

## The Present Crisis

This war has to be fought with the scale and duration and savagery that is only true of civil wars. We are lucky in this country that our civil wars are fought at the ballot box, not on the battlefield; nonetheless it is a true civil war.

Newt Gingrich, remarks at the Eleventh Annual Resource Bank Meeting (1988)

Donald Trump's election to the U.S. presidency produced shock and disbelief among liberals, progressives, and leftists around the world. Even many who recognize the flaws in the myth of America's democratic perfectibility and exceptionalism mourn its passing. That said, there is a tendency to read too much into the results of elections. They do not provide us with an objective diagnostic of a country's political condition: they are voter mobilization projects (conducted, in the main, by elites). The interpretation of the results, their meaning, and their so-called mandate retains a character of political positioning, even score setting. The desire to parse and explain the disastrous outcome of a Trump electoral victory and a Republican Party majority in both houses of Congress is understandable. But because much of the early analysis neglected a longer-term explanation of how we got here, it has only contributed to our collective disorientation. Written in the months following the election, this chapter attempts to take a longer view.

Many first assessments of Trump's electoral victory had an unseemly character of piling on. The most egregious examples were the gangland triumphalism of some Trump supporters, for whom victory licensed acts of bigotry, intimidation, and humiliation. Some centrist liberals, worried about a loss of proximity to power, similarly aimed their fire at more vulnerable groups, warning that it was the solicitude for so-called identity politics and sectional concerns of immigrants, racial minorities, women, and LGBT communities that caused Clinton's electoral defeat. The *New York Times* presented, in the guise of description, a depiction of terminal racial conflict in the language of eugenics, calling the result an electric response by white voters to "long-term demographic decay."<sup>1</sup>

We would do well to look beyond efforts to reduce complexity in the current political climate or to presume that demography is destiny, especially when such thinking betrays fear-induced submission to Trumpism itself, by naturalizing some idea of ineluctable or spontaneous racial animus. We did not suddenly awaken in a different country the day after the election. We would have had a very different conversation if fewer than one hundred thousand voters had swung the other way in the upper Midwest, the epicenter of an economic catastrophe whose roots go back to the 1970s and early 1980s. Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by a margin of 3 million popular votes (winning almost exactly the number of votes Obama gained in 2012, although in a larger electorate). How would we be interpreting her victory if she had mastered the baroque math of the Electoral College?

I do not suggest that we should not be alarmed. In retrospect, it is Trump's ascendancy with a Republican Party majority that should have worried us most. Long before Trump emerged, the GOP was the most politically entrenched, racially homogeneous far-Right political party in the Western world, one that mobilized and welded together social conservatism, a near-fanatical commitment to upward wealth redistribution, climate-change denial, the rejection of socially useful public spending, hostility to

taxation in support of transfer payments to the poorest and most vulnerable, racially coded appeals to law and order, and anti-immigrant animus. Its ascent was aided by opposition to gains in formal equality, particularly the reproductive rights of women, the civil rights of racial and sexual minorities, and the ethno-racial diversification of U.S. public institutions and public culture—including schools and universities. Republican public policy was informed by moral panics about crime, drugs, and welfare, and legal resistance to moderate reforms such as affirmative action, antidiscrimination remedies, voting-rights protection and abortion rights. The last time the Republican Party controlled all three branches of government was in 2001, and we know what ensued then. Before that, the last occurrence of this special alignment was 1928, right before the Great Depression.

In the 1990s, Bill Clinton completed the redefinition of the Democratic Party by quietly taking over the Right's dog-whistle racism and policy preferences: dressing down the rapper Sister Souljah; presiding over the execution of the cognitively impaired black prisoner Ricky Ray Rector; withdrawing his nomination of Lani Guinier for assistant attorney general when Republicans derided her as a "quota queen"; agreeing (as he put it) "to end welfare as we know it"; and passing the most comprehensive and punitive crime bill in U.S. history, defined through the imagery of "superpredators," "street terrorists," and criminal migrants.<sup>2</sup> The first Clinton strategy (in this as in other things) was to meet the Right halfway: to neutralize appeals to white identity politics with domestically focused promises of economic prosperity for all<sup>3</sup>; to take a hard-line stance on crime and welfare; to ratchet up the deportation of undocumented immigrants and to confine amelioration of racial inequality to a repertoire of sympathetic nods toward diversity and demonstrations of personal commitment to interracial comity.

The initial windfalls of so-called free trade, financial deregulation, and the accelerated globalization of manufacturing that pumped up U.S. financial and real-estate markets during these years appeared to vindicate an

approach that softened overt racial antagonism and presented neoliberal policy on finance, trade, and welfare requirements in a progressive guise: In the face of right-wing intransigence, Toni Morrison even conferred upon Clinton the honorary title of "first black president."<sup>4</sup> The old Midwestern industrial belt and the social safety nets that prevented catastrophe for the urban and rural poor were not only weakened but also being recast as incubators of individual dependency and dereliction rather than seen as a needed response to social and market failures. Meanwhile, U.S. prisons and jails, many newly built, were filling to capacity. The culture wars, tawdry scandals, and military misadventures of this period, including the impeachment of a sitting president, were indicators of a social and political system hurtling toward crisis.

Writing in the late 1990s, the philosopher Richard Rorty offered a prediction that, immediately following the election of Trump, many commentators invoked as if stumbling upon a lost prophecy. Rorty, along with others, recognized that one economic consequence of the globalization of trade and industry was the substantial loss of well-paying manufacturing jobs for American workers with no more than a high school education. He warned that inattention to the declining fortunes of this group, particularly among professional, college-educated suburbanites, would lead to a reactionary working-class revolt and the election of a divisive and dictatorial "strongman" to America's highest office.<sup>5</sup> He largely ignored the fact that the most creative and ambitious movement organizing during this period brought together trade unionists and environmentalists in opposition to institutions like the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund (culminating in the 1999 protest in Seattle) and sought to challenge forms of globalist governance on the grounds of their erosion of labor rights, living standards, democratic accountability, and environmental protection.

Rorty might also have emphasized the effects of a long period of right-wing antitax revolts, the NIMBY politics of small property holders, military

and carceral spending, and punitive social budgeting. These policies and attitudes undermined support for redistributive public investments in infrastructure, job training, and higher education to address the generational crisis wrought by deindustrialization and global outsourcing. Instead, Rorty and other left-liberal critics of multiculturalism, like Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Walter Benn Michaels, framed the conflict in cultural terms (while ironically also criticizing such framing): in their view, an emphasis on a politics of identity and difference, advanced by university-trained liberals and progressives, had led to the neglect of the material grievances of the white working class. "One thing that is very likely to happen," Rorty wrote, "is that the gains made in the past forty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion. . . . All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet."<sup>5</sup>

The last point is the one that jarred: it appeared to be an apt description of Trumpism. Yet the diagnosis actually redoubled a type of elite contempt by failing to mark the fact that the *contempt of elites*, rather than the spontaneous and disorganized social feeling of those at the lower (class) end of the social order, was the far more significant cause. From Kevin Phillips to Lee Atwater and now Steve Bannon, the steady rightward political movement in the United States in recent decades has been aided by the strategic limning of an inner societal war through coded appeals to a white constituency. Figures like the silent majority, the Reagan Democrat, or the forgotten, hard-working American have been used to represent those dispossessed as a consequence of elite solicitude for racial outsiders. This approach has nourished a potent imagery of (male) whites whose misfortunes are tied to the rise of Asian capital, the wave of Mexican migrants, or the perfidy of black criminals; it has long been the dark art of U.S. partisan and electoral politics.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, it was George W. Bush who softened this approach, promoting a more racially and ethnically inclusive "compassionate conservatism," with

support for broad-based immigration reform that offered a pathway to citizenship for a significant number of undocumented migrants. After winning the inconclusive, contentious election of 2000, however, the Bush administration was politically adrift until the 9/11 terrorist attack licensed a different organizing project and principle, one long planned by a group of administration insiders: large-scale war in the world's energy heartlands. What the war promised but failed to deliver was a "new American century," in which continued U.S. arrogation of "global leadership" and military supremacy would also offer enduring material advantages for the great majority within the North American redoubt.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, it was a grand illusion. First on the Bush agenda was withdrawal from the Kyoto climate-change accords, followed by tax cuts for the very wealthy, including an extension of provisions protecting vast family estates. It was followed by an expansion of prescription drug benefits that failed to curb exorbitant profitmaking by big pharmaceutical concerns. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq consumed everything else, with runaway, off-the-books spending enabled for warfare and its growing legions of private contractors. At the height of its war powers, the Bush administration claimed a hold on a new post-truth world that feels eerily familiar—one in which history is made by access to superior violence and projections of force, which create the facts that those of us in the "reality-based community" will be compelled to witness and "write about."<sup>8</sup>

A joke circulated in those days that the U.S. public was to the Bush administration as a wife to her cheating, abusive husband, who, when confronted with evidence of his misdeeds, asks, "So who are you going to believe, me or your own lying eyes?" Integral to this bad relationship was the administration's open sanctioning of torture, rendition, and offshore detention, trafficking in brown bodies that could be taken and broken outside any national or international norms and laws of war. Despite its multicultural personnel, quickly forgotten humility about nation building, and vacillation

on the language of a civilizational struggle against Islam, the Bush administration quite clearly embraced what Hannah Arendt once termed the expansionist tradition of thought that “equates power with violence” and that conceives of power in the most stripped-down, biological terms.<sup>9</sup>

Soon after the events of 9/11, Bush did his best Gary Cooper, warning, “We’re steady, clear-eyed, and patient, but pretty soon we are going to have to start displaying scalps.” Like military conflicts that unfolded on the Great Plains, in the Philippines, and in Vietnam, the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions showed that the demotic idiom of American capitalism on its “disordered frontiers” is savage war and race war, along with the proliferation of subjects without rights. No less an authority than the historian John Lewis Gaddis (and he was not alone) affirmed these transitive properties, casually remarking that arrogation of a preemptive violence against “non-state actors” in the name of global security drew on the usable past that North American settlers claimed in their twilight battles against “Native Americans . . . and other marauders.”<sup>10</sup>

The calamity of unending war, crises of legitimization related to false claims about weapons of mass destruction, the scandal of torture, fiscal policies rooted in tax breaks for wealthy individuals and corporate actors, and a banking crisis that drove the country close to economic collapse delivered a seemingly fatal blow to long-held illusions about links between U.S. imperial power and broadly held domestic prosperity. At the same time, the fin-de-siècle claims about a victory of the Left in the culture wars, including Rorty’s argument that the diminution of “socially accepted sadism” represented a thin reed of civility in the winds of the political and economic disasters to come, overstated the case: the disaster was presaged by efforts to sanction sadism at the pinnacle of U.S. policymaking and legal thought.

That we would have spent the following decade arguing about whether torture was efficacious and desirable (a view that we seem poised to readopt),

that the United States would continue to lead the world in arresting and incarcerating citizens and deporting noncitizens, that we would be continuously at war and poised for more war, or that we would have done so little to reduce or mitigate our toxic contribution to the planet’s ecological commons was, to put it kindly, unanticipated then, even as it tends to be forgotten now by those who view the election of Trump as unprecedented or as a departure from our political tradition. But in many ways Trump is the creature of the long war; and it now appears that he wants to bring the war home.

To understand the lacuna in our collective political imagination—which rendered it unthinkable until right after the 2016 election that avowed racists, white supremacists, evangelical home schoolers, and climate-change deniers might be installed to direct national security, oversee justice, administer public education, and safeguard the environment—we must consider something equally unpredictable in the cycle of political events: the election to the presidency of Barack Hussein Obama, viewed as a harbinger of political stability, a return to normative conceptions of political communication and truth-telling, multilateralism and a sense of sobriety about the limits of American military power. A little-known first-term senator, whose claims to lead rested on slender antiwar credentials and surplus charisma, Obama, too, found his path obstructed by Hillary Clinton, anointed by Democratic Party insiders as the heir apparent in the wake of the disasters of the George W. Bush administration. Significantly, Clinton offered a reprise of Rortyan wisdom, touting her support among “hard-working Americans, white Americans . . . who had not completed college” as a necessary bulwark of any successful electoral campaign in the face of Obama’s outsider challenge. She was also a foreign-policy hawk. It didn’t work then, either; Obama, it appeared, had broken the mold, marrying multiculturalism to an ersatz populism.<sup>11</sup>

As the effects of the collapse of the housing market and the crisis of big financial institutions became evident, Obama’s opponent, John McCain, in a

sotto voce reference to the old racial humbug, announced that real Americans were the makers and not the victims of history.<sup>12</sup> Yet, despite the revelation of Obama's former associations with Bill Ayers and Jeremiah Wright—one a 1960s counterculture bomb thrower and the other a stridently anti-imperialist black nationalist—McCain actually pulled back from emphasizing Obama's racial alterity and foreignness (the approach favoured by his running mate, Sarah Palin, who also warned of "Second Amendment remedies"). McCain even publicly upbraided a would-be voter who labeled Obama a Muslim terrorist.

In retrospect, McCain's belated act of restraint and civility foretold the resumption of the inner war and the breakdown of the racial truce that liberals and conservatives appeared to have quietly organized around the poles of color-blind jurisprudence and neoliberal multiculturalism during the Bush years, including a growing acceptance of diversification among upwardly mobile, college-educated elites, corporate-friendly trade and finance policies, mass incarceration, and external war. But it was the housing crisis and threat of systemic financial collapse in 2008 that augured the potentially far bigger upset of this neoliberal, neoconservative order. Beneath his campaign message of "hope and change," Obama sounded more adversarial, populist notes (especially in 2012, running against the venture capitalist and corporate raider Mitt Romney). It was mostly political theater, barely pink meat for the base.

Obama's talk of financial "fat cats" outraged Wall Street's lords; they served notice, even though they did not defect. Along with Obama's more strident Tea Party opponents, they deployed an inflammatory rhetoric of totalitarian domination by out-of-control big government. Venture capitalists, private equity managers, and CEOs compared Obama's corporate-tax proposals to Nazi persecution of the Jews.<sup>13</sup> (This too was mostly theater, and today the Ironies abound, as the very bankers who were targeted by Trump's veiled anti-Semitic attack on "globalist finance" on the eve of the 2016 elec-

tion seem assured that his government will be, in the words of Lloyd Blankfein, CEO of Goldman Sachs, "market- and asset-friendly"). The partisan war, however, was real. Led by the fire-breathing, right-wing Southern senator Jim DeMint from South Carolina, then heading the Heritage Foundation, Obama's opponents vowed to "break him." Although they failed to cut off the head in 2012, they started landing huge blows to the body. The massive Democratic political losses at the state and Congressional level, beginning in 2009, were the first signal that all was not well. Supported by pools of dark money unleashed by the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision, from 2010 onward the GOP gained some one thousand seats in state legislatures and total control of the state legislatures in twenty-five states.<sup>14</sup>

In his policy approach, Obama was far short of the socialist revolutionary demagogue he was made out to be. In fact, his tenure can now be properly seen for the vast laundering operation that it was. Even when he had the most political leverage and authority, Obama conceded early to budget-balancing monetarists and tribunes of moral hazard, coming out against calls for a larger fiscal stimulus and a forceful settlement with the banks that would have stopped the foreclosure juggernaut that ruined so many homeowners. Hope and change were rapidly transformed into incremental reformism, including a degree of restoration of regulatory control over runaway finance, labor-friendly board appointments that mildly redressed wildly imbalanced power relations between capital and labor, the prohibition of sex-based wage discrimination, and the administration's signature effort on health care—a Democratic policy priority since 1948, but one that succumbed to the logic of market dependency, thereby keeping costs high for those most in need and including punitive financial sanctions as the bulwark of social benefit.

The Obama balance sheet is decidedly mixed. Although he lowered the volume of tough terror talk and sought to end the mandatory sentencing provisions that put so many low-level drug buyers and sellers in prison, he strengthened the framework and security architecture of the long war,

including renewing Bush's open-ended executive war powers, expanding mass surveillance and government data-mining operations, and adding a lethal new element: targeted assassination by drone anywhere in the world. Obama tied the hands of lingering Iran hawks with a slender thread of an agreement that may now be undone. He supported gay marriage and federal antidiscrimination protection for LGBT workers and retained and expanded support for women's reproductive choice under the provisions of the health care law, but these measures are certainly on Trump's chopping block. He reestablished the United States' commitment to address climate change with reentry into global climate accords, but now big energy is positioned to rule the table. Obama made diplomatic overtures to Cuba, but the American gulag in Guantanamo Bay (territory secured over a century ago by gunboat diplomacy) that Obama promised to dismantle is intact. Rendition and torture are back on the agenda. Obama offered support for undocumented children of migrants under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival program (DACA), but he strengthened immigration enforcement bureaucracies, quietly deporting 2.5 million; under Trump, raids, roundups, and expulsions on an even larger scale are in the offing.

Obama was, admittedly, a steady hand in a moment of crisis and economic turmoil: he did less harm than his predecessor (and likely his successor), but his administration settled nothing of political consequence. Most significantly, albeit intangibly, he habituated ordinary people once again to the idea of positive and responsive government. Perhaps his greatest strategic failure was his decision to continue operating within the terms of the neoliberal market-state consensus. A progressive neoliberal, Obama attempted to reduce social and political volatility and to moderately increase the public commitment to collective risk sharing. This approach prevailed in matters of public finance, public health, race relations, political partisanship, diplomacy, nuclear nonproliferation, environmental degradation, and

immigration, and even the limitation of the use of military force (the expansion of drones notwithstanding).

Obama also eschewed partisan politics and party building. He seemed to believe that restoring transparent and competent government within strict neoliberal policy parameters was commensurate with the epochal demands of social renovation that his own unlikely emergence was supposed to signify. Before the 2016 election, in the Rust Belt—where globalization was practically a swear word, and a few hundred thousand former Obama voters were deciding whether to gamble on Trump—Obama pushed for the unpopular Trans-Pacific Partnership free-trade agreement. Immediately after the election, in an uncharacteristically fumbling address, he spoke of “the peaceful transition of power,” describing the election as an “intramural scrimmage” among people who “want what’s best for the country.” The fearful undertones reverberated as Obama expressed hope that Trump would uphold values that were formerly understood to be banal and commonplace: “a respect for our institutions, our way of life, the rule of law, and each other.” He emphasized that his own administration accomplished what was its “mission from day one”: to make government “run better,” to be “more responsive . . . efficient . . . and service friendly.”<sup>16</sup> In retrospect, it should not be surprising that this unifying pabulum, repressive tolerance, and small-ball, progressive tinkering failed to hold back the forces of repressive desublimation and social decay that Trump represents. Risk and volatility are back, bigly; the wrecking crew is back in charge.

Trump constituted himself early on as Obama's negative mirror image. From the moment he burst on the scene as a public figure in the late 1980s, with a full-page ad in the *New York Times* calling for the execution of the (wrongly convicted) black youths known as the Central Park Five, Trump proved to be a skilful reader and manager of the undercurrent of racist fear and contempt in the United States, as well as more conscious forms of white

supremacist commitment. His insistent, conspiratorial questioning of Obama's Hawaii-issued birth certificate melded attention to Obama's blackness with assumptions about his foreignness, allegations of his Muslim fealty, and antipathy to dominant idioms of American civic religiosity. This was the crucible for his brand of "alt-right," post-truth politicking, one that cleverly inverted attacks on various iterations of minority "identity politics" and "political correctness" into an idea that American greatness depends upon reviving the vigor of an aggrieved and demographically besieged white majority.

A narrative that portrayed Obama's cool rise through elite institutions and community organizing to a postracial presidency offered us the alternative, reassuring, and ameliorative story of post-civil rights progress. Our mistake was to believe it, in spite of evidence to the contrary. Built on the idea that diversification of the elite is one of the primary indexes of legitimate government, and that sensitivity to various kinds of narrowly and subjectively defined "privilege" is an adequate standard of social justice, it suggested that despite wars, mass deportation, economic stagnation, and rising income and wealth inequality, all was for the best in the best of all possible republics, and Obama was its living embodiment. As he put it in a soaring, idealistic speech celebrating his victory in 2008, "If there is anyone out there who doubts that America is a place where anything is possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer."<sup>16</sup>

Rhetorically and intellectually, Obama affirmed the best of the American liberal reform tradition, from abolition to the New Deal to the civil rights movement. At times, he seemed to exemplify a latter-day progressive maxim that the legacy of struggles of the victims of U.S. history against racial exclusion, labor exploitation, and sexual and gender discrimination represent the core of "our better history." But these affirmations were less a spur to militant, collective action than an inheritance he sought to personally embody.

If he could be elected, then it must be ascendant. Those inside the liberal bubble presumed that Trump's buffoonery, overt racism, and crude sexism would render him easy to defeat. Given that the Republican Party already controlled Congress and a supermajority of state legislatures, however, the idea that Trump was a weak candidate beggars belief. The rising racial tensions signaled by a barrage of extrajudicial and police killings of African Americans suggested deep-seated racial conflicts that were unresponsive to, and perhaps even triggered by, Obama's rise.

How Trump captured the Republican Party deserves more scrutiny, but he did not need to invent the playbook. An unorthodox politician with great understanding of male dogging rituals, he outmanned his opponents at every turn. Though less wealthy than some, he ultimately gained the backing of oddball right-wing billionaires with obscure agendas, like Robert and Rebekah Mercer, who had previously backed Ted Cruz, another insurgent, far-right candidate. More substantively, Trump dared to venture beyond the neoliberal and imperial terrain, welding a populism that invoked an abandoned generation of virtuous heartland producers to a foreign policy that emphasized hitting hard and unilaterally, but only against clearly marked enemies. Perhaps most importantly, he enjoined a brutal, sadistic inversion of the inclusionary niceties of neoliberal diversity talk with a return to a casual banter of racial, gender, and sexual punishment: arrest for abortion, criminal prosecution for participating in Black Lives Matter, registration and surveillance for Muslims, torture for terrorists. Nothing could have been more shocking to the creative classes, grown accustomed to tinkering with microaggressions and safe spaces within shrinking kingdoms of high cultural and educational attainment.

In light of the history sketched here, it is wrong to see Trump as an exception. The sense of collective disorientation in the face of his rise comes from the fact that the election resulted in the broad discrediting of the many experts (who now see fit to pronounce on its meaning). More significantly,

Trump's campaign was a determined exercise in flouting civilities and norms of consensual politics. Every shock—the humiliation of his opponents, incitement to violence against protesters, calumny against migrants, belittling of disabled people, “pussy grabbing” with impunity, outright lying, promises to tear up international agreements, and the threat to reject the result of a “rigged election” if he lost—seemed to render him unfit for office, according to wizened commentators; and yet many (though not the majority) disagreed.

As we learn more about Trump's domination of the media—including the role of fake-news farms; the investments in microtargeting, psychological profiling, and social-media news filtering under the auspices of the right-wing data firm Cambridge Analytica; and his embrace of Twitter as a vehicle of bullying and disinformation—we can see how Trump has become both a symptom and an accelerator of the broad degradation of our information ecology (much of which, not incidentally, has been advanced by decades of corporate-sponsored lying about our degraded physical ecology). In response to his loss of the popular vote, Trump asserted that millions of illegal votes were cast for Hillary Clinton. Perhaps these statements were made in preparation for advancing voter-suppression legislation on the federal level, as Republican domination of state legislatures has already advanced it at the state level.<sup>17</sup> The fight for the vote and against the abuse of fact will be among the many important lines in the battle to restore a degree of honest public communication and democratic procedure. With the Voting Rights Act gutted by the U.S. Supreme Court and legislation pending in multiple states to make voting less accessible through identification requirements and reductions in polling places and hours, the prospect is not favorable.

A more tangible question is how Trump will govern. There is a possibility that he will attempt to triangulate to a certain extent: for example, exchanging funding for pet infrastructure projects for a new round of tax cuts for the wealthy, along with radical deregulation of finance and industry. Even

before he took office, he claimed to have successfully bullied and cajoled one firm, Carrier, to partially forgo a planned closure of its U.S. manufacturing operation in his vice president's home state, Indiana. Undoubtedly Trump's populism, which promises the subjugation rather than the activation of organized labor (especially public employee unions), will gain a few more concessions from capital than any left-wing populist would. What is less clear is whether he will accede to extreme right-wing demands of Congressional Republicans, including gutting Medicaid, accelerating the looting of public education, and bringing the Federal Reserve to heel with tight monetary policy. Although the last would be anathema to his spending promises, his appointments in key arenas of domestic policy—such as appointing Betsy DeVos, the billionaire champion of private Christian schools, charter schools, home schooling (and apparently also an advocate of easing child-labor statutes), as education secretary; Mike Price, the leader of the anti-Obamacare forces, to lead the Department of Health and Human Services; and Scott Pruitt, former attorney general of Oklahoma, climate change denier, and oil and gas enthusiast, as head of the Environmental Protection Agency—suggest that we are facing an extreme right-wing devolution.

One thing seems certain at the time of writing, halfway through his first hundred days: First, Trump will make good on his promise to ratchet up the inner war. He has already done so with his signature appointments of Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller of the far right-wing Breitbart News as his chief strategist and national policy adviser. His first significant executive order, a chaotically implemented travel ban that targeted Muslims from seven countries, was a shot across the bows (temporarily stalled by the courts and spontaneous protest), a signal to his base and to his supporters in the enforcement bureaucracies of the Department of Homeland Security. Trump is likely to lean heavily on the hard, racially motivated Right when he fails to actually bring back manufacturing jobs (as he promised), let alone get the coal fires burning again in Cambria County. The position of attorney general,



aply titled since this is the general for the inner war, has long been the administrative appointment watched most closely by the extreme Right. In Jeff Sessions, Trump has chosen someone who has made no secret of his desire to reverse engineer the twentieth century, returning us to a time when "the blacks" (as Trump calls them) knew their place, women were subordinated to men, and immigrants were subject to severe restrictions defined by racial and national origin.

In a recent book, Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval describe neoliberalism as "the rationality of contemporary capitalism, a capitalism freed from its archaic references."<sup>18</sup> Part of the genius of the millennial iteration of neoliberalism was that it promoted upward economic distribution in the context of commitments to formal rights and nondiscrimination principles. The public commitment to racial, gender, and sexual equity and equality became an index of capitalism's progressivism in a period marked by the savage erosion of occupational stability, union membership, educational opportunity, and public health support for the vast majority of working people. Unfortunately, this conjunction resulted in a major category error by parts of the Left, which began to view issues of social justice as simple tools of neoliberalism itself, rather than public goods that might need to be defended on their own terms. Just as Trump's election reflects cracks in the neoliberal order, his administration is also likely to test the durability of formal equality as one of the institutions of our social formation and, along with it, basic conceptions of democratic rights.

During the campaign it appeared that corporate America would reject Trump because of his unpredictability, his bigotry, and the likelihood that he would use his position for naked self-enrichment—in a word, kleptocracy. Blanklein's prediction of a "market- and asset-friendly" environment indicates that tax cuts and financial deregulation may be enough to buy them off in the medium term. Trump's Goldman Sachs-friendly appointments include the hedge-fund billionaire Steve Mnuchin, who made his

money peddling subprime mortgages before the 2008 crash, as treasury secretary. In this way, Trump's ideology seems less a rejection of neoliberalism *tout court* than its acceleration toward what Sheldon Wolin somewhat awkwardly termed "inverted totalitarianism," a moment when the neoliberal market state merges with an increasingly politicized corporate realm alarmed about the terms of order and rule.<sup>19</sup>

The loyalties of the military-industrial complex are less certain. Elements of the FBI (the main agents of the inner war) apparently supported Trump, as demonstrated by FBI director James Comey's intervention shortly before the election, putting Clinton's e-mail controversy back in the spotlight. Those charged with the outer war, however, including the CIA and the bulk of the national security bureaucracy, rejected him in favour of Clinton. The outgoing CIA director, John Brennan, termed Trump's calls to undo the Iran deal "the height of folly" and, with others, has derided Russian interference in the election on Trump's behalf and at the behest of his surrogates.<sup>20</sup> It remains to be seen whether Trump, the big boss man, someone intolerant of plural centers of power, someone who kept Hitler's speeches at his bedside, and someone who admires a wide range of authoritarian rulers abroad, will effectively tame these guardians of the national security state. In only the first weeks of his presidency, leaked surveillance detailing pre-election meetings of his national security adviser, Mike Flynn, with Russia's U.S. ambassador led to Flynn's ouster. Trump's firing of Comey while he was leading a widening FBI probe into the Russian links created an early sense of crisis and siege within the administration. These interneccine battles represent one of the most consequential vectors in the coming period of struggle.<sup>21</sup>

Trump has derided the outer wars, leading many to identify him, mistakenly, as an isolationist and someone who augurs a break with the broad trajectory of post-1945 U.S. foreign policy. Emerging from the global wreckage of World War II, the U.S. imperium undertook a sustained, and unprecedented effort to organize a consensual, rule-bound world order based on

multilateral free trade, democracy, and respect for national sovereignty. Arguably one of the moral and systemic requirements of this liberal-internationalist order was removal of the "archaic" residues of slavery, colonialism, and conquest, and with them the specter of violent revolution. With the United States as its guarantor, anticommunism, inflected by partisan competition between liberal doctrines of containment and coexistence and right-wing visions of rollback and offensive war against communist regimes, provided a grammar and strategy for policing world order. Covert and overt U.S. military interventionism and a series of big "small wars" gave the lie to U.S. postimperial pretensions outside Europe and Japan. But the vision of a long peace and the constitution of a democratic security community in Europe and East Asia achieved a significant measure of success.

When the millennial narratives of benign globalization and Francis Fukuyama's declaration of the "end of history," under the aegis of liberal free trade and unfettered capital mobility, announced the successful extension of this project at a global scale, it was already unraveling. Announcing Trump's victory, his clever consigliere Bannon offered a different story from the one we have typically been told about American global power, foretelling a restoration of native "American capitalism" to its place in the sun. In the eyes of Bannon and Trump, the bill has come due for the global protection scheme that the U.S. has run for the past seventy years. "The globalists gutted the American working class and created a middle class in Asia," Bannon declared. "Like [Andrew] Jackson's populism, we are going to build an entirely new political movement . . . it's going to be as exciting as the 1930s, greater than the Reagan revolution—conservatives, plus populists, in an economic nationalist movement."<sup>22</sup>

Here, the language of economy in Trumpism is also quite definitively a language of racial and national enemies and competitors. It is also a language generously sprinkled with social Darwinism, more reminiscent of late-nineteenth-century paens to Anglo-Saxon supremacy than of the rise of

European fascism. What Trump and Bannon envision and want to hasten, with the cooperation of the emergent far Right in Europe, is a revival of a far more exclusionary capitalist order across Europe and North America, one defined by a civic and religious distinctiveness that they imagine to have been diluted by globalism and the rise of China in particular (a nation with which Bannon once frighteningly predicted war within five years).

It seems likely that there will be new wars. Two of Trump's top appointees are Marine generals who have expressed bellicosity toward Iran. Trump is better understood as a right-wing militarist than as an isolationist.<sup>23</sup> Asserting hemispheric dominance, ensuring the internal subjugation of racial and foreign others, and finishing the long Asia war have together comprised the American far Right's understanding of the proper U.S. orientation to the world since 1950. "Remember Pearl Harbor!" brought them out of isolation and into World War II. "The loss of China" became their cold war rallying cry. They supported General Douglas MacArthur's brinkmanship in Korea (including the threat of a nuclear first strike). Their constant moral and political pressure spooked liberals into Vietnam; the failure there they branded a "stab in the back." On the brink of the Reagan era, they rallied against the loss of the Panama Canal and stoked military and political interventions in Central America. After 9/11 they talked about taking Iraq's oil, but they also said, "Real men go to Tehran." They came to view the most militant Israeli settlers as their kin. As Bannon put it, "You have expansionist Islam and you have expansionist China. Right? They are motivated. They're arrogant. They're on the march. And they think the Judeo-Christian West is on the retreat."<sup>24</sup> The central premises of this global vision are war, predation, and a racial and civilizational divide (one that also runs through the United States). Somewhere in hell, Carl Schmitt and Samuel Huntington are smiling.

The cultivation of U.S. vernacular racism and the explicit rejection of norms that have been hallmarks of Trump's campaign are not incidental.

They signal a conscious understanding of relationships between various dimensions of progressive, regulatory power that need to be overturned: the belief in a shared and vulnerable global ecology, the value of an egalitarian and inclusive social ethic, the need to limit the power and dispensations of capital and private property, and of course the rules restricting the use of military force and police power. Trump, Bannon, and Sessions seem to count on the idea that they have a national constituency, one based on what Mike Davis has called "geriatric white privilege," and that they can expand that constituency by signaling a commitment to a white, Christian, native-born identity politics—forcefully extended, through the familiar ambit of "law and order," in the domain of border control—and the rollback of sexual and reproductive rights. The major weakness of this kind of politics, of course, is that it works assiduously to narrow its own base. Despite its durability in U.S. political life, openly racist and nativist rule is highly unstable; it tends to operate against the terms of hegemonic order and must necessarily prioritize force over consent.<sup>25</sup>

This type of politics has invited a comparison to fascism. Much of the discussion of fascism in the United States centers on making or dismissing faulty Nazi analogies. If we want to develop an account of what Langston Hughes called "our native fascisms," however, we need to think about how the development of extreme right-wing politics in the U.S. has been routed through American ideas about sovereignty, expansion, race, region, religion, entrepreneurship, and individualism, including hostility to bureaucracy, legal universalism, and centralized authority.<sup>26</sup> The construction of racist individualism and settler freedom that distinguished the Jacksonian democracy idealized by Bannon, for instance, encouraged a slackness of centralized government control tethered to a violence exercised at its borders and margins, something that seemed chaotic, unstable, and disordered from the controlling seat of power. Considered in these terms, the Trump administration hardly needs organized paramilitaries to do its bidding, given the nor-

native, historical, and institutional ways in which police powers in the United States operate as delegated and sovereign prerogatives to master and control indigenous and exogenous others.

Facing such an adversary, nothing would be more mistaken than to narrow our sights or reduce our political ambitions. As suggested, there has long been a tendency among U.S. and Western leftists to believe that an emphasis on identity politics within liberalism—that is, sectional attention to "social justice" and to the range of social and individual, public and private forms of discrimination that tacitly support and actively enforce racial, gender, sexual, and able-bodied hierarchies—has reduced concern for economic inequality and thus eroded the necessary basis for broader solidarities on the Left.

This debate was reignited by the contest between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders for the Democratic nomination, when Clinton and many of her supporters charged that personal "sexism" (of the "Bernie Bros") and inadequate attention to "racial justice" (and "intersectionality") were constitutive features of Sanders's program, his broad focus on economic fairness and shared wealth, and his criticisms of Clinton's cosiness with financial elites. Using social justice as a weapon against economic justice was a depressing new low in the Clintons' triangulation politics. It reminded us how attention to social domination and limitation of policy concern to those deemed to be most vulnerable to social harm are often defining features of progressive neoliberalism, which has abandoned a defense of universalist and broadly redistributive economic policies in favor of means-tested allocations, thus acceding to the attrition of the strongest and most politically popular aspects of the welfare state.

Unfortunately, many identified with the weakened U.S. Left take the bait, imagining that the language of the economy can somehow be disembedded from a wider range of unequal social relationships. The rise of Trump, let alone a cursory reading of U.S. history, should caution against an emphasis on an economic populism that is inattentive to its racist and sexist coordination and

packaging. Any flickering hopes that Trump will not govern according to hard-edged racist and sexist presumptions should have been doused by his initial cabinet appointments and his first few months in office.

People are immensely susceptible to racially divisive, even starkly violent proposals that seem to make sense of their suffering. A Left that believes that this tendency can simply be short-circuited by some kind of neutral call to common economic interests makes a major error—as demonstrated by continued assaults on voting rights, promises of relaxed supervision of local police agents by Sessions' Department of Justice, and new temptations to racist trolling and gaslighting in public and online (by legions of "mini-Trumps").<sup>27</sup> A Left that cannot fight on multiple fronts, protecting those who remain most vulnerable to state-sanctioned and extrajudicial violence while also defending principles of economic fairness—including forms of income support, affordable housing, and the right to health care and education—is likely to remain fragmented, isolated, and ineffective.

Languages of race and languages of class intermingle and recombine in the United States and all the old imperial and settler polities. At the level of campaign rhetoric, Obama was actually quite good at pegging the egalitarian recognition of divided class interests to a defense of multicultural democracy. The opposite formula, in which class division is avowed only when its animus can be directed toward vulnerable and appropriable scapegoats and threats, is more common, and in the absence of a countervailing discourse, it is unsurprising that it has regained traction. We should not necessarily mourn the demise of the progressive neoliberalism that characterized the Obama years (and that Clinton promised to continue). It was never more than a holding pattern against a fuller apprehension of the crisis, an effort to buy some time. We were likely to reap the consequence of its failures, even if the crisis has come sooner than many of us expected.

Rather than a new departure, Trump's rise nonetheless may represent the last gasp of boomer conservatives (and boomer liberals) who have stripped

the country down by upwardly redistributing its wealth, shredding its already flimsy webs of social protection, prosecuting unnecessary wars overseas, punishing and jailing the poor at home, and neglecting the ecology that sustains our common life. Despite the rightward electoral shifts in Midwestern states, the white working class did not elect Trump. Those who elected Trump were the legions of older, wealthier, suburban white voters who vote Republican in every election, viewing the GOP as the true guardians of their economic self-interest and accumulated insider advantages. Trump also attracted evangelical and right-to-life voters willing to look past his personal immorality. The younger and substantially poorer voters whom Obama galvanized in 2008 largely stayed home. Like the legacy of NAFTA in the Midwest, the memory of Bill and Hillary Clinton's support of welfare reform and mass incarceration likely helped to hold down the black vote as well. Obama galvanized his coalition by promising new directions: a fairer economy; a less punitive, more racially just society; and a less bellicose relationship to the world. Because of his own limitations and entrenched opposition from political forces he could neither tame nor defeat, he could not deliver on these promises. But they are still things that the majority of people want.

Only a committed and organized political opposition, however, will be able to realize this proposition. To create such an opposition in the coming period, it will be necessary to strengthen natural bases of support in liberal civic institutions, including progressive churches; to strengthen and scale up local labor and community networks to defend increasingly vulnerable populations; and to develop national and popular political organizations on the Left, both within and outside the Democratic Party. Opponents of the administration should not pay much attention to episodic efforts of Democrats to find common ground with Trump on particular issues (even if only on tactical grounds, to exploit internal contradictions within the ruling party). The broad focus should be how we can derail the project of Trump and the GOP and where we want to go. Developing coherent and persuasive

answers that can orient a more just and egalitarian approach to politics will require more strongly partisan vision, organization, and planning than we have seen on the political Left in recent decades. No one can be sanguine about the soundness of the Democratic Party as a vehicle for advancing these purposes. But in light of Bernie Sanders' success across the plurality of voting blocs and particularly among younger voters, it still seems like the necessary vehicle for electoral politics. Developing stronger linkages to similar political movements at the international scale will also be crucial. There is every reason to believe that the wreckage from Trump's rule is going to be terrible, and we had better build something that can help us outlast it and move forward.

Overcoming old divisions and distrust on the Left that arise from different emphases on economic and social justice, and, more specifically, on class as opposed to race and gender politics, requires determined effort. One way to bridge these divides would be to cultivate a more politically generous understanding of how racist commitment is activated. As I have argued, racism and racial animus are not fixed characteristics of an already defined group of people but a situational dimension of our common political life that is repeatedly mobilized. So-called white people and white workers in particular can be won over to a nonracist politics centered on economic justice; but it is necessary to actively build the constituency for that politics. In this effort the composite imaginary known as the "white working class" is likely to fail us analytically and politically every single time it is used, for it tacitly presumes that individual investment in whiteness conditions class solidarity, which is precisely the problem to be overcome.

More Americans now identify as working class than at perhaps any time since the 1930s and 1940s. This represents an enormous potential constituency for an inclusive, antiracist politics and for radical defense of our increasingly fragile commons. The term *white working class* refines the link between whiteness and the material interests of working and unemployed

people. It makes less and less sense in the context of the most hopeful, vibrant movements of today: the multiracial fight for the \$15 hourly minimum wage; the organization of legions of home workers and domestic caregivers; the least visible and most diverse sectors of the working class (mostly women); the battles to prevent the poisoning of vital resources at Standing Rock, across Indian lands, and in the national commons, where ancient struggles for decolonization continue; the demands to be protected from arbitrary force and premature death at the hands of police; and the creation of sanctuary for those facing summary deportation and destruction of their kinship and neighborhood ties.

We clearly face an uncertain period in which those most responsible for a dire array of contemporary social, political, economic, and ecological predicaments will hold big levers of power, at least in the short term. But they are also the ones who will be tasked with solving intractable problems. Their inevitable failures will be our opportunity; we cannot afford to let another serious crisis go to waste.