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## Trump's triumph: the failure of Clinton's progressive politics and the demise of liberal world order

Adrian Pabst

Trump's election represents primarily the failure of Clinton's brand of progressive politics. Her courting of Wall St, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood celebrities alienated the forgotten men and women (the one memorable phrase in Trump's victory speech) of America's industrial working class. Whereas Obama carried places such as Wyoming River Valley in northeastern Pennsylvania and Youngstown in Ohio, Clinton's neglect of the Democrats' working-class base came back to haunt her as the industrial ghost-towns across Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa went with Trump. It was not simply white men but also a majority of white women – those without college degrees – as well as about 30 per cent of Latinos and around 8 per cent of African-American voters who together with the Republican core support ensured Trump's triumph.

The reservoir of resentment that the Trump movement has tapped into is closely correlated with the contempt in which the leadership of the Democratic Party holds working-class people. In the former heartlands along the Rust Belt and in the south, Clinton and her clique on the Democratic National Committee are viewed as arrogant, snobbish, uncaring about 'ordinary people' and mostly serving the interests of their friends at Google and Goldman. There was a palpable sense that the Clinton campaign did not care about the party's traditional base it took for granted. Her ideology betrayed the very people it purported to represent. Clinton's liberalism of the 'professional class' is empty, and this void is now occupied by Trump's insurgency.

The seeds were sown in the late 1960s when the Democrats first embraced a progressive politics defined essentially by social liberalism and they abandoned the idea of creating an industrial democracy by fighting cartel capitalism. Fast forward to the early 1990s when Bill Clinton's 'new center' aligned the party with liberal market globalization in which transnational ties progressively replace national bonds. Robert Reich, Clinton's Secretary of Labor, described this new model of political economy in the following terms: "There will be no national products or technologies, no national corporations, no national industries. There will no longer be national economies. At least as we have come to understand that concept".<sup>1</sup> Thus

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<sup>1</sup> Robert B. Reich, *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21<sup>st</sup>-century Capitalism* (New York: Vintage 1992), p. 3 (original italics).

the Clintons' version of progressive politics rests on the idea of a capitalist culture that privileges mobility and permanent change over national sovereignty and more settled ways of life. From this perspective, patriotism, tradition, and people's sense of belonging are subordinated to cosmopolitanism, modernization, and abstraction from embeddedness. To dismiss even half of Trump supporters as 'a basket of deplorables' speaks volumes about the arrogance of leading Democrats and their disdain for working families. Plenty of condescension and little empathy fuel the flames of rage that are engulfing America.

Benefitting from the post-Cold War peace dividend, Bill Clinton not only balanced the federal budget but also adopted a new economic model based on job-exporting trade deals and the deregulation of Wall Street. When the 2008 financial crash hit, both the working and the middle classes struggled to make ends meet as their jobs were threatened and communities drowned in debt, but the Democrat establishment failed to understand their pain. Obama's stimulus package helped to save the car industry but equally it bailed out the banks without demanding structural reform, leaving in place a system dominated by both big business and big government. Another example of this complicit collusion is Obamacare, which on the one hand has extended health care coverage to many millions of previously uninsured people, yet on the other hand represents a government subsidy of vast health care corporations. A mutualized model with many more health care cooperatives linked to community hospitals and a more personal care system is the radical alternative to a nationalized or privatized model (or the worst of both worlds) that was never seriously considered. None of this justifies Trump's pledge to repeal parts of Obamacare, but it highlights yet another missed opportunity to challenge America's oligarchy.

Beyond the failure to build an economic settlement that works for its traditional working-class base (not just the old elites on Wall St and the new classes in Silicon Valley), the Democrats also lost popular trust because they engaged in identity politics. Starting in the late 1960s, the party began to embrace a utopian ideology of diversity that in reality adopted the values of students, middle-class feminists, ethnic minorities, as well as east and west coast college-educated elites.<sup>2</sup> For all the important advancement in terms of equality and non-discrimination, this liberal progressivism alienated more socially conservative voters who are predominantly white but also include many African-American and Latino communities (some of whom voted for Trump). Thus the Clinton and Obama presidencies tore down trade

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Stricherz, *Why the Democrats are Blue: How Secular Liberals Hijacked the People's Party* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007).

barriers and borders, building a global model of mobility that overwhelmingly enriched elites – especially a new ‘professional class’ who are driven in equal measure by ‘enlightened’ self-interest and a sanctimonious pretense of moral superiority.<sup>3</sup> But in the meantime the leading progressives in the Democratic Party ignored and even despised those who neither supported this politics nor benefitted from its effects – those for whom free trade, open borders, and cosmopolitan multiculturalism meant greater economic hardship and unnerving cultural compromises.

Compared with the emphasis on self-organization and mutual solidarity in the case of the civil rights movement, the Democrats’ embrace of diversity and emancipation has promoted an identity politics that is no less divisive than Trump’s atavistic nativism because it is a ‘coalition of the fringes’ that excludes the white working-class and sections of the middle class who resent identity politics for everyone else but them. Neither the Democrats nor the Republicans have a positive conception of place and belonging around which new coalitions can emerge that overcome the old identity politics of the ‘culture wars.’

Trump’s victory is only in part the result of a ‘white-lash’ against the establishment obsession with certain minority rights and diversity at the expense of the majority. The other elements is the Latino, African-American, and even female vote that cannot be explained away by media bias or lack of education. What these different groups are most of all bitter about is liberal indifference or even hostility to a sense of belonging and the enduring importance of family, community, and locality. Trump drew support not simply from moral cave-dwellers (the xenophobes, racists and sexists who are much emboldened by his election) but much more significantly from working- and middle-class people who feel forgotten and resent their exclusion from Washington politics.

What this reveals is not merely the deep divisions between the Democrats and their former supporters but the growing gulf between the people and the U.S. establishment, which Trump has used to his double advantage – first smashing the Republican Party leadership before winning an election that was Clinton’s to lose. Yet for all his posturing, Trump is a silver-spoon demagogue who rails against the ‘rigged system’ he has profited from and the ‘out-of-touch elite’ of which he is a member.<sup>4</sup> A self-made Manhattan billionaire with alleged links to

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of this class – consisting of the Silicon Valley-based ‘Tech oligarchy’ of hedge-fund investors, start-up business owners and technological experts, as well as ‘Clerisy’ (i.e. liberal elites in academia, media and think-tanks), see Joel Kotkin, *The New Class Conflict* (New York: Telos Publishing Press, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> See the trilogy by Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (Boston: Holt McDougal, 2005); *Pity the Billionaire: The Hard-Times Swindle and the Unlikely*

organized crime, Trump is neither a Middle American nor a Republican nor a classical conservative. Rather, his political outlook seems to combine nationalist-libertarian ideas with a preference for populist-authoritarian leadership at home and abroad. The red thread that runs through his rhetoric over the past thirty years is an anti-liberal assault on the implicit bipartisan consensus at the heart of U.S. politics: free trade, immigration and a liberal world order underwritten by America's economic and military might, as I have argued in these pages.<sup>5</sup>

None of this is particularly new in U.S. politics. In 1992 Pat Buchanan ran for the Republican nomination promising a mix of mercantilism and greater geopolitical restraint. Half a century earlier, Senator Robert Taft who failed to become the Republican nominee in 1940, 1948 and 1952 advocated isolationism before World War Two and thereafter opposed President Truman's policy to expand trade. His anti-communism did not stop him from opposing containment and the creation NATO because it would over-commit America. Trump's penchant for Putin and other strongmen is also, as Thomas Wright has argued, "reminiscent of Charles Lindbergh, once an American hero, who led the isolationist America First movement. In some areas, Trump's views go back even further, to 19<sup>th</sup>-century high-tariff protectionism and every-country-for-itself mercantilism."<sup>6</sup>

What drives Trump is his anger about the bad deal the country supposedly gets from the liberal international order upheld by U.S. hegemony since 1945 and especially after 1989. Trump is opposed to the military alliances that are subsidized by American taxpayers, the trade arrangements that export jobs and import immigrants, as well as the promotion of liberal democracy that antagonizes fellow 'great powers' like Russia while harming America's national self-interest. Anti-liberalism on economic, social, and geopolitical issues seems to be the common ground with Vladimir Putin. Both believe that their countries have not benefitted from the liberal model of globalization, which is why Trump wants to roll back free trade and immigration while Putin is trying to opt out in favor of parallel structures – starting with greater protection from global forces for the national economies of neighboring countries that join the Eurasian Economic Union. The leaders of Russia and America are also united in rejecting the 'open-border progressivism' of liberal governments across the West and want to put national greatness ahead of minority demands. And for different reasons, both favor neo-

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Comeback of the Right (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012); Listen, Liberal: or, what ever happened to the party of the people? (London: Scribe, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Adrian Pabst, 'Brexit, post-liberalism, and the politics of paradox,' *Telos* 176 (Fall 2016): 189-201.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Wright, 'Trump's 19<sup>th</sup>-century Foreign Policy,' *Politico Magazine* 20 January 2016, at <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/donald-trump-foreign-policy-213546?paginate=false>

isolationism for the U.S.A. because they see a weariness from the imperative of ‘global leadership’ – Trump at home and Putin across the world (except among America’s Western allies who fear a resurgent Russia).

By contrast, Trump who instinctively trusts nobody views Putin as a competitor, not an enemy or adversary. The new president is confident enough in his own strength and decisiveness and relies on an ability to speak with his counterpart ‘man to man.’ In business-like fashion, Trump sees competition as ‘win-win’ so long as both sides are prepared to do a deal and cut their losses when an escalating conflict of interest threatens to spin out of control. The contours of such a deal are clear: in exchange for help on Islamic State, North Korea and Iran, Trump might recognize Russia’s pre-eminent status in a post-Assad Syria and grant her a greater role in global affairs. (But how to achieve this while trying to distance himself from Iran when Tehran and Moscow are allies and key pillars in the resistance against the Sunni fundamentalism that threatens much of the Middle East?) And in exchange for no further Russian military adventure in Eastern Europe where a refusal to retaliate would make Trump look weak (something he will not countenance), he might even accept the annexation of Crimea and a sphere of influence that includes Ukraine. What would be off the table is a policy of containment and demonization, alongside global trade arrangements excluding Russia, the continuation of economic sanctions, further NATO expansion, provocation on the Russian border, and the promotion of democracy across the entire post-Soviet space by way of US-orchestrated regime change.

Far from being another ‘reset’ in relations with Russia (which under Obama failed due to a lack of strategic vision based on shared interests), Trump seems to propose a fundamental rapprochement.<sup>7</sup> While many politicians and pundits will dismiss it as an alliance of reactionaries (à la Lindbergh and Hitler) or a new Populist International that also includes Britain’s UKIP and France’s Martine Le Pen, the aim is seemingly to get America’s allies in Asia and Europe to pay their fair share for the U.S. security umbrella and to tone down the level of vitriol in order to avert an escalation with Moscow that might end in war.

For all his bluster and apparent incompetence, Trump may be a ruthless strategist with diabolic cunning and a wily plot that could yet outflank Russia’s KGB-dominated leadership: keeping the Kremlin guessing in a geopolitical chess contest in which a simpleton from

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<sup>7</sup> Here I am indebted to Russell Berman for comments on an earlier draft.

Queens beats the ‘supreme godfather’ at his own game of trying to end the U.S.-led international order while oozing strength and ‘making America great again.’

The paradox is that the Republicans control both Congress and the White House at a time when they are more deeply split than since the time of Lindbergh. Trump’s insurgency has overthrown the hegemony of both Republican realists and the neocons, but the party establishment that is so profoundly steeped in American supremacy and a U.S.-dominated international order may yet strike back and try to torpedo Trump’s renewal of old mercantilist, protectionist and isolationist tendencies, which have been dormant for long. Not to mention the entire American foreign, security and defence policy establishment, the federal bureaucracy and the deep state that will try to capture Trump or at least neutralize any adventurism in the global arena of agon.

So although we will not know for some time what Trump might do as President, his victory will likely mark the demise of the post-1945 liberal order that has been in retreat since 9/11 and the 2008 financial crash. What might replace it and what happens next is anyone’s guess. Will it be more global anarchy and a slide into direct confrontation between the U.S.A. and China? Or else some new order based on non-liberal institutions and rules, perhaps akin to a nineteenth-century type ‘great power’ concert in a new guise with an implicit recognition of spheres of influence? Either way, the tectonic plates have already shifted and the unfolding earthquake is only just beginning to engulf the West and the rest.