising the ability to restore racial hierarchy as

its own reward (Dworkin, 2017). If economic anxiety is involved, it is merely as a conduit for racism and sexism:

> The form of economic anxiety propelling the racism of devoted Trump supporters is associated with paying taxes; with jealously guarding their modest savings; with stopping black people from moving nearby and diminishing the value of their property and thus the quality of their kids' schools; and with preserving the patriarchal family structure that facilitates it all. (Myerson, 2017, para. 9)

Overt Authoritarianism of Trump Supporters

Probably the strongest argument refuting the economic anxiety thesis is represented by the words and actions of Trump supporters themselves, whose discourse adheres them firmly to authoritarianism with its associated racism, sexism, and xenophobia, *not* the prioritization of economic issues. Here, *authoritarianism* is used as a convenient catchall term to encompass a collection of interrelated beliefs not just limited to racism or sexism itself, but refers to an overall distrust of government, journalism, science, and expertise. Authoritarianism also includes the more recent term *Alt-right*, which is used to refer to various individuals and movements who mostly operate in online settings, but who have now achieved positions of power in government and media.

Contemporary adherents of authoritarianism can be roughly placed into two coalitions, who share but emphasize the importance of different priorities: populists, who uphold anti-establishment views of government and white supremacists/fascists who prioritize hierarchical order (Forscher & Kteily, 2017). Forscher and Kteily found that both subgroups reported distrust of the mainstream media, hatred toward feminism, expressed a feeling of victimization by liberals, unconditional support for the police, orientation toward social dominance, and overt dehumanization of other religions/ethnicities and groups they saw as oppositional, such as Black Lives Matter. Dehumanization was measured by presenting a common illustration of evolution, with apes on the left side of the scale progressing to an upright human on the right. Black Lives Matter was associated with the ape image among this sample, as was Hillary Clinton and Democrats.

Compared to more representative samples of whites, the alt-right groups registered a full point above on support for concepts such as "some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups" (Forscher & Kteily, 2017, p. 11). Those who identified as white supremacist showed even more open willingness to target others and had overtly aggressive tendencies while populists were more occupied with what they perceived as government corruption. However, one of the most important findings of the study is the potential for more populist strands of authoritarians to move toward white supremacist and fascist ones:

It is possible, for example, that the clusters represent two stages in a developmental trajectory of alt-right identification, with people starting in the populist cluster and then moving into the supremacist cluster as they acquire more alt-right friends—a possibility consistent our finding that those in the supremacist cluster were relatively ideologically embedded among fellow alt-righters. Becoming more embedded within alt-right social networks may further motivate people to express prejudice, both for value-based and normative reasons, causing more dehumanization and aggression. (p. 3)

One only has to look at Trump's earlier questioning of the validity of Obama's birth certificate and more recent calls for building a wall on the Mexican border as direct appeals to white nationalists in addition to a form of normalizing white supremacist discourse (Anderson, 2017; Coates, 2017; Sedillo, 2017). DeVega (2016) concludes, "Trump's voters could not resist the chance to put their boots on the backs of other people in order to lift themselves up, psychologically and perhaps materially as well" (para. 14).

Additional surveys of voters show that the strongest correlates for Trump support were first, GOP membership and second, resentment of racial and ethnic minorities, with income level and economic concerns not showing statistical significance (Beachamp, 2016, para.102; Matthews, 2016, para. 15). Beauchamp (2016) notes some geographic indicators, such as whites from former confederate states being more likely to support both racism and GOP candidates such as Trump. Further illustrating the clear connections between Trump, racism, and authoritarianism, past favorability ratings of former GOP presidential candidates McCain and Romney showed no statistical significance with racism or sexism factors (Lopez, 2017, para. 15). Lopez also reported that "racism and sexism…can explain about two-thirds of the education gap among whites in the 2016 presidential vote" (para. 4).

More specifically, prior to the 2016 election, those who identified as white were *more* likely to support Trump when they were told that whites would become a demographic minority by 2040 (Beauchamp, 2016, para. 9). Beauchamp also noted similar political tendencies among those who supported Brexit, in particular agreement with authoritarian values and anti-immigrant sentiment:

Hardcore supporters of Trump and his global peers are not the people profiled endlessly in the Rust Belt, who lament the loss of factory jobs. What unites far-right politicians and their supporters, on both sides of the Atlantic, is a set of regressive attitudes toward difference. Racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia—and not economic anxiety—are their calling cards. (para. 9)

Ultimately, it is important to understand that rather than representing an aberration, Trump and his supporters make up the core of the Republican Party and are an integral part of its platform and rightward direction. Post (2017) and Matthews (2016) note how the views of conservative voters have radicalized significantly since the election of Obama in 2008. Where in the past, conservative voters were

acquiescent with the GOP's harsh neoliberal economic measures in exchange for their party's politicians targeting women, LGBTQ people, and minorities, those days are gone. Now, we have a situation where GOP politicians and candidates are making running against their own "establishment" party representatives a key part of their policies and campaigns, with "traditional" Republicans having no choice but to meekly follow along or else risk losing votes (Coates, 2017). Anderson (2017) sums up what is going on:

> Like on Christmas morning, every day brings his supporters presents: travel bans against Muslims, Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids in Hispanic communities and brutal, family-gutting deportations, a crackdown on sanctuary cities, an Election Integrity Commission stacked with notorious vote suppressors, announcements of a ban on transgender personnel in the military, approval of police brutality against "thugs," a denial of citizenship to immigrants who serve in the armed forces and a renewed war on drugs that, if it is anything like the last one, will single out African-Americans and Latinos although they are not the primary drug users in this country. (para. 4)

The fact that the constitutionality of these measures has been successfully challenged in court and is opposed through protest is of no consequence to Trump supporters. What matters to them is revenge, most recently personified in the confirmation hearing hysterics of accused sexual assailant Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court.

WHY NOW?

The prior analysis of what drives Trump support has culminated in dialectical questions. Why is there this effort spent by liberal/left writers to present right-wing populism in such a sympathetic light, leading up to and post-election? Instead of making the fight against right-wing populism and fascism the number one priority, energy is spent critiquing "identity politics" (read: concerns of women, LGBTQ people and minorities), Hillary Clinton/Obama and even critics of Trump himself. What is driving the need of some liberal commentators to bend over backwards to excuse Trump and his supporters and why is this happening now? Bray (2017) poses the key question shaping this section:

> Why is the specter of the white working class continually invoked? Why are liberals still addressing it... Seeing this connection [between historical constructions of liberal racism and the racism of Trump supporters] clarifies both the weakness of liberal responses to the resurgence of white supremacy and why a genuinely anti-racist response to this resurgence must include having done with the trope of the "white working class." (para. 4)

This sympathetic turn represents what I call a *racialization of urgency*. Put simply, this is where economic and social problems are not viewed compassionately by the public until they start to impact middle-class and even working-class whites

who are normally buffered to a greater degree because of the legacy of white supremacy in a capitalist society (Browning, 2017; Hamilton, 2016). Job loss in urban centers made headlines nearly 40 years ago but the public response included chiding black communities about the need for retraining, endless analyses of the pathology of the black family and single mothers, and the advice of "get over it" when it came to disappearing industrial, liveable wage work (see Mead, 1997). Now that this type of work is leaving majority white communities, it suddenly becomes a national emergency. In this context, "poverty" is used as a generic diversionary term which serves to provide sympathy for poor whites while refusing to examine racial inequalities in incarceration rates that is behind such economic inequality (Thomas, 2017).

We saw the same racialization of urgency surrounding the controversy of standardized testing in public schools. Testing has been a part of the institutional fabric of schooling since the 1970s, intensifying in the 1990s and 2000s (Lemann, 2000; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). However, attitudes of liberal analysts ranged from obliviousness to a defense of the need for assessment systems and accountability with conservative pundits cracking down on schools in minority communities. As long as "those kids" received the intellectual abuse of standardized testing and direct instruction, fine. But once "our kids" started to become impacted by testing regimes and a narrowed curriculum in the wake of No Child Left Behind, a crisis situation appeared with parents and students boycotting testing.

One could also argue that a similar racialization of urgency is happening with the current portrayal of those addicted to opioids compared to coverage of the crack epidemic in the 1990s (Cohen, 2015). Ultimately, a racialization of urgency involves the role of resentment wherein "members of dominant groups simply believe they deserve to be the dominant force in their societies, and resent those challenging their positions at the top of the pyramid" (Beauchamp, 2016, para. 21).

Bray's (2017) analysis is prescient regarding the liberal Left's need to remain relevant in the face of a decades-old right-wing media onslaught since the 1970s. Essentially, liberals try to ally with the right using the guise of the economic anxiety talking point and sympathetic media coverage of small towns in decline. Liberals have found themselves stuck with the unpleasant legacy of decades of pushing the color-blind meme downplaying systemic racism while safely locating its overt, privatized forms into the white working class, a part of what Bray terms *post-racialization* or *neoliberal racism*. The insistence that we are a post-racial society (and a post-feminist one) has come home to roost in the inability to now effectively confront and overcome fascism. Instead, liberals remain ideologically stuck in a holding pattern of simultaneously denying the role of race while acknowledging the concerns of a demographically diversifying society, but also keeping reactionary whites happy. It's an impossible game but they keep playing it.

Therefore, efforts to portray right wing populism in a favorable light has a great deal to do with the conundrum now facing liberals in their continued insistence on a post-racial discourse (Bray, 2017). On the one hand, they do acknowledge

structural aspects of inequality, but this is uneven at best, with the bulk of the sympathy consistently aimed at white working—and middle-class voters. Coates (2017) describes this as "raceless antiracism," which is a hallmark of today's Left politicians, including Bernie Sanders. As Coates explains, "few national liberal politicians have shown any recognition that there is something systemic and particular in the relationship between black people and their country that might require specific policy solutions" (para. 28). Indeed, it is "only the idea of a long-suffering white working class" who can "cleanse the conscience of white people for having elected Donald Trump" (para. 31).

On the other hand, the target of blame cannot ever be capitalism, so a quasi-left narrative has to be made to fit the reality of the widest gulf between rich and poor since such data was originally recorded (Salles, 2014). This impossible "both sides" approach is becoming increasingly untenable as we see the raw racism, xenophobia and fascism revealed on a daily basis by Trump and his supporters, making it harder to attribute to economic factors alone; yet all the while they deny that Trump or they are racist. Liberals are also caught in what Bray (2017) terms "the denial of denial, where race becomes a free-floating concept encased in murky terms like "social justice." Serwer (2017) correctly notes how this contradiction is historically situated:

> The specific dissonance of Trumpism—advocacy for discriminatory, even cruel, policies combined with vehement denials that such policies are racially motivated—provides the emotional core of its appeal. It is the most recent manifestation of a contradiction as old as the United States, a society founded by slaveholders on the principle that all men are created equal. (para. 28)

However, two recent events may represent the final nail in the coffin of the economic anxiety thesis. First, was the summer 2017 torch-wielding march of open fascists and white supremacists in Charlottesville, chanting themes such as "blood and soil" and "we will not be replaced" in their reaction to removing Confederate monuments. Liberals, in particular, were shocked to see violence that was no longer contained to the typical internet banter of Trump supporters—all with the police just standing by and watching:

> At one of countless such confrontations, an angry mob of white supremacists formed a battle line across from a group of counterprotesters, many of them older and gray-haired, who had gathered near a church parking lot. On command from their leader, the young men charged and pummeled their ideological foes with abandon. One woman was hurled to the pavement, and the blood from her bruised head was instantly visible. (Thompson & Faturechi, 2017, para. 1)

This was followed by Trump's eventual false equivalency condemnation of the march's violence and refusal to single out fascist groups (Astor, Caron, & Victor, 2017). Yet the march in Charlottesville didn't just contain "Alt-right" elements, it was *overtly* racist, fascist, and nationalist in its messaging, with economics not even putting in a rhetorical appearance.

The second event that severely challenges the economic anxiety thesis was the Fall 2017 Senate campaign of Roy Moore, a twice-removed, once disbarred Alabama Supreme Court justice who installed a Ten Commandments monument in the state courthouse and directed judges to not issue marriage licenses to gay and lesbian couples (Camacho, 2017). Even after several women came forward to describe their accounts of sexual assault by Moore when they were teenagers, and those accounts being supported by locals who confirmed he had once been banned from the mall for stalking teenage girls, Republican voters and politicians dug in and doubled-down on their support, claiming Moore was still better than electing a Democrat. Moore's own campaign was peppered with apocalyptic and theocratic religious rhetoric and barely mentioned economic issues. The #MeToo movement, with its focus on women confronting and making public their testimonials of sexual harassment, abuse, and assault, played a key role in Moore's eventual loss, directly challenging the plausibility of a colorblind and genderblind capitalism (Petty, 2017).

CONCLUSION: A BAD PATH FORWARD

Economic anxiety is a reactionary, not Marxian or even remotely useful left-populist analytical frame. Put bluntly, it is a bad path forward and must be resisted in its totality. As outlined above, it is based on unsound tenets, easily refuted by a simple dialectical analysis. However, its durability shouldn't be underestimated, especially in a climate with increased attacks on the working class and growing attractiveness of fascist rhetoric, along with liberal desires to retain relevance (Matthews, 2017; Szalavitz, 2017). Muldoon (2016) emphasizes the need for widening resistance beyond just Trump himself:

> The developing polarization in the US needs a stronger opposition movement that can defeat both Trump's hate-mongering and the attitudes of the supposedly more rational mainstream conservatives, who direct their condescension toward the entire working class even while championing policies that immiserate it. (para. 39)

However, blindly allying with working-class Trump supporters is not the answer either. DiMaggio (2017) discusses the proposed "solution" of some on the left to find common ground with far-right movements, around the concept of class. Part of this motivation stems from a desperation to remain relevant now that authoritarian populism has appropriated the economic talking points that the left once used:

> Marginalized from access to mainstream political, economic, or media institutions, some claiming to speak for "the left" have concluded that the path forward is in allying with fascist forces on the right. This act of desperation reveals the utter failure of the Green Party to make serious inroads with the public or in gaining political power. But this Hail Mary is destined to fail. No progressive social movement is ever going to be built by propping up

reactionary bigots and conspiracy theorists, who have zero interest in the fight against economic inequality, racism, and capitalism more broadly. (para. 17)

Instead, DiMaggio argues that leftists would be better off focusing their energies on directly confronting fascism while openly supporting those who are the targets of the far right, as well as the ones most likely to see common cause with workers' rights, a social safety net, national health care, and civil protections.

It is therefore important to face several facts, the first being that the authoritarian populist project is one of *restoration* of an imagined past hostile to women, minorities, LGBTQ people, *and* the majority of white workers. In particular, color-blind "working-class" or "middle-class" descriptors are stand-ins for a specific type of white voter, who matters most (Demeter, 2016). A restorative political project, which the economic anxiety thesis aids and abets, includes the notion that only some work counts as "authentic work"—manual labor, small businesses, coal mining—not public-sector worker, retail, or service industry, which are the largest labor sectors in the United States today.

Selfa (2017) points out that "a younger, more multiracial and more tolerant country is one that is inhospitable to what conservatism has become in the 21st century. In this respect, Trumpism has the feel of a last stand for a bygone era" (p. 5). This refusal to see the working class as a multi-racial and multi-gendered one must be challenged. As Thomson (2017) asserts, we are facing a choice between pluralist social democracy or white nativist protectionism (para. 11).

Likewise, the pejorative post-racial label of "identity politics" used by authoritarian populists and some on the left to relegate any not-exclusively-white-working-class male concerns to an irrelevant status needs to hit the dustbin along with other forms of crude class reductionism (Coates, 2017). The 'identity politics' meme also fosters the irrational concept of zero-sum thinking, that women and minorities have received all of the political attention, leaving white males behind. The capitalist class utilizes this resentment to their advantage, as was done during the Trump campaign and to a lesser degree Sanders' campaign. Davidson (2017) has the appropriate response: "To believe that greater social equality is the cause of your economic misery requires a significant amount of manipulation, perhaps the greatest bait and switch that has ever been perpetuated against middle—and lower-middle-class Americans" (p. 69).

Finally, leftists must understand that authoritarian populism doesn't involve across-the-board class consciousness. It is filled with major flaws and contradictions, a primary one being the concept of the wealthy-outsider-as-savior. Berlet and Lyons (2016) trace the development of this mythical figure which has figured prominently in right wing populist rhetoric throughout history. The wealthy outsider bands together with oppressed (white) workers and other businessmen to fight off liberal elites, minorities, and LGBTQ people who are after one's money and seek to impose a secular agenda. That Trump supporters include Wall Street and globalization in their critiques only shows the great degree of cognitive dissonance buttressed by decades of Fox News and a significant lack of class consciousness. It also indicates

that these beliefs actively cripple any ability to locate the real source of the problem, as it is pretty clear by now that Trump has "represented the same interests as the lobbyists and figures from big business and the financial and political establishment of the past" (Kellner, 2017, p. 63).

The bitter irony is that the falling wages of white workers has to do with the very candidates they consistently support, in particular the sustained attack on labor unions, starting in the South and continuing in the Rust Belt states with the passage of right-to-work laws (Tanenhaus, 2017). Trump supporters who persist in believing that he and he alone will bring back American jobs while simultaneously cutting taxes overlook the fact that Republicans in Congress will happily take the tax cuts and deregulations but refuse to authorize the infrastructure spending that was also promised (Sefla, 2017). As Chacon (2017) points out, "Trump's criticism of "free trade" isn't that it is unjust for workers; rather, he believes trade rules can be 'improved' so that they are less regulatory, provide even fewer rights for workers, and give even more power to corporate profiteers" (p. 39). This is ultimately a form of economic nationalism, where you "combine neoliberalism at home with protectionism against foreign competition" (Smith, 2017, p. 51).

Leftists need to face reality that no number of political counter-examples are going to totally erode support for Trump and other authoritarian populist or fascist candidates that are likely to come along after he is out of office. This is a long-term global-level problem that requires facing the facts, not attempting to downplay the situation. We have to start comprehending—and stop denying—the self-destructive aspects of those who take the authoritarian populist path:

> There exists no law of history that stipulated a Trump victory, but there are laws of tendency that exist that strongly suggest that unemployed, broken and desperate people—in Trump's campaign, mostly white people—will attempt to bring down what it perceives as the elite political class for destroying their lives. One of the many problems with this strategy is that the white working class has looked to a billionaire real estate tycoon to save them. Their failure to recognize that the problem is not only with the political class or the ruling elite guiding the direction of the transnational capitalist class, but with the social relations of exploitation of capitalism itself will unjustly inflict the poor with a prolonged and lingering tragedy for the foreseeable future" (McClaren, 2016, para. 12)

Kellner (2016) believes that "we are seeing the end of rational choice politics" as Trump supporters ignore the news and their own self-preservation in the hopes that by aligning with the billionaire outsider and other rich conservatives, they will achieve success (or more importantly, revenge) and show those elites a thing or two (p. 33). That this belief mirrors the evangelical tendencies of his base cannot be overlooked. Ultimately, it might be wise to follow Hamilton's (2016) advice: "We should not waste our time or imaginations trying to reconfigure Trumpism to explain

why all of the "good people" supported him. It is more important to see it for what it is and resist" (para. 41).

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JEREMY T. GODWIN

6. THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO WHITE CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

Religion, Race, and Nation in the Trump Era

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the intersection of religion, race, and nation, with a particular focus on religion. I will argue that efforts to address the question of what to do in the face of injustice and threats to democracy must take this intersection into consideration and specifically, that a broader definition of religion is necessary as a part of that process. First, this chapter briefly outlines some of the literature regarding Trump supporters. Next, I highlight some examples of pro-Trump media, including items of print and digital culture, exploring how these media reflect that co-constitution, followed by an examination of how our understandings of religion, race, and nation might be affected as a result. Finally, the chapter closes with some preliminary considerations of how to craft a response.

Keywords: Trump, religion, Christianity, evangelicals, conservatives, religious right, racism, nationalism, media, televangelists

INTRODUCTION

In the medieval period, a fraudulent document was created, now known as the "Publius Lentulus letter," which claimed to be an eye-witness account of Jesus during his lifetime and contained a vivid description of his supposed physical appearance (Blum & Harvey, 2012, p. 20). This letter was known to be a fraud by early Americans, but during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was "transformed from a tall tale to an established truth" by White supremacist groups who wanted to assert the Whiteness of Jesus, turning him into a symbol of their political causes (p. 21). The letter was subsequently published in a tiny volume, *The Crucifixion, by An Eye-Witness* that went through multiple volumes and was widely distributed throughout the country, and the letter began to gain the approval of religious leaders and religious biographers and artists who used it as a reference for their own physical descriptions of a (White) Jesus. The letter fell out of favor again in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and is now not widely known, even though the images inspired by it persist. In short, the "Publius Lentulus letter" was

fake news. It was known to be fake by White supremacists and White evangelicals, but that did not matter. Because it served a purpose, it was taken to be truth instead.

One of those figures was Madison Grant, a New York attorney and author of *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916). He argued in this book that "millions of "new immigrants" flooding into the United States during the previous thirty years would spell doom for America" (Blum & Harvey, 2012, p. 163). Grant offered in this book a suggestion of protecting "Nordic whites" and provided Congress with the rationale and statistics needed to support the laws passed in the 1920s, severely restricting immigration (p. 63). In the notes of his book, Grant also discussed the Publius Lentulus letter. He, too, acknowledged its fraudulence, but he was quick to add that even though the letter itself was a fake, the truths it pointed to affirmed a "Nordic" Christ, an essential spiritual element of his particular brand of White supremacy (p. 63). Even an acknowledgement of its "fake"-ness was no antidote to its poison. In the end, whether the Publius Lentulus letter is real or fake was beside the point. The fact that it was received and wielded as truth had real consequences.

Sounds familiar? One of the hallmarks of the candidacy and presidency of Donald Trump has been a campaign of disinformation regarding immigration and the so-called border crisis. The latest polling suggests that 70% of White evangelicals think there is a crisis at the border, with 67% approving of the declaration of a national emergency to build a border wall (Sargent, 2019, para. 9). Other polls have suggested that 75% of White evangelicals rate "the federal crackdown on undocumented immigrants" as positive (Boorstein & Zauzmer, 2018, para. 8). As for Jesus, one of Trump's faith advisors, Paula White, was quick to point out that Jesus could not possibly have been a refugee, much less an illegal immigrant when he fled across the border to Egypt with his family, because "if he had broken the law then he would have been sinful and he would not have been our Messiah" (Burton, 2018a, para. 3). The fact that there is no evidence for this so-called border crisis (Editorial Board of *The Washington Post*, 2019) again, does not seem to matter. It is still being used as justification for rhetoric and policies like the separation of families and the recent national emergency for border wall funding—actions that can and do have real consequences.

It is tempting to label the Trump era as completely unprecedented, but perhaps it is not so simple. What these examples—both historical and contemporary—reveal is the deep, long-standing intersection of religion, race, and nation in the United States. This chapter will explore this intersection, with a particular focus on religion. However, this chapter will not focus on trying to explain the role religion played in getting Trump elected or on any attempts to explain how Trump "happened." Solving that puzzle has been the overwhelming focus of countless articles and think-pieces since Trump announced his candidacy. Those puzzle pieces are important to this chapter, but they are not the primary objective.

This chapter will also not engage in fact-checking forms of analysis in any sustained way. I do not mean to suggest that that accuracy or "factualness" is not important. We, as a society, certainly should insist on a pursuit of accuracy as standard practice in the way we conduct and govern ourselves. What I am suggesting is that whether or not something is accurate or factual does not, at present, always seem to form the basis of such a standard—as the introductory examples illustrate. As Toni Morrison (1995) notes, "facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot" (p. 93). I take this to mean that truth is always embodied. How facts are used or ignored, accepted or twisted, is ultimately a product of human behavior, and that behavior manifests in material ways.

Instead, the focus of this chapter will be on the print and digital culture of the Trump era that is rooted in the intersections of race, religion, and nation. However, it will treat that intersection in a particular way. Goldschmidt (2004) argues that as much as scholars argue that religion, race, and nation interact and intersect, they still too often remain autonomous forces in their analyses. What he proposes is that race, religion, and nation are instead "*co-constituted* categories, wholly dependent on each other for their social existence and symbolic meanings" (p. 7, emphasis in original). He goes further in arguing that religion, race, and nation are not separate things at all and only exist "as they are constructed in and through each other, and through other categories of difference" (p. 7). Even as one category may emerge as the seemingly preeminent one in a given context, the others are there, at work, and being formed and re-formed in tandem. Religion, in particular, is far too often treated as something separate from the rest of social life, merely "underlying social structures," as opposed to a major player (p. 19).

As such, I will argue that efforts to address the question of what to do in the face of injustice and threats to democracy must take this intersection into consideration and specifically, that a broader definition of religion is necessary as a part of that process. First, this chapter will briefly outline some of the literature regarding Trump supporters. Next, I will highlight some examples of pro-Trump media, including items of print and digital culture, exploring how these media reflect that co-constitution, followed by an examination of how our understandings of religion, race, and nation might be affected as a result. Finally, the chapter will close with some preliminary considerations of how to craft a response.

RELIGION, RACE, AND NATION: SOME INSIGHT ON TRUMP SUPPORTERS

In the 2016 election, 81% of White evangelicals voted for Trump (Smith & Martínez, 2016, para. 2). Though still substantial, at the end of 2018 that support had dropped to 68%, making White evangelicals the only major religious group to have a favorable view of Trump (Jones et al., 2018, p. 11). It is important to note that the term *evangelical* is contested among scholars, though the general consensus is that even across the diversity in the evangelical community, there are three general beliefs: (1) the Bible as the inspired revelation of God to humanity; (2) the centrality

of the conversion experience, i.e., being "born again"; 3.) a shared conviction toward evangelizing and bringing in converts (Balmer, 2010). Outlining the history of evangelicalism is far beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is worth pointing out that despite a general withdrawal from political and sociocultural life for most of the twentieth century, in the 1970s, evangelicals began to emerge back onto the scene, specifically aligning themselves with political conservatives (Balmer, 2010).

This re-emergence was largely due to perceived attacks on their subculture. Though the prevailing narrative cites abortion as the cornerstone issue, Balmer (2010) argues that the event that caused the initial uproar was not *Roe v. Wade* but the 1971 case, *Green v. Connolly* that indicated that segregated institutions (or any institution that engaged in racial discrimination) would lose their tax-exempt status. Bob Jones University would test this policy. Even though they began to admit students of color as a result of this ruling, they continued to ban interracial dating, and the IRS revoked Bob Jones University's tax-exempt status. In other words, race and the protection of racism played a major role in the rise of the Religious Right.

Because of this trajectory, historian John Fea (2018) registers little surprise at the overwhelming support for Trump among White evangelicals. He argues that Trump is merely the "latest manifestation of a long-standing evangelical approach to public life," an approach rooted in fear, nostalgia, and the pursuit of political power (p. 6). In alignment with that perspective, sociologist Philip Gorski (2017) argues that the reason so many White evangelicals voted for Trump is because they are also White Christian nationalists. It is important to point out, however, that not all White conservative evangelicals are White Christian nationalists. In fact, Whitehead, Perry, and Baker (2018) discovered that Christian nationalism was "a robust predictor of voting for Trump, even after controlling for economic dissatisfaction, sexism, anti-black prejudice, anti-Muslim refugee attitudes, and anti-immigrant sentiment, as well as measures of religion, sociodemographics, and political identity" (p. 147).

Though there were certainly strong correlations with these other factors, the one common denominator for support of Trump was Christian nationalism. They continue:

> Christian nationalism is a pervasive set of beliefs and ideals that merge American and Christian group memberships—along with their histories and futures—that helped shape the political actions of Americans who viewed a Trump presidency as a defense of the country's perceived Christian heritage and a step toward the restoration of a distinctly Christian future. Christian nationalism provides a metanarrative for a religiously distinct national identity, and Americans who embrace this narrative and perceive threats to that identity overwhelmingly voted for Trump. (Whitehead et al., 2018, p. 165)

Whitehead et al. do point out, however, that Christian nationalism is far more common among White conservative Protestants or White evangelicals and that this narrative is most associated with that community. They are just trying to point out that Christian nationalism also transcends this community. In the end whether it is

synonymous with White evangelicalism writ large or not, racism is at the core of White Christian nationalism (Gorski, 2017).

How does this continue to play out? Perry, Whitehead, and Davis (2019) found that those who adhere to Christian nationalism, regardless of race, "are more likely to believe that police treat blacks the same as whites and that police shoot blacks more often because blacks are more violent than whites" (p. 130). Similarly, Davis (2018) found that White Christian nationalists are more likely to oppose government funding for policies that are racially-coded to benefit minorities (e.g., welfare) and more likely to support those policies that are racially-coded to punish minorities (e.g., border patrol, law enforcement) (p. 15). Unfortunately, aside from these two studies, most polls do not use White Christian nationalism as a category, so we will have to rely on White evangelicals as a proxy. Among White evangelicals, 54% feel that "becoming a majority-nonwhite nation in the future will be mostly negative," the only major religious group to reflect that sentiment (Jones et al., 2018, p. 28). They are also the most likely (19%) among all major religious groups to be dissatisfied if their child were to marry someone of a different race (Jones & Najle, 2019, p. 21). Only 8% agreed with the statement that they mostly prefer a nation made up of people belonging to a wide variety of religions with 60% agreeing that they prefer a country with a Christian majority (p. 24).

These data serve to illuminate the identities, beliefs, and political engagement of Trump supporters. Within the space of White Christian nationalism, race, religion, and nation are co-constituted in such a way that it is difficult, if not altogether impossible, to tease out where one aspect of its identity ends and another begins. How this co-constitution manifests is another matter.

PRO-TRUMP MEDIA: ITEMS OF PRINT AND DIGITAL CULTURE

It is not difficult to find examples of pro-Trump media. However, making decisions about which particular items of print and digital culture to focus on is somewhat more difficult. As somewhat of a guide, Fea (2018) writes about what he describes as "court evangelicals," those "well-known evangelical leaders with very large followings" that are Trump supporters and have access to Trump (p. 118). These court evangelicals come from three main groups: the Christian Right, the proponents of the "prosperity gospel," and the Independent Network Charismatics (INC) (p. 123). Though I will consider some aspects of the first two in the latter part of this section, I decided to focus primarily on that third group.

As Fea (2018) notes, INC is a group of Pentecostal Christians who operate outside the traditional networks and denominations. It is "the fastest-growing Christian movement in both the Western world and the global South" (p. 129). INC is a network of independent spiritual leaders with very large followings, also known in some networks as the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR). Christerson and Flory (2017) note that much of this following is online, where the leaders are able to operate without any oversight and can market their products directly to believers:

> INC Christianity offers consumers an aggressive and intensely experiential form of Christianity. It promises each believer access to direct words of prophecy coming straight from God, to the power to heal diseases and perhaps even raise people from the dead, and to the spiritual ability to drive demonic forces out of individuals, cities, and even nations, liberating them for the rule of God. It also promises participation in a grand project of world transformation through which "heaven on earth" will be established. (p. 149)

There is no need for a church building. All the business (monetary donations and otherwise) of these communities can be conducted online or in the daily lives of members through events like prayer rallies, marches, or public healings. Also, because there is no upkeep of facilities, "INC leaders can spend their resources on promotional materials that further expand their following and resources—conferences, media productions, live-streamed broadcasts, and books" (p. 151). Even though it is rapidly growing, it remains a small percentage of Christian followers, and because of the way it operates, can be difficult to track. Fea (2018) notes that even though the INC is less prominent, leaders have spent time with Trump, and their overall belief is that Trump has been anointed by God to fulfill prophecy. Given that less overall attention has been paid to their influence, I identified and analyzed three books by leaders within the INC movement or associated closely with it to get a sense of how they articulate their ideas about Trump. Though I do not have the space—nor is it necessary—to address the entirety of each these books, it is worth noting some examples in order to examine how their work reflects the co-constitution of religion, race, and nation.

Lance Wallnau: God's Chaos Candidate

Lance Wallnau, an INC leader, owns a teaching and consulting company based in Dallas, TX ("About," n.d.). His book, *God's Chaos Candidate*, is unique among the books in this section, because it was published just prior to the 2016 election. In the opening, Wallnau (2016) writes: "I remember when the Lord spoke to me about Donald Trump, at a time when there were still 15 or so candidates for the nomination. I heard in my spirit: *Donald Trump is a wrecking ball to the spirit of political correctness*" (p. 7, emphasis in original). Donald Trump, "a rugged wilderness voice emerged" out of "incidents of homegrown terror, border invasion and crime" (p. 8). The rest of the book serves to explain the prophecies surrounding Trump and the role Trump (and his Christian followers) will play in those prophecies. It essentially serves as an argument for voting for Trump.

Wallnau is the originator of the "7 Mountain Strategy" that is a hallmark of the INC, which articulates the seven main institutions of culture and that whoever controls those institutions holds the power in society: religion, family, education, government, news media, entertainment, business/economics. He warns that progressives have made considerable progress in taking over these realms and

that evangelical Christians must take these over. For Wallnau (2016), "if you are concerned about the future of America, [Trump] is a potential answer to prayer" (p. 21). Fea (2018) points out that this is the foundational stance of "INC prophets and apostles" who "believe they have been anointed to serve as God's agents in ushering in his future kingdom" by promoting "candidates who will defend Christian values, reclaim the United States as a Christian nation, and ultimately serve as God's instruments for ushering in the kingdom" (p. 130). In short, Wallnau positions himself a messenger who is revealing the person, in this case Donald Trump, who would be God's instrument for enabling (evangelical) Christians to take over the seven mountains of culture.

But Trump is not an evangelical Christian. Wallnau is also one of the primary originators of the idea that Trump is a new Cyrus as a way of justifying Trump's seemingly outsider status to the evangelical community that supports him. According to Wallnau (2016), after he received a vision of Trump being the 45th President of the United States, he heard God say to him, "Read Isaiah 45" (p. 22). There, he found a reference to Cyrus, a Persian king who had been anointed by God to defeat the Babylonians, return the Jews to their homeland, and allow them to rebuild the temple. Wallnau presents Trump as a newly prophesied version of Cyrus, a secular leader anointed by God for a specific purpose, in this case to restore America.

Wallnau was present for at least three clergy meetings with Trump, and at one of them, he was asked by the meeting's organizer to share his thoughts on Cyrus:

I shared Isaiah 45, and the word to Cyrus, and how I believe it applied to him. He nodded attentively, trying to understand what he could. I would have stopped there but Bishop Scott wanted the preachers in the room to know about "Common Grace," so I explained how God calls and empowers even those that "know him not." I explained he has much support in our tribe, yet we, who are evangelicals, don't base our support on him on the fact that he is one of us, but because of the grace of God that we see on him. We believe God has blessed him and God has his hand on Mr. Trump. As the meeting broke up, Mr. Trump came toward me and stood in front of me with his hands on his chest, saying, "What you said really, uh, how do I put it? It meant a lot to me. I mean that." In church language, he was saying that "what I said ministered to him." (p. 78)

Wallnau is also quick in the book to suggest that Trump is not ashamed of his Christian faith (p. 30). Trump is Christian, but he is not an evangelical Christian, not "one of us." Nevertheless, Trump has their support, because of God's grace.

Biblical scholar Joel Baden (2018) notes that drawing a parallel between Trump and Cyrus leaves out an important aspect of the Cyrus narrative. Cyrus treated all of the peoples he conquered the same as he did the Israelites, restoring them to their own lands and allowing them to self-govern. He further utilized the religious beliefs of each group to "authorize his imperial domination and curry favor with the conquered peoples" (para. 13). Essentially, according to Baden, the Israelites bought into imperial Persian propaganda. He further argues that this is the *actual* parallel at

work here, that Trump adopted the language of the religious right, "promising them a return to their cherished customs and beliefs," and the religious right "has bought what he is selling, and declared him, quite literally to be a messiah figure" (paras. 15–16).

Sociologist Rebecca Barrett-Fox (2018) offers a similar analysis, though expressed in even starker terms:

> Likewise, Trump's relationship with conservative Christians is highly transactional: votes in exchange for political power or at least for a sense of continued cultural and political importance despite a demographic decline. The salvation Cyrus delivered was a side effect of his desire to expand his own power. The glory that Trump promises Christian voters—the glory that only he can restore to them, he says—is not a result of his love for them or for God; it's their reward for giving him power. (p. 512)

Though these are helpful analyses, much like the argument over facts, it does not seem to matter which narrative is more accurate to White evangelicals who originally offered it. Assessing the accuracy or even the genuineness of it does not change that the Cyrus story is the lens through which Wallnau and others make sense of and justify their support of Trump. Regardless, there is an easy out for evangelicals, because when pointing out the discrepancy, they can easily claim that it is God who does the actual work; Trump is merely the instrument. If things go wrong, God has probably just moved on to another instrument. Alternatively, they could return to the strategy used during the Obama presidency, claiming something (or someone) else intervened in God's plan, justifying their fears and claims of persecution (Fea, 2018). Cyrus serves as a justifying purpose, but it does not the change the overall motivations for supporting Trump, those rooted in White Christian nationalism.

Though Wallnau is White, this event where he shared the Cyrus narrative with Trump took place at a meeting with Black clergy. Wallnau (2016) goes on to argue that Trump could not possibly be racist, because he was making the Black community a priority, "more than any Republican before him" (p. 79). He cites Trump's long history with "black celebrities and entertainers" as evidence of Trump's lack of racism (p. 81). Wallnau also explains away the negative comments made by Trump in the campaign, articulating what Trump "actually" said about Mexicans and Muslims (p. 105). However, what might be Wallnau's most galling rhetorical move, is at the end of his book when he calls for Christians to "rise up AS ONE and participate in the unfolding of God's strategy"—by voting for Donald Trump, of course (p. 150). In order to provide a parallel, he notes this movement would be like "William Wilberforce and… the nonviolent model that attacked racism, ended slavery, and restored Christian values to what had become a decadent slave trading nation" (p. 150). Apparently, a vote for Donald Trump is like fighting against slavery!

These tropes are all classic strategies used by White people to deny racism: "I know people of color, so I'm not racist;" rushing to prove what was said or done was not really racist; and claiming moral superiority in order to dismiss ongoing systemic

racism (DiAngelo, 2016). Though these passages in Wallnau (2016) appear on the surface to be direct engagement with the issue of Trump's racism, they actually serve as deflective tactics to which other White evangelicals can point to similarly explain future instances of racism on the part of Trump, his administration, and those who support them.

Stephen E. Strang: God and Donald Trump

Stephen Strang is the CEO, founder, and editor of *Charisma*, a magazine that covers the INC, as well as more traditional charismatic movements (Fea, 2018). His book, *God and Donald Trump,* has been widely lauded by INC insiders and beyond within the broader evangelical camp. This book details the Trump campaign, of which Strang was a strong supporter, the election, and the early days of Trump's presidency. From the outset, Strang (2017) remarks that Trump has a "sincere faith" (p. 2). He immediately launches into an explanation of how Trump won despite opposition from all sides. In a particularly troubling passage, he remarks:

> Meanwhile notorious antidemocratic groups such as MoveOn.org, funded by Hungarian billionaire and former Nazi collaborator George Soros, were on the warpath. A laundry list of self-styled anarchist cells and racially motivated groups such as Black Lives Matter and UnidosUs (formerly called La Raza), along with rent-a-mob organizations and union thugs, were on the march, intimidating conservative gatherings, congressional town hall meetings, and even Christian churches. By stalking conservatives, screaming vulgar epithets, and threatening physical violence, these groups have been able to subvert the natural course of government and violate the rights of citizens to participate in the political process. All together such activity represents a dangerous—and I would add, demonic—attempt to undermine free speech and our most basic freedoms. (p. 9, emphasis added)

This statement is the embodiment of White evangelical fear tactics (Fea, 2018; Gorski, 2017), as well as the popular attempt on the part of White people to claim that it is actually people of color who are racially motivated and who perpetuate issues of racism via so-called "reverse racism" (DiAngelo, 2016, p. 263).

And in case that passage was not clear enough, I will highlight here an articulation of exactly when America was "great" previously:

> Americans who grew up in the 1950s, or whose lives were formed at an early age by people from that era, tend to look back on that time not only as a wonderful era of American prosperity but also as a time of moral righteousness on a national level. Many Americans look back fondly to this period of history as a time when there were no disputes about right and wrong, good and evil. Everybody seemed to agree about such things. Small groups and individuals who had a more liberal perspective worked behind the scenes, we now know.

But no one preached rebellion against the conventional moral code. Of course, it was also a time of segregation in part of the country, and minorities who lived under the injustice of Jim Crow laws that weren't changed until a decade later don't look back fondly on those days. The fifties weren't perfect in other ways: for example, many adults who deal with sexual abuse as children were molested in the fifties, but it wasn't talked about. And the "stable" fifties were the incubator for the social fomenting of the 1960s. Nonetheless, David Aikman writes that America had a civic religion in those days, a basic Christian morality reinforced by the preaching of evangelists such as Billy Graham, who was greatly admired by all regardless of their political leanings. (p. 15)

Though these pericopes are lengthy, they reveal the underlying logic of Strang's narrative, one rooted in White Christian nationalist nostalgia (Fea, 2018; Gorski, 2017): The 1950s were great, because everyone got along, and everyone agreed about what was right and wrong. Those (apparently non-White people) who were victimized by this overwhelming consensus probably did not feel the same way, which he acknowledges, but somehow simultaneously ignores in asserting a "basic Christian morality" that prevailed. This statement is a thinly veiled apology for the good 'ole days for White Christians before the "messiness" of the 1960s and the decades of decline that followed, as evidenced by "racially motivated groups" protesting the continued injustices (p. 8).

Later in the book, Strang is quick to mention the support of Alveda King, niece of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and bemoans the ongoing influence of "identity politics" that "drive a wedge between the blacks and whites" (pp. 80–81). Much like the Wallnau (2016) book, this passage gives the appearance of addressing the concerns of people of color and acknowledging their stories, but it really serves to erase those experiences by relegating racism to the past and by painting those who continue to highlight racism as "the problem" in a wider declension narrative.

The rest of the book is largely an exploration of the various people and groups who played a role in getting Trump elected. For example, Strang (2017) writes about Cindy Jacobs, who organized 10,000 people to "'prayer walk' the seven critical states that helped Trump win" where they would "walk around courthouses or through the centers of towns praying for righteousness to prevail" (p. 20). She and her friend, Lou Engle, another INC leader who organized TheCall, sent out calls for supporters to go on three-day fasts to petition for God's mercy and intervention to prevent Hillary Clinton from being elected (p. 21). These activities have continued after the election. Strang describes a weekly Trump Cabinet Bible Study, led by an evangelical minister and attended by cabinet members and other elected officials. There is also an INC organization called POTUS (Prophetic Order of the United States) Shield, "a group of prophets and intercessors who could speak to power in our country and who could also be a spiritual shield for the new president" (p. 177). The group maintains an active website[1] that is consistently updated with

new material, instructions for prayer, and information about how to join or donate to the cause.

Overall, Strang endorses the idea of a "breaker anointing" that has become quite popular in INC circles and beyond, which is the idea that Trump was anointed by God as a way of activating a larger plan to unite the diverse factions of Christianity, restore America as a Christian nation, all in preparation for the second coming of Christ. This connection is made explicit in another book by Paul McGuire and Troy Anderson (2018), *Trumpocalypse*, where Trump is labelled the new "John the Baptist" for just that preparatory purpose. Part of the struggle earlier in the campaign, though, was convincing sceptics that this kind of "anointing" was possible. Strang (2017) outlines how one particular article by Dr. Jim Garlow, an evangelical pastor, about why Christians should vote for Trump, was shared 4.1 million times (p. 51). If nothing else, Strang's book reveals the wide reach of such groups and their ongoing influence. It and others like it serve as a kind of hagiography for Trump, a gospel proclaiming the "good news" of White Christian nationalism as seen in the life of Trump and his followers.

Mark Taylor and Mary Colbert: The Trump Prophecies

Mark Taylor is a retired firefighter and Mary Colbert is a minister and leader of an online community. In 2011, while recovering from PTSD, Mark Taylor (2017) was watching television when he saw Donald Trump come on the screen, and heard the Lord speak, "You are hearing the voice of a president" (p. 5). He immediately got up and wrote down the whole prophecy, what would become known as the "Commander-in-Chief Prophecy." He was seeing Mary's husband, Dr. Don Colbert, for treatment using natural remedies in 2015, when Mark shared the prophecy with him, and Dr. Colbert later shared it with his wife Mary. They co-wrote this book in order to articulate both of their roles. She is largely responsible for helping to spread the prophecy of Mark Taylor.

The full text of the prophecy is quite lengthy, so I will not include it here, but the key part is: "For I will use this man to bring honor, respect, and restoration to America. America will be respected once again as the most powerful and prosperous nation on earth (other than Israel)" (Taylor, 2017, p. 59). Soon thereafter, Mary would share the prophecy widely and establish a "Nation Builders Prayer Site" with thousands of people on a prayer chain with weekly calls to lead prayer for the election of Donald Trump (pp. 76–80).

Mark Taylor has continued to receive prophecies, and he explains those in the latter half of the book. He acknowledges that he has been targeted online for his ongoing work and labelled a "false prophet," a condemnation he rejects by reminding the reader that Jesus said that "no prophet is accepted in his own country" (p. 102, quoting Luke 4:24). He insists that, in fact, he is not a prophet and does not even consider himself to be an educated person, but he feels that God is using him

for a specific purpose. Again, there is a great deal of information here, but I will summarize some of the main components:

- After Trump is inaugurated, "God would begin to purge the land. During this time, the Church would be required to transform, rise to the occasion, and take ground. When ground is taken, the Church is to hold it at all costs" (p. 101).
- For "proof" of the original prophecy, Trump announced his presidency on June 16, 2015, which was also the day in 1945 when the decision was made to drop the atomic bomb—both are considered "shots heard around the world" (p. 109).
- This is part of his "America, America" prophecy: "The Spirit of God says, 'The gatekeeper, the gatekeeper, the President of the United States is the spiritual gatekeeper. I have chosen this man Donald Trump and anointed him as President for such a time as this. Can you not see this? For even in his name, Donald— meaning world leader (spiritual coronation; faithful); Trump—meaning to get the better of, or to outrank or defeat someone or something often in a highly public way. This man I have chosen will be a faithful world leader, and together with My army, will defeat all of America's enemies in the spiritual and in the natural'" (p. 147).
- More from that prophecy: "The Spirit of God says, 'The border, the border is a 2,000-mile gate, that's flowing across with demonic hate. I will use my President to shut this gate and seal it shut. It must be shut. Then I will use him and My Army to root out evil structures that are still there, to the point that the government will begin to call on My Army. They will prophetically locate these structures so they may be dismantled before any evil can take place.' [...] This prophecy is in the stages of fulfillment now: 'The sign will be a mass exodus in the natural as the spiritual flee,' as the departure of illegals leaving the country is a sign that the Army of God is advancing in the spiritual realm" (pp. 154, 157).
- Walker even argues that Hillary Clinton's collapse during the campaign was as a result of his asking "with targeted repentance and prayer for the Lord to remove those who were corrupt in leadership," which was a sign that her campaign was going to collapse (p. 169).

Taylor goes on to explicitly call for other Christians to join in the movement and to "take ground and hold it at all costs!" (p. 217). Though he is quick to point out that he means in the spiritual realm, it is clear from the above examples that this so-called spiritual warfare has "natural" consequences. These tropes are long-standing manifestations of the co-constitution of religion, race, and nation where cultural deficiency was tied to notions of the "demonic"—a link that was eventually mapped onto lines of racial difference—as justification for forced conversion or eradication (Jennings, 2013). It is also part of the White Christian nationalist notion of sacrificialism, whereby racial and religious others are painted as pollutants to American society and therefore must be separated and removed as part of a larger strategy of purification and protection (Gorski, 2017). Deportations, travel bans,

family separations, and even the broader idea of law and order fit into this larger narrative of controlling and quashing the (racialized) demonic.

It is important to note that Walker and Colbert's book is by no means relegated to the fringe of evangelical Christianity. In 2018, ReelWorks Studios, a Christian company, and Liberty University's School of Cinematic Art (along with some faculty and students) collaborated in producing a film version of the book that screened in 1,200 cinemas across the United States, and will be available for purchase in spring 2019 (Burton, 2018b). Though it is not clear how well-attended these screenings were or what the overall reach of the film will be, its high-profile backers have given it a great deal of media attention. It also demonstrates the degree to which the idea that Donald Trump has been anointed by God to be President is perhaps more widely palatable to the broader White evangelical community than it would seem, not just to the charismatic sects and INC/NAR groups who are the primary originators of the idea.

Other Examples

There are other prominent evangelical leaders who have expressed their support for Trump in various ways. One of Trump's primary supporters is Jerry Fallwell, Jr., president of Liberty University. In January 2019, when asked if there was anything Trump could do to put his or other evangelical leaders' support in jeopardy, he responded simply, "No" (Heim, 2019, paras. 16–17). When pressed, he expanded on that by saying, "I know that he only wants what's best for this country, and I know anything he does…it's going to be what's best for this country, and I can't imagine him doing anything that's not good for the country" (para. 19). In that same interview, he stated:

> It's such a distortion of the teachings of Jesus to say that what he taught us to do personally—to love our neighbors as ourselves, help the poor—can somehow be imputed on a nation. […] It's a distortion of the teaching of Christ to say Jesus taught love and forgiveness and therefore the United States as a nation should be loving and forgiving. […] That's not what Jesus taught. You almost have to believe that this is a theocracy to think that way, to think that public policy should be dictated by the teachings of Jesus. […] There's two kingdoms. There's the earthly kingdom and the heavenly kingdom. In the heavenly kingdom the responsibility is to treat others as you'd like to be treated. In the earthly kingdom, the responsibility is to choose leaders who will do what's best for your country. Think about it. Why have Americans been able to do more to help people in need around the world than any other country in history? It's because of free enterprise, freedom, ingenuity, entrepreneurism and wealth. A poor person never gave anyone a job. A poor person never gave anybody charity, not of any real volume. It's just common sense to me. […] It

may be immoral for [other evangelical leaders] not to support [Trump]. (paras. 4, 21, 23)

There is a lot to unpack here, but it is interesting (and contradictory) that Falwell criticizes the notion of love as a standard for governance based on the idea that it would be theocratic, given that one of the primary goals of White Christian nationalism is for America to conform to their version of Christian morality and a biblical worldview. In addition, the two kingdoms idea was the same one used to support slavery (Irons, 2009). Essentially, Falwell is giving Trump the support to do anything he wishes, because Trump is apparently incapable of doing anything not in the country's best interests.

Another evangelical leader, Robert Jeffress, who has been a long-time supporter of Trump and one of his top religious advisors, has called "Never Trump" evangelicals "morons" who "cannot admit that they were wrong" (Kuruvilla, 2019, para. 3). Earlier in Trump's presidency, he stated in response to Trump's comments on North Korea:

When it comes to how we should teal with evil doers, the Bible, in the book of Romans, is very clear: God has endowed rulers full power to use whatever means necessary—including war—to stop evil. In the case of North Korea, God has given Trump authority to take out Kim Jong-Un. (Burton, 2017, para. 2)

The Romans 13 argument has also been used by then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions to defend Trump's immigration policy: "I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of government because God has ordained the government for his purposes"—an argument soon thereafter reinforced by White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders (Zauzmer & McMillan, 2018, para. 2). Again, Trump can do anything he wishes, because Romans 13 says he is ordained by God.

Jeffress is perhaps well-known for another event early in the Trump presidency. In July 2017, he led a "Freedom Rally" where the First Baptist Church choir in Dallas sang a new hymn based on his campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again," a video Trump tweeted (Shiff, 2017). That song is now available for other churches to download and use (Burton, 2017). On the one hand, this kind of display is not new. Daniel Hummel (2016) points out that Jerry Falwell brought the Baptist College choir to Washington, D.C. to sing in an "I Love America" rally with lyrics like "Free to worship as we please…that's why I love America" (pp. 123–124).

This occurrence does provide an opportunity to consider Trump rallies yet another example of the co-constitution of religion, race, and nation. These rallies are part of a longer trajectory of what Hummel (2016) calls "revivalist nationalism," a "fusion of revivalist form, practice, and language with national concern and nationalistic policies" (p. 116). Even Trump's campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again," was originally used by Ronald Reagan in similar fashion (p. 128). That is, the

religious form of revival (large rallies with a charismatic leader) becomes a vehicle for drumming up support for White Christian nationalist causes in a political arena.

An analysis of pro-Trump media would be incomplete without at least some consideration of social media. There are countless examples, many of which originate with Trump himself. I will turn to Trump's own words in the next section, but for now, I will highlight three other examples. The first is a tweet that came early in Trump's presidency, where Ann Coulter (who has since soured on Trump) tweeted: "Trump is already head of state. After that press conference, in my eyes, he's now head of church" (AnnCoulter, 2017). This example is reflective of a pattern on Coulter's part for equating Trump with the divine, titling her pro-Trump book during the campaign, *In Trump We Trust*, as opposed to "In God We Trust." Rarely are equations of Trump with God so explicit, but these acts only serve as further evidence of the deification of Trump's policies.

This example is not the only one of this kind of deification. Prior to the November 2018 midterms, a group calling themselves, "Make the Gospel Great Again," posted an image on their Facebook page of Donald Trump speaking with the caption "'THE WORD BECAME FLESH…'—John 1:14" on a red background beneath (Make the Gospel Great Again, 2018a). It was also posted on an electronic billboard in at least a couple of locations (Gardiner, 2018). After swift backlash, the billboards were taken down, and the group posted the following:

> Our billboard IS NOT equating Jesus with President Donald Trump. Salvation comes only from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, not any man. But God does send his messengers to us, and just as King David liberated the faithful in his day, President Trump is doing this today through his protection of the unborn, defense of our land against foreign invaders and standing up for Israel. (Make the Gospel Great Again, 2018a)

The issue with that justification is that the verse in John explicitly refers to the incarnation of Jesus, not a general principle of God sending messengers. Whether they intended to do so or not, the message does have the effect of equating Trump with Jesus as another example of God becoming incarnate in the world.

The group's case is not helped by yet another example found in their mission statement: "MGGA will work tirelessly to remind Christians to be loyal to President Trump and trust him in all circumstances. As Proverbs 3:5 reminds us, "Trust him with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" (Make the Gospel Great Again, 2018b). Once again, that biblical text is explicitly referring to God, not to a human messenger, explaining that people are to trust in God, and yet, the group is using it as justification for loyalty to Trump. These acts of deification are clearly intended to encourage fealty on the part of those who might be tempted to support another candidate or other causes.

Finally, though not nearly as egregious, another image has been circulating through social media in early 2019 of Nehemiah with the following captions:

DID YOU EVER WONDER IF TRUMP WAS THE RIGHT CHOICE WELL WONDER NO MORE HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF: And the man God chose was neither a politician nor a priest. Instead, God chose a builder whose name was Nehemiah. And the first step of rebuilding the nation was a the building of a great wall. God instructed Nehemiah to build a wall around Jerusalem to protect its citizens from enemy attack. (Moon, 2019)

Much like the Cyrus narrative, Trump is equated with the biblical figure Nehemiah as a frame for justifying the building of the wall on the US-Mexico border. All of these examples, ranging from Nehemiah to Cyrus to Jesus, demonstrate how White Christian nationalists utilizing the biblical narrative as justification for Trump's policies and to provide insider legitimacy. I do not actually think that these images and tropes are meant for non-evangelicals. They are not meant to convince outsiders. These memes have a clear purpose for signaling to other White Christian nationalists that the choice they made is divinely purposed and that Trump continues to be anointed to carry out whatever policies he deems fit. And for those insiders who do not agree, the message is this: disloyalty to Trump is disloyalty to God, so get on board or risk the (eternal) consequences.

The Words of Trump

Though the focus of this section and the chapter overall is primarily on pro-Trump culture, I do want to briefly examine Trump's own words, especially those directed toward or about his evangelical supporters. It is certainly not possible to examine everything Trump has said regarding religion (or race or nation), so here is a sample:

- January 2016: "I really appreciate the support given to me by the evangelicals. They've been incredible. Every poll says how well I'm going with them. [...] I will never let you down" (Scott, 2016, paras. 2–3).
- July 2016: "At this moment, I would like to thank the evangelical community, because I will tell you what, the support they have given—and I'm not sure I totally deserve it—has been so amazing. And has had such a big reason for me being here tonight. They have much to contribute to our policies" (Plumer, 2016, para. 115).
- July 2016: "I am your voice. I alone can fix it. I will restore law and order" (Appelbaum, 2016, para. 7).
- September 2016: "Yet, our media culture often mocks and demeans people of faith. And you understand that. All the time I hear from concerned parents how much harder it is for a Christian family to raise their children in today's media environment. [...] Your values of love, charity and faith built this nation. So how can it be that our media treats people of faith so poorly? One of the reasons is that our politicians have really abandoned you, to a large extent. And Hillary Clinton, you can forget about her. So let me say this right up front: A Trump administration, our Christian heritage will be cherished, protected, defended, like

you've never seen before. Believe me. I believe it. And you believe it. And you know it. You know it. And that includes religious liberty" (Politico Staff, 2016, paras. 6–8).

- August 2018: (In a dinner with evangelical leaders) "You're one election away from losing everything that you've got. [...] The level of hatred, the level of anger is unbelievable. Part of it is because of some of the things I've done for you and for me and for my family but I've done them....This Nov. 6 election is very much a referendum on not only me, it's a referendum on your religion, it's a referendum on free speech and the First Amendment. [...] [The Democrats] will overturn everything that we've done and they'll do it quickly and violently, and violently. There's violence. When you look at Antifa and you look at some of these groups—these are violent people" (Nadi & Dilanian, 2018, paras. 3, 6–7).
- November 2018: "They're [the evangelicals] going to show up for me because nobody's done more for Christians or evangelicals or, frankly, religion than I have" (Kuruvilla, 2018, para. 3).

Trump's version of the narrative of evangelical support is almost entirely self-centered. In fact, Trump says "believe me" so often in so many contexts, there are numerous compilation videos circulating online of him saying the phrase over and over again (e.g., CJ Foxtau, 2017; TheTCOLL, 2016). The co-constitution of religion, race, and nation that exists in White Christian nationalist culture is refracted through Trump himself. He is the apotheosis of that process, so to speak. Much like the veracity of the Publius Lentulus letter, the veracity or genuineness of Trump's faith or Christian identity is largely irrelevant.

Whether one believes Trump to be God's instrument or not is also, largely irrelevant. The Publius Lentulus letter was used to support White supremacist causes, and Trump's anointing is used as justification for blind obedience to his policies on the part of White Christian nationalists—a role Trump willingly plays. Trump urges people to believe [in] him, because he alone can fix it. And we (scholars) who are not Trump supporters are left needing to reconfigure our understandings of religion, race, and nation in the wake of this co-constitution that has become incarnate in the person of Trump.

RE-CONCEPTUALIZING RELIGION, RACE, AND NATION IN THE TRUMP ERA

The foregoing analysis provided a glimpse into the co-constitution of religion, race, and nation in the Trump era. Specifically, I have shown how this co-constitution is reflected in various examples of print and digital culture from Trump supporters, specifically those aligned with White Christian nationalism. On the one hand, even the name itself—White Christian nationalism—demonstrates the extent to which religion, race, and nation depend on each other for their meaning and are constructed in and through each other (Goldschmidt, 2004). On the other hand, even though this is an important process to analyze, it does not take us far enough in understanding

how religion, race, and nation are being *re-made* in the Trump era, which means that we (as scholars and beyond) may also need to *re-conceptualize* our approach to this co-constitution.

One approach that has already been offered, particularly in academic circles, is to suggest that Trumpism is a more secular form of White Christian nationalism (Gorski, 2017). In particular, Gorski argues that Trumpism does not neatly fit the historical patterns of an explicit Christian grounding and the "secular messianism" of Trump as a figure. Hummel (2016) similarly notes that Trump represents a "gradual secularization of revivalist nationalism" (p. 129). Another approach, more common in the popular press and among "Never Trump" evangelical leaders is to highlight the blatant hypocrisy of White Christian nationalists (e.g., Gerson, 2018; Graham, 2018; Keller, 2017; Wallis, 2017). These pieces demonstrate a blend of pointing out both the inconsistency of their political positions as compared with conservatism and their moral and theological reasoning as compared with the teachings of Jesus.

I would argue that both of these approaches are inadequate, largely for the same reason, which is that they are based on a comparative approach (to historical patterns of religious nationalism in the former case and to "traditional" political approaches and biblical interpretation in the latter). It is not that these comparisons are not helpful, it is that they do not push far enough in providing new conceptual tools for understanding the situation at hand.

How, then, do we make sense of religion, race, and nation in the Trump era? First, we will take a step back in time, to examine the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, a Christian theologian and ethicist. In 1944, at the height of World War II, he wrote a book, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, as a kind of defense of democracy against totalitarianism. His argument is a complex one, but it does provide some important insights. First, in terms of what he means by children of light and children of darkness:

> We may well designate the moral cynics, who know no law beyond their will and interest, with a scriptural designation of "children of this world" or "children of darkness." Those who believe that self-interest should be brought under the discipline of a higher law could then be termed "the children of light." [...] The children of darkness are evil because they know no law beyond the self. They are wise, though evil, because they understand the power of self-interest. The children of light are virtuous because they have some conception of a higher law than their own will. They are usually foolish because they do not know the power of self-will. [...] It does not know that the same man who is ostensibly devoted to the "common good" may have desires and ambitions, hopes and fears, which set him at variance with his neighbor. (Niebuhr, 1944, pp. 9–11)

In short, the children of darkness are those that elevate their own self-interest above all else, and the children of light are those who seek to submit self-interest to a higher good, to a universal sense of harmony and justice. Unfortunately, the children

of light often assume (wrongly) that appeals to the universal will automatically outweigh the power of self-interest and render it harmless. The children of darkness are wise, and use particular tactics to hide their self-interest. I will focus on two here:

> The liberal creed is never an explicit instrument of the children of darkness. But it is surprising to what degree the forces of darkness are able to make covert use of the creed. One must therefore, in analyzing the liberal hope of a simple social and political harmony, be equally aware of the universalistic presuppositions which underlie the hope and of the egoistic corruptions (both individual and collective) which inevitably express themselves in our culture in terms of, and in despite of, the creed. One must understand that it is a creed of children of light; but also that it betrays their blindness to the forces of darkness. (p. 24)

> The children of darkness… set the false universal of the national community against all other particular expressions of vitality. (p. 124)

The latter Niebuhr sees as a form of collective pride, the root of which is "the tendency to make [the group's] own standards the final norms of existence and to judge others for failure to conform to them" (p. 140). To put the two together: the children of darkness elevate their own sense of self identity (individual and/or collective) to become a universal standard, but they often use the form of the liberal creed to covertly hide this equation of self-interest with national interest.

This analysis is a profoundly insightful fit for the Trump era. However, it does not quite take us far enough. Though Niebuhr does note that racism is both a form of and plays a role in this process, he does not go far enough in naming Whiteness as the particular form it takes. That move of equating self with universal is the calling card of Whiteness from the initial colonial encounter to the present, ongoing imperialist moment: "Whiteness emerges as the ground for the universal: the ability of the one to represent the many, as well as the ability of the one to present reality on behalf of the many" (Jennings, 2013, p. 788).

However, this process is hidden under a quasi-liberal creed of universality and colorblindness. As Matias and Newlove (2017) put it:

> Yet, on the other hand, Whiteness…still draws upon Bonilla-Silva's (2006) abstract liberalism to espouse the idea that such an epistemology is equitable and just. That is, this epistemological moment is characterized by boldly accepting White supremacist ideals… yet in its boldness it still hides itself by drawing from the colorblind practices. Specifically, emboldening en/whitening epistemology perverts its pseudo-bold racist intent by reframing it as a pseudo-sense of civil liberties. (p. 924)

In other words, the White Christian nationalists of this moment are able to hide their true motives under the guise of promoting national interest, and when those motives are called into question, they cry for protection under abstract ideas of freedom and

use the liberal hope of universality to claim their right to speak—which is really the right to continue to promote their own self-interest above all.

And yet, this analysis still makes Trump look like just a new form of old patterns. Where is religion in all of this? For that, we turn to the work of religious scholar Kathryn Lofton. In *Consuming Religion* (2017), she argues for a broader conception of religion, one that aligns with the process Niebuhr describes:

> Religion is therefore also a way of describing structures by which we distinguish ourselves from others, often by uniting around things that claim universal interest. We distinguish ourselves from others the minute we decide to join others in their liking. (p. 5)

Here, though, she is referring specifically to choices regarding cultural consumption. Religion is "always organizing" (p. 4). That is, when we make decisions about what to purchase, what to consume, "these small decisions are where we organize ourselves... as political and economic actors, in alignment with certain demographics and social wholes and implicitly or explicitly in dissent from others" (p. 4).

As a result of this process, "religion manifests in efforts to mass-produce relations of value," and Lofton (2017) uses the marketplace "as the primary archive of religion" in "a contemporary context in which the distinction between what is the market and what is not seems wholly impossible to determine (pp. 3, 6–7). In this context, "the product is a material way to access something ineffable" (p. 9). To put it all together: "Whatever your spirit, whatever your ritual, *you are in it*. You are being consumed by the social inevitability of consumer decision. *Religion* is a word to intensify what we do when we name authority, practice interactions, and interpret life itself" (p. 13). This definition of religion is an expansive one, to be sure, but it is arguably the final piece of the puzzle we need to better understand how religion, race, and nation are being re-made in the Trump era.

In this light, purchasing and wearing a red "Make America Great Again" or MAGA hat is a religious act, not just a matter of speech or consumer choice. It signals a distinction from others, one that aligns the wearer with certain groups. It does not just signal a support for Trump and Trump's policies; it signals *consumption* of those ideas and a participation in them. It is an act of White Christian nationalist spirituality. As a product, the MAGA hat represents an attempt to access the ineffable, in this case a time (apparently the 1950s) when America *was* great (meaning predominantly White and Christian). It equates the self-interest of the wearer with national interest (à la Niebuhr's children of darkness). It is an attempt to access an imagined future or eternity, an Americanized version of salvation, where White demographic decline is halted and the country is purged of the Other. Whether the person who buys the hat actually "believes" these things is mostly irrelevant, because the act of consumption, followed by the act of wearing, is a ritual that signals "you are in it," as Lofton puts it (p. 13). The MAGA hat is not the representation of a secularization of religious nationalism. It *is* religious nationalism. Religion is simply being re-made in the Trump era.

Likewise, purchasing a pro-Trump book or t-shirt, attending a Trump rally, donating money online to a national prayer chain for Trump and for America, attending *The Trump Prophecy* movie, and sharing pro-Trump memes on Facebook are all acts of consumption. They are all representations of a desire to see (racialized and religious) self-interest elevated to national interest via what appears to be nothing more than consumer choice in a universal marketplace. In each of these cases, religion, race, or nation might be more at the forefront, but they are all there, forming and being re-formed by the individual and communal acts.

What about Trump himself? What is remarkable about Trump is the degree to which he removes the veneer that often masks these co-constitutive forces. He embodies them. He wears the equation of self-interest with national interest like a badge of honor. That is, he is *prima facie* a child of darkness. Also, Trump *is* the brand. He trademarked the phrase, "Make America Great Again" early in his campaign in 2015 (though he had applied for it in 2012), aggressively going after other Republican primary candidates who started to use the phrase (Tumulty, 2017). Trump even designed the MAGA hat himself, and Federal Election Commission filings revealed that the campaign spent more on purchasing hats "than on polling, political consultants, staff or television ads" (para. 25). With these acts, the line between Trump and product grows even slimmer, which only heightens the religiosity of wearing the hat. The MAGA hat becomes a kind of contemporary relic from a White Christian nationalist "saint"—a seemingly endless supply available for purchase. In that sense, if Trump is the product, purchasing the hat or any item of pro-Trump culture, is an attempt not only to access the ineffable but also an attempt to access Trump himself. It is an effort to be linked to God's instrument who will restore America to its former (White) glory. What could be more religious than that?

CONCLUSION: GOING BEYOND

It is easy to feel overwhelmed, immobilized even, in the current moment. Part of this feeling is due not only to the issues at hand but also to the failed efforts that should, at least in theory, be effective in countering the Trump agenda. I would argue that is time to let fact-checking go as the *primary* mode of epistemological resistance. Recalling Morrison's (1995) words: "facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot" (p. 93). As Matias and Newlove (2017) remind us:

> Some epistemological stances are wrought with false knowledge sets and bogus science but instead of rendering them meaningless, they are emboldened because those falsities are protected by a power structure that erroneously and, most dangerously, equates alternative facts to reality. (p. 922)

Facts can be disembodied, but how they are incorporated (or not) into a person's sense of truth cannot be. Facts are filtered through and distorted by religion, race, and nation, so fact-checking runs up against how people make sense and meaning out of the world around them, for better or worse. This does not mean that we should

stop calling out or correcting falsity. It is simply not enough to stop there or to assume that this alone will fix the problem.

Fact-checking is also wrapped up in the thoroughly-debunked appeals to rationality and universal reason as the force that will save us all. As Niebuhr (1944) reminds us:

> [Reason] always remains organically related to a particular center of vitality, individual and collective; and it is therefore always a weapon of defense and attack for this vitality against competing vitalities, as well as a transcendent force which arbitrates between conflicting vitalities. A high perspective of reason may as easily enlarge the realm of dominion of an imperial self as mitigate expansive desires in the interest of the harmony of the whole. [...] Because reason is something more than a weapon of self-interest it can be an instrument of justice; but since reason is never dissociated from the vitalities of life, individual and collective, it cannot be a pure instrument of justice. (pp. 66–67, 72)

In short, reason is never disembodied from those who would use it to further their own interests, and as such, is insufficient as an appeal for universal justice.

Appeals to the secular are also not sufficient, as if one could escape the effects of religious nationalism. As Vincent Lloyd (2016) notes:

> Whiteness is secular, and the secular is white. The unmarked racial category and the unmarked religious category jointly mark their others. Or, put another way, the desire to stand outside religion and the desire to stand outside race are complementary delusions, for the seemingly outside is in fact the hegemonic. (p. 5)

The secular is about the management of bodies, and traditional secular approaches to diversity and multiculturalism have been grounded in treating race, gender, sexuality, and religion (among others) as "identity groups to which one may or may not belong" or as separate "trait[s] of the atomized subject, another niche market for corporate profit" (p. 12). Johnathon Kahn (2016) takes this even further in noting that because the secular is a managing force, it is also "about the nature of justice—about who counts and who does not, who is seen as fully human and who is not, and how rights and material goods are apportioned in this light" (p. 245). The secular is not "the outside." To claim the outside is like claiming universal reason. It is not neutral and does not provide an automatic escape route out of the Trump era.

We need new solutions, to be sure. Niebuhr (1944) issues a stern warning that all efforts will be prone to the distortions of self-interest. He further warns that "a society which exempts ultimate principles from criticisms will find difficulty in dealing with the historical forces which have appropriated these truths as their special possession" (p. 75). Conceptualizations of justice must continually be re-examined (p. 78). We cannot un-critically assume that our society has merely gotten off track from some abstract vision of justice that has yet to be realized. We need to

examine how Trump and his supporters have appropriated that vision for their own purposes. One final piece of advice from Niebuhr:

> The preservation of a democratic civilization requires the wisdom of the serpent and the harmlessness of the dove. The children of light must be armed with the wisdom of the children of darkness but remain free from their malice. They must know the power of self-interest in human society without giving it moral justification. They must have this wisdom in order that they may beguile, deflect, harness and restrain self-interest, individual and collective, for the sake of the community. (p. 41)

We need to be aware of the self-interest at work in the Trump era, and this chapter highlights one particular aspect. However, this knowledge must be used in service of restraining that self-interest run amok. In other words, once it is uncovered, it must be directly challenged. In the meantime, we must continue the work of articulating standards of justice that take seriously an expansive notion of the co-constitution of religion, race, and nation—standards that view difference not as a barrier to change but as a foundation for that work. We must insist on a society built on belonging instead of rejection and love instead of fear.

NOTE

[1] See www.potusshield.org

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DANIEL IAN RUBIN

7. WHITE STUPIDIFICATION AND THE NEED FOR DIALECTICAL THOUGHT IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I explain how K-12 and university educators can assist their students in becoming critical and cognizant voices in American society. In order to accomplish this, I discuss the "Trump Effect" in K-12 schools in the United States and how Trump's racist, immature posturing has negatively affected everyone from Latinx high schoolers to Jewish students on college campuses. I explain the concept of willful ignorance and how Trump has mastered his method of leading the country in ways that have been both harmful to critical thought as well as dangerous to American citizenry. The importance of dialectical thought in US schools and how it is vital to an informed and democratic populace, is also addressed. This chapter asserts that it is each teachers' job—nay obligation—to teach students to think dialectically in order to fight against Trump and his racist, exploitive policies and beliefs.

Keywords: public schools, Trump, white supremacy, dialectics, classrooms, democracy, critical thinking

INTRODUCTION

Those of us who live in the United States now find ourselves in a time fraught with fear and uncertainty (Rubin, 2018). For many of us in the US, the Presidential election of 2016—resulting in the swearing in of billionaire, reality-TV star Donald Trump—marked the beginning of a seismic upheaval in social, cultural, and intellectual life. It was an election that was deeply marked along racial and economic lines (McElwee & McDaniel, 2017), providing irrefutable evidence that, despite what some White people may believe, the US is not a post-racial society (Dawson & Bobo, 2009; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

Professor James Banks (2016), esteemed multiculturalist, has gone as far as to assert that racism will always exist in some form no matter how hard we work to eliminate it. Issues of race effect the everyday existence of many people of color—from where they can live, to how they are disciplined in school, and to how they are portrayed by the mass media. In the Presidential election of 2016, Trump, to his own benefit, "merely exploited the [racial] vulnerabilities of the moment, and upped the ante" (Bobo, 2017, p. 97). Trump has stirred up an Anglo-centric fury

in the US, and this has led to outright displays of White power and antisemitic hostility, such as that of the 2017 Charlottesville, Virginia White Nationalist rally (Jones, 2017). Due to the lived realities of people of color and non-Christians in the United States, something needs to be done to address the complex and harmful racial issues plaguing this country, as well as those created and/or exacerbated by Trump himself.

Unfortunately, since the Presidential election of 2016, White people have really "doubled down" on racist beliefs and ideas that are simply untrue. Particularly troubling, many still believe falsehoods perpetuated by the media (and repeated by Trump himself) aimed at people of color. For example, when announcing his candidacy, Trump repeated the myth that illegal immigrants from Mexico commit crimes at higher rates than US citizens, which is completely and utterly false (Pérez-Peña, 2017). Yet, due to many people believing this falsehood, Trump's Mexican border-wall proposal continues to be supported by 77% of Republican voters (Manchester, 2018, para. 3). I assert that in order to break down lies such as these, which are continually perpetuated by politicians and the mass media, our youth must be taught how to think critically and dialectically in order to become a more aware and critical populace.

In this chapter, I will explain how K-12 and university educators can assist their students in becoming critical and cognizant voices in American society. In order to accomplish this, I am going to discuss the "Trump Effect" in K-12 schools in the United States and how Trump's racist, immature posturing has negatively affected everyone from Latinx high schoolers to Jewish students on college campuses. I will also explain the concept of willful ignorance and how Trump has mastered his method of leading the country in ways that have been both harmful to critical thought as well as dangerous to American citizenry. The importance of dialectical thought in US schools and how it is vital to an informed and democratic populace, will also be addressed. This chapter asserts that it is each teachers' job—nay obligation—to teach students to think dialectically in order to fight against Trump and his racist, exploitive policies and beliefs.

TRUMP, RACISM, AND THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

It has been asserted that during his election campaign, "Trump stoked a revived white nationalism while denying its racist content" (Goldstein & Hall, 2017, p. 402), and as a result, he created an atmosphere of acceptance for racist views that had been relatively hidden beneath the surface for decades. According to Bobo (2017):

In an era of acutely worsening economic inequality and a rising sense of material vulnerability across a wide swath of the American working and middle class, Donald Trump fueled and exploited anxiety about growing ethno-racial diversity in the US. He did so primarily by demonizing and scapegoating

Mexican immigrants, ostracizing Muslims, and grossly stereotyping black people and communities. (pp. 99–100)

Trump's consistent racist undertones (or overtones) in his public speeches provided Whites an opportunity to openly express their disdain for those perceived as being non-White and/or foreign—whether it be Mexican immigrants (either documented or undocumented), Muslims, Blacks and Latinos, members of the GLBTQ community, and Jews (Pollock, 2017). Trump's manipulation of people's fears had a significant impact on White voters and their stances on political issues. A comprehensive study of the 2016 US Presidential election, showed that racism propelled Trump to victory.

In particular, his racist policies and statements (Bobo, 2017; Konrad, 2018; Wood, 2017) in the form of anti-immigrant sentiment and animosity towards Black people (McElwee & McDaniel, 2017) were major reasons for the Trump campaign's rise to electoral victory. (Note: Trump lost the popular vote by almost 3 million votes.) The election results show that Trump was widely supported by evangelical (81%) Whites (58%) who were predominantly non-college uneducated (67%) (Balmer, 2017, para. 1; Tyson & Maniam, 2016, para. 2). Due to Trump's blatant disparaging of people of color (McElwee & McDaniel, 2017), it is no real surprise that Trump received only 8% of the Black vote and 33% of the Latinx vote (Krogstad & Lopez, 2016, para. 3).

By spewing his racist rhetoric during his presidential campaign, Trump unlocked a Pandora's box of racial hatred, one which allowed oft-hidden demons to see the light of day, without shame or humiliation. Crandall, Miller, and White II (2018) found that Trump's racist comments "gave [voters] voice and license to express the previously suppressed" (p. 191). Therefore, while racist feelings and attitudes might have still existed in the US prior to the 2016 Presidential election, at least they were kept relatively silent and behind closed doors. Ultimately, White people followed Trump's lead of spewing racist venom during and after the Presidential election.

Johnson (2017) has asserted that a president's personal behavior, and how the president treats others, creates an acceptable code of conduct for other people to follow. Unfortunately, due to Trump's unfettered attack of people of color, Trump's supporters followed suit. Schaffner (2018) found that "being exposed to Trump's racist quotes causes people to say more offensive things, not only about the groups targeted by Trump, but also about other identity groups as well" (p. 1). With Trump leading the way, White Americans have begun to feel more comfortable and justified in expressing their racist and prejudicial beliefs out in the open. Being openly hostile and racist is now acceptable in the White lexicon. According to Terrill (2017):

many observers have attributed Trump's political success, in part, to his willingness to say out loud what others have been willing only to imply. Where others have cloaked their racism and misogyny in coded language apt to be most clearly decoded by a specific and targeted audience, Trump speaks plainly, unconstrained by the bogeyman of 'political correctness.' (p. 498)

The truth of the matter is that Trump has legitimized both hate speech and harassment (Pollock, 2017) in both US society and schools. He has used, and continues to use, "dog whistle"[1] attacks on everyone from Mexicans, Muslims, and Haitians to the entire continent of Africa (Bates, 2018). Trump has mobilized and emboldened racist bigots (Johnson, 2017), males in particular, to support his racist, sexist, and xenophobic sociopolitical agenda. This has validated their once-hidden racist (as well as ignorant) beliefs. Research is now showing that Trump's vitriol has led to more than just name calling and verbal harassment; his words have led to hate crimes, as well. A recent study has found that Trump's use of anti-Muslim tweets since the beginning of his presidential campaign has led to an increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes, especially in those counties with higher Twitter usage (Müller & Schwarz, 2018). In addition, as a result of Trump's behavior, many have felt that the White Nationalist "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in the summer of 2017 was inflamed by Trump's racist brand of leadership (Roberts, 2017). There is no doubt that Trump is instigating and fueling hatred in the US.

THE TRUMP NARRATIVE AND WHITE STUPIDIFICATION

In order for Trump to control the racist narrative of his presidency, he must do so at any cost (Cook, 2017). To accomplish this task, Trump must attempt to regulate the media and the stories that come out about him. Studies show that Trump received a huge amount of free coverage from the media during the course of his Presidential campaign. It has been estimated that Trump received $2 billion worth of such free media attention, which was about twice that of Clinton (Confessore & Yourish, 2016, para. 7). In addition, the media focused much more heavily on Clinton's alleged scandals than Trump's (19% compared to 15%); the attention given to Clinton's supposed scandals accounted for 16% of her media coverage, which was four times the amount given to Trump's negative treatment of women (Wemple, 2017, p. 1).

Since Trump has used the media so efficiently in the past, he is intolerant of anything he thinks is negative. Therefore, if Trump hears something about himself that he does not like and/or agree with, he simply calls it "fake news." This has become a special go-to for the Trump administration and a rallying cry for his blind followers. There are three major differences between real and fake news, and they are as follows: "fabrication (i.e., fake news is conjured rather than reported), deception (i.e., fake news is designed to persuade rather than inform), and virality (i.e., fake news thrives on superficiality and escalation rather than depth and moderation)" (Rosenzweig, 2017, p. 5).

What Trump fails to comprehend (or perhaps he does) is that just because one does not agree with a news story does not make it any less real and important to the American public. Maybe news stories are negative about Trump because his presidency is incredibly unorthodox as well as tumultuous (Bump, 2018). It is obvious to some that, "Recently, the Trump team has taken to using 'fake news' as a synonym for 'what is reported in the non-alt-right press'" (Lakoff, 2017, p. 604). In

other words, if the news is critical of Trump, then it is simply disregarded as being "fake." This allows Trump to ignore criticism since he simply does not give credence to stories that he does not approve of.

Trump followers have shown that facts are no longer necessary to make informed decisions. As previously discussed, all news is fake if it does not reinforce their already existing, often factually incorrect, beliefs. While it is true that many people across the political spectrum adhere to the practice of "confirmation bias," or looking for information that confirms one's already existing beliefs (McIntyre, 2015), that does not excuse being uninformed and flat-out wrong on particular issues.

Despite their constant accusations of fake news in the media, researchers at Oxford have found that Trump supporters share more fake news stories on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook than any other political group (Shugerman, 2018). Trump followers have created this false narrative of fake news so that they may continue to be willfully ignorant and follow Trump without question. Over 25 years ago, world-renowned scholar Donaldo Macedo (1993) examined the problem of "why we supposedly highly literate and principled citizens of a great democracy frequently demonstrate the inability to separate myth from reality" (p. 184). By constantly trying to control his narrative via Twitter tantrums and media attacks, Trump consistently obfuscates the line between myth and reality. In doing so, Trump makes it quite difficult for his uninformed supporters to separate fact from fiction, and this leads to a complete and utter lack of understanding of key issues in US society (e.g., immigration reform). Brennan (2016) has observed that, "Donald Trump always enjoyed massive support from uneducated, low-information white people" (p. 1), and this, I assert has led us to a state of White stupidification in the United States.

I use the term *White Stupidification* to describe the apparent state of blindness that many of Trump's followers are victim to. The term is based on Donaldo Macedo's (1993) seminal work *Literacy for Stupidification: The Pedagogy of Big Lies*. In the piece, Macedo discusses the notion of literacy and education in the US. He questions why students are not given the opportunity to critically analyze what they learn in school and what they experience in the world around them. Macedo also asserts that this lack of critical thought is harming all of us as Americans, and this is just as important today as when Macedo wrote his article years ago. As such, he posited that:

> Because the "learned ignoramus" is mainly concerned with his or her own tiny portion of the world disconnected from other bodies of knowledge, he or she is never able to relate the flux of information as to gain a critical reading of the world. (p. 193)

Like Macedo, I believe that White people, such as those predominantly in positions of power in the US, are still making decisions based on falsehoods and untruths (i.e., lies) spouted by Trump and his administration. To the detriment of most American citizens, White people are doing little to admit and rectify their obliviousness. Trump

played on White people's fears and ignorance in order to win the presidency, and the fact of the matter is that a majority of those who voted for Trump did not have college degrees (69%) (Carnes & Lupu, 2017). Therefore, it is the task of K-12 schools to prepare American youth to question Trump and expose his lies at every turn; following blindly serves no one except those in power.

THE TRUMP EFFECT IN US SCHOOLS

Trump's racist comments during and after the election have been both offensive and insulting to large groups of people around the world. He has called Mexicans criminals and rapists, immigrants from Haiti as all having AIDS, repeatedly called Senator Elizabeth Warren "Pocahontas," and even referred to Haiti and the entire continent of Africa as "sh-thole countries" (Leonhardt & Philbrick, 2018). These comments have not gone unnoticed by the youth of the United States, and it appears that, "Bullying begets bigotry and bigotry begets bullying" (Johnson, 2017, p. 460).

Trump's hateful rhetoric has had a profound impact on students of color, Muslims, Jews, and GLBTQ students in US schools at all levels. According to Costello (2016), Trump's 2016 Presidential election campaign "produc[ed] an alarming level of fear and anxiety among children of color and inflame[ed] racial and ethnic tensions in the classroom" (p. 4). This has been seen in everything from the shouting of racist chants, such as "build the wall" at Latinx students to antisemitic graffiti on bathroom walls (Pollock, 2017).

In addition, as discussed earlier, many White students have felt emboldened by Trump's racist rhetoric and this has led to "an increase in bullying, harassment and intimidation of students whose races, religions or nationalities ha[d] been the verbal targets of candidates on the campaign trail" (Costello, 2016, p. 4). This increase in racial/ethnic/religious/gender-based bullying and intimidation has been referred to as the "Trump Effect," and reports of this type of hostility and abuse has increased dramatically since the Presidential election in 2016. The HRC Foundation conducted a massive post-election study of children aged 13–18, and it revealed some upsetting trends. The online survey found that:

> 70 percent of respondents have witnessed bullying, hate messages or harassment since the election, with racial bias the most common motive cited. More than a quarter of LGBTQ youth said they have been personally bullied or harassed since Election Day—compared to 14 percent of non-LGBTQ youth—with transgender young people most frequently targeted. Additionally, Hispanic and Latinx respondents were 20 percent more likely than other youth to report having been personally bullied, with harassment targeting both immigrant and nonimmigrant communities. (Turner, 2017, p. 1)

Since the presidential election, schools have become hot zones for bullying, and it is not just children of color and members of the GLBTQ community who are being targeted in Trump's America; antisemitism has also been on the rise since

the 2016 Presidential election. In its annual Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents, the Anti-Defamation League (2018) found that "Anti-Semitic incidents in K-12 schools increased by approximately 100% each year for the past two years. Instances of vandalism with anti-Semitic messages and symbols, as well as harassment and assaults against Jewish children, increased 94% in 2017…and…106% in 2016" (ADL, 2018, p. 1). Antisemitic hatred has not only been limited to the K-12 schools. It has also been found that there was an 89% increase in all forms of antisemitism on US college campuses in 2017 (ADL, 2018). This increase in bullying and harassment can be tied directly to the acceptance of Trump's racist rhetoric (Johnson, 2017). This is quite concerning, to say the least.

Teachers in US K-12 schools have been put in a very difficult position. They now have to protect their students from ethnic, religious, and gender-based bullying and discrimination. According to Strom and Martin (2017):

> The increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of the student population suggests that teachers in varied contexts will engage with, and be tasked with, protecting and advocating for young people who represent those groups most targeted by the rhetoric of the Trump administration and the 'alt-right.' (p. 8)

Teachers are now forced to confront Trump's racist policies and bullying by his young followers, in order to have a safe and accepting learning environment for all students.

Yet, there are several ways for US educators to counteract the hatred of the Trump administration. For example, Mica Pollock (2017) suggests that educators must do three things to combat the Trump Effect in K-12 schools: (1) denounce each and every occurrence of hatred and bullying on school campuses, (2) break down myths by teaching facts and data, and (3) protect each student's individual right to explore and learn. The Editors of *Rethinking Schools* (2017) have also suggested several ways for educators to fight against the Trump Effect in US schools, such as: (1) create social justice classrooms, (2) become democratic spaces, (3) encourage solidarity to fight racism and xenophobia, (4) make a stand against sexism, heterosexism, and transphobia, (5) focus on the student and not standardized assessments, and (6) support student activism.

In addition to these positive and productive methods to counteract the Trump Effect in US schools, educators can also begin to teach dialectical thought. Therefore, while bullying and discrimination has increased in US schools during the age of Trump, all educators, from pre-K to university professors, can learn to teach their students to think dialectically in order to combat willful ignorance in the fight for equity and social justice for all.

WILLFUL IGNORANCE AND DIALECTICAL THOUGHT

Quite simply, many Trump supporters use willful ignorance in their blind acceptance of the Trump administration. Willful ignorance (Dei, Karumanchery,

& Karumanchery-Luik, 2004), defined here as a person's deliberate ignorance by choice, is dangerous for all Americans. While Trump did not create the practice of willful ignorance, he appears to bask in the obfuscation of facts through name calling, taunting, and constant lies. Wieland (2017) explains that people who use willful ignorance "are ignorant not because it's excessively difficult to know better, but because [they] do not want to know better even though it's relatively easy to do so" (p. 106).

As a recent example, according to an analysis by *The Washington Post*, Trump made 3,001 false or misleading claims (i.e., lies) in just his first 466 days in office,[2] which is an average of more than 6.5 lies a day (Kessler, Rizzo, & Kelly, 2018a, p. 1). To the detriment to the American people, Trump also tends to repeat, again and again, many of his own lies. As one of those popular phrases goes, when you tell a lie often enough, people tend to believe it, and it becomes fact. Now, as a point of comparison, in Trump's first 10 months in office, he told nearly six times as many untrue statements as President Obama did during his entire presidency (Leonhardt, Philbrick, & Thompson, 2017, para. 4). It really is obscene how many lies Trump tells on a daily basis, repeats again and again, yet is not called to task by his own supporters.

Trump's use of lies is unprecedented in US politics, and it appears that his ardent followers just eat up whatever he spouts off with little doubt or concern. They appear to "follow him not because of who he is or what he does, but because of what they think he believes—and what they think that says about them" (Newton, 2018, p. 4). McIntrye (2015) goes on to explain that there is a difference between simple, everyday ignorance and willful ignorance. It is completely natural to not be fluent in some aspect of knowledge or understanding (i.e., simple ignorance). Willful ignorance is defined as simple ignorance joined with an individual's decision to remain ignorant. According to McIntyre (2015), "Normally [willful ignorance] occurs when someone has a firm commitment to an ideology that proclaims it has all the answers—even if it counters empirical matters that have been well covered by scientific investigation" (p. B10). Many Trump adherents are playing follow-the-leader blindly, not knowing the real arguments to support their beliefs or having any substantial data to back them up.

The standardized, test-focused school systems in the US and the accompanying lack of teaching about independent, critical thought (Rubin, 2017) has led us to the point of willful ignorance and the emerging White stupidification. Dialectical thinking can be an effective tool to combat willful ignorance in US society, yet many educators do not attempt to address sociopolitical issues which are deemed controversial. They may shy away from addressing particular topics because they "[want] to avoid dissension in the classroom, [know] that their personal views are not in line with students' views, and [they do not know] how to handle such discussions in class" (Will, 2017, p. 12). If our youth do not discuss controversial issues in class and attempt to critique what they see and hear, then they will continue to be uniformed about important issues today (e.g., Trump's "Muslim travel ban").

Due to the massive amount of false information created and recycled on "news" programs and social media (Rubin, 2018), dialectical thought can be of great benefit to those educators wishing to tackle difficult social justice issues in their classrooms.

This chapter's interpretation of dialectical thinking is based on the collection of writings of Professor Bertell Ollman (1986, 1998, 2015). Ollman (1986) posits that the dialectical method (or thought process) focuses on a large issue or system, examines the parts that make up the issue, sees how they function, fit, and contradict, and eventually leads to a better understanding of the whole or "bigger picture." *Dialectic thought*, as it is used in this chapter, is defined as "a way of thinking which brings into focus the full range of changes and interactions that occur in the world" (Ollman, 1986, p. 1). In other words, dialectical thinking is the process of thinking critically about a particular topic (by using the past to inform the present), with the ultimate goal of moving to a point of social change, referred to as *praxis*. When all is said and done, the hope is that by coming to a new understanding of a particular issue, a person will have a moment of praxis where s/he will move forward and act to make positive change in the world (Ollman, 1998).

The dialectical thought process can be quite complex, so Ollman (1998) made it more easily understandable by describing it as a dance—where one can move back, forward, to the right, and to the left in one's thought process. In summation:

> in order to think dialectically, the first move is to *analyze* an issue and look for connections and patterns in the present day. The second step is to *historicize* or look at the most important conditions in the present and find their causes in the past. The next move is to *visionize* or move important social contradictions from the past to the present and to their resolution in the future. The last step is to *organize* and arrive at a moment of praxis. In other words, at the end of the "dance," a person reaches a point of understanding about a particular issue and chooses to act on those realizations while gaining a deeper understanding of the issue at the same time. (Rubin, 2018, pp. 76–77)

Teaching students to think dialectically can be an intimidating process at first glance, but it is well worth the effort.

There is a significant gap in the academic literature regarding the use of dialectical thought in the K-12 and university classrooms; those articles that do exist are mostly theoretical in nature but have no real application in the classroom (Rubin, 2017). This issue is greatly lacking in practice, so I have begun exploring dialectical thinking and how it can be used effectively and successfully in the high school and university settings. I have taught dialectical thinking successfully in a high school Latino/Latina literature class as well as a Survey of Latino Literature university course (Rubin, 2017, 2018). It takes time to model and teach how to think dialectically, but it is amazing to see one's students begin to see the world in a more critical and thoughtful manner. I believe that, in order to overcome any form of willful ignorance, our schools must be a source of critical thought and social change (Rubin, 2018). Macedo (1993) asserted that schools and the media "reproduce

cultural values that work to distort and falsify realities so as to benefit the interest of the power elite," and if our schools were really involved in developing students' critical thought processes to identify and counteract these falsehoods, "they would have both to teach the truth and teach to question" (p. 202).

The purpose of a quality education is to teach children how to think and not just simply memorize facts and figures (Rubin & Kazanjian, 2011). It has been asserted that, "In order to seriously address this nation's issues (e.g., poverty, racism), students must be able to break down arguments, see the facts from all sides, and then come to a clear, independent decision free from hype and hearsay" (Rubin, 2012, p. 71). Teaching students to think dialectically can help create a future where independent, social-justice oriented youth attack lies and the politicians who spread them, instead of electing them as President of the United States.

As it has been discussed previously, Trump is a distorter of the truth (to put it lightly). To fight against his racist rhetoric and uninformed policy decisions, educators need to be able to model dialectical thinking for their students. Our youth must be armed with the facts in order to combat ignorance and lies. To this end, I will now provide a detailed example of how an educator can teach her/his students to think dialectically and critically in the classroom. For this scenario, let us say that there is a university history professor in the United States discussing the Civil Rights Movement with her intro survey class. While discussing the use of non-violent resistance by Martin Luther King, Jr., an inquisitive student asks about former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick's decision to kneel during the playing of the "The Star-Spangled Banner" before football games. The student then explains that he feels Kaepernick's actions were incredibly disrespectful to US servicemen and women. As a result of his controversial, yet peaceful behavior, Kaepernick has become the most polarizing figure in US professional sports (Branch, 2017). It is important to note that a national poll showed that refusing to stand for the national anthem was overwhelmingly supported by Black people (74%) yet strongly disapproved by White people (63%) (Holland, 2016, paras. 3–4).

While some professors might shy away from addressing such a controversial and heated topic in the university classroom, this professor always takes the time to help students better understand the world in which we live, so she sees this as a positive learning opportunity. Let me first say that the protesting of police violence must be handled calmly and thoroughly, for there are likely to be many in the room who believe that any act perceived to be un-American, such as kneeling during the anthem, is simply intolerable. It is also important to note that dialectically addressing such a large issue takes time and energy (Rubin, 2017), so it may take more than one class period to approach all of the varying points that need to be discussed.

In order to discuss Black professional athletes kneeling during the playing of the "The Star-Spangled Banner" before football games, the professor needs to begin with the first step of the "Dance of the Dialectic." Therefore, the professor would first *analyze* the issue at hand; thereby, describing exactly what Kaepernick and his

fellow Black athletes are doing during the national anthem and why they are doing it (i.e., to draw attention to police violence against Black people). This can be done by either reading one of the many current articles online or by simply watching a video on YouTube (e.g., "Colin Kaepernick Takes a Knee for National Anthem").

Then, as a class, the professor can help facilitate a discussion and begin to analyze Kaepernick's behavior and demeanor during his non-violent protests. Next, the professor can assign the students to read the article *Black and Blue: Exploring Racial Bias and Law Enforcement in the Killings of Unarmed Black Male Civilians* by Hall, Hall, and Perry (2016). In this piece, the authors discuss racial bias by police and how Black males are 21 times more likely to be killed by police than were young White male civilians (p. 176). The professor can then have a general classroom discussion about why some students are angry about Kaepernick's protest (e.g., it is disrespectful to US soldiers to not stand for the anthem). It is important for the teacher to know why students feel as they do, so that she can address any falsehoods and misunderstandings as well as help separate emotion from reality. In other words, she can help identify the students' positions on the issue and begin to understand why they feel as they do.

The next step for the class is to *historicize*. In order to do this, the professor can cover a brief history of protests by Black athletes. For example, she can discuss how, at the Mexico City Olympic games in 1968, two Black American athletes stood on the winner's podium and raised their fists in the air as a protest against Black discrimination in the US (Chow, 2014). The professor can also discuss the non-violent protests of the Civil Rights Movement, such as the lunch counter sit-ins, what they looked like, and what non-violent protesters tried to accomplish by their defiant actions. Then she could ask the class to explain how players kneeling before football games are similar to the non-violent protests during the Jim Crow era.

The next step for the professor is to *visionize* by moving back to the present and seeing where any contradictions may lie. This is based on any new student understanding that emerged from the *analyze* and *historicize* stages. For example, the professor might explore how we, as White American citizens, now view the actions of those who fought against racial discrimination during the Jim Crow era. She can then compare how White people feel about the protests by Kaepernick and other Black athletes. She can pose questions such as, "What are the physical, emotional, and ideological differences between the protests of Blacks during Jim Crow and those of the professional athletes?" and "Why are opinions on this issue so radically split along racial lines?"

It is also important to explore why, if Kaepernick was behaving in such an egregious way, he won the Amnesty International Ambassador of Conscience Award in 2018 for "choos[ing] to speak out and inspire others despite the professional and personal risks...[because] Colin Kaepernick's commitment is all the more remarkable because of the alarming levels of vitriol it has attracted from those in power" (Amnesty International, 2018, p. 1). This should generate quite the vigorous

discussion in class and hopefully display how most, if not all, of the students are coming to new understandings on the topic.

The final step of the dance is to *organize* and evaluate how the students now feel about the issue of Black athletes kneeling during the national anthem. The professor might choose to have the students complete a reflection paper in which they explain their initial thoughts about the topic, how they feel about it now, and what, if anything facilitated the change in mindset. Then, the students can contemplate how they can continue to fight for social justice for Black people in the US (and all peoples, for that matter). As seen in Figure 7.1, the professor can help visual learners at any time in the dialectical thought process by drawing models on the board to help guide students through the "dance."

The point of this exercise is to take an issue in society and come to understand it more clearly and factually, and in the process, become more knowledgeable of the topic. The goal is to help create independent thinkers who can begin to see issues as complex and historically driven and not simply as being positioned on one side or the other, depending on the political party doing the talking. True knowledge is embracing all possible ideas and outcomes and transcending sides. Now, while it is much easier for an educator to avoid complex and challenging societal issues in class, it is each teacher's job, if not moral imperative, to help their students become critical, dialectical thinkers. This is the only real way that the populace can identify and steer political discussions for the betterment of all peoples.

Visionize
- 50s v. today
- Acceptable form of protest?

Historicize
- History of protest in U.S. sports
- Non-violent protest in U.S.

Analyze
- Kaepernick's behavior and demeanor
- Discuss racial bias by police
- Sports protest

Organize
- Come to new understanding
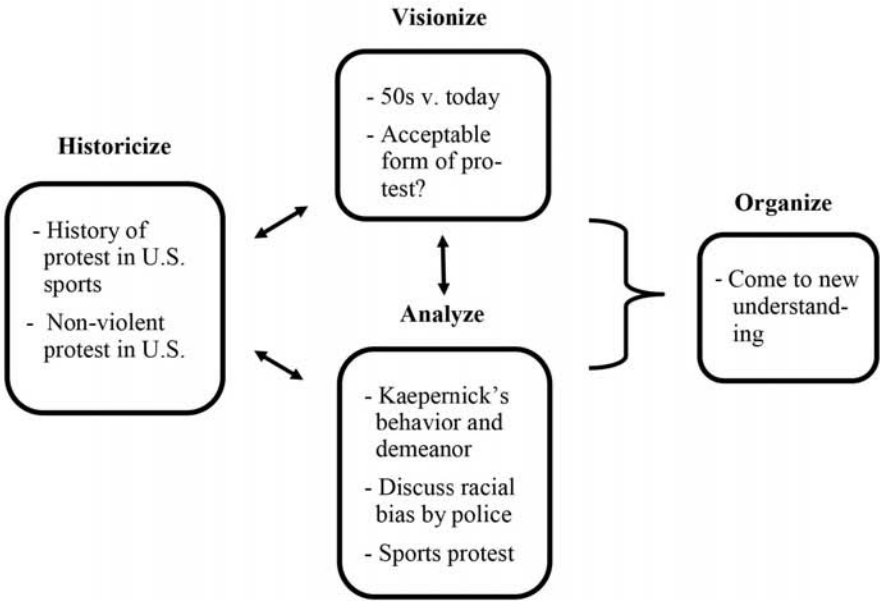
Figure 7.1. Dialectical thinking

CONCLUSION

The election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth President of the United States is as shocking as it is appalling. Having a racist, name-calling-liar as the supposed leader of the free world has already had an enormous impact of many people in the US. Just for starters, Muslims are being targeted by a travel ban (Chen, 2018), illegal immigrant families are being torn apart, often with children being separated from their parents (Tanfani & Carcamo, 2018), and members of the GLBTQ community are being discriminated against under the guise of "religious freedom" (Gessen, 2017). This is the new normal living in the age of Trump if you are not White, Christian, and heterosexual. Therefore, it is essential that educators take it upon themselves to begin to teach their students how to think dialectically in the fight for social justice.

Trump's brand of vitriolic hatred used in the effort to "Make American Great Again" must be fought at every turn, every moment. We have more than enough "keyboard warriors" in society, who only vent frustration on Twitter or Facebook; this is the time for intellectual and academic warriors (West, 2017). Classroom teachers and university professors have an obligation to prepare students to think independently and critically. By teaching our youth to think dialectically with a focus on social change, the future generation can become doers and not just complainers. No educator can ever truly tell the level of impact she has on her students by teaching dialectically and planting seeds of social justice, yet it must be done now for the sake of all Americans.

NOTES

[1] Defined as "speaking in code to a target audience…centered on race" (López, 2014, p. 4).
[2] By press time, Trump made over 9,014 false or misleading claims (Kessler, Rizzo, & Kelly, 2019, p. 1).

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FAITH AGOSTINONE-WILSON

8. CONCLUSION

ABSTRACT

In this conclusion, I provide an overview of the continuing relevance of each contributing author's analysis, in light of the rapidly evolving political events of the past four years.

Keywords: Trump, truth, fake news, climate change, racism

Since the initial manuscript for this book was assembled, the perpetual parade of Trump-induced crises and major events has only escalated, culminating in the impeachment of Trump and, most recently, the Trump-ordered assassination of Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani. Both of these incidents have highlighted, in stark relief, how fully embedded conspiracy theory—as distributed by social media—is within the highest levels of government. The total conflation of journalism, television, and social media have resulted in essential policy decisions being made based solely on content that is essentially tied to a handful of conspiracy theory sites, with a hefty dose of "shooting from the hip" tyranny of common sense and "gut instinct." These impulsive decisions fuelled by conspiracy talking points are then reported on as if they were well-considered, factual—or given a hearing in the name of "journalistic fairness," which further blurs the lines between truth and fake news. In reviewing the chapters of this book, it is clear how the authors' analyses have continued to hold up over time; in fact, they are even more relevant than before.

Austin Pickup and Eric Sheffield's exploration of endless babbling and how the media willingly passes it along can be applied to both the impeachment proceedings and the Iran situation. During the impeachment hearings, one Republican official after another, rather than answering specific questions regarding Trump's conduct with Ukraine, simply utilized repetitive conspiracy theory talking points. When given the opportunity to cross-examine those testifying, Republican officials rephrased the same talking points (in some cases shouting them) in the form of questions. Though refusing to testify under oath, Trump did not hesitate to share his thoughts in the form of constant Tweets, which reinforced the same conspiracy talking points regarding Ukraine, and Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden's son, Hunter. After the assassination of Soleimani, the endless babbling took the form of after-the-fact justifications for Trump's actions, with Iranian officials portrayed as

terrorists who were targeting American citizens and had, apparently, "already killed Americans." These talking points were traced to a few conspiracy sites, readily shared by Trump's tweets.

One of the more frightening phenomena of this spread of fake news is that a segment of the population now only relies on Trump as the final arbiter of truth. This situation is explained aptly through the lens of religiosity and whiteness in Jeremy Godwin's chapter. By embracing Trump as an unlikely messianic figure, evangelical voters are able to overcome his blatant hypocritical behavior while uncritically accepting what he says and does as "truth." Any criticisms of Trump, including from other Republicans, is immediately rejected as being "biased." This is extended to the media, which is dismissed if not outright attacked. Trump's evangelical supporters immediately validated the assassination of Soleimani by viewing Iran as a critical step toward hastening the end times and the fulfilment of prophecy, similar to how they ran with "intelligence" that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction during the Bush Jr. era. The irony, of course, is that Trump's actions are not the result of enacting a specific political philosophy, but are sheer impulse masquerading as shrewd political calculus. His followers, however, view him as a "truth-teller" whose every move is ripe for divine interpretation and prophecy.

Daniel Rubin's chapter makes it clear how racism has ultimately resulted in the stupidification of a majority of white people in the US, who overwhelmingly voted for Trump in 2016. Though his support among this demographic has been waning, the Republican Party has sealed its trajectory as a white nationalist political organization, who relies on the antiquated Electoral College, partisan gerrymandering, and voter suppression (along with lies about immigrant "voter fraud") to cobble together wins as they lose the battle of demographic diversity. Both my chapter and Jones Irwin's connect support for Trump to the larger project of authoritarian populism and fascism. Yet, even once Trump is gone from office, the continued problem of one of two political parties seeking to retain absolute political power at all costs will remain. Rational choice politics is officially dead within the Republican Party, though hopefully outmatched by growing activism among younger and disempowered voters who have had enough of the bullshit.

Finally, the fires in Australia have illustrated the urgency of addressing climate change that Mike Cole discusses in the Foreword and Afterword. As the fires continue to grow since October 2019, the horrific reality of 500 million animals and 24 people dead have made it increasingly difficult to deny the role of humans in global warming. This hasn't stopped right-wing social media posters from blaming the fires on arsons or other preposterous and baseless explanations. Compared to the other impacts of denying truth in favor of "alternative facts," however, the consequences of prioritizing corporate interests over human and animal life are even more dire and have widespread effects. While we are rightly focused on more local examples of injustice and an ongoing lack of accountability for the criminal ruling class, the problem of climate change lurks in the background, a form of irrefutable truth that cannot be Tweeted away.

MIKE COLE

9. AFTERWORD: ECOLOGICAL CATASTROPHE IN THE FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

The Case for Eco-Socialism and the Role of the Media

ABSTRACT

To conclude this book, I look at some of the ways the left can use the media to promote public pedagogies (educational activity and learning that occurs outside of educational institutions) that both challenge right-wing ideologies, and crucially also advance the cause of eco-socialism. In order to do this, it is informative to critically evaluate two axiomatic realities facing capitalism today: first, the (impending) ecological catastrophe that has been understated in everyday parlance as "climate change"; second, a massive transformation in scientific and technical innovations that has become known as the fourth industrial revolution or Industry 4.0. I will consider each in turn.

Keywords: eco-socialism, media, activism, climate change, economy, socialism, right-wing, ideology, leftists

INTRODUCTION

In the Introduction to this volume, Faith Agostinone-Wilson notes: "disappointingly, the US left, such as it is, has shown itself inadequate to the task of confronting right wing ideologies, which have only intensified since the election" of Trump. To conclude this book, I look at some of the ways the left can use the media to promote public pedagogies (educational activity and learning that occurs outside of educational institutions) that both challenge right-wing ideologies, and crucially also advance the cause of eco-socialism.

In order to do this, it is informative to critically evaluate two axiomatic realities facing capitalism today: first, the (impending) ecological catastrophe that has been understated in everyday parlance as "climate change"; second, a massive transformation in scientific and technical innovations that has become known as the fourth industrial revolution or Industry 4.0. I will consider each in turn.

IMPENDING ECOLOGICAL CATASTROPHE

In the Foreword, I outlined some to the ways that Trump is undermining the battle against ecological catastrophe, including his decision to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement of 2015. This accord limited global warming to "well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels" (Stylianou et al., 2019, para. 15). To underline the grave implications of Trump's climate change denial, a landmark report by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the UN's body for assessing the science related to climate change, made the case that the 2°C pledge did not go far enough and that the global average temperature rise actually needs to be kept below 1.5°C (Stylianou et al., 2019, para. 1). Most disturbingly, the Panel's view is that there are only about twelve years for global warming to be kept to a maximum of 1.5°C: even half a degree will significantly worsen the risks of drought, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people (Watts, 2018). There are a number of causes for immediate and urgent concern.

First, the biggest emitter of greenhouse gases is China (26.6% of the total), with the US, second, at 13.1% (Stylianou et al., 2019, para. 18). If Trump gets re-elected in 2020, and his Paris agreement withdrawal comes into effect, as scheduled, one day after the election on November 4, one can only speculate how this might intensify the destruction of our planet.

Second, Trump notwithstanding, it is overwhelmingly acknowledged throughout most of the world that the earth is getting hotter. According to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the global average temperature for the first 10 months of 2018 was almost one degree warmer than the levels of 1850-1900 (Stylianou et al., 2019, para. 4). Recent analysis (Hawkins, 2017; Hawkins et al., 2017) has suggested that 1720–1800 is a more accurate baseline for the pre-industrial era, not actually defined at the Paris agreement. Moreover, the 20 warmest years on record have been in the past 22 years, with 2015–2018 being the hottest four. If this trend continues, temperatures may rise by 3–5°C by 2100 (Stylianou et al., 2019, para. 5). The IPCC warns that if countries fail to act the result will be rising sea levels, increasing ocean temperatures and changes to the ocean chemistry, such as acidification. Crucially, the ability to grow rice, maize and wheat will be seriously threatened with obvious potentially devastating impacts, especially for the poor in the world's developing countries, which comprise most of the southern hemisphere (World Population Review, 2019).

Third, a succession of heatwaves in 2018 set a number of records. As Daisy Dunne, Science writer for CarbonBrief, a UK-based website covering the latest developments in climate science, climate policy and energy policy, points out, the extreme heat "broke temperature records simultaneously across North America, Europe and Asia" (Dunne, 2019, para. 5):

> Among its impacts, the heatwave caused crop failures across Europe, fanned wildfires from Manchester in the UK to Yosemite National Park in the US and

exposed more than 34,000 people to power outages in Los Angeles as the grid experienced an unprecedented demand for air conditioning. (para. 6)

This led scientists, she explains, to conclude that it is "virtually certain" that the 2018 northern-hemisphere heatwave could not have happened without climate change, with "virtually certain," according to Martha Vogel, of the Institute for Atmospheric and Climate Science, amounting to more than 98% probability (Dunne, 2019, para. 21). Moreover, summer heatwaves on such a scale could occur every year if global temperatures reach 2°C above pre-industrial levels. If global warming is limited to 1.5°C, such heatwaves could occur in two of every three years. By a similar token, the extreme heat seen in Japan in 2018, in which more than 1,000 people died, could not have occurred without climate change (para. 3).

Fourth, almost all cites (95%) facing extreme climate change (rising temperatures and extreme weather) risks are in Africa or Asia, with the faster-growing cities (84 in number) most at risk (Stylianou et al., 2019, para. 21).

Fifth, the extent of Arctic sea ice reached its lowest point on record in 2012, and the Arctic Ocean may be ice-free in the summer as soon as the 2050s unless emissions are reduced. The WMO found the extent of Arctic sea ice in 2018 was much lower than normal, with the maximum in March, the third lowest on record, and the September minimum, the sixth lowest (Stylianou et al., 2019, para. 24).

It is not just the existence of humankind that is under threat of course. Around a million species—perhaps one eighth of all plant and animal species on Earth—are in danger of becoming extinct, many within a matter of decades, according to a report, the most comprehensive assessment of global biodiversity ever conducted, released in May, 2019 from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). This includes more than 40% of amphibians, a third of all corals and all sharks (de Vries, 2019, para. 7). As Daniel de Vries, writing on the World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) points out:

While there have been five previous mass extinctions during the 3.5-billion-year history of life on Earth, the die-off of biodiversity over the past 50 years is not only unprecedented in the existence of humanity, it is caused by our species. (para. 3)

In June, 2019, the then UK Prime Minister Theresa May enshrined in law a commitment to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050, being the first G7 country to do so (Walker, 2019). Occurring in the dying days of her premiership, this needs to be contextualised as an obvious attempt to cement some legacy to the universal condemnation of her Brexit failures (Rentoul, 2019); the dire consequences of Tory Austerity (Mason, 2019); the sheer cruelties of her "really hostile environment" for so-called "illegal" immigrants that has had and continues to have such a devastating effect on UK society (Cole, 2019a, 2020); and the fallout from the Grenfell Tower disaster (Sharman, 2019).

As a result of May's pledge, Bill McKibben (1989, 2019), an American global environmentalist who predicted climate change thirty years ago in his book, *The End of Nature,* and author of *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?* was interviewed by Adam Boulton on the "All Out Politics" program on Sky News (June 13, 2019). While obviously welcoming May's intervention, he went on to refer to recent heatwaves of 125F (nearly 52°C) in Asia, and pointed out that by the middle of the century this will be "normal weather across much of the world." McKibben stressed that we are no longer able to stop global warming. Thirty years ago, it may have been possible, he explained, but we paid no attention then. He estimated that the world will witness up to a billion climate refugees this century. McKibben concluded that we need urgently to give up coal, gas and oil, and replace them with sun and wind. The government's chief adviser on climate change has warned that the prime May's plan to eliminate Britain's contribution to global warming will fail unless cuts to greenhouse gases are dramatically stepped up (Moore, 2019).

At the age of 15 in 2018, Greta Thunberg began protesting outside the Swedish Parliament about the need for urgent and immediate steps to control climate change, inspiring climate strikes by young people around the world. Born in London on October 31, 2018, and now active in large parts of the world including the US, considerable credit must also be afforded to Extinction Rebellion in forcing climate change up the political agenda (Rehman, 2019). Its US website (Extinction Rebellion, 2019) pledges "non-violent rebellion against the US Government for its criminal inaction on the ecological crisis. It is important that rebellion against governments must be fully inclusive, as demanded, for example, by "Wretched of the Earth," a diverse grassroots collective representing dozens of activist groups (see, for example, Wretched of the Earth, 2019). While making us all aware of (impending) ecological catastrophe is essential, period, from a Marxist perspective, a critique of the role of the world capitalist system must be central.

Referring to the IPBES report, de Vries (2019) argues that while it makes a clear call for "transformative change," that is, "fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic and social factors" (para. 6), what is lacking is not the knowledge or technological capability to implement these changes, but the necessary social initiative. "By its very nature," Robert Watson of IPBES said, "transformative change can expect opposition from those with interests vested in the status quo, but also…such opposition can be overcome for the broader public good" (para 7). de Vries concludes by translating "the cautious wording of scientific studies conducted under the auspices of the United Nations" into the language of socialism" (para. 17). Further:

the issue confronting humanity is the incapability of dealing with ecological catastrophe under the present regime: an economy based on private profit and a world divided into antagonistic nation-states. The problem is capitalism as a global system (para. 17).

I return to the case for eco-socialism in the last section of this Afterword.

THE FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION: A SOCALIST CRITIQUE

Klaus Schwab (2016) has summarised the progression from the first industrial revolution to the fourth or Industry 4.0, as it has become known:

> The First Industrial Revolution used water and steam power to mechanize production. The Second used electric power to create mass production. The Third used electronics and information technology to automate production. Now a Fourth Industrial Revolution is building on the Third, the digital revolution that has been occurring since the middle of the last century. It is characterized by a fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres. (para. 2)

At first sight, Patrick Craven (2017) argues, this "revolution" could be seen as a huge advance for humankind, "raising the possibility of thousands of dangerous, unhealthy or even just boring jobs being performed by computers and machines, and workers being freed to enjoy more leisure time and live life to the full" (para. 3). However Schwab is the founder and Executive Chairman (sic) of the World Economic Forum (WEF) that exists, in the accurate words of Craven (supporter of the South African Movement for Socialism a group that aims to build a new revolutionary socialist workers' party), to "bring together the world's rich and powerful capitalist leaders to discuss how best to protect their wealth and privileges" (para. 1).

The reality for the US, as research by Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael A. Osborne (2013), co-directors of the programme on Technology & Employment at Oxford University reveal, is that about 47% of jobs are at risk as a result of computerisation in the next 20 years (p. 37). Indeed, entrepreneur, philanthropist and Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang told *Hill.TV* in March, 2019 that it was the fourth industrial revolution that, in part, "led directly to Donald Trump being elected in that we automated away 4 million manufacturing jobs in Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Missouri and Iowa" (Manchester, 2019, para. 3). He went on:

> My friends in Silicon Valley know full well we're about to do the same thing to millions of retail workers, call center workers, truck drivers, and on and on through the economy. We need to think much bigger about how to help Americans handle this transition. (para. 4)

This fourth industrial revolution also widens inequality even more. A report by the Swiss bank UBS (Treanor, 2016) has warned that the richest stand to benefit most. The report, published in January, 2016, outlines a polarisation in the labour force and "greater income inequality imply[ing] larger gains for those at the top of the income, skills and wealth spectrums" (para. 5). Moreover, Schwab concedes honestly that government "regulation" of its effects is not likely to be effective:

> Current systems of public policy and decision-making evolved alongside the Second Industrial Revolution, when decision-makers had time to study a

specific issue and develop the necessary response or appropriate regulatory framework…But such an approach is no longer feasible. Given the Fourth Industrial Revolution's rapid pace of change and broad impacts, legislators and regulators are being challenged to an unprecedented degree and for the most part are proving unable to cope. (Craven, 2017, para. 9)

Craven argues that what is, of course, missing from Schwab's account is "any understanding that this crisis exposes a fundamental contradiction at the heart of capitalism," namely that "problems he warns about are caused by the very system he wants to preserve" (para. 10). Craven is referring to the multiple manifestations of the Marxist contention that capitalist profit derives from the surplus value appropriated from workers' labor power: the Labor Theory of Value (LTV).

THE LABOR THEORY OF VALUE IN 4.0

According to the LTV, without labor power, there is no surplus value and, therefore, no profit. Thus, capitalism is dependent on labor power to exist. Marxists argue that the worker gets only a proportion of the value she or he creates (how much is dependent on historical and socio-economic factors, not least the extent to which workers are able to successfully demand higher wages) and the rest is appropriated, or hived off, by the capitalist. While the value of the raw materials and of the depreciating machinery is simply passed on to the commodity in production, labor power is a peculiar, indeed unique, commodity, in that it creates new value.

At this point, it is necessary to add a couple of caveats to relate the LTV to 4.0. First, Marx holds that it not the *type* or *nature* of the commodity that is important in relation to value-creation. Glenn Rikowski (2017) explains this as follows, with respect to the general class of commodities:

Although in the first volume of *Capital* Marx uses 'hard' physical commodities as examples in his illustrations regarding the nature of the commodity and the formation of exchange-value, the general class can include *immaterial* as well as solid, material commodities (such as boot-polish, coats, linen and wheat etc.). Commodities in the general class may be immaterial, fragmentary or have a strictly time-limited existence—such as drama performances or transport. Marx examines such cases in depth in the first part of *Theories of Surplus Labour* (Marx, 1863), and Fiona Tregenna (2009) argues convincingly that what can be called 'services' (e.g. hairdressing, garage services but also education and health services) could also be commodities for Marx. (pp. 7-9)

Rikowski cites Ryder (2017): "Marx's examples [in *Capital*, volume I] are usually physical products, like coats or tables, but…the same dynamics apply to writing codes or teaching or musical performances or whatever" (p. 4).

Second, others, such as Harry Cleaver (2017) have analysed the LTV as applied to the labor of those working in banking and financial services. While the commodities

are produced as various financial "services," it remains labor, in some form, that is always involved in their production, produces value and therefore falls under the misfortune of performing unpaid labor.

These two caveats need to be borne in mind when reading Marx and also, in applying the LTV to 4.0, where labor-power continues to retain its "magical quality"; and its value for capital remains "critical" (Rikowski, 2001, p. 11). "Labour-power creates more value [and therefore profit] in its consumption than it possesses itself, and than it costs" (Marx, 1894 [1966], p. 351). Unlike, for example, the value of a given commodity, which can only be realized in the market as itself, labor creates a new value, a value greater than itself, a value that previously did not exist. It is for this reason that labor power is so important for the capitalist in the quest for capital accumulation, and why for Marxists, exploitation is an objective fact (see Cole, 2011, pp. 42–44 for further explanation and a numerical example of how this works).

THE TENDENCY FOR THE RATE OF PROFIT TO FALL

Capitalism dictates an ongoing "project of expelling labour power from the capitalist labour process through technological innovation" (Rikowski & Ocampo Gonzalez, 2018, p. 113). The ever-increasing technological drive for productivity, in order to undercut rivals by making commodities in the technosphere more cheaply, means more machines ("dead labor"—since labor produces them) and less labor power (the source of profit). Thus, there is a tendency for the rate of profit (the ratio of profit to investment) to fall (TRPF), meaning that booms get shorter and slumps, longer and longer and deeper and deeper. As Samir Hinks (2012) explains, because profit can only come from human labor,

> as more and more capitalists invest in the new machinery [in 4.0, in the technocapitalist complex] the average labour time required to produce each commodity [hypertechno-commodity in 4.0] falls. This is what makes the rate of profit fall, as the ratio of surplus value to investment falls across the whole system. (para. 14)

It is important to stress that the TRPF is only a *tendency* rather than a law. The solution for the capitalist is to attack workers' conditions, for example, by increasing hours without increasing pay, giving workers less breaks, keeping them under greater surveillance and by laying off workers on contracts and replacing them with workers on zero hours contracts at very low rates of pay or the legal minimum wage if there is one. In the fourth industrial revolution, because of the "rapid change of pace," emphasised by Schwab, the replacing of labor by computers and other machines accelerates and the contradictions intensify.

As Craven (2017) explains, this acceleration and intensification in Industry 4.0 means that the first companies who innovate with newer and more advanced machines make a big and quick profit by undercutting the prices of their competitors. But soon these competitors are forced to follow suit, and, because the surplus value

added by fewer workers is smaller, the rate of profit tumbles. This was the case in the previous industrial revolutions, but following suit is sooner and profit crashes quicker in the fourth. Moreover, as Craven explains: "Meanwhile the thousands of workers who have been replaced by the machines do not have the money to buy the goods and services the machines are churning out" (para. 13). He cites Nicolas Yan (2016) as quipping, "After all, machines don't consume like humans do—a burger-flipping bot cannot enjoy a Big Mac, nor would a droid on the factory floor ever desire to purchase the iPhone that it assembles" (para. 10). This leads to over-production of goods which further pushes down prices and profits.

THE URGENT NEED FOR ECO-SOCIALISM

Friedrich Engels noted the risible effect of this particular feature of capitalism some one hundred and fifty years ago:

> The division of society into a small, excessively rich class and a large, propertyless class of wage-workers results in a society suffocating from its own super-abundance, while the great majority of its members are scarcely, or even not at all, protected from extreme want. This state of affairs becomes daily more absurd and—more unnecessary. It must be abolished, it can be abolished. (Craven, 2017, para. 14)

Craven (2017) concludes his critique of Schwab thus:

> All [he] can offer as a solution is the now commonplace capitalist appeal for all classes to work together to establish 'a new collective and moral consciousness based on a shared sense of destiny,'" expecting millions of unemployed and impoverished workers "to help to bail out the very class and economic system which has caused their misery. (para. 15)

The only real "solution" is that advocated by Marx and Engels at the time of the first industrial revolution: "the abolition of capitalism and a socialist society in which the world's wealth is owned by the workers who create it and planned so that society as a whole reap the benefits" (para. 16).

Capitalism, of course, survived the first, second and third revolutions, although it was stalled for many years in the Soviet Union and in a number of other countries. However, given the crisis in neoliberalism (see the Foreword to this volume) and the burgeoning global backlash against right-wing populism, fascism and Trump, and the world-wide dimensions of the class struggle (Kishore, 2019), while Industry 4.0 is more wide-ranging in its effects than ever before, so is and will continue to be the resistance to it. Indeed, the Left must strive to make struggles against capitalism and (impending) ecological catastrophe game-changing and the clarion call for an eco-socialist revolution.

There is one vital element missing from Craven's (2017) prescient analysis. Any socialism for the twenty-first century must have ecology at its core. Perhaps it is a

good idea for socialists, whenever they refer to socialism, to use "eco-socialism" instead as a matter of course: a succinct and potentially very effective brief sobriquet of public pedagogy.

In my book, *Trump, the Alt-Right and Public Pedagogies of Hate and For Fascism: What Is to Be Done* (Cole, 2019b, chapter 6), I examined a number of movements, groupings and parties for progressive economic, political and social reform and revolution, and their respective public pedagogies. Public pedagogy for socialism goes beyond the social justice agenda of progressive public pedagogy theory (Sandlin et al., 2011) in that it is about nothing less that the promotion of the transformation of society to a post-capitalist, and socialist future. However, there can be no blueprint for a United Socialist States of America, since:

> [u]nlike the utopian socialists, who drew up intricate blueprints of post-capitalist society (which they sometimes attempted to put into practice on a small scale) [see Cole, 2008, 15–27, for a discussion and Marxist critique] Marx and Engels never speculated on the detailed organization of a future socialist or communist society. The key task for them was building a movement to overthrow capitalism. If and when that movement won power, it would be up to the members of the new society to decide democratically how it was to be organized, in the concrete historical circumstances in which they found themselves (Gasper, 2009, para. 11)

Here, nevertheless, are some pre-requisites, based in part on my analysis in chapter 6 of Cole, 2019b and on the proposals of various groupings, discussed in that chapter:

- the redistribution of wealth in as equal a manner as possible
- the democratisation of the economy, so that it is owned, and controlled *democratically* in the true sense of the word (rule of the people) *by* and *for* workers and communities
- the production of goods and services for *need* and not for profit
- the basic necessities (free food, drink, housing, healthcare, education and childcare for all) as a right
- full equality for all, regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and age, irrespective of faith or no faith, and no discrimination on grounds of these identities or any other identity
- open borders for people and equal rights for immigrants; closed borders for profiteers and warmongers
- no death penalty
- no imperialism, colonialism or militarism
- self-determination for Native Americans
- address climate change seriously; end fracking, pipelines and extracitivism
- follow the lead of indigenous peoples in protecting water, land and air.

It cannot be stressed enough that the last three bullet points self-evidently are in the twenty-first century a *pre-condition* for the building of socialism, and must be central in a public pedagogy for socialism and ecology. Quite literally, we will have no world in which to create a socialist future and no people to do it, unless we prioritise ecological issues. As Ian Angus (2013), editor of the journal, *Climate & Capitalism,* puts it:

the environmental crisis we face today is not a simple extension of capitalism's centuries-old war with nature. In the last half of the 20th century, what Marx and Engels called the 'metabolic rift' [a rupture in the interaction between humanity and nature, emanating from capitalist production] became *qualitatively wider, qualitatively more serious...* [B]ecause the metabolic rift has become a global ecological abyss, *socialists today must be ecosocialists.* (para. 7)

The fight against environmental destruction, he goes on, "is *central* to the fight against capitalism" (para. 8). In the 21st century, "fighting capitalist ecocide must be at the heart of our vision, our program and our activity" (para. 9). He concludes:

Capitalism has driven us to a crisis point in the relationship between humanity and the rest of nature—if business as usual continues, major ecological collapse isn't just possible but probable, and that will put civilization at risk. There is a giant death sentence hanging over much of our world, and capitalism is the executioner... socialists must be ecosocialists, and humanity needs an ecosocialist revolution. (para. 102)

Eco-socialism becomes all the more urgent in the light of Trump's (wilful) ecological ignorance that adversely affects not just the US, but the whole planet. The most conservative estimates are that each year, almost a million lives in the global south are already being claimed by the violence of climate change, with millions of others losing their homes and livelihoods (Rehman, 2019). We need to act now.

CHALLENGING RIGHT-WING IDEOLOGIES AND PROMOTING ECO-SOCIALISM VIA THE MEDIA

I conclude this Afterword with some suggestions as to the ways the left can use the media to promote public pedagogies that both challenge right-wing ideologies, and crucially also advance the cause of eco-socialism. In order to do this, we must both democratise the media and empower its workers and explore the possibilities of post-capitalist social media. I will consider each in turn.

A Media for the Many, Not the Few

Jeremy Corbyn (2018) has made the case for a media for the many not the few. First, there is a need to support local, investigative, and public interest journalism, which all tend to challenge the right-wing establishment. As Corbyn puts it, "The

best journalism takes on the powerful, in the corporate world as well as government, and, helps create an informed public" (para. 35). He goes on state that Labour would expand the UK Freedom of Information (FOI) Act so that it covers private providers of public services at will "look at ending the ministerial veto to prevent the Information Commissioner being overruled" (para. 49).

Second, Corbyn (2018) insists that the BBC, and, by extension public broadcasting in general, must not be broken up or privatized, should be freed from government control, democratized and made representative. Media workers should reflect diversity in all its forms, and public broadcasters should be completely transparent by publishing equality data, including social class. Trade unions have a crucial role to play, and should not be excluded or marginalized, and national and regional boards could be elected by staff and the public. Corbyn concludes that public broadcasting should compete with private multinational giants such as Netflix, Amazon, Google and Facebook and, with secure funding and empowered staff and audience could "move forward into the twenty-first century educating, informing and entertaining" (para. 66). To this, I would add, for socialists this would be an important form of public pedagogy, where right-wing populism and its attendant destructive ideologies, including climate change denial, as well as the aforementioned pre-requisites for socialism can be vigorously debated and developed.

Third, Corbyn (2018) suggested giving journalists the power to elect editors, and having seats on boards for workers and consumers (already in place at the liberal *Guardian* newspaper) when there is sufficient audience share, extended to reader, viewer or listener board membership, with higher audience share, thus empowering those who create and consume media over those who want to control and own it.

Finally, Corbyn (2018) re-floated the idea of "a publicly owned British Digital Corporation," originally suggested by James Harding, former BBC Director of Home News:

A BDC would use all of our best minds, the latest technology and our existing public assets not only to deliver information and entertainment to rival Netflix and Amazon but also to harness data for the public good (para. 73).

Corbyn concludes:

We can build a free, vibrant, democratic, and financially sustainable media in the digital age. We just need to harness the technology, empower the best instincts of media workers, wherever possible put the public in control, and take on the power of unaccountable billionaires who claim they are setting us free but in reality are holding us back from achieving what we can all achieve together. (para. 80)

In the US, Sanders has already used alternative media at the local level to "take TV out the hands of for-profit corporations" and into his own hands, hosting, "Bernie Speaks with the Community" in the mid-1980s when he was mayor of Vermont (Otterbein, 2019, para. 18). The programs have now been digitalised (CCTV, 2019).

The opening song of the show is, "We Shall Overcome" or Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land," as recorded by Pete Seeger in Burlington in 1986. In episode 50, Sanders proclaims, "The day after I was elected mayor, I said to some of my colleagues, "We can't survive. We're going to have to develop our own media" (Otterbein, 2019, para. 16).

As Holly Otterbein (2019) explains, Sanders used the show to make the case for an array of left-wing proposals, including a progressive income tax, a national health care system, the "immorality" of the war in Nicaragua, the "stupid" property tax, the effects of the looming nuclear apocalypse on children, and the rich getting richer, the poor getting poorer. Jeff Weaver, who was the campaign manager for Sanders' 2016 run for the White House, points out:

> When Bernie Sanders became mayor, he took on the entirety of the local establishment. The local mainstream media was dead set against him. I think he understood, correctly, that if he was going to have a way to talk directly to people about what he was trying to accomplish in Burlington, he was going to do that himself. (Otterbein, 2019, para. 23)

Facebook after Capitalism

Beginning his appraisal of Corbyn's (2018) intervention, Lewis Bassett, a political education officer for the Derby North Constituency Labour Party, describes it as "a paradigm shift" and "a breakthrough in the public debate on new media" (para. 4). The rise of Corbyn and of "democratic socialism" in the US has been aided by social media, and Bassett's aim is to explore the possibilities of "a Facebook after capitalism" (para. 18).

He acknowledges that this will not be easy: "when the logic of capitalist competition is applied to media, public alternatives will struggle in an aggressive market for popular attention" (Corbyn, 2018, para. 15). Alternatives to Facebook, he points out, already exist, "but none have achieved the critical mass to make them viable" (para. 15). "Even if Zuckerberg's monopoly is broken up," he goes on, "the capitalist incentives driving the media environment could sustain Facebook, or platforms like it, indefinitely by constantly revolutionizing the means of addiction" (see Neiger, 2018, referenced in Corbyn, 2018, para. 15). Referring to the possibility of going beyond Corbyn and nationalizing Facebook (see Mason, 2018), Bassett argues that the resources of a tech giant, consisting mainly of data and active users are not fixed, like a coal mine in some specific territory, but are transferrable, and that therefore nationalization might not be viable.

His solution, therefore, is to "kill off Facebook's business model" by banning advertising, whether commercial or political (Bassett, 2018, para. 16). It could then be replaced by a "publicly funded platform." Like Wikipedia, it could be "a collective endeavour" (para. 18). For this to be a possibility:

A socialist Facebook will need to be shaped by both the infinite possibilities for increased participation online as well as more traditional yet accountable editorial (that is, both human and algorithmic) oversight. The outline for this governance structure can be found in Corbyn's vision of a democratic BBC, in which he proposed a governing body to be elected by the platform's workers and its users. (para. 19)

Bassett concludes that recent crises have challenged the myth of neutrality that social media giants promote, but if we are serious about alternatives, "we should liberate big data and global connectivity from the anarchy of the market" (para. 20).

And Finally...

Having unashamedly promoted some key ideas of Jeremy Corbyn in the last section of this Afterword, it needs to be stressed that, despite Tory and right-wing media attempts to portray Corbyn as a "Marxist," his policies may more accurately be described as "left social democratic." Having said that, like many on the left in the UK, I re-joined the Labour Party, after decades of absence, once Corbyn became leader. My decision to do this, as I explained in Cole, 2020 is that, *at this present conjuncture in the UK,* the priority was to get Theresa May our of government, and replace her with a Left Labour Government, that just like a Left US Government led by Bernie Sanders or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, this would move eco-socialism more to the mainstream. I have always taken the view that Marxists and other socialists should support reforms that benefit the working class, but with an overall vision of a world beyond capitalism. As I write this, May has gone, and the race for a new Prime Minister has started, with Boris Johnson as the almost certain winner. Past history and current developments indicate that nothing will change with respect to racism, and that the Tory class struggle from above will intensify. In the US, the possible re-election of Trump, or his possible refusal to leave office (see the Foreword to this volume), for any progressive person, is unthinkable.

In conclusion, I should stress that while, in the third decade of the twenty-first century, it is imperative that we on the Left embrace media-based struggle, this does not replace the traditional forms on the streets, at the workplaces, including schools and universities and in the trade union movement. On the contrary, eco-socialist public pedagogy to confront right-wing ideologies and to resist capitalism via the media (traditional and social) exists in a dialectical relationship with pre-internet struggle. Its synthesis is the enhancement of praxis in the pursuit of socialism on the planet.

I will leave the last word to 'Ecosocialist Horizons,' an organisation that seeks to provide "news and analysis of ecosocialist concern through a multi-media website and other publications"; to educate "members to produce creative work and to organize events and actions"; and to organize "convergences to advance diverse struggles towards an ecosocialist horizon" (Ecosocialist Horizons, 2011):

- Ecosocialism is a vision of a transformed society in harmony with nature, and the development of practices that can attain it. It is directed toward alternatives to all socially and ecologically destructive systems, such as patriarchy, racism, homophobia and the fossil-fuel based economy. It is based on a perspective that regards other species and natural ecosystems as valuable in themselves and as partners in a common destiny.
- Ecosocialism shares with traditional socialism a passion for justice. It shares the conviction that capitalism has been a deadly detour for humanity. We understand capitalism to be a class society based on infinite expansion, through the exploitation of labor and the ransacking of nature. Ecosocialists are also guided by the life-ways of indigenous peoples whose economies are embedded in a classless society in fundamental unity with nature. We draw upon the wisdom of the ages as well as the latest science, and will do what can be done to bring a new society, beyond capitalism, into existence.
- We recognize that ecosocialism on a global scale is a long way from being realized. But it is on the horizon: far off, yet rising; indefinite yet vital, a terrain to be mapped, explored, and brought into existence. Our mission is to facilitate a global movement toward the ecosocialist horizon. The whole future depends upon it.

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INDEX