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TRUMP'S SAVAGE CAPITALISM: THE NIGHTMARE IS REAL

ENZO TRAVERSO



GAGE SKIDMORE

During the U.S. presidential campaign, most opinion polls and news outlets predicted a Hillary Clinton victory. At the time, it seemed natural—inescapable, even—that Clinton, a candidate supported by Wall Street, political elites, and the media, would defeat Donald Trump, a reality-TV star. When the final results came in, the triumph of an indecent, semifascist monster over a former secretary of state produced a vast and prolonged trauma. Prepared for a Democratic victory, many now feel thrown into a counterfactual story, like the

postwar America dominated by Nazi Germany and imperial Japan in the television series *The Man in the High Castle*. The verdict was written in advance, and, as a result, the presidency of Donald J. Trump seems like a transgression of the “laws” of history. If one thinks that things should have happened differently, it is difficult to accept that this nightmare is real.

Coming from Italy, a country that experienced 20 years of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi—a billionaire TV tycoon, our Trump—I tend to be more blasé, though I recognize that the consequences of Trump’s victory are incomparably bigger. But what the media failed to foresee was not a Trump landslide—which did not take place—but the decline of the democratic vote. Trump received fewer votes than Clinton and fewer votes than Mitt Romney in 2012; it is the Democratic candidate’s foundering—Clinton lost many millions of votes that Barack Obama won in 2008 as well as several traditionally Democratic states—that explains his victory. We are not facing the transformation of the United States into a fascist community embodied by a charismatic leader; what occurred is the rejection of the political establishment through mass abstention and a protest vote captured by a populist demagogue in a few key states. In other words, Trump signifies an upheaval at the political level, not a sudden, dramatic change in American society (as the Nazi party did in Germany, shifting from 2.6 percent to 37.27 percent of the popular vote between the elections of 1928 and 1932).

Sketching Trumpism’s resemblance to fascism involves speculation about what the latter would look like in the 21st century. Historical parallels allow us to draw analogies rather than homologies; we cannot simply impose the profile of Trump upon a fascist paradigm that appeared in the years between the two world wars.

Trump is as far from classical fascism as Occupy Wall Street, *los Indignados*, and *Nuit Debout* are from 20th-century communism. Nevertheless, Trumpism and the Occupy movement represent a social, political, and even class polarity as deep as the conflict between fascism and communism nearly a century ago. This comparison seems legitimate, even if the modern-day subjects of this opposition reject the historical filiation. Unlike Sen. Bernie Sanders, who professes a form of democratic socialism, Trump does not inscribe himself into a fascist tradition. His fascist inclinations can only be deduced from his acts and declarations, not from a political culture he would consciously defend.

During the electoral campaign, many observers highlighted Trump’s fascist features in the pages of reputable newspapers. Last May, Robert Kagan—a neoconservative political thinker and one of the ideologues of George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq—wrote an article in *The Washington Post* titled, “This is How Fascism Comes to America.” In *The New York Times*, Ross Douthat bluntly asked: “Is Donald Trump a Fascist?” and listed traits that bring him close to the fascist leaders of the 1930s: a charismatic conception of politics, authoritarianism, hatred for pluralism, radical nationalism, racism, xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia, Islamophobia, and a populist style that considers citizens only as a crowd to mesmerize, manipulate, and mislead.

In many ways, Trump does behave like a 21st-century fascist. Trump presents himself as a “man of action,” not a thinker; he despises intellectuals and does not accept criticism; his misogyny is outrageous; he exhibits his virility with vulgarity and aggression; and he uses racism and xenophobia as propaganda weapons. He wants to expel Muslims and Latino immigrants, depicting them as terrorists and

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criminals; he defends the police when they kill African Americans, and, by expressing doubts about Obama's birth in the U.S., he suggests that African Americans cannot be true Americans. He pretends to defend the popular classes that have been deeply affected by the economic crises of 2008 and the deindustrialization of the country—not by denouncing the main culprit, financial capitalism, but by offering them a scapegoat. His campaign reproduced features of old anti-Semitism, which defined a mythical, ethnically homogeneous national community against its enemies: the Jews. Trump took this model and enlarged the spectrum to include African Americans, Latinos, Muslims, and non-white immigrants.

The incredible split between urban and rural America reveals the persistence of a connection between economic crisis and xenophobia. It seems to me that, in Trump's rhetoric, his condemnations of "the establishment" reproduce the anti-Semitic cliché of a virtuous agrarian community rooted in land and tradition opposed to an anonymous, corrupted, intellectual, and cosmopolitan metropolis. It is not that he dislikes Jewish politicians or representatives of the economic elite—today, his Islamophobia is certainly stronger than his prejudice against the Jews—but rather he portrays the cities as realms of an abstract and ungraspable power generated by media, finance, and culture, which anti-Semitism codified during the past century. Of course, this portrayal does not acknowledge Trump's roots in New York, a city that epitomizes the urban landscape he renounces, nor does it hinder him from having excellent relations with Wall Street—his administration is a gathering of billionaires. The fascists and the Nazis acted similarly in the 1930s, despite vilifying the "parasitic" Jewish elite.

Trump plays the strong, captivating leader who alone is able to save the country through his exceptional, almost demiurgic faculties. In the purest tradition of charismatic, authoritar-

ian politics, he pretends both to represent a national community and to transcend it as its savior and redeemer. His speeches and meetings recall fascist aesthetics: One could not view the images of his aircraft landing at a rally, surrounded by a cheering crowd, without remembering the opening sequence of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, with Hitler flying over Nuremberg to join his waiting disciples at the Nazi congress.

NO MOVEMENT

All these features have an incontestably fascist taste, but they remain at the superficial level of personality. Unlike Mussolini and Hitler, Trump probably does not know Gustave Le Bon's *Psychology of Crowds*; instead, he draws his demagogic skills from his experience on TV shows. The European dictators relied on the electrical, exciting atmosphere of mass rallies, in which their mystical union with the people resulted from the physical presence of the crowd; Trump's charisma runs through TV screens.

HE EMBODIES A XENOPHOBIC AND REACTIONARY VISION OF AMERICANISM.

Temperamentally, Trump is a "decisionist"—a leader who decides and acts without any parliamentary constraints and ignores procedural rules—though he has certainly never heard the name of Carl Schmitt, the theoretician of "decisionism." We can also suppose that many people gathering at his campaign rallies probably exhibit the marks of what Erich Fromm and Theodor W. Adorno called the "authoritarian personality"—the proclivity to submit

themselves to an arbitrary, tyrannical rule—but fascism is reducible neither to the character of a political leader nor to the psychological predispositions of his followers.

The fact is there is no fascist organization behind Trump. He does not lead a mass movement; he is a TV star. From this point of view, he is much more reminiscent of Berlusconi than Mussolini. Unlike Mussolini, he does not come from the left, and unlike Hitler, he is not a *lumpen*, a marginal figure who discovered politics in a society devastated by war. But like Berlusconi, he is a billionaire (or at least claims to be) whose political activities will permanently collide with his private business. Thus, he would never think to lead a march of black or brown shirts on Washington, simply because he couldn't; there are no sizable organized groups behind him. He was able to channel the dissatisfaction and anger of ordinary people against Washington and Wall Street, but his only tools to oppose "the establishment" are his supposedly unparalleled faculties. The Republican Party he now leads is precisely the opposite of a radical, subversive movement.

Nobody knows what Trump's full program will be, though we've all heard his promises to deport Muslims and Latinos and build a wall at the Mexican border. He announced several authoritarian measures—against Muslims, refugees, Mexican immigrants, abortion rights—that put into question both democracy and the state of law. His cabinet choices for the new administration—notably the extreme-right nationalist Steve Bannon as "chief strategist"—clearly confirm this trend. Economically, though, he merges protectionism and neoliberalism: On the one hand, he wishes to annul the free trade agreement with Mexico; on the other, he wants to deregulate finance and privatize social services, which means abolishing the modest achievements of Obama's health-care policies. From this point of view, Trump is much more open to neoliberal policies than the European radical

right opposed to the euro and supportive of socialized health care, and far away from classical fascist corporatism (which in many cases established forms of social security). In France, Italy, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and even Germany, the far-right movements claim a kind of xenophobic welfare state. Trump defends a form of authoritarian neoliberalism in domestic policy. Like a populist demagogue, he sets up ordinary people against a so-called establishment, but he does not propose any social policy (even a xenophobic or racist one) to defend them.

Classical fascisms worshipped the state, defended imperialism, and promoted military expansionism. Their foreign policies were oriented toward war and the conquest of the so-called "vital space" (*spazio vitale*, *Lebensraum*). Trump, by contrast, seems more oriented toward isolationism insofar as he criticizes the war in Iraq and supports an alliance with Vladimir Putin's Russia. In the field of foreign policy, his vision does not transcend his own business interests. Instead of fascism, which strongly affirmed the idea of a national or racial community (*stirpe*, *Volk*), Trump preaches individualism. All in all, he embodies a xenophobic and reactionary vision of Americanism: a social-Darwinist self-made man, the avenger bringing arms, the resentment of a white population that cannot accept ever becoming a minority in a country of immigrants. He won the votes of only a quarter of eligible American voters, and his success gives a voice to the fear and frustrations of a minority, like WASP nationalism did a century ago, when its targets were the Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe.

Fascism was a product of the Great War and the collapse of the 19th-century European order. Its radical nationalism came out of this global continental crisis and it adopted a form of militarized politics inherited from the trenches and sharpened in a violent confrontation with Bolshevism. In this cataclysmic context, fascism

proposed, in spite of an ideological eclecticism, an alternative to the decaying liberal order. In short, it offered a new project of society and civilization, causing many scholars to speak of a “fascist revolution” or a “third way” opposed to both liberalism and communism. Trump belongs to a different time, and proposes no new model of society or civilization. He can only offer slogans: “Make America Great Again” or “America First.” He does not wish to change the American social and economic model, if only because he has enormous private interests to defend in it.

Trump emerges in an age of financial capitalism, competitive individualism, and social precariousness. He does not organize and mobilize the masses; he attracts an audience in an atomized society of consumers. He does not wear a uniform, like Hitler and Mussolini, but instead exhibits his luxurious lifestyle like a stereotype of a Hollywood star. More than a new political project, he represents a neoliberal anthropological model: market, competition, and private interests adopted as a “conduct of life.” While the U.S. has never had a president as reactionary and right-wing as Trump, fascist ideas are also less widespread in America today than they were 70 or 100 years ago, during McCarthyism or the Red Scare. The Bolshevik threat no longer exists, and the specter of terrorism isn’t sufficiently frightening for Americans to readily give up their freedoms in exchange for promises of security.

Finally, Trump’s victory has to be inscribed within an international context, between the European refugee crisis, “Brexit,” and the next French presidential elections. It belongs to a

wave of right-wing, anti-globalization movements. Riding a tide that could upend the trans-Atlantic order, Trump is a danger, and we should prepare for a period of social and political conflict.

Nevertheless, I am not convinced that interpreting him through the old category of fascism can help us to understand the novelty of the Trump era. We tend to depict new political phenomena and objects through the lens of preexisting concepts, but Trump’s rise is not a sudden return to barbarism, nor is it a meteor crashing down onto a peaceful country. Rather he is the product of the transformations of

HE PERSONIFIES A FORM OF SAVAGE CAPITALISM—A CAPITALISM WITHOUT A HUMAN FACE.

capitalism in recent decades. With his nationalist, populist, racist, and authoritarian tendencies, he personifies a form of savage capitalism—a capitalism without a human face. It is not a resurgence of fascism, but something new and not yet realized. For now, we might call it “post-fascism.” Since Trump does not respect the rule of law, traditional politics risks becoming obsolete or, at the very least, largely inadequate. Politics, therefore, is returning to the streets. ●