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HUGH GUSTERSON
George Washington University

From Brexit to Trump:

Anthropology and the rise of nationalist populism

ABSTRACT
Brexit and Donald Trump's election victory are symptoms of a new nationalist populism in western Europe and the United States. This political and ideological movement has arisen in reaction to reconfigurations of power, wealth, and identity that are endemic to global neoliberalism. In the United States, however, the media's dominant "blue-collar narrative" about Trump's victory simplifies the relationship between neoliberalism and nationalist populism by ignoring the role of the petty bourgeoisie and the wealthy in Trump's coalition. An anthropology of Trump requires ethnographies of communities largely shunned by anthropologists as well as reflexivity about the unintended role of universities in producing support for Trump.
[*neoliberalism, political parties, identity politics, class, race, Donald Trump, Brexit*]

Populism is a little like pornography in Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous characterization: it's hard to define, but one knows it when one sees it. According to historian Michael Kazin (2016) this "contested and ambiguous concept" combines elements of "a creed, a style, a political strategy, [and] a marketing ploy." However one defines it, recent years have seen an upsurge, in Europe and the United States, of assorted varieties of what I call here *nationalist populism*. This is the same broad phenomenon that Stuart Hall (1980) and Nicolette Makovicky (2013) call "authoritarian populism," Salih Can Aciksoz and Umut Yıldırım (2016) call "right-wing populisms," Gillian Evans (2017) calls "cultural nationalism," Ana Carolina Balthazar (2017) calls "nostalgic nationalism," Andre Gingrich and Marcus Banks (2006) call "neo-nationalisms," and Douglas Holmes (2016) calls "Fascism 2." Nationalist populism is quite different from the leftist populism of, say, US senator and former presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, who refuses to scapegoat immigrants and favors income redistribution and deeper government intervention in the economy. In addition to Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US election, manifestations of the upsurge in nationalist populism include the British vote in the June 2016 referendum in favor of a "Brexit" from the European Union; the December 2016 vote in the Italian referendum to reject constitutional reform and, with it, to effectively oust a solidly pro-EU government; the 2015 election of a populist authoritarian government in Poland that is attacking the courts and the press while undermining the teaching of evolution and climate science in public schools; the consolidation of power by the government of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, a government that has weakened the courts and the press while attacking immigrants, Jews, gays, and European bureaucrats; and the unprecedented popularity in France of Marine Le Pen's anti-immigrant National Front party in the run-up to the country's presidential election of 2017.

There are important structural variations between the economic circumstances, ethnic landscapes, demographic coalitions, and political platforms undergirding the rise of nationalist populism in these different countries. To give just one example, in the United Kingdom the wealthy were more likely to vote against Brexit than their US counterparts were to vote against Trump, and xenophobia there focused more on legal immigrants than in the United States (Martin 2016). Nevertheless, there are

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family resemblances between the agendas and styles of diverse nationalist populist movements: a hostility toward (at least some) immigrants and ethnic others, especially Muslims (Evans 2012; Makovicky 2013; Shoshan 2016); a claim to speak for working people, whose interests are no longer well represented by traditional parties of the Left (Evans 2017; Gingrich and Banks 2006; Jansen 2016; Kalb 2009; Walley 2017b); an insistence that established government institutions have become corrupt or unresponsive to ordinary people (Balthazar 2017; Knight 2009; Koch 2016, 2017; Mikus 2016; Mollona 2009; Smith 2012); an attack on transnational organizations such as the European Union, NATO, the United Nations, and the World Trade Organization (Eriksen 2016; Shore 2016); a disparagement of cosmopolitan elites; and a call for a return to (an invented) "tradition" (Knight 2017).

The anthropological analysis of such movements, more developed in Europe than in the United States, is still embryonic. But anthropologists take as a truism that nationalist populist movements should be understood as a reaction to a neoliberal political and economic order that has been taking shape since the early 1970s and has accelerated with the end of the Cold War and the development of digital communication technologies. (Media commentary eschews the term *neoliberalism* but, similarly, frames the rise of populism as a response to "globalization.") The characteristics of this new neoliberal order include the hyperfinancialization of the economy, with its attendant increase in the political and economic power of the banking sector; the intensification of global trade, which has made local communities vulnerable to shifts in commodity prices, exchange rates, and labor competition in other countries; the offshoring of investment and production facilities in pursuit of increased profits; the rise of the Internet economy and digital capitalism, together with the enrichment of a new class of knowledge workers in information technology, biotechnology, and consulting; massive transnational movements of economic migrants dislocated by the fluidity of the new capitalism as well as refugees from a succession of wars in the Middle East and northeast Africa; the emergence of forms of capitalism that are deeply imbricated with a regulatory state that has bureaucratized daily life while enriching lobbyists and lawyers; and levels of social and economic inequality not seen in the West since the early 20th century.[1]

The blue-collar narrative

One should be skeptical of explanations that reduce Trump's electoral victory to a single cause (Butler 2017). Nonetheless, mainstream media in the United States have put disproportionate weight on a single narrative thread: the role of free trade and factory closings in alienating a postindustrial white working class, especially in the Midwest, from its traditional home in the Democratic Party. In this respect, the media inadvertently reproduce the discourse of Trump, who likes to present himself as a champion of the working class, a sort of blue-collar billionaire (Cooper 2016). Now that Trump is president, this lingering narrative frame will make it easier for him to take measures that shift wealth to the oligarchic elite without being seen to do so. Although white working-class swing voters were indeed important in giving Trump his narrow victories in such Rust Belt states as Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, the mainstream media's narrative distorts and oversimplifies, even inverts, the larger story. As Christine Walley points out,

> While Trump made a strong bid for votes in industrial and postindustrial areas through promises to renegotiate trade deals and bring back manufacturing jobs, exit polls from the primaries showed that those who voted for him earned each year an average $72,000, well above the US median yearly income of $56,000. (2017a, 232)

In other words, instead of representing Trump as the champion of US workers, the media would have been just as accurate in portraying him as the candidate of wealthier Americans: after all, he won the majority of votes among those earning over $50,000 a year (Henley 2016). Instead, the blue-collar trope makes the billionaire in the red baseball cap a man of the people.

Clearly, the relationship between US neoliberalism and Trump's victory demands a more complex understanding than the media's dominant "blue-collar narrative." This narrative obscures the importance to the Trump coalition of alignments not based on class: for example, Trump lost every racial group but whites; he lost the young but won majorities among those over 45 years old (Castillo 2016); and, vociferously opposing abortion, he won 81 percent of the white evangelical vote, which Faye Ginsburg (2017) argues "may have provided his electoral tipping point." The blue-collar narrative also obscures the centrality of other social classes in the Trump coalition, as well as the fact that many members of the white working class supported Sanders in the primaries and Hillary Clinton in the presidential election. And, in its singular focus on job losses as an animating grievance, the blue-collar narrative gives an impoverished account of the dynamics of nationalist populism and its larger relationship to neoliberalism. A fuller account of those dynamics—constructed here on the basis of work by the historian and commentator Thomas Frank and the journalist George Packer—demands a discomfiting reflexivity that undermines academics' preferred view from nowhere and puts us instead inside the story, where we become, against our wishes, part of the circuitry that enabled Trump's victory.

Neoliberalism has indeed ravaged the working class in the old industrial centers of the United States: manufacturing employment has fallen from a high of 19.6 million jobs in 1979 to 12.3 million in 2016, and in 2016, manufacturing employment fell by a further 62,000 jobs even as 1.8 million new jobs were created in the economic recovery (Rattner 2016). Under neoliberalism, postindustrial workers have seen their living standards decline precipitously. As Naomi Klein (2016) notes, "They have lost jobs. They have lost pensions. They have lost much of the safety net that used to make these losses less frightening. They see a future for their kids even worse than their precarious present." Packer (2016) observes that

> "working class" . . . once suggested productivity and sturdiness. Now it means downwardly mobile, poor, even pathological. A significant part of the W.W.C. [white working class] has succumbed to the ills that used to be associated with the black urban "underclass": intergenerational poverty, welfare, debt, bankruptcy, out-of-wedlock births, trash entertainment, addiction, jail, social distrust, political cynicism, bad health, unhappiness, early death.

But if we are to fully understand the political realignment of segments of the postindustrial white working class in the 2016 US election, it is important to locate it analytically in the wider context of the entire US neoliberal assemblage, which extends far beyond the offshoring of skilled factory jobs. For example, even as the white working class is engulfed by a claustrophobic sense of being trapped in decaying local communities, a vibrantly fluid transnational and cosmopolitan urban lifeworld has evolved, buoyed by the expanding economies of international finance, information technology, biomedicine, and social media. These expanding economic sectors, and the universities that feed them with knowledge workers, are the locus of a glamorous, socially liberal culture of transnational cosmopolitanism, conspicuous consumption, metrosexual broadmindedness, and affirmative action—or what Jonathan Rosa and Yarimar Bonilla (2017) call "inclusion-oriented and body-based diversity projects." As Richard Rorty observed almost two decades ago, these cosmopolitan elites have "no more sense of community with any workers anywhere than the great American capitalists of the year 1900" (1999, 87). The disdain that such elites feel for the white working class is perfectly captured in Hillary Clinton's leaked characterization (to a group of affluent donors) of much of this community as a "basket of deplorables" who are "racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it" (Blake 2016). Those of us who teach in universities must grapple with the fact, emphasized in Katherine Cramer's (2016) study of the Wisconsin Tea Party, that our institutions—which we often see as the vanguard of a liberal pluralistic 21st-century culture—are seen by those outside the gates as alien citadels of class superiority and elitist prejudice toward those who work with their hands. Indeed, even as universities seek to performatively erase prejudice, they can, perversely, function as engines of a liberal illiberalism that is complicit in creating new social schisms. This became clear to me recently when, at the end of a class in which I taught Christine Walley's (2013) ethnography of the deindustrialized white working class in Chicago, one graduate student announced to the class, "I don't like these people. They're racists and sexists who make their wives stay home, and I don't want to read about them." This is an example of what Makovicky (2013, 79) refers to as "domestic orientalism" and "liberal othering of the working class" in contemporary ethnography. As Keir Martin observes, this condescension toward working-class whites "smacks of the kind of pillorying of allegedly 'irrational' beliefs that anthropologists would be the first to challenge in most contexts" (2016, 494).

In this environment, as Frank (2016a) describes, the cosmopolitan elites who dominate banking, media, information technology, and technoscience have made a political home in the Democratic Party, which they have helped to remake into an organ of social liberalism but increasing economic conservatism. In the absence of campaign-finance reform, politicians of both parties need alliances with wealthy donors to get elected. Thus, since the 1980s, the Democratic Party has backed away from its New Deal alliance with (declining) labor unions, embraced the deregulatory policies sought by major donors, built a donor alliance with the titans of the "knowledge economy" and the professionals who work for them, and created a new progressive politics that deemphasizes blue-collar economic issues in favor of pluralistic identity politics. Under Tony Blair, Britain's Labour Party executed the same maneuver (Driver and Martell 2006; Evans 2012, 2017; Knight 2017). Mocking the Democratic Party as "the party of Martha's Vineyard," Frank (2016b) argues that the university-educated professionals at its heart see social and economic hierarchy not in terms of class politics but meritocracy:

> To the liberal class, every big economic problem is really an education problem, a failure by the losers to learn the right skills and get the credentials everyone knows you'll need in the society of the future. Take inequality. The real problem, many liberals believe, is that not enough poor people get a chance to go to college and join the professional-managerial elite. . . . If poor people want to stop being poor, poor people must go to college. (Frank 2016a, 34–35)

In the same vein, Packer (2016) observes that Clintonism embodies "a secular brand of Calvinism, with the state of inward grace revealed outwardly by an Ivy League degree, Silicon Valley stock options, and a White House invitation."

Confronted with a world of declining economic opportunity and a Democratic Party whose blue-collar bona fides had frayed, many white working-class voters abandoned their ancestral allegiance to the Democratic Party in 2016, often defying their union bosses in the process, and voted for the Republican, Donald Trump. But although media accounts have fetishized these working-class swing voters, turning them into the ultimate icons of Trumpism, they were just one component of a much larger coalition. Particularly overlooked in media framings is the petty bourgeoisie. If one reads media accounts of Trump rallies carefully, one often finds quotes from small-business owners, accountants, and pharmacists, but they are buried in the prose rather than headlined. Yet such people formed the backbone of the Tea Party movement that presaged Trump's rise (Cramer 2016; Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Westermeyer 2016). Like their class counterparts in the United Kingdom who voted solidly for Brexit, the people of this class are deeply alienated from distant bureaucracies (Brussels, London, and Washington) and ever-expanding regulatory regimes, and they are particularly disposed to believe that their tax dollars go to undeserving welfare cases. They tend to be intensely patriotic, resentful of the educated cosmopolitans above them, and intensely fearful of slipping into the working class below them (Ehrenreich 1990; Sampson 2016). They are little studied by anthropologists, and if we want to understand nationalist populism, that is a problem.

It is clear that race and hostility to immigrants played a role in working-class and petty bourgeois support for Trump, which some have characterized as a "whitelash" (Ryan 2016). A cursory look at any photograph of a Trump rally shows a paucity of nonwhite faces and, according to exit-poll data, Trump won 58 percent of the white vote but only 21 percent of the nonwhite vote (Henley 2016). But the role of race and its intersectional relationship with class in an electoral moment marked by extreme volatility calls for analytic care and subtlety. To begin with, as Walley (2017b) points out, the local configuration of racial politics was different in the southern and midwestern states that Trump carried, and it is noteworthy that the few social scientists who have conducted fieldwork with Tea Party or Brexit supporters tend, more than analyses from a distance, to downplay allegations of racism (Cramer 2016; Eriksen 2016; Evans 2012; Koch 2016; Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Westermeyer 2016). Such analysts argue that the white working class, rather than expressing some primordial racism, began "to learn, in the multicultural climate, how to be ethnic too" (Evans 2017). Trump won 200 counties that had previously voted for Obama, and polls suggested that 12 percent of Trump supporters approved of Barack Obama (Confessore and Cohn 2016; Hartigan 2017; Uhrmacher 2016). Clearly, while Trump's campaign had strong racial and anti-immigrant themes, there are, alongside the frankly prejudiced people who enjoyed watching Trump break the discursive taboos around race and gender in US political campaigns, many voters who are capable of voting for a black man in one election and a white racist in the next. This is not to say that these voters are free of racial prejudice or have a strong critique of white privilege but that, at the level of voting at least, their racial preference is not a foregone conclusion. Writing at a moment when Americans have astonished and moved me by showing up en masse at airports to cheer arriving Syrians and Iranians, I think it is clear that the post-civil-rights neoliberal force field has morphed the politics of race in ways we are only beginning to understand.

Conclusion: Anthropology and the future of the Trump coalition

Trump knitted together an improbable coalition: the majority of US voters who earn more than $50,000 a year and a huge majority of voters with no college education. In 1996, Democrats won the latter demographic by one percentage point; in 2012 they lost it by 26 points and in 2016 by 39 points (Henley 2016). As I have sought to suggest, educational capital becomes a key element of social stratification in the move from an industrial economy to a neoliberal knowledge economy. Those who lack educational capital are gravely disadvantaged in the new economic dispensation, and they are acutely aware of being condescended to by those who have a university education. Their sense of grievance makes them tinder for nationalist populist movements.

But will the Trump coalition prove stable over the long run? On the one hand, there is a strong argument that the Trump coalition will fall apart when it becomes clear that the government cannot satisfy the demands of both plutocrats and the workers whose wealth they are expropriating and that, in any case, Trump's victory was a "black swan" event (Taleb 2007) brought about by a highly improbable concatenation of circumstances: a weak Democratic candidate, Russian hacking, a rogue FBI director, and Republican voter-repression efforts (Berman 2016), to name a few.

On the other hand, writing about the European situation, Douglas Holmes (2016, 2) says, "I am now convinced that a self-sustaining extremism is in place and it is being replicated across Europe." One could imagine a similar argument for the United States that foregrounds feedback loops between neoliberalism and nationalist populism. One feedback loop might look like this: university-educated cosmopolitans react to nationalist populists with condescension, which drives the latter deeper into populism, which increases the cosmopolitans' disdain for them.

Surely this crisis in democratic politics in western Europe and the United States calls for a reorientation and extension of anthropological work. Trump's victory

confronts US anthropology with an incompleteness in the project of repatriated anthropology. While anthropologists of the United States have been busy studying scientists and financial traders at one end of the social scale and crack dealers and immigrant communities at the other, we have not had so much to say about the middle ground, the people who supported Trump—people we tend not to like. Nor have we produced ethnographies of the political parties. We prefer Occupy. If we are to contribute to the analysis of current menacing trends, and to help find a way to reverse them, we need rich, deep, nuanced encounters with the conservative Other, encounters that will require all the skills of reflexivity, relativism, and humane critique that our discipline can summon.

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1. The literature on neoliberalism is enormous. For general accounts of its political economy, see Castells 2009; Ganti 2014; Hacker 2008; Harvey 2007; Piketty 2014. Baumann 2006 probes the ontology of neoliberalism. More Foucauldian interpretations are provided by Brown 2003 and Ong 2006. There are many ethnographic depictions of neoliberal society, including the following: Allison 2013; Gusterson and Besteman 2010; Ho 2009; Newman 1993.

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Hugh Gusterson
Department of Anthropology
George Washington University
2110 G Street NW
Washington, DC 20052

guster@gwu.edu