

## TRUMPIST POPULISM AND ECONOMIC NATIONALISM

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*Since I came from the other side of the Atlantic, my presentation will adopt a comparative approach in addressing the rise of American populism and the dynamics of the U.S. civil society in seeking to curb Trumpism while shaping of the growth of the global civil society. First, I would like to recognize three individuals in this conference room. Without their welcoming initiatives, I would not be able to join you today: Jean-Michel Caudron who is known to many of you and has made with several important initiatives; I am proud to be your friend. I would like to recognize also Abdelaziz Saret, president of La Federation Mondiale des Organizations Democratiques Marocaines. I also recognize a young and promising journalist who represent the young generation in the global civil society community. She travelled this morning from Paris, where she works for Le Figaro, her name is Loubna Chlaikhy and I am proud to be her first cousin.*

How did Donald Trump formulate his discourse of populism and white nationalism, and how did he manage to beat 16 Republican candidates and one Democratic in the course of fifteen months and win the presidential elections last November? Was Trump's populism construed by an innovative political strategy; or were there certain ideological and historical precursors, if we consider the correlation of Trump's success with the revival of the extreme right movement, known as "the Alt-Right", in pushing for an exclusive White America under the banner of "Making America Great Again."? One thing for sure in terms of discourse and policies is that Trump's populist view did not grow in a vacuum; and the main threat to America's democracy has come from its Electoral College institution and its own democratic game, as a déjà-vu scenario that emerged in some parts of Europe in 1930s.

These questions presuppose certain dynamic elements of transformation inside the United States, which had been always guided, as a political context, by certain values and political correctness. However, the American political system has never been challenged by a president who tries to undermine existing own rules and norms and impose his subjective claims, such as "believe me", "fake news", and "alternative facts". I argue Trump has tried to instill his own post-modern politics into one of the most heavily-guarded constitutional systems in the world; whereas the American civil society has taken up the task of fighting against tyranny and excessive concentration of executive power. He has declared war on the political establishment, the judiciary, the media, intellectuals, and all the critical civil society.

This introduction leads to a third question: how has the American civil society reacted to Trump's populism and anti-minority speech? It has positioned itself as Francis Fukuyama would

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say, as a “critical check on presidential power, and that it is necessary for the progressive left to come out of its election funk and mobilize to support policies they favor.”<sup>i</sup> To help address these points, we need to deconstruct the overall context which gave rise to this non-inclusive, anti-tolerant, and anti-globalist populism in conjunction of the resistance of the civil society.

As a conflict analyst, I argue for some contextualization of Trump’s populism to help deconstruct the role of the socio-economic structure vis-à-vis his own political agency. Let me start with a prediction which was made six years before Trump decided to nominate himself as a presidential candidate. Philosopher and historian Noam Chomsky sensed some real trouble in America because of “the frustration, disillusionment, the justified anger and the absence of any coherent response.” He expressed concern about some growing socio-psychological trends since “the mood of the country is frightening. The level of anger, frustration, and hatred of institutions is not organized in a constructive way. It is going off into self-destructive fantasies.”<sup>ii</sup>

Chomsky offered a dark vision of America's future that was easily dismissed and was proved valid this year. He warned of the success a "charismatic figure" would have if one ran for office promising to cure society's ills, and listed elements of their campaign that would take them to power. The similarities to Trump are manifold and clear, from military force being exalted (Trump consistently heaps praise on the army and secret service) to the scapegoating of illegal immigrants”.<sup>iii</sup>

Trump has acted as a strong man who can lead the club of the powerful. He appears to share several political strategies and trajectories with Putin of Russia, Erdogan of Turkey, Sisi of Egypt, Duterte of the Philippines, and Chavez of Venezuela. The common denominator between these power-driven leaders is their pursuit of defying constitutional norms, democratic fundamentals, and the respect of human rights. For instance, the case of Erdogan’s Turkey has been contested by several groups of the civil society in Europe. However, the situation in Egypt seems to be worse as human rights and the local civil society have been constrained by a number of draconian measures since the summer of 2013. In protesting any manifest or latent abuse of the prerequisites of governance, the global civil society should adopt a similar approach across the board in any country and regardless of the political system or ideological doctrine.

Some analysts like Daron Acemoglu, an economist who studies failing states, have asserted that American checks and balances are not as strong as Americans typically believe: Congress is controlled by Trump’s party and will do his bidding; the judiciary can be shifted by new appointments to the Supreme Court and the federal judiciary; and the executive branch bureaucracy’s 4,000 political appointees will bend their agencies to the president’s will.<sup>iv</sup>

### **Socio-Economic Malaise:**

The rise of Trump’s populism was partially fueled by the vengeance of the ‘Forgotten White Man’ against the entire political establishment in Washington. For the last twenty years, Republican leaders have sided with wealthy conservatives and Wall Street elite instead of formulating a pro-active strategy to help avoid the current rupture between the Party and the

working class. Trump's popularity implies the failure of the Republican Party in containing the Tea Party as a rebellious movement against the elitist Republican policies.

Robert Reich, a leading Democrat and former Secretary of labor in the Clinton Administration points out that "median family income is lower now than it was 16 years ago, adjusted for inflation. Workers without college degrees – the old working class – have fallen furthest. Most economic gains, meanwhile, have gone to top. These gains have translated into political power to elicit bank bailouts, corporate subsidies, special tax loopholes, favorable trade deals and increasing market power without interference by anti-monopoly enforcement – all of which have further reduced wages and pulled up profits."<sup>v</sup>

One can argue that the main driver behind Trump's victory is these forgotten white folks who have been negatively impacted by the 2008 financial crisis and the growing wave of outsourcing of jobs. Trump has spoken directly to that pain. In his victory speech, he paid homage to "the forgotten men and women of our country," vowing that they "will be forgotten no longer."

This social malaise seemed to be a déjà vu decline of deep America. Many researchers have gone back to the works of sociologist William G. Sumner who coined the term "forgotten man" when he published his political essay "What the Social Classes Owe to Each Other" near the dawn of the Progressive Era (1890s-1920s). He lamented the lost autonomy of hard-working citizens suddenly forced to pay for high-flown programs of social reform.<sup>vi</sup>

Trump adopted this social prototype and put it back into political circulation in 2016 as a gesture of solidarity with the old ways of thinking about the "silent majority" and the "forgotten American." And though he included "men and women" in his victory speech, Trump's campaign mobilized around the same image that once animated the Roosevelt coalition: the "forgotten" white working-class man.<sup>vii</sup>

Yale historian Beverly Cage proposes an interesting reflection about the centrality of this social category as she argues, "this essential political idea — that a vast segment of the nation's white citizens have been overlooked, or looked down upon — has driven every major realignment in American politics since the New Deal."<sup>viii</sup> Trump's dark view of America and fear of the other has led to growing attachment to political and economic protectionism. Many American workers remain skeptical of several free trade agreements, including NAFTA with Mexico and Canada, and the trade imbalance with China, Japan, and Mexico.

From a global perspective, author and social activist Naomi Klein points to the failure of neoliberal policies of deregulation, privatization, austerity and corporate trade. She draws a parallel between Trump's victory and the Brexit in the way they have answered "with nostalgic nationalism and anger at remote economic bureaucracies – whether Washington, the North American free trade agreement the World Trade Organization or the EU. And of course, they answer it by bashing immigrants and people of color, vilifying Muslims, and degrading women. Elite neoliberalism has nothing to offer that pain, because neoliberalism unleashed the Davos

class... Trump's message was: "All is hell." Clinton answered: "All is well." But it's not well – far from it."<sup>ix</sup>

Moreover, there has been a blind spot in the pursuit of equal opportunity, or meritocracy, as a driving force behind America's liberal democracy. This year's election can be perceived as a battle of economism between urban development and rural under-development. Political scientist Fareed Zakaria points to the consequences of meritocracy "where people from all economic walks of life can move up the ladder of achievement and income (usually ending up in cities). It is better than using race, gender or bloodlines as the key to wealth and power, but it does create its own problems. As in any system, some people won't ascend to the top, and because it is a meritocracy, it is easy to believe that that's justified."<sup>x</sup>

As a result, the gap of the electoral results last November was staggering in rural counties where 90.5% of the votes chose Trump whereas 9.5% went for Clinton. However, educational attainment had an opposite effect in counties where at least 50% of adults have bachelor's degrees; 79.1% of them voted for Clinton versus 20.9% for Trump.

### **Economic nationalism:**

Trump capitalized on this disgruntled collective mood of deep America to solidify his white nationalism, economic populism, and anti-establishment impulses. He took workers' social and economic ills produced as much by Democrats as by Republicans, and "fed them through a racial grinder to make his alt-white sausage. He created an identity that a majority of the white working class and middle class flocked to. It is racist, but it's not fixed. And much of this failure to retain a majority of the white working class in the Democratic Party lays with organized labor, which does little organizing beyond get-out-the-vote and contract negotiation campaigns."<sup>xi</sup>

By adopting the new economic formula of his main advisor Steve Bannon, Trump wants massive domestic deregulation, corporate tax cuts, infrastructure and defense spending, and high protectionist barriers to importing goods, services, and people.<sup>xii</sup> Other countries will respond with measures that hurt American exports as well, but I don't think this bothers Trump's White House team one little bit. When Peter Navarro talks about deglobalizing America's manufacturing supply chain, you know you're in for an administration that wants to radically reshape the American economy.

However, several economic analysts have contested the promise of this economic nationalism. Stuart Anderson Executive Director of the National Foundation For American Policy argues it is not a real economic theory that explains how markets function in a global economy. It is instead a set of political arguments aimed at blaming foreigners for America's problems. In sum, "economic nationalism" equals economic nonsense.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **Riding the Media Horse**

The dilemma of populism and its impact on the masses cannot be fully understood outside the transformation of the media narratives and the symbolism of power politics played in the public sphere. The irony here is that candidate Trump benefited from about two-billion-dollar worth of free publicity, and now he wants to use his allegedly viable “movement” to intimidate the mainstream media by discrediting them and undermining their ability to hold him accountable, and also to intimidate anyone who gets in the way of his policy agenda.<sup>xiv</sup>

As German philosopher Jürgen Habermas once said, the media have “colonized” the lifeworld.”<sup>xv</sup> The rise of Trump represents two interrelated phenomena: one political with an ideological trajectory of protecting America and re-empowering the white majority; and the other is mediatized as he has capitalized on his TV fame and manipulated most broadcast and print media outlets. His public discourse has been synonymous to several controversies. He has developed the notoriety of being a “loose cannon” firing frequent attacks against Mexican immigrants, Muslims, refugees, women, and other minorities. Hillary Clinton argued that “Trump’s ideas aren’t just different – they are dangerously incoherent. They’re not even really ideas – just a series of bizarre rants, personal feuds, and outright lies.”

As a new complex political doctrine; Trumpism can be considered the product of the frustration, fear, and intolerance of most conservative: It is also the nexus of white, extreme right-wing, nativist, and isolationist politics. One of the most controversial statements was his call for a ban on the entry of Muslims to the United States in December 2015. This narrative implies a clash-of-civilizations interpretation of the terrorism dilemma. He reinforced his position three months later with another rejectionist narrative “Islam hates us”. His fellow candidates; both Democrats and Republican criticized him for drifting towards demagoguery and authoritarianism.

Trump’s Islamophobia, anti-immigration, and anti-refugees positions have revealed some fatigue of American democracy. Fascism scholar Robert Paxton notices that “the use of ethnic stereotypes and exploitation of fear of foreigners is directly out of the fascist’s recipe book. A sense of victimhood is absolutely essential to the rise of fascism and that is very strong in America today, particularly among the white middle class.”

Carl Bernstein veteran editor of the Washington Post argues that Trump is “a neo-fascist in the sense of his appeal and methodology that has to do with authoritarianism, nativism, and incitement, which we’re seeing now.” However, I argue that this coziness with neo-fascism and tyranny implies the existence of some societal shifts which have served as a launching platform of Trumpism. In the same week of Trump’s electoral victory back in November, a group of militant extreme right or Alt-Right gathered in Washington not far away from the White House chanting some Nazi-like slogans in celebrating his ascendance to power.

The New York Times republished the summary of its first article about Adolf Hitler back on November 21<sup>st</sup>, 1922 to showcase some parallels between the then- and now anti-Semitism. The article points to the subtle hatred advocacy in Hitler’s and Trump’s discourses. It reads: “A sophisticated politician credited Hitler with peculiar political cleverness for laying emphasis and

over-emphasis on anti-Semitism, saying: “You can’t expect the masses to understand or appreciate your finer real aims. You must feed the masses with cruder morsels and ideas like anti-Semitism. It would be politically all wrong to tell them the truth where you are really leading them.”<sup>xvi</sup>

## **The Identity War Narrative**

Besides these socio-economic and factors, Trump’s populism was energized by the identity war between a shrinking white-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant majority and growing minorities. Latinos are expected to become the new majority in the United States by 2025. In his populism, or “defending the people” motto, Trump has used a simplified and fiery language beyond political correctness and the nuances of the public discourse. His communication strategy reveals two main tendencies: a) his limited political knowledge which he derives from watching news programs on television, and b) the no-university educational background of most of his supporters. However, Trump’s apparent populism is not innocent; it hides a deliberate ideological exploitation of the gap between the political elite in Washington and ordinary Americans. It is also an extension to his demagoguery in playing the card of identity politics.

Trump’s followers in particular seem to be the whitest, with a dominant European ancestry, and the least representative of the multi-racial and colored America. They have been uncomfortable with the current demographic shift with one million new immigrants settling in America every year. They also remain concerned with the growth of the Latino communities as the new majority by 2025.

As Trump’s motto “Make America Great Again” echoes the loss of the old good days, it projects a mythical past to which WASP America must return. Right-wing populism, nativism, Islamophobia, Hispanophobia represent various roads that lead to one destination: the White Republic or the resurrection of the new world of WASP.

This nativism was one of the precursors of the Tea Party which presented itself as a renewal movement of the Republican Party in 2009. Trump’s electoral speeches showcased the radicalization of the public discourse in a society which was always made by immigrants from different geographies, religions and ethnicities. However, Trump’s electoral success gave momentum to the extreme right to flirt with Neo-Nazism in America.

With the help of FOX News and other right-wing media outlets, Trump projected the image of American power, as the new sole superpower, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War era. His populist and anti-Muslim discourse derived from the intellectual legacy of someone I consider to be the father of the new right in the United States. I am referring to Samuel Huntington, who hypothesized the imminence of “civilizational conflicts” in the new century, in his controversial *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* book, published in 1996 three years after his essay *Clash of Civilizations* in *Foreign Affairs* magazine.

He pointed to the "bloody borders" between Islamic and non-Islamic civilizations. At the end of the essay, he wrote, "this is not to advocate the desirability of conflicts between civilizations. It is to set forth descriptive hypothesis as to what the future may be like." This is a clear insinuation of the suggestive build-up for the Islamophobic battle!

However in terms of Trump's discourse of Hispanophobia, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and promoting the perception of certain ethnic minorities in America as the "other", Trump has worked off another book written by Huntington and has more alarming tendencies. It is book entitled *Who Are We? The Challenges of America's National Identity* in 2004 shortly after the 9/11 attacks, where Huntington tried to validate the intensification of the national security politics, and the we/they dichotomy between the white majority and the growing ethnic and religious minorities within the United States.

### **From Context to the Pursuit of Resistance**

For more than six months now, the social capital of the American civil society has been an emerging excitement of popular resistance and goodwill to protect democracy and constitutionalism across the United States energized by grass-roots activism. I have some good news: where there is power, there is resistance.

One day after Trump's inauguration at the Nation's capitol, Washington witnessed the biggest women-led protest against his intended policies. Members of Congress, both in the House and the Senate, have been pressured with well-organized gatherings at their state offices to avoid Trump's Repeal and Replace bill of ObamaCare as an example.

By the same token, Trump's infamous ascendance to power at the White House and his controversial Presidential Orders, such as the Travel Ban, have awakened several institutions including the judiciary and legal advocacy groups especially the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) that have defied the will of the president. The implantation of most of his Presidential Orders have been put on hold or rejected by several state courts in Washington, Hawaii, and other states. This leaves us with the one true defense we have, which Hamilton, Madison, and Washington neither designed nor much approved of: civil society's vigilance and protest. In fact, this is not unique to the United States.<sup>xvii</sup>

Certain mainstream media outlets like CNN and the New York Times have decided to contest Trump's drive for "post-truth" and "alternative facts" and restore the legitimacy and morality of objectivity and truth. They are the new custodian and defender of the American values of transparency, critical thinking, democracy, multiculturalism and diversity. The America public sphere is replete with multi-dimensional forms of contestation and critical-thinking questioning of Trump's decisions and policies. This new renaissance of the American civil society seems to showcase what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's argument that social capital is "convertible" into several forms of human, cultural, political as well as moral capital.

What we have seen, so far, in the media, universities, and public squares across America is how real social capital is located not in the protestors or social actors, but in the relations with other protestors and actors. It is the relational dimension that is at the core of power of the civil society. American sociologist James Samuel Coleman has argued for this relationship more than the contribution of individuals or networks in his famous 1990 *Foundations of Social Theory* volume.

There is more emphasis on this connectivity among social actors by another sociologist Robert Putnam who perceives social capital as "connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them."<sup>xviii</sup> Through this relational dialectic, one can visualize the dynamism of the emerging concept known as liquid social capital that has guided the sustainability of anti-Trump resistance at various levels, while solidifying the grass-root need to contain the emperor and his neo Machiavellian practice of politics. Connectivity has been the key engine of historical and American creativity.

If there is one lesson to be learned here from the opened-ended battle of power politics and moral politics in America, I would highlight two points: a) to decipher the discourse of populism and nationalism of any leader or political party before they capitalize on the disgruntled public opinion. Certain groups within societies may undergo periods of frustration and regression, but their social malaise should not be exploited by shrewd candidates like Trump. Western values of modernity, democracy, and fundamental rights should be protected in a pro-active manner by deconstructing the fallacy of Trump-like politicians. The moment that the field is so "tilted that accountability becomes impossible is when the system shifts from being a real liberal democracy to being an electoral authoritarian one."<sup>xix</sup>

b) As agents of positive social change, civil society organizations, academia and all bottom-up forces should invest heavily in networking and positioning themselves within the public sphere. The media both traditional broadcast and print as well as social media are the most effective tool in projecting who we are and what kind of change we aspire to help being part of the public eye and public ear, with the hope of becoming part of the public imagination and public will to redress our political and cultural systems.

I would like to end with a quote from Daron Acemoglu who wrote "the future of our much cherished institutions depends not on others but on ourselves, and that we are all individually responsible for our institutions. If we lose them to a would-be strongman, we have only ourselves to blame. We are the last defense."<sup>xx</sup>

Thank you!

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