

Trump, Clinton and the Crisis in US Society

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Like many, I can't stop overdosing on the runaway train, in slow motion, that is this presidential election. That's because, this time around, the train is on the much larger track of American Hegemony, with an arsonist inside threatening to set all of it aflame. I'm reminded of the essay written by Immanuel Wallerstein shortly after 9/11, "The Eagle Has Crash Landed."

This moment speaks to the profound social decay that comes with the decline of Empire. The insanity of this election, with its surreal soap-opera quality, is a reflection of this cultural downward spiral as much as it is a sign of a deep internal political crisis within the country's ruling class, made and paid for by the elites of both parties, whose policies have caused untold suffering on people of all races, domestically and around the world, for decades. Amidst the crisis, an unprecedented number of people here and around the world are tuned-in to find out which combination of social forces will prevail and influence the direction of the country.

The second presidential debate asks if Trump, the Houdini of political scandal, will prevail. Trump is master of both unrepentant fabrication and unrepentant truth-telling, however self-serving. He is especially skilled at exploiting the sense that the system is rigged, a pervasive feeling in the country. To that end, Trump was effective during the second presidential debate on misogyny, taxes, Bernie, and Syria. And herein lies the danger of "The Donald" to the ruling class. He is a wild card feeding the country's discontent and anti-establishment anger.

Here is a paraphrase summary of positions Trump took during the debate that featured sparks of genuine brilliance.

I engaged in low-down sexist banter, yes. But your husband, Bill, is the Misogynist in Chief. I was caught shooting my mouth, but it was Bill who was caught doing all kinds of crazy misogynist shit, in the oval office no less.

(Fact check: Trump, like many Democrats and Republicans are all guilty of the crime of sexual assault – isn't this the subject of scandal in the US every six months?)

Yes, correct, I took advantage of tax laws that favor the rich. But so have all your donors and buddies who, by the way, have paid you to implement tax breaks for the rich.

(Fact check # 2. The rich pay something like 6.6% in taxes as opposed to the 25% that the rest of us pay.)

You started the nasty racism against Obama by circulating photos of Obama in Muslim garments. And despite that, Obama beat you fair and square in the election. But in this last go around, you stole the presidential nomination in your party from Bernie. Between Super Delegates and Debbie Wasserman Shultz' schemes against Sanders, Bernie didn't stand a chance. And then Bernie decided to cut a deal with the Devil. Sad.

(Correct.)

Who the f\*&ck are the Syrian rebels? Hillary doesn't know who they are. And the fact is that when you arm rebels, the rebels come back and bite you in the ass. ISIS is a product of US intervention in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East.

(The Nixon Doctrine, CIA's 1979 intervention in Afghanistan and Al-Qaeda, anyone? Isis emerged from an Al-Qaeda group in Iraq, after the US assault and occupation there, and even once received funding as a "rebel group" from the US for its position against Assad's regime in Syria. Clinton has played a risky and unpredictable game that is the result of US wars and brinkmanship by both Bush and Obama/Clinton foreign policy.)

Your ass should be prosecuted and put in jail. And if I get to the White House, I'll make sure it happens.

(Correct. She should be. For the emails, for the Crime Bill, for conflicts of interest in the handling of the Haitian relief funds while she was Secretary of State and working with the Clinton Foundation, among others. But so should you, buddy, for tax evasion, sexual assault, and your role in creating the racist frenzy in New York that led to the wrongful conviction of the Central Park 5, among others).

Trump has grown his base by dramatizing, at every turn, his rejection of and contempt for the politics of respectability, a cornerstone of American politics, on which both parties depend to prop up their capitalist charade. And as we have seen, Hillary – the master of respectability herself – is rattled by Trump's bombast and is unfit to challenge his dangerous, proto-fascist politics that now offend her, even though they have been fed over the last thirty years by the racist rhetoric and policies of her party.

The presidential debates have illustrated what pundits and polls suggested a number of months ago: that in a race against Trump, a Democratic victory in November would have been nearly guaranteed with Bernie Sanders, not with Hillary Clinton. She is a dry-ass, saltless, saltine cracker who absorbs, as her own, whatever argument is put before her. I'm thinking of the SNL sketch in which Hillary morphed into Bernie. In this latest presidential debate, even on the Aleppo question she tailed Trump, and was incapable of saying that in terms of soft power, it might not be a good thing for US Empire to take the sidelines in an epic humanitarian crisis that the US itself created.

That said, Hillary will not need the Left to stop the runaway Trump train in November. With a little help from the Washington Post and the ruling class of both parties that is scared of the Frankenstein it has unleashed, Trump himself has laid the path for his defeat. Still, the scale of Trumps' popularity, in spite of his impending defeat, is cause for great concern. But so is the neoliberal agenda that Hillary Clinton has in store for us. That's all to say that this moment is one that calls for left analysis and action. But after a Democratic victory, historically the country's weak Left has faced further weakening and demobilization.

Of concern is Trump's continued, though tarnished popularity. His success is a reflection of the broadening of right-wing forces, much like the simultaneous Bernie phenomenon was a reflection of a broader leftward shift in consciousness. The latter was unleashed and made visible first with Occupy and then with the protests against police brutality that began with the killing of Trayvon Martin, the execution of Troy Davis before that, and the police killing of Mike Brown in Ferguson. All happened immediately after uprisings by young people abroad in places like Iran, Tunisia, Egypt and all over Latin America.

For his part, Trump is riding a right wing current that has been gathering steam, and groping for organizational form, for at least two decades — although the historical roots of this process are found earlier in the 1960s and 1970s with the rise of the new right and the rabid repression, defeat and organizational shortcomings of the sixties Left. Most recently, however, the “basket of deplorables” to which Trump is speaking have been organizing openly since the 1990s. I'm thinking of the anti-immigrant border militia — the Minute Men — of that decade. The Minute Men were invited to speak on college campuses across the country during that decade, among them Columbia University, where student protesters shut-down their event in a fierce, militant show-down. Similar extreme, right-wing forces have also been organizing among prison guards and the police, probably with more confidence since the 9/11 attacks that breathed new life into all of these forces. Most recently, we saw a broader array of these forces reacting to and cohering against the election of Barack Obama, with the emergence of the Tea Party in 2009 just a year after his election in 2008. The Trump candidacy is clearly the most organized expression of this long-term process.

The consequences of Trump's proto-fascist campaign for his targets — black people, immigrants from Latin America, and Muslims — is serious. Not to mention, the world. Recall the article in the New Yorker, which featured the ghost writer of Trump's bestseller, *The Art of Deal*, who articulated what we've known and seen on display over the last year: that Trump is a monstrous narcissist and pathological liar with the attention span of a fly who should be kept away from any sources of real political power.

What is also dangerous, however, is that Hillary is now set to shore-up US hegemony at home and abroad with renewed vigor and the backing of both parties. Unlike Trump, she is a very desirable manager of the state in crisis, much like Obama in the aftermath of the Iraq debacle. It is important to reiterate what has been said before: that the racist ideology that today fuels and animates Trump's campaign was institutionalized and amplified by the crime, anti-welfare, anti-immigrant, and anti-terrorism legislation advanced by the Clintons in the 1990s, not to mention NAFTA, the domestic corporate class war they advanced, and the reactionary post 9/11 wars and legislation they vigorously supported, which also enlarged the far right.

Trump mentioned, during the second presidential debate that 45% of African Americans in urban centers are living in poverty in an environment that is not producing jobs and where schools are an abomination. Correct. Vast percentages of people of color have been living in depression-like conditions in this country, since its inception. The difference today, however, is that these conditions have ripened in working class white communities. But the racist ideology peddled by the Clintons and the Bushes alike has kept poor, working and middle class white people confused about the real source of their discontent. And now, the advent of Clinton's presidency with her business as usual policies is set to convince many white Americans that Trump's propaganda was legitimate and that the darker-hued electorate (that will certainly determine the outcome of these elections) cheated them out of the project of making America great again.

Given this reality, it seems to me that the Left and people of conscience have to seriously consider building a movement that sees white workers as an important target audience. Bernie Sanders, a gruff old white man, with plain speech and a scruffy look, certainly could have been a spoke in this wheel. But Bernie is a keen politician — not an activist or revolutionary. He was, naturally, committed to protecting his political standing within the Democratic Party. This project must simultaneously prioritize, support and strengthen the gathering pace of movements against police violence and racism, with their attention to gender violence and normativity. It's unclear what this work would look like, but the challenge is an urgent one.

Part of the challenge is that our country is so spatially segregated along racial lines, a product of the conservative reaction to the labor struggles of the 1930s that brought us white suburbanization. Working people of color and white workers live in different worlds, literally; although the participation of many young white people in anti-police violence protests has been quite evident. All of this raises the usual question about the work place as potential site of struggle, a point of departure for discussions on what the workplace looks like these days in American society and the racial breakdown of key industries.

These 2016 elections are ripe with all the predations of capitalism's runaway train on the disabled, the sick, the environment, the working class, prisoners, women, African Americans, Latinos, other people of color, weaker nations, and our very humanity.

**Johanna Fernández** is assistant professor of 20<sup>th</sup> Century US history at Baruch College of the City University of New York. She is a leading member of the Campaign to Bring Mumia Home and the broader movement to free Mumia.

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