

#AgainstTrump: Notes From Year One



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Jeffrey C. Isaac



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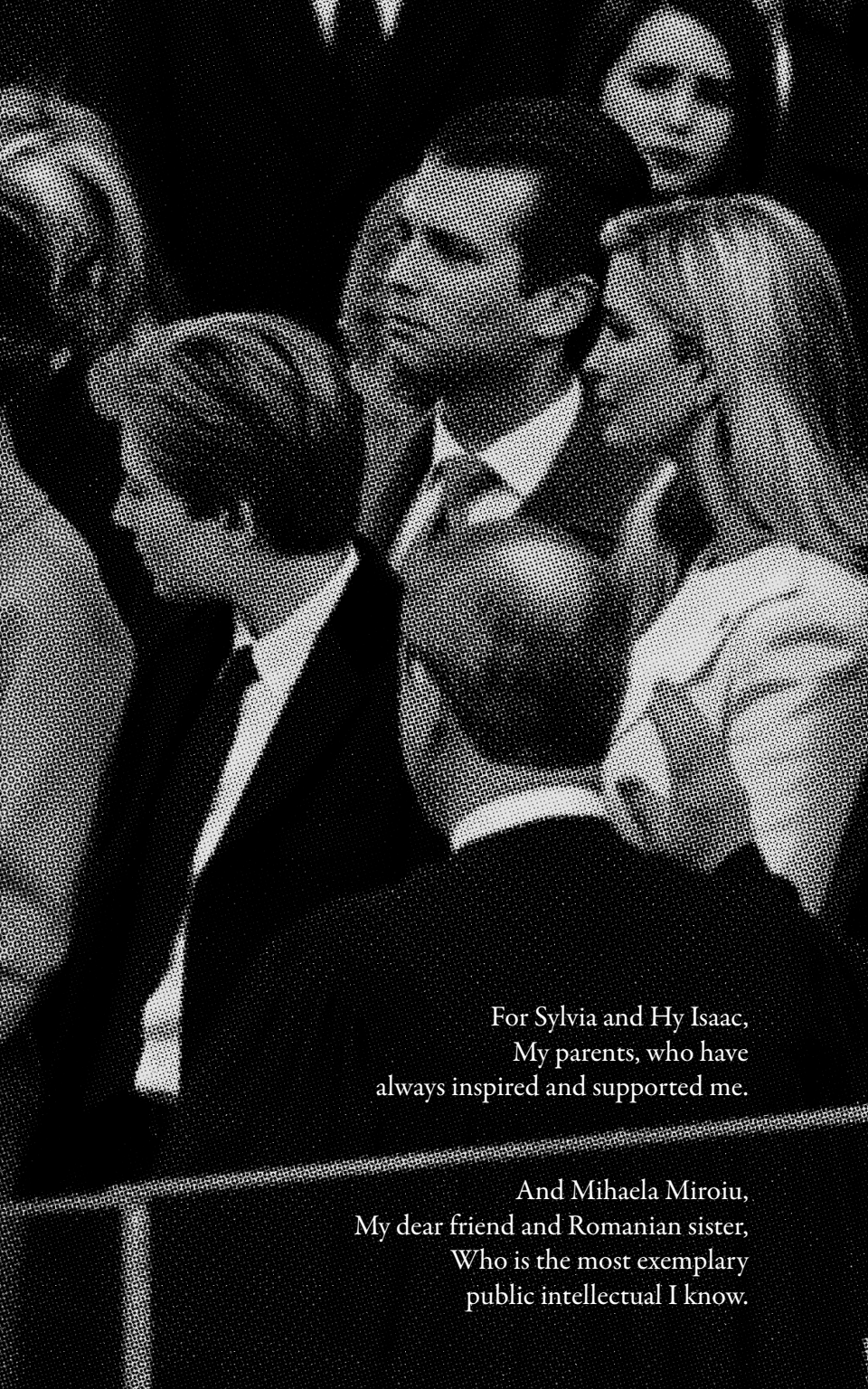
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For Sylvia and Hy Isaac,
My parents, who have
always inspired and supported me.

And Mihaela Miroiu,
My dear friend and Romanian sister,
Who is the most exemplary
public intellectual I know.

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Jeffrey C. Goldfarb

Foreword

Public Seminar, *Public Seminar Books*, and this book, Jeffrey C. Isaac's *#AgainstTrump*, are all significant innovations in publishing. Yet they also flow out of a deep intellectual-political tradition of The New School for Social Research, and its engagement with the problems of the times and enduring problems of the human condition: the struggles for cultural freedom and democracy against tyranny. While I am proud of the innovations we are making, I am thrilled that they are serving a critical tradition that is especially dear to me, and especially important now.

The New School was founded in 1919 in response to the threats to academic freedom in the United States during World War I and its aftermath. In 1933, its tradition was strengthened and broadened as the relatively small and underendowed academic enterprise played a big role in rescuing intellectual refugees fleeing Nazi Europe. In the 1980s, in this tradition, a number of my New School colleagues and I, with the active participation of then-president of The New School Jonathan Fanton, engaged with and supported the democratic oppositions in Central Europe in the fight for liberal and democratic values in that part of the world. They were our colleagues. We worked on joint intellectual projects, including a clandestine democracy seminar, held in Budapest, Warsaw and New York, and then after 1989 conducted openly all around the old Soviet bloc. *Public Seminar's* founding was informed by these century-long engagements, applying them to the problems and possibilities of twenty-first century public life.

Now, the sad irony: the work of opposing the enemies of democracy and intellectual openness is hitting very close to home, as the imperfect but invaluable norms and practices of American liberal democracy are under frontal attack, not by a foreign dictator, but by the president of United States and his

administration. Understanding, criticizing, and opposing this has become one of *Public Seminar's* major themes, and Jeffrey C. Isaac has played a key role.

He first joined *Public Seminar* as an occasional contributor, writing telling essays on the presidential primaries. The occasions multiplied, and then he and I organized special features: the Election Forum and then the Post Election Forum, and he became a Senior Editor. *#AgainstTrump* is an outgrowth of these activities.

It's an illuminating book. The chapters are organized chronologically as they appeared (primarily) on *Public Seminar*. They reveal critical thought in action. They are "exercises in political thinking," as Hannah Arendt described her own political essays. And while they present a running commentary on the 2016 elections and the first year of Donald Trump's presidency, they also provide a thick description of the political and cultural challenges of our times, concerning key issues and possibilities.

There is a crisis in the political, cultural, and economic order, about which Isaac has been writing for decades, and the threat of Trumpism is as much a manifestation of this crisis as it is the consequence of the person, Donald Trump. The new authoritarianism is personified in Trump, along with his global cousin, Vladimir Putin, and their many illiberal, as well as anti-liberal colleagues: Viktor Orbán, Marine Le Pen, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Jarosław Kaczyński, Rodrigo Duterte and Miloš Zeman, et al. Yet, these authoritarians and their regimes, with the authoritarianism variously realized, are not just a consequence of a set of personalities.

Isaac, as a self-described left liberal, is fully cognizant of and concerned about social injustice and inequality and the deep challenges of globalization. So many have been left behind. So many fear the foreign and the foreigner. So many are confused, and are convinced by easy solutions to complex problems. Isaac offers sober analysis. As a leftist, he is aware of the limitations of liberalism ("neo-liberalism" so called), but as a liberal, the limitations of leftism are clear. He writes about this with understanding, empathy, and insight, and observes interesting

interactions.

He presents telling observations and judgments, as he responds to current events and links them to the history of political inquiry in each essay. Democracies die and live. He notes that faced with the alarming, we should sound the alarm without being alarmist. Words matter, and the way Trump uses them is not only hurtful, racist, sexist, and much more, but also could destroy the possibility of democratic life and could yield a nuclear war. The mad authoritarian is supported by more conventional ones, and facilitated by those who don't take these folks seriously. There are liberal, leftist, and conservative reasons to oppose Trump. Conservative critics are opponents, not enemies. Liberals and leftists should make common cause. There is a difference between a political opponent and an enemy. Both the form and the content of Trump's tweets are dictatorial. There is something fundamentally disturbing about Trump's family life, about his relationship with his wives, to be sure, but also in the relationships between the father and the mothers and their children. In this the personal is political in a bizarre way. As we look for reasons for the Trump victory we should proceed modestly. Talking to adversaries is preferable to shouting them down.

In sum, he identifies an authoritarian threat, and counsels that those who recognize it should unite in opposition and resist, as they recognize that their differences should be resolved democratically.

As I read these chapters and as we have worked with each other these past few years, Isaac and I have forged a friendship. We had known each other for decades, though only as corresponding colleagues, first through letters and later through email and Facebook, including video chats. We feel close to each other, but haven't actually met, as of this writing. We will meet for the first time the day of publication and at the book launch of

JEFFREY C. GOLDFARB: FOREWORD

#AgainstTrump, which will include a dialogue between Adam Michnik and Isaac about the book, followed by a reception. There is poetry in this that I think provides insight into the book project and the contributions it makes.

As I recall, Isaac wrote me in the early 1990s about my book *Beyond Glasnost: The Post-Totalitarian Mind*. The book's title is misleading, the result of a bad deal I made with The University of Chicago Press. Finished at the time of Glasnost, what proved to be the last years of the Soviet Union, and before the fall of the Berlin Wall, I agreed to put the word glasnost in the title, and the press in turn agreed to market it as a trade book. There is only a closing reflection on glasnost, in which I maintain the real alternative is not in this new official ideology, but beyond such ideology. The book, in fact, is an analysis of the radical social, cultural, and political alternatives to ideological communism and anti-communism emerging from Central Europe. It is in this sense an analysis of the mind after totalitarianism. It is a reflection on practical experiences of Solidarność and the actions that preceded Solidarność in Poland, and similar practical experiences among Poland's neighbors. It also presents a critical review of the writing of a number of key authors whose work informed these experiences and was informed by these experiences, including Václav Havel and Milan Kundera of Czechoslovakia, György Konrád of Hungary, and Stanisław Barańczak and Adam Michnik of Poland, among others. Our responses to these thinkers brought Jeff and I together.

My memory is fuzzy. I long ago lost the copy of the letter Isaac wrote, but I seem also to remember that he followed up with a phone call, hoping to make contact with Michnik, who I believe he wanted to invite to Indiana University. This is important here and now because I realize what I had labeled the post-totalitarian mind back then, informs Isaac's, and also my, thinking about the

current crisis now.

Isaac never believes that there is a singular simple answer to complex problems. He knows about the perilous relationship between truth and politics. He seeks to understand and make common cause with people who think differently than he, and to understand his opponents as fully as possible. He is not naïve and doesn't know that everything will work out in the end, but he looks for hopeful openings and then is willing to act. He writes clearly and directly, seeking to communicate, not to assert authority.

And beyond these positive qualities, there is the awareness of darkness. We both have dear friends in East Central Europe, he in Romania, I in Poland, and we have learned a lot from them about the horrors of the twentieth century and resistance to these horrors. We see foreboding echoes of those horrors now. As left liberals, we, with sorrow, note that everything that has been accomplished in the past decades is under attack. As American observers, we see that the struggle to constitute decent normal democratic society in East and Central Europe seems to be failing, as we observe the same problems closer to home.

Enervating despair is a temptation, but Isaac looks for guidance in a political intellectual tradition that animates the sensibility that informs the chapters of *Against Trump*. We turn to the same people for guidance.

Isaac here: "One place to look would be to Tony Judt's short book *The Burdens of Responsibility*, which brilliantly elucidates three exemplary modalities of twentieth-century anti-totalitarian resistance relevant to our present: Leon Blum's party-political opposition to fascism, Albert Camus's 'rebellious politics' of resistance (and Resistance), and Raymond Aron's 'engaged spectatorship.' Each of those figures sounded an alarm without being alarmist. Each enacted a kind of conscientious resistance to

authoritarianism that was not moralizing and that was linked to a sense of real political agency and possibility. A second place to look would be to those who in fact organized successful resistance to communism in Eastern Europe only a few decades ago: not Palach, but Václav Havel, Adam Michnik, Miklós Haraszti, György Konrád, János Kis, and Jacek Kuroń. Some of these people are now gone. Many of them live and continue to oppose authoritarianism.”

Thus, the poetry of the fact that the first public discussion about *#AgainstTrump* will be between Isaac and Michnik. I am imagining a hopeful, though soberly considered, link between the past and the future.

Such thought, such sensibility, informs these chapters.

Public Seminar is dedicated to promoting engaged and relevant thinking of this kind, building upon the great traditions of The New School. We are excited to be launching our new book imprint in collaboration with OR Books. And we hope that more and more colleagues will join us, as readers, as writers, and as contributors to a global republic of letters dedicated to the promotion of liberal values in an illiberal time.

Preface

This is an unusual book for an unusual time.

The book is a collection of essays, almost all originally published at *Public Seminar* in the period between early 2016 and early 2018.

Its title is intended to be catchy, but also to articulate, starkly, two sentiments that have become ever more obvious to me as the events of the past two years have unfolded: that the political rise of Donald Trump represents a profound danger to liberal democracy and to elemental human decency, and that this danger must be resisted. Of course resistance is not enough. Resistance is never enough. Of course there is no Silver Linings Playbook of resistance. There are many ways of resisting, just as there are many ways of experiencing the danger that resistance seeks to avert. But right now and into the foreseeable future, Trump occupies the White House and has at his disposal all of the powers associated with being the chief executive of the United States. That his ascendancy was made possible by enabling conditions is important. But right now, what is most important is that he has ascended, that he has mobilized some of the most toxic and dangerous forces in our politics, and that we will long reckon with the consequences of his power. So, while “Against Trump” is not the only thing worth saying right now, it is an essential thing, and it is both an ethical and political priority to say it repeatedly, in a variety of venues, as events unfold, and also to explain it. In a few years such statements might be of mere historical interest. I hope for this. I also want to increase the likelihood that this will be the case. And so going about business as usual, or simply assimilating the dangers before us to well-established academic or intellectual scripts, is not an option for me.

This book represents my ongoing effort to respond in words. To write or to speak is to act. It is not the only way to act. I have also

written checks to support independent media that are ever more important at the same time that they are rendered vulnerable to economic precarity. I have given money to promising Democratic candidates, and have in other ways offered my support to such candidates. I have helped to organize some events, and have participated in some events, sometimes speaking, sometimes playing benefits with my band. But for many of us words are an especially powerful tool. And so we speak, and write, and argue. I have no illusions about the power of my words. At the same time, as I have reached the age of 60 and have achieved some measure of professional success, I have come to learn that my words do have some traction. Many welcome them. Some no doubt dislike and perhaps even despise them. Regardless, they are mine, and they are central to my way of being in the world. And so I speak, and write, and listen, and argue, and do what I can.

We live in the digital age. And the essays collected here were all stimulated by a wide range of ongoing and contentious conversations to which I have been a party, on Facebook and email and numerous media—*Dissent*, the *Washington Post*, the *Nation*—that are either digitally based or have digital platforms. In recent years two venues have loomed especially large. One is *Perspectives on Politics: A Political Science Public Sphere*, a flagship journal of the American Political Science Association. I served as editor-in-chief of *Perspectives* for eight amazing years. During this time, I had the privilege of working with hundreds of article authors, and of curating and editing thousands of book reviews, and I learned so much from so many people. I also had the privilege of working with an amazing staff, whose overall contributions to my thinking and my well-being are beyond words. I'd like to thank especially James Moskowitz, Margot Morgan, Rafael Khachaturian, Brendon Westler, Laura Bucci, Adrian Florea, and Rebekah Tromble.

The most important venue for me over the past two years has been *Public Seminar*, which has been both an amazingly supportive and welcoming platform for my writing and an engaging intellectual community. Jeffrey Goldfarb is truly an inspired and inspiring founding editor, and he has become a close friend and colleague. And the *Public Seminar* team—Claire Potter, Dara Levandosky, Zachary Sunderman, Maryam Omid, Christopher Howard-Woods, Colin Laidley, and Juliette Cezzar—is extraordinary, and I thank them.

As I have done with every book I've published, I pay homage to my former teachers—Bob Dahl, Ray Franklin, Mike Krasner, Peter Manicas, and Lenny Markovitz—from whom I have learned so much. I also thank a few close friends and colleagues whose insights and support have been very important to me over the past two years: Oana Băluță, Maria Bucur, Ira Allen, Bob Orsi, Rich Balaban, Aurelian Craiutu, Russ Hanson, Mary Katzenstein, Jenny Mansbridge, Sandy Schram, Bill Scheuerman, Sid Tarrow, Will Winecoff, Bob Ivie, Tim Waters, Adrian Miroiu, and especially Mihaela Miroiu. Mihaela is an extraordinary woman, scholar, teacher, public intellectual, and friend. She has inspired and mentored generations of young Romanian scholars and democratic activists. Her intellectual support and profound hospitality are indispensable to me, and I am happy to dedicate this book to her.

Finally, I thank my family, who always provide love and support: my daughter Lisi, my son Adam, and their mom and my most special friend, Deb; Jessie and Rollie (who passed last August), my special housemates; and especially my parents, Hy and Sylvia Isaac, to whom I also dedicate this book.

Introduction: Thinking Politically in the Age of Trump

As the events of the past two years have unfolded, the ascendancy of Donald Trump has cast a dark and frightening shadow over our politics, and has demanded urgent responses—of which the reflections contained here constitute only one very personal response, as developed as it were “in real time.” This book is animated by my powerful revulsion at, and opposition to, both Trump and what he has unleashed upon us. But it is about much more than Trump, and its contents reflect not only on what it means to be against, but also why it is worth being for—liberal democracy, with all of its profound flaws, both remediable and irreparable.

As a collection of essays published between 2016 and 2018, it is obviously not literally a reflection on a single year though, following a now-widely respected historical convention, it is perhaps possible to think of the book in terms of the *long duree*, as a commentary on the “long year” of 2017—an interminable year!—in which Trump first became president. Yet while everything about this book is colored and shaped by Trump’s presidency, many of the pieces deal with the 2016 primary battles and especially with the hopeful energies generated by the Democratic primary contest between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton, during the period in which Trump was simply the most outrageous outlier in a field of seventeen Republican candidates. In fact Trump’s election was in no way inevitable, and whether or not in the broad sweep of history it looms large as a defining moment depends, in part, on what we think and do, now and in the coming weeks, months, and years. (Yes, of course there are

also long-term structural tendencies that enable and constrain us... but within those limits, which can never be fully known in advance, what we think and what we do matter. And if they didn't, what would be the point of political writing altogether?).

The book's very title, in short, raises questions about the volume itself, questions that require some answer.

In this introduction I propose to furnish some answers, introducing the essays that follow, and reflecting on the reasons for publishing this collection now, and under the rubric of reflections or "notes" on "The Age of Trump."

1. THE AGE OF TRUMP

The essays collected were written in the period between February 2016 and February 2018, a period of almost two years, extending from the middle of the presidential primary campaigns of 2016 to the end of the first year of Trump's tenure as the forty-fifth president of the United States. The act of collecting the essays and publishing them together, sandwiched between broader reflective essays, has been undertaken in early 2018, in the shadow of Trump's first year. Trump has long cast his shadow on American public life, as an authoritarian (and apparently entertaining) media personality who is a master of gaining media attention, and whose "brand" is linked to a particular kind of "mastery"—the mastery of others, and the enactment of a dictatorial personality well summed up by the phrase for which he is best known by most TV-watching Americans: "You're fired." And yet while Trump was able to segue seamlessly from his private sector bombastic self-aggrandizement (and self-enrichment) to the public stage of presidential primary politics, and while from the start he garnered incredible amounts of what the experts call "unearned media attention," it is worth recalling that when he announced

his candidacy for the Republican nomination for president on June 16, 2015, he was himself something of a “celebrity apprentice” in the business of electoral politics. His victory in the Republican primary was no doubt overdetermined, in part a function of his ability to tap into and manipulate some widespread anxieties and resentments about “who governs” the U.S., and in part a function of the literal disarray of the Republican Party at the national level, which allowed him to rise to the top while the other more “mainstream” candidates refused to coalesce, cannibalizing each other before TV screens in ways that Trump, the P.T. Barnum of our time, worked to his advantage. But this victory was by no means assured. Almost every serious commentator, including me, believed for the first year of his candidacy that he could not win (indeed, the only person I know who confidently predicted Trump’s victory from the start was my musician-photographer-writer-amateur historian and real estate agent son Adam Kent-Isaac). His opponents believed he could not win. If there is any truth in Michael Wolff’s book *Fire and Fury* (2018), it is possible that Trump himself did not believe he could win (it seems entirely believable that poor Melania held this belief, and has been in mourning ever since election day).

But win he did.

The period covered in the book, then, is a period that includes real contingencies and genuine surprises. The structure of the book is intended to mirror this shifting terrain, even if it culminates, in the now, at a dark moment indeed.

While the book proceeds chronologically, in my comments here I begin in the brief, shocking moment of what I would call a “Rude Awakening” that followed the Trump victory on election day, November 8, 2016. This moment was far from inevitable and, as Part I, “Trump Agonistes,” recounts, the entire period that preceded it, both the primary season and the general election

contest, was highly contentious, with the stakes becoming increasingly high, and positions becoming increasingly hardened. And so when the final votes were tallied, and Trump was declared the winner, such hardened positions were immediately invoked as explanations. On the right, ideologues exulted in the supposed “mandate” of a candidate who actually lost the popular vote. And on the left, the bitter recriminations of the Hillary Clinton-Bernie Sanders primary fight came again to the surface, with many Clinton supporters casting blame on Sanders supporters for their failure to rally behind Hillary, and many Sanders supporters casting blame on the Democratic Party, or Hillary or neoliberalism, or even “liberals” in general, for supposedly “handing” the election to Trump by refusing to support a more radical candidate. If on the right many exulted in the popularity of a man who lost the general election popular vote, on the left many chose strangely to regard the defeat of the woman who handily defeated the self-proclaimed “democratic socialist” to her left in the Democratic primaries, as proof that only a left candidate can viably defeat a conservative.

The piece I wrote on November 9, 2016, “The Day After,” proceeds from genuine exhaustion and shock (at that point I could not even imagine how exhausting and shocking the year to come would be), and appeals to both liberals and radicals to avoid moralistic blaming, and to step back and ask hard questions about why Trump was able to win and how it might be possible to join together to push back against him and to repudiate the Republican victory in coming elections: “This is a time for hard questioning and serious dialogue among those who will be politically humbled and opposed and often defeated under a Trump administration. There is hard work ahead. This is no time for foolish recriminations among people who really have only two choices: to work together or to hang separately.” In this piece,

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and in the one that followed it days later, “Why Did Trump Win?” my purpose was to defend what might be called “the middle ground” between mainstream liberals and those to the left of the mainstream who have had enough of liberalism altogether, and who are so disenchanted with the liberal mainstream—and with the Democratic Party that is its political vehicle, for good and ill—that they were almost ready to welcome Trump’s defeat of Clinton as a rude awakening that would expose the bankruptcies of liberalism and eventually empower a post-liberal, and perhaps even a socialist left.

This middle ground is not “the middle” as conventionally conceived. Far from the center of our increasingly right-leaning political spectrum, it is quite explicitly the ground between the center left and the more radical left, a position not reducible to any neat label, but probably best captured by the term “left liberal.” As a left-leaning liberal, I consider our political system deeply flawed and plagued by social and economic injustices, and I identify in many ways with those socialist and radical traditions that have historically contested these injustices. As a liberal on the left, I am a strong and principled supporter of core liberal values—individual autonomy; freedom of inquiry, speech, expression, and association; intellectual and political pluralism—and believe that all legitimate efforts to promote greater justice or popular empowerment must be consistent with these values. I thus regard liberal democracy as an imperfect, precarious, and indispensable achievement of twentieth century political struggles whose defense and improvement is essential at a time when it is under assault from the right, by free market fundamentalists opposed to almost all forms of public policy designed to remedy injustice, and by right-wing populists committed to a form of nationalism that is xenophobic, masculinist, strongly authoritarian, and fanatically anti-liberal.

This right-wing assault on important features of liberal democracy in the U.S. has a long recent history, traceable at least to the Southern resistance to civil rights that culminated in the presidential candidacy of George Wallace, and the emergence of the so-called “Southern strategy” of the Republican Party under Richard Nixon and then Ronald Reagan. Many of the most noxious aspects of this tendency came to the fore in the strident and unrelenting Republican opposition to the presidency of Barack Obama, and in the “birther” movement led by Trump. Until mid-2016 it was difficult to imagine that Trump could even win the Republican primary, much less win a general presidential election. But it was easy to see the ways in which even the most “centrist” of his Republican rivals, such as Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, and John Kasich, were being pulled far to the right by the “magnetic force” of Ted Cruz, Ben Carson, Carly Fiorina, and of course Trump himself, and also by the emergence of a strong “Tea Party” movement amply funded by the Koch brothers and other right-wing billionaires. (One fine book on the broader history is Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson’s 2006 *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy*.)

At the same time, the race within the Democratic Party to succeed Obama was evolving in interesting and unexpected ways, as the candidacy of Hillary Clinton—former first lady, former U.S. senator, former secretary of state, and the designated candidate of the party mainstream who was also the first female major party candidate in U.S. history—was contested by Bernie Sanders, self-described “democratic socialist” and political independent whose insurgent candidacy captured the attention of many millennials, and gained increasing support, and momentum, as the primary season unfolded.

It was in the face of these contests that the essays in Part I were written. I’ve entitled this section “Trump Agonistes” only

because in retrospect the most surprising, and consequential, development was the ascendancy of Trump to the absolute center of media attention and then to the White House itself. In retrospect these months represent not simply the victory through struggle of Trump (any affinities between Trump's triumph from political marginality, and the more famous *Kampf* of an earlier tribune of Saxon virtue, can be regarded as merely accidental; or not. Here I plead a sardonic agnosticism) but the beginnings of an agonizing ordeal to which all Americans, and indeed all humans throughout the entire world, have been subjected ever since. At the same time, this victory was far from inevitable. And the essays written during this period can be read as my contribution, in words, to the (failing) effort to produce a different outcome.

As the electoral season unfolded, the outcome came largely to be conceived by me in negative terms, as *Being Against Trump*. But I did not write a single piece centered on Trump until May 30, 2016. And my first five entries of the year were not about Trump at all. They were about the contest between Clinton and Sanders, and my effort to interpret this contest for Democrats and those to the left of them who were absorbed in it. I sought to explain how both candidates could reasonably lay claim to the mantle of "progressivism," based on different though not unrelated genealogies of the term, and to explain, and support, Sanders's claim to be a "democratic socialist," and to clarify the important American lineage of this claim. In a critique of an op-ed by Cass Sunstein, I defended the leftist populist discourse of "the one percent" from his centrist objections. And yet in a second piece I challenged those leftists sympathetic to Sanders though hostile to the Democratic Party, who sought to "occupy the party" in order to "tear it apart." For these people: "The more we engage, the more damage we can do, at every turn demonstrating the gap between people and practice. . . . The far left should support

the Sanders campaign not in order to broaden or energize the Democratic Party but because this party, for now, is a site of struggle over the horizon of U.S. politics.” I tried to argue that this approach “is a strategy for promoting discord on the left and for probably throwing the presidential election to the Republicans—with dire long-term consequences for most people that ‘the left’ claims to care about.”

As the Clinton vs. Sanders contest unfolded, things became increasingly acrimonious, at the same time that the stakes became increasingly high, as it became increasingly likely that a Democratic defeat would lead not simply to the victory of a Republican but to the victory of the most frightening of all the Republicans: Trump.

As the end of the primary season approached, and the general election loomed, my energies were devoted to two interrelated purposes: explaining why I thought Trump represented a serious danger to constitutional democracy, and why I thought that Clinton’s “neoliberalism with a human face” deserved the support of liberals and people on the left. And I insisted that there were two good reasons to support her: because her “lean-in feminism” represented something important to support in spite of its limits, and because whatever the limits of the centrism practiced by Obama and promised by Clinton, it was preferable to the disaster that was Trump.

Everything that follows in the book represents an extended running commentary on this disaster. Part II, “Rude Awakening,” reflects on the immediate shock of the Trump victory. Part III, “Interlude,” offers reflections on the “interregnum” between Trump’s November 2016 election and his January 2017 inauguration. Here I emphasized the danger as it loomed ominously in the near future. In Part IV, “Trump Ascendant,” I treat Trump, and Trumpism, the politics he

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represents, as a present danger that seems only to deepen with the passage of time.

And in Part V, “What’s Next?” which will be published in the print version of the book, I furnish some tentative and uncertain ideas about how best to think about the revival of a reinvigorated, relevant left liberalism. Here I critically engage liberals “to my right” such as Mark Lilla and Sean Wilentz, and radicals “to my left” such as Nancy Fraser and Joseph Schwartz and Bhaskar Sunkara, sharpening what is “left” and what is “liberal” in my left liberalism. I argue that the best way for self-styled “liberals” and “leftists” to move forward is by proceeding together on the basis of agonistic respect, acknowledging that they share many commonalities in the defense of liberal democracy; that their disagreements represent political differences to be negotiated and not moral or existential battles to be fought; and that because there is so much at stake, and no historical guarantees of success, it is important to negotiate the differences, and to work together, whenever possible, to both defend and deepen liberal democracy.

2. TRUMPISM AS A CRISIS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

As noted above, Trump’s ascension to the presidency was hardly inevitable. He might have and probably should have failed in his quest. His success can be charged to many factors, any one of which might well have unfolded differently: the way in which a crowded field of Republican candidates destroyed each other, and the way that Trump, vicious individual and master showman, was able to exploit these bitter rivalries to his advantage; the ways that Trump pioneered a new and improved form of “Teflon” personalism aided and abetted both by reality and “shock” TV and by his use of Twitter; the interlocking vagaries of the Republican-stoked obsession with “Hillary’s emails,” abetted by

Fox News conspiracy mongering, and the intricacies of Russian interference, the Wikileaks revelations, the Comey memo, and the machinations of Cambridge Analytica; and a level of vitriol toward Clinton on the part of some on the left that far exceeded that accorded to any Democratic candidate—all males—in recent memory (an equally strong hostility was in evidence on the right, but this was no surprise, because Hillary had for decades been vilified for being a Clinton, a woman, and worst of all a feminist, a veritable “hyena in petticoats”—a calumny leveled against an earlier feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft).

Of course, we must add to this the serious weaknesses of the Clinton campaign and of its candidate, and also a level of disaffection with the status quo, especially in the “Rust Belt,” that helped to reinforce the conventional electoral advantage of the opposition Republicans after a two-term Democratic president.

That said, Clinton, who so many on both the right and the far left denounced as an evil and unappealing candidate, still won the popular vote by over three million votes. And in those Midwestern “blue-leaning” states that supposedly constituted her “firewall”—Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—her losses, which catapulted Trump to an electoral college majority, were by exceptionally small margins.

Trump could have lost, and Clinton could have won.

Had that happened, we would still be concerned with a broad crisis of U.S. politics, linked to a crisis of liberal democracy, but it would be experienced very differently, perhaps less urgently, perhaps more challengingly. (And quite obviously, had that happened this book would not exist.) Too much of the discussion of Trump in office has centered on the individual, and too little on what he represents, and how he articulates broader tendencies and dangers, and also poses broader challenges that might be addressed. Of course, to note this is not to deny that he is a

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particularly noxious individual, whose combination of idiocy and megalomania makes his possession of presidential powers profoundly troubling.

In my essays on this topic I have consistently tried to strike a balance between the two dominant approaches to Trump on the left and center left: the tendency by some to minimize the gravity of Trump and the dangers his presidency presents, and the tendency by others to exaggerate the danger, as if until Trump came along the U.S. had a well-functioning liberal democracy, and his authoritarian tendencies are entirely aberrational.

Trump is not an aberration.

Indeed, Trump is hardly unique in mobilizing substantial resentment against liberal democratic politics as usual and in advancing an authoritarian nationalist agenda capable of garnering mass political support, and he is only an American version of a much broader tendency that has swept across Europe (this is the core thesis of the essay on “Illiberal Democracy” in Part III.) At the same time, as a distinctively American form of this broader tendency, Trumpism is most assuredly grounded in prior developments in U.S. politics, including a long history of racism that is deeply entwined with peculiarities of the U.S. political system—federalism, traditions of so-called states rights and the exaggerated representation of states in the Senate; the lack of a fully nationalized electoral system, and the prevalence of both gerrymandering and state-level voter identification laws designed to disenfranchise poor and minority voters and thus depress turnout among liberal constituencies; and the institution of the electoral college itself. These unique features of American politics have long shaped the evolution of American capitalism, and have colored (pun intended) and limited the labor movement and the character of the U.S. welfare state, since at least the New Deal. All of these things have influenced the development

of post-World War II liberalism in the U.S. and helped to lay the foundation for Trumpism. And all of them would require our attention even if Trump had never been born.

At the same time, the peculiar combination of authoritarian personality, relentlessly xenophobic rhetoric, and popular adulation and agitation that is Donald Trump is now, in 2018, the defining feature of our politics. And however long the Trump presidency lasts—can he last through his first term? Will he run for and win a second term in 2020?—it is likely to cast a dark shadow on our politics for years to come.

3. THINKING POLITICALLY IN THE FACE OF TRUMP

For me, thinking politically in the Age of Trump means understanding the broader context of Trumpism but also its proximate causes and likely short-to-medium term consequences. And it means taking seriously its regressive and inegalitarian policy implications, but also taking seriously the extent to which it has inflamed popular resentments, actively promoted conspiracy thinking and hostility toward government, and debased both elite and mass public discourse. I am not a believer in most versions of what is considered deliberative democratic theory, and I surely do not believe that the U.S. has ever been “a deliberative democracy.” Exclusion, antagonism, hostility, denunciation, outrage, repression and resistance and more repression and more resistance—these have been essential features of the American political system as it has evolved since 1787. At the same time, it has evolved, and been liberalized, and democratized, through contestation and through the consequential cooptation and institutionalization of demands for inclusion, recognition, and justice. As a result, the U.S. political system today is not a monarchy or a totalitarian or authoritarian

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or apartheid regime. It is a liberal democracy, even if a deeply flawed and precarious one. Its flaws surely contribute to its vulnerability. And the remedy of these flaws, by means of further reform, is surely a central imperative.

The deepening and the defense of liberal democracy are thus mutually entwined.

In the face of the very real crisis that liberal democracy currently faces, it may be tempting for some to exult in the exposure of its hypocrisies, and to press on its vulnerabilities, in the hopes that such moves can generate a radical alternative, beyond the imperfections of representative government in an age of mass politics and the inequalities of neoliberalism in an age of flexible, global capitalism.

But this is a dangerous temptation.

One reason might be called consequentialist: because crises do not necessarily generate progress. Antonio Gramsci, writing from prison in the period between the twentieth century's two world wars, is famous for having observed of his time that: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." Gramsci was greatly attuned to the experience of morbidity; and he did not live to see the end of the "interregnum" of which he wrote. Even Marx and Engels acknowledged that revolutionary situations can result "either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes." Of course, as Albert Hirschman argued in his brilliant book *The Rhetoric of Reaction* (1991), the uncertainties of the future are a very bad reason to remain wedded to the status quo. But they are a very good reason to think twice before celebrating and perhaps even abetting the breakdown of a political order that in comparative historical terms looks pretty good relative to the alternatives thus far

attempted. And indeed, it is hard to imagine exactly what would represent a wholesale replacement of representative government in an age of mass politics and neoliberalism in an age of flexible, global capitalism.

The second reason might be called ethical: because the achievements of liberal democracy, however limited, are of real value, and the rhetorical disparagement of these achievements diminishes them and the people whose lives they enhance. Trumpism centers on the rhetorical disparagement and administrative assault on these achievements: civil rights for women and for racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities; civil liberties for dissenters and activists; freedom of association, including the right to form labor unions and protest groups; a free press unhindered by prior restraint or libel or sedition laws; voting rights for all citizens; environmental safety, health and workplace regulations designed to protect the well-being of citizens and to promote environmental sustainability; social security in the broadest sense. It is true that all of these achievements have been halting and precarious, in many cases honored more in the breach than in fact. It is also true that these achievements are real and constitute normative benchmarks, laying a basis for future juridical and political demands for the redress of grievances, and furnishing a ground on which to fight for these demands.

I honestly do not understand the investment that some smart people on the left seem to have in persistently chastising, mocking, and attacking what they call “liberal tyrannophobia.” Not only is such rhetorical pathologizing condescending, the notion that it is not the Trump administration but its liberal critics who warrant outrage is, well, rather outrageous. It seems to rest on the idea that a focus on the authoritarian dangers of Trumpism represents a distraction from the deeper failings of neoliberalism itself, that an emphasis on Trump somehow implies that if only Trump

would go away, all would be well. Indeed, there may be certain television pundits who believe this. But most of the serious liberal critics of Trumpism believe nothing of the sort. And I most certainly believe nothing of the sort.

And it is possible to say, at one and the same time, that Trump's assaults on liberalism expose its hypocrisies and limits, and that such assaults are both dangerous and wrong, and that the proper remedy for the hypocrisies and limits of liberalism is further reforms of liberalism that realize in practice what has thus far only been promised in rhetoric and in law.

At the same time, saying so still leaves us facing a host of very real political challenges of coalition and movement and party-building to which there are no easy answers and many substantial obstacles. The five essays that comprise Part V, "What's Next?" address many of these challenges. So too my "Coda: Against Trumpism, For Liberal Democracy." These pieces furnish little comfort. The widely-bemoaned tensions between so-called "identity liberalism" and "social democratic liberalism," and between what Nancy Fraser has called "recognition" and "redistribution," are very real. The fissiparous and inegalitarian tendencies of "flexible" capitalism are also very real. When these challenges are placed in a genuinely global economic and geopolitical context, and considered in light of the virtually inevitable constraints likely to be imposed by global warming, it is easy to imagine that we are in for a long period of what the Greeks called *stasis*—a kind of tension-filled and conflict-ridden "immobilism" with no obvious terminus. Indeed, the "morbid symptoms" of our situation might well represent not an "interregnum" at all, but the only dispensation we have reason to expect moving forward.

But in truth, we cannot know what comes next. We can only attempt, in a spirit of healthy disagreement that is at the heart

of serious inquiry, to understand the evolving situation and the constraints and opportunities it presents; and to act, on the basis of our always imperfect understandings, to make a difference. But what does “make a difference” even mean in a “postmodern” situation in which it is impossible to confidently identify the issue, or constituency, or value, or even the rhetoric that ought to guide us or that can claim universality or stand unambiguously for “progress” or “freedom” or “justice” (even here, it is impossible to find the single right word)? “No to Trump.” “Not My President.” “Black Lives Matter.” “#MeToo.” “ACT UP.” “Fight for \$15.” “Immigrant Rights are Human Rights.” “Fight Like a Girl.” “Black Trans Lives Matter.” “Mother Earth Needs Us to Come Together.” “Different is not Dangerous.” “Democratic Socialists of America.” “This Pussy Fights Back.” “They Only Call It Class Warfare When We Fight Back.” “I’m With Her.” “This Machine Kills Fascists.” “Love Trumps Hate.” “Unity. Peace. Equality.” “Indivisible.” Each of these signs was featured at the January 2018 Women’s March in Washington, D.C. Each says something different, and some would seem in direct contradiction to others. And each, when read along with the others, symbolizes a pluralism, heterogeneity, and fractiousness of both political identity and political strategy on the left.

And this is why it is important among liberals and those on the left to maintain a healthy sense of what William Connolly long ago called “agonistic respect.” There is no single way to resist what “Trumpism” represents, in part because it does not represent the same thing for each of us, and in part because depending on our analyses, and our personal or aesthetic or metaphysical dispositions, and our sense of who we are and what matters most to us, we will think differently about how to resist and indeed what it means to resist and in the name of what values such resistance even makes sense.

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My own view is that right now the most important imperative is to defend and extend the basic norms and institutions of our imperfect liberal democracy, in order to forestall a looming authoritarianism and in order to legally and politically empower movements for social and environmental justice, or at least to keep open spaces of contestation for such movements. At the same time, I think it is very important to advocate for this in a way that seeks, whenever possible, to minimize unnecessary political divisions within the broad “resistance” to Trumpism on the left. One way to do this is to foreground some of the broad procedural concerns that might be relatively widely shared. A second is to attempt to be critical of interlocutors without being disparaging. And to be clear, I am talking here about interlocutors, those who I regard as participants in a common debate and dialogue, however agonistic it might sometimes become. As readers of my very active Facebook page well know, I have no problem at all saying that Trump is a “thug” or worse, and that many of his supporters are either racist or complicit in racism. I regard many of Trump’s supporters not simply as political adversaries but as political enemies, people who are hostile to core moral principles I hold dear, hostile to groups of people I consider to be personal or political friends and sometimes even family, and hostile to me—what I think and who I am.

Where to draw the line? Ultimately, each of us must think this through for ourselves, and draw the boundaries that make most sense. We can and should argue about this. But even our most earnest disagreements are incapable of delivering a “knock down argument.”

Richard Spencer, Steve Bannon, *Breitbart News*, David Horowitz, John Kelly and Donald Trump: these are not my “interlocutors.” They are adversaries, and indeed in a political sense my enemies (to say this is not to declare them to be “enemies

of the people,” whatever this might mean, nor to call for their heads to roll). I still retain sufficient faith in the “rule of law,” speaking very broadly, to consider them enemies who yet still remain constrained by the institutions of procedural democracy. They demonstrate that they are not particularly respectful of many of the norms that govern such institutions. Some of them or their followers violate norms, and laws, in ways that are cruel and harmful. But the institutions—including the criminal justice and police institutions—still play an important practical and normative role, which is why the “weapon” with which I engage them is primarily the weapon of words. [Note: it so happens that I am not an African American male. If I were, I would surely experience the police very differently—though even here there is no one way to experience, and there are serious arguments among African American males about how adversarial to regard the police as such, as opposed to police officers who violate civil rights. Again, there is no single place to draw the line, even among those who share many egalitarian values.]

David Brooks? He is an ideological adversary for sure. A moralistic windbag too, at least too often for my tastes. But he is no enemy of liberal democracy, and while I disagree with most of what he says—about culture, about political contention, about the importance of “moderation”—he and those who share his general views are people to argue with, and to politically oppose, and even sometimes to make common cause. When he criticizes Trump, or “know nothingism” more generally, I welcome this, both because it represents an important fissure among conservative adversaries more generally, but also because I agree with these things, and I believe it is important to recognize agreements among fellow citizens, even ideological adversaries, when such agreements arise. That is why I welcome the recent arguments of David Frum, and why I regard his *Trumpocracy*

as an important book, even though it is entirely too uncritical of everything not Trump to suit my tastes. At the same time, while I agree with most of the critique of Trumpism offered by E. J. Dionne, Jr., Norman J. Orenstein, and Thomas E. Mann, in their important book *One Nation Under Trump*, I do not share their belief that “progressives must welcome and work with the anti-Trump right” (see especially their “Welcoming All Trump’s Critics” in the Winter 2017 *Democracy Journal*). Or, to be more precise, while I agree that it is important to work together when there are unequivocal common values at stake, I also believe that the problems of our time run much deeper than most on the “anti-Trump right” can acknowledge, and that building a strong left liberal movement requires a principled commitment to egalitarian left values towards which those on the right are typically adversarial if not downright hostile, even if I also believe that it requires a principled commitment to liberal values around which it is possible to join with many “Never Trumpers.” More important, my own convictions aside, I also believe that many of those “to my left” with whom I wish to work can never embrace anti-Trump Republicans, because the left values they hold dear make such an embrace impossible.

All of this makes for a very complicated set of political priorities and public interventions. And it is further complicated by the fact that while I regard many “to my left” as genuine interlocutors and as real or at least potential “allies” in a political sense, there are also those to my left whose positions I oppose and with whom I cannot envision aligning. These include many who embraced the “occupy the party” effort to magnify the contradictions of the Democratic Party, as a way of breaking apart that party and organizing a more radical labor or for some even “communist” party on its ruins, and also the ideological adherents of “antifa,” whose opposition to right-wing authoritarianism is animated by

a sectarian, and authoritarian, leftism far from my own version of left liberalism.

What I've outlined above constitutes only the barest outline of my own rough "political map," and the general ways I see myself navigating the terrain (at the same time, every moment presents its own distinct challenges and opportunities that are impossible to simply be "read off" of a broad political perspective). I do not presume that this map is or ought to be shared by anyone else. Indeed, the purpose of this volume is simply to share my own perspective, in a way that resonates with others who are in my rough "vicinity," engages those who might be open to venturing somewhat closer, and exemplifies and also clarifies for others why I think as I do, and why I challenge, criticize, or outright oppose what they support.

4.WHY THIS?

As I've noted already, much of this book consists of *Public Seminar* pieces that have already been published. Why publish them again, in this format? In a way I hope the answer is clear from everything I've already said above. But I think a bit more discussion of "format" is due. For while I would never consider publishing anything that I did not truly wish to publicize, a primary motivation behind the precise form of this book is my desire to contribute to *Public Seminar* Books, and to *Public Seminar* more generally, because of what is novel and exciting about the overall venture.

When I first started writing for *Public Seminar* I had had no prior experience writing regularly for a digital publication. And indeed, I did not imagine that I would find myself writing regularly at all. Yet if the technologies of our digital, social media age make it possible to connect almost instantly with

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others across the globe, and to access a vast range of opinions on a daily and even hourly basis, the very experience of doing so engenders, at least for many of us, the need not simply to “listen” but to “speak.” And the same technologies that offer access to the ideas of so many others also offer each of us the ability to reach broadly, and quickly, about the things that matter most to us. It is well known that much of what passes through the interwebs is noise, or junk, and sometimes even something more malevolent in intent or result. But the very best digital platforms make it possible to participate meaningfully in an extensive, deep, rich, and multifaceted digital public sphere. I have discovered, to my delight, that *Public Seminar* is such a platform, and as it has grown, it has become increasingly welcoming to me. This is partly a function of the unique perspective and talents of founding editor Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, who is a prolific scholar of the samizdat public spheres pioneered by Eastern-European dissidents under communism, and who has very deliberately sought to foster a site for broad and contentious intellectual and political sharing that models what was best about some of those public spheres. It is due to the unique staff, which is also an intellectual community, that has been brought together by Jeffrey and his co-editor Claire Potter. And finally, it is due to the unique commitment of resources by the New School to *Public Seminar*, *Public Seminar* Books, and the broader effort to nurture public intellectualism in the digital age. While I have long lived in Bloomington, Indiana, and while I benefit greatly from my association with Indiana University, a truly global university, I am originally from New York City, and I have always felt a particular affinity toward the New School. Founded in 1919 by liberal critics of the “first red scare” such as Charles Beard, John Dewey, and Thorstein Veblen, and expanded by Alvin Johnson in the thirties through its sponsorship of the University in Exile, the

New School has always been a center of transnational civil society linked to independent inquiry and critical theory. The *Public Seminar* project is an important cosmopolitan initiative linking left and liberal writers and publics, and it is the kind of project that can play an important role in countering the dangerous forms of populism that currently plague our public life.

When the idea of doing this book was first proposed to me by Jeffrey, I was deeply skeptical. I had no desire to even re-read the things I had already published, much less to publish them again. But I was persuaded otherwise, by Jeffrey's prodding and by my re-readings that were also a result of his persistent prodding. I came to believe that the pieces hang together well; that together they say something worth saying; and that there is real value in sharing them in this format. For the format not only affords a perspective on the evolution of a very particular political intervention—mine—over time. It also allows for a consideration of how different kinds of pieces—essays, reviews, and a few academic article-type pieces—articulating a more or less coherent perspective while motivated by very specific occasions, can together, over time, contribute to public debate. The volume, in short, exemplifies some of the potential advantages, over time, of contributing to a platform, an online magazine, like *Public Seminar*. One advantage is the ability to experiment with ideas, themes, or even genres. Another is the ability to build on what came before, from you and from others, and in the process to establish a “presence,” in real time, in relationship to other interlocutors.

All the same, to publish such interventions together, even if bookended by framing essays, is risky. Do the pieces really cohere? When does what might be considered effective reiteration become simply repetition? The answers to such questions are for each reader to judge. Such questions might be particularly

dispositive for readers who regularly read *Public Seminar*, and have thus encountered some of these pieces before. Such readers are of course free to read as selectively as they like! At the same time, there are a great many potential readers out there who are not yet regular readers of *Public Seminar*, and one of the functions of books such as this one can be to reach out to them, and bring them into the magazine's regular networks of conversation. And there are many readers who are simply drawn to a book of essays entitled *#AgainstTrump*, because they are against Trump, and are curious to test their ideas, or to learn, or to argue. We are now in year two of the Trump presidency. The United States, and indeed the entire world, remains profoundly unsettled. And for many of us, this unsettlement is mixed with fear, and dread, and an urgent sense of the need to regroup, to rethink, to resist, and to remedy.

There is no time like the present.

PART 1

TRUMP AGONISTES

FEBRUARY 6, 2016—OCTOBER 30, 2016

Clinton vs. Sanders

Who's the real progressive?

The Democratic Party presidential primary is now heating up as a two-person race between two evenly matched candidates, both of whom declare themselves and not their adversary to be a “progressive.”

Bernie Sanders has declared that “you can be a moderate. You can be a progressive. But you cannot be a moderate and a progressive.”

Hillary Clinton has expressed amusement that Sanders considers himself the “gatekeeper on who’s progressive,” defending her consistent claim that “I’m a progressive who likes to get things done.”

Which of these public figures is right? Who is truly a progressive? The answer is that both are partially right and partially wrong, and both can lay legitimate claim to the mantle of progressivism.

The term “progressivism” entered American political discourse at the turn of the twentieth century. So-called Gilded Age America was a very different place from the pastoral republic envisioned by Jefferson and the framers of the Constitution. It confronted major challenges associated with industrial capitalism—rising inequality, displacement, deskilling, and disciplining of workers, and a proliferation of health and safety problems associated with untrammelled free markets. It also confronted major challenges associated with immigration, cultural pluralism, urbanization, and the rise of a science-based economy. Turn-of-the-century progressives sought to harness new technologies and institutions, and also to solve the problems these caused. These progressives were reformist and centrist, and they rhetorically cast themselves as opponents of both conservatism

(“backward looking” rather than “progressive”) and radicalism—at this moment the Populist Movement and the Socialist Party of Eugene V. Debs were quite powerful, particularly in certain sections of the country.

There is a complex but also fairly straight line linking early Progressives such as Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, Robert M. La Follette, and Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, to FDR’s New Deal, Harry Truman’s Fair Deal, JFK’s New Frontier, LBJ’s Great Society, and the “third way” pioneered by President Bill Clinton, as inspired by the Democratic Leadership Council and its Progressive Policy Institute. This is the Progressivism extolled by E. J. Dionne, Jr., in his 1996 *They Only Look Dead: Why Progressives Will Dominate the Next Political Era*. It is likely the progressivism embraced by the Obama administration, despite Obama’s early rhetorical flourishes.

Clinton is a “progressive” in this mold—centrist, moderate, anti-radical but reformist, pragmatist, and mainstream Democrat. She is the kind of “progressive” who is a corporate liberal—the kind that is not against corporate capitalism but seeks to sand off its edges; the kind that regards corporations and moneyed interests as legitimate interlocutors, and indeed institutions that have what political scientist Charles Lindblom once pejoratively called “a privileged position.”

Sanders is *not* a “progressive” in this sense. Sanders has remained outside of the orbit of the Democratic Party mainstream, and indeed he proudly calls himself a “democratic socialist.” Sanders advocates major structural transformations of capitalism, and calls for a “political revolution”—a peaceful revolution to be sure, via the normal institutions of representative democracy, but a revolution nonetheless, based on the mobilization of millions of workers, the poor, and others who

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have been largely disenfranchised and who have suffered through thirty years of economic insecurity and declining real wages.

But Sanders *is* a “progressive” in the sense of Henry Wallace’s Progressive Party candidacy for the presidency in 1948. This is a more robustly left progressivism, which seeks to incorporate the radical legacies and impulses of turn-of-the-century populism and socialism, and the protest movements associated with antiwar struggles, civil rights struggles, and gender and sexual liberation struggles. This “progressivism” is more radical in its critique of the injustices of our society, and in its vision of a more just society. It is not revolutionary in the Bolshevik sense. But it is linked to the radical labor movements of the twentieth century, some of which did involve important Communist organizers and surely involved many self-styled socialists and even Marxian socialists. Sanders is a man of what the late Michael Harrington, the founder of Democratic Socialists of America, called “the democratic left.” He represents a political tendency linked to some of the more radical elements of the labor movement, and such journals of opinion as *Dissent*, *In These Times*, *The Progressive*, *The Nation*, *Mother Jones*, and *Jacobin*.

Sanders is correct that Clinton is not a “progressive” in this sense. She is a centrist, a moderate, an establishment figure. A *corporate liberal*.

Clinton is correct that Sanders is not a “progressive” in the sense of The Progressive Policy Institute. He is a leftist, a radical of sorts—though one who has held elective office for over a quarter-century—an independent and something of an anti-establishment figure. He is a democratic socialist. Or perhaps a social democrat. Or a left liberal.

Thus they are both right. For “progressivism” is a complex identity with a contentious history.

What might we say about this semantic dispute, beyond clarifying history and the meaning of terms?

For one thing, that while in some ways the differences between the two “progressivisms” are important—especially regarding banks and major financial institutions, and on the morality of extreme economic inequality—in many ways the differences are not that great.

Both versions of “progressivism” lay claim to the New Deal, though Sanders places more emphasis on the insurgencies and mass movements that brought it about, and on some the more visionary ideas, such as national health insurance, that never succeeded.

Both value science, human rights, and a democratic state that addresses the public problems of society.

And both represent a serious commitment to public reason, and public life, that is anathema to the Republican Party and the right-wing forces that control it. Indeed, “progressivism” in either variant can be defined in part by the fact that it arouses the vehement hostility of the conservative movement.

It is a good thing that the debate about the future of the Democratic Party centers on the claim to being a “progressive.” That a major Democratic contestant for the presidential nomination is a woman is surely something to celebrate, and for some it is even a sufficient reason to support Clinton. And indeed, in very complicated ways, Clinton has thus far been able to capture much of the support of feminist and African American activists (though this is being contested: see the many critical responses by African American leftists to recent pieces by Ta-Nehisi Coates in *the Atlantic*, and by left feminists to Katha Pollitt’s recent piece in *the Nation*).

But the fact that the leading “establishment” candidate of the party is a self-styled “progressive” is nothing new, and in recent history, at least since the nineties, Democrats have followed the lead of Bill Clinton in claiming the mantle of “progressive.”

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What is novel is that this candidate faces an opponent who lays legitimate claim to the more *radical* version of progressivism, and who celebrates the history of democratic socialism, and the labor movement, and poor people's movements, and other protest movements of the past, and who calls for a "political revolution" against a system "rigged" by money and power.

The Sanders campaign did not arise out of thin air. It draws on a history of ideas and networks on the Democratic left, and also draws on the rhetoric, and some of the impulses and networks, of the Occupy movement. At the same time, it has taken the punditry by surprise, and it has succeeded, at least for now, in shifting public discourse to the left. This is a major accomplishment, and represents something very novel indeed, something that this country arguably has not seen for at least a half-century.

For this reason, I support Sanders. It is doubtful that he can be a viable candidate in the general election, even given the extremism and idiocy of the current Republican primary. It is even doubtful that he can defeat Clinton in the Democratic primaries. But indeed to some extent it is *because* I consider the latter doubtful that I am comfortable supporting Sanders now. I prefer either version of "progressivism" to the *reaction* that is promised by the Republicans, and I can comfortably support Sanders now, since I believe that his campaign can strengthen the party in the general election to come, and can also have long-term effects on its future. And if the campaign picks up steam, who knows where it might lead?

Can either version of "progressivism," or more likely some combination of them, bring about major reforms of the current system, or ambitious responses to climate change, or a more fundamentally egalitarian or just society? Here I remain deeply skeptical, for reasons outlined in my 2002 book *The Poverty of*

Progressivism. The Sanders campaign would seem to give the lie to that book's arguments, by demonstrating the vitality and richness of a left progressive revival. But appearances can be deceiving, and I remain skeptical. At the same time, the Sanders campaign offers a unique and precious opportunity for left progressive ideas to shape public debate, and perhaps even for these ideas to propel a decent, intelligent, and passionate democratic socialist to the White House. It is an opportunity worth supporting, and at this moment in time, a "risk" worth taking.

And so while I do not agree with Sanders that Clinton is no progressive—and while I believe that in most ways Sanders is more "moderate" than some of his rhetoric indicates—I prefer his progressivism, now, to Clinton's. This may change as things unfold (if Clinton wins the primary, as I expect she will, I will support her with enthusiasm—she is the first woman in the history of the United States to approach the presidency). What will not change is my belief that, however one interprets "progressivism," and whatever its limits as a political label or vision, it is infinitely preferable to the *regressivism* that is promised by the Republicans.

publicseminar.org, February 6, 2016

Why Cass Sunstein Is Wrong About the One Percent

In his article “Clinton and Sanders Focus on the Wrong Percent,” published by *Bloomberg*, Cass Sunstein argues that the campaigns of both Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders have been focused on the wealth of the “top one percent,” rather than on the betterment of the “bottom ten percent” and that this is wrong because such a focus is long on “outrage” but short on “solutions,” and because this focus is at odds with the core message of the New Deal as explained in President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s famous “Four Freedoms” speech. But it is Sunstein who is wrong. Let me count the ways.

First, he is wrong to lump Clinton and Sanders together as “operating within the terms set by top one percent progressivism.” Only Sanders has been consistently operating within the terms of this discourse. Clinton is in fact clearly a partisan of Sunstein’s more meliorist and centrist approach. If she is now talking about the one percent, it is only because the success of Sanders’s insurgent campaign has forced her to the left. Would that Sanders be who represents the current “progressive” consensus. He does not. But his success is forcing “progressives” of all stripes to take seriously his populist and social democratic message.

Second, Sunstein is wrong to locate the language of the one percent in either of the two Democratic campaigns; this language was thrust to the center of public discourse, at least since 2012, by the Occupy movement in this country and beyond—for Occupy was a global phenomenon. This language is simplistic, as all political slogans and chants are simplistic, from “Springtime in America” to “Change We Can Believe In.” But behind the slogan is a very serious critique of long-term secular trends that have

led to an enormous concentration of income and wealth among the top one percent and growing precarity below. This critique resonates widely (for one example of research that supports this claim, see “The Insecure American: Economic Experiences, Financial Worries, and Policy Attitudes”). To draw energy from this critique is not a category mistake or a foolish strategic choice. It is an acknowledgment of fundamental features of the current political economy that have been identified by many prominent political economists.

Third, Sunstein is wrong because he fails to see that “outrage” is a very productive political force, which can be mobilized for good or ill. Most of the current Republican candidates are mobilizing outrage in the name of xenophobia and fear. But the discourse of the one percent that has been catapulted to the forefront by Sanders and is now somewhat adopted by Clinton mobilizes outrage in the name of *civic equality*. Is that really a bad thing? This outrage is better described as indignation at the many injustices characteristic of our current system. And *indignation* at its best is informed by a profound sense of *dignity* that is the polar opposition of resentment.

This leads to the fourth reason why Sunstein is wrong: because his article simply fails to recognize that indignation, and popular mobilization against injustice, has been the single most important source of progressive change and the expansion of civic and material equality in the history of the United States. It was precisely such indignation and such mobilization that energized the New Deal and that led FDR to denounce “economic royalists” and to pursue a broad and deep program of institutional reform. New Deal liberalism was not a form of “seriousness” belied by popular mobilization. It was a kind of “political revolution” (historian Carl Degler called it “the third American revolution”) fueled by the *seriousness of popular mobilization*. It was not

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“nudging,” but the insistent demands of popular movements and organized groups that empowered FDR to do what he did.

Sunstein is correct that slogans about “one percent” are not sufficient to mobilize a substantial movement for progressive reform, much less to generate political victories for such reform. Does the Sanders campaign have what it takes to accomplish this? I am doubtful. But this has more to do with the profound obstacles confronting economic reform than it does with the weaknesses of the campaign or its vision. Clear, however, is the understanding that it is a very good thing that a language of economic justice resonates today and that the Sanders campaign is mobilizing this energy in a productive way. Sunstein does this campaign and its activists and supporters an injustice when he implies that it is powered by naive moralizing. The moralizing is not so naive. More important, behind it is a serious strategic idea—the idea that egalitarian political-economic reforms require mass mobilization and that such mobilization involves not only primaries and elections, but also coalitions with labor unions, poor people’s movements, and civil rights organizations as well as support for the kinds of laws and policies that will allow these organizations to grow. Sanders does not simply orate about inequality. He also has sponsored a major reform of U.S. labor law, the Workplace Democracy Act, and has spent a lifetime working to strengthen unions in the United States.

Sunstein is wrong to suggest that the left turn in the current primary debate represents mere sloganeering about “the wealthy.” To the contrary, it may represent the first possibility in decades for a serious debate about what is needed “to provide help and opportunity for the many millions of Americans who urgently need it.”

publicseminar.org, February 10, 2016

Bernie Sanders, Democratic Socialist

A primer

Many people have asked me to explain the “democratic socialism” of Bernie Sanders. Below are answers to a set of questions recently posed by a bright young interlocutor.

Donald Trump said this week, “We’re dealing with a socialist, perhaps even a Communist.” How do you define “democratic socialist” and how is that different from “socialist” in general?

In the most general terms, “socialism” is the idea that the productive wealth of a society—factories, offices, large-scale service firms, etc—should not be owned, controlled, and deployed for the benefit of a small class of people, but should be owned, controlled, and deployed for the benefit of the society as a whole. The basic rationale for such “socialization” of productive wealth is simple: the knowledge, techniques, and relations of production that produce wealth are all social. In the story of Robinson Crusoe an individual works more or less from scratch (with his “man Friday!”) on “virgin” nature. But in reality all wealth is social. Particular individuals may innovate. They may even deserve special rewards for their innovations. But most members of “the one percent” are not innovators of this kind. Further, even those that are innovators did not grow up in the wild and innovate through their own efforts alone. They matured in a society with an educational system and a knowledge base and an infrastructure and a division of labor, and their innovations involved a complex network of others. The idea of socialism is the idea that because all innovation and all production is “social” in this way, the production process ought to be organized in a way that ensures some democratic social control and some broad social welfare.

Socialism is a very old idea, and it can be traced back to Plato, the early Christians, Sir Thomas More, and many important modern writers who wrote before Karl Marx was even born. Marx and Engels were socialists who claimed that their socialism was “scientific.” Marxism is a complex subject. Suffice it so say that the founder of Soviet Communism—Lenin—was a Marxist, but so too were founders of German social democracy and advocates of a parliamentary road to socialism, such as Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky. More importantly, while most Marxists have been socialists, and some even democratic socialists, most socialists are not Marxists at all. Some examples include Albert Einstein, George Orwell, Bertrand Russell, W.E.B. Dubois, and perhaps even Martin Luther King Jr.

Democratic socialism is a variant of socialism that emphasizes the importance of democracy in two ways: a socialist society ought to be run on a democratic basis and not as a dictatorship—as Lenin and his Soviet and Chinese followers believed—and it ought to be achieved by working through the institutions of a liberal, representative democracy, mobilizing citizens and voters, winning elections, and legislating social reform.

In the twentieth-century U.S. a number of important figures were democratic socialists, most notably Eugene V. Debs, Norman Thomas, and Michael Harrington, whose book *Socialism* is the best book on the topic. Harrington was the founder of Democratic Socialists of America, a group that is strongly backing Sanders. This group does *not* believe in state control of all economic assets. It believes in the use of a democratic state to institute egalitarian social reforms and a more “progressive” system of taxation, and to steer social investments in more public ways (think public transportation as opposed to publicly-subsidized, privately-owned sports mega-stadiums). Sanders has had some ties to this group—which has always seen itself as “the left-wing of the Democratic Party”—and the things he supports are the kinds of things this group has long supported, and also the kinds of things that European social democrats—in Germany, the UK, France, and Scandinavia—have long supported.

Trump is red-baiting when he calls this “Communist.” Such a vision

of socialism is democratic and historically it is *anti*-Communist.

Likewise, what does Sanders mean when he talks about starting a “political revolution,” and what do people think when they hear the term? Is he conjuring images of tanks rolling in the streets?

It is much clearer what Sanders does *not* mean than what he means by “political revolution.” He does not mean a classic “revolution.” Classical “revolutions” typically involved tanks in the streets deployed by authoritarian governments (like Tsarism) to suppress revolutionary and insurrectionist masses of citizens. This entire scenario is alien to Sanders. Sanders is a small “d” democrat who has spent his entire adult life participating in the normal institutions of representative democracy, running for office—for mayor, representative, senator, president—in free elections, debating his opponents in open forums, collaborating with other legislators to pass legislation. The “conjured images” are bogeymen, and have no basis in reality.

What does Sanders mean by “political revolution?” He seems to mean the mobilization, through campaigning, of masses of new voters—voter participation in the U.S. is very low—and the strengthening of institutions such as labor unions, civil rights and labor organizations, and student groups so that the members of these groups can be more active citizens inclined to support his agenda. Sanders is in no way a “revolutionary” in spite of his appeal to “political revolution”—a term that has indeed been used by many leaders in American history. I must say that I find Sanders to be very vague about “political revolution,” and I am also skeptical that the kind of broad-based social and political movements he supports can be brought together to achieve the goals he seeks. But I think it is a noble effort, and in the past efforts such as these have played a crucial role in making the U.S. a more democratic and socially just society.

Do Americans need a civics refresher course to understand what he’s

talking about?

Sadly, yes. If the broad mass of Americans were more historically informed, they would know that self-styled socialists have played an important role in U.S. history, that most of the leaders of the early trade and industrial union movement were socialists, that important New Deal figures were socialists, that one of the most important leaders of the U.S. civil rights movement, Bayard Rustin, was a socialist, and that a socialist, Michael Harrington, is widely credited with having inspired Lyndon B Johnson's "Great Society" programs through his book on poverty,

The Other America.

Indeed, the so-called neoconservative movement in the U.S. was founded by former socialists, many of whom had earlier been not simply socialists but Communists or Trotskyists. These people turned hard to the right. But others, like Harrington, and Irving Howe, the founder of *Dissent* magazine, and like Sanders, continued to be active in the struggle to democratically achieve democratic socialism. Sanders is an authentic American democrat who works hard to advance his ideas—the supreme virtue of democratic citizenship.

Is there a strain of democratic socialism that advocates state control of the economy?

This is a complicated question. The simple answer is no. One of the defining features of modern democratic socialism is an opposition to the widespread "collectivization" of the economy as was practiced by the Soviets. Some European democratic socialist parties have supported public enterprise and some forms of nationalization of certain industries—but so have non-socialists in Europe. (Indeed, one need look no further than the enormous bailout of U.S. banks in 2008 to see that it is not only socialists

who advocate for government socialization—they simply advocate socializing the losses of big business, and not the gains.) But none support the wholesale collectivization of the economy.

Sanders clearly supports a “mixed economy,” as any of his statements or position papers makes clear.

On experiments with public ownership, I recommend Gar Aperovitz’s “Socialism in America is Closer Than You Think” in *the Nation* (February 11, 2016).

How is what Sanders wants the same/different from what modern European social democrats want/have? Or from modern Russia? Or China?

It is very similar to what European social democrats have long advocated and enacted, as he himself has stated repeatedly. It is also much less ambitious than the most ambitious social democratic party platforms.

For reasons explained above, it is totally different from the Soviet or Chinese or Cuban or North Korean models.

Sanders does *not* advocate the abolition of private property in the means of production. He does not even advocate massive wealth expropriations. He advocates breaking up banks and more progressive income taxes and the public subsidization of health care and public education (most of these things are quite common in Europe). Further, all of his policy proposals are contributions to the ongoing democratic debate of a democratic society, advanced as proposals to be legislated when and if a democratic majority of citizens can bring such an agenda into office through democratic elections.

BERNIE SANDERS DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST: A PRIMER

Sanders is running for president of the U.S. and seeking the freely given electoral support of American citizens. He is not organizing a vanguard revolutionary party intent on seizing power!

In other words, he is a *democratic socialist*.

publicseminar.org, February 12, 2016

The Sanders Campaign and ‘Political Revolution’

Support yes, credulity no

The Bernie Sanders campaign for president is one of the most exciting and hopeful developments in U.S. politics in decades. Sanders is, and long has been, a man of principle—*democratic socialist* principle. He articulates a clear message—that a more genuine democratic politics in the United States needs to mobilize millions of people on behalf of an egalitarian political economic agenda—and he does so in a way that is both consistent and intelligent. He is always “on message,” because he has expressed this message for decades and he knows and believes in it, not because he is properly “handled.” His campaign has thus far succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of most supporters and indeed apparently of its architects, in mobilizing large crowds, in raising extraordinary amounts of money on the basis of small donations, and in running neck-and-neck with Hillary Clinton in the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary. The Sanders campaign has a viability, and a Sanders victory in the primaries has a plausibility, which is surprising and even heartening to those of us who support greater social justice and equality. I support this campaign now because I believe its message is crucial and the campaign represents the most promising opportunity for this message of social justice to be empowered and also because I truly believe that committed democrats ought to embrace the possibility of surprises—what Hannah Arendt once called “miracles”—whereby conventional wisdoms are upset and new and good things become possible.

At the same time, my support consists almost exclusively in the opinions I can offer on the basis of what I honestly believe to be true. Political campaigns and movements need activists, and

true believers. But I am not an activist, and although I am deeply committed to liberal values, I am a true believer in nothing. I am a writer, a teacher, a political scientist, an editor, and an individual, and I owe it to myself, and to those I can reasonably believe might care about what I think, to reflect seriously on what is going on. Some may regard such a posture as something of a cop-out, or as a luxury that only a certain kind of self-styled “intellectual” can adopt. But I lead no organization, have no followers, wield no particular political power—I don’t even have a blog or a Twitter account!—and indeed I have nothing political to contribute except my honest opinion.

And so I must say that although I support the Sanders campaign now, and I believe that a strong Democratic candidate for president in 2016 can arise only from a vigorous contest for the nomination, I also have substantial skepticism about the “political revolution” that the Sanders campaign claims to be advancing. My deepest skepticism relates to what I think any Democratic president can hope to accomplish in the next eight years. Here Sanders may be more serious than Clinton, for in his more candid moments he insists that a president can do little without a movement behind him (or her!) and that this takes time and energy to build. I suspect that the chances of such a strong movement being mobilized over the medium term are very low. But even if I am wrong about this—and here only time will tell—I am skeptical, in a more proximate sense, about whether the Sanders campaign is as politically “revolutionary,” in a serious sense, as it claims to be, and whether it can really command the kind of “people power” to even win the Democratic primary, much less the presidency in November 2016. And I think the reasons for skepticism are important *politically*, because an exaggerated sense of the power of the Sanders campaign is closely linked to an exaggerated sense of grievance toward those Democrats, including some on the left, who are not Sanders supporters. I am concerned that the legitimate contest between Sanders and Clinton is beginning to generate a kind of rancor, on both sides, that can have the unintended consequence of strengthening the power of the Republicans in the coming election.

The ongoing dustup over Democratic party “superdelegates” encapsulates my skepticism. It will thus be my point of departure.

It cannot be doubted that the Democratic National Committee under the leadership of Debbie Wasserman Schultz has been transparently biased in favor of the Clinton candidacy. Nor can it be doubted that the Democratic party establishment, following the lead of the Clinton campaign, has employed some pretty “dirty” tactics to benefit the Clinton candidacy. But can serious left political analysts and strategists be surprised by this? There is a great deal of moralizing coming from Sanders supporters, including some formerly establishment figures such as Bob Reich, that the existence of “superdelegates” epitomizes the “rigging” of the “establishment.” But I submit that this moralizing needs a reality check.

For many decades American political parties were fairly insular organizations run by insiders and political machines—and the interest groups, including labor unions, that were both “patrons” and “beneficiaries” of these parties. Party nominees were typically selected by such insiders. Over time this method of selection was reformed, and primary elections were organized as a way of opening up the process to political competition and “public opinion.” Most of the delegates to national conventions are now chosen through primary elections and caucuses. But the national party organizations still retain the privilege of appointing a substantial number of “superdelegates” to represent the interests of “party regulars” in convention decisions. Is this bad? Is it contrary to democracy that political parties are organizations that have leaders who do the regular work of the parties and who therefore claim some guaranteed representation in the party’s own decision-making processes? Most of these “superdelegates” are Democratic officeholders at local and state levels, people active in the party in a way that most ordinary

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primary voters are not. Indeed, in the American system, nineteen states have open primaries. This means that a voter does not need to be a member or participant in a party, or even a regular voter/registered voter for the party, in order to decide to vote in the party's primary. In these states—which include Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Texas—anyone can vote in any party's primary. In these states Democratic Party delegates responsible for selecting candidates are selected through voting that can include not only registered Democrats, but also registered Republicans, anarchists, libertarians, and independents of all kinds. These practices, quite obviously, severely dilute and weaken parties. That is indeed their purpose. But is this a good thing for “democracy?” In most of the strong “social democracies” of Europe, there are strong political parties. In the United States, the “superdelegate” system is one important mechanism for counterbalancing this party weakening.

The Sanders campaign and its supporters, myself included, are proud to say that it would be a good thing if the politics of U.S. social policy were more like those of European countries such as Denmark or Germany or even the United Kingdom. But there is no advanced democracy in the world that has political parties as weak as the political parties in the United States. Some on the left are pleased to liken the Sanders ascendancy to the rise of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the British Labour Party. *But Corbyn has been an activist in the British Labour Party since 1974.* He rose through the ranks of that party and was selected as leader of the party through a party decision process that privileged the role of the party's affiliated trade unions. Corbyn is a party activist who was elevated by the party establishment in which he long participated. Is it “undemocratic” that labor unions and their representatives have special privileges in the British *Labour* Party? Is it unfair that lots of people—independents,

Conservatives, members of the far-right National Party, etc—who might have liked to see a more moderate Labour leader, were not part of the process? No serious person on the left would answer “yes.”

The fact is this: the United States—a deeply flawed system in manifold ways—is the only representative democracy where an individual who is not even a member of a major party can vie to become its principal national candidate. It is a good thing that Sanders can vie for the Democratic nomination for president. It is a wonderful thing that he can mobilize throngs of voters, many of them young people who are not regular participants in the political process. But the Democratic Party is a political party; it has a structure, and it has activists who work every day to advance its goals. Some of these activists are rich people and their lobbyists. Some of them are trade unionists and teachers and social workers. As a party, it furnishes advantages to its most dedicated participants. It is a strange “political revolution” that wishes to proceed as if these forces do not exist or ought not to exist and to moralize that they represent “corruption.”

The Sanders campaign, then, stands in a very peculiar relationship to the Democratic Party, derived in large part from the fact that its candidate is not a member of the party and many of its supporters have had little involvement in the party. If it is to win the Democratic Party nomination, it must reckon with the fact that this party has a history and an organization and certain procedures, one of which is that it “reserves” a certain number of delegates to be chosen by party leaders. In other words, *it is a political party*. This is a challenge. And the American two-party system most definitely is an obstacle to socialists, and others, who do not lean toward the center and who challenge the political status quo. But isn’t the point of a “political revolution” to reckon seriously with the obstacles to political change?

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In a fine recent piece in *Jacobin*, “The War on Bernie Sanders,” Matt Karp observed that “there is abundant evidence that the Democratic Party elite has thrown its full weight behind Clinton—and against Sanders—in ways that surpass any other primary campaign in recent history.” This seems true, and it is something that Sanders supporters must struggle against. But why cast this as a “war on Bernie Sanders” rather than what it is: an effort by party activists to do what party activists do—support the priorities, commitments, and candidates to which they have long been connected?

Here some sobering facts must be taken very seriously:

Clinton has won the support of thirty-nine of forty-six Senate Democrats, 158 of 188 House Democrats, and twelve of eighteen Democratic governors. (It is also sobering to note that in each case, Democrats constitute the minority of the class in question.)

Clinton has been endorsed by more than forty of seventy members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, including figures such as Maxine Waters, Eddie Bernice Johnson, Donna Edwards, and John Conyers—a long-time member of Democratic Socialists of America.

The Congressional Black Caucus PAC (political action committee) recently endorsed Clinton and disparaged Sanders. I happen to deplore this, and it is true, as Rep. Keith Ellison has insisted, that this PAC is not accountable to the actual Congressional Black Caucus. But it is also true that forty-one of forty-six individual members of the CBC have endorsed Clinton. This includes some of the most left-liberal members of Congress, including people—such as Waters and Conyers—who have long been considered beacons of the Democratic left. One can disagree with these forty-one individuals, each a substantial political force representing many thousands of people. But one cannot simply

chalk it all up to “rich lobbyists” or toadying.

In the same way, only months ago the mayoral victory of Bill de Blasio in New York City was hailed by left commentators as a victory for the left. Similar things were said about the electoral success of Sherrod Brown when he was elected to the Senate in 2007 and about Al Franken when he defeated Norm Coleman to win a Democratic Senate seat in 2009. These Democratic office holders are now all working for Clinton. Have they become sellouts? Or might they have good reasons to support a more “establishment” candidate, one of which might even be the desire to strengthen Democratic representation in Congress?

But it is not simply “the party establishment” that is in question. There is also “the establishment” more broadly. Sanders took some heat when he described Planned Parenthood, pejoratively, as part of “the establishment.” Well, in the real world, political parties and campaigns and movements are composed of constituent interests and organizations. Planned Parenthood, NARAL, and Emily’s List have long been considered very important and very left-liberal women’s organizations and stakeholders in the Democratic Party. They all support Clinton. So too do Stonewall Democrats and the Human Rights Campaign.

Most importantly for the left, the Clinton campaign has the endorsement of twenty-three unions, including AFSME, AFT, NEA, IAM (Machinists), Building Trades, UFCW (Foodworkers), and the SEIU. These are major unions. It is true that the CWA has endorsed Sanders, that the AFL-CIO has withheld endorsement thus far, and that many rank-and-file union activists and workers support Sanders. But the vast bulk of organized labor support has gone to the Clinton campaign. And some major labor leaders have emphatically endorsed Clinton. Dolores Huerta, the legendary leader of the United Farm

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Workers, supports Clinton. On October 24, 2013, I attended the celebration of the 60th anniversary of *Dissent* magazine. The event took place at the UFT hall in lower Manhattan. The opening remarks, a tribute to the magazine, and to the traditions of democratic socialism in the United States, were delivered by co-host Randi Weingarten, president of UFT. Weingarten is a major Clinton supporter, and her union has endorsed Clinton. What are we to make of this? Can this all be explained in terms of “establishment reaction?”

To be clear, many individuals associated with these groups support Sanders. Some important leaders support Sanders. And this support has no doubt helped to fuel the extraordinary success of the Sanders campaign. My point is not that Sanders lacks support. My point is that this support includes virtually *none* of the entire range of constituent groups that have long buttressed the democratic left in U.S. politics. We are talking about a substantial array of political forces, including many forces that would presumably anchor a real “political revolution” to transform status quo politics in the United States.

In what, then, does the “political revolution” currently consist? There is a set of real positions and proposals to legislate egalitarian reforms of the financial system, the system of higher education, and the health care system. And there is Sanders himself, a dynamic and charismatic figure who is both principled and seemingly indefatigable. But neither political ideas nor a political leader can constitute a “movement” much less a “revolution.” And I believe that Sanders and his key advisers would be the first to admit that the core of his “revolution” thus far has been his energetic and resourceful campaign organization, and its ability to mobilize millions of voters, especially new voters and young voters. This is a real mobilization, and it is indeed reason to be excited about the Sanders campaign.

But it is worth pointing out that we have been here before, with the Barack Obama campaigns of 2008 and 2012 and the Howard Dean campaign of 2004. Why should we expect the Sanders campaign's extraordinary mobilization of millennial voters to be any more enduring and any more transformative than the earlier mobilizations by Dean, who eventually tanked, and Obama, who *won*?

Indeed, the greatest reason for skepticism of the "political revolution" being promised may be Obama himself. It is worth recalling that in 2008 it was Obama who was widely hailed as a "transformative" candidate. He was no democratic socialist, as commentators on the left well knew. But he represented something new and exciting, not simply because he was African American, but because he was a former community organizer and an antiwar candidate and because he spoke for an exuberant left communitarianism and an audacious hope. I vividly recall how many of my friends who now enthusiastically support Sanders enthused about Obama in 2008. Now they are disappointed. I am not resorting to the cynical lines now being peddled by the Clinton campaign, in their effort to link her as closely as possible to Obama's achievements.

My friends who enthused about Obama in 2008 are *right* to be disappointed. Obama is a good president in many ways, and he has delivered some good things. But even though he mobilized much enthusiasm and many young voters and even though he voiced progressive values, he did not come to power with a substantial mass movement at his back, as he would have needed to do the "heavy lifting" that would be required of any substantial program of reform. And he faced substantial Republican opposition (which has only intensified) as well as red-baiting and race-baiting. He maneuvered, and feinted and jabbed and compromised and retreated, and made some good moves and some sorry moves. In truth, his program did not match his

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vision and especially his eloquence. Having ascended to the “commanding heights” of the strongest capitalist state in the world, he became largely a captive to this state—as any president is likely to become.

The obstacles facing Sanders are more daunting than those that faced Obama. That his aspirations are greater makes his success even less probable. Sanders is a tribune of a noble cause, a democratic socialist politician who has no substantial organized working class base, and a self-styled progressive who lacks the confidence of many of the most prominent progressive *organizations* in the United States. He stands for good things. I support many of these things, and so I support him. It is good that he is forcing the Democratic mainstream to the left. If Clinton is to be a strong candidate in the general election, as her supporters claim only she can be, then she will have to defeat Sanders in the primary. If she cannot defeat Sanders, then I do not see how she can claim to be the “most electable” candidate. The contest can thus only be good in testing ideas, in testing individual candidates, and in testing campaign organizations. Furthermore, who knows what might happen in the coming months? It is possible that a tide will turn and some organizational support might shift to Sanders. Or that Elizabeth Warren will join his team, and this will galvanize constituencies, including many women, behind a Sanders/Warren ticket. Or that through sheer electoral mobilization Sanders can win the Democratic primaries, and perhaps even the nomination, “over the heads” of the many organizations endorsing Clinton. This is very unlikely. But it is possible.

It is also possible that a sustained Democratic contest will lead to a Democratic candidate—a triumphant Sanders, a bloodied-but-standing Clinton—who will be unviable in a general election. This is a real risk to supporting Sanders. But at this point, I believe, it is a risk worth taking, because Clinton has yet to demonstrate her own viability, and because the contest is bringing to the fore

issues too-long ignored. It is very true that it is important for a Democrat—a strong, tested candidate with a strong base of support among organizations *and voters*—to win in November, and to have the power to nominate Supreme Court justices, and do many other things worth doing. It is also true that it is about time that the issues that Sanders is raising be brought to the front and center of the Democratic Party, if it is to win in November and, just as importantly, if it is to broaden its base and grow stronger in the future.

It thus makes sense to me to support Sanders now. But it also makes sense to face the facts. Chances are that he will win some primaries and lose many others and that in the convention the Democratic “superdelegates” will back Clinton, partly out of an understandable sense of “party loyalty,” but mainly because the organized forces that these delegates “represent” will have succeeded in mobilizing money and votes for Clinton, who is likely to have at least a plurality of delegates. And chances are that Clinton will be the Democratic nominee. If this happens, it will not be because “the establishment” made “war” on Sanders, or because immoral and corrupt “elites” opposed a noble man of justice. It will be because there exist what the late E. E. Schattschneider called strong “mobilizations of bias” in favor of the status quo, and these biases include the play of many organized interests including left interests, and the privileged position of business in a capitalist society, and the weaknesses and centrist leanings of organized labor, and, in the end, the fact that mass “public opinion” in the United States is not amenable to the selection of a democratic socialist presidential candidate on the Democratic ticket.

Sanders is right when he says that “the system” is “rigged.” It is the nature of systems to be “rigged”—and the duty of radicals to understand the difference between exhortation and

transformation. In this case the obstacles are many, and are reducible to no simple cause and surely not to the machinations of a small group of corrupt campaign donors and their lackeys. In the end, in November we will most likely be faced with a choice between corporate liberalism and corporate anti-liberalism. That for me will be an easy choice. But for now I support the anti-corporate candidate, because he is keeping things “real,” and miracles sometimes to happen, and who knows when an ember that is kept oxygenated now might really *burn* in the future? And while I am no true believer, I admire the idealism that the Sanders campaign has inspired and believe it is very important to value and support it.

I've shared these reflections with some friends who are Clinton supporters, some well-known people of the left who have expressed frustration that, after rehearsing the litany of limits of the Sanders campaign, I conclude by reiterating my support for it now. But the “for now” is a crucial part of what I am saying, for my sense of political responsibility entails an acute sensitivity to the passage of time. I am saying to Clinton supporters that they need to understand why many people question their candidate and now support Sanders because of the energy and ideas and possibilities he brings to a politics long mired in cynicism, even in spite of the limits of this campaign. But I am mainly speaking here to my friends who enthusiastically support Sanders. It is important for them to realize that the issues Sanders is raising are important, and the moral dimension of the Sanders campaign is elevating and valuable, but that this contest between Sanders and Clinton is not a struggle between angels and demons. The obstacles in the way of the Sanders campaign are very real, and they are rooted in the very real balance of forces in society, especially on the left. If Sanders loses, it will not be because of the malevolence of Clinton and her supporters. And if it comes to this,

it will be important for those who really care about the values Sanders promotes to take the full measure of the situation; to join the party and its constituent interest groups, including labor unions, to support the Democratic nominee; and at the same time to continue to do the hard work of building support for a more egalitarian agenda moving forward.

publicseminar.org, February 16, 2016

A Response to Occupy the Party

I had read “Occupy the Party” in an earlier version, posted on Facebook, and would like to offer a brief response.

I have four thoughts about this piece.

The first no doubt marks me as bourgeois: I don’t really know how to engage a “collective” in dialogue, and I personally prefer that when people address me they actually get my name right. Jeff Isaac. Period. Seriously: in my worldview, organizations have positions, but only specific individuals have opinions and write essays. I try always to take seriously the people with whom I engage. This sets me at a distance from Not an Alternative.

The second is that the piece is in many ways an intelligent, neo-Leninist or neo-Gramscian account of how self-styled “far-left” activists should understand the complex fissures within all institutions, link movements and parties, and engage the Democratic Party and the Sanders campaign. The piece is really addressed not to me or to people to my “right.” It is addressed to “infantile leftists,” whoever they are, who are dismissing the Sanders campaign and refusing to engage the Democratic Party (the piece indeed reminds me of Lenin’s classic 1920 pamphlet “Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder”).

The third is that I am a sincere Democrat as well as someone who thinks of himself as a member of the broad “democratic left,” and I can only welcome serious disagreement and political contention. The people who comprise Not an Alternative have every right to mobilize in the manner they advocate, and indeed I agree that the Sanders campaign has broadened discourse and opened up possibilities and this is good.

The fourth is that this collective argues from a position that is best described as left Schmittean (which is what Leninism

is): although it acknowledges the complexities of institutions, it still presumes a rather simple binary of “friends” and “enemies.” There is, essentially, the capitalist class and its supporters on the one side (am I a supporter of “class hegemony” by noting that something like it exists?) and the working class and its supporters on the other. One problem with this way of thinking is that all issues and forces do not so neatly resolve themselves to “class struggle.” This is a rather serious political and normative problem. But we’ve been here before. A second is that, unfortunately for Not an Alternative, there exists no mass working class support for the struggle that they seek to abet. They are thus largely speaking to themselves. That is a problem mainly for them, and I wish them luck in their efforts to struggle on behalf of socialism.

But it is not a problem *only* for them. For, as they know, actions have consequences.

They write, “The political question this poses for the far left is whether we want to join the battle tearing apart the Democratic Party. Instead of treating the party as some kind of authority with the power to co-opt our message, we need to treat it like any street or park and occupy it. The more we engage, the more damage we can do, at every turn demonstrating the gap between people and practice . . . The far left should support the Sanders campaign not in order to broaden or energize the Democratic Party but because this party, for now, is a site of struggle over the horizon of U.S. politics.”

This is *exactly* the perspective attributed to the Sanders campaign by supporters of Clinton. Indeed, many good friends and colleagues, smart people on the democratic left—not the “far left”—who support Clinton have argued with me that the ultimate consequence of the Sanders campaign will be a weakening of the Democratic Party and its eventual presidential candidate, and a likely Republican victory. I have argued that this

is not necessarily true. Not an Alternative agrees with my pro-Clinton friends, and indeed they articulate exactly the view that is feared—rightly—by my pro-Clinton friends. They say nothing about the Republican Party. They speak only of “occupying” and thus “damaging” the Democratic Party, by bringing to the fore its contradictions (and perhaps exploding them in the name of a new “party?”).

This is a strategy. I do not believe that it is even remotely a strategy for developing a long-term socialist majority in the United States. But it is a strategy for promoting discord on the left and for probably throwing the presidential election to the Republicans—with dire long-term consequences for most people that “the left” claims to care about.

Such a result will greatly darken the horizon of U.S. politics.

I hope that most of the young people who now enthusiastically support the Sanders campaign will see this, and that as the primary contest unfolds, they will act accordingly.

publicseminar.org, February 21, 2016

Neither Angels nor Demons and the Importance of Coalescing to Defeat Donald Trump

In a televised AP interview in May 2016, Bernie Sanders was asked if he thought the Democratic Party convention this summer would be contentious. He replied, “I think if they make the right choice and open the doors to working-class people and young people and create the kind of dynamism that the Democratic Party needs, it’s going to be messy. . . . Democracy is not always nice and quiet and gentle but that is where the Democratic Party should go. . . . Democracy is messy. Everyday my life is messy. But if you want everything to be quiet and orderly and allow, you know, just things to proceed without vigorous debate, that is not what democracy is about.”

Sanders was right.

A number of Democrat-leaning commentators, most notably MSNBC’s Chris Matthews, were taken aback by Sanders’s statement, concerned that a divisive and rancorous convention could weaken the presumptive Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton.

They were also right.

To be clear, Sanders was much *more* right. Democracy, even in the attenuated and quasi-oligarchic version practiced in the United States, is contentious and messy. There are real differences of opinion and interest. People are free to express their opinions and to act on their perceived interests. This generally involves conflict. The Sanders campaign has mobilized issues and

constituencies. They are part of the political process, they will be heard, and they should be heeded, especially by Democratic Party leaders interested in expanding the party base and in winning the presidential election.

Elections are, at least ideally, about things that matter—issues, policies, reforms, legal recognition. If the Democratic Party hopes to win the election, it must care about these things, and it must take seriously the opinions of the diverse constituencies that make up its coalition. A party convention is not a coronation. It is an assembly designed to forge a platform through position-taking, argument, and compromise to generate energy for the general election and to select a candidate who can credibly represent that platform and its constituents and channel that energy.

The horror expressed at Sanders's words is foolish and betrays a misunderstanding of both democracy in general and the very real political and partisan crisis in which we currently find ourselves. If there is a way beyond stasis—and I personally doubt that there is such a way—then it can come only from an openness of the Democratic Party to the constituencies and issues mobilized by Sanders and his supporters.

At the same time, the liberal pundits in question were also partly right. The United States is not a deliberative democracy, and presidential elections in particular are highly mediated and in many ways hyper-real performance contests, centered on “media moments” and played out, not in town meetings and citizen assemblies, but on television screens and Twitter feeds. This has never been clearer than it is at the current moment, when the Republican candidate for president, Donald Trump, is above all a reality-TV star and media manipulator par excellence. If the Democratic Party convention gets too contentious and too “messy,” it might be possible to describe the event as an exemplary enactment of radical democracy. But it might also be possible to describe the event as a public spectacle of confusion and weakness that will contrast mightily with the authoritarian, scripted, and produced TV spectacle that Trump will no doubt put on for the Republicans in Cleveland. Given the fact that the presumptive Democratic nominee, Clinton, is the first woman

ever to run for president as a major U.S. party candidate and that she has been subjected to thirty years of vilification with a strong sexist component, this eventuality is likely to severely weaken her and to strengthen Trump.

This is not an argument for shutting down legitimate debate. There is never a good argument for shutting down legitimate debate, though no form of politics is an everlasting conversation without end points, and there surely are arguments to be made for resolving disagreements, at least provisionally, and moving on. This, however, is an argument for a mindfulness regarding consequences.

Among Sanders supporters, there seem to be two main responses to this situation. One is sometimes summed up in the phrase “Bernie or Bust.” On this view, there is little difference between Clinton and Trump, and seizing every opportunity to advocate for and publicize radical positions and demands is much more important than preventing a vicious right-wing populist from being elected. In one version of this view, if there is a problem, it is Clinton’s, and hers alone. In another, it is not even clear that Clinton—“warmonger” and “neoliberal” that she is—is better than Trump.

Robert Reich, one of the most visible supporters of Sanders from the start, has effectively challenged this way of thinking in a number of recent Facebook posts that can be summed up simply: people who believe in equality have every reason to support Sanders over Clinton and Trump, but there is a huge difference between Clinton and Trump, and if Clinton wins the Democratic nomination, those who refuse to support her election (at least by voting) will be enhancing the likelihood that Trump will be elected president (a supporter of Ralph Nader’s candidacy in 2000 has also made a similar plea). I know many people who are not (yet?) convinced of Reich’s argument. Although some

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are no doubt true believers in radical left organizing, many more seem to be motivated by a moralistic refusal to “dirty their hands” with Clinton or indeed with either of the two major parties. They would prefer to vote for the Green Party, or something else, or not to vote at all, come what may.

I consider this short-sighted and unfortunate. But some people will go this route, choosing symbolic indignation over serious political judgment regarding the likely consequences of their action. And that is their choice, as regrettable and perhaps deplorable as I (and many others) may consider it to be.

A second response is much more serious and more political, and it contains genuine insight. Many versions of this response have come across my Facebook feed, best represented by a recent post by Corey Robin. An important and widely read blogger and writer, Robin has sought to avoid the more polarizing arguments between Sanders and Clinton supporters. He has made clear that there are good reasons why some on the left would support Clinton even if he does not. Although he supports Sanders, Robin has also made clear that if and when forced to choose (in November) between Clintonian neoliberalism and Trumpism, his opposition to the latter would trump his opposition to the former. At the same time, he takes issue with pundits who chastise Sanders supporters for their “combativeness” and their refusal to fall in line behind Clinton. He thus cites a recent Yougov.com poll showing that “half of Sanders voters are not yet ready to support Clinton in a Clinton-Trump matchup.” (May 26, 2016) Robin responds, “I hope the Clinton campaign and its media surrogates understand: their challenge is not the chatter on social media; it’s not the Bernie Bros; it’s not crypto-Trump supporters; it’s the voters.”

The implication seems straightforward: because Clinton claims to be the stronger and better Democratic candidate,

and because she appears to be winning the primary balloting, the responsibility is now on *her* to mobilize an electoral coalition sufficient to defeat Trump. And if she believes that she “deserves” the support of most or at least many Sanders supporters moving forward, then she needs to earn that support by making credible commitments to the issues these supporters embrace and to a fairly organized convention in which these supporters will have a voice.

Robin is absolutely right. In an electoral democracy, no candidate is “entitled” to any votes. Every vote must be earned. And any politician who seeks public office must in the first instance assume responsibility for garnering the support they need to be elected. It is bad faith to invoke Weberian notions of “political responsibility” against Sanders supporters while absolving Clinton of primary responsibility for her own vulnerabilities as a candidate.

Nevertheless, precisely because no politician operates in a vacuum, no politician can be held exclusively “responsible” for their situation. It is reasonable to ask the Clinton camp, loudly and insistently, what are you doing to earn the support of Sanders adherents? But it is *also* reasonable to ask Sanders adherents, what can Clinton do, short of morphing into Sanders, to earn your support? To be clear, many Sanders supporters, and indeed sometimes Sanders himself, are prepared to furnish real answers to this question (more in a moment). But as I read the blogosphere and monitor my own very active Facebook page, I discern some troubling tendencies among many, though not all, Sanders supporters, including some very smart and good people with whom I am personally close. These include the following:

Insensitivity to the decades of relentless and often misogynistic attacks that have been leveled against Hillary Clinton, the first woman (presumptively to be sure) to claim the mantle of

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leadership of a major political party in the history of the United States: this requires no further gloss. That it has motivated a great many prominent left liberals—including many women who have long been deservedly respected for their advocacy of gender equality—to support Clinton should not be lost on anyone who takes gender equality seriously. This does not mean that feminists “must” support Clinton rather than Sanders. But it does mean that all people who care about gender equality should be mindful of the role of vicious sexism in shaping Clinton’s public image as well as the trajectory of her long career as a professional woman. They should be equally mindful of the horror and fear at the prospect of a Trump presidency that fills the hearts of so many important feminists.

Tone deafness to Clinton’s real appeal to the many voters—more voters than have supported Sanders, however you count them—who have supported her because of her admirable stands on a range of issues that matter deeply to them as women or members of racial or sexual minorities or simply as liberals who believe in equal opportunity and Clinton’s brand of “inclusion” and “lowering boundaries” and “leaning in.” Clinton may be a neoliberal on economics; she may be a liberal hawk on foreign policy, and for many, these are the reasons to oppose Clinton and support Sanders. But for others, these things are not dispositive, or on balance, these voters lean Clinton because she “represents,” symbolically and programmatically, what they consider most important. Disagreeing, even strongly, with such people is fine. However, speaking and acting as if these people—apparently the majority of those who voted in the Democratic primary—are foolish adherents of “identity politics,” tools of neoliberalism, or otherwise inessential or lacking in “progressive” credibility is not fine. There are reasons why many interest groups traditionally associated with the center left as well as the most important labor

unions support Clinton. Clinton has genuine strengths, in terms of the constituencies to whom she primarily appeals as well as her positions on many issues—especially when compared with the positions of her Republican contemporaries. At some point, it seems reasonable for Sanders supporters to recognize this.

A level of vituperation about Clinton's "neoliberalism" and "Wall Street ties" that far exceeds the rancor expressed toward almost any other mainstream Democratic politician, including Barack Obama, virtually all of whom are liable to the same criticisms. No serious commentator has gone farther down this road than Jeffrey Sachs—the Columbia University economist considered an architect of neoliberal "shock therapy" in the nineties in Russia, Poland, and elsewhere and who has become a major Sanders supporter—who has declared that Clinton is "the candidate of Wall Street . . . [and] the candidate of the military-industrial complex . . . the list of her incompetence and warmongering goes on." (*HuffPost*, February 5, 2017) Clinton shares responsibility for many very bad foreign policies. But it is worth noting that these were policies of the Obama administration, that they had much Democratic political support, and that Clinton is hardly uniquely responsible for them. To call Clinton a "warmonger" and "a threat to world peace" is a bit much. To be clear, Sachs is a smart man, and he is entitled to employ whatever rhetoric he chooses. But if anyone should appreciate the fact that power often involves "dirty hands," it is he.

In March 2012, Sachs wrote a fascinating and exemplary piece, "What I Did in Russia," in which he explained the complex intellectual and political responsibilities animating his economic interventions in the nineties ("A successful economic advisor must chart out a feasible course of action that solves the acute economic problems"). I am sure he would blanch at being called "a capitalist tool" or "a destroyer of social security for millions,"

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and rightly so. He chose to engage in a difficult situation and to work with existing institutions, including financial and political institutions with “dirty hands,” to promote a conception of a “smooth” and “fair” (economic) reform. Is that so different from what Clinton, and the many establishment Democrats, including “Wall Street people,” have done? Again, the point is not that Clinton is beyond criticism for her choices and their consequences. She has served many roles in what Louis Althusser once called “the political and ideological apparatuses of the state.” In these capacities, she has done many things for which she is and should be held responsible. But some sense of proportion should be considered in assessing this responsibility, especially amidst the obvious effort of the Trump campaign to revive every nasty slander ever leveled against the woman.

Schadenfreude attraction to right-wing scandal mongering about email servers, influence peddling, and the arrogance of “the Clintons” that sometimes exceeds credulity. These issues are important, but it is also important to recognize that much of the rhetoric on display is simply a rehashing of a vicious Republican propaganda campaign against the Clinton Administration back in the nineties that involved the impeachment of a U.S. president for a sexual indiscretion. That’s right, an indiscretion. In 1998, the president of the United States was impeached by a Republican-controlled House for the “high crime and misdemeanor” of being fellated by a female aide and lying about it. Are the Clintons beyond reproach? Of course not, but one would think that self-identified people on the left who support Sanders would also be able to acknowledge that much of this anti-Clinton hysteria is a well-orchestrated construction of the conservative media. “Vast right-wing conspiracy” might be a slight exaggeration. But only slight.

There’s also their moralistic refusal to take “yes, kind of” for an answer: a common refrain among some Sanders supporters

is that Clinton is an opportunist who has sought to steal many of Sanders's issues. Sanders, for example, has long and nobly supported a \$15 hourly federal minimum wage. In some of the debates Clinton waffled on whether she supported this policy or supported "getting there" over time. After much hedging, Clinton (seemingly) came out in support of a \$12 minimum wage. This might be inadequate. It is also far in excess of the current \$7.50 federal minimum wage. Is this opportunism or compromise—or both? A similar dynamic has unfolded regarding trade agreements, "too big to fail," publicly supported access to higher education, and many other issues: Clinton has haltingly but clearly tacked to the left in response to the rhetorical and political successes of the Sanders campaign. It makes perfect sense for Sanders supporters to be skeptical of Clinton. It makes sense for Sanders activists to commit themselves to a relentless and long-term strategy of pressuring Clinton and the Democratic Party from the left, now and into the future. But as the primary season comes to a close, and as a Clinton nomination becomes almost a certainty, does it not also make sense to dial back some of the bitter rhetoric for now and to prepare in a serious way for the fact that, while the broader political struggle continues, the narrower electoral contest for the presidency in November will boil down to a choice between a flawed and compromised Hillary Clinton and a vicious and reactionary Donald Trump?

Here we arrive at the most knotty issue: the political responsibility of Sanders. This is complicated for three reasons: first, talk of Sanders's responsibility can easily slide into a kind of absolution regarding Clinton, who now bears the major responsibility for the fate of her candidacy. Second, although the mass media has largely refrained (so far) from red-baiting Sanders, most pundits have been happy to treat the Clinton nomination as a *fait accompli* and have often moralized about

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the “destructiveness” of a Sanders campaign that has by and large stayed focused on issues and that “owes” Clinton no deference. Third, these factors have helped to generate an extraordinary defensiveness among many Sanders supporters, who tend to regard any criticism of Sanders as an affront to decency.

All the same, Sanders is now a major public personality, the symbolic leader of a real movement, and a constant media presence. What he says matters. And what he has said on the topic of Clinton has been ambiguous. He has made it clear that he will ultimately work hard to defeat Trump. He has said and done many things that either state or clearly signal a willingness to engage the Democratic Party establishment, to negotiate and to compromise, and to play a constructive role in the convention and in the November campaign. Indeed, it seems pretty clear, at least to me, that this is his overriding intention.

Nevertheless, he has said and done things that raise doubts, suggesting he is willing to play “hardball” pretty far down to the wire or that the “price” of his “constructive engagement” will be unreasonably high, perhaps impossibly high. In late April, for example, Sanders articulated a position well summed up in this heading: “Bernie Sanders Suggests Clinton Will Need to Back ‘Medicare for All’ to Win His Supporters.” (*NY Mag*, April 26, 2016) Indeed, this brings us back to the recent comment about “messiness” with which I began. Sanders continues to maintain that his campaign, his delegates, and his supporters are planning to press their agenda at the Democratic convention. They have every right to do this. Further, their agenda represents important forms of “inclusion” about which Clinton comes up short. The pressing of this agenda is a good thing for the Democratic Party and for the cause of social justice. Insisting that the platform, or more importantly the Clinton campaign, incorporate Sander’s positions on wages, banks, trade, health care, and public

education is legitimate. Insisting that the Clinton campaign not simply gesture toward or compromise with these positions but embrace them *in toto* is a demand that Clinton cannot possibly accept. Her acceptance of such a demand would foolishly limit her campaign. Clinton needs Sanders supporters, but if she is going to win, she also needs her own supporters as well as independent voters and even some liberal Republicans.

This all boils down to a simple point, well-stated in the title of a piece by Joshua Holland in *the Nation*: “Clinton Needs Sanders Supporters to Win, But Sanders Needs Clinton Supporters to Change the System.” (May 24, 2016) Of course, there is a possible rejoinder to this, from many of Sanders’s supporters and perhaps even from Sanders: the Democratic Party is *not* my party; it is simply the most convenient vehicle through which to pursue a “political revolution.” Although such a rejoinder is possible, it is not plausible and is not even “true” to what the Sanders campaign has been, done, and represented. Sanders has campaigned, mightily, for the Democratic presidential nomination. He continues this campaign, he plans to influence the party convention, and he has assumed a major national role as a party leader.

Whereas some of his supporters might, legitimately, refuse to identify with the party—that is their choice—Sanders, and his campaign, has become linked to the party and is seeking change within the party. This makes the candidate, and the campaign, responsible for the party and electoral consequences of every move that is made between now and November. The “revolution” that Sanders has announced exceeds the party. But its fate is now tied to the fate of the party. This is a resource for Clinton, and an opportunity that she should not squander (recent actions provide a hopeful sign). It is bad to be a sore loser, but it is both bad and foolish to be an exultant and ungracious winner. Yet, it is also

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bad, and foolish, to be a sore loser, especially when in a broader sense you have not “lost.” The Sanders campaign has far exceeded everyone’s expectations, including those of Sanders, in opening up the Democratic Party to new constituencies and in shifting it leftward. Owning this accomplishment by joining forces with other Democratic constituencies is important to move the party forward in the general election.

There are no angels and demons in this contest between Clinton and her supporters and Sanders and his supporters. There are centrist, “neoliberal” Democrats on the one side and left-liberal Democrats and independent leftists on the other. Indeed, a host of issues traverse this divide in “intersectional” ways and others that transcend this divide. In the coming months, as these many issues are debated, two that transcend the differences will come to the fore—defeating a Trump candidacy and fighting to end the Republican control of Congress. In this fight, Clinton will almost certainly be the standard bearer, but she will not stand alone.

Clinton will succeed only if she is able to rally supporters to her side. These supporters must come from and cross various divides: they will include mainstream Democratic Party loyalists and believers in the Clinton vision; Democratic Party activists, such as U.S. Rep. Keith Ellison, who are insurgent leaders within their own party and whose commitment to Sanders is linked to their commitment to work within the party to move it leftward; voters who are moved by sheer lesser-evilism, who have no love for Clinton and no commitment to any version of liberalism, but who cannot bear the thought of a Trump presidency (and these supporters will be crucial); and left-movement activists who were drawn to the Sanders vision and mobilized by the Sanders campaign, who are committed not to any particular politician or electoral victory, but to a cause and a movement that exceeds November 2016 and exceeds conventional two-party politics.

In 2001, Robert Kuttner, one of the founding editors of the liberal *American Prospect*, published a short piece entitled “Why Liberals Need Radicals.” Writing in the aftermath of the Seattle demonstrations, and perhaps anticipating the Occupy movement to come much later, he noted, “If the terms of global capitalism are finally becoming debatable, we can thank the young radicals for forcing the issue.” Kuttner explained why he nonetheless considered himself a liberal rather than a radical (readers of the *American Prospect* will know that as a liberal Kuttner has consistently written in support of the Sanders agenda). “But,” he concluded, “I’m glad my radical friends are there. American liberalism is weak today not because there are too many radicals to our left, but too few.”

At this moment, there are a few more radicals to the left of American liberals than there were in 2001, and there are many more citizens willing to avow support for left policies, to show up in thousands to political rallies, and to vote for a man who is an avowed “democratic socialist.” This is a moment of opportunity and a moment of challenge, for liberals and for those to their left. For liberals, the opportunity is to win a Democratic election and to strengthen the Democratic Party. The challenge is to be open to and willing to incorporate aspects of the Sanders agenda and, perhaps even more important, to welcome participation of activists who propel this agenda. For Sanders and his supporters, the opportunity is to shift public discourse in the United States to the left and to have a palpable impact on shaping the national policy agenda moving forward. Their challenge is to be willing to be incorporated and co-opted by the Democratic Party establishment, for now, and to be willing to compromise with the neoliberal center and to back the candidate—Clinton—who represents this center.

To support a neoliberal candidate is not to sanctify her nor is

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it to embrace everything she stands for—though, I repeat, she stands for much that is good under the banner of “inclusion.” It is perfectly reasonable for Sanders supporters to continue supporting Sanders now; to work at the convention, in a spirit of constructive contention, to press the Democratic Party and its candidate to the left and to publicize and advocate on behalf of greater economic quality; to mobilize electorally in support of Clinton in the months leading up to the election; and to continue building a left movement, and advocating on behalf of its agenda, in the aftermath of the election. Timing is everything. I submit that now is the time to start dialing down the rhetoric, to focus on the issues, and to recognize that the November election, a few months away, is only an election, not the end of political contestation. At the same time, it is an election whose outcome *really* matters.

Neoliberalism is an impoverished form of politics. At the same time, it is still a kind of liberalism. And the November U.S. presidential election offers a stark choice: neoliberalism or barbarism.

publicseminar.org, May 30, 2016

Why Melania Trump's Plagiarism Matters

Two paragraphs from Melania Trump's speech last night before the Republican National Convention were almost word for word the same as two paragraphs from Michelle Obama's 2008 speech. This is a fact. Such verbatim quoting without attribution is called plagiarism. Plagiarism is widely recognized as a kind of cheating, indeed as a kind of theft. A plagiarist is someone who steals the words of others and makes believe that they are his or her own words. Plagiarism is a violation of common sense standards of integrity. It is also a violation of expectations that are widely shared by the major institutions of our society, including schools, professional institutions—including bar associations and business schools—and media institutions.

Melania's speech involved plagiarism. And the author of her speech was a plagiarist.

Why does this matter? After all, the plagiarism in question involved only two paragraphs. And the speech in question was not a substantial political speech by a candidate, but "only" a performance by the candidate's wife. Right? *Wrong*.

The first and most important reason why this plagiarism matters is because of what it demonstrates about the ethics, or rather the lack of ethics, of the Trump campaign itself: that the campaign plays fast and loose with the truth, and consistently acts as if it can say or do whatever it wants, simply deny responsibility, and then angrily maintain that its critics are always wrong and the fault is theirs. Trump is always right. His critics are always evil. The brouhaha over this plagiarized speech is simply a blatant example of this. Just deny the obvious, defensively maintain innocence, and then blame those who point

out the obvious wrongdoing, claiming that they are liars, they are evil, they are self-interested. On this logic, it's all Hillary Clinton's fault! In any other sphere of life such behavior would be regarded as transparently self-serving and juvenile. And yet this is the *modus operandi* of the Trump campaign. The campaign rests on lies and innuendos and provocations.

The second reason the plagiarism matters is because of what it demonstrates about the campaign as an organization: that the campaign is an organization only in the loosest of senses. It has no campaign manager in a proper sense; it has little clear structure; it has devoted little time and energy to fundraising or building an electoral ground game; and it seems entirely driven by the whims and the ego of Trump himself, and by his small coterie of advisers who, like Paul Manafort, have an established track record of unscrupulous behavior. The Trump presidential campaign is not being run in a professional manner. It has consistently proven unable to properly plan or to anticipate the likely effects of its own activities or to demonstrate even the most rudimentary form of political responsibility of the sort that many citizens of our highly mediated electoral democracy expect. The campaign is inept, and it consistently masks its ineptitude with bravado and threats.

And this brings me to the third reason why the plagiarism is important: the extent to which the entire campaign is an extension of Trump's ego, and thus a perverse and tacky family affair rather than a serious coalition of diverse political people. Everywhere Trump goes his adult children follow. His children are touted as his key advisers. His sons serve as important campaign spokesmen. His 34-year-old daughter Ivanka—who seems like a nice enough person, but whose entire career has involved showcasing the Trump genes and the Trump brand—is presented to the public as his chief confidant and political genius, to the absurd extent of actually being mentioned as a possible vice presidential candidate. Every U.S. president and presidential candidate in recent history has had a family. In almost every case, these families included spouses, or children, who had demonstrated real accomplishment, on their own, in business

or journalism or education or medicine or the law. In no case has a family ever played such an important role in a campaign's operations and in its public presentation as Trump's family plays in his campaign. We are talking about a bunch of people in their thirties, who were raised with silver spoons in their mouths, and who have all risen to "success" as acolytes of their wealthy father. The situation would be laughable were it not so frightening. Some of these young people might be fine individuals. Some seem quite clearly to be arrogant punks. *This* is the "brain trust" behind the Trump campaign? These are the faces of the Republican Party?

Finally, there is Melania herself, the woman who spoke the plagiarized words in question. It is difficult to comment on this woman given the rampant sexism in our culture. That she is Slovenian, that she is a beautiful former model, that she is a much younger woman—these are things that are not relevant to any assessment of her character, personality, or accomplishments. At the same time, it is impossible to completely ignore such things, in connection to her husband, given the fact that she is being escorted across the public stage as "the next First Lady of the U.S." For Trump uses women, and he has a history of seeking approbation for the beautiful woman he has been able to use as "eye candy." And Melania was being showcased as a way of promoting Trump's own masculinity, before the Republican Party and before the entire world. Her prescribed role was a simple one: to look beautiful, to say some things about the "hard work" that brought her before our eyes, and to sing the praises of Donald. What else could anyone expect from her given the role she has long played in her husband's public performances? If she was put in a difficult or compromising position by the campaign, or furnished with plagiarized words, that is unfortunate. And ultimately the campaign is about Trump and not about her. So some of the sympathy being expressed for Melania in the media

WHY MELANIA TRUMP'S PLAGIARISM MATTERS

is understandable. At the same time, she is Trump's wife, the woman who represents his sense of "family values" (his previous two buxom and blonde former-model ex-wives are things of the past, having served their roles as carriers of the Trump genes). And she is 46 years old. She is a grown woman. *Is she not responsible for herself and for her own words?* It is claimed in her promotional materials that she is an accomplished and dedicated businesswoman. Perhaps she is (though apparently when she met her future husband the multi-millionaire she was a 26 year-old model). It is also claimed that she is a graduate of University in Slovenia. She is not a university graduate. And indeed, while the locution, with its capitalized "U," seems to imply that there exists a particular university from which she graduated, there is in fact no actual university being referenced here. University in Slovenia? That would be like me listing on my CV "University in United States." Fast and loose with the truth she is—assuming that she has had anything to do with her own narrative on her own website.

Shortly before presenting her partly-plagiarized speech—and plagiarism is kind of like pregnancy; either you plagiarize or you don't; she did—Melania claimed that she wrote the speech herself. With all due regard for the solicitude of media pundits who prefer to think of Melania as a victim of campaign staffers, why doubt this? Is it really so difficult to imagine that the model who Trump married, who claims to have graduated a university that does not exist, whose entire life has centered on the airbrushed presentation of herself, and who chose to marry an egomaniacal and narcissistic sexist whose most obvious character trait is his great wealth, would plagiarize a speech?

The Trump campaign chose to begin its reality-TV inspired, heavily scripted and produced spectacle of a convention by showcasing "Melania." Perhaps what viewers saw and heard is

a perfect representation of Trump and his campaign: all show and no substance, all mendacity and no truth, and all ego and no real concern for anyone else. Say what you want. Do what you want. Vilify others and then steal their words. Get caught and then try to shout down and bully those who notice. This is not an aberration. This is Trumpism. One can only hope that a few months from now we can laugh about this absurd reality TV show being enacted before our eyes. And yet I fear that the joke may be on us.

publicseminar.org, July 19, 2016

Mothers and Their Children

Further thoughts on Trump and “family values”

Good evening. I’m Donald Trump, Jr. Thank you. I’m the father of five young children, from two-year-old Chloe to Kai who just turned nine. I’m the husband to Vanessa, an amazing wife and mother, and the son of a great man. –Donald Trump Jr., before the Republican National Convention.

For decades the Republican Party has trumpeted the importance of “family values,” as part of a more general strategy of using so-called wedge issues—race, gender, ethnicity, religion—to appeal to largely white working-class male voters. With the candidacy of Donald Trump, the Republicans have reached new heights of familiarity and familiarity. They have nominated one of the most notorious womanizers in our popular culture, someone who has deliberately promoted his image as a Casanova, and who at the same time has resolutely promoted his own children, setting them up in businesses bearing the Trump brand, and thrusting them into the public eye. The role of the four adult Trump children in their father’s campaign and in the Republican National Convention is unprecedented. It is also an exceptionally savvy move conceived by a master showman and reality television personality. Whenever a challenge arises, the Trump children are pressed forward as personifications of Trump’s essential goodness. In recent days practically every journalist on the cable news networks, including Rachel Maddow, has gushed about how poised, bright, good-looking, and impressive Donald Jr., Ivanka, Eric, and Tiffany are, and about what this says about Donald Trump the man, a line repeated by the Trump children themselves: our father is a wonderful man and a devoted father who has raised us to be upstanding American citizens.

Melania Trump fits rather uneasily in this narrative. We can

put the plagiarism question to one side. In recent weeks and months we have been treated to an endless series of photo ops of “the Trump family”: Donald, the four adult children, and the wife—Donald’s *third* wife—who is mother to *none* of the four adult children, and who is a mere eight years older than Donald’s eldest son. Picture perfect perhaps. But perfect? Unlikely.

Let us also put to one side the obvious and common tensions that exist between children and their fathers who remarry much younger women, and between those children and their new “stepmothers.” Let us imagine that the master of *The Art of the Deal* has managed to do some wonderful deals with his children. Let us imagine them relatively happy among themselves.

But there is something missing from this happy picture: the actual mothers of the adult children. The eldest three children are the children of Ivana Trump, Donald’s first wife. The youngest of the adult children, Tiffany, is the daughter of Marla Maples, the actress with whom Donald conducted an affair that led to the breakup of his first marriage and the excommunication of glamorous Ivana in favor of the younger Marla. This is a blended family if ever there was one. It is possible to look at the family together and wonder “which one is the wife.” Is it possible to look at the four children together and imagine a beautiful harmony, in spite of the fact that young Tiffany apparently was raised by her mother in California, far away from Donald and the others in New York? What was that like for her? One can only wonder.

There are so many things to wonder about here. It could be said, rightly, that these are private matters, unrelated to matters of politics or policy. In a way this is true, and it seems wrong to probe into the lives of these young people, each of whom has their own life to live. On the other hand, it is their father who has made them who they are—something they seem very happy to prate about—and who has thrust them into the public eye, and

MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

presented them as evidence of his manly virtue and family values, and, bizarrely, as his closest confidants. So the questions are unavoidable.

As I listened to Donald Jr., give his speech last night, I was struck by that opening statement, about being “the son of a great man.” Did Donald actually birth his namesake, I wondered? Or perhaps Jr. sprung from his father’s ample forehead, as the goddess Athena was said to have sprung from the forehead of Zeus? In fact, as we all know, Jr. has a father and he *also* has a *mother*. His mother was once a young model from Eastern Europe named Ivana. Then she bore children, and aged. And the rest is history.

I point this out not to judge the private affairs of these individuals, but to judge the public spectacle that the media are buying hook, line, and sinker. It is only possible to look at the Trump family and see a wonderful assemblage of wonderful people by choosing to simply ignore the history of adultery that led to this moment in the life of Trump, and to simply forget the fact that the wonderful children who appear before our eyes were not raised by their self-absorbed father, but by mothers who are now relegated to historical oblivion.

These things quite obviously have little to do with the many important reasons why Trump ought to be feared by all who believe in liberal democracy.

But they are indicative nonetheless, of the hypocrisy with which Republicans trumpet “family values,” and the brazenness with which Trump will manipulate the media to project images of himself, and the sexism that is so manifest in every aspect of the person and the persona that is Donald Trump. These features of the Trumps are not matters of public policy. But they reflect attitudes that bear heavily on policy, and even more heavily on the narcissistic and authoritarian personality of the paterfamilias himself.

#AgainstTrump

May he be kept far away from political power.

publicseminar.org, July 20, 2016

Why I Support Hillary Clinton for President

A letter to my friends on the left

I support Hillary Clinton's election unreservedly, and intend to work for her election, though I have no illusions about her character or her politics. My primary motivation is my absolute opposition to the candidacy of Donald Trump, who I regard as a danger to liberal democracy. Liberal democracy is a very flawed system that has in different ways been eroded by both the Bush and Obama administrations. But with Trump we are dealing with a brazen authoritarian who is hostile to civil liberties, pluralism, legality, and equal rights, and who mobilizes racism and xenophobia.

Honestly, I would have supported Clinton even if the Republican candidate had been George Bush or John Kasich or whoever. Because parties do matter, largely because of the constituencies they mobilize and represent, and in my view any Democratic candidate is preferable to any Republican candidate. This is "lesser evilism," and I embrace it unapologetically as an approach to electoral support (all politics is not elections) especially in the waning months and weeks of a campaign when the contestants are clear.

That is not the only reason I am comfortable supporting Clinton. Although I understand the limits of "lean in" feminism, I also think it is a very progressive and principled commitment. It is a commitment that every woman I have ever befriended, collaborated with, parented, or loved has embraced. It is, indeed, a commitment that the most incisive feminist scholars who criticize it also embrace when it comes to their own tenure and promotion and professional development. I admire the way Clinton has promoted this commitment in the face of much hostility, and I believe it would be great progress for the U.S. to finally elect a woman as president who is committed to liberal

gender equality.

There are other things about Clinton that I also like, even though in general I am averse to partisan establishments and she is very much an establishment person. I believe that American society suffers from serious injustices that the Democratic establishment does not seriously oppose to my satisfaction. The party can be described as “corporate” and “neoliberal” (though I think that both of these terms are typically bandied about with little care) and I don’t like this. I welcomed the Sanders campaign. In terms of positions I lean in that direction. I know Clinton is an “insider” and she is rich, etc. But she is also a decent and indeed a pioneering liberal feminist in a world still gravely in need of this kind of feminism. She is a liberal centrist, no more nor less corrupt than most other liberal centrist politicians. She is far superior to Trump, and Trump is the only other person who could possibly be elected.

In addition, Clinton is the first woman in the history of the United States to be nominated as the presidential candidate of a major party, and she is the first woman in the nation’s history to have a real chance at becoming president. This is major. *Major*. I don’t agree with everything she stands for. But what she most symbolizes, and what has caused her to be the object of so much hatred, is something I emphatically support: the right of women to receive the same treatment as men, and the possibility of women achieving success and leadership in this country without facing obstacles based on their gender. Can the symbolic and real importance of this not be evident to my friends on the left, *now*? Okay, you supported Sanders. And he lost. And he has sensibly furnished his reasons for pressing his agenda and for supporting Clinton. And you still denounce Clinton (and now Sanders too)?

Right now, more than before, when I think of Clinton, I think of my mother, and my daughter, and my colleagues who still

WHY I SUPPORT HILLARY CLINTON FOR PRESIDENT

struggle, daily, against sexism. They may not be organizing janitors. How many of my friends are organizing janitors? They may not be struggling for socialism. How many of my friends here are really struggling for socialism, as opposed to talking about struggling for socialism? They are women who don't want to be sexually harassed on the job, who prize reproductive freedom, who appreciate it (as most feminist theorists actually do) when their friends and partners "lean in" to support them. They want equal opportunity at work, whether this means opportunity to be hired or fairness in tenure and promotion or simple respect on the job. Clinton represents these things. Is it not time for such things to be given their due politically?

Okay, these things are not everything. Some of you have argued that a more "radical" politics was desirable. But this argument lost in the primary contest. It *didn't* lose in a more general sense. Keep arguing. Keep struggling. But there is a time to acknowledge that your candidate lost, and has conceded, and it is time to move on. There is also a time to respect the process of the party that you supposedly sought to engage, and even to respect the actual positions of the party's candidate, in spite of their limits. And there are always limits!

Clinton is not Margaret Thatcher and she is not Trump. You don't like her? Fine. You disagree with her? Great! But do you really need to keep heaping scorn on her and her supporters? Do you need to be enthusiastic when a cadre of delegates, who choose to be disruptive in ways that disrespect rightly respected progressive leaders trying to speak, can only weaken the campaign and strengthen Trump?

This is not an argument. It is an explanation. It is not a plea. People will do what they do. I am very proud to see how many friends have engaged these questions with seriousness. I am very sorry to see how many people have preferred to license or

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articulate a purism with decidedly anti-liberal dimensions. I do not respect this, even if I may respect some who choose to do it. I fear its consequences, and I am horrified by the indifference to consequences that seems all too common. And those who want to promote agonism, please don't call me a liberal policeman! If politics involves agonism, then thicken your skin, take a hit, and respond if you wish.

I support Clinton. I will work hard to support her election. I will also continue to do the many other things that I do, politically and intellectually. And if she wins, I will be relieved, and even happy, and I will continue to do what I can to support serious intellectual engagement and critique. And if she loses, we are fucked. Seriously. We are fucked. Think about that. And then, perhaps, act accordingly.

publicseminar.org, July 26, 2016

Some Thoughts on Shouting Down Allies Much Less Adversaries

Interesting questions of political ethics are presented by the various “disruptions” enacted by some “Bernie or Bust” delegates on the Democratic National Committee convention floor, obviously related, at least in part, to real arguments about “deliberative democracy” and “agonistic democracy.” These oppositions can easily be oversimplified. Some adherents of “deliberation” clearly know that forms of agonism and contention are unavoidable, and some adherents of “agonism” and contention clearly recognize that “agonistic respect” is an important thing. This is not a simple matter.

I make no pretense of resolving it here. I will confess to being annoyed and troubled by some of the disruption. But I have also publicly stated that contention is part of politics, and some of the indignation of the angry Sanders supporters is both understandable and appropriate—within limits. Indeed I think Barack Obama said it well in his speech, which sought to embrace rather than denounce the protestors: it is all more or less part of the process. There were orchestrated speeches, there were a few moments of tension, and things proceeded. Fine. At the same time, when delegates to a political party try to shout down leaders of their party at a televised convention centering on the presidential election, and the opposition candidate is an authoritarian demagogue whose campaign centers on bringing “law and order,” serious questions about political judgment arise. I do not believe that any writer can settle these questions for others or even for him or herself. I do believe that a blog post is probably not the place to attempt a meaningful reflection on the complexities.

So instead of an argument, a story. A true story.

Years ago in a graduate seminar on democratic theory, a very

fine group of my students were discussing these very issues. I think it is fair to say that the political spectrum ranged from the Habermassian left to the Foucauldian left—not a very large slice of the political spectrum in the world at large. An earnest adherent of “deliberation” was making his case about the importance of reason-giving and reciprocal respect, and a clever adherent of an “agonistic” perspective was objecting at every turn, insisting that there is no language or communication outside of power, and thus no basis on which to privilege any notion of a discourse ethic over any other mode of conduct. The idea that people ought to give reasons, or let others speak, was thus powerfully challenged. “It’s all power. Your ‘ethic’ is a form of policing.” Then something happened. The “deliberativist” stood up, walked over to the “agonist,” and said “*Go fuck yourself.*” Everyone was taken aback, myself included. He then repeated himself more loudly. The agonist was horrified. And then it was said, again and again, more loudly every time. “*Go fuck yourself.*”

Don’t ask what pedagogical skills I employed to defuse the situation and return the class to the discussion at hand.

All the same, a point was quite dramatically made: a line had been crossed by the verbal assault, and the crossing was problematic. No one in the room thought it was okay that the agonist was shouted down like that, and no one was more indignant than the agonist himself. It was wrong. Apparently there are times when it is just wrong to shout down others, and right to follow a certain decorum.

What are those times and places? When is it appropriate to disrupt speeches and shout down those with whom you disagree? Who are the proper targets of such shouting? Are the shouters really prepared to accept this mode of conduct when applied to them? Or are they enacting “a performative contradiction” when they state “we want more open discussion and debate” and

SHOUTING DOWN ALLIES MUCH LESS ADVERSARIES

then they seek to silence others? And do such contradictions matter, ethically and intellectually, even if one is not a “Kantian” who believes that all ethical conduct must consistently apply a universal rule?

These are very important questions. I do not believe there are simple answers to them, in general or in this case.

But I am afraid that too many of the people I saw shouting do not regard them as questions at all. I hope I am wrong. I intend to do my part, as a writer and as a teacher, to prove this fear misplaced. But I am afraid. There is too much angry shouting. One of the two major candidates for president is an angry shouter. I think it will take something else to defeat him and to make our country an even marginally more just place to live. I also think it will take a lot to make the country a place where there is a more vigorous, inclusive, and intelligent public discourse about matters of consequence. May each of us do our part.

publicseminar.org, July 28, 2016

An Open Letter to John McCain

Dear Senator John McCain:

We don't know each other. You are a war hero, a major public personality, a former presidential candidate, a distinguished leader of your party, and a Republican. I am a 59-year-old political science professor who grew up in New York and lives in Indiana, who has never served in the armed forces, and is a liberal who generally supports Democrats. We are very different. And there is no reason why you should really care what I think. But we are both American citizens who care about public life. And while I have usually disagreed with you on policy, I have always admired you, because you are a "maverick," and very much your own man. And you clearly are a man who has sacrificed greatly and heroically for what you believe. You are a man of honor.

And so I am writing, openly and sincerely, to ask you: when will you come out publicly against Donald Trump's presidential candidacy?

I know he is a Republican candidate and you are a Republican—though we both know that you have been a lifelong Republican, and he is a carpetbagger. I know you are up for re-election and facing a primary challenge from your right. I know that there are many things about the Barack Obama administration that you don't like, and that there are many things about a Hillary Clinton administration that you would not like.

But I also know that you are a serious man and, above all, you are a patriot.

You know that a great many Republican intellectuals have distanced themselves from Trump and have moved toward or even endorsed Clinton, including especially some so-called

neoconservatives who support a strong military and a “muscular” foreign policy and who are indeed in many ways your own ideological soulmates. And you know why: because Clinton has serious foreign policy commitments, and Trump has neither commitments nor credentials.

You know that Clinton has a record of working in a fairly bipartisan way, and in the past you have yourself publicly stated this about her work as a U.S. senator.

You have heard the many derogatory things that Trump has said about the U.S. military, and especially about you. He crudely disparaged you and your time as a prisoner of war, calling you “a loser.” This was shocking to many. I can understand why you might have avoided responding to Trump in kind. For you are a man of honor and not a man of the gutter, and you are sufficiently proud of your own accomplishments to be able to ignore a nasty man who is so insecure about his own.

But a little over a week ago Donald Trump placed our country’s commitment to NATO in question in a most irresponsible way. And this week he went further, publicly endorsing efforts of Russian espionage agencies to hack the emails of Clinton, the Democratic Party’s presidential nominee, a former secretary of state, a former first lady, a former Senate colleague, and an American citizen.

You know this. And you know what it means. So when will you speak out against it?

If there is anyone who understands that some things are more important than party, it is you.

If there is anyone who symbolizes patriotism, it is you.

You and I are politically very far apart. But we are both citizens of the United States. And right now our constitutional and democratic order is in danger. The political party with which you are associated is promoting as its presidential candidate a xenophobic demagogue who seems more aligned with Vladimir Putin than with his own government and its laws.

You are a conservative. Edmund Burke, the father of modern

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conservatism, once said that “the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” You know this quote. And you are a good man. You have kept your distance from Trump. But recent events require more. And you are a doer, and not a man content to do nothing. So please, please answer this question of mine, which is a question also held by so many of your fellow citizens, both Democrats and Republicans: when will you stand up proudly, as the patriot that you are, and say to the American people that a vote for Trump is a vote for demagogue, and a vote against American democracy, and a vote that you cannot support. When will you publicly declare that you are against the campaign of this nasty man who has disparaged you and threatened our country? I appreciate that you just denounced Trump’s nasty comments about the Khan family, and also appreciate that you said that you would not refrain from making such comments even if they “may benefit others with whom I disagree.” I admire this. But when will you come out and denounce not simply Trump’s comment but Trump himself, and say that you disagree strongly with Trump, and *oppose* his election, and encourage all who are serious about patriotism to vote for someone else?

When?

Time is running out. And we are waiting . . .

publicseminar.org, August 2, 2016

Republicans: When is Enough Enough?

"I'm not going to make a decision today based on what I know today."

—Michael Steele, former head of the
Republican National Committee

In recent weeks, the campaign of Donald Trump has imploded. Trump won the Republican presidential nomination by disparaging his Republican rivals ("Lyin' Ted," "Baby Marco," etc.) and promoting himself as an outsized bully willing to flout all conventions, to repudiate all forms of decorum as "political correctness," and to loudly proclaim his intention to "make America great again" by building "huge" walls to keep out Mexicans, Muslims, foreign goods, and anything else that could be seen to "contaminate" Americans. When Republican Senator John McCain—a former Republican presidential nominee and a genuine war hero who spent years as a prisoner of war in a North Vietnamese camp—questioned some of these ideas, he was disparaged as "a loser" because he was caught in the first place: "He was a war hero because he was captured. I like people who weren't captured," Trump said. Trump has demonstrated that he is uninformed about public policy and world affairs, and that he has no real connections with people with serious political or military experience. He is his own principal adviser, and his closest political confidants and most vocal supporters are his thirty-something children.

In recent weeks he has declared that he might renege on American military commitments to NATO; he has invited Russian autocrat Vladimir Putin to hack the emails of Hillary Clinton; he has disparaged the Muslim-American Gold Star family of a fallen serviceman, causing the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the conservative group that only weeks ago hosted him, to

denounce him. In recent days he has bickered with journalists; audience members at rallies, including a crying baby; fire marshals at events he has held; and the leaders of his own party, most recently declaring loudly that he does not support either McCain or Paul Ryan in their reelection bids. This has led many journalists, both Democratic-leaning and Republican-leaning, to raise questions not simply about his character but about his serious anger management issues and, indeed, his sanity. Joe Scarborough, the conservative Republican MSNBC talk show host who for months gave Trump hours of free time on air, and has declared himself to be a personal friend, has gone so far as to state publicly that Trump has become “unhinged,” and is now a danger to his party and to the country.

Indeed, a number of important Republicans have declared that they cannot support Trump (e.g., Senator Jeff Flake [R-Arizona], Senator Ben Sasse [R-Nebraska], Mitt Romney, and many Republican congressmen) or that they will in fact support Clinton (e.g., Rep. Richard Hanna [R-NY] and Meg Whitman).

And yet major Republican leaders—including Ryan, Mitch McConnell, and McCain himself—continue to offer almost daily criticisms of Trump’s pronouncements and his reckless behavior, but refuse to declare that they can no longer support him.

Michael Steele speaks for these people when he basically insists that there is “still time” for Trump “to pivot,” and to give them a reason to support him.

Still time?

Trump has been a public figure for decades. His egocentrism, bullying style, and general belief that he is better than anyone else have long been on display. He made his name politically in 2008 by obsessively promoting “birtherism” and dark conspiracy theories that he has never recanted though they have absolutely no basis in fact. For over a year he has consistently

REPUBLICANS WHEN IS ENOUGH ENOUGH?

behaved like a bully and a boor, and he has consistently offended minority groups, women, and politicians, Democratic and Republican alike. He says whatever he wants without regard to consequences. He spends no time educating himself about public affairs, and he spends much time on Twitter, compulsively responding to every public comment about him, at apparently all hours of the day or night.

What could he do now, at this late date, to “prove” that he is worthy of support to be the next president of the United States?

These words are so hollow, and they make otherwise respectable Republican men and women look sad and, quite honestly, cowardly.

Let's be frank. Adults know that people don't change overnight, even if they try to make believe that they have changed. Trump has demonstrated that he has no interest in even “looking good.” He says whatever he wants, everyone else be damned. But what if he suddenly showed more restraint, and decided to “stay on script?” Would this say anything about his qualifications for the nation's highest office? No! All this would mean is that somehow a group of handlers was able to help him act the part of a serious politician for a few months. Act the part of one. Not be one. Anybody who is paying attention knows that Trump is a bully, a crude and mean person, and a loose cannon. He has no experience in politics, and he has no disposition to govern a self-governing people. He is a dictator in business, he is a dictator in his campaign, and dictating is the only thing he knows how to do. He can do nothing to prove that he has the mettle to be president.

Those Republicans who still insist that what they “know today” might be changed by new information, that somehow Trump could speak and act in a way that inspires their confidence, are lying through their teeth. They are doing this out of a loyalty to their party, and perhaps out of an aversion to the Democrats and

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to Clinton. But they are lying nonetheless, and they are doing it brazenly because they do it consciously, and they are awkward, embarrassed, and confused.

Such Republicans are in a very difficult and compromised position.

There is only one way to recover their integrity: to speak the truth and to denounce the Trump campaign as a travesty of their party and of American politics.

Enough is enough.

publicseminar.org, August 4, 2016

Hillary Clinton is a Centrist Liberal and an Establishment Politician—She Is Not the Enemy

To my friends on the left

I am uncomfortable with political labels, especially when applied to me. But to most people in the world, I would be considered someone on the left. I am a contributing editor of *Dissent*; I recently edited a new edition of *The Communist Manifesto* to which I contributed a rather sympathetic essay; through the early summer I was a supporter of the Bernie Sanders campaign, and published a number of pieces seeking to explain and to (critically) support this campaign. Only after the Democratic National Convention did I decide to support Hillary Clinton, which I explained in a piece entitled “Why I Support Hillary Clinton for President: A letter to my friends on the left.” Since that time I have been a strong Clinton supporter, because I believe that her centrist liberalism is strongly preferable to the neo-fascism of Donald Trump; because her neoliberal feminism and multiculturalism is strongly preferable to the anti-feminism, racism, and xenophobia of the Republican Party; and because I believe it is a good thing, symbolically and practically speaking, for the U.S., for the first time in over 200 years, to elect an establishment woman who is a feminist to the presidency rather than an establishment man who is a misogynist. Clinton is not running against Sanders or Elizabeth Warren—who both strongly support her. She is running against Trump.

I never thought that Sanders could be a viable Democratic candidate for president. I doubted he could win the primary, I doubted that he could survive a red-baiting general election

campaign, and I was skeptical of some of the claims to having mobilized a mass movement in support of “political revolution.” But I supported him, and had he won, I would be supporting him now. Alas, he lost. Clinton won. She won because she had more power and money and resources, and she used these things to win. That is politics.

I have many friends on the left, and many of them are to my left by any stretch of the imagination. They are smart people and good people, and among them, unsurprisingly, there exists a range of opinion on Clinton and whether to support her. But most of them—most of you—have made clear that they strongly oppose a Trump presidency, and that while they do not like Clinton, they intend to vote for her, even if they have to hold their nose while doing so. This sentiment was perhaps most cleverly and also intelligently summed up in the piece by Adolph Reed bearing the title “Vote for the Lying Liberal Warmonger: It’s Important.” I understand and respect this position. At the same time, this kind of language—“Lying Liberal Warmonger”—has made me uncomfortable, even if it is intended to be tongue-in-cheek—and I am not sure that it is. Because it is so excessive. Perhaps some consider this justified. I don’t. And the firestorm that has erupted in the past two days in response to FBI Director James Comey’s letter to Congress, announcing that the FBI will be evaluating the emails of Huma Abedin, found on the laptop of her estranged husband Anthony Weiner, underscores why: because in this electoral contest, right now, it is very important for intellectuals on the left to help get out the vote to defeat Trump and elect Clinton, precisely so that, as a recent *Nation* editorial states, the left can continue to best advocate for greater social justice.

That right-wing witch hunters like Jason Chaffetz would immediately jump all over this is no surprise.

But I have been taken aback by the responses of some (not

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all) of my friends on the left, who have basically said “I told you so. We always said that Hillary was flawed and corrupt and that she was vulnerable to these accusations and now it is all coming to pass and her corruption is going to result either in a Trump presidency or four years of congressional investigation of her corruption. You should have listened to us when we supported Bernie instead of supporting Clinton. Now you are reaping what you have sown. Your candidate has fucked up everything, like we knew she would.”

I understand this kind of indignation, though I do not share it in this case. I urge my friends to consider that while moral outrage has its place—and in the end only each individual can decide for themselves what this place is—at this moment, less than two weeks before a very consequential presidential election, such indignation serves no good consequence. Even if you say, “Of course I’ll vote for Hillary, because I hate Trump, but she is a lying liberal imperialist and I hate her and she deserves everything she is getting,” what you are doing, it seems to me, is giving credence to all of those young people—who read you, respect you, and learn from you, inside the classroom and outside of it—who cannot bring themselves to vote. At this moment, when it is so important to support Clinton and to encourage others to do so with their votes, your words are conveying a different message.

Behind the reaction that concerns me lay two premises. One is that Sanders would have been a stronger candidate against Trump. I do not believe this is true, but it is also a moot point, because Sanders lost, and conceded his loss, and while the Clinton campaign worked very hard to undermine Sanders and to defeat him—this is what presidential campaigns do—defeat him they did. Clinton is the candidate of the Democratic Party because she was the insider candidate and she had the resources and the organization and she won the primary by getting both

more votes and more delegates. It makes perfect sense to keep one's eyes on the prize of further reforming the Democratic Party and supporting the forces of Sanders and Warren. But right now, the Democrats have a candidate, and it is important to support this candidate.

The second premise is that Clinton is a uniquely flawed and corrupt politician whose record cannot stand serious scrutiny, and who has brought these troubles on herself by being such a wheeling, dealing, corrupt individual who plays fast and loose with the rules.

It is this premise that I wish to question here.

And my basic reason is simple: I honestly don't understand why so many of my friends on the left, who are so adept at employing the powers of critique to challenge conventional wisdoms and to uncover forms of power, are so willing to accept at face value the version of Clinton that has so assiduously been developed, purveyed, and prosecuted, for decades, by her right-wing opponents in their pursuit of power.

I do understand the reasons why serious people of the left would oppose much of what Clinton stands for and would struggle for a more left platform—indeed, the current Democratic platform is such a platform! But I urge my friends to reconsider their animus toward Clinton, especially at this moment.

First let's consider FBI Director Comey's letter.

Comey's letter is very disturbing, and many people, myself included, have responded with annoyance and even outrage to this "October surprise." The immediate response of some of my friends on the left to this outrage has been a kind of defense of Comey. In this view, Comey was compelled to send the letter, and in doing so he was simply following standard procedures of investigating a corrupt and possibly criminal wrongdoing.

Perhaps. But why lend such credence to the self-justification

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of the director of the FBI in this case? Why ignore what is known—that Comey has conservative ties; that when he publicly “exonerated” Clinton months ago, he did so in a very awkward and troubling manner that raised questions about his professionalism; that he had clearly placed himself in an odd position with Republican legislators hoping for a different outcome, and he might clearly have psychological reasons to seek to ingratiate himself with these legislators by sending them a letter like the one he just sent? Such things are part of the political situation that surrounds Comey, his letter, and the way that it was predictably seized upon by the Republican right and the Trump campaign. And yet some seemed inclined to simply take his letter at face value.

Only hours later, it is now clear that the FBI has had access to Weiner’s computer for some time, weeks if not months, and yet still has not analyzed the emails in question; that these emails had nothing to do with Clinton’s email account or her email server, and at most regard the judgment of Clinton’s aide; that the Comey letter itself was very awkward and misleading, because in fact the only information it conveyed is that the FBI has some other emails that may or may not have anything to do with Clinton (there is always “something else” that “may or may not” be relevant; how often does the FBI director send letters to Congress about such things?); that Comey’s letter, like his earlier press conference, was contrary to Justice Department policy; and that Comey had actually been instructed by his superiors at the Justice Department not to send the letter that he sent anyway. This is all quite stunning and suspicious.

One response to the entire email “scandal” is the one offered months ago by Sanders during the primary debates: it is a side issue, and it has been extensively investigated and no criminal wrongdoing has been shown, and while Clinton’s judgment in this

case might be questioned, what she did was little different than what her Republican predecessors Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell did, and it is time to let it drop as a matter of investigation and inquisition, and to focus on the issues at stake in this election, which is now a contest between Clinton and Trump.

A second response is the one adamantly expressed by the Trump campaign and by every Republican elected official: Clinton is “crooked,” and this must be investigated (and litigated) ad infinitum, and the slightest shred of “information” even remotely connected to Clinton ought to be treated as an occasion for further outrage and further scrutiny of Clinton and the matter ought never to be left to rest.

Comey apparently decided to lean toward the second response, and through his own very questionable judgment, he has thrown red meat to the Republican sharks eager to prosecute Clinton and to defeat the Democratic ticket in the upcoming election.

This entire matter is a prime example of the many ways that the Republican leadership continues to play “hardball” with the Obama administration and with the Clinton campaign—about the Supreme Court, about all legislation, about everything. The Republicans are about attack and obstruction.

This seems obvious. Why treat it as if it is about the corruptions of Clinton when it is primarily a Republican effort to frame Clinton as a criminal? Why treat it as a matter of individual personality when it is clearly a matter of politics?

In this light, let’s give a second thought to Clinton herself, this supposedly corrupt woman whose corruption, it would seem, exceeds all bounds of normal politics and warrants special investigations. I have to confess, it is the animus expressed by some of my friends, including women friends, about this, that most perplexes me. For in almost every way that matters, Clinton is nothing more and nothing less than a successful professional

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woman like most successful professional women we all know and that we often like, and that indeed many of us are. Consider these few points:

1. She preaches and practices a kind of “lean-in” feminism that valorizes meritocracy and the professional success of elite women like herself and her daughter.

Is this really different from the way most professional women, including left academic women, proceed? The university is as much a corporate institution as is a corporate business or a government bureaucracy. Do we fault our colleagues, our friends, for seeking prestigious research grants that give them course release, and for asking their famous friends to write letters of recommendation or to organize book panels promoting their work? Do we fault our colleagues for being preoccupied with publication in the officially sanctioned journals, so that they can build records of accomplishment sufficient to earn tenure and promotion, and the privileges these involve, privileges that are not available to most women in the workforce? Do we cast suspicion on our friends who do everything possible to promote the educational performance of their children so that they can be admitted into elite universities? In her pursuit of movement up the career ladder, and her valorization of this approach to success, is Clinton that different than most of us who, honestly, belong to the “professional managerial class” as much as she does, and who work through its institutions in the same way she does?

2. She has achieved positions of leadership in hierarchical corporate institutions, where she has traded on connections, and has mixed with members of a power elite with access to money and power.

In this, is she any different than women colleagues who become distinguished professors, and department chairs, and deans and provosts and college presidents? I have many friends—

feminists, leftists—who have achieved such positions, and who have embraced them. These positions are obtained by “playing the academic game,” by cooperating with others in positions of institutional authority, by compromising on their ideals in order to get something done in a conservative bureaucracy, by agreeing to manage programs and personnel, i.e., colleagues, by agreeing to fundraise from wealthy alumni and corporate donors, and to participate in events that please such alumni and donors so that they will support you and your institution. Is Clinton’s “game” really that different?

3. She uses her professional connections for personal advantage, making connections that can benefit her in the future, accepting side payments in exchange for her services. Is this that different than colleagues in the academic bureaucracy, who accept the salary increases and bonuses and research and travel accounts and course release that come with this kind of work? I am a distinguished professor at Indiana University. I enjoy these things. Many of us do, including many wonderful scholars to my left who really dislike Clinton. But is she really so different than the rest of us? Really?

In some ways, the differences are obvious. Clinton has succeeded largely through public institutions. She has succeeded on a much larger scale. She has benefited financially on a much larger scale. She is a woman of great power and influence and wealth, who has sought out a degree of power and influence and wealth that greatly exceeds the norm for anyone and especially for any woman. And she is on the public stage, so that every aspect of her action, and her self-promotion—and her emailing—is potentially subject to public scrutiny. But is this a sign of her personal corruption, or simply a sign that she has learned how to play the establishment political game and to win at the highest levels? What man who has ever served in the U.S. Senate or been

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secretary of state or has been elected president of the U.S. has behaved otherwise than she has?

Clinton may be more insular, self-protective, awkward in public, etc., than most politicians—but how many of them have been Clinton, the first woman to endure this level of scrutiny in the history of the United States, and someone who also had to endure eight very public years as the first lady of a philandering husband, and whose husband was impeached for this philandering? Might this not generate a level of insularity and suspicion in any woman?

She might surround herself with a very insular group of trusted confidants, at the expense of transparency—but don't all politicians do this?

She might have gained great wealth from her connections—but does this distinguish her from any other powerful person?

In short, Clinton is a successful political leader who is also a woman in a man's world. And, as Plato taught us millennia ago, political leaders tend to be loved by their friends and hated by their enemies.

And Clinton's principal enemies are clear: partisans of a Republican Party that is led by Paul Ryan, Mitch McConnell, and a cadre of right-wing extremists, that selected Donald Trump as its presidential candidate, and that seeks to turn back the clock on decades of progress for women's rights, civil rights, the rights of minorities, and the (already very attenuated) rights of workers.

Clinton is a centrist liberal, not a socialist or a social democrat. She is a liberal feminist, not a socialist feminist. She is a foreign policy hawk, but within a bipartisan mainstream. She is an insider and an experienced operative in an oligopolistic two-party system, and not a radical or participatory democrat. These are the reasons she is the presidential candidate of a major political party in the U.S., which is not Sweden! It is true, on every one of these dimensions she comes up short when judged from the left. On

every one of these dimensions of politics and policy, she deserves criticism. This was true before, it is true now, and it will be true if she wins the White House.

But this does not make her an evil or an irredeemably corrupt person, and it does not make her a political enemy.

Her opponents on the right have demonized Clinton for decades. They have succeeded in raising her to a level of distrust and opprobrium in the eyes of the mass public that exceeds any reasonable sense of proportion. Mike Pence is now saying that she has a “criminal scheme” to take over the U.S. government. Trump calls her a “criminal” and he promises to jail her. The Republican congressional leadership is pledged to either defeat her or to dedicate four years to a legislative politics of inquisition modeled on the Benghazi hearings.

She is being attacked by the right wing because the right wing hates her, and the right wing hates her because she is a liberal and a feminist and a woman and because she supports the things that most anger the right wing: gender equality, reproductive freedom, equality for gays and lesbians, gun control, racial equality, and civil rights.

These things that she supports are the things that we support. The things she supports have their limits. She has her limits. But she is not evil, and she is not an enemy.

In the next ten days leading up to election day, Clinton will be subjected to a last-ditch barrage of attacks from the right. She does not “deserve” these attacks. And while the attackers target her, what they attack is much of what is valuable to you. To us.

Let us not exult in her travails. They are undeserved. And such exultation does no good in any case. Let us defeat a Republican neo-fascist by electing a Democratic neoliberal feminist.

And then let us treat that Democratic neoliberal feminist, once in office, the same way that any president ought to be treated:

with suspicion and critical scrutiny and a determination to press forward an agenda of greater social justice and political responsibility.

publicseminar.org, October 30, 2016

PART 2

RUDE AWAKENING

NOVEMBER 9, 2016—NOVEMBER 12, 2016

The Day After

I didn't sleep much last night. I think it was near 4:00 am when I was finally able to shut off the lights after watching Trump's victory speech. Perhaps I slept fitfully for a few hours. I don't know. My mind raced through so many scenarios, so many questions. And then I awoke.

Donald Trump is the president-elect of the United States.

In the days and weeks to come much will be said about how and why this came to pass.

But behind these important inquiries is an elemental fact: Trump won the presidential election because over fifty-nine million American citizens voted for him.

Yes, it appears that he will have barely lost the popular vote. The electorate is very split, almost right down the middle, about the outcome. It is important to keep this in mind. Even in those solidly red states, there was lots of blue too. The election did not give Trump a "mandate." But it did give him a victory. He won the states that mattered. He annihilated Hillary Clinton's so-called "firewall." He carried the day according to the arcane rules of U.S. presidential elections, which are decided by electoral college votes and not popular votes.

Trump was Trump till the very end. A bully, a liar, a misogynist, xenophobe and ultranationalist. A man who brought the white supremacist so-called alt-right into the mainstream of American politics and into the heart of his campaign. A man who stoked resentment and rhetorical violence at the mass rallies that represented the heart of his campaign, that demeaned his opponents, that called for the arrest of his principal opponent ("Lock her up!"), that viciously denounced the press, that lied repeatedly about so many things—Clinton's emails, his business dealings, his personal life—and lied ever more insistently the more obvious it was that he was lying.

His meanness, his lies, his scapegoating, his egomania—these things were plain for all to see. He did not hide them. He exulted in them and made them the centerpiece of his campaign.

Everyone watching and listening saw and heard him.

And almost sixty million Americans voted for him.

Sixty million.

If nothing else, the election has made two things perfectly clear.

First: there is a deep and a wide reservoir of alienation and resentment in American society and political culture.

Second: almost sixty million adult American citizens are so alienated and resentful that they will support a man whose entire political persona recapitulates Mussolini and whose “policies,” if we can call them that, center on blaming others, closing borders, and closing ranks to “Make America Great Again”—an empty hypernationalist slogan angrily screamed by an angry egomaniac with no political experience.

Trump may have incorporated trade into his rhetoric once he saw that it worked for Bernie Sanders.

But Trump’s populism was only secondarily an economic populism. It has always been primarily a nationalist and a chauvinistic populism with very strong undercurrents of racism and sexism. From the start, Trump was all about building a wall to keep out Mexicans, and building a police force to deport the millions of our neighbors who are here as “undocumented aliens,” and using the border police to keep out Muslims, and denouncing Black Lives Matter, and enacting a proudly aggressive and indeed violent masculinity. The roughly sixty million Americans who voted for these things no doubt had complex motivations. This is always true. But what they voted for was *that*. They did not vote for a program of economic reconstruction or justice, for there was no such program. They voted for anger and xenophobia and racism and above all, for sexism. The mainly white people who voted for Trump voted for a man who stood for two things: the repudiation of the country’s first African American president, and the denunciation and defeat of the country’s possibly first

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woman president. This is what Trump was and what he is, and by voting for him, our Trump-supporting fellow citizens were supporting *that*.

These are dark times.

The forces of reaction are now celebrating. They will celebrate for many months to come.

And as they celebrate, “we”—those of us who are shell-shocked, those who are reading this, those who give two shits about what I think—will reckon long and hard with the experience of a dramatic and dispiriting political defeat.

If the last few hours are any indication, it will be very hard to avoid a foolish cycle of recriminations.

Among many demoralized Clinton supporters, one can hear denunciations of those on the left, mainly disaffected “Sanderistas,” who refused to support or to vote for Clinton. “It’s their fault,” I’ve heard it said.

It is not their fault. In a democracy candidates need to earn support. I regret and perhaps even deplore many of the things that have been said and done by people on the left who refused to support Clinton. But they are citizens too, and are not obliged to think as I think or do as I do. What have been the consequences of their conduct? This is no doubt a complicated question, worthy of serious consideration. But to blame them for Trump’s victory is wrong, factually and ethically.

Trump did not win because some people failed to support Clinton.

Trump won because almost sixty million Americans voted to support his right-wing populist message.

If Clinton supporters need reminding of this, so too do many of those anti-Clinton polemicists of the left, who have responded to Trump’s victory with a self-righteous *schadenfreude* that is beneath them. I have seen so much of this on my Facebook feed. It

is sad and also outrageous. The most emphatic version is perhaps Thomas Frank's "I told you so" piece in *the Guardian*, entitled "Donald Trump is Moving to the White House, And Liberals Put Him There." Years ago Frank appointed himself the official spokesman of the aggrieved *hoi polloi* who have supposedly been victimized by "professional-class virtue" and a "rotting" and "complacent" liberalism. Journalists, and the media especially, come in for particular blame. They supposedly obsessed about Trump's racism and xenophobia, and ignored Clinton's essential corruption, and were clueless about the sufferings of "the working class." These unnamed journalists—indeed, the entire class of journalists and commentators—supposedly "chose insulting the other side over trying to understand what motivated them. They transformed opinion writing into a vehicle for high moral boasting."

The result: they handed the election to Trump instead of rallying behind a left populist candidate. According to Frank, "The American white-collar class just spent the year rallying around a super-competent professional (who really wasn't all that competent) and either insulting or silencing everyone who didn't accept their assessment. And then they lost. Maybe it's time to consider whether there's something about shrill self-righteousness, shouted from a position of high social status, that turns people away."

Talk about shrill self-righteousness shouted from a position of high social status.

Those that Frank denounces as "liberals" no more put Trump in the White House than did Frank and his compatriots and followers.

It is easy to blame "liberals" for the Clinton candidacy. But the fact is that Clinton won the Democratic primary, and Sanders didn't, and Joe Biden didn't run, and neither did Elizabeth Warren or Eugene V. Debs or Norman Thomas or William Jennings Bryan.

Many on the left are now treating Clinton's defeat in the general

election as proof that a more left candidate could have won. This is worthy of serious discussion and not polemics or hyperbole. But it stretches credulity to imagine that Clinton's defeat of Sanders in the primary demonstrates the power of the socialist left in the U.S. It does not.

In any case, Clinton did defeat Sanders, and became the Democratic candidate. And Sanders supported her, as did almost the entire infrastructure of the political left in the U.S. unions, civil right groups, women's rights groups, left elected officials, left periodicals such as *the Nation*.

And they—we—were just soundly defeated by Trump.

Liberals did not elect Trump.

The roughly sixty million Americans who voted for him elected him.

Might some of them have voted for a different candidate if given a different set of choices? Probably. But they were not given a different set of choices. They were given two choices: a continuation of Obama-Clinton centrist liberalism and neo-fascism. They chose neo-fascism.

Trump's victory is a huge defeat of political liberalism in the United States.

It is also a huge defeat for the American left more generally.

This is partly because the left has always flourished as the radical wing of liberalism, just as liberalism has always flourished with pressure from a strong left (see Robert Kuttner's classic "Why Liberals Need Radicals.")

And it is partly because a great many members of the white working class—the group that has always been the gleam in the eye of the socialist left—are apparently animated not by a politics of proletarian empowerment but by a politics of racial, sexual, and national identity.

They supported Trump.

And Trump is now the president-elect.

There is much work to be done, the work of thinking and of acting.

Clearly some of Trump's supporters may be amenable to a different kind of politics. But the task of actually creating such a politics, and

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of persuading them to sign onto it, is a long-term process, and if any on the left feel empowered by this bruising Trump victory, I think they are deluding themselves.

Clearly some of Trump's supporters, and perhaps even most of them, are not very easily "transformed" through persuasion. Like the majority of the citizens of my state, Indiana, they really seem to hate reproductive freedom and LGBT rights and African Americans protesting for equal protection under the law. Whatever their real economic problems and grievances, a Trump-like politics of resentment strikes a chord with them. It trumps other concerns. It motivates them to support Trump. If you doubt this, I seriously invite you to come to Indiana and try to engage Trump voters in serious conversation about the need for socialism. See how that goes.

It is now clear that what Louis Hartz called "the liberal tradition in America" is politically under siege, and that its enemies—Trump and his Republican Party supporters—have a vast reservoir of support among the mass public.

This is a time for hard questioning and serious dialogue among those who will be politically humbled and opposed and often defeated under a Trump administration.

There is hard work ahead.

This is no time for foolish recriminations among people who really have only two choices: to work together or to hang separately.

publicseminar.org, November 9, 2016

Why Did Trump Win?

A proposal for modesty

Why did Trump win? I begin with a question. Because it is a question being asked by so many people, ordinary citizens—and “undocumented” resident non-citizens—intellectuals, writers, and academics. And because it is, and will long remain, a question with no simple answer.

The election was only a few days ago. The votes are still being tallied. And the results were dramatic and shocking to many, including me. And so questions are furiously being posed, and answers furiously being given. There is much anger and effort to carefully analyze the polls and the election results. And wishful thinking. And laying of blame.

Here's a suggestion: a very wide range of responses make sense, and people should share them, but at the same time some sense of provisionality might be in order, because it is impossible to furnish the kinds of answers that are now being sought, and that are now being offered.

One reason is because it is simply impossible to definitively settle complex questions of political and historical causality. This is what keeps historians and social scientists in business, for good or for ill.

A second is because it takes more than a few days to sort through all of the relevant evidence, and it takes even longer to generate compelling and sufficiently nuanced accounts of events so current and so shocking.

Let me be clear: I am not making an academic point. And I am not suggesting that we should all just calm down, or that

we should refrain from acting until we know more or know better. People are acting now, in the streets, on social media, in their neighborhoods and in their conversations, and they—we—ought to act now. And we are acting now because we know a lot, now, about the racism and sexism and xenophobia that Trump's victory has mobilized, and about the dangers posed by the policies that Trump has promised to enact, and about the hostility with which Trump clearly treats an independent press and all forms of criticism and opposition. At the same time, as we express our solidarity and our outrage and opposition to the great dangers that a Trump presidency poses, we ought to refrain from a premature and too-confident sense that what has happened, and what is still happening, fits easily within our pre-existing understandings. And so I suggest that as we act, now, we also think hard, now, about the causes of Trump's victory, the contours of the current political situation, and the best ways forward.

In the past couple of days, I have read so many things written by so many smart people that contained truth but were put forth with confidence as *the* truth. Instead of asking, listening, thinking, paying attention, arguing, rethinking, there has been lots of self-assured answering. And the votes are still being tallied! Further, we are still in a state of shock.

That's right. The people likely to be reading this are in shock. Few if any expected that what happened would happen.

Since the Democratic primary, many really smart and good people dissented from those, like me, who loudly supported Clinton. They rightly criticized her neoliberalism. They did not like Trump. But as the campaign unfolded they thought that Clinton's victory was pretty likely, and thus reasoned that it made more sense to focus their energy on criticizing the neoliberalism of the Democratic candidate than the neo-fascism of the Republican candidate, because Clinton was likely to be the next

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president. And Clinton lost.

Farther to the left were people who adamantly refused to even acknowledge the danger of Trump or the importance of defeating him. Susan Sarandon spoke for these people, and apparently Slavoj Žižek speaks for them now. Their enemy is neoliberalism. For some, any kind of support for Clinton was impossible. For others, the defeat of Clinton was to be welcomed so that new spaces for their brand of left politics could flourish. Some voted for Jill Stein, some perhaps even for Gary Johnson. Some abstained, or wrote in another name. Some talked about building a new communist party. They insisted that Trump was not the danger to be most feared. And now many of them are out in the streets, calling for massive resistance to Trump. It now appears that Trump is really scary.

And then there were people like me. Left liberals or even just liberals who were never excited about Clinton, and who were for a time excited about Bernie Sanders—in my case, it was an excitement tempered by skepticism—but who strongly supported Clinton when she became the Democratic nominee, because we saw good things about her as well as bad things, and also because we feared Trump, and we believed she could defeat Trump. We were sometimes accused of fear-mongering about Trump. Some even accused us of picking on Trump so as to absolve Clinton of her sins. Two things are clear: (1) we did fear Trump, and (2) we never thought that Clinton's victory was assured; that's why we argued so much on behalf of supporting her. Yet we underestimated the depth of the resentment against the Democrats, Clinton, and neoliberalism itself. And we really did think that, in the end, Clinton would win. We thought it would be close. But we believed the polls, and the "logic" of her "firewall" strategy, and the "logic" of the two-party system. And she lost.

There's a lot of blame to go around if we are seeking to disparage the opinions of others with whom we disagreed. And

nothing supports blame so much as a ready-made explanation.

But such explanations come up short. So let me propose a more provisional set of thoughts. Consider them hypotheses if you will. They are designed to enter into an ongoing discussion and to generate further discussion. They are not academic hypotheses but practical ones, fallible suggestions intended to help people of like mind to think through the current situation and then to act, in times that are both dark and uncertain.

1. Trump won the election, in a way. And in a way not.

He won a majority of state-allocated votes in the Electoral College. According to convention and long-standing due process, in December, the Electoral College will meet, the votes will be cast, and he will receive a majority of electoral votes. He will then truly be president-elect.

But Trump did not win a majority of votes. Clinton won the popular vote. This does not negate her electoral defeat according to the established procedures. But it does negate the idea that the election somehow conferred a “popular mandate” or a special “democratic legitimacy” upon Trump. It did not. It is important to remind Trump and his supporters and his media acolytes of this. But it is also important to remind some on the left of this. Some have quite loudly proclaimed that Clinton’s loss was inevitable because she is a flawed candidate and people were sick of her. Many people were sick of her. But more people were sick of Trump. And more people voted for her, and some of them even did so with some enthusiasm. She was not defeated in a landslide. And indeed she was defeated, in a simple procedural sense, mainly because the U.S. lacks a system of popular election for its president. No one thought that Trump could lose the popular vote and win the election. And yet, like in 2000, it was the Electoral College and not a voting majority that gave the election to the Republicans.

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2. It is not only that Trump failed to win a majority of popular votes and yet still “won.” In many other ways this election was flawed, and perhaps “rigged,” even by the very minimal standards against which U.S. elections are normally judged.

This is very important politically, and it is somewhat surprising that many commentators, right and left, are so willing to bracket this out of their explanations and to moralize in simple ways about victory and defeat.

I’ll be brief here, and simply mention three things we know to have played some role in the defeat of Clinton.

Voter suppression: the U.S. has a very decentralized system of electoral laws. It is well-known that in some states—including Florida and Wisconsin, where Clinton lost by relatively small margins—Republican-dominated state legislatures have sought to restrict voting and have succeeded in doing so. There is a mobilization of bias against typical Democratic voters that is built into the electoral system and, many of my colleagues have compellingly argued, it is intentional.

Wikileaks: for months the emails of the Clinton campaign and the Democratic National Committee were hacked—probably by Russian government-linked hackers—and released, in a deliberate effort to weaken the Clinton campaign, by Julian Assange and Wikileaks. This happened to one party in a two-party system, and it happened regularly and systematically. And each time it happened, the media jumped all over it—the hacked emails, and not the hacking. And at key moments Trump seemed to encourage the hacking, and to encourage anything that might undermine “Lying Hillary.” The hacking involved breaking the law to advantage the Trump campaign. It worked. How much did it work? We don’t know. But that it worked cannot be doubted.

James T. Comey: for years the Senate and House Republicans had used the oversight powers of congressional committees to

investigate and interrogate and harass Clinton over her email practices when she was secretary of state. This was an obviously partisan effort, and when their guards were down, the Republican harassers said as much. In July, the FBI finally determined that there had been no criminal wrongdoing. But FBI Director Comey found it necessary to exceed his authority and to publicly cast aspersions on Clinton's character. Then, in the waning days of the campaign, Comey issued his famous letter about "new emails." The letter violated Justice Department protocols and was sent against the advice of Comey's superiors. The letter was sufficiently vague to immediately cause a firestorm of condemnation of Clinton, which was seized upon by Trump, and for days fueled his campaign. Then Comey admitted that no one in the FBI had even seen any of the emails in question. A few days later, he declared that the emails contained nothing of relevance. Nothing. There can be no doubt that Comey's behavior completely altered the momentum of the contest. Due to some fine investigative reporting, there can also be no doubt that Comey was responding to a strong core of anti-Clinton FBI agents in New York City with close connections to Rudolph Giuliani. A "rogue element?" A "deep state?" Clearly something that one would think people on the left would incorporate very seriously into their analyses.

In each of these ways, the election was weighted if not rigged against Clinton. It was not a "free and fair" election as this is normally understood by people who care about such things. I am not suggesting that in a simple sense the election was "stolen," or that there is constitutional recourse. But the election was weighted against Clinton.

These things are well known. They suggest that the question "Why did Trump win?" needs to be addressed in manifold political ways, and not reduced to a simple tale of Trump's

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popularity or Clinton's coldness, neoliberalism, arrogance, or whatever. The voting was translated through complex decision rules, and it was shaped in complex ways by a political environment in which legality was skirted to the advantage of Trump.

3. Further, the election, in all of its procedural complexity, was in the end a very close election.

Political scientist Larry Bartels, among others, has gone so far as to argue that the election was little different than any recent close election (putting aside for a moment, of course, its tone and its impact on the future!)—roughly evenly divided electorate, the tendency of a two-term incumbent presidential party to be replaced, etc.,—and that in the end it was so close as to have been decided by a coin toss.

When you put these three things together, what you have is something very far from a strong popular victory for Trump.

But Trump did receive over sixty million votes. And he won the election according to the rules governing U.S. presidential elections. And Clinton conceded. It has been “decided.”

4. Was it race or gender or class that mattered most in explaining the fact that Trump received over sixty million votes, and won many Rust Belt states that had been treated as safely Democratic?

Many commentators have held forth in support of each of these explanations.

Some claim that in the end Clinton was defeated because she was a woman. This is not implausible. There was a clear gender gap in the voting, even if Trump apparently received many more white female voters than expected. Clinton had been subjected to sexist attack for decades. And Trump's masculinism is a central

element of his public persona and his public discourse.

Some claim that in the end Trump won because he was a white man in a society still shaped by a deep racism. The racism of his rhetoric, and of his supporters, is not in doubt. Trump's huge support among white voters is clear. Trump lost the black vote and the Latinx vote to Clinton by gigantic margins. The margins might have been marginally smaller than the margins whereby Barack Obama beat Mitt Romney. But only marginally so. Race clearly played an important role.

Some claim that in the end Trump won because his voters were alienated by serious economic insecurity and decline, and by neoliberalism, and by a corrupt political establishment. As journalist William Greider put it: "I predict that this date will live forever in the annals of small-d democracy. The governing system was overthrown by the plain people, who are mostly ignored by systems of power and influence."

In this view, which is most prevalent among supporters of Sanders who refused to support Clinton, the election was really about class, about the fact that there has been a demonstrated decline in the living standards of the (white) blue-collar working class, and that these people are "mad as hell and not going to take it anymore."

Was it racism, or sexism, or classism, that explains Trump's voters?

The answer, obviously, is all of them!

Of course many members of the white working class have become increasingly disaffected from the dominant institutions of political and economic governance, and for good reason, and of course this disaffection played an important role in their political behavior. The surprising Democratic losses in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin are obvious signs of this, and signs that the Democratic Party failed to say and do the things necessary to

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appeal to these voters.

And of course all of the men and women who voted for Trump are not wife beaters and proponents of sexual harassment. But just as clearly, they were willing to support a political leader whose words and actions screamed “sexist user and abuser of women.” Sexism might not have been the single motivator for most of these Trump voters, male and female. But these voters were willing at least to accept Trump’s sexism, and they were willing to buy his tough-guy promises about “kicking the shit out of America’s enemies,” and they were willing to embrace many of the anti-Clinton tropes that have long been laced with undeniable sexism. In these ways sexism was hugely important, even if it was not everything and it obviously varied in importance from person to person.

And of course most of the white men and women who voted for Trump are not members of the KKK or proponents of “white supremacy.” Many might not have been motivated subjectively by racial animus. Some might have voted for Obama in 2008 or 2012. Some might have supported Ben Carson in the Republican primary. But everything about Trump’s political persona has been laced with race and racism, from his crusading “birtherism” to his rhetorical denunciations of Mexicans and Muslims and Arabs and Latinxs to his angry responses to Black Lives Matter to his recirculating of KKK and neo-Nazi posts and symbols to his embrace of Stephen Bannon and of *Breitbart News* and of the entire alt-right. Sure, most of his voters were against corruption and against free trade, and they resented the Democrats and especially their female and feminist candidate. But they were also for Trump, and Trump was all about the Mexican wall and the deportation of millions of people and the ban on Muslims and all-in with *Breitbart News*. And so they were for all of this. Were they all mean-spirited harbingers of racial hatred? No—though a great many were, and those that came out to Trump’s rallies, and who energized his campaign and gave it media cache, were often angry and violently racist. Were they supporters of a candidate

who stoked racial and ethnic hatred and who promised to institute racist measures? Yes! If that is not racism, what is?

But again, my point here is not to offer a complete or final explanation. It is to underscore how many things are necessarily factors to be taken into account in the effort to understand and to explain.

Many commentators will use their interpretive skills to explain why their favored explanation is right. Many commentators will use their statistical skills to assign a correlation coefficient—a number—to the factors they consider essential. But no one will provide a knock down explanation, not now, and indeed not ever.

Does this mean that explanations don't matter? No. They matter. And the effort to "get it right" makes sense. Because "getting it right" will help those who care to "do the right thing."

But here's the rub: we know that there will never be consensus on either the right explanation or the right thing to do.

And so we should approach the tasks of explanation and of strategy with a healthy sense of epistemic modesty.

Race and ethnicity and gender and sexual identity and class all matter. Nationality matters. And nature matters, even if does not "speak" for itself.

A left-liberal-progressive-egalitarian-democratic-socialist-civic alternative—that's right, I can't find the right word—will need to pay attention to all of these things, to develop explanations and narratives and visions that can bring diverse constituencies into agonistic, respectful, and productive dialogues and compromises, and to reconcile the importance of racial equality, gender equality, economic equality, an open and cosmopolitan sense of national and civic identity, and a serious commitment to the sustainability of life itself on planet earth.

All of these things matter. How do they matter? How can they be combined in a reasonable and just way? How can movement

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politics and party politics be reformed to politically empower such combinations?

The answers remain to be determined. The answers we arrive at will be imperfect, contestable, and contested, and they will greatly impact the solutions we attempt in 2018, and 2020, and 2022 and beyond. The more each of us shouts what we think the answer is, the less likely it is that we will be able to learn from each other. And if we cannot learn from each other, and arrive at common initiatives and collective actions based on this mutual learning, then we are doomed.

publicseminar.org, November 12, 2016

PART 3

INTERLUDE

NOVEMBER 14, 2016—JANUARY 11, 2017

U.S. Political Scientists

Teach About Dissent and Civil Resistance

A great many of my political science friends and colleagues recently signed an open letter declaring that, as political scientists, they considered Donald Trump to be a threat to democracy and they opposed his election.

I have long believed this, and have worked hard, with many others, to oppose Trump.

And Trump won the election.

And many of us are shocked, frightened, and deeply concerned.

What can we political scientists who share this concern and fear do?

There are of course many things to do. We are already analyzing, and arguing, and acting.

There is so much to say, and many ways to act, to organize, as like-minded colleagues and as fellow citizens.

Yet here I want to make one simple point: in the coming weeks and months and years, one very important thing that we political scientists of all persuasions can do is to make the topics of dissent and civil resistance central to our teaching.

This is not a deep argument, and I think it is a point easily made.

Trump's ascendancy, his rhetoric, his promised policies, and the "movement" that he has mobilized pose serious threats to constitutionalism, to liberal, pluralist democracy, and to the human rights of Americans, whether they legally are citizens or not.

This is clear.

It is also clear that there will be and ought to be resistance to Trump. It has already begun and it will continue. It will take many forms. And one of the scariest things about Trump is that he hates criticism and disparages independent journalists and the media and has a history of silencing and bullying his opponents.

Trump as candidate is one thing. Trump as president-elect is another thing. Trump as president, as chief executive, and

commander-in-chief, is something else entirely. For come January 20, President Trump will have at his disposal a veritable monopoly on the use of force. And he will also have at his disposal a compliant media, and his Twitter account, whereby he can reach his millions of followers at a moment's notice—as he very sharply, and ominously, observed in his recent CBS “60 Minutes” interview with Leslie Stahl.

There will thus be dissent and there will be protest and resistance and there will be *repression*.

And as political scientists, who teach hundreds of thousands if not millions of undergraduates every year about politics, we have a responsibility to educate our students, and perhaps broader publics as well, about the history and legality and productivity and dynamics of dissent and civil resistance, which are absolutely central features of modern politics.

Our students who will dissent and protest deserve to be seriously engaged, and educated, about the history and politics of dissent and protest.

Our students who support Trump, and who will oppose the dissent and the protest, deserve to be seriously engaged, and educated, about the history and politics of dissent and protest.

All political scientists know that these things are important. But in fact most of us do not treat these themes as central to our teaching. And that is because most of us, most of the time, center our teaching on the workings of political institutions and on the empirical and normative requisites of citizenship under the legitimate authority of a state. We teach about institutions of government, and voting, and interest groups and parties, and bureaucracies. We teach about militaries and transnational advocacy groups. We teach about public policy. And as we teach about these things, some of us also incorporate discussion of the politics of dissent and civil resistance to constituted authority.

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But few of us regard this as central to everything we teach about politics.

Fact: dissent and civil resistance to constituted authority are increasingly central features of the political world, everywhere.

Fact: dissent and civil resistance are likely to assume greater importance in American politics in the age of Trump than they have in decades.

Fact: our president-elect disparages constitutional democracy and has mobilized a mob mentality that frightens and endangers those citizens inclined to dissent and to protest.

Value: If we are to be responsible educators in these dark times, we need to make dissent and protest *central* and not peripheral to the way we teach *everything* that we teach about politics. Whether we teach American politics or comparative politics or international relations or political theory or any other subfield topics, if we teach about politics, then our courses should include serious attention to dissent and protest.

Of course in the classroom we are teachers and not activists. Of course we must avoid proselytizing our students, and respect the different perspectives and opinions of our students. And of course, all teaching involves an engagement, and a kind of enlightenment, and at the heart of this enlightenment is *questioning*. We ought to model a questioning spirit, and respect questioning, and teach about the ways that throughout history people have questioned about, written about, and acted as dissenters and protestors.

Our students need to know that dissent and disobedience are, have been, and hopefully always will be central to our political and legal traditions, our constitutional system, and our evolving history as a democratic society.

This is not the only thing that can be done. Indeed, in a political sense, my proposal is a fairly modest one.

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But in our professional capacities as political scientists, we are above all writers and teachers.

And the most important, palpable, and powerful way that most of us reach others in the broader public is through our teaching and in our classrooms.

We know that dissent and disobedience are very important in a democratic society and are sure to become more important. We fear that in the coming weeks, months, and years, our political system will become more authoritarian. And we know that dissent and disobedience will become more important than they have been in a long time, and that a Trump administration is not likely to welcome this.

Let us thus do our part as educators to teach about dissent and disobedience in serious, fair, compassionate, and urgent ways.

publicseminar.org, November 14, 2016

Family and Friends

Another thought about Donald Trump's authoritarianism

Family and friends. We all have them, or at least most of the time we want them. In colloquial terms, family and friends offer support, love, and joy. They constitute a sphere of personal intimacy that makes a life more meaningful. The support of family and friends helps us to do the things in the world that we wish to do.

And yet there is something deeply disturbing, personally and politically, about the picture of family closeness provided by the Trump family. The kleptocratic dimensions of this are important, and have rightly received much attention. For it is clear that the Trump White House will involve conflicts of interest, “pay for play,” and brazen efforts to monetize the Trump brand beyond anything our country has ever seen. But what most disturbs me about the Trump family is something even deeper, that goes to the heart of what is wrong with Donald Trump as a political leader—his profound insularity, imperiousness, and lack of respect for his fellow citizens, linked to his pathological need to be surrounded at all times by *underlings*.

In a previous post, written months ago, I commented on the disturbing way that the Trump children have been presented to the world as if they had no mothers, and had been birthed by Trump himself. This, it still seems to me, has much to do with the misogyny at the heart of Trump's character and his public persona. I really thought this would damage him politically in his contest with Hillary Clinton. I was wrong.

Clinton is now gone. I propose that we put this question of Trump's personal misogyny aside, for but a moment, and reflect on what remains—the handful of people who constitute president-elect Trump's inner circle, and who will likely influence his actions as president: Donald, Jr., Ivanka, and Eric Trump, Trump's children; Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law; Stephen

Bannon, Trump's principal adviser; and Reince Priebus, Trump's new chief of staff. This, by all appearances, constitutes Trump's inner circle of family and friends. (Poor Tiffany, Melania, Mike Pence, and even Kellyanne Conway already know this.)

What does this circle tell us about the man who will be the next president of the United States?

First, the children.

It is a wonderful thing to have adult children that you love and can truly be proud of. I speak from personal experience. My children, ages 30 and 25, bring me joy. I rely on them, and confide in them—within healthy limits. I trust them deeply. And they are independent adults, each with their own lives, tastes, and political convictions. They are with me sometimes, but mainly they are in their own lives, with their own friends, careers, passions. And I love this! I hold a responsible job, and I sometimes make complicated and consequential decisions. I sometimes talk with my children about these things, and sometimes they even give me advice. But they are not my *advisers*; they are my children (and their mother's children too)! My children are fine young people. And they are *young* people, who have grown up under my tutelage, and who now are fashioning their own lives. They lack my experience and, quite frankly, they spent their formative years in my shadow. What would it say about me if I surrounded myself with them, kept them always within arm's length, and treated them as my primary source of wisdom? What does it say about Trump that he maintains such an emotionally incestuous relationship with his children? That these are the people—the people long subjected to his paternal support, and training, and supervision, and absorption into “the Trump family business”—who he regards as his closest confidants and advisers? Can his children, young people shaped by years of strong patriarchal discipline, who have spent their entire lives in the orbit of Big

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Daddy, be real sources of independent and mature judgment? Can they inspire confidence in anyone other than their overbearing and insecure daddy?

But the children are not alone in the inner circle. There is also son-in-law Kushner, who is a family member by marriage and a clear protégé (a protégé, by conventional definition, is “a person who is guided and supported by an older and more experienced and influential person”). There is Priebus, the sycophantic former head of the Republican National Committee, who Trump disparaged repeatedly and viciously during the campaign, and has now decided to use for his own purposes. And there is, finally, Stephen Bannon, the former head of the white supremacist, racist, xenophobic and sexist media outlet *Breitbart News*, who Trump brought late into his campaign (after firing or letting go his first two campaign heads, Corey Lewandowski and Paul Manafort).

As a 59-year-old man with a career, when I am called upon to make important decisions, I do not turn to my children or their significant others. I turn to my friends: my professional friends, close colleagues with whom I collaborate regularly, who I regard as peers—equals—whose opinions and accomplishments I admire, and who I can trust to share with me their perspectives, which are *not* my perspective; and my personal friends, adults with whom I have shared years of experience, ups and downs, and honest conversations, people who are fellow travelers in life.

Who are Trump’s professional and personal friends?

It is a rather interesting thing that in all of the media coverage of Trump, there has been no discussion of his friends and colleagues. It has all been about his children, his properties, and the women he has treated as his properties.

Who are Trump’s long time personal friends? Who are those peers in the business world with whom he has collaborated and maintained long-term personal relationships of trust?

We do not know.

We do know this: that by all accounts, from all of the profiles and even from his own words, Trump is a hypercompetitive individual who regards others as obstacles or means to his own personal triumphs; that he has a history of seeking always to be the top dog, of being very mean to people, of firing people who have for a time been close to him, of disparaging anyone who falls out of his favor, and of being vindictive and litigious with anyone who questions him.

It does not appear that Trump has many if any friends at all in a proper sense.

Indeed, among his inner circle, there is only one person who can plausibly be considered a friend rather than a protégé or lackey: Bannon. Only Bannon can be considered a person of substance who stands on his own two feet, and came to Trump from his own position of power and affinity. Bannon alone is not indebted to Trump, and indeed in some very important ways Bannon might be the only person to whom Trump himself is indebted.

There is an intellectual tradition, going back to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, of viewing *philia*, or friendship, as central to political life. In this view, citizenship in the broadest sense is a kind of sharing of responsibility among equals who are by virtue of this collaboration "friends." To be in politics is to have friends with whom one regularly interacts, friends who are similar to you and friends who are different, friends with whom you typically agree and friends with whom you typically disagree. Citizenship in a modern constitutional democracy rests on a version of this idea. Trump does not seem to understand this idea at all.

There is another intellectual tradition, of more recent vintage, according to which the defining feature of politics is not collaborating with "friends" but doing battle with "enemies." This tradition is associated with many totalitarian thinkers of the interwar period between World War I and World War II, and especially with the proponents of fascism. The most famous

of them was the Nazi-affiliated philosopher Carl Schmitt, who said that “Tell me who your enemy is, and I will tell you who you are.” This is the political tradition from whence Bannon comes. Here is the glowing headline of the November 19, 2016, lead piece on *Breitbart News*: “The Wall Street Journal: Steve Bannon on Politics as War.” Bannon has long been a crusader of “war” against liberalism, “the establishment,” racial, gender, and sexual equality, and human rights, things that he considers threatening to the “white nationalism” for which he speaks. Bannon is a political pugilist, a bully and a mobilizer of hate. In him Trump has found an ideological soulmate.

Trump has virtually no friends in a proper sense.

He surrounds himself with his children and their friends, and with sycophants. This is because he distrusts everyone who does not reflect himself and repeat himself. He is a megalomaniac who has no real respect for peers. He is a narcissist for whom every public issue is about him. And he is a sociopath, who really does not seem capable of appreciating any opinion or deed or object that is not his, or of respecting any person that he does not regard as an extension of himself. He lacks a sense of empathy with others, and curiosity about the world, and appreciation for the complexity of human affairs. He sees himself and hears only himself. He is enclosed, with others branded “Trump,” in a gigantic glass tower that bears his name and that hovers over the city in which he lives and the people with whom he shares this city, pawns in his real-life game of Monopoly.

This angry and defensive lone wolf who has no peers and must always be on top is the man who will be the next president of the United States and commander in chief of the U.S. military.

This is disturbing, right?

But consider this. He may have one friend: Bannon.

Are you feeling any better now?

publicseminar.org, November 20, 2016

Is There a Crisis of Democracy?

The rise of Trump-like figures in democracies

There is a very interesting debate taking place between Yascha Mounk and Roberto Stefan Foa and Erik Voeten on *Monkey Cage* and *Wonkblog*.

According to Mounk and Foa: “Public attitudes toward democracy ... have soured over time. Citizens, especially millennials, have less faith in the democratic system. They are more likely to express hostile views of democracy. And they vote for anti-establishment parties and candidates that disregard long-standing democratic norms in ever greater numbers.”

According to Voeten: “Public support for democracy is not a major problem in well-established Western democracies. Or at the very least, it’s not a bigger problem than it was 20 years ago. There is no strong evidence that people in Western democracies have slowly become so dissatisfied with democracy that they are starting to embrace alternatives.”

The positions could not seem more different, and the difference seems to center on how to interpret the World Values Survey and the European Values Survey, two major surveys that track changes in public opinion on a range of social and political questions. I am not an opinion researcher. Voeten’s skepticism about the way Mounk and Foa interpret the data, and especially the implications they draw from whatever small changes might be discerned, seems apt to me. At the same time, the concern about the future of liberal democracy that seems to motivate Mounk and Foa also seems apt.

But I suspect that neither Voeten nor Mounk and Foa are well served by fixating on the survey data. For the difference in their perspectives seems to lie elsewhere, not in mass opinion, but in party-political and electoral shifts more broadly, and especially in the growing power of what Mounk and Foa call “anti-

establishment parties and leaders.”

The real concern of Mounk and Foa is not so much with the vague disavowal of “democracy,” but in the meanings of “democracy” that are increasingly mobilized, especially by populists, and especially by right-wing populists. Here it is worth quoting Mounk at length, writing this past summer in *Slate*:

Across the affluent, established democracies of North America and Western Europe, the last years have witnessed a meteoric rise of figures who may not be quite so brash or garish as Trump and yet bear a striking resemblance to him: Marine Le Pen in France, Frauke Petry in Germany, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, and many of the leading Brexiteers in the United Kingdom. They too harness a new level of anger that is quite unlike anything liberal democracies have witnessed in a half-century. They too promise to stand up for ordinary people, to do away with a corrupt political elite, and to put the ethnic and religious minorities who are now (supposedly) being favored in their rightful (subordinate) place. They, too, are willing to do away with liberal political institutions like an independent judiciary or a free, robust press so long as those stand in the way of the people’s will. Together, they are building a new type of political regime that is slowly coming into its own: illiberal democracy.

Critics often attack Trump, Le Pen, and their cohort for being undemocratic. But that is to misunderstand both their priorities and the reasons for their appeal. For the most part, their belief in the will of the people is real. Their primary objection to the status quo is, quite simply, that institutional roadblocks like independent courts or norms like a ‘politically correct’ concern for the rights of minorities stop the system from channeling the people’s righteous anger into public policy. What they promise, then, is not to move away from popular rule but rather to strip it of its artificial, liberal guise — all the while embodying the only true version of the people’s will.

Mounk is here tracking something that is of increasing concern

to many journalists and political scientists: the ascendancy of an increasingly illiberal and anti-liberal discourse of “democracy.” The project of instituting a new form of “illiberal democracy” in place of the supposedly outmoded form of liberal democracy is most closely linked to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has repeatedly announced this intention. But the idea is commonly associated with a broader range of political leaders—Jaroslaw Kaczyński in Poland, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Recep Erdoğan in Turkey, among others—who have sought to institute illiberal measures and to justify them, at least in part, by appeal to a more authentic form of “democracy.” And, as Mounk, along with many others, points out, this tendency is now ascendant in the “West”—in the UK, France, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and the U.S. itself. Leaders like Nigel Farage, Marine Le Pen, and Donald Trump have not come out against “democracy.” They claim to speak for “the people” in a way that those they denounce as “liberal elites” have failed to do (this logic, one presumes, lies behind the “Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy” group in the EU parliament, a militantly Euro-skeptic group co-chaired by Farage). They claim, in some ways, to *restore* “popular sovereignty,” even if their “restoration” is disingenuous, and centers on a mythic past. Because they trumpet their own version of “the people,” “popular sovereignty,” and “democracy,” when increasing numbers of citizens vote for them and their parties, they are not voting against “democracy,” but for it.

To be clear, the “democracy” being supported here is typically ethnically, racially, or religiously exclusive; animated by fear of immigrants and of multicultural “threats” to an essentialist national identity; suspicious of and often hostile to legal and bureaucratic institutions designed to support human rights; and generally hostile to cosmopolitanism, pluralism, and liberalism.

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But it is justified as “democratic,” it is pursued through the electoral process, and it is advanced through legislative and constitutional measures defended on majoritarian grounds.

Mounk and Foa may exaggerate the extent to which public opinion tracks a decline in democratic commitment. Voeten may be right that the survey data suggests more marginal changes in value commitments in recent decades. “Democracy” might still be a central keyword of political life to which many continue to attach themselves. But its meaning is being increasingly contested, on the left as well as on the right. And both the practice and the discourse of pluralistic, representative liberal democracy surely seem to be facing major political challenges. Such challenges may be driven less by value change, than by a set of overlapping institutional crises associated with capitalism, the EU, the immigration crisis, and a more generalized crisis of social security. But they are challenges nonetheless.

How will “democracy” fare as these challenges unfold? Will a broadly liberal and pluralistic version of democracy be deepened, and perhaps made in some ways more social democratic, in order to meet these challenges? Or will it be replaced by something anti-liberal, a kind of “illiberal democracy,” à la Orbán or Erdoğan or Trump, that in time might even give way to something more emphatically authoritarian, as Putin’s “sovereign democracy” has done? The jury is out. We defenders of liberal and pluralist democracy have our work cut out for us. Such work involves institutional analysis and institutional experimentation, normative critique and normative reconstruction. It is necessary to persuasively argue that any vision of “democracy” that rejects the “polyarchal” institutions of civil liberty, freedom of association, and competitive elections is a recipe for political closure, growing acrimony and resentment, and illegitimacy. But it is equally necessary to deepen and extend these institutions so

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that they can meaningfully address issues of political alienation and social injustice that plague existing liberal democracies. In the end, I agree with Mounk: it is important, especially now, to defend and give deeper meaning to liberal democracy. The alternatives, whether or not they are advanced in the name of some other supposedly more authentic conception of “democracy,” are grim.

publicseminar.org, December 15, 2016

How Hannah Arendt's Classic Work on Totalitarianism Illuminates Today's America

The rise of right-wing populism in Europe and the United States, accentuated by the election of Donald Trump, has led to growing fears about the possibility of new forms of authoritarianism. In search of insight, many commentators have turned to a book published some sixty-five years ago—Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt was a German Jewish intellectual who fled Germany with the rise of Adolf Hitler in 1933, lived in Paris as a stateless refugee and Zionist activist until 1941 and then fled to and settled in the United States.

Origins, first published in 1951, was based on research and writing done during the forties. The book's primary purpose is to understand totalitarianism, a novel form of mobilizational and genocidal dictatorship epitomized by Stalinism in Soviet Russia and Hitlerism in Nazi Germany, and it culminates in a vivid account of the system of concentration and death camps that Arendt believed defined totalitarian rule. The book's very first words signal the mood:

Two world wars in one generation, separated by an uninterrupted chain of local wars and revolutions, followed by no peace treaty for the vanquished and no respite for the victor, have ended in the anticipation of a third world war between the two remaining superpowers. This moment of anticipation is like the calm, that settles after all hopes have died ... Under the most diverse conditions and disparate circumstances, we watch the development of the same phenomena—homelessness on an unprecedented scale, rootlessness to an unprecedented depth.

Never has our future been more unpredictable, never have we depended so much on political forces that cannot be trusted to follow the rules of common sense and self-interest—forces that look like sheer insanity, if judged by the standards of other centuries.

How could such a book speak so powerfully to our present moment? The short answer is that we, too, live in dark times, even if they are different and perhaps less dark, and *Origins* raises a set of fundamental questions about how tyranny can arise and the dangerous forms of inhumanity to which it can lead.

THE “GROTESQUE DISPARITY BETWEEN CAUSE AND EFFECT”

Origins centers on the rise of totalitarianism, especially its Nazi variant, out of the ashes of the first world war and the Great Depression. As Arendt made clear, her interest is in understanding the origins of totalitarianism, not explaining its “causes.” The elements that together made its rise possible—anti-Semitism, imperialism, racism, the post-World War I crises of multinational empires, the displacement of peoples by war and by technological change—were important. But their “crystallization” into the horrific outcome that was totalitarianism was neither predictable nor inevitable. While her account of these “elements” is bracing, even more disturbing is the way she links them to the monstrous outcome to which they gave rise. *Origins* charts the “grotesque disparity between cause and effect,” which made the horrors of the forties so surprising, and shocking, to so many. One reason the book resonates so strongly today is its fixation on the way many “bads” long taken for granted can come together to generate a maelstrom of evil and horror foreseen by

HANNAH ARENDT'S CLASSIC WORK ON TOTALITARIANISM

no one, perhaps not even the protagonists themselves. The lesson: freedom is fragile, and when demagogues speak, and others start following them, it is wise to pay attention.

ALIENATION AND POLITICAL EXTREMISM

A subtheme of *Origins* is that by the thirties, there was throughout Europe a generalized crisis of legitimacy. Large numbers of people felt dispossessed, disenfranchised, disconnected from dominant social institutions. The political party system, and parliamentary government more generally, were regarded as corrupt and oligarchic. Such an environment was fertile ground for a “mob mentality,” in which outsiders—Jews, Roma, Slavs, gays, “cosmopolitan intellectuals”—could be scapegoated and a savior could be craved: “The mob always will shout for ‘the strong man,’ the ‘great leader.’ For the mob hates the society from which it is excluded, as well as parliament where it is not represented.”

And a society suffused with resentment, according to Arendt, is ripe for manipulation by the propaganda of sensationalist demagogues: “What convinces masses are not facts, and not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part . . . Totalitarian propaganda thrives on this escape from reality into fiction . . . [and] can outrageously insult common sense only where common sense has lost its validity.” Cynicism. Contempt for truth. Appeal to the craving of the masses for simple stories of malevolent conspiracy. Stephen Bannon of *Breitbart News* may not have read *Origins*, but it is clear he has taken a page from the movements Arendt analyzes.

A CRISIS OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

In modern mass democracies, political parties serve an essential role in structuring competitive elections and linking citizens to government. According to Arendt, a central condition of the rise of totalitarianism was a crisis in the functioning and the legitimacy of party politics and of parliamentary government: “The success of totalitarian movements among the masses meant the end of two illusions of democratically ruled countries in general and of European nation-states and their party system in particular. The first was that the people in its majority had taken an active part in government, and that each individual was in sympathy with one’s own or somebody else’s party ... The second ... was that these politically indifferent masses did not matter, that they were truly neutral and constituted no more than the inarticulate backward setting for the political life of the nation.”

In short, voters freed from conventional partisan attachments were swayed by anti-system movements, parties and leaders, who promised something new and different and whose appeal lay mainly in the very fact that they were new and different. Such appeals can be politically energizing. But by propelling such anti-system movements to political power, these appeals to novelty for its own sake can justify a kind of dictatorial exercise of power unrestrained by legal precedents, parliamentary procedures, or constitutional limits.

“THE DECLINE OF THE NATION-STATE AND THE END OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN”

One of the most brilliant features of *Origins* is the way it charts the interconnection of “domestic” and “global” origins of totalitarianism, in particular the role of the first world war in exposing the limits of national sovereignty, creating a refugee

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crisis of epic proportions and putting the lie to established norms of "the rights of man."

"Before totalitarian politics consciously attacked and partially destroyed the very structure of European civilization, the explosion of 1914 and its severe consequences of instability had sufficiently shattered the facade of Europe's political system to lay bare its hidden frame. Such visible exposures were the sufferings of more and more groups of people to whom suddenly the rules of the world around them had ceased to apply."

Among these groups were not only "the dispossessed middle classes, the unemployed, the small rentiers, the pensioners," but also stateless refugees ("displaced persons") and ethnic minorities, who became isolated, scapegoated, and deprived of legal recognition except as "problems" to be regulated, interned or expelled.

The more powerless the individual nation-states were to deal with the challenges before them, the greater the temptation was to close ranks and to close borders. Peoples made superfluous by the consequences of the war were rendered superfluous in a legal and political sense; an atmosphere of suspicion and lawlessness spread; and "the very phrase 'human rights' became for all concerned—victims, persecutors, onlookers alike—the evidence of hopeless idealism or fumbling feeble-minded hypocrisy." Thus was laid the foundation for the concentration camps and death camps to follow.

POLITICS BEYOND DESPAIR

There is almost no politics in *Origins* beyond the decisions and processes that eventuated in total domination. It is a dark book, written in a dark time and reflecting on the darkest moment of modern European (and arguably world) history. But it is not

without hope. In her preface, Arendt envisions a new form of transnational governance, insisting that “human dignity needs a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited, rooted in and controlled by newly established territorial entities.” And in her conclusion she insists that there is always the possibility of renewal: “But there remains also the truth that every end in history also contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only ‘message’ which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man’s freedom . . . This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man.”

In her subsequent work, Arendt reflected at length about the revival of a politics of human dignity, autonomy and active citizenship. While she was highly critical of the depoliticizing tendencies of modern liberal individualism, she was a strong believer in the rule of law and in the importance of constitutional and extra-constitutional restraints on political power. This is most clear in her 1972 *Crises of Republic*, collecting four essays written in the midst of the legitimacy crises associated with the Vietnam War, the rise of the New Left and Black Power movements, and the deceit and authoritarianism of the Nixon administration. In “Civil Disobedience,” originally published in the *New York Review of Books*, she echoes many observations offered in “*Origins*” more than 20 years earlier. “Representative government itself,” she writes, “is in a crisis today, partly because it has lost . . . all institutions that permitted the citizens’ actual participation, and partly because it is now gravely affected by the disease from which the party system suffers: bureaucratization and the two parties’ tendency to represent nobody but the party machines.” She then proceeds to offer a robust defense of civil disobedience as grounded in the “spirit of the laws” of the American republic and as a practice best suited to enacting

the processes of active consent and dissent that alone can revive American democracy.

Arendt understood that the late sixties legitimacy crises facing the United States and many other societies, including France, Germany, Mexico and Czechoslovakia, were different than the crises facing the countries of interwar Europe. She recognized that the emergence of full-blown totalitarianism was not the only danger facing liberal democracies. Indeed, she noted in *Origins* that “it may even be that the true predicaments of our time will assume their authentic form—though not necessarily the cruelest—only when totalitarianism has become a thing of the past.” But she brilliantly diagnosed the forms of alienation and dispossession that diminished human dignity, threatened freedom and fueled the rise of authoritarianism.

The current rise of right-wing populism throughout Eastern Europe, Western Europe and the United States presents unique challenges of its own. These demand new analyses and new prescriptions. Arendt begins *Origins* with an epigram from her teacher Karl Jaspers that seems apt: “Give in neither to the past nor the future. What matters is to be entirely present.”

While we should not “give in” to the past, neither can we afford to ignore it and its lessons. And that is why the writings of Arendt continue to be read.

The Washington Post, *December 17, 2016*

Obama's Speech was Powerful and Flawed

President Barack Obama gave an incredible Farewell Address tonight. He spoke about the meaning of democratic citizenship, and invoked the historical effort to realize the egalitarian ideals enunciated in the Declaration of Independence. He paraphrased Martin Luther King about the moral arc of the universe bending toward progress. He appealed to civic virtue, and solidarity, and a spirit of democratic egalitarianism. He underscored the importance of trying to understand the standpoints of others and of the need for coalitions, and compromises, based on differences of identities, values, and opinions. He named historical struggles to achieve greater justice, and called upon us, as Americans, to continue the struggle. He appealed to our better angels. It was a powerful speech, and a moving one. It was Obama at his best.

Ever since Aristotle, we have known that language is what makes possible politics. Obama is a rhetorician in the best sense. He takes words seriously. He uses words to open us to the perspectives of others and to move us to do good. In his speeches, he both articulates and enacts the dignity of public life and the possibilities of democratic equality. And as listeners of his speeches, we are elevated as citizens. Obama sounded all the right notes tonight.

He identified the main economic, cultural, and environmental challenges ahead. He underscored the importance of democracy as a means of crafting publicly intelligent and publicly legitimate responses to these challenges. He reminded us of the importance of democratic citizenship and of the fact that this citizenship must be exercised in order to be maintained.

The speech was all the more powerful in light of the obvious

contrast with what we can expect from his successor. There will be no such speeches from Donald Trump. It is not in his repertoire. It is not within his intellectual ability. It is not within his character. We have seen and heard him speak, or rather angrily shout. We have seen him disparage and demean. We have seen him harass and threaten. We have seen him vilify others, and appeal to the basest forms of nativism and tribalism. We have seen the sneer on his face. We know what to expect from him. He will use words to aggrandize himself and to dominate. And he will aggrandize himself. And he will dominate.

It was impossible to watch and listen to Obama tonight without being painfully aware of this. The greatness of Obama's speech is that he reminded us of values worth fighting for and of the importance of public integrity.

And this was also the weakness of the speech. It was a powerful sermon about values. But it lacked any sense of urgency. It was too much like Obama's earlier speeches. But now things are different. For Obama's values have been defeated at the ballot box (yes, that defeat is tainted; but alas, it is real nonetheless, if only because it will not be politically contested—Obama himself has made sure of this—and in a few days Trump will be inaugurated as president). Obama's signature legislative achievements are in danger of being revoked. The Democratic Party—about which Obama said nothing in his speech—is in shambles, shut out of the national government and of a majority of state governments. And Obama's anointed successor, Hillary Clinton, was defeated by a man who exults in bigotry, xenophobia, horrific sexism, and utter contempt for political disagreement. Trump, the father of Birtherism, is a repudiation of everything that Obama stands for. Obama has dignity. But Trump now has *power*.

Let me be clear. I am not one of those who has gone from adulation to hatred of Obama. I never believed that he represented the promise of democratic progressivism, for I have long believed that the social and political infrastructure for such a politics has long been eroded. Obama had successes and failures. He did some things well and other things less well. He did not build upon the momentum of his initial victory to empower the

left or the Democratic Party. He had a congressional majority for a time, and he perhaps could have done more with it. But he confronted big challenges from the start, and faced enormous political obstacles, and a vicious opposition that was inflected with racial resentment, and he became constrained by the structures and the ideologies of state power, no less but also no more than almost every president before him.

Obama is a great man. He surmounted incredible obstacles to become the first African American president in U.S. history. He has behaved with grace under fire and has consistently been a voice of public reason. He represents the best that political liberalism has had to offer. This is not to be taken lightly. If anyone doubts this, let them think for two minutes about what now comes next.

At the same time, as he departs the historical scene, he leaves us terrified and politically weakened. He is not responsible for Trump. But Trump is what his eight years in office have bequeathed to us, not in the sense of moral responsibility, but in the sense of political responsibility. And what was most disappointing about his speech tonight was that it failed to register this in any real way. Obama might want to go out on a positive note. He might want to “go high when they go low.” And I surely understand that he is committed to a certain “decorum,” and does not wish to use his Farewell Address to attack Trump or to rally his supporters in opposition to Trump.

But this is the man who still talks about political organizing and who still quotes Douglass and King and Alinsky. And this is the man who a few months ago was out on the campaign trail saying the absolute truth about Trump—that he lacks the political or the personal abilities to be president, that he is a fool and a bully, that he is a danger to the republic.

We needed something more tonight from Obama’s powerful

OBAMA'S SPEECH WAS POWERFUL AND FLAWED

speech. We needed some outrage and indignation, or at least some appreciation for the outrage and indignation felt and expressed by so many, including those protesters who today sought to disrupt the testimony of Jeff Sessions, but also those many thousands who are planning to descend on Washington, D.C., and to march on behalf of women, in protest of Trump's inauguration. We needed some concrete talk about the importance of rebuilding the Democratic Party from the ground up, and of rebuilding those movements, including the labor movement, that are necessary to contribute to this task.

We needed a candid acknowledgement from Obama that these are very dark times for democracy, and that the incoming administration represents a threat to the very values he speaks of, and that our citizenship will truly be tested in the days and weeks to come.

The speech represented all that is great about Obama, and it reminded us of how much this will be missed. But it also represented the limits of uplifting rhetoric in a time of crisis, especially when this rhetoric is not linked to a real political vision and some real ideas about how to empower this vision.

In a few days Obama will fly off into the sunset, and we will be left with Trump, and with Pence and Sessions, and Bannon and Flynn and Conway and Priebus and Ryan and McConnell and the rest. We have our work cut out for us.

publicseminar.org, January 11, 2017

PART 4

TRUMP ASCENDANT

FEBRUARY 4, 2017 — JANUARY 29, 2018

How to Bring Down a Dictator

Reading Gene Sharp in Trump's America

If it wasn't clear before, it has become all too clear after two weeks that the Trump administration poses a serious threat to liberal democracy.

What we have witnessed since January 20 has little precedent in U.S. politics. A raft of commentary since the election—from Masha Gessen's "Autocracy: Rules for Survival" to historian Timothy Snyder's "20 Lessons from the 20th Century on How to Survive in Trump's America" to a recent op-ed by Miklós Haraszti, the Hungarian former anti-Communist dissident, likening Trump to Hungary's current authoritarian-leaning leader, Viktor Orbán—has fittingly sought to explain and confront Trumpism by turning to authoritarian regimes abroad.

Many political scientists share these writers' concerns. As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt recently wrote, a well-designed constitution alone cannot constrain authoritarian tendencies. Daniel Nexon has summarized the threats that existing domestic and international institutions now face. And political economist Daron Acemoglu has suggested that civil society must act as the last line of defense against the autocratic tendencies of the Trump administration.

Meanwhile the Trump administration continues to issue disturbing executive orders at a furious pace, setting in motion the promised Mexican wall and Muslim ban, reorganizing the National Security Council to replace the chairman of the joint chief of staffs with white nationalist Stephen Bannon, and continuing to wage war on the independent media.

We will surely see a proliferation of resistance movements over the next four years. The nationwide women's marches of January 21 were the first sign. The rapid upsurge of protest against last

week's immigrant ban is another. Protests, marches, and rallies have been key channels for resistance to hybrid-regime autocrats such as Turkey's Erdoğan and Russia's Putin, and the United States has its own long history of civil disobedience. Progressive voices from Frances Fox Piven to Robert Reich have already begun putting forward ideas of how resistance to the Trump administration can be organized.

Surprisingly, one name has been largely absent from these conversations: Gene Sharp. A longtime and prolific theorist of nonviolent direct action, Sharp first came to international prominence in 2000, when Serbian democratic activists inspired by his ideas helped to depose Slobodan Milošević, as portrayed in the powerful documentary *Bringing Down a Dictator*. Sharp's name resurfaced in 2011, when the activists of the Arab Spring found inspiration in his books and pamphlets, and CNN referred to him as "a dictator's worst nightmare."

Until now, Sharp's ideas have largely been applied in authoritarian contexts abroad, whether in the Middle East, post-Communist Europe, or elsewhere. But under Trump, Sharp's ideas have become all too relevant to the contemporary United States. What insights could American activists today glean from his work about the possibility of resisting the Trump administration?

Sharp has codified an approach to nonviolent civil resistance that draws on the lessons of Gandhi, King, Havel, and others. Sharp's theory of power emphasizes that authoritarianism is premised upon the obedience of the population and the collaboration of individuals with those in power. His basic point is that concerted nonviolent resistance can strip the moral and political authority of an authoritarian regime.

Compliance is key to the legitimacy of any regime, and Sharp offers a handbook for how to effectively withhold it. His

HOW TO BRING DOWN A DICTATOR

compendium of “198 Methods for Nonviolent Action” presents a wide range of techniques—from letters and speak-outs to boycotts, strikes, sit-ins, blockades, and slowdowns—that citizens can employ to refuse an illegitimate authority. When coupled with more traditional forms of protest, these tactical disruptions of the normal functioning of the system can place immense pressure on dictators. Sharp treats authoritarian regimes as fragmented coalitions held together by a tenuous obedience to authority. Once the perception of invincibility is removed, such regimes can rapidly disintegrate.

If Machiavelli’s writings envision an “economy of violence” (per Sheldon Wolin), then Sharp can be considered Machiavelli’s heir, in form if not in content. Sharp’s work is organized around an economy of *nonviolence*, understood as a political praxis that, when wielded by committed and organized groups, can radically change the distribution of power in a society.

While drawing from the moral tradition of pacifism, Sharp’s appeal to nonviolent resistance is a pragmatic one: he largely sidesteps normative discussions in favor of a sober, one could say *realist*, analysis of the dynamics of political power. Concerted nonviolence, he finds, is simply more effective in challenging authoritarian regimes than armed uprising.

Since the 1990s, Sharp’s ideas have spread rapidly. His *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, first published in English and Burmese in 1993, was soon translated and circulated in over forty countries. It influenced figures like Srdja Popović of the Serbian group Otpor!, which helped depose Milošević, and activists of the “color revolutions” of the early-mid aughts, Lebanon’s Cedar Revolution of 2005, Iran’s Green Movement in 2009, and the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions of 2011.

Sharp’s notoriety has made him enemies across the political spectrum. Though Sharp’s Albert Einstein Institute is a wholly independent operation, his books have become important resources in the repertoire of U.S. “democracy promotion.”

Autocrats have accused him of propagating revolutionary (or “counter-revolutionary”) ideas. Left critics claim that his work assists U.S. clandestine efforts to promote soft regime change abroad, though Sharp denies the latter point, with figures including Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn coming to his defense.

Sharp’s work furnishes a practical toolkit for organizing resistance to Trump’s authoritarianism. Nonviolent resistance has a long history in the United States, and Sharp is above all a pithy synthesizer of widely circulated movement wisdom. Many recent initiatives across the country, from Black Lives Matter to the water protectors’ camp at Standing Rock, have already put to use the tactics Sharp advocates. Leaders of the NAACP were recently arrested for sitting in at the office of Senator Jeff Sessions in protest against his nomination as attorney general. Immigrant-rights groups linked to the sanctuary movement are preparing to practice civil disobedience in response to a threatened crackdown from the Trump administration.

Whether and how these various protest initiatives can coalesce is an open question. Sharp’s work is useful for thinking not just about the tactics of resistance but about a *strategy* centered on *the regime itself*. While Sharp’s advice is relevant to all forms of citizen action, it is most relevant to thinking about challenging dictatorships rather than “flawed democracies.” But if Gessen and others are right, and if the furious trend of the past weeks is any guide, then we are closer to authoritarianism than most previously suspected.

The distinctive features of the U.S. constitutional system will hopefully furnish us with opportunities unavailable to citizens of Russia, Hungary, or Turkey—though we can no longer take this for granted. Regardless, seizing what opportunities remain will require an upsurge of democratic citizen action. And if such a civic uprising is going to succeed, it will require savvy attention to the themes highlighted by Sharp.

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February 4, 2017*

Thoughts on Putin and Trump

Democratic “interference” and the transnational contest for “democracy”

One of the biggest stories of the 2016 U.S. presidential election was the Russian hacking of the email accounts of the Democratic National Committee and of Clinton campaign chief John Podesta, with the strategic release of the stolen emails—primarily by using Julian Assange’s *Wikileaks* as a conduit—in order to weaken the Clinton campaign and to bolster the campaign of her rival, now-President Donald Trump. The conventional response among most mainstream media commentators and politicians, whether Democratic or Republican-leaning, has been to express alarm and outrage at the Kremlin’s interference in U.S. elections and then to move on. (The Trump team and its supporters are, of course, another matter entirely. But there is nothing “mainstream” about them. And for obvious reasons of political convenience and ideological affinity, Trump will not and cannot denounce Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin.) On the left, there have been two main responses. The first, articulated most predictably and consistently by Glenn Greenwald at *the Intercept*, is a skepticism, bordering on radical empiricism, that there is reasonable proof (which for Greenwald must be definitive and incontrovertible) that the Russian government pursued a strategy of hacking at all. The second is a historical relativization of the significance of the hacking that can easily be summed up thus: who are we to express outrage at such things, since the U.S. has interfered in elections elsewhere scores of times? This second response has obvious merit. The U.S. government historically has very deliberately interfered with elections elsewhere on numerous occasions, many of which involved efforts to undermine perceived “enemies” and to promote “friends” even if they were “our sons-of-a-bitch,” as President Franklin Roosevelt famously said of Nicaraguan

dictator Anastasio Somoza in the thirties. There is a long record of such interventions, especially in the Western hemisphere but indeed throughout the world, which have been well-documented by a range of historians going back to Richard J. Barnet's classic 1968 *Intervention and Revolution: The United States in the Third World*, and the many books of William Appelman Williams.

At the same time, ironically, this response of outrage at the conventional U.S. outrage, is no less moralistic and simplistic than the moralistic outrage at Russia it seeks to counter. It is also deeply misleading about what is currently at stake in the Russian hacking scandal: a genuinely transnational and global struggle over the very meaning of "democracy," that pits a deeply illiberal and indeed authoritarian praxis of "popular sovereignty"—a blend of theory and *practice*—against a liberal praxis that is deeply flawed, but is also a necessary condition of freedom in the modern world.

What is wrong about the Russian hacking is *not* that it represents an "interference" in an otherwise pristine, completely free and fair democratic process whereby ordinary Americans determine their own collective destiny as part of an authentic "community of nations." There is no authentic community of nations. *The world is riven by inequality, and the U.S. is a superpower on the world stage, and no innocent republic adhering to a cosmopolitan ideal.* And the U.S. is no pristine participatory or liberal democracy. It is a deeply flawed and oligarchic political system.

But it is a liberal or pluralistic democracy nonetheless, even if an attenuated one. And because it is, it has been targeted by Putin and has been damaged by him. And Putin's persistent exultation is entirely predictable, and explicable.

Putin's hostility to liberal democracy is not new, and it runs much deeper, historically and ideologically, than the recent

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presidential contest between Hillary Clinton and Trump. While Putin may furnish ideological succor to the U.S. nationalist right with which Trump is connected, and may even have worked to “expose” Clinton and to “expose” flaws in U.S. democracy, what is wrong here is less Putin’s corruption of U.S. elections—which have many sources of corruption—than *Putin’s more general agenda of illiberal democracy promotion* in Europe and the world more generally, including, but hardly limited to, the U.S. In the service of this agenda he has engineered a cyber-attack—a deliberate violation of law—with the purpose of undermining liberal democracy in the U.S. But his broader purpose was to empower the forces of anti-liberalism that he hopes to lead.

That Trump, in league with Steve Bannon, Mike Flynn, Rex Tillerson, and Paul Manafort, would be considered by Putin to be the preferred U.S. leader, and even an ideological ally, is no surprise. But this is not a simple story about individuals such as Putin and Trump. It is a story about how Putin has long regarded the spread of liberal democracy, in Europe and especially in his own country, as a threat. He has long sought to counter this threat by all means necessary, including the disruption of liberal democracy and the dissemination and promotion of an anti-liberal, and thus authoritarian alternative. That this alternative is spreading in the liberal democratic world, for many reasons not reducible to Putin’s efforts but nonetheless in synergy with Putin’s ideological agenda, is the real danger.

I

Let us begin with these two quotes, each approximately ten years old.

I would first ask these people how they understand the concept of democracy. This is a philosophical question, after all, and

#AgainstTrump

there is no one clear answer to it. In your country, what is democracy in the direct sense of the term? Democracy is the rule of the people. But what does the rule of the people mean in the modern world, in a huge, multiethnic and multireligious state? In older days in some parts of the world, in the city states of ancient Greece, for example, or in the Republic of Novgorod (there used to be such a state on the territory of what is now the Russian Federation) the people would gather in the city square and vote directly. This was direct democracy in the most direct sense of the word. But what is democracy in a modern state with a population of millions? In your country, the United States, the president is elected not through direct secret ballot but through a system of electoral colleges. Here in Russia, the president is elected through direct secret ballot by the entire population of the Russian Federation. So whose system is more democratic when it comes to deciding this crucial issue of power, yours or ours? This is a question to which our critics cannot give a direct answer. — *Russian President Vladimir Putin, Interview with NBC Television, July 12, 2006*

However, what is a unipolar world? However one might embellish this term, at the end of the day it refers to one type of situation, namely one center of authority, one center of force, one center of decision-making. It is a world in which there is one master, one sovereign. And at the end of the day this is pernicious not only for all those within this system, but also for the sovereign itself because it destroys itself from within. And this certainly has nothing in common with democracy. Because, as you know, democracy is the power of the majority in light of the interests and opinions of the minority. Incidentally, Russia—we—are constantly being taught about democracy. But for some reason those who teach us do not

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want to learn themselves. I consider that the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world. . . According to the founding documents, in the humanitarian sphere the OSCE is designed to assist country members in observing international human rights norms at their request. This is an important task. We support this. But this does not mean interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, and especially not imposing a regime that determines how these states should live and develop. It is obvious that such interference does not promote the development of democratic states at all. On the contrary, it makes them dependent and, as a consequence, politically and economically unstable. We expect that the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) be guided by its primary tasks and build relations with sovereign states based on respect, trust and transparency. — *Russian President Vladimir Putin's Speech at the 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy, 10 February, 2007*

As these statements make clear, Putin has long had a problem with liberal democracy, which he consistently has regarded as a threat to "Russia," i.e., his conception of how Russia ought to be governed. Indeed, his entire political career has centered on nationalist resistance to the eastward spread of liberal democracy in the post-1989 period. That this spread has been geopolitical and economic and not merely ideological, and has involved NATO as well as the EU and the OSCE, is without question. That this spread was welcomed by the post-Communist regimes in Eastern Europe seeking both to democratize and to open to the West is also without question.

Putin has responded by insisting that Russian-style "democracy" is superior to liberal democracy, and that both the U.S. and the OSCE are trying to impose liberal democracy—competitive elections, the autonomy of civil society organizations,

media independence, free and fair electoral procedures—on Russia in violation of its sovereignty and its traditions. Indeed, during the period when he made the above statements, he went even further, embracing the idea of “sovereign democracy” put forth by his chief ideologist, Vladislav Surkov, who declared, in an infamous July 2005 speech entitled, “How Russia Should Fight International Conspiracies”:

I would like to say, that our project is a commonplace one. I would name it briefly as a “sovereign democracy.” It is not good to add something to democracy because a third way issue appears. But we are forced to do that because liberal politicians consider the sovereignty issue as not actual. I often hear that democracy is more important than sovereignty. We do not admit it. We think we need both. An independent state is worth fighting for.

What are the affronts to sovereignty that so troubled Surkov in this speech? One is the supposed danger of “terrorism” in the Caucasus, a reference to struggles for regional autonomy and independence in Chechnya and Georgia. A second involves critics of Russia who voice concern about the independence of Finland and the Baltic states, especially when they appeal to the EU (or, as Putin mentioned, the OSCE, both of which are committed to a strong program of human rights monitoring throughout Europe). The situation of Ukraine is of particular concern to Surkov, who singles out for criticism the role of “our rightist leader Boris Nemtsov” in advising the leaders of the “Orange Revolution.” (Nemtsov was a vocal liberal critic of Putin who was assassinated in 2015 under very mysterious circumstances, one of a substantial number of Putin’s critics to suffer a similar fate.) But Surkov also speaks more broadly about the “danger” associated with “all those orange revolutions, [and] humanitarian institutes activities.

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It is common knowledge, that Freedom House is headed by James Woolsey, who used to be the head of the CIA. It takes an idiot to believe in the humanitarian mission of this establishment. We also should not forget, that specific circles in those countries are also pursuing similar tasks. We have to take this into account in our work.” Here Surkov cuts to the chase: Russia is endangered by “international conspiracies” spearheaded by the U.S. and its CIA, but also by domestic forces seeking to “weaken” Russia, some indeed in league with “foreigners.” His “sovereign democracy” is a political system in which democratic forms of opposition and contestation are subordinated to a nationalist economic and political agenda that keeps at bay “dangerous” influences from outside the Russian sphere of influence.

This belief in the need to “protect” the sovereignty of Russia in the face of external and especially “Western” and liberal influences has been an overriding commitment of Putin during the *eighteen years* that he has been the unchallenged leader of the Russian Federation (he has served as prime minister from 1999-2000; president from 2000-2008; prime minister again from 2008-2012, during which time the president was his protégé Dmitry Medvedev; and president again since 2012). In the name of this commitment, his government has brazenly employed military force. It intervened militarily in 2008 to back separatist forces in the enclaves of Abkhazia and South Ossetia seeking to break away from Georgia, bombed civilian populations in both the disputed areas and Georgia itself. After orchestrating the incineration of Grozny in 1999-2000, it has supported, since 2007, the brutal rule of Ramzan Kadyrov as head of the Chechen Republic. It also responded to the Ukrainian Euromaidan movement of 2014 by seizing and then annexing Crimea and infiltrating troops and equipment into the Donbas region of far eastern Ukraine in support of separatist forces there.

More important than Putin's use of deadly force to "protect" the "sovereignty" of Russia in the immediate Russian sphere of influence has been his employment of repressive measures to "inoculate" Russia itself from "contagion" from the "outside influence" of "liberalism." As Larry Diamond has observed: "Since huge swaths of society rose up in color revolutions in the former Yugoslavia in 2000, in Georgia in 2003, and in Ukraine in 2004-2005—all to protest electoral fraud and bring about a transition from authoritarianism to democracy—Putin has behaved as if obsessed with fear that the virus of mass democratic mobilization might spread to Russia itself."

Here are some of the results:

According to Olesya Zakjarova: "In 2015, Russia's parliament passed another infamous law, this time allowing the government to designate foreign NGOs as 'undesirable organizations' and driven out of the country. Seven groups, including the National Endowment for Democracy and George Soros's Open Society Foundation, have already been declared undesirable. The regime has further tightened its grip by cracking down on the rights of free assembly and freedom of speech. Unsurprisingly, the main targets of this persecution are organizations that promote human rights or engage in other activities that challenge President Vladimir Putin and his grip on Russian politics. As a result, between 2012 and 2015, the number of civic groups in Russia decreased by 33 percent."

According to Reporters Without Borders, which ranked Russia 148th out of 180 countries for its (lack of) respect for press freedom: "What with draconian laws and website blocking, the pressure on independent media has grown steadily since Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012. Leading independent news outlets have either been brought under control or throttled out of existence. While TV channels continue to inundate viewers with

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propaganda, the climate has become very oppressive for those who question the new patriotic and neo-conservative discourse or just try to maintain quality journalism.”

And according to Freedom House, in Putin’s Russia today:

Opposition politicians and activists are frequently targeted with fabricated criminal cases and other forms of administrative harassment. . . . The government controls, directly or through state-owned companies and friendly business magnates, all of the national television networks and many radio and print outlets, as well as most of the media advertising market. These media effectively serve as venues for Kremlin propaganda. . . . Only a small and shrinking number of radio stations and print outlets with limited reach offer a wide range of viewpoints. . . . The government has consistently reduced the space for freedoms of assembly and association. Overwhelming police responses, the use of force, routine arrests, and harsh fines and prison sentences have discouraged unsanctioned protests, though pro-Kremlin groups are able to demonstrate freely. . . . In February, Putin signed a law that increased the penalties for ‘extremism’, adding to an array of restrictions that can be used against activists and NGOs.” It bears emphasis that Freedom House is a Western human rights and democracy promoting organization supported by the U.S. government, and that Freedom House, the National Endowment of Democracy, and a number of NGOs linked to the Soros Foundation have all been banned from operation in Russia as part of the very effort to “protect Russian sovereignty.

II

Through such means Putin has sought to “diffusion-proof” his

regime, rendering it “immune” to the reception of “dangerous” ideas from “the outside” about human rights, pluralism, dissent, and constitutional government. At the same time, he has sought to promote and to widely disseminate a counter-ideology centering on the rejection of liberal values as dissolute, weak, hostile to a strong nation, and “alien.” This has led to a vigorous campaign of support for a range of right-wing populist movements, parties, and leaders throughout Europe. In an April 2014 *openDemocracy* piece on “The Kremlin’s Marriage of Convenience with the European Far-Right,” Anton Shekhovstov charts the ideological affinities and institutional connections between Moscow and a wide range of right-wing groups, including Austria’s Freiheitliche Partei (FPÖ) and Bündnis Zukunft, the Belgian Vlaams Belang and Parti Communautaire National-Européen, the Bulgarian Ataka, the French Front National, the Hungarian Jobbik, the Italian Lega Nord and Fiamma Tricolore, the Polish Samoobrona, the Serbian ‘Dveri’ movement, and the Spanish Plataforma per Catalunya. As he points out, these groups share with Putin’s regime strong ideological commitments to national sovereignty; authoritarian conservative values regarding gender, sexuality, multiculturalism, and liberal individualism; and hostility toward liberalism more generally. These connections have been documented in a number of reports by risk analysts such as Risk and Forecast, research institutes such as the Bulgarian Center for Strategic and International Studies (in its 2016 report “The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian influence in Central and Eastern Europe”) and a range of Western intelligence experts.

To observe this is not to attribute to Putin’s Russia a profound malevolence nor to reduce the serious crises facing liberal democratic parties and liberal democracy itself—as a mode of governing nation-states and as a mode of organizing

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international political and economic relations—to the machinations of Putin. As Ivan Krastev, one of the sharpest critical observers of these things, has noted, such a reductionism promotes a “paranoia” of Putin, and it reproduces the worst elements of Cold War Manichean thinking. As he writes:

It’s hard to underestimate the extent of Russia’s anti-American paranoia. Russia’s leaders take it as an article of faith that the mass protests in Moscow in 2011 and 2012 were orchestrated from abroad, and that Ukraine’s Euromaidan revolution in 2013 and 2014 was generated with Western resources and inspiration. Even the declining price of oil is, to them, a CIA plot. . . . But it requires an astounding level of exaggeration to believe that Russian interference will decide the election, or that Russia would even try to. The Kremlin’s actions are more akin to a black-arts version of the “democracy promotion” that the United States undertakes in countries like Russia, funding liberal NGOs as a way of challenging Mr. Putin’s monopoly on power. Annoying, and concerning, but hardly a threat. . . . What is disturbing with the “blame Putin” stance endorsed by serious Western politicians, analysts and news media outlets is that it makes the Russian leader appear omnipotent while making the rest of us seem impotent. Casting blame in Moscow’s direction prevents us from productively discussing the grave problems we face as societies, and simplistically reduces the uncertainties and risks of an increasingly interdependent world to the great powers rivalry. It neither helps us better understand Russia and the nature of its government, nor makes it easier for us to have effective policy vis-à-vis Moscow.

Krastev wrote these words in August 2016. The possibility that Russian activity tipped the balance of the November election in the U.S. to Trump seems much less exaggerated today in light of

recent U.S. intelligence reports. Nonetheless, Krastev is correct: both the crisis of liberal democracy and the antagonism between the U.S. and Russia are political phenomena with complex causes, and the demonization of Putin helps us to understand neither.

At the same time, while demonization is a mistake, so too is delusion. And when Fyodor Lukyanov, the editor the Kremlin-connected *Russia in Global Affairs*, declares that “Putin is giving America a taste of its own medicine: Aiming to spread democracy, the U.S. has meddled in foreign countries’ politics for decades. Russia just returned the favor,” he is going way too far beyond the bounds of credulity. One reason is because Putin sought not simply to influence U.S. politics, but to organize a cyber-espionage campaign designed to systematically leak information; it is not the propaganda of *Russia Today* that is in question, it is the hacking of the servers of the Democratic National Committee and the leaking of information to Wikileaks. But the more important reason is that the goals of Russian “meddling” are very different from the goals of U.S. “meddling” associated with “democracy promotion.” Krastev, who does not deny this difference, thus says it better: “The Kremlin’s actions are more akin to a black-arts version of the ‘democracy promotion’ that the United States undertakes in countries like Russia, funding liberal NGOs as a way of challenging Mr. Putin’s monopoly on power.”

There is a big difference, ethically and politically, between funding liberal NGOs in Russia that challenge the authoritarianism of the Putin regime, or liberal NGOs that challenge authoritarianism in Belarus or Hungary or anywhere else in the former Soviet bloc, on the one hand, and the funding and support of neo-fascist or right-wing populist parties in Austria or Hungary or France on the other. Western “democracy promotion” organizations provide financial, logistical, and organizational support to a wide range of groups seeking to expand press freedom

and human rights, and not to groups seeking to limit these things. Western “democracy promotion” has a complicated history to be sure, and this is a political history linked to the agendas and ideological dispositions of the states and organizations involved. Such democracy promotion is hardly “innocent.” And it surely prefers the support of liberal democrats to support for more radical democrats. But one thing is beyond question. While such “democracy promotion” includes organizations supported by the United States—such as National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, United States Institute for Peace—it also includes organizations supported by a range of other civil society organizations in other countries, such as the German Social Democratic Party’s Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung and the German Christian Democratic Party’s Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung, and a range of Helsinki Committees; the extensive network of locally-based NGOs supported by George Soros and his Open Society Institute, but also the Central European University that he helped to finance (Soros has been the object of vicious, anti-Semitic campaigns throughout Eastern Europe and Russia) and a range of other more official efforts, such as Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and its Department of Democracy, Human Rights, and Gender Equality.

When Putin opposes Western democracy promotion, he is opposing not simply U.S.-supported organizations, but a much broader range of efforts, all of which have the same broad goal—supporting diverse and autonomous civil societies in which the institutions of “polyarchy” play an important role. Human Rights Watch currently lists 105 groups that are registered as “foreign agents” under Russian law and remain targeted for monitoring and harassment by the Putin regime. Among them are “Golos” (The Association of NGOs in Defense of Voter Rights), “Memorial” Human Rights Center, Lawyers

for Constitutional Rights and Freedoms (which was shut down in May 2015), Freedom of Information Foundation, Agora International Human Rights Association (shut down in 2015), Center for Social Policy and Gender Studies (shut down in 2015), Side By Side LGBT International Film Festival, and a wide range of civil rights, women's rights, LGBT rights, consumer rights, and ecology organizations.

Putin's "dark arts" version of Western "democracy promotion" thus boils down to a suppression of the activity of Russian civil society groups seeking to democratize their society, on the one hand; and the promotion of anti-liberal groups that oppose human rights, LGBT rights, immigrant rights, the rights of ethnic minorities, and the rights of women on the other.

There is thus a huge and rather obvious difference between supporting groups dedicated to the legacies of individuals such as Olof Palme and Konrad Adenauer, on the one hand and supporting the heirs of Mussolini and Hitler on the other. And those who liken what Putin is doing to what the U.S. and other Western supporters of "democracy promotion" are doing miss this entirely. In both cases, there is a kind of activity, involvement, and support for like-minded groups across borders. But only for Putin, and for his nationalist allies in other countries, do such civic connections involve "interference" and meddling. For supporters of Western "democracy promotion," these sorts of activities are better viewed as transnational *solidarity* with citizen activists, journalists, legal professionals, academics, and political elites in places where an autonomous civil society is under threat. And the response of Putin and his allies is to act in solidarity *with those who threaten it*.

III

The Russian cyber campaign against the Democratic Party, and in favor of Trump's candidacy, represents a frightening disruption of and interference in the U.S. electoral process. If suspicions that there were contacts between the Kremlin and the Trump campaign about such efforts turn out to be true, the interference would be more glaring, and might even be considered a conspiracy to disrupt the presidential election. This is serious, though it is extremely unlikely at this point that such knowledge would have any bearing on the occupant of the White House.

But more serious is the fact that there is an ideological affinity between Putin and Trump that leads them to praise and to mutually support each other. Putin cracks down on political opposition and intimidates or closes down independent media, and Trump praises Putin as a "strong" and "effective" leader. Trump declares that he will "make America great again" by closing borders and deporting "undesirable aliens" and by denouncing and taming the media, and Putin talks favorably about Trump's boldness and his vision ("It's not our job to judge his qualities, that's a job for American voters, but he's the absolute leader in the presidential race") and proceeds to denounce Trump's political and journalistic critics, and embrace the ideological affinities between the new Republican administration and his own regime ("It means that a significant part of the American people have the same perception about how the world should be developing. . . . It is good that people support us in this, in terms of traditional values").

While the election of Trump signals a troubling level of Russian investment in domestic U.S. politics, what is most dangerous here is simply the *mutual complicity* of Trump and Putin, along with a wide range of other nationalist leaders

throughout Europe, in a loose transnational movement that is hostile to core elements of liberal democracy. This is not so much a question of “foreign interference” as it is a question of overlapping and mutually reinforcing ideological commitments. The danger here, as Masha Gessen made clear in her widely-discussed essay “Autocracy: Rules for Survival,” is the dismantling of liberal democracy itself. But as Gessen has also insisted, it would be a huge mistake to believe “that Trump is some sort of a foreign agent rather than a homegrown demagogue.” Trump may have been buoyed by Putin. But his ascendancy to the presidency is the product of America’s dysfunctional political system, and he rose to power with the organized support of millions of Americans who voted for, and thus offered political support to, what he stands for. Trump’s victory was not caused by Putin any more than the rise of Nigel Farage or Marine Le Pen or Viktor Orbán was caused by Putin. In each case, it is a particular liberal democracy and its deficiencies that has been placed into question by the rise of anti-liberal forces, even if it is of course true that the states in question are part of a broader world and that their EU connections are particularly important. And in each case, it is the organized activity of domestic citizen groups and political parties that will be the first line of defense against such authoritarian leaders.

At the same time, these anti-liberal leaders furnish ideological and political support to one another, and share a broadly common agenda. And up until now, for many years the symbolic leader of this group has been Putin. It now appears that he has been joined by Trump. What is at stake here is not a geopolitical struggle so much as an ideological one. At stake is the future of Ukraine, and the Baltic states, and Europe more generally, but also the future of the U.S. and indeed of Russia itself. Will the future be closed borders and authoritarianism and the blunt use of force to expel or to dominate vulnerable populations? Or will it be the relatively free flow of goods and peoples across borders, and political

pluralism, and liberal democracy?

This remains an open question. And just as the ascendancy of the new nationalists had been transnational, transatlantic, and global, so too will the defense of liberal democracy require transnational, transatlantic, and global forms of mutual support and solidarity.

publicseminar.org, February 4, 2017

A “No!” to Gorsuch is a “Yes!” to Democracy

Democrats must oppose Neil Gorsuch for SCOTUS

Neil Gorsuch may be a decent man and a reasonable jurist, though it is clear that his “reasonableness” includes some very right-wing convictions about reproductive freedom and “religious freedom.” But okay. He is not a lunatic, unlike most Trump appointees. It does not matter. He is being nominated in the middle of a crisis of the republic, and he is only being considered because the Republicans outrageously refused to allow President Obama to fulfill his constitutional duties to fill the court vacancy caused by Antonin Scalia’s death.

Democrats must oppose Gorsuch on principle, but also because of the pragmatics of starting to organize real opposition to Trumpism and to mobilize Democratic constituencies and reinvigorate the party.

Indeed, every Democratic senator who questions him at his confirmation hearings should ask him these three questions:

1. Do you believe that the Constitution empowers the sitting president of the U.S. to fill vacancies to the Supreme Court with the advice and consent of the Senate, and do you believe that it is constitutional for a Senate majority to refuse to even consider a nominee because they don’t like the president and would rather have a vacant seat than anyone appointed by him or her?
2. Are you familiar with the record of Merrick Garland, the Chief Judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of

Columbia? Do you believe that he is an honorable and respected professional jurist who meets the qualifications to serve as a Supreme Court justice?

3. Do you believe that it was proper, right, or constitutional for the Republican-controlled U.S. Senate to refuse to even hear Garland's nomination?

It is important to call him out and put his integrity to the test.

But it is even more important to use the Senate confirmation process as an opportunity to communicate loudly and clearly a simple and yet fundamental message: in a constitutional democracy, the rule of law matters.

The general public needs to be reminded, seriously and clearly, that the Republican Party has recently played fast and loose with the rule of law, and that the current Republican president has disdain for the rule of law, his nomination announcement last night notwithstanding.

The core Democratic constituencies need to be reminded—and perhaps even informed!—that the Democratic party is serious about principle and serious about mounting a strong opposition to the Trump agenda.

And the Republicans in the Senate and the House and throughout the land need to be reminded that if politics is “hardball,” the Democrats can play too, and that they can play for the “long game” as well as the short one.

There is danger here, as there is in all political moves. Such an opposition to the Gorsuch confirmation could backfire among the broad public if it is not done effectively and communicated well. It might well intensify the sense of constitutional crisis—but the crisis is being caused by the Republicans and especially by Trump, and it will not be resolved by laying down to whatever the Republicans want. Moreover, such a move will surely upset those Republicans, such as John McCain and Lindsey Graham, who in other ways are potential allies in contesting some of the extreme measures envisioned by the Trump administration. But, again, too much has been done to placate these figures, who have been timid, and inconsistent, in their criticisms of Trump, and have

consistently signaled that they are Republicans first. So be it. If they might be allies in some things, this is fine. This is a reason to engage them *agonistically*. But it is not a reason to submit to them.

The Senate's authority to advise and consent, and the congressional power to hold public hearings more generally, is an important part of many decision-making processes. In this case, it will determine whether or not Gorsuch will be confirmed. Here the hearings will matter, but also the Senate filibuster rule, and whether Senate Republicans will respect this long-standing rule.

But such hearings are also important in a broader way, as occasions for issues to be publicly aired, for experts to be invited to give testimony, and for political appointees to be challenged, about their own views but also the views of the administration that has nominated them.

Senate Democrats are now on the spot in a very public way. They will either perform their own cravenness, or they will perform a broad political commitment to the rule of law and to the core values of a liberal democracy.

They ought to say a loud "No!" to Gorsuch. For by doing so, they will be saying "Yes!" to the political project of building a new Democratic, and democratic, political majority.

publicseminar.org, February 1, 2017

A Citizen's Appeal to Barack Obama

Defending our democracy from authoritarianism

Barack Obama: if you meant what you said in your presidential farewell address, then it is time to come out of political retirement. *Now*. Trump may have smiled as he crossed paths with you on his way to your former home. But that was a game, and you've known it all along. The gloves are now off. He is denouncing, revoking, and undermining everything of value that you tried to do. He is the antithesis of everything you said about democracy. He is a danger to the republic and to everyone who inhabits our common earth.

This can't wait. Every day brings us one day closer to authoritarianism, to war, to disaster. Unless you have closed your eyes and ears, you can see and hear this. You know this.

What canon of "civility" and "respect for the constitutional transfer of authority" can require you now, as a citizen, to refuse to speak out against this travesty to American liberal democracy?

You were the center of Democratic politics for over eight years. The Democratic Party is now leaderless and rudderless. And the Constitution is now under siege.

You are not a savior. You are not a prophet. You are an ex-president who is also a good man and a citizen of our democracy. You are a husband and a father and a neighbor of people who are being threatened by what your successor is doing on an hourly basis.

It is time for you to speak out. It is time for you to mobilize others to speak out. You still demand attention. You command respect. Yours is a powerful voice for democracy. Use it. *Now*. Speak. Act. Join. Lead. Help us organize what John Dewey once called a Great Community. There is no time like the present.

#AgainstTrump

There is no time to wait. The arc of the universe may bend toward justice. Or it might now be twisted out of shape altogether. We need to bend the arc toward justice. And we need you to do your fair share, to use the resources uniquely at your disposal.

President Obama—we still call ex-presidents that—it is time to defend the democracy that you so eloquently envisioned.

It is time. Now.

publicseminar.org, February 2, 2017

The Politics of Disclosure

Trump's dangerous authoritarianism

Serious questions have been swirling around the Trump political operation since long before Trump's election last November. One set of questions has related to the personal, economic, and ideological connections between key Trump people—Paul Manafort, Mike Flynn, Steve Bannon, and Trump and his children themselves—and the Russian economic and political elite centered on Vladimir Putin. A second set of questions related to the Russian hacking of the Democratic Party during the 2016 election campaign, and to the connections between this hacking and the remarkably pro-Putin rhetoric of Trump. Lurking in the background was a third question that was entirely speculative: was there actual collusion between the Trump operation, before and after the November 2016 election, and the Putin regime?

Now this question has come out into the open, and certain facts have reached the light of day. Extensive investigative reporting by *the Washington Post*, *the New York Times*, and other media outlets has shown that:

1. Trump's National Security Adviser, Flynn, already known to have extensive ties to Putin, had numerous contacts with Russian diplomats in December 2016, and that the Obama administration's newly announced sanctions were among the topics of discussion; and
2. Manafort and other unnamed important Trump campaign officials had extensive and ongoing contact with Russian intelligence agents during the 2016 campaign.

In the face of these revelations the Trump administration has dissimulated and lied; Democrats and other critics of the administration have denounced this news and called for serious congressional investigations, including perhaps a Senate select committee or a special commission akin to the 9/11 commission;

and the Republican leadership has cravenly prevaricated and sought to change the subject.

For most critics of the Trump administration, these revelations are incendiary, and they are symptomatic of the broad and deep ways that the administration has threatened, and is threatening, core institutions of constitutional democracy.

The Trump administration has sought to deflect all attention from these revelations by insisting that the “real” issue here is the “leaking” of intelligence information to the press, without which the revelations would never have been revealed. That this move is the height of hypocrisy, because Trump’s entire campaign centered on celebrating Wikileaks disclosures about the Democratic Party, has been widely noted. That it is one tactic of obfuscation and demonization of the media in a long train of such abuses is obvious.

And yet, strangely, this critique of “leaking” is now being seconded by an unlikely alliance of skeptics right and left who are united by a fear of “the deep state.”

Damon Linker, the prominent moderate conservative writer, has just published a widely-quoted piece entitled, “America’s Spies Anonymously Took Down Michael Flynn. That is Deeply Worrying.” In this piece, Linker declares that: “Flynn’s ouster was a soft coup (or political assassination) engineered by anonymous intelligence community bureaucrats. The results might be salutary, but this isn’t the way a liberal democracy is supposed to function.” It is worth noting that his piece has been seconded by Noah Millman in *American Conservative* and, more importantly, by *Breitbart News* in a piece entitled “Trump is Right About Enormous Problem of Deep State Links.”

In making this argument, Linker echoes an argument long made by Glenn Greenwald in *the Intercept*, most recently in a piece entitled “The Deep State Goes to War with President-

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Elect, Using Unverified Claims, as Democrats Cheer.”

Greenwald, erstwhile left critic of all aspects of the U.S. political establishment, accuses an alliance of Democrats, journalists, and intelligence operatives of seeking to question the “legitimacy” of the Trump presidency and, by doing so, undermining democracy itself: “Whatever one’s views . . . it is the democratic framework—the presidential election, the confirmation process, congressional leaders, judicial proceedings, citizen activism and protest, civil disobedience—that should determine how they are resolved. All of those policy disputes were debated out in the open; the public heard them; and Trump won. Nobody should crave the rule of Deep State overlords.” This is precisely the rhetoric of the Trump administration, and it is no surprise that it has been enthusiastically featured by right-wing pundit Tucker Carlson.

The fact that Linker and Greenwald strangely agree about the “deep state” danger, or that their views line up so well with the claims of Trump, ought to give one pause. But it does not “prove” that they are wrong. All the same, they are wrong. Here’s why: This talk of “the deep state” is overheated and imprecise. Such talk might sound like a simple reference to deeper structures of power not normally in public view. But it is not. The idea of “the deep state” first emerged in connection with discussion of the Turkish, Egyptian, and Pakistani states, all of which were shaped by military coups and have long involved a strong military presence in politics that borders on military dictatorship. The idea of “the deep state” in this context is a reference to the very complex relationships between titular civilian politicians, military institutions, security and police forces, and a netherworld of veritable criminal warlords and mafias.

Does the United States have a “national security establishment?” Yes. Is it “a national security state?” Perhaps. It is true, and important, that in the midst of the Cold War,

institutions of “national security,” including the National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency, were created. It is true that throughout the Cold War period these institutions engaged in many nefarious activities, domestically and abroad. And it is certainly true that after 9/11, the announced “war on terror” greatly empowered institutions of surveillance, detention, and repression. These are real and troubling features of U.S. politics, that have been criticized for decades by people on the democratic left.

But do they constitute a “deep state” that operates analogously to the functioning of the Turkish, Pakistani, or Egyptian states? No. Do their officials represent puppet masters pulling the strings of politics from behind the scenes? No, outside of far-right conspiracy theories about dangerous UN “blue helmets” and Justice Department “jackboots” and far-left conspiracy “truther” theories about 9/11 as a CIA plot. The institutions of the U.S. “national security state” surely represent serious constraints on, and defects in, the politics of constitutional democracy. But they are not “rogue” institutions involved in systematically or regularly subverting domestic politics. To the contrary, the institutions, and the priorities they serve, have for a very long time been supported and justified by both major political parties. Yes, as Noam Chomsky has long argued, this has involved a “manufacturing of consent.” But it has also involved a general hegemony; this hegemony has been sustained by a very public politics; and it has sometimes been electorally contested and has frequently been criticized. In short, the U.S. political system is a constrained, inequalitarian, and flawed liberal democracy, but it is a liberal democracy nonetheless, and has not yet crossed the line to authoritarianism.

Further, most of the many thousands of individuals who work in these institutions are professionals. Yes, there is some

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corruption, especially in many Pentagon contracts. But there is not the widespread corruption, graft, and clientelism that characterizes actual “deep states.” The people who work in the CIA, and the State Department, and the Pentagon are mostly highly professionalized civil servants who take their jobs seriously and who take the institutional subordination of military authority to civilian control and democratic determination very seriously. By all accounts, at every step along the way, the handling of secret information has involved great care and attentiveness to institutional rules.

The public revelations of secret dealings involving Flynn and others very close to Trump might have involved some “leaking” of information by intelligence officials seeking to “protect their turf” from Trump’s repeated attacks, but it mainly involved relentless investigative reporting by independent journalists who were able to find sources within the security establishment and the White House willing to disclose classified or confidential information in order to shine a light on official misconduct. To denounce or criticize intelligence professionals willing to whistleblow important information as “leakers” exercising powers of “the deep state” is wrong.

Such a claim does a real injustice to some excellent investigative journalists. To imply that they are hacks of the CIA is to adopt precisely the derisive tone of Trump himself.

And it does an injustice to intelligence professionals, who in fact were in possession of very important information, bearing on U.S. foreign policy and possible collusion in the interference with a presidential election. (Interestingly Greenwald himself, who has devoted much critical attention to “deep state” opposition to Trump, defends the most recent whistleblowing as criminal but “wholly justified,” declaring that “any leak that results in the exposure of high-level wrongdoing—as this one did—should

be praised, not scorned and punished.” Greenwald does not reconcile this observation with his other arguments about how “deep state” attacks on Trump represent a threat to democracy.)

Such revelations are not nefarious. They are genuine contributions to public understanding. To say this is not to celebrate the vast and troubling expansion of surveillance powers by the U.S. government since 9/11. Such powers ought to be reined in, and reining them in ought to be a priority for liberals. But there is a difference between harassing dissidents or detaining suspects at “black sites,” on the one hand, and wiretapping the phones of Russian diplomats and intelligence agents, on the other. And if important information about questionable or borderline illegal activity by public officials is uncovered through such wiretaps, and if such information is shared with political authorities, but political authorities, for a variety of reasons, refuse to act on this information and indeed disparage its sources, what is better for democracy, continued secrecy, or public disclosure? And it is quite obvious that neither the White House nor the Republican congressional establishment have had any interest in seriously pursuing Trump’s many troubling Russian ties. Indeed, even now, after the whistleblowing that alone brought important facts to light, Senate Republican leaders are maneuvering to limit any inquiry to secret intelligence committee hearings, and Representative Jason Chaffetz, the Republican chair of the House government oversight committee, is insisting that no investigation is needed because “the situation has taken care of itself.”

Indeed, while the disclosures do not constitute a “soft coup” or a nefarious interference in an otherwise pure democratic process, they do constitute a kind of resistance—to an administration very publicly committed to rolling back long-standing limits on state power, in connection with the rights of immigrants

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(“extreme vetting”), prisoners of war (“waterboarding is not torture, it is extreme interrogation”), women, the free press and domestic political opponents. Intelligence professionals are not noble liberals or uniquely heroic defenders of liberal democracy. They are mostly professionals by and large committed to bureaucratic lines of authority and even to a certain understanding of the rule of law. There is of course an underside to all of this. But this does not mean that everything that they do constitutes a nefarious intervention.

Another way of putting this: they are officials of the state. The state is a bureaucratic institution that claims a monopoly over the legitimate use of force within the country. It involves institutional routines and loyalties, and a certain institutional conservatism and resistance to radical change. But to consider such bureaucratic resistance as a kind of coup is to abandon any sense of intellectual proportion.

The fact is that the Trump administration is a uniquely dangerous, authoritarian administration. It is headed by a small group of people, most of whom have no experience of public service, and who are hostile to all forms of proceduralism, institutionalism, and constitutionalism. In Bannon, they have an ideologue who has quite emphatically committed himself to disrupting the basic operations of the state. They are starting to make real headway in this agenda. And in response, there is an emerging resistance by public officials. Within the State Department, and the Justice Department, and the Department of Education, and the EPA, civil service employees and long-term appointees committed to the missions of their agencies are offering bureaucratic resistance to Trump’s most disturbing initiatives. Is this bad? Does it automatically become bad when it involves intelligence officials who are in possession of explosive information about serious wrongdoing and who

confront a paranoid administration committed to public dissimulation and deceit?

We are in the midst of a serious political and constitutional crisis. No major social, economic, or political institution is untouched. The Trump administration is not the “cause” of the crisis. But it has brought this crisis to a head, and has promised and begun to enact one very frightening way of resolving the crisis—through the creation of a truly anti-liberal, xenophobic and authoritarian regime.

To ignore the questionable circumstances under which it came to power, and even more to bracket out the very dangerous ways it has already begun to exercise its power, and to treat it as an expression of “democracy” and to treat intelligence whistleblowers as agents of “the deep state” or even enemies of democracy—this represents a serious lapse of good political judgment. That a similar rhetorical tack is being relentlessly pursued by Trump and his lackeys is something much worse—a form of pure cynicism.

The current clear and present danger to democracy is the man who won 306 Electoral College votes, Trump, the so-called president of the United States, who has already placed his administration on a collision course with liberal democracy and with reality.

The danger is not a “soft coup” by “the deep state.” The danger is a hard push to authoritarianism by an elected president committed to making war on science, public education, a free press, rational bureaucracy, the rule of law, and all forms of intelligence. The main work of resisting this danger falls to citizens acting autonomously. But we can only hope that there will continue to be conscientious journalists willing to relentlessly pursue leads, and conscientious public officials and civil servants willing to disclose publicly important information even when, and especially when, elected leaders do everything in their power to keep it secret.

publicseminar.org, February 16, 2017

Trump and the Recent Denunciation of Anti-Semitism

11 theses

1. There has been a striking upsurge of anti-Semitic threats and incidents since Donald Trump was elected president in November 2016.
2. This is a very bad thing for Jewish Americans, for minorities of all kinds, for all citizens who care about the rights of individuals and the importance of constitutional democracy, and for all human beings who care about human dignity and respect.
3. It is imperative that this anti-Semitism is denounced and opposed.
4. It is a good thing that Trump finally denounced it today during remarks at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Better late than never.
5. At the same time, it is shocking and disturbing that it took him so long; that he had repeatedly sought to evade the issue; and that as recently as Holocaust memorial day he refused to mention much less denounce anti-Semitism. It is also rather curious that while he refused to speak of anti-Semitism in commemorating the Holocaust, he chose to speak of it, and not the history of slavery and Jim Crow—in prepared remarks—while commemorating an African American history museum. Legitimate questions should be raised here about whether or not there is a strategy of dissimulation going on here. There are good reasons to be

suspicious. Always.

6. Trump's refusal, until today, to explicitly name and condemn anti-Semitism is symptomatic of a much broader and deeper problem: his affiliation with far-right, "alt-right" individuals and groups, his attraction to far-right conspiracy and "birther" theories, and his appeal to a rhetoric of "America first" that has its roots in Nazi-sympathizing groups of the forties. The fact that his chief White House advisor is Steve Bannon is merely the tip of this iceberg.

7. Drawing on these connections, Trump has consistently buoyed the fascist aspirations of the far-right, and has consistently received the praise of far-right—white supremacist and neo-Nazi—leaders.

8. Trump's statement today ought to be welcomed. But it was weak, odd, and merely a drop in an ocean of racism that he has done a great deal—more than any other politician in recent memory since George Wallace—to cultivate.

9. If Trump is even remotely serious about the "horror" of anti-Semitism, then he must loudly and consistently speak out against it, and demonstrate, in action as well as words, his opposition. He should remove Bannon from his White House position, an important symbolic gesture. More importantly, he should direct the attorney general to commence a serious Justice Department response that involves investigating the spread of vandalism, harassment, and threats and bringing to justice the perpetrators, and elevating the level of security at all Jewish community centers in the United States.

10. As Martin Luther King, Jr. famously stated, we are all "caught

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in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” If Trump is serious about the scourge of anti-Semitism, and hatred and bigotry more generally, then he ought to abandon central promises of his campaign—including the Mexican wall, the expanded deportation order, and the Muslim ban—and work hard, and publicly, to repair the social fabric that he has done so very much to tear apart. Let him publicly speak about the fact that immigration, and ethnic pluralism, are central features of the American political tradition. Let him announce his commitment to enforcing the Voting Rights Act. Let him announce his commitment to the reproductive freedom of women. Let him work respectfully with civil rights groups instead of denouncing them. Let him stop denouncing the independent press as “liars” and “enemies of the people,” and demonstrate a serious commitment to a free press. Let him behave like a president who understands and values the basic principles of a constitutional democracy.

11. Philosophers and writers of all kinds will make these arguments in the coming days, as well they should. It is important to understand and to criticize the bigotry and exclusivism and authoritarianism at the heart of Trumpism. At the same time, the point is to challenge and *to change it*.

publicseminar.org, February 21, 2017

“Focus on the Issues, Not on Trump?” NOT!

How the Trump administration is waging war against the media

As the mishaps, scandals, and outrages of the Trump administration unfold on a daily if not hourly basis, some in the media are starting to suggest that all of these things are distractions from the real, substantive issues that ought to be receiving more attention.

The right-wing version of this, expressed by conservative MSNBC talk-show host Joe Scarborough but also by his MSNBC colleague Chuck Todd, goes something like this (I paraphrase): “Trump’s antics are distracting him from attending to the substantive policy issues of his campaign. He is needlessly making enemies of the press, playing only to his base, and shooting himself in the foot. We ought to do our part as responsible media to focus attention where it really belongs, on the issues.”

The left-wing version is harder to locate, but it is a kind of mirror image of the right-wing one (again, I paraphrase): “All of this talk about Trump, Bannon, Priebus, Spicer, how they treat the press, how they get along or don’t get along with the FBI or the CIA: these are distractions from the real policy issues that ought to be the focus of discussion. Trump might even be trying to distract us, because he has no real policy agenda. But we should not let ourselves be so distracted. Let us focus on the issues—jobs, the environment, etc.—and not get caught up with Trump.”

There is an element of truth in these sorts of claims. Trump is a master showman; he does deliberately play the media, and he does seek to distract the public from certain things, and we ought not to allow him to get all the attention, to determine the agenda,

and to use the criticism of himself as a way of whipping up mob hysteria about how liberals are “enemies of the people.”

It would be good if the focus was not on Trump but on issues and policies.

But here’s the problem with this call to focus more on the issues: Trump is the president of the United States, and the president is the most powerful chief executive in the world. Trump possesses and exercises great power. And that is the problem—the *power* and the way it is being exercised. This is not a question of Trump as an individual. It is a question of Trump as a public figure, the holder of public office, the maker of public decisions and the issuer of executive orders, and the mobilizer of right-wing populist resentment from the most visible, powerful bully pulpit in the world.

The issue is not Donald Trump. The issue is that Trump is making mincemeat of constitutional democracy in the United States; that he admires, and has clear ideological and other connections to, dictators like Vladimir Putin; and that his rhetoric and his decisions thus far have been consistently authoritarian and seem headed more in this direction every day.

“Trump’s authoritarianism” might sound less substantive than “the economy,” or “the environment,” or “health care reform,” or “education policy.” But “issues” and the “policies” that address them are politically defined, politically organized, politically legislated, and politically implemented by a political system. And the shape and character of the political system is kind of an important issue!

To be more blunt: Trump’s erratic personal conduct, his corrupt and clientelistic business connections, his hostility towards the independent media, his brazen disregard of important political conventions and legal requirements, and his efforts to restrict the flow of information and of people—all of this together is frighteningly *dictatorial*.

In other words, we are dealing here not simply with policies on this or that issue, but with the very question of whether the United States will continue to be a flawed liberal democracy, or it will become, or has already started to become, something

different, something darker, more authoritarian, and more dangerous.

This afternoon the Trump administration decided to ban the *New York Times*, CNN, *Politico*, and the *HuffPost* from the White House press room. This morning, as a prelude, Trump gave a televised speech that led with the claim, repeated many times, that the press are “enemies of the people.” He claimed he is “only” targeting “the fake press,” and that he respects “the real press.” But he has made clear that for him it is independent news organizations that are the purveyors of “fake news,” and that it is *Breitbart News*, Fox, and other organs of his own broad ideological apparatus that are the “real journalists” that he “respects.” This is utter and transparent deception. Trump is making war on independent news outlets, by denouncing them, by banning them and restricting the information flowing to them, and by generating daily propaganda about their “fake news.”

It has been suggested today that it would be a mistake for the media to make too much of this. Instead, they should focus on the issues. But this *is* the *fundamental* issue: our democracy is in clear and present danger. No self-respecting journalist should cooperate in any way with the administration so long as these thuggish tactics and rhetorics are being deployed. If the *Times* is banned from the press room, then the *Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* should refuse to participate. If CNN is banned, then MSNBC and NBC and CBS and ABC should refuse to participate.

But that is not all. These media should cover the entire range of issues, scandals, and investigations. But they should also get serious about the broader narrative in which these particulars are embedded.

The narrative is simple. Alas, it is too simple, and terrifying in its simplicity: American constitutional democracy is in danger, and if the Trump administration is not challenged, we may soon experience real regime change. It happens. And our media have

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no difficulty reporting it when it happens—elsewhere. Well, it can happen here. It’s already happening. Here. Now. That’s a pretty big story, isn’t it? Will it get the attention it deserves?

publicseminar.org, February 25, 2017

Hungarian Higher Education Under Attack

The fate of CEU is the fate of freedom

Central European University, (CEU) one of the most important institutions of higher education in Europe, is currently being threatened by the Hungarian government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his nationalist-populist Fidesz party. CEU, founded in 1991 during the early phases of the post-Communist transition, is officially registered and accredited in New York as well as in Hungary. The new legislation proposed by Fidesz will impose burdensome requirements on CEU that are justified on the grounds that it is a “foreign university.” Only if it complies with these impossible conditions, which include opening a campus in New York within a year, will CEU be permitted to remain open as Hungary’s premiere university. Otherwise it will be forced to close, in violation of Hungarian law.

CEU, founded by the Soros Foundation, is a Hungarian institution, located in Budapest, that employs and educates many Hungarians. It is also a European university and indeed a cosmopolitan center of higher learning and education. Since its inception, it has been emphatically committed to universalist values of scholarship and free inquiry; the promotion of a genuinely diverse faculty and student body that is welcoming toward many colleagues and guests from all parts of the world; and the basic principles of an open society. In short, it is a thoroughly modern university, linked to other modern universities in a global republic of letters that knows no national or geographical boundaries. It epitomizes *openness*.

By threatening CEU, the new legislation threatens academic freedom and intellectual and political pluralism in Hungary, in Europe, and indeed throughout the world. At this moment, the

most important thing for scholars, teachers, intellectuals, and concerned citizens to do is to express their support for CEU.

At the same time, what is going on with CEU is not an isolated incident, nor is it merely an “academic” matter—though it is a vital matter of *academic freedom*—and it needs to be understood as part of the broader effort of Viktor Orbán, in league with other similarly-inclined leaders, to reject Western liberal democracy in favor of a self-described “illiberal democracy.”

Orbán made this clear in a widely-quoted July 2014 speech:

“Today, the stars of international analyses are Singapore, China, India, Turkey, Russia. And I believe that our political community rightly anticipated this challenge . . . We are searching for (and we are doing our best to find, ways of parting with Western European dogmas, making ourselves independent from them) the form of organizing a community that is capable of making us competitive in this great world-race . . . In order to be able to do this . . . we needed to courageously state a sentence . . . considered to be a sacrilege in the liberal world order. We needed to state that a democracy is not necessarily liberal. Just because something is not liberal, it still can be a democracy. Moreover, it could be and needed to be expressed that probably societies founded upon the principle of the liberal way to organize a state will not be able to sustain their world-competitiveness in the following years, and more likely they will suffer a setback, unless they will be able to substantially reform themselves . . . we have to abandon liberal methods and principles of organizing a society, as well as the liberal way to look at the world . . . The Hungarian nation is not a simple sum of individuals, but a community that needs to be organized, strengthened and developed, and in this sense, the new state that we are building is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state.”

Orbán’s “illiberal democracy” is strongly nationalist, emphatically anti-liberal, and hostile to immigration and to “foreigners” of different kinds—his program is a version of “Making Hungary great again for Hungarians.” Universalist concerns about human rights, and transnational organizations committed to human rights, are anathema to Orbán. Resistance to what Orbán considers “outside interference”—whether by

NGOs or by the EU and its expectation that member states respect civil autonomy and transparency—has long been a hallmark of his populist appeal.

Like Vladimir Putin, Recep Erdoğan, and other authoritarian rulers deploying a populist rhetoric, Orbán has for many years sought to hamper the operation of liberal civil society institutions with links to transnational NGOs and foundations and to Western governments. His primary targets have included a number of organizations supported by the Soros Foundation. In mid-January a Fidesz party deputy singled out three Soros-funded NGOs—the Helsinki Committee, the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union TASZ, and Transparency International—to be “swept out” of Hungary. Orbán spokesman Zoltan Kovacs explained that these groups represent a threat to the “national sovereignty” of Hungary, which has been subjected to “unfounded accusations about transparency and corruption. . . . We believe that by getting rid of these elements of the political argumentation, it is going to be easier” (*the Guardian* January 13, 2017). Orbán, who has erected a fence at the Hungarian border to keep out immigrants, has employed rhetoric similar to Donald Trump’s rhetoric about the need for a wall to keep out “rapists and drug dealers.” And, like Trump, he has insinuated that liberals are responsible for endangering the safety of citizens. “Hungary cannot afford to allow organizations that remain in the shadows—not declaring who they receive their money from and for what purposes—to continuously encourage migrants to break Hungarian law to somehow get into the country,” said Orbán in a radio address on February 24, adding that “by doing so, international organizations which are primarily linked to George Soros have overstepped a line.” In this effort to crack down on civil society institutions and to demonize the Soros connection, Orbán has a strong ally in Putin and in Russia’s state-

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sponsored media outlet RT, whose coverage of Hungarian politics is epitomized by this headline from January 30: “Soros-funded NGOs Aim to Bring Down Hungarian Government—Foreign Minister to RT.”

The current attack on CEU needs to be understood in this broader context. What is at stake is the fate of a superb university, but also the fate of an autonomous civil society in Hungary, and indeed the very future of liberal democracy in Europe. CEU is not a “foreign” entity to Hungary. It employs Hungarian faculty and staff, educates Hungarian students, participates actively in the broader world of Hungarian higher education, and contributes greatly to the cultural and intellectual life of Hungarian society. At the same time, CEU is a cosmopolitan institution that stands for intellectual openness, promotes a vigorous intellectual public sphere through CEU Press and through the activities of its faculty and students, and relies on a dense network of contacts with scholars and universities the world over. Such a worldly institution is perceived as threatening by a political party intent on closing borders and enforcing a new isolationism. And such an intellectually vibrant institution is perceived as threatening by a regime intent on instituting a new “illiberal” order.

CEU is a symbol of the cultural vitality and intellectual pluralism of Hungarian society and of the indivisibility of freedom. Those of us who stand with CEU stand with the faculty, staff, and students of a world class university that contributes immeasurably to higher learning. We also stand with all of those Hungarians who wish to live in a free society.

publicseminar.org, April 3, 2017

Trump is an Authoritarian

In his actions and his words—and words are actions

In a recent piece in *the Guardian*, Corey Robin argues that “liberals” exaggerate the danger posed by Donald Trump, and do so because they pay “almost exclusive attention to what Trump says rather than what he does” (May 2, 2017). He attributes to liberals—“journalists such as *Vox*’s Ezra Klein and academics such as Yale historian Timothy Snyder”—the belief that Trump has a “master plan” to seize control of and then “deconstruct” the state. He then points to the obvious fact that Trump is erratic, ineffective, and contradictory in his actions. “It’s a strange kind of authoritarian who fails, as the first order of business, to seize control of the state apparatus.” Robin claims that while Trump talks like an authoritarian, he hasn’t done all that much, especially in the matter of legislation; and the things he has done are mainly unexceptional: “They reflect no peculiar authoritarianism on Trump’s part; they’re just the revanchist stock-in-trade of the American right, which any Republican president would pursue.”

Robin is correct. Trump is not yet a Mussolini or a Putin or even an Orbán. Not *yet*. And indeed, it is quite possible that he will never be a leader like these authoritarians. But he has only been in office for three months, and it is too early to tell. Most of the liberals, myself included, who have spoken about Trump’s authoritarianism have not claimed that he has radically transformed the state. They have claimed that his actions, his words—which are actions—and the forces he has mobilized pose a clear and present danger to America’s already compromised system of constitutional democracy. It is true that Trump rules over a chaotic administration (so did Hitler) and a divided Republican Party, and that many of his policy proposals are conventional right-wing Republican proposals. But it is also true that Trump rules over this administration and this party in a

particularly toxic way, and given the powers of the presidency, he is capable of great harm.

Trump has not instituted an authoritarian regime. Yet. But he is an authoritarian, in at least these four ways:

First, he is a narcissistic egomaniac who has a history of ruling his domain—his family, his business, which are indeed the same, and now the U.S. government—by decree, and who exhibits an extreme form of authoritarian personality. With the possible exception of Richard Nixon—whose “authoritarianism” frightened many people in his time—no president in modern history has evinced the idea that “you are either with me or against me” more than Trump. Trump is a dictatorial individual; by disposition, he is an authoritarian.

Second, his administration is the most nepotistic and kleptocratic U.S. administration in memory. He has brazenly ignored every convention, rule, and law governing conflicts of interest, and he uses his office to advance the business interests of his friends, his family, and himself. That his conduct resembles Papa Doc Duvalier more than it does Franco or Mussolini does not make it any less authoritarian. True, this corruption can be seen as a “petty” aspect of Trump’s authoritarianism. But it is also a means of projecting his grandiose image and of maintaining his power. And it is a serious abuse of power.

Third, while only in his early months in office, Trump has sought to institute some seriously authoritarian measures. He has appointed a number of individuals with neo-fascist leanings to his administration. He has declared an intention to crack down on the sanctuary movement and to punish sanctuary cities. He has created a climate of fear among the agencies charged with regulating environmental health and safety. He has endorsed repressive, “Giuliani-time” policies designed to empower police. Robin concedes that “there’s little doubt that Trump’s administration has pursued policies designed to make life crueler and harder for immigrants, people of color and women. There’s also little doubt that some in his administration, particularly his attorney general, Jeff Sessions, will be successful in doing so.” Do these efforts reflect a “peculiar authoritarianism on Trump’s part”? Some clearly do.

Others don't. Trump, after all, did not create Sessions, who enjoyed a malevolent career long before he joined his fate to that of Trump. Nonetheless, Trump has empowered Sessions to curtail civil liberties and eviscerate voting rights monitoring and enforcement and to empower an even more draconian regime of border control and enforcement. His efforts have already ruined many lives, even if some of these efforts have been constrained by court rulings. Trump's commitments draw on a broader repertoire of Republican reaction, and he has made common cause with other conservatives. Does this make his authoritarian aspirations and efforts any less authoritarian? And does the fact that he has thus far experienced failures, and sometimes resistance, make the authoritarianism any less frightening?

Finally, Trump is above all a performer who uses social media, mass media, staged public events, and massive, Hitlerian rallies to denounce, bully, and attack his opponents, and to mobilize angry crowds of supporters around resentful, xenophobic slogans such as "Make America Great Again" and "America First" and hateful chants like "USA, USA, USA" and "Lock Her Up!" His supporters attack protesters, and indeed his rhetoric has clearly encouraged many in the so-called alt-right to demonstrate, harass, and organize. Such behavior, on the part of a political leader who commands the attention of a U.S. president, represents a form of authoritarianism par excellence.

Robin writes: "'Strong leader' is a slogan for Trump, a rhetoric, a performance, but that's about it. Trump has always thought his words were more real than reality." It is true that Trump has a megalomaniacal belief in the power of his own words. But it is not true that there are his words on one side, and "reality" on the other. As Robin well understands, politics is all about words, meanings, and rhetorical enactments. Trump's words—tweeted daily to tens of millions, and broadcast to hundreds of millions—are real. They are political acts. Trump's words mobilize hatred

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against “foreigners.” They denounce and demonize journalists and independent news organizations. They enact and encourage an utter cynicism about the distinction between truth and falsity. They incite anger and hostility towards judges, the rule of law, and regulations and procedures that stand in the way of the decisive action of The Leader.

If that is not “authoritarianism,” then what is?

True enough, in some ways Trump represents a lethal mutation of previously-experienced forms of American reaction. And in many ways he is feckless, and has not yet realized his most frightening promises. This is partly due to confusion. It is partly due to the fact that a great deal of opposition has been mobilized against Trump’s authoritarianism. It is partly due to the resilience of a political system that is very obstructive to change. Authoritarianism does not always succeed. But it is nonetheless authoritarian for that. Indeed, it is reasonable to believe that authoritarianism is more likely to fail when it is identified, named and opposed for what it is. And calling it “typical Republicanism” doesn’t really do it. It is also mistaken. For Trump is not a typical Republican.

Trump is an authoritarian leader who uses bullshit to justify and to mobilize. Most of Trump’s liberal critics are not taken in by his bullshit. They are legitimately frightened by the way it is being used: by an arrogant and authoritarian individual to serve genuinely authoritarian aspirations. Perhaps it is time that certain left critics of liberals treat what liberal writers say with a little more care, and treat what Trump says, and does, with a little more concern.

publicseminar.org, May 3, 2017

Is There Illiberal Democracy?

A problem with no semantic solution

**This is the introduction to an extended essay by the same title published in Public Seminar on July 12, 2017.*

A specter is haunting Europe and the United States; the specter of illiberal democracy.

The project of instituting a new form of “illiberal democracy” in place of the supposedly outmoded form of liberal democracy is most closely linked to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has repeatedly announced this intention. But the idea is commonly associated with a broader range of political leaders—Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Recep Erdoğan in Turkey, among others—who have sought to institute illiberal measures and to justify them, at least in part, by appeal to a more authentic form of “democracy.” As David Ost has recently observed of the Hungarian and Polish cases:

Eviscerating the Constitutional Court and purging the judiciary, complete politicization of the civil service, turning public media into a government mouthpiece, restricting opposition prerogatives in parliament, unilateral wholesale change of the Constitution or plain violation of it, official tolerance and even promotion of racism and bigotry, administrative assertion of traditional gender norms, cultural resurrection of authoritarian traditions, placing loyalty over competence in awarding state posts, surveillance without check—with such policies and more, right-wing governments in Hungary and Poland are engaged in a direct attack on

the institutions of democracy. The ruling parties, Fidesz and Law and Justice (PiS) respectively, do not even claim to adhere to “liberal” democracy anymore. Are they committed to democracy at all? Both accept it now that elections have brought unchecked one-party rule by the party representing “the nation.” Otherwise, “democracy” appears to be only a curtsy to the political correctness they otherwise abhor.”
(*Public Seminar*, September 21, 2016)

The still recent victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election is perhaps the most vivid example of this tendency. Such projects have caused political commentators such as Dani Rodrik to worry about “why illiberal democracies are on the rise” (*HuffPost*, May 18, 2015). And they have received increasing attention from political scientists interested in the ebbs and flows and waves and undertows of “democratization,” who are concerned not simply about the spread of “illiberalism” in the previously-considered “democratizing” countries, but its emergence in the more “advanced” or “consolidated” democracies as well. As Yascha Mounk notes:

Across the affluent, established democracies of North America and Western Europe, the last years have witnessed a meteoric rise of figures who may not be quite so brash or garish as Trump and yet bear a striking resemblance to him: Marine Le Pen in France, Frauke Petry in Germany, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, and many of the leading Brexiteers in the United Kingdom. They too harness a new level of anger that is quite unlike anything liberal democracies have witnessed in a half-century. They too promise to stand up for ordinary people, to do away with a corrupt political elite, and to put the ethnic and religious minorities who are now (supposedly) being favored in their rightful (subordinate) place. They, too, are willing to do away with liberal political institutions like an independent judiciary or a free, robust press so long as those stand in the way of the people’s will. Together, they are building a new type of political regime that is slowly coming into its own: illiberal democracy.

#AgainstTrump

Critics often attack Trump, Le Pen, and their cohort for being undemocratic. But that is to misunderstand both their priorities and the reasons for their appeal. For the most part, their belief in the will of the people is real. Their primary objection to the status quo is, quite simply, that institutional roadblocks like independent courts or norms like a ‘politically correct’ concern for the rights of minorities stop the system from channeling the people’s righteous anger into public policy. What they promise, then, is not to move away from popular rule but rather to strip it of its artificial, liberal guise—all the while embodying the only true version of the people’s will. (*Slate*, August 14, 2016)

What are we to make of this phenomenon, and how ought we to respond to it?

Indeed, is its very identification as illiberal democracy at all useful, or is it rather part of the very problem that many of its critics wish to understand and to combat?

In a recent piece entitled “The Problem with ‘Illiberal Democracy,’” Jan-Werner Muller argues that “to call what is being constructed in Poland ‘illiberal democracy’ is deeply misleading—and in a way that undermines efforts to rein in would-be autocrats like Kaczyński and Orbán. “After all, Muller claims, “it is not just liberalism that is under attack, but democracy itself” (*Project Syndicate*, January 21, 2016). Muller insists that to accept the dichotomy of liberal democracy vs. *illiberal democracy*, is foolishly to give credence to the claims of Kaczyński and Orbán to be authentic democrats who are troubled by excessive personal liberty and simply seek a less libertarian and more communitarian form of democracy. “What governments like those in Poland, Hungary, and Turkey are proposing is something very different. It is one thing to criticize

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materialism, atheism, or even individualism. It is something else altogether to attempt to limit freedom of speech and assembly, media pluralism, or the protection of minorities. The first is a disagreement about different political philosophies that can justify democracy. The second is an attack on democracy's very foundations." Muller thus insists that what many are calling *illiberal democracy* is really better described as a form of populist *authoritarianism*, and we would do well to discard the very term *illiberal democracy*. For him, the basic architecture of liberal democracy is democracy itself, and to be against this architecture is to be against democracy itself. Janos Kornai recently made the same point: "Personally, I consider this concept a dead end: illiberal democracy is like an atheist pope: the adjectival structure itself is contradictory. In my view all democracies are liberal. I lost my taste for concepts of democracy with an adjective when the Communist dictatorship referred to itself as a 'people's democracy,' clearly distinguishing itself from the so-called bourgeois democracies" (*Hungarian Spectrum*, December 30, 2016). To paraphrase a friend, a distinguished scholar of democratization, who put it more bluntly in private correspondence: "If we cannot specify some minimum core of institutional practice for *democracy*—that it must give people a real opportunity to choose and replace their leaders in free and fair elections—then there is no way to avoid falling into, and no way to climb out of, a relativistic semantic swamp in which the word democracy can mean anything, and then almost any claim has to be debated and taken seriously . . . Are we now going to have to re-litigate the dreadfully tired arguments from 40-50 years ago about whether the *Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, with its totalitarian *juche* ideology, offers just another form of 'popular sovereignty?'"

These are powerful objections to the concept of illiberal

democracy. I share the aversion to the evolving authoritarianism being practiced in Poland, Hungary, Turkey, and elsewhere, and I also share a commitment to liberal democratic values and practices. Words do matter. And it is troubling to allow Orbán, Kaczyński, Erdoğan or even Putin to claim the mantle of democracy. To the extent that this implies any kind of sympathetic understanding much less endorsement, it seems more appropriate simply to deny such leaders the imprimatur of democracy, and to place their authoritarianism front and center.

At the same time, I believe it is a mistake simply to dismiss the idea of illiberal democracy because it is mobilized for objectionable political purposes. It may be distasteful. It might echo earlier efforts to invoke “democracy with adjectives” on behalf of oppressive and sometimes murderous policies. But this is precisely why we must take it seriously as a rhetoric and a political project that has real traction in the world. It is true that after 1989, it was possible to declare, as Philippe Schmitter and Terry Karl did in *Journal of Democracy*, that: “The wave of transitions away from autocratic rule ... has produced a welcome convergence towards a common definition of democracy. Everywhere there has been a silent abandonment of dubious adjectives like ‘popular,’ ‘guided,’ ‘bourgeois,’ and ‘formal’ to modify ‘democracy.’ At the same time, a remarkable consensus has emerged concerning the minimal conditions that polities must meet in order to merit the prestigious appellation ‘democratic.’”² But it is equally true that this consensus about “democracy without adjectives” was always contested, and it was rather short-lived, and it has recently been eroded. The challenge facing supporters of liberal democracy is to take the full measure of this erosion, so that it can better be countered. In that sense we *do* need to re-litigate the arguments from forty or fifty years ago about what to make of illiberal appeals to popular sovereignty

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and democracy. I wish it were not the case. But it is. And the reason why is because throughout Europe and in the U.S. leaders are rising to power, through at least quasi-democratic means, and claiming to stand for and to institute an illiberal form of democracy. We need to oppose them. And part of that means litigating the ideological contest that they are pursuing, i.e., to bring a suit against them, to take seriously their arguments and to demonstrate rather than simply assert that their claim to democracy ought to be rejected.

In what follows I would like to outline a more careful approach to the topic and explain why I think it is both analytically and normatively important to proceed in such a manner. I want to suggest that instead of discarding the idea of illiberal democracy, we ought to distinguish between at least three ways that this term needs to be understood: (1) as a form of justificatory praxis or legitimation that warrants understanding though not embrace, precisely because an essential element of political analysis is understanding the terms, symbols, and self-understandings of political actors and the ways that these ideas resonate with publics, whether we like these terms and symbols or not; (2) as a social scientific concept that registers a political aspiration or project but does not thereby offer an adequate conceptualization of the political consequences of this aspiration or project; and (3) as a normative commitment that ought to be criticized by those who take the values of individual autonomy and political pluralism seriously. And I want to suggest that only by fully grappling with these different uses can we take the full measure of the challenge that illiberal democracy presents to a more pluralistic and egalitarian liberal democracy that is worthy of our support. It is too easy to simply dismiss the rhetoric of illiberal democracy as a fraud, and doing so inhibits both proper understanding of the phenomenon and its appeal, and proper

normative critique.

My point is not that it is wrong to denounce adherents of illiberal democracy as authoritarian or to claim that such actors threaten democracy. There surely are many practical situations where this kind of rhetoric makes perfect sense. Mass politics is not a graduate seminar, and rhetorics of denunciation play an important role in democratic politics. My point is that, as political theorists and as participants in the effort to clarify public events for broader publics, we ought to proceed with a proper sense of care. And the assertion that what goes under the heading of *illiberal democracy* is simply hostility to democracy itself is too simplistic. Indeed, we need to better clarify the different meanings of democracy precisely so that we can better appreciate the strengths and limits of the liberal democracy that is worthy of our intellectual and political support.

publicseminar.org, July 12, 2017

Trump, Tweets, and the Illiberal Mind

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *dictation* as “authoritative utterance or prescription . . . the making of a pronouncement . . . command.” It defines *dictatorship* as “a system of government by absolute rule of a single individual; a state ruled by a dictator.” Both words derive from the Latin word *dicere*, meaning “to say” or “to speak.” A dictator rules by *edict*; the dictator’s word is law.

It is well known that there is no person whose word simply prevails by virtue of its being uttered. Such power might be a megalomaniac’s aspiration. It might describe dictatorship as an ideal type. It might describe a would-be dictator’s dream. But it describes no actual human being. In the Biblical book of *Genesis*, the commandments of God bring the world into existence. “And God said let there be light, and there was light. . .”

This past Wednesday morning at 5:55 am, Donald Trump declared via Twitter that there shall be no transgender individuals in the U.S. Armed Forces. “After consultation with my generals and military experts, please be advised that the United States government will not accept or allow transgender individuals to serve in any capacity in the U.S. Military.”

By all appearances the declaration came completely out of the blue. It shocked those in and close to the national security establishment. It generated immediate outrage from people who care about LGBT rights in particular, civil rights in general, and the future of constitutional democracy.

The shock and outrage were not due to the words themselves, nor to the sentiments behind them, as objectionable as they might be. They were due to the fact that the words were uttered by an individual, Donald Trump, who occupies the office of U.S. president, and is thus both chief executive and commander-in-Chief of the U.S. government. By edict, it appeared, Trump had

proclaimed, declared, *dictated* a new (discriminatory, cruel, and stupid) public policy.

Then an interesting thing happened: serious news outlets began reporting that Trump's announcement had in fact taken "his" generals and military experts by complete surprise, that they had not been consulted, and that they were deeply disturbed by both the form and the substance of the announcement. Army Chief of Staff General Mark Milley said that he had received no "directives on implementation" for a ban, and learned about the president's decision through the media. "We will work through the implementation guidance when we get it and then we'll move from there," he added. And General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, announced that there will be "no modifications to the current policy until the president's direction has been received by the secretary of defense and the secretary has issued implementation guidelines . . . In the meantime, we will continue to treat all of our personnel with respect . . . As importantly, given the current fight and the challenges we face, we will all remain focused on accomplishing our assigned missions."

A number of days have now passed since Trump tweeted his pronouncement. It is clear that the pronouncement has generated outrage and pushback. It is not clear that it has had any policy effect, except perhaps to reinforce the more inclusive current policy that Trump wished to repudiate.

What is going on here?

This past June, now-deposed and humiliated White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer declared at a daily press briefing that Trump's tweets are official statements: "The president is the president of the United States, so they're considered official statements by the president of the United States." (*CNN*, June 6, 2016) But what does it *mean* to say that the tweets are "official

statements?” At stake in the current brouhaha over Trump’s transgender tweet is a fundamental question at the heart of a liberal, constitutional democracy: what is law, and is it something that can simply be dictated by an individual?

For Trump, it would seem, his words are sufficient unto themselves, and have or at least ought to have the force of law. He wakes up in the morning, decides, for whatever reason—a bad dream, indigestion, his performative failures in bed the previous night—that transgender people annoy him or that dissing them pleases him, picks up his phone, and tweets that there shall no longer be transgender people in the U.S. military. Period.

But Trump is not the God of *Genesis*. Indeed, he is no god at all. He is an (insecure and narcissistic) individual human being who happens to live in the White House due to a fluke election (that is indeed currently under Justice Department investigation). What makes his words anything other than the ravings of a mean, ignorant, and thuggish man is the office that he occupies and the constitutional system that empowers that office. And while he and his acolytes may regard his tweets as “official statements,” this does not mean that these statements have the political force he desires.

The response of “his” generals—who are not “his” generals at all, but career military officers who have taken an oath to protect and defend the United States and not Donald, Donald Jr., and Ivanka Trump—is instructive. Acting in their own official capacity as serious and experienced public servants, they have appealed to a conception of law that is directly counter to Trump’s conception. For them, in order for a pronouncement to have the force of law, it must be issued and communicated through an orderly process that confers legitimacy upon it. Presidents are constitutionally constrained by the U.S. Constitution, by the legislative powers invested in

Congress, and by the judicial powers invested in the federal courts. Within those constraints presidents are empowered to act, including the power to issue executive orders. But even then, their mere words do not automatically compel obedience. For the U.S. government is a complex “machinery,” owned by no one; it requires the collaboration of many individuals and institutions; and there are rules and procedures that govern this collaboration. Thus the generals’ insistence that there will be “no modifications to the current policy until the president’s direction has been received by the secretary of defense and the secretary has issued implementation guidelines,” and on fidelity to “our assigned missions.”

Trump thinks like a dictator. His family, his ever-changing, acrimonious, and back-biting inner circle—including his new attack dog, Anthony “Mooch” Scaramucci—apparently share this belief. Indeed, Trump, enabled by these acolytes, has taken the “logic” of dictatorship to a new level. Whereas other dictators have made decisions and issued commands based on some knowledge of the systems that they lead, and in consultation with other relevant officials charged with carrying out the orders, Trump has reduced this entire process to late-night and early-morning tweets. He doesn’t even use his phone to talk to those charged with carrying out his orders. He uses it to simply declare his wishes as if they are facts.

These tweets are typically uninformed, unhinged, cruel, and dangerous. And they have definite political effects, in mobilizing an angry base; intimidating opponents; keeping the public in a state of perpetual suspense; and sometimes laying the foundation for malign actions to come. This is all terrible for constitutional democracy. At the same time, while these tweets surely display a dictatorial disposition, they do not—at least not *yet*—actualize this disposition, Trump’s fantasies and delusions

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notwithstanding. For Trump is not Yahweh, and his words do not automatically bring into existence the things he desires. Because there is an actual world beyond Trump's limited mind that acts back upon these words, generating unanticipated and negative consequences. And because there is a constitutional system of government that alone makes his words even remotely relevant in a public sense. Trump has no knowledge of or appreciation for this system. And he may yet permanently damage it. But while Trump has made a mockery of this system, it yet persists. And without it, Trump would simply be a miserable, overweight, misanthropic rich man with sleep and obsessive personality disorders, sitting around in his bathrobe with a smartphone that is a lot smarter than he is.

This system is limited, and fragile, and in grave danger. If it continues to persist and perhaps even to improve, it will only be because of the dedicated public servants, unhindered journalists, autonomous civil society, and especially the good, conscientious ordinary citizens who elude, and resist, Trump's dictatorial mind and his travesty of democratic government.

publicseminar.org, July 29, 2017

Trump, Nukes, and Democracy at Its Limits

The whole world is watching

In the history of political thought there have been many rationales offered for democracy as an ideal of self-government, just as there have been many criticisms of the very idea of democracy.

One of the most cogent rationales is the simple idea that regular democratic elections make political power accountable, because they require elected politicians to be responsive to electorates if they wish to remain in office, and because they make it possible to remedy bad public policies by “throwing the bums out” in the next election. This view is sometimes described as “realist,” since it makes no grand assumptions about the rationality of ordinary citizens, and it is sometimes described as “minimalist,” since it posits no great values to be served beyond simple electoral accountability. On this view, while democracy promises no great public edification or enlightenment, it does promise that citizens can at least remedy the worst errors committed by those who govern in their name. They can do so because whatever is done in the citizenry’s name at a given point in time, at some predictable future point in time that thing can be reevaluated and potentially reversed by electing politicians committed to something else.

Yesterday Donald Trump declared that North Korea’s development of a nuclear ICBM was intolerable, and that: “North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States. They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen . . . he has been very threatening beyond a normal state. They will be met with fire, fury and frankly power the likes of which this world has never seen before.”

Trump is no ordinary individual. For on November 8, 2016, he was elected the forty-fifth president of the United States. It

is true, and worth mentioning, that due to the rather arcane and anachronistic rules governing U.S. presidential elections, he won this election in the Electoral College, despite having received three million popular votes less than his opponent, Hillary Clinton. It is also worth mentioning that this election involved apparent Russian interference that is now the subject of House and Senate investigations and also the subject of a Justice Department investigation being led by Special Counsel Robert Mueller. Trump is president nonetheless. And yesterday's chilling words raise fundamental questions of war and peace, political ethics in the nuclear age, and democratic legitimacy itself.

The Trump administration has put democratic theory to the test in many ways. While we might imagine that a democratically elected president would staff his administration with experienced and qualified individuals, Trump has placed inexperienced family members in important White House positions while failing to fill other important positions. While we might imagine that a democratically elected president would make public policy based on facts, and would communicate public policy to the citizenry in a factually accurate way, Trump disparages expert advice presented to him by qualified governmental officials, preferring to trust right-wing extremist websites; communicates with the public mainly through early-morning tweets that say more about his state of mind than about public policy; and manifestly lies about what is happening and what he is doing. While we might assume that a president in a democracy would regard a free press as an important institution, Trump regularly and consistently disparages, denounces, and demonizes the press, declares that all independent media institutions are purveyors of "fake news," and has gone so far as to set up his own alternative media institutions to propagandize on behalf of his own version of "the truth." And while we might imagine that the president in a constitutional democracy would be subject to the law, Trump behaves and speaks as if he is entirely above the law.

Trump, in short, governs in a manifestly authoritarian manner. This has been widely noted by journalists and commentators across the political spectrum (including prominent Republicans

such as Joe Scarborough and George Will), and it has resulted in the emergence of significant “resistance” movements seeking to counter his actions and to lay the groundwork for electoral challenges in the congressional election of 2018 and in the presidential election of 2020.

It would be true to say that Trump represents a fundamental threat to U.S. constitutional democracy. It could also be said that many of the institutions of this democracy—Congress, the courts, the press, citizen groups—have at least to some extent worked to counter Trump, and to employ the conventional tools of democratic opposition to limit and to repair the damage that he is doing. For the past six months, it has been the premise, and the hope, of a great many people—Democrats, independents, and even Republicans—that democracy will work in this way, however disturbing the statements and actions of this president.

But then there was yesterday. Yesterday Trump threatened the preemptive use of nuclear weapons against North Korea. The words can’t be taken back. They have already produced a dangerous rhetorical escalation. More important, the possible consequences—nuclear war itself—are irreversible.

Virtually every serious expert, including currently serving military officers, has long stated that even a conventional war on the Korean peninsula would be devastating, threatening the lives of many millions of people, including North Koreans, South Koreans, and over 35,000 U.S. troops permanently stationed in South Korea. A nuclear war would be even more devastating. It would threaten both China and Japan, the entire region, and indeed the entire world. A great many commentators and politicians have thus, reasonably, declared that Trump’s statement was “bombastic,” “unwise,” “dangerous,” and even “crazy.” Retired four-star general Barry McCaffrey immediately stated on MSNBC that there is “not a chance” that Trump’s

statement reflected the advice of his military and national security advisors, because the threat flies in the face of everything that these advisors know. “They’re dealing with a president with an incoherent world view . . . Never in my experience has any president made this kind of a blustering statement.” Today’s *New York Times* confirms McCaffrey, noting in a story bearing the headline, “Trump’s threat to North Korea was improvised,” that President Trump delivered his “fire and fury threat to North Korea on Tuesday with arms folded, jaw set and eyes flitting on what appeared to be a single page of talking points set before him on the conference table at his New Jersey golf resort. The piece of paper, as it turned out, was a fact sheet on the opioid crisis he had come to talk about, and his ominous warning to Pyongyang was entirely improvised, according to several people with direct knowledge of what unfolded. In discussions with advisors beforehand, he had not run the specific language by them.” If many very serious people have publicly stated that Trump’s threat was dangerous and ill-advised, former Republican senator Gordon Humphrey has gone further, stating that it is “crazy,” and that Trump’s “poor judgment, belligerence, vindictiveness and reckless impetuosity constitute an indictment of his mental health” (*The Independent*, August 11, 2017). Humphrey is saying what a great many other serious people have been saying for the past six months and longer: Donald Trump is a narcissistic and unstable man, precisely the kind of person who should not have his finger “on the button.”

And yet here we are. This man has his finger on the button. And he is threatening to use it. Trump is playing nuclear “chicken” with a man, Kim Jong-un, well known for his own murderous narcissism. On MSNBC, Evelyn Farkas, a deputy assistant secretary of defense in the Obama administration, echoed many in noting that “President Trump sounds more like a North Korean leader, unfortunately, than an American leader.” Some

have even suggested that Trump exceeds the North Korean dictator in his dangerous bluster. Joshua Keating, for example, writes in *Slate*: “We need one sane leader in the US-North Korea standoff. Pressure’s on you, Kim Jong-un” (August 9, 2017).

At this moment every U.S. citizen and indeed every thinking human being must come to terms with three basic facts: (1) the U.S. political system empowers the president to command the military; (2) in the nuclear age, the president and the president alone has his veritable “finger on the nuclear button”; and (3) the current president is an arrogant, impulsive, and unbalanced individual who has long been enthralled by the thought that U.S. foreign policy problems can be solved by nuclear war.

While Trump endangers constitutional democracy in so many ways, it is this power, which threatens the lives of millions, that most glaringly exposes the limits of U.S. constitutional democracy. For while most other decisions can be overturned or remedied by future decisions, the decision to proceed down the slippery slope of nuclear brinkmanship, much less to use nuclear weapons—and the blunt public threat to use them is itself a rhetorical use of them—threatens devastating and irreversible consequences that would render democratic accountability meaningless. This was noted decades ago by Robert Dahl in his 1985 book *Controlling Nuclear Weapons: Democracy Versus Guardianship*: “We have in fact turned over to a small group of people decisions of incalculable importance to ourselves and mankind, and it is very far from clear how, if at all, we could recapture a control that in fact we have never had.” Dahl’s sentiments have long been understood by many. Some have been fine with the undemocratic consequences of nuclear decision-making. Some have had some faith that broader norms, procedures, and institutional imperatives would play some role in constraining nuclear decisions and keep them broadly subject to a presumed public consensus about the logic of deterrence

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and importance of avoiding nuclear war itself. Some, such as Jonathan Schell in his 1982 bestseller *The Fate of the Earth*, have raised the alarm over the extreme threat posed by nuclear weapons to democracy and indeed to life on earth itself. In the mid-eighties such a sensibility indeed inspired mass movements for “nuclear freeze” and sometimes for “abolition.” Then came the revolutions of 1989, the fall of communism in Russia and Eastern Europe, the expansion of NATO, and a widespread faith in a “democratic peace” and “an end to history.” The nuclear question receded, and continued to recede.

And here we are.

A madman is in the White House (indeed, he is as likely to be at one of his private resorts as in the White House itself). He is unmoved by the norms and the laws governing a constitutional democracy. He is unmoved by the advice of national security experts, including “his own generals,” who seem to be more important to him as ornaments than as advisors. Defense Secretary James Mattis has today made statements that sound like reinforcements of Trump’s threat. Trump surely is not alone in his brinkmanship—Senator Lindsey Graham has also uttered similar comments—but Trump alone will decide whether and how to threaten, and whether and when to act on his threats. He has stated publicly on more than one occasion that he “knows more than the generals” about military affairs. His finger is on the trigger. And we, citizens of the U.S. and citizens of the world, are mere subjects of his decision.

The whole world is watching.

What will he do? Is there anything we can do but watch? What will become of constitutional democracy? What will become of us? Bracing questions for a terrifying time.

publicseminar.org, August 9, 2017

Charlottesville and Trump

David Duke explains neo-Nazi violence to you

There is fire and fury today on the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia.

Neo-Nazis and white supremacists, some bearing guns, are violently protesting the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee and attacking anti-racist counterprotesters.

David Duke has declared that this is the fulfillment of President Donald Trump's vision for America.

"We are determined to take our country back," Duke said from the rally, calling it a "turning point." "We are going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump. That's what we believed in. That's why we voted for Donald Trump, because he said he's going to take our country back" (*Vox*, August 12, 2017).

Duke was a neo-Nazi/racist long before Trump became a political figure. He is no doubt seeking to exploit this situation. More importantly, he is stoking embers and flames of white racial and racist resentment that have a long contemporary history (the Civil Rights Act of 1964) and a much longer history (slavery; Jim Crow; structures of institutionalized racism that persist into the present). What is happening today in Virginia is not due to "Trump," and combating both right-wing extremism and underlying structures of racism, and also the structures of economic dislocation that generate a politics of resentment, requires much more than criticizing Trump.

At the same time, electoral politics matters, and executive politics matters, and these are not mere "expressions" of underlying social and economic causes. Trump ran an extremist, right-wing populist and xenophobic campaign against the political establishment in general. His campaign centered on mobilizing white racism and resentment and normalizing and legitimizing the so-called alt-right. As president he has installed

a set of powerful far-right figures—Steve Bannon, Michael Flynn, Sebastian Gorka, Stephen Miller, the crank who wrote the NSC memo—at the highest reaches of political power, many in the White House. He has actively attacked all establishment media in favor of *Breitbart*-style “truth.” He has regularly employed violent rhetoric about his opponents. He has invited violence against protesters and encouraged police violence against suspects. He has vilified Black Lives Matter. Trump has done all of this and more. And so Duke is not “wrong” when he claims to be “true” to the Trump agenda. Because Duke, Richard Spencer, and the rest, have been encouraged, mobilized, and normalized by Trump.

To that extent, it is impossible to understand, and to combat, what is happening right now in Charlottesville without recognizing the danger that Trump and Trumpism pose to social justice and to liberal democracy.

Saying this is not “hysterical” or “tyrannophobic.” And it does not reduce everything to Trump, or insist that other dynamics and institutions are not also responsible. In my opinion saying this is a precondition of serious political analysis right now. There are other things worth saying too. But to avoid this is, I am afraid, mistaken.

publicseminar.org, August 12, 2017

Taking Political Differences Seriously

Why I did not protest John Yoo at the APSA meetings

I am a political scientist. I oppose torture. I take very seriously questions of professional ethics, and I have publicly supported the view that professional associations such as The American Political Science Association (APSA) ought to support human rights abroad and also in the U.S., a position I first articulated in a September 2004 article entitled “Social Science and Liberal Values in a Time of War” (*Perspectives on Politics*).

But I did not protest John Yoo’s presence at this year’s APSA meeting in San Francisco, and the reason why is simple: I believe the protest was misplaced and also advanced a principle that I find disturbing and cannot support.

Let me be clear: I did not and do not “oppose” the protest, and I admire many of the protesters, and indeed count many among my friends. But I did not join in. A number of the protest organizers made statements at the time suggesting that anyone serious about torture, human rights or professional integrity would have joined in, and that those who refrained were in one way or another complicit in torture and perhaps even complicit in Trumpism. I am very skeptical that the APSA protest had any substantial effect on the practice of torture anywhere, even if it was covered in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. In addition, I am inclined to believe that the time to protest Yoo was the time when he served in government, and that little is to be accomplished by protesting him now. (And while I acknowledge the links between the Bush “war on terror” and Trumpism, I also note that Yoo has been a public critic of Trump, and indeed published a February *New York Times* op-ed piece entitled “Executive Power Run Amok” (February 5, 2017). This might be ironic. It

is also true that political scientists ought to take such political differences seriously. Many supporters of Bush and his “war on terror” oppose Trump. This matters.) At the same time, I respect those colleagues who thought differently. While their tactics of protest pressed the limits of what might be called “professional collegiality,” they did not substantially disturb those limits (in my opinion Yoo’s obnoxious panel comments about the protesters, which referenced “open carry,” and thus implied a threat, however “joking,” were much more disturbing). And even if they had, there are values more important than “collegiality.” I agree with Jodi Dean and Paul Passavant that such tactics of protest are justifiable in principle, and that even if one believes in the importance of persuasion, such protests are sometimes necessary as part of the broader process of persuasion.

It was not the tactic of the protest that caused me to abstain, though I will confess that I am personally disinclined to participate in disruptions of academic speakers, even when the disruptions are relatively silent and “civil,” as the protests of Yoo appear to have been. It was, at the margins, the timing: Yoo is “low-hanging fruit” for those who wish to seriously agitate for a more responsible and just professional association, and protesting him now, a decade after his time in government, seemed questionable to me. But it was, more centrally, the venue and the principle behind the protest that troubled me. The venue was not a governmental office, or even a university or other public setting. It was a professional conference. The protesters were expressing outrage that Yoo could be “given a platform,” and thus a kind of support, by APSA. And they articulated the idea that if APSA had integrity, then Yoo would have no such “platform”—that the standards of professional ethics, and the procedures for organizing annual meetings, would make it impossible for Yoo, and others like him, to speak.

I find this problematic.

The basic reason is simple: there are political scientists who share Yoo’s views on the U.S. Constitution, and on other aspects of the so-called “war on terror.” This should come as no surprise. Indeed, as many of the protesters well know, there is a rather

substantial body of literature in political theory on the themes of “just war” and “dirty hands.” There are indeed many people on the left who have argued that in certain circumstances it is justifiable to repress, detain, attack, or even kill “enemies.” I would be very loath to support prohibiting anyone who holds these views from participating in APSA. I would not expect groups like Caucus for a New Political Science or the Socialist Scholar’s Conference to welcome people like Yoo. But APSA is a professional and not a politically-defined scholarly organization, and a ban on Yoo would also likely be a ban on all of those who have publicly expressed similar views and certainly on all of those who wish to interact with him or to hear him speak because they consider his views important. I have little regard for such people. I would never invite Yoo to participate on any panel I might organize. I would not agree to participate on a panel with him. He is intellectually and personally distasteful to me. But I cannot support the claim that his “torture memos”—his reprehensible legal briefs justifying what he called “enhanced interrogation”—constitute a reason to prevent him from participating on an APSA panel if a group of APSA political scientists, or an organized or affiliated section of APSA, choose to invite him.

I would feel differently if APSA were to bestow a public service award on Yoo, or in some other way to honor him as an association. But for APSA to allow him to be a participant on a panel organized by its members seems completely consistent with the professional purpose of APSA. And that does not constitute “giving him a platform.” It simply involves allowing an affiliated group the right held by all affiliated groups: to organize some panels as they choose.

I confess, if I believed that Yoo were literally the modern-day equivalent of Eichmann, then I might feel differently. But I do not believe this, just as I do not believe that the contemporary

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U.S. government is a totalitarian dictatorship, or that the “war on terror” is a form of genocide, even though I acknowledge its harms. I strongly disagree with Yoo. I object morally and politically to what he has done. But I doubt that he is a “war criminal,” in the same way that I doubt that the authors of *The Pentagon Papers*, or others involved in justifying or supporting the Vietnam War, or other destructive and murderous wars, are thus people who committed “war crimes.” Many political scientists worked for Bush II, or Bush I, or Nixon, or Clinton, or Obama, and were involved in planning or justifying things that might be considered morally objectionable. Does the articulation of objectionable views about the Constitution constitute a form of criminal malfeasance equivalent to psychologists—or physicians or perhaps even political scientists—who actually participate in the torture of individuals? Where do we draw the line?

Dean and Passavant write that the protests were linked to “getting measures passed at the APSA business meeting that would instruct and enable the ethics committee to bring the association’s concern with abuses caused or experienced by political scientists together with its stated commitment to human rights” (*Public Seminar*, September 20, 2017). That is true, and the effort to raise the issues was a noble one, for which the protesters deserve credit. APSA ought to be much more serious about human rights, academic freedom, and professional responsibility. But the protesters did more than raise the issues. They sought to use the Yoo case to make an argument for the banning of people like Yoo from APSA. I’ve already stated that I consider the logic of this a troubling slippery slope. But it is also seriously politically misguided.

I’ve already pointed out above that while we might be inclined to treat Yoo as a simple miscreant, in fact there are serious scholarly debates about the arguments of his that we might

consider most troubling. And these debates are not the province only of supporters of Abu Graib and Gitmo and Islamophobia. “Dirty hands” arguments have been central to contemporary political theory at least since the writings of Lenin and Trotsky, both of whom penned powerful and influential essays about the need to deal harshly with “enemies.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Humanism and Terror* (1947) is a classic contribution to this genre. In 2007, Slavoj Žižek edited a series for Verso seeking to rehabilitate the theme of revolutionary violence (*Virtue and Terror: Zizek Presents Robespierre; On Practice and Contradiction: Zizek Presents Mao; Terrorism and Communism: Zizek Presents Trotsky*). Dean and Passavant know this better than most. For Dean is a very public admirer of Zizek and an advocate for a revival of Lenin and of a new type of communist party. I strongly disagree with her about these things and have explained why in print. But that is not my point. My point, rather, is that the demand that APSA codify respect for human rights might be more complicated than the protesters realize, and might in fact damn some of them in the same way it damns Yoo. Among the leaders of the protesters, some have been quite vocal in their effort to legitimize certain texts, and practices, that many might reasonably consider to be complicit in tyranny. And we don’t need to look back to the Jacobin “terror” or Lenin or Trotsky during the period of Civil War Communism or Mao’s Cultural Revolution. We can look no further than the practices of the late Hugo Chavez or his successor, Nicolas Maduro. Should APSA’s human rights guidelines also proscribe scholars who extol the Castro regime in Cuba, or the “Bolivarian Revolution” in Venezuela? Those regimes imprison and torture dissenters. Are supporters of those regimes or sympathizers of their ideas to be considered supporters of torture whose scholarly credentials should be impugned?

This is a very dangerous road on which to travel. I do not

favor it. I *do* favor more serious consideration of the ethical and professional ethical issues at stake, and a more vigorous discussion within the political science profession about the many challenges to professional integrity we currently face.

But I doubt that protests and bans are the answer for professional associations such as APSA, or for colleagues who wish to participate seriously in the ongoing governance and reform of such associations. For political science, like most disciplines, is a pluralistic enterprise, in which many perspectives, and indeed fundamental concepts, are “essentially contested.” Yoo’s legal scholarship, and the official legal opinions this scholarship has produced, are deeply objectionable. The best antidote to Yoo’s shoddy legal scholarship is good legal scholarship. Public protesting of Yoo’s public pronouncements and activities is an eminently democratic activity. I doubt that protesting Yoo’s appearance at an APSA panel will do much to either move public opinion about torture or enlighten or persuade other political scientists about the issue. I can’t object to those who think otherwise. There are many more important things to be concerned about. And one of them is academic freedom, broadly construed. And so while I did not and do not “oppose” such protests because of the “disruption” they cause, I do oppose the idea that the way for professional associations such as APSA to attend to serious concerns about human rights is to create policies that limit the participation of those who subscribe to objectionable views, whether they be views about state torture, revolutionary terror, colonialism, racial reparations, or the legitimacy of “Bolivarian revolution,” “Euromaidan protest,” “Arab Spring,” or “Black Lives Matter.”

I oppose torture. And I oppose Yoo’s views about torture. But I also oppose the effort to prevent the participation of the John Yoos of the right and of the left from participation in scholarly activity so long as they are acting in their professional

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capacities. Academic freedom of expression and freedom of association are hardly cures for the injustices of our broader social and political world. But when it comes to the deficiencies and dubious intellectual and ethical choices of colleagues in their professional capacities, there are probably none better. To paraphrase Churchill, they might be problematic. But they are less problematic than the alternatives.

publicseminar.org, September 20, 2017

Why I Welcome John McCain's "Liberty Medal" Speech

Yesterday Senator John McCain was awarded a "Liberty medal" by the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. And he chose this event to make an important speech about the "meaning of American politics."

The Center is a bipartisan organization created by Congress to promote an appreciation for the U.S. Constitution. Its president and CEO is Jeffrey Rosen, a highly respected legal journalist. Its Chairman is Joseph Biden (previous chairs include Jeb Bush, Bill Clinton, and George H.W. Bush); its Executive Committee is chaired by Doug DeVos; its Board of Trustees includes a number of prominent legal scholars, corporate leaders, and celebrities; and its Advisory Board consists of top legal scholars from across the political spectrum. According to the Center's website:

The National Constitution Center is the first and only institution in America established by Congress to "disseminate information about the United States Constitution on a non-partisan basis in order to increase the awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people." The Constitution Center brings the United States Constitution to life by hosting interactive exhibits and constitutional conversations and inspires active citizenship by celebrating the American constitutional tradition.

The Liberty Medal is "awarded annually by the National Constitution Center to men and women of courage and conviction who have strived to secure the blessings of liberty to people the world over." Previous Medal winners include John Lewis (2016), the Dalai Lama (2015), Malala Yousafzai (2014), Hillary Clinton (2013) and Muhammad Ali (2012).

McCain's speech has been widely reported, especially its full-throated repudiation of the "America first" discourse of Donald Trump and Steve Bannon: "To fear the world we have organized and led for three-quarters of a century, to abandon the ideals we have advanced around the globe, to refuse the obligations of international leadership and our duty to remain 'the last best hope of earth' for the sake of some half-baked, spurious nationalism cooked up by people who would rather find scapegoats than solve problems is as unpatriotic as an attachment to any other tired dogma of the past that Americans consigned to the ash heap of history" (*Medium*, October 16, 2017). The speech was more than a clear denunciation of Trumpism. It offered a testament to Senatorial bipartisanship, American exceptionalism ("We are living in the land of the free, the land where anything is possible, the land of the immigrant's dream, the land with the storied past forgotten in the rush to the imagined future, the land that repairs and reinvents itself, the land where a person can escape the consequences of a self-centered youth and know the satisfaction of sacrificing for an ideal, the land where you can go from aimless rebellion to a noble cause, and from the bottom of your class to your party's nomination for president"), and a strong U.S. role in the world, as epitomized by "the international order we helped build from the ashes of world war."

McCain's message is summed up best in these words:

We live in a land made of ideals, not blood and soil. We are the custodians of those ideals at home, and their champion abroad. We have done great good in the world. That leadership has had its costs, but we have become incomparably powerful and wealthy as we did. We have a moral obligation to continue in our just cause, and we would bring more than shame on ourselves if we don't. We will not thrive in a world where our

WHY I WELCOME JOHN MCCAIN'S "LIBERTY MEDAL" SPEECH

leadership and ideals are absent. We wouldn't deserve to.

There is nothing new or surprising in these words. They seem well-designed to suit the occasion of their delivery, at an utterly establishment, mainstream event put on by an emphatically patriotic organization run by elites. And they are perfectly consistent with the perspective for which McCain has long been known: a globalist, interventionist, neoconservative commitment to the discourse of "democracy promotion" and "human rights." As notable as are McCain's powerful words are the silences in his speech, about the historical failings of the American political system, and the actual freedom struggles that have been fought (and are still being fought) to right some of those wrongs, and about some of the most notable foreign policy disasters associated with his global vision, including Vietnam but also the Iraq war that McCain so strenuously supported.

The mainstream media has perhaps been too eager to celebrate McCain and his speech, and too reluctant or unable to set this speech in a broader historical context, in which its limits can be better understood, and in which McCain's personal limits can be better understood (think Sarah Palin). And it is important to say that McCain's discourse about human rights and global democracy and indeed about America's "mission" is linked to a broader neoconservative policy agenda that serious people on the liberal left oppose and should oppose.

I oppose it. And I question the speech's gentlemanly appeal to bipartisanship, its broadly celebratory tone, and its silences about the real "dark sides" of the American political tradition.

At the same time, I welcome the speech. One reason why I welcome it is completely situational: at this particular moment in U.S. political history, when the White House is being occupied by an ignorant, cruel and narcissistic man who is wedded to a

cynical, xenophobic, and authoritarian agenda, words such as McCain's, coming from a senior Republican senator and a former presidential candidate, represent an important intervention. Through his words McCain is articulating real fissures within the Republican party that can hopefully widen. He is also standing up to the bullying of Trump, who is bullying all too many people. It matters that McCain chose this occasion to make this particular speech, and that it is receiving attention, and that it is thus laying down a marker in the broader political fight against Trumpism. I think this is important in a human and a moral sense. But I am thinking mainly about politics here. There are a great many things about McCain's politics with which I strongly disagree, especially his hawkish positions on Iran and North Korea—and it is indeed on these issues that I believe the greatest imminent danger currently lies. Nonetheless, it is politically important that McCain chooses now to make this speech, even as Trump is moving in a hawkish direction on Iran and North Korea. For it suggests that certain things are more important to McCain than policy (even as he clearly believes that Trump's hawkish moves involve no real policy), things like freedom. Further, while McCain's appeals to bipartisanship ring somewhat hollow, their audibility is magnified by the current mess. And McCain's consistent calls for a "return to regular order" represent an important counter to Trump's authoritarian presidency.

And this leads me to my second reason for welcoming McCain's speech: the clarity with which he articulated what can only be described as a robust civic nationalism beautifully summed up in his insistence that "we live in a land made of ideals, not blood and soil." The self-congratulatory Wilsonianism of these words is obvious, and I will return to them momentarily. But here too, it is important to note that, the actual depredations of Wilsonianism aside, there is a genealogical difference between a Wilsonian

rhetoric of "making the world safe for democracy" and a rhetoric of "blood and soil." McCain clearly speaks the language of the Declaration of Independence, and of Lincoln, Wilson, and FDR (and, yes, of Reagan, Clinton, Bush and Obama) at a time when our current president, like too many anti-liberal leaders, speaks the language of Charles Lindbergh, Julius Evola, Mussolini and Hitler. While Trump speaks of "this American carnage" and consistently incites a cult of American victimhood, McCain insists that American globalism, while it has its "costs," has also made the country "incomparably powerful and wealthy." This is not the violent, neo-fascist rhetoric of "rising from the ashes." It is the rhetoric of global responsibility. It is self-righteous to be sure, and it supports many policies that I oppose. But it supports these policies in way that is consistent with a broader set of real arguments about how the U.S., as a liberal democracy, can best advance human rights, and best orient its foreign policy.

McCain is a neoconservative. But he is not a neo-fascist. And that difference matters, especially now. It matters to heroic democratic activists in places like Russia, Ukraine, Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, Hungary, Poland, and China. It matters to refugees, and immigrants, who prefer the discourse of "human rights" to the discourse of "America first." And it matters to U.S. citizens, even citizens on the left, who can recognize McCain as a political opponent but not as a would-be-tyrant.

And that is the third and perhaps most important reason why I welcome McCain's speech: because it enacts certain values, minimal to be sure, that define a liberal, constitutional democracy and that distinguish it from illiberal and indeed anti-liberal alternatives. McCain speaks the language of citizenship and not the language of "enemies of the people." He represents a policy perspective that with which I strongly disagree and that I strongly oppose in almost all respects. Almost. For we agree on this: liberal democracy is something worth defending. For most

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of my personal and professional life as a political scientist, this did not seem like much. For I, like most of my peers, took it for granted. It was the premise of our strenuous criticism of virtually everything existing. But it is a premise no longer. It is, instead, a value under siege. John McCain is neither the only nor the best representative of this value. But he defends it nonetheless. And that is something worth welcoming.

publicseminar.org, October 17, 2017

John Kelly is a Present Danger to the Republic

With all due respect

On Thursday of this week General John Kelly, the chief of staff for President Donald Trump, took to the microphone for the second time in two weeks to defend the malfeasance and malevolence of his boss.

Kelly spoke at length about the sacrifices of fallen soldiers, the duties of their military superiors, his own experiences as a commander and also as the father of a fallen soldier, and the advice he supposedly gave to Trump about how best to convey condolences to the families of fallen soldiers. He presented Trump as a “brave” and compassionate man who spoke exactly as he had been instructed to speak by his handler—Kelly himself.

Kelly has long been treated with adulation by the media—especially the mainstream media that his boss consistently derides as “fake”—because of his combat and military leadership experience, his personal sacrifices, and his “probity.” We are consistently invited to think of him—along with Generals “Mad Dog” Mattis and H. R. McMaster and corporate titan Rex Tillerson, but mainly him—as “the adult” in the room. Serious men and women have been known to “praise God” that Kelly remains in the White House, to tutor his emotionally adolescent ward, the president.

Many critics of Trump, including retired military critics such as Barry McCaffrey and Jack Jacobs, who have questioned Trump’s politicization of the “fallen soldier” question, praised Kelly’s Thursday speech, especially the way it centered on honoring fallen soldiers. Kelly surely spoke with a clarity, confidence, and gravitas that reflects his real-world experience, and that is far beyond the capacities of his erstwhile commander

in chief. And he proved, yet again, how valuable he is to Trump, through his professional discipline, his willingness to offer public defenses, and his very presence, which confers an aura of competence on this most incompetent of presidents. Kelly's speech may have been heartfelt. It may have been delivered by a man of substance rather than by an idiot. And it may even have contained a few subtleties worth praising (for example, he *seemed* to go out of his way to underscore that he was not criticizing Obama). But it was a deeply disturbing speech nonetheless, and it does not deserve the adulation that it has received even from some well-meaning liberals.

Its most disturbing feature was precisely what so many have praised: its military sensibility and decorum, i.e., its *authoritarianism*. Kelly exulted in his authority as a military man who knows better than the civilians and whose experiences of combat—and of death and loss—confer a distinctive wisdom and patriotic glory. He expressed contempt for civilians who interfere with military ceremonies, and he maintained that soldiers are the most virtuous and good Americans by virtue of their willingness to shed their blood—which is usefully contrasted with John McCain's recent *repudiation* of the rhetoric of "blood and soil." As Masha Gessen has just written, Kelly spoke, sanctimoniously and from on high, "in the language of a military coup" (*The New Yorker*, October 20, 2017). Both his words and their tone confirmed concerns, long-expressed by many, that the power behind Trump's throne is the generals.

Many commentators have been wondering just how long Kelly could possibly remain in the White House, subject to Trump's unprofessionalism and his whims. Many imagined that Trump's recent public exploitation of the death of Kelly's son ("Ask General Kelly if Obama phoned him") would be the straw that broke the camel's back. But Kelly stands by his commitments,

however despicable, and if many serious military commentators have been deeply troubled by the callousness and unpredictability of the president, Kelly has made clear that *he* is in it for the long haul. And while he might remain out of a sense of duty, the reason why he is there in the first place is pretty simple: he is Trump's man, and shares Trump's ethnonationalist worldview.

Kelly's ideological attachment to Trumpism is something that has received too little attention. He might be an adult. But he is a reactionary adult in league with his *reactionary* boss.

Indeed, in emphasizing proper respect for and even "sanctification" of military discipline and protocol, Kelly was reiterating themes that Trump has been exploiting for months, by his constant invocation of "his generals"; his angry speeches before police and military crowds, where he regularly denounces "enemies of the people" and calls for "law and order"; and especially his obsessive attacks on Colin Kaepernick and other mostly African American athletes for their "kneeling," a deliberate sign of democratic protest that Trump has chosen to turn into a question of "respect for our flag and for our men in uniform." It is true that in his speech, Kelly articulated a military gravity that Trump could never match. But it is also true that in making that speech in that way, Kelly was doing more than defending his boss or asserting his military authority behind the scenes; he was playing Trump's game of whipping up hysteria against the supposed "disrespect" of our military and our power.

America First. Kelly is unequivocal about this. And so he also expressed an astonishing nostalgia for a culturally reactionary vision of America: "You know, when I was a kid growing up, a lot of things were sacred in our country. Women were sacred, looked upon with great honor. That's obviously not the case anymore as we see from recent cases. Life—the dignity of life—is sacred. That's gone. Religion, that seems to be gone as

well” (*White House Press Briefing*, October 19, 2017). And now, it would seem, we have feminism, and reproductive freedom, and secularism. It is an obvious irony, lost on Kelly, that the man he serves is the most nihilistic, self-serving, female-harassing and *dishonorable* president in U.S. history. But regardless, Kelly told us, in no uncertain terms that, like his boss, and like his Republican Party, he believes that liberalism, “political correctness,” and indeed almost everything associated with the cultural radicalism of the sixties is the source of our nation’s decline.

Lawrence O’Donnell, on MSNBC, has made a powerful case that there was latent racism behind Kelly’s extended and slanderous denunciation of Congresswoman Frederica Wilson, an honorable African American woman who Kelly completely misrepresented and defamed. O’Donnell focused on Kelly’s derogatory reference to Wilson as “an empty barrel.” The text is worth quoting at length:

And a congresswoman stood up, and in the long tradition of empty barrels making the most noise, stood up there and all of that and talked about how she was instrumental in getting the funding for that building, and how she took care of her constituents because she got the money, and she just called up President Obama, and on that phone call he gave the money—the \$20 million—to build the building. And she sat down, and we were stunned. Stunned that she had done it. Even for someone that is that empty a barrel, we were stunned. (*The New York Times*, October 19, 2017)

Kelly is being really nasty. More important, he is misleadingly treating a public dedication of a public facility like it is a memorial service for fallen heroes, which it is not—even though Representative Wilson’s speech offered sustained encomiums to

fallen heroes, to the FBI, and to then-FBI Director James Comey. But what is most important is the utter disdain Kelly displays towards parliamentary politics and representative government. He is denouncing an elected representative for referencing constituent service, and for thanking the public officials whose support made the public facility possible. And he is implying that elected representatives are “empty barrels” — windbags who are all talk—in contrast to the real citizens, Kelly and his military peers and their subordinates, who place their bodies on the line and are willing to shed their blood. In speaking in this way, Kelly articulates a hostility to democratic debate and deliberation that has long been a staple of totalitarian rhetoric. Here is a classic statement:

All the parties that profess so-called bourgeois principles look upon political life as in reality a struggle for seats in parliament. The moment their principles and convictions are of no further use in that struggle they are thrown overboard, as if they were sand ballast . . . They lack the great magnetic force which alone attracts the broad masses; for these masses always respond to the compelling force which emanates from absolute faith in the ideas put forward, combined with an indomitable zest to fight for and defend them.

The words were Hitler’s. But they could just as well have been from Mussolini, or Lenin, or Stalin. Or Bannon, or Trump, or Trump’s Four-Star General handler.

Much has been made of the neo-fascist resonances of Trump’s inauguration speech (“This American carnage stops here”) and of the many xenophobic speeches crafted for him by the fanatical Stephen Miller. And so it is worth underscoring Kelly’s clear affinity for these sentiments. It is also worth emphasizing that the words that follow belong not to Trump or to Miller but

to Kelly, and they were uttered while he served as Trump's loyal secretary of homeland security, long before he chose to become Trump's maître d':

... make no mistake—we are a nation under attack. We are under attack from criminals who think their greed justifies raping young girls at knifepoint, dealing poison to our youth, or killing just for fun. We are under attack from people who hate us, hate our freedoms, hate our laws, hate our values, hate the way we simply live our lives. We are under attack from failed states, cyber terrorists, vicious smugglers, and sadistic radicals. And we are under attack every single day. The threats are relentless ... [We] face very real threats from so-called Special Interest Aliens ... the damage [they] do is not only violence and potential terror. It is also vast tonnages of marijuana and hard drugs—cocaine, heroin, counterfeit opiates, fentanyl, and methamphetamines—they smuggle across our borders to feed both the recreational and addictive U.S. drug demand... The threat to our nation and our American way of life has not diminished. In fact, the threat has metastasized and decentralized, and the risk is as threatening today as it was that September morning almost 16 years ago. We are under attack from terrorists both within and outside of our borders. They are without conscience, and they operate without rules. They despise the United States, because we are a nation of rights, laws, and freedoms. They have a single mission, and that is our destruction ... And since the first week of President Trump's administration, we have been actively securing our borders and enforcing our immigration laws. Not only is this our right as a sovereign nation—it is our responsibility to ensure the safety of the American public. People who illegally cross our borders do not respect the laws

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of our nation. We want to get the lawbreakers off our streets, and out of the country, for the good of our communities . . . But for too long, the men and women of my department have been political pawns. They have been asked to do more with less, and less, and less. In many ways similar to the treatment suffered by law enforcement over the last few years, they are often ridiculed and insulted by public officials, and frequently convicted in the court of public opinion on unfounded allegations testified to by street lawyers and spokespersons. If lawmakers do not like the laws they've passed and we are charged to enforce—then they should have the courage and skill to change the laws. Otherwise they should shut up and support the men and women on the front lines. My people have been discouraged from doing their jobs for nearly a decade, disabled by pointless bureaucracy and political meddling, and suffered disrespect and contempt by public officials who have no idea what it means to serve. . . . We will never apologize for enforcing and upholding the law. We will never apologize for carrying out our mission. We will never apologize for making our country more secure. We ask for nothing more than respect and your support. We don't do this for the thank yous—we do this keep [sic] America strong, secure, and free. (Homeland Security, April 18, 2017)

Those are the words of the adult in the Oval Office.

The nasty, mendacious, militaristic adult. The guy who earlier this year set up Homeland Security's new office of Victims of Immigration Crime Engagement, and described it thus: "Our mission is clear and that is to acknowledge the exceptional damage caused by criminal illegal aliens and to support the victims of these preventable crimes." The same family-loving guy who proposed this March that Homeland Security would

separate all undocumented children from their parents at the border, in order to deter illegal immigration.

Kelly has made patriotic sacrifices, and he deserves the respect due to individuals who are willing to sacrifice for what they believe in—a respect due to genuine civic heroes, many of whom have had no military experience whatsoever (though many of them, like John Lewis, have surely experienced the use of military force against them).

But Kelly is not a noble soul. He is an angry man capable of much nastiness in his public treatment of those with whom he disagrees. He is a military man who exercises undue influence on our (shockingly disorganized) civilian government. And he is an authoritarian man who has fully aligned himself with the anti-liberal, xenophobic, and reactionary agenda of Trump. Like his boss, and like the other “adults” with whom he consorts in the West Wing, he is a danger to constitutional democracy. His public behavior is dishonorable. And what he deserves politically is not respect but vigorous criticism and strenuous opposition.

publicseminar.org, October 20, 2017

Why Trump's Words Were Offensive

Myeshia Johnson confirms Trump's comments as hurtful and disrespectful

Last week General John Kelly defended Donald Trump's way of handling the deaths of the four fallen U.S. soldiers in Niger. He did so in a way that excused his boss, misrepresented and disparaged Representative Frederica Wilson, and expressed the self-righteous attitude that military people are true patriots and civilians are second-rate citizens who should not speak of what they do not know.

Central to all of this was Kelly's assertion that Trump's words about Sgt. La David Johnson, the fallen soldier—"he knew what he was getting into when he signed up"—were appropriate words, which Kelly himself had been told by General Mo Dunsford when his own son was killed, and which Kelly then passed along to Trump. There is no reason to doubt Kelly here. There is also no reason to doubt that whatever subtlety might be contained in such words when delivered by a caring military officer, was lost when these words were conveyed by the self-absorbed, ethically-challenged Trump (the draft evader who has disparaged John McCain's years of torture at the Hanoi Hilton by saying, "I prefer military guys who don't get shot down").

Kelly's performance has been widely treated as an enactment of military seriousness and respect for the men and women who risk their lives for their country. I have suggested that this performance was an authoritarian enactment by a man who is a danger to the republic. I stand by that suggestion. At the same time, I have no doubt that Kelly is a "man of honor" as he understands professional military honor, nor do I doubt that the young men and women who risk, and sacrifice, their lives as

members of the U.S. military deserve proper respect.

But in the rush to exalt Kelly's particular enactment of respect, something fundamental has been obscured: the fact that while members of the military might feel bound by a common patriotism and esprit de corps, the military is a hierarchical and authoritarian institution that cultivates both esprit de corps and submission to authority. More specifically, the U.S. military is an "all-volunteer" force, in the sense that most of those who serve are not highly trained and high-ranking officers like Kelly or Dunsford, but relatively "ordinary" people who typically come from modest or poor backgrounds, who are drawn to the military in large part by the economic prospects and career options it affords, and who serve as privates or non-commissioned officers, the kinds of people whose families get to hear words like those defended by Kelly, but who do not ever get to utter such words themselves.

Kelly believes that the words "he knew what he was getting into" show respect for the institution and the mission. I have no doubt that this is the way they are intended when delivered by a dedicated military official (and not by the idiotic hotel developer who currently occupies the White House).

But this does not mean that this is the meaning that is *conveyed* by these words to all hearers. Representative Wilson reported last week that Johnson's family members were offended by Trump's words, by their manner of delivery but also by the words themselves. Now the Sgt.'s widow, Myeshia Johnson, has come out publicly to say this: the words were hurtful and disrespectful. And yet Kelly insists the words were respectful.

How can this be?

The answer is simple: Kelly speaks for those who command the military, and Johnson's family members speaks as people related to those who are military *subordinates*.

WHY TRUMP'S WORDS WERE OFFENSIVE

Johnson was twenty five years-old when he was killed in the field. CNN reports that “before joining the Army in 2014, Johnson was an employee in the produce department at Walmart, where he became known as ‘Wheelie King’ because he commuted to work on a bicycle with no front wheel. . .” (October 21, 2017). Think about it. An inner-city young AfricanAmerican man with no college degree, who had benefited from a school program for “at risk youth,” who worked for Walmart and commuted to work on a bicycle with one wheel. Of course this is a story of a young man with grit and determination and some real panache. But it is also a story of a young man who was poor or at least not very well off. Was he a patriot? Sure. Was he a military “lifer” or a West Point graduate or even a community college graduate? Surely *not*.

When a Dunsford says to a Kelly that his son, an officer, did not die in vain, and that “he knew what he was getting into,” it makes sense that Kelly will hear this as a sincere compliment.

But when the Johnson family is told these words, whether by Trump or by Kelly, they will not hear this as a sincere compliment. Because they are not part of the “imagined community” that is the U.S. military. They are struggling people who know that their loved one, who was La David Johnson before he became Sgt. Johnson, died very young in a very dangerous job because that very dangerous job was his best way to “be all he can be,” where that means being *anything* more than a Walmart employee riding a one-wheeled bicycle to work.

publicseminar.org, October 23, 2017

Neither Normalization Nor Alarmism

Responding to Ivan Krastev

Ivan Krastev has long been one of the most insightful commentators on the politics of populism in post-communist Eastern Europe. His just-published *New York Times* piece, “What’s a Bigger Threat, ‘Normalization’ or Alarmism?” (December 3, 2017) raises an important question: how should liberal democrats respond to the rise of anti-liberal elected governments, in Poland, Hungary, and the United States? It also furnishes an answer: an “alarmist” response is a bigger threat than a “normalizing” one, because it plays into the hands of the populists, fueling their extremist energy, which is driven by hostility to “normality.”

Krastev is surely right that the current situation is distinctive (indeed *all* situations are distinctive), and simplistic analogies to thirties fascism or seventies communism are misleading.

He is also right that “alarmism” is mistaken (after all, when is “alarmism,” as opposed to “sounding the alarm,” *ever* a good thing?), and that the defense of democracy requires “passion and a readiness to defend one’s values” yet also requires “a sense of proportion.”

Such a sense of proportion is especially necessary because, as Krastev notes, the right-wing populists thrive on polarization and alarmism. But who are the liberal “alarmists” that so concern Krastev? I am aware of few serious liberal and democratic opponents of “illiberal democracy,” beyond the small group of antifa activists, who regard as exemplary the German “young leftist radicals” of the seventies who “were so obsessed with the idea that there were no major differences between Nazi Germany and the postwar German Federal Republic that they made

profound errors in judgment and, at times, ended up as terrorists and enemies of democracy.” Nor are there many calling for Jan Palach-style self-immolations.

But many of us are *sounding the alarm* about the dangers of the current anti-liberal movement, which is transnational and powerful. One reason is because the anti-liberal governments, while elected, are threatening to use their electorally-based power to attack press freedom, independent judiciaries and regulatory agencies, civil liberties and protections for minorities, and even freedom of association, thereby privileging their own power in ways that jeopardize the future of constitutional democracy. The second reason is precisely because they are successfully mobilizing millions of people in support of this agenda, in the process exploiting and inflaming mass resentment and anger that has already spilled out into civil society, engendering vigilantism and violence.

Krastev understands this, and has elsewhere analyzed such dangers. And yet, by emphasizing the elected nature of the principal threats, and framing his piece around the dangers of “alarmism,” he is effectively minimizing these dangers. This is unfortunate. Because most of us who advocate “resistance” to the anti-liberals hardly take our cue from “polarizing” or “alarmist” radicalism, and we have much more judicious, and also *powerful*, sources from which to draw. It is too bad that Krastev does not attend to these.

One place to look would be to Tony Judt’s short book *The Burden of Responsibility* (1998), which brilliantly elucidates three exemplary modalities of twentieth-century anti-totalitarian resistance of relevance to our present: Leon Blum’s party-political opposition to fascism, Albert Camus’s “rebellious politics” of resistance (and Resistance), and Raymond Aron’s “engaged spectatorship.” Each of those figures sounded an alarm without being alarmist. Each enacted a kind of conscientious resistance to authoritarianism that was not moralizing and that was linked to a sense of real political agency and possibility. A second place to look would be to those who in fact organized successful resistance to communism in Eastern Europe only a few decades ago: not

Palach, but Václav Havel, Adam Michnik, Miklós Haraszti, György Konrad, János Kis, and Jacek Kuron. Some of these people are now gone. Many of them live, breathe, and continue to oppose authoritarianism.

To be clear: these are merely a few examples among many that might be offered. Further, they are hardly examples of self-sufficient or unadulterated “success.” Both the defeat of fascism during World War II, and the “Revolution of 1989” that brought down communism in Eastern Europe, involved complex intersections of political resistance and geopolitics, and of good judgment and good luck. And both engendered compromises, and mistakes, and outcomes that, perhaps tragically, marginalized many of those conscientious resisters.

My point is a simple one. There are traditions of thinking about and enacting resistance to authoritarianism that elude the dichotomy of “normalization” versus “alarmism” that frames Krastev’s essay. The current form of authoritarianism being instituted by our new “illiberal democrats” is fueled by contemporary injustices, grievances, resentments, and viral media of digital communication. And it requires mindful contemporary responses. There are no obvious or guaranteed strategies of resisting it or reviving the kinds of liberal- and social-democratic movements, institutions, and policies that played important roles in the past. Krastev is right that “overreaction” is a danger. But so is “under-reaction.” Indeed, today, like always, the defense of democracy requires “a sense of proportion,” but also a “passion and a readiness to defend one’s values.” And because it does, those of us who wish to be “neither victims nor executioners” need to sound the alarm, and to act judiciously, and to refuse to normalize the forms of small-mindedness, xenophobia, racism, and fear-mongering that are seeking and acquiring power in our midst. It may be that in some of these

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places, like Poland, many months of protests of the right-wing government have not shaken and might even have strengthened the government. It may also be that right now in many places—including the United States?—the defense of liberal values and constitutional democracy cuts against the grain of a powerful populism. Perhaps protest needs to be better linked with other forms of civic initiative and party-political activism. There are different ways to resist. And Krastev's piece offers a useful cautionary note. But if "alarmism" is to be avoided, so too must be "normalization." For while certain strategies and tactics of resistance might be "dangerous," it is also possible that they are less dangerous and more promising than they might seem. Moreover, what seems *most* dangerous right now is not the resistance, but the mobilization and empowerment of bigotry and Know-Nothingism that the resistance seeks to counter.

publicseminar.org, December 6, 2017

Why Is Trump's Authoritarianism So Hard for Some to Recognize?

Responding to Corey Robin

Corey Robin asks, "If authoritarianism is looming in the U.S., how come Trump looks so weak?" (*the Guardian*, January 13, 2018). He has posed this question many times in the past year, and always to the same effect: Trump looks weak because he is weak, and his weakness proves that "authoritarianism" is not "looming."

Robin likes to take aim at the rhetoric of liberal journalists like Matthew Yglesias, who recently tweeted that Trump is "consolidating an authoritarian regime." Robin is correct to challenge such exaggerated rhetoric. The U.S. is not (yet?) an "authoritarian regime," much less one that is "consolidating" (as Robin knows, no political scientist worth her salt would speak of such "consolidation"). He is also correct to note that the U.S. political system is far from the crisis-ridden Weimar Republic (formed in 1918 after a catastrophic world war and only fifteen years old when the Nazis came to power); that Trump is not Hitler; and that year one of the Trump administration has been nothing like year one of Hitler's "Third Reich."

True that. And yet what serious analyst has said otherwise? Yes, I know, the rhetoric of "fascism" and "Hitler" has frequently been invoked, typically to sound alarm, and to articulate real fear. And historical parallels have been drawn, and lessons have been inferred, by scholars, such as Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky, interested in serious historical analogies and disanalogies. But demonstrating that Trump's Republican administration is no Nazi regime proves very little of relevance to a serious analysis of the challenges that Trump presents to *us* now.

It is worth unpacking the elements of Robin's argument: "weakness," "authoritarianism," and "looming" are the keywords to examine.

Robin claims that Trump looks weak. In the ways that Robin notes, this is obviously true. But as he also knows, there exists no standpoint-independent place from which to observe such things. And it is worth considering whether there are some standpoints, rooted in real experience, from which Trump looks not weak but powerful and frightening by virtue of his power. I wonder if so-called DACA children and their families see Trump and his administration as "weak." Or women, associated with #MeToo and a range of long-standing groups and causes, who have experienced sexual harassment and violence or who fear it, and who are distressed that a serial abuser holds the most powerful position in the country. Are African American youth paying attention to Trump's supposed weakness when he encourages police to break some heads?

Are there not real constituencies, numbering in the millions of people, who experience the way Trump regularly incites, mobilizes, and enacts racism, sexism, and xenophobia? Can we imagine that they see not "weakness," but powerful and energizing rhetoric, sometimes linked to actual policy efforts, and sometimes to actual violence, that threatens them?

Does this mean that Trump is a proto-Hitler? No. But does it mean that Trump appears dangerously powerful and powerfully dangerous to many citizens, and that serious political analysis ought to take account of this? Yes.

Robin slides from the claim that Trump looks weak to the claim that Trump is weak. The distinction is important. It does not follow from the fact that many people fear Trump that all of their fears are justified. And while Robin's assertion that Trump looks weak is too cavalier, he is not wrong to note the real limits to Trump's—or any president's—power. Furthermore, Trump is in many ways personally incompetent. His administration, as an organization, is chaotic and in many ways dysfunctional. Many of his most outrageous policy initiatives—the Mexican wall, the Muslim ban, the Affordable Care Act repeal—have

been delayed, stymied, or defeated in the courts or in Congress. A constitutional separation of powers is still in effect. The Bill of Rights has not been abolished. Further, Trump's presidency has exposed real fissures in the Republican Party, which is genuinely vulnerable in the 2018 elections. In all of these ways, Trump's presidency is flawed, limited, and even politically precarious. Trump is no Hitler, or Putin, or Erdoğan.

At the same time, Trump has succeeded in some important ways, and has leveraged his power to forward key conservative agendas. While some of these successes—the Gorsuch appointment, the stacking of lower courts with conservative extremists, the recent tax legislation—clearly involve more “ordinary” Republican Party priorities, others—the gutting of the federal bureaucracy, and especially the use of the departments of justice and labor to roll back important civil and labor rights—represent a more authoritarian turn. Trump's repeal of DACA has thus far been stalled. But will there be mass deportations that far exceed those of the Obama administration, and that include hundreds of thousands of DACA children? It is too early to tell. Will Trump's verbal attacks on the press lead to legal infringements of press freedom? Again, it is too early to tell.

What is not too early to tell is that in a single year Trump, through his rhetoric and his ham-fisted policy efforts, has mobilized race hatred and incited violence; eviscerated environmental protection and assaulted the very idea of civil service professionalism; and has moved the Republican Party much further towards being a party of “white nationalism.” Perhaps most importantly, he has used the “bully pulpit” of the presidency, buoyed by the tremendous reach of his Twitter feed, to intimidate his critics, promote hostility to the rule of law, and to lie and dissimulate in a way that profoundly undermines elemental notions of factual truth. Trump has not started from

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scratch in these things, and he draws on broader tendencies in our politics. But he has extended the boundaries of what is considered acceptable far beyond any recent predecessor. It is true that Trump's presidency is above all else a *rhetorical* presidency. It is also true that his rhetoric is poison; that its purpose is to enrich his family, to externalize his anger, and most importantly to elevate himself; and that in this sense, Trump governs—if “governs” is the right word—in a way that can only be described as autocratic.

Has Trump instituted a new, “authoritarian” regime? No.

Is his presidency profoundly authoritarian in its approach to the rhetoric and the enactment of political power? Yes.

Does authoritarianism “loom,” as a dark shadow cast upon everything, and as a frightening possibility thus far forestalled by determined forms of political opposition and civic resistance? Of course it does.

This does not make Trump a Putin or even an Orbán. It simply makes him a dangerous demagogue in his own right, with autocratic tendencies and ideological affinities with Putin or Orbán.

And it is here that Robin's argument goes most off the rails. In his understandable annoyance at certain forms of fear-mongering, and his equally understandable revulsion at a certain uniquely American refusal to acknowledge the deep failings of the U.S. political system, Robin has reproduced the worst error of self-congratulatory American exceptionalism: the idea that the U.S. can be treated as a case unto itself.

When Trump speaks, he acts. And when he speaks, he is heard not simply in Brooklyn or Chicago but throughout the entire U.S. and indeed throughout the entire world.

And while he is no Putin or Orbán or Erdogan, what he says echoes what they say, and it also gives credence to what they say.

In this respect, Trumpism is part of a broader pattern of right-wing populism that threatens both social justice and the minimal forms of liberal democracy we currently enjoy.

It is strange that Robin has so little concern for this.

Consider, by contrast, the recent words of Nancy Fraser:

Our political crisis, if that's what it is, is not just American, but global ... [involving] a dramatic weakening, if not a simple breakdown, of the authority of the established political classes and political parties. It is as if masses of people throughout the world had stopped believing in the reigning common sense that underpinned political domination for the last several decades ... Donald Trump is the poster child for this hegemonic crisis. But we cannot understand his ascent unless we clarify the conditions that enabled it. And that means identifying the worldview that Trumpism displaced and charting the process through which it unraveled.

Fraser reads Trump as a symptom of a systemic crisis of neoliberalism, one that can only be solved through a counter-hegemonic project of transforming capitalism. I agree with some of her diagnosis. I disagree with her prescription. But I fully agree that "Trump" is not merely an individual but a phenomenon that is linked to deep failings and broad challenges to normal liberal democratic politics in the U.S., throughout Europe, and indeed globally. And the phenomenon in question stands for revanchist, exclusionary, populist nationalism. Scores of serious commentators across the political spectrum have concerned themselves with this (one good overview is Takis Pappas, "The Specter Haunting Europe: Distinguishing Liberal Democracy's Challengers," in *Journal of Democracy*, October 2016). And yet Robin writes as if Trump is simply an uncouth version of Clinton or Bush or Obama. And he is not.

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Our world is not the world of 1914 or 1929 or 1933. Trump is not Hitler. We are not likely to see another Hitler.

But Trump is a distinctly American version of a broader global trend: the rise of authoritarian populist leaders who use new media platforms to attack already eroded forms of party politics and mass communication, attack independent judicial, civil service, and media institutions, and incite populist resentment as a way of building a base of political power.

Trump has thus far been less successful than many other authoritarian populist leaders, because of his own personal defects, because of the relative resilience of American institutions, and also because there has been very strong opposition to his efforts. This opposition has been energized by the very concern that Robin dismisses: that authoritarianism is a looming danger that must be contested.

I do not understand why it is so difficult for Robin to acknowledge this. Doing so does not mean that Trump is some kind of demiurgic evil. It does not exonerate the U.S. political system from its serious failings, including long-standing authoritarian tendencies linked to “the national security state.” It simply means that Trump represents something new and dangerous, an exacerbation of some of the worst tendencies of our politics, and that contesting him and what he represents is a necessary, though surely not sufficient, challenge for those who care about democracy.

Robin almost concedes as much, in passing, at the very end of his piece, when he declares: “There’s little doubt that Trump’s regime is a cause for concern, on multiple grounds, as I and many others have written. But we should not mistake mood for moment” (*the Guardian*, January 13, 2018). But this really won’t do. Because the force of his piece, like the December *Guardian* piece that he cites, is to diminish concern and indeed to disparage those who express it for being hyperbolists or, worse, smug

liberals. In this way, his piece is itself more about mood—the mood of knowing nostalgia—than it is about moment.

The 1974 Philip Roth quote with which Robin ends his piece is powerful, and I remember that time well. It is good to be reminded that before there was Trump there was Nixon, and that now is not the first time that serious people have worried about what Hannah Arendt then called *The Crisis of the Republic* (1972).

It is also good to wonder what our own intellectual world would be like if Arendt had not written the essays comprising that book, or if Roth had not written his piece, because some clever writer had convinced them that people had also worried about the crises of the republic in the 1930's, and there are always people who worry about such things, and maybe it's time for us to stop with all the worrying. The answer is clear: we would be intellectually impoverished. Because those interventions mattered at *their moment*. And now, four decades later, we occupy a different moment. In the U.S. we face not Nixon but Trump and what he represents. And in the world at large, we face a powerful tide of populist anti-liberalism that genuinely threatens many of the gains of the past.

As I noted, Robin closes his essay by quoting Roth from 1974. Roth still lives. And about a year ago he gave an interview to *the New Yorker* that appeared in print as “Roth on Trump.” In that interview Roth compared Trump unfavorably to Charles Lindbergh, the fascist who inspired his 2004 novel *The Plot Against America*. He went on: “It isn’t Trump as a character, a human type—the real-estate type, the callow and callous killer capitalist—that outstrips the imagination. It is Trump as president of the United States” (*The New Yorker*, January 30, 2017). Acknowledging that the U.S. in the age of Trump is not (yet) a dictatorship, he concludes: “As for how Trump threatens us, I would say that, like the anxious and fear-ridden families in my book, what is most terrifying is that he makes any and everything

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possible, including, of course, the nuclear catastrophe.”

It is ironic that Robin's piece came out in *the Guardian* the same day that the people of Hawaii were terrorized by a false alarm of a nuclear attack, one that had become all too credible by the repeated threats of Trump to start a nuclear war with North Korea.

We live in dangerous times. They are not the first dangerous times, and they won't be the last. But our dangers are our own. Trumpism is not Hitlerism. It is Trumpism. It threatens us. We ought to take the full measure of the threat, so that we can better argue and deliberate about how best to counter it.

I agree with Robin when he writes that “there's little doubt that Trump's regime is a cause for concern, on multiple grounds.” And this is why I *disagree* with him: serious discussion of Trump's authoritarianism is needed now more than ever.

publicseminar.org, January 16, 2018

How Democracies Die and How They Live

Over the past year a number of writers, myself included, have conducted an ongoing debate about the relationship between Trump, Trumpism, and authoritarianism.

The debate has shed some real light on an important topic: the state of and challenges to democracy in the U.S. Yet while some illumination has broken through the clouds of public confusion, there has also been much hot air, and a fair amount of smoke has also been blown. Serious political discussion of “Trump” has gotten caught up in pet peeves about “liberal” journalists and with efforts to retroactively vindicate positions taken in 2016 about the importance, or not, of supporting Clinton.

I have been one of those who has argued consistently that Trumpism presents a real danger of an authoritarian turn in U.S. politics. I have never argued that Trump has instituted an authoritarian regime; indeed, I have argued that even in Hungary and Poland, it is much too early to conclude that a “regime change” has been instituted. But I have argued that Trump exhibits a dictatorial style of governing; that he has mobilized profoundly authoritarian, and indeed racist and xenophobic, political energies, which have been unleashed in our public life in ways that are deeply disturbing and whose consequences cannot be predicted; that many of his policies and executive measures represent efforts to curtail forms of public accountability; and that in these ways he has affinities with, and even offers symbolic support to, authoritarians elsewhere who are already doing great harm to liberal democratic values.

I have never regarded myself as being on a particular “side” of a two-sided “debate.” I speak only for myself. But I have argued, and continue to argue, that Trumpism represents a serious threat to liberal democracy and poses a real danger of authoritarianism,

whether or not the ultimate result is something that might properly be labeled “an authoritarian regime.” And I believe that one of the most important ways of making sure that it does not result in an “authoritarian regime” is to relentlessly criticize its authoritarian dimensions and to consistently advocate on behalf of the broadly left liberal values whose advocacy is necessary both to defend liberal democracy and to deepen and extend it.

For these reasons I have welcomed the interventions of Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, in their op-ed pieces and interviews and in their newly-published book, *How Democracies Die* (2018). They are both important scholars of political science who have published serious scholarly articles and monographs on the comparative politics of democratization; and in their new book they apply the insights contained in this scholarship to current public concerns.

In my opinion their central thesis is correct and deeply important: “We should not take democracy for granted. There is nothing intrinsic in American culture that immunizes us against its breakdown” (*The New York Times*, January 27, 2018). Furthermore, it is to their great credit that they consider our current situation in a broader context of “crises of democracy,” delineating some general political dynamics of “democratic breakdown” that are not unique to the U.S. and that should concern us: the central role of political parties as organizations, and the dynamics of partisan competition, which can either reinforce or undermine ongoing liberal democratic governance; the role of “informal norms” of partisanship, bureaucratic discretion, and minimal forms of public transparency and accountability in the ongoing operations of liberal democratic governance; and the ways that populist mobilization can sometimes engender political overreach or political immobilism, in either case weakening the legitimacy of liberal democracy among mass publics and among relevant elites.

In all of these ways, Levitsky and Ziblatt draw upon a substantial body of scholarship shaped by the seminal work of Juan Linz and Al Stepan on *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (1978), and they make an important contribution to public

discourse by developing this perspective in a publicly accessible and relevant way.

At the same time, their perspective on democracy is hardly the only perspective even within the field of comparative politics, much less the broader domain of “democratic theory.”

And while I share their political commitment to the defense of liberal democracy, I believe that their way of thinking about “democratic breakdown” is too functionalist and, strangely for a book so rich in comparative historical analysis, too ahistorical. As a result, they proceed from an understanding of liberal democracy that is too uncritical of its serious and *chronic* normative deficiencies and legitimacy problems, and insufficiently attuned to the centrality of contentious politics to the entire history of democratization. And their defense centers much too heavily on problems of so-called “norm erosion” and on the importance of what can only be described as “normative order,” an idea that goes back to the fifties “functionalism” of Talcott Parsons and to the “structural functionalism” of the school of comparative politics initiated by the late Gabriel Almond.

And so, while there is much about their account of “how democracies die” that I embrace, I believe that they say too little about *how democracies live*.

In what follows I will expand on this, and also comment on a recent piece by Corey Robin, with the purpose of clarifying some of what is at stake in the debate about “authoritarianism,” and suggesting that in some ways there is more common ground among the debaters than might appear.

HOW DEMOCRACIES DIE AND HOW THEY LIVE

HISTORY

Levitsky and Ziblatt furnish compelling examples of how the lack of “self-restraint”—what is sometimes referred to as “political extremism”—has undermined constitutional order, sometimes to the point of violence. But the force of these examples only makes sense on the assumption that the “breakdown” they describe should be seen as a “democratic breakdown.” And in many cases this assumption is questionable. Because we are concerned here about American democracy, I will briefly focus on three important moments in the history of U.S. democracy.

The first is the broad period between roughly 1840 and 1876 during which the U.S. was riven by three interrelated waves of contention centering on the question of slavery and racial inequality more generally: the abolitionist movement, the Civil War, and the period of Reconstruction and especially that period known as “Black Reconstruction.”

Levitsky and Ziblatt offer this as a cautionary tale of “norm erosion”:

Could it happen here? It already has. During the 1850s, polarization over slavery undermined America’s democratic norms. Southern Democrats viewed the antislavery position of the emerging Republican Party as an existential threat. They assailed Republicans as ‘traitors to the Constitution’ and vowed to ‘never permit this federal government to pass into the traitorous hands of the black Republican Party.’ Partisan violence pervaded Congress. Joanne Freeman, a historian at Yale, counted more than 100 incidents of violence (including fistfights, canings and the pulling of knives and pistols) on the floor of Congress between 1830 and 1860. Before long, the republic would be broken—and Americans would be killing one another in the hundreds of thousands.

To be clear: I wholeheartedly embrace the idea that current struggles about democratization ought to be non-violent whenever possible, and that in liberal democracies such as the U.S., only non-violent struggles can be normatively justified.

But in a way, this begs the question: when do we actually have a liberal democracy? Levitsky and Ziblatt claim that the bitter struggles surrounding slavery “undermined democratic norms.” And it is surely true that they undermined “constitutional order.” But it is equally true that this undermining was done in the very name of democratic norms that were violently violated by the so-called “peculiar institution” of black chattel slavery. As a matter of rhetoric, abolitionist agitation was justified on the basis of democratic and republican ideals, “Black Jacobin” ideas, and radical appeals to the spirit of the Declaration of Independence, none more rousing than Frederick Douglass’s 1852 “Fourth of July Oration.”

What Levitsky and Ziblatt describe as “norm erosion” was in fact *struggle for democratization* in the name of democratic norms that were in tension with the existing constitutional order (much ink has been spilled on the reasons why for most abolitionists the Declaration was a better source of argumentation than the Constitution; obviously Lincoln, not an abolitionist, appealed to both).

Their second example is court packing. And they are surely correct, that at many moments in history, and today in places like Hungary, Poland, and Turkey, authoritarian leaders have sought to cement their power by constraining judicial autonomy and filling the courts with political supporters who are partisans and not jurists committed to the rule of law. At the same time, whether or not judicial autonomy advances the cause of democracy depends in part on how truly “autonomous” is the judiciary, and how democratic is the political system in question.

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These are *complicated* questions. FDR's "court-packing scheme" during the New Deal is a case in point. As a matter of procedural democracy, the effort arguably employed some questionable means. But in point of fact, before the New Deal, in many ways procedural democracy in the U.S. was severely undermined by a legal system, and especially a Supreme Court, that regarded private property as in many ways inviolable, and was hostile to social democratic reform, even when reform was supported by majorities. FDR's "court packing," which failed, was clearly part of a broader process of democratizing the American state, making it more responsive to the articulated demands for social justice of groups that had for too long been politically marginalized. This is why Bruce Ackerman, in *We The People* (1991), regards the New Deal, like Reconstruction before it and the civil rights movement after it, as a kind of constitutional "revolution."

My point here is not to advocate for "court packing" schemes. It is to insist that how we evaluate efforts to politicize or reform judicial institutions must take into account the broader function of these institutions and the broader context in which they are being politicized, and whether and how such efforts serve the value of extending and deepening liberal democratic values, or repressing liberal democratic values.

And here it is worth briefly considering a third example of a lack of "forbearance" that could be considered a form of "norm erosion" by Levitsky and Ziblatt: the strategies and tactics of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience practiced by the civil rights movement in the fifties and sixties. (To be very clear: I am not claiming that Levitsky and Ziblatt would in any way disparage this movement, and I am confident they will agree with everything I will now say; I am simply claiming that the episode poses problems for their conception of "norm erosion.") It is convenient for us to remember this moment in U.S. history

as a moment of civility. But in fact, what defined that moment above all was a very profound contest over the very meaning of civility, a contest in which bodies were broken and incarcerated and lives were sometimes taken. It is often forgotten, for example, that Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" was written in response to an open letter criticizing him that was written by eight Alabama clergymen who were the "white moderates" against whom King (sharply yet moderately) wrote, and that this letter articulated what was the common sense of the moment: that King was an "extremist" and a disruptor, and that if he really cared about democracy, he would be patient, and pursue normal political means of advocacy, and *forbear*. King refused. He embraced the idea that he was an "agitator for love." It is well known that as events unfolded, he became increasingly radical, as did other important leaders associated with SCLC and SNCC. It is also well known that on occasion he very explicitly and publicly acknowledged that much of his credibility as a leader derived from the fact that "out there" in the streets were others—most notably Malcolm—more angry, and less interested in negotiation, than he.

All of this was very messy, and very contentious. From the vantage point of the present, we can look back on this as a process of political inclusion and democratization that enhanced democratic norms. But at the time, the effort was widely regarded, especially by mainstream journalists and political elites, as "extremism," "radicalism," and disregard for democratic norms.

The history of American democracy, like the history of democracy everywhere, is a history of contestation of political authority, and of the democratization of this authority, by legal changes that are powered by social movements and by forms of contentious politics that indeed at certain moments in our history have either pressed the limits of non-violence or even exceeded

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those limits, typically in response to the violence of the state.

All of this risks being lost in Levitsky and Ziblatt's focus on "norm erosion."

NORMATIVITY

While I was in the middle of writing this piece, Robin's fine post "Democracy is Norm Erosion" (*Corey Robin*, January 28, 2018) came across my desk. I have been debating with Robin about the "authoritarianism" question for some time, and I was pleased to see his post, and that it made many of the same arguments that I was developing. This did not surprise me. And so, to be clear: in his post, which came out a day before mine, Robin makes a good argument that is very similar to the argument outlined above. At the same time, there is a real difference between us, and his critique of Levitsky and Ziblatt is the perfect opportunity to clarify and reflect on this difference.

The upshot of Robin's reading of episodes such as the ones noted above is that, contra Levitsky and Ziblatt, it is not "norm erosion," but in some sense conventional norms themselves, that inhibit democracy. Thus his title: "democracy is norm erosion." And I agree, to a point: norm erosion is central to democracy. But so is normativity, by which I mean both normative argumentation and the codification of norms in laws and institutions, through democratic processes that are at the same time always open to contestation and political revision.

Robin's position is a very respectable one. Indeed, in political theory, it is most closely associated with the "radical democratic" theorizing of Sheldon Wolin, who famously, and brilliantly, argued that both the institutions of liberal democratic states and the very form of constitutionalism itself represent limits on the civic energies that truly "constitute" democracy.

These are very complicated issues of normative political theory,

and it is impossible for me to do them justice here (pun intended?).

But I think it is fair to say that Levitsky and Ziblatt subscribe to what is basically a “static” view of liberal democracy most closely associated with the “political liberalism” of the late liberal theorist John Rawls. Rawls, on at least one reading (there are many readings, in part because Rawls kept on modifying his claims), believed that all legitimate contestation in a liberal democracy must be consistent with certain forms of argumentation and procedure that he called “public reason.” Like Levitsky and Ziblatt, he believed that the erosion of these norms could be fatal to liberal democracy. To simplify, to believe this is to subscribe to a broadly deliberative conception of democracy and to believe that it is through the orderly forms of law and processes associated with “normal politics,” through electoral competition and parliamentary debate and legislation, that democracy is best sustained. (In recent years a very interesting argument has unfolded about how this conception does and does not support practices of “civil disobedience” and practices of “disobedience” more generally.)

But there are two fundamental problems with this general “Rawlsian” view.

One is empirical: “really existing democracies” are profoundly flawed political systems even from the perspective of their own liberal democratic legitimation. These defects and flaws are indeed the focus of an entire literature in the comparative politics of democracy (“democracy studies”) sometimes referred to as “the quality of democracy.” Levitsky and Ziblatt know this literature well, and indeed have contributed to it. If we take this literature seriously, then we must acknowledge that the “norm erosions” currently being enacted by right-wing authoritarian populists such as Trump are fueled by serious weaknesses of normal liberal democratic politics—oligarchic parties

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and “hollowed out” forms of partisan competition; deficits of participation and trust; corporate media institutions; serious economic inequalities and insecurities; deep reservoirs of civic resentment, etc.—and that however objectionable the rhetoric, mobilizations, or policies of these authoritarian populists, it is hard to regard these in any simple sense as the “erosion of stable norms” rather than as the rejection of very complex and contentious norms that are in many ways undermined by the very practices these norms support.

The second is normative: democracy always has been and always will be a deeply and essentially contested idea, and at best, it only imperfectly maps onto the institutions of the liberal democratic nation state. This is a real problem. And it is why so much contemporary contention—including much right-wing mobilization but also much left-wing populist mobilization—is enacted in the very name of “democracy,” broadly understood.

This is why Robin is correct to blanch at a simple reassertion of the value of liberal democracy, and to insist that democracy is norm erosion. Because it is.

But if it is only that, then it is not simply in Wolin’s terms “fugitive,” but also dangerous and indeed morally objectionable.

“Democracy” unmoored to certain moral principles—human rights, civic equality, the importance of legal and political institutions and forms of representation, and even, in combination with all else, the importance of certain norms of self-limitation or forbearance—easily becomes thuggishness or tyranny, whether in the name of the majority or not. And this is why normative principles are as important to modern democratic politics as are challenges to these norms.

Within normative political theory, a version of what I am saying has been most systematically defended by Jürgen Habermas in his now classic *Between Facts and Norms* (1992). In

a different vein, a similar argument can be found in some of the writings of Etienne Balibar on the theme of “equaliberty.” There is much more to be said about these issues, and much serious debate to be had. I make no pretense to “settling” anything here.

But from my perspective both Robin, and Levitsky and Ziblatt are half-right.

Robin is right that “norm erosion,” i.e., normative challenge, contention and excess, is essential to the ongoing contentious politics of democracy. But in his commendable desire to advance this position against simplistic and sometimes even self-congratulatory appeals to “norms,” he perhaps goes too far in the other direction, devoting too much rhetorical energy to the “debunking” of liberal democratic moralism, and insufficient attention to the real value of, and dangers to, existing liberal democratic norms and procedures, which are very flawed but also very much in need of defending in the face of very bad right-wing politics—as I think he actually acknowledges, though this sometimes is lost in the critique of liberal moralism.

And Levitsky and Ziblatt are right that the norms of really existing liberal democracy are important achievements, that they are currently being threatened by right-wing authoritarians such as Trump, and that this ought to be opposed. If we do not understand these norms and defend them, we are in danger of losing them, to our peril. But in their commendable desire to oppose Trumpism, they perhaps go too far in valorizing normative consensus at the expense of normative dissensus, and of a more critical analysis of the serious failings of really existing democracies, which make them vulnerable to populist-democratic critiques, and which need to be addressed if liberal democracy is to be defended.

In short, we need to both defend and to extend liberal democracy.

HOW DEMOCRACIES DIE AND HOW THEY LIVE

And this involves a complex interplay of normative contestation and normative construction; efforts to reform the institutions of “normal politics” such as parties and campaign finance and electoral systems, etc., and efforts through social movements and forms of protest to mobilize on behalf of democratic equality beyond the confines of normal politics.

Trumpism, and right-wing populism more generally, presents a real danger of “de-democratization,” and authoritarianism, that must be understood and contested.

But Trumpism thrives in a soil of political alienation. Economic and social inequality and resentment, marking the limits of existing liberal democracy, needs to be politically addressed, and contested, if Trumpism is to be countered.

We need normative defenses of liberal democratic institutions and of a certain kind of political “normality.”

We also need insistent demands for recognition, justice, and equality, and we ought to be prepared for such demands to sometimes exceed the institutions and even the norms of ordinary liberal democratic politics.

Such a politics of defending and extending liberal democracy, over time and space, will necessarily be fractious and uncertain (a theme developed in the important recent writing of William Connolly). There will never be a “moment” in which such a politics is ever “successful.” As Hannah Arendt once said in a different context, in politics the only final solution is death. At the same time, those of us who care about democracy will face choices. Elections are moments of choice. They are hardly the only or even the most important moments. But they can be very consequential. Building alternative institutions, over time, will for some loom very large. For others, working within the existing party system will be most important. Some may actually believe that voting for Democratic candidates in national elections

advances a real agenda for invigorating democracy. Some may vote for Democratic candidates as a form of lesser evilism—and anyone who has studied the history of the twentieth century should be wary of disparaging the desire to lessen evil (the most brilliant political theorist to reflect on such things was the late Judith Shklar). Some will refuse this choice. Many of us will sometimes do one thing, and sometimes another. It is possible to do more than one thing at a time. It is also possible to adjust one's tactics depending on the circumstance, or even to change one's mind. There are no formulae here.

But I submit that the so-called “debate” between many of us about whether or not Trumpism is “authoritarian” could benefit from a momentary step back to consider what is and what is not at stake in our differences. Then we can continue to discuss and to debate.

I believe that most of us share some common concerns about how democracy dies and how it lives.

And I suspect that for most of us, our theoretical interest in these questions is linked to our practical, normative, and ethical commitments to defend, and to improve, the quality of the very flawed liberal democracy in which we currently live. Perhaps as we continue to discuss which theoretical concepts best capture what is going on and what we are doing, we might also discuss what forms of praxis follow from our conceptualizations, and how they contribute to the practical challenges of keeping democracy alive, kicking, and growing.

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Coda: Trumpism No, Liberal Democracy Yes

Being *Against Trump* is rhetorically easy.

Indeed, it was none other than the conservative journal *National Review* that declared itself “Against Trump” by emblazoning these words on the cover of its January 22, 2016 issue, and explaining in an editorial that “Donald Trump is a menace to American conservatism who would take the work of generations and trample it underfoot in behalf of a populism as heedless and crude as the Donald himself.” Trump is a human miscreant and political barbarian, and while the leadership of the Republican Party has proven itself astonishingly submissive to him, a number of prominent Republicans, both conservative and neoconservative, have been revolted by his recklessness and for some by his obvious disregard for rudimentary features of constitutional democracy.

Perhaps the most consistent and principled of these “Never Trumpers” has been David Frum, the former speechwriter for George W. Bush, who has written regularly in *the Atlantic* about the danger Trump poses to democracy, and whose recent book, *Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic*, strongly makes this case. Frum is thoughtful and self-reflective; he has long been critical of the far-right drift of the Republican Party, with its birtherism and demonization of political opponents and refusal to do anything constructive at all by way of actual governance; and his book is quite forthright about some of the ways that Trump’s ascendancy has had both Republican “enablers” and “pre-existing conditions” that included growing plutocracy and long-standing Republican efforts to use statehouse politics to disenfranchise core Democratic constituencies. Frum is a bright man of integrity, and like Max Boot, Bret Stephens, Charlie Sykes, and many of MSNBC’s regular commentators (especially Joe

Scarborough, Nicolle Wallace, and Steve Schmidt), he has of late consistently called out both Trump and his Republican enablers for their “corruption of the American Republic.”

I regard such people as “co-belligerents” and in a way even “allies” in the struggle against Trumpism and its authoritarian tendencies, for they are offering important defenses of principles of constitutional democracy that are in dire need of defense, principles that I share. But in a broader sense they are also political adversaries—though not “enemies”—in the ongoing effort to advance a left liberal politics in the U.S. For while they are “against Trump,” and indeed sincere in their basic commitment to constitutional democracy, they do not go very far in their critique of Trumpism, laying too much responsibility at the feet of Trump himself, and not enough at the feet of both parties, and of the political-economic system both parties have helped to co-create. This is perhaps another way of articulating the sentiment whose evolution is traced in this very book: that I come to my critique of Trump not as a disenchanted conservative who had in fact hoped that some other Republican—maybe Jeb Bush, maybe Marco Rubio, maybe even Ted Cruz—would win the presidency; nor as a regular Democrat who enthused about Hillary or Barack before her or Bill before him; but as an academic and intellectual who has spent his entire adult life writing for left liberal and democratic socialist publications, and who was sufficiently skeptical of national electoral politics to support Bernie Sanders only lukewarmly, and who became a strong supporter of Hillary in the general election because I admired some of her accomplishments, but mainly because I really do believe that there are many moments in life when we have only two choices, and at such moments “lesser evilism” is the only sensible alternative.

My opposition to Trumpism, then, is linked to beliefs and

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commitments that place me “left of center” in conventional terms, and that make me blanch at those aspects of an “easier” kind of “Never Trumpism” that seem to inoculate the American political system from serious criticism. Or, to put this in other terms, when Frum speaks of “the corruption of the American Republic,” I need to insist that this very phrase, and the venerable Roman thinkers and neoclassical D.C. architecture that it evokes, masks as much as it describes. For the U.S. has never really been a “republic” in that civic humanist sense. Originating as a federalist republic based upon slavery, patriarchy, and an imperious and perhaps genocidal sense of “manifest destiny,” it is a continental nation-state and a global power whose political system integrates liberalism and mass democracy in a highly imperfect way. The U.S., then, is a *liberal democracy* that has always suffered from “corruptions” of its most noble ideals; that has only become what it is through waves of arduous struggle against injustice; and whose “story” is hardly at an end. The promise of liberal democracy is far from having been fulfilled, and Trump is not simply a regression or an aberration but a *symptom* of the need for further efforts to deepen liberal democracy so as to bring its promise of egalitarian citizenship closer to realization. I am not against approaches to American history that center on the “unfolding” of freedom, such as Eric Foner’s *The Story of American Freedom* (1994) or Bruce Ackerman’s *We the People* (1991). Nor am I against a form of civic nationalism centered on the theme of egalitarian citizenship, as for example has been advocated by Yascha Mounk in his new book, *The People Vs. Democracy* (2018). But I am against efforts to whitewash U.S. history, or obscure some of its unseemly episodes or tragic conjunctions or downright failures. This book is about being Against Trump. Because Trump is the president now, and it is important to be against him now. But I am against Trump because I am for a deepened and robust liberal democracy that

does much more than the one we have to realize the ideals of egalitarian citizenship. And I am mindful of the important role of contentious politics, in all of its messiness and sometimes discomfort, in realizing these ideals.

In what follows I will expand on this theme in the form of a set of eleven theses, seeking to sharpen and extend the core claims developed in the essays above, and to clarify the left liberal character of my strong opposition to Trump and to Trumpism.

THESIS 1: WE FACE A GENERAL CRISIS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The current crisis of liberal democracy is deep, and it is general, though it is unfolding differently, with different dynamics, temporalities, and dangers, in different places. In each country it has a distinct history, but there is also a more general history, related to the breakdown of the post-World War II world order, which, perhaps ironically, is coterminous with the so-called “third wave” of democratization that began in the mid-seventies. For at the very moment at which liberal democratic “breakthroughs” occurred in Southern Europe and Latin America, anticipating similar breakthroughs in Eastern Europe a decade later, the liberal democracies of Western Europe and North America began to experience generalized crises of “governability.” Whether described in terms of “system overload,” “rights revolution,” “democratic excess,” “legitimation crisis,” or “fiscal crisis of the state,” liberal democratic regimes, many only recently consolidated in the aftermath of World War II, were beset by serious and unmanageable problems (in 1976 Claus Offe published a famous essay on “the crisis of crisis management”) that severely tested party systems and indeed generated increasing political polarization. From that point forward,

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through the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and the momentary enthusiasm about an “end of history” that never came, through the global financial crisis of 2008, to the current moment, liberal democratic states have been under serious stress. These limits of liberal democracy were indeed the subject of my 1998 book *Democracy in Dark Times*. Recent changes in the geopolitical situation—the rise of China and Russia, the crisis of the EU and of Europe, etc.—have only exacerbated this stress, a point made beautifully by Edward Luce in his 2017 book, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*. This is an institutional crisis that cannot be laid at the feet of a particular malevolent leader or regime or foreign policy or hacked email account.

THESIS 2: THIS CRISIS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY HAS NO SINGLE CAUSE OR SIMPLE SOLUTION

This crisis of liberal democracy is a complex, multi-faceted crisis, involving growing economic inequality and social insecurity under the conditions of fiscal crisis and policy austerity; cultural divisions and identity struggles, related to questions of gender, sexuality, race, and immigration policy; and the hollowing out of political parties by the decline of interest-based politics, including labor politics, the development of new digital media, and the breakdown of conventional forms of social capital and intermediation that long sustained a level of “social trust” that can be regarded as a support for liberal democracy. There is no simple explanation of this crisis, and there surely is no simple “solution” to it.

THESIS 3: TRUMPISM IS RIGHT-WING POPULISM, AMERICAN-STYLE

Trumpism is the American variant of the more general rise of

right-wing populist authoritarianism, associated with a range of leaders who are neither American nor Trump, including Recep Erdoğan in Turkey, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Miloš Zeman in the Czech Republic, Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, and Marine Le Pen in France. These leaders, and the organizations they lead, participate in electoral politics in order to advance a political agenda that is hostile to core features of liberal democracy: ethnic and political pluralism; independent press and media institutions; professional bureaucracy; and civic equality more generally. They employ an often apocalyptic rhetoric of ethnic and national violation and humiliation that often draws on masculinist themes, and they promise national renovation and the restoration of the “sovereignty of the nation.” Blaming “outsiders,” restricting immigration, closing borders and building walls, and cracking down on “dangerous elements” (what Trump calls “bad hombres”) are central to this effort. In short, they represent a vision of illiberal democracy. They claim to speak for popular empowerment, though they in fact seek power through the institutions of mass democracy in order to institute measures that disenfranchise many constituencies and that limit the possibility of their power ever being contested. In these ways Trump is hardly unique. But he is particularly troubling to Americans because he is our president and he represents right-wing populism, American-style. At the same time, his power is of grave concern far beyond the borders of the United States, because he is the leader of the most powerful country in the world, and what he does and says matters the world over. For it frightens many people, and also gives aid and comfort to right-wingers and xenophobes here and elsewhere. The mobilizing and energizing of a far-right base is a substantial and dangerous political achievement, even if many of Trump’s most extreme policy proposals have been blocked thus far—and to the extent that they have been blocked,

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the resistance of those who consider Trump dangerous is surely the main reason why. And this toxic populism is likely to far outlast Trump himself.

THESIS 4: TRUMP IS AN AWFUL HUMAN BEING ACCENTUATES HIS REAL DANGER

Trump is also a distinctly narcissistic, cruel, malevolent, and misanthropic individual, whose entire personal history has fed his extraordinary arrogance and narcissism. This makes him particularly off-putting and offensive to a great many people, including me. It is true that we ought to distinguish between personal probity and civic virtue; that many heroes of the struggle for freedom have had private lives that were “questionable” or worse; that in order to rise to the level of chief executive of any country, one must have made many morally compromising choices; and that many American presidents have been in one way or another miserable human beings. It is also true that Trump is a particularly miserable human being, and his sociopathic tendencies are truly unnerving and disturbing, especially because they are so regularly on public display, and through his awful performances he is able to appeal to so many millions of citizens through his Twitter feed. It may well be the case that his deplorable personal characteristics also limit his ability to function as a chief executive and as a leader of his party, and that they undermine aspects of his frightening political agenda. But the jury is still out on this. At the same time, it is genuinely disturbing that this sociopath is in possession of so much discretionary executive power, including the power to make war; that he is able to mobilize millions of people through the public enactments, rhetorical and actual, of his cruel disposition; and that his cruelty actually has the widespread appeal that it does.

THESIS 5: TRUMP IS NOT A “DISTRACTION” FROM “DEEPER” ISSUES. HIS HOSTILITY TOWARD LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IS THE ISSUE.

Trump’s awful public persona is one thing, it could be argued, but however distasteful, isn’t it naïve to focus on these matters of appearance while ignoring the deep injustices that make Trump possible? I have two responses to this. One is that I am not ignoring the injustices. Period. And the suggestion that I (and others writing in this vein) are doing so is simply a cheap debating point. The second is this: perhaps if one thinks that liberal democracy is a mere charade of self-governance, or a form of “parliamentary cretinism” (the term was Lenin’s), then Trump’s “bad manners” might seem relatively unimportant, and one might even experience some *schadenfreude* at the way he scandalizes liberals and their notions of civic virtue. Épater la bourgeoisie and all that. But if you are even slightly troubled by Trump’s incivilities—and my Facebook feed indicates that many friends on the left who decry “liberal tyrannophobia” are pretty upset by Trump—then it is perhaps because you do not think that liberal democracy is pure bullshit after all. As someone who has long been a critic of the hypocrisies of liberalism, who grew up in a working-class family and whose teaching at a public university in Indiana has centered on critique for the past thirty years, I am quite well aware of the ways in which the political system warrants reproach. At the same time, liberal democratic citizenship matters, because it was achieved on the backs of previous generations who fought and sacrificed and sometimes died for it, and because it affords real opportunities to freely associate, and to publish, and to mobilize fellow citizens in favor of some political programs and against others. I know it matters

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as a student of history. I also know it matters because I am lucky to count among my friends many amazing people who lived under communism in Eastern Europe, and who experienced the absence of these civic opportunities, and who suffered whenever they sought to claim them, and I have listened to these people and their stories. And so for me, as for many, it is genuinely disturbing, and offensive to the meaning of this citizenship, in spite of its limits, that long-standing norms and constitutional principles are being so routinely and blatantly and contemptuously flouted by the Trump White House. In his classic *Leviathan* (1651), Thomas Hobbes explains that in considering the importance of “manners,” he means not “decency of behavior; as how one man should salute another, or how a man should wash his mouth, or pick his teeth before company, and such other points of the Small Morals; but those qualities of mankind that concern their living together in Peace, and Unity.” And Trumpism surely disturbs the “peace.” Yet it does more. Hobbes had a very low view of politics. But a liberal democracy involves real forms of normative legitimacy that exceed mere civil peace. And Trump despoils these norms on a daily basis. By regularly using his Twitter feed to approximate “picking his teeth before company,” and much worse, he debases public life and makes a mockery of constitutional democracy. That is bad, for us, and for our children. Indeed, the whole world is watching. And what they are seeing reflects poorly on us all.

THESIS 6: THAT TRUMP BECAME PRESIDENT UNDER VERY QUESTIONABLE CIRCUMSTANCES IS NOT WHAT IS MOST TROUBLING ABOUT HIS PRESIDENCY. BUT IT IS TROUBLING NONETHELESS.

Trump’s presidency is also particularly galling because there are real and legitimate questions about whether his election was legitimate. The investigation of Special Counsel Robert Mueller

is not a “hoax”; it is obvious to everyone who is not named Glenn Greenwald or Stephen F. Cohen that the Russian government has engaged in a long-standing campaign of “cyber warfare”—which is serious, but not “war” as conventionally understood; more in a second—and that this campaign involved efforts to disrupt the 2016 election, to undermine the Clinton candidacy, and even to aid the Trump candidacy. It is indeed possible that there were connections between the Trump campaign and Russian agents that might rise to the level of a legal case of “conspiracy” (the Mueller investigation seems headed toward this case, but at the time of this writing it is too soon to know). It is certain that there were interfaces between many high-level representatives of the Trump campaign—Donald Jr., Jared Kushner, Paul Manafort, Michael Flynn, Carter Page etc.—and Russian agents, whatever legal culpability is ultimately attached to these connections. The extent of these connections is unprecedented in the history of U.S. presidential elections. The link between these connections and the financial investments and liabilities of the president and those closest to him—this too is unprecedented. The solicitude of Trump for Putin is also unprecedented. What does this all mean? We do not yet know all we wish to know. But there is good reason to be suspicious. And it is very possible that these things turned a very close election to Trump. The fact that Trump won three million fewer popular votes adds to this suspicion. The fact that he and everyone around him has consistently lied about every aspect of this does too.

THESIS 7: THE MUELLER INVESTIGATION IS IMPORTANT IN A LEGAL AND IN AN ELECTORAL-POLITICAL SENSE. IT IS NOT A DISTRACTION, IT IS AN ENACTMENT OF IMPORTANT LEGAL AND POLITICAL CHECKS ON THE PRESIDENT AND IT IS A CHALLENGE TO HIS

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REPUBLICAN ENABLERS.

In this sense “Russian meddling” is a real issue. But for a range of practical reasons, barring some as yet undisclosed revelation, it is likely impossible to say that it “turned” the election or decisively invalidated it. The point of the Mueller investigation is primarily criminal justice. And while Trump’s associates might be criminally liable, Trump himself will not be so liable while remaining in office. If impeachable offenses have been committed, this will prove politically important. It might even lead to an impeachment, and perhaps even a conviction. But however that plays out, it will not change the fact that the Republicans won the 2016 election and can now claim in a juridical sense to legitimately control the presidency and both houses of Congress. The “Russia” scandal cannot change this. At the same time, it might well influence how the Republicans do in the 2018 and 2020 elections, and this matters, in the same way that Watergate mattered in 1974 and 1976. For this reason, those on the left who disparage the investigation are wrong. The investigation is an enactment of due process and constitutional checks and balances. It is also a moment in the broader processes of democratic political contestation and political accountability. And to the extent that it limits and hinders the functioning of an administration whose legitimacy deserves to be questioned, both because of how it came into office and because of what it seeks to do, this is a good thing.

THESIS 8: RUSSIAN CYBER-ATTACKS OUGHT TO BE OPPOSED, BUT LEGITIMATE ATTENTION TO NATIONAL SECURITY SHOULD NOT LEAD US TO EXAGGERATE THE DANGER FROM RUSSIA OR TO INTERPRET TRUMPISM AS SOME KIND OF RUSSIAN MALWARE.

At the same time, there has been a tendency among some

conservatives and some liberals to exaggerate the importance of the Russian meddling and the unique and mortal danger that it poses to American democracy. We have not yet approached the dimensions of a “Red Scare.” But in my opinion there has sometimes been too much hyperbole about “Russia,” linked to a simplistic narrative of patriotic defense against the Russians, as if were it not for the Russians, we could rest easy in our democratic bona fides. A piece in the *Atlantic* by David Frum, for example, bears the headline “America Is Under Attack and the President Doesn’t Care.” But the notion that we are under “Russian attack” and that the most egregious thing about Trump is that he refuses to “defend” us is now widespread, and liberal MSNBC commentators such as Joy Reid and especially Rachel Maddow have made this a central talking point. To be clear: as I have already indicated, I do believe that there are Russian “cyberattacks,” and I also believe that Trump has been disturbingly and suspiciously complacent about them.

But the relentless focus on this does come at a price, and to this extent Jackson Lears is correct to call attention to “What We Don’t Talk About When We Talk About Russian Hacking” (*London Review of Books*, January 4, 2018). For Trump is not a form of Russian “malware” unleashed on the U.S.; he is Made in America, whatever his links to Putin. And while cyberwarfare and cybersecurity are essential features of our brave new world, and while they do demand serious attention, it does no good to speak of Russian hacking as if it were the equivalent of Pearl Harbor or even the 9/11 attacks. If we have learned anything from the debacles that accompanied George W. Bush’s announced “War on Terror,” it should be that the rhetorical abuses of talk about war do no good for democracy. In the same way, it does no good to transform real global political challenges into metaphysical antagonisms. Russia and China are both

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serious geopolitical rivals. And both are authoritarian regimes whose domestic politics and ideological commitments abroad make them enemies of human rights and challengers to a loosely “liberal” world order worth defending. But it is not as if the U.S. is “innocent” in world affairs. Nor is it as if we are in a life and death struggle to “make the world safe for democracy.” The real dangers need to be taken seriously. But the rhetoric of “attack” and “national defense” needs to be toned down. For we are in the domain of geopolitics, not a new clash of civilizations.

THESIS 9: WHAT IS MOST TROUBLING ABOUT THE RUSSIAN STATE’S CURRENT ROLE IN WORLD POLITICS IS THAT IT SEEKS TO UNDERMINE LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND TO SUPPORT ITS AUTHORITARIAN CHALLENGERS

That said, while a new “liberal hawkism” towards Russia ought to be avoided, the easy recourse to a kind of Kissingerian “realism” by those, such as Glenn Greenwald at *the Intercept* and Stephen F. Cohen and some others at *the Nation*, who prefer to treat Eastern Europe as a Russian sphere of influence (while simultaneously reminding us ad infinitum how bad it was when the U.S. treated Central America in this way), also ought to be avoided. For values are at stake here, even in the grayness of things. Russia under Putin is an authoritarian regime even if it is neither totalitarian nor evil incarnate. And Russia is a “bad actor” in geopolitics, in Ukraine and other parts of Caucasus; further west in Europe, where it supports authoritarian populist parties and leaders; and in the Middle East, where it supports what is perhaps the most brutal regime currently in existence, Bashar al-Assad’s Syria.

This does not make the U.S. a “good actor.” The U.S. is a liberal democratic state that remains a “superpower” on the world stage, even if it increasingly behaves like a fading power that faces real

competitors (Russia and China) in a world that eludes the grasp it once claimed. The U.S. does not “stand for” good in the world, and in many times and places it has done wrong. Sometimes very wrong. At the same time, the U.S. does, or at least did before Trump, “stand for” an imperfect liberal world order centered, especially since the eighties, on support for the development of imperfect liberal democratic nation-states. There is a difference between Russian military occupation and political annexation of the Crimea, and U.S. support for an independent Ukraine. There is a difference between Russian use of covert financing and cyberwarfare to promote the rise of authoritarian populist leaders and parties who are hostile to “Europe” and express support for Putinist ideology, and U.S. forms of “democracy promotion” that aid independent civil society institutions and human rights and press freedom monitors in emerging or fragile liberal democracies. From the vantage point of a certain conception of “national sovereignty,” both can be considered cases of “foreign meddling” or “interference.” And it is true that both are cases of a state—which is neither a God nor a virtuous individual—using foreign policy tools to influence what is going on in other countries and to advance its own foreign policy. At the same time, both the tools employed, and the foreign policy goals, are very different. In the one case illiberal means are employed in the service of illiberal ends, while in the other mostly liberal means are employed in the service of mostly liberal ends.

Conservative journalist Christopher Caldwell explained this well in a February 2017 speech that is worth quoting at length:

Vladimir Putin is a powerful ideological symbol and a highly effective ideological litmus test. He is a hero to populist conservatives around the world and anathema to progressives ... Our globalist leaders may have deprecated sovereignty

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since the end of the Cold War, but that does not mean it has ceased for an instant to be the primary subject of politics Vladimir Vladimirovich is not the president of a feminist NGO. He is not a transgender-rights activist. He is not an ombudsman appointed by the United Nations to make and deliver slideshows about green energy. He is the elected leader of Russia—a rugged, relatively poor, militarily powerful country that in recent years has been frequently humiliated, robbed, and misled. His job has been to protect his country’s prerogatives and its sovereignty in an international system that seeks to erode sovereignty in general and views Russia’s sovereignty in particular as a threat . . . By American standards, Putin’s respect for the democratic process has been fitful at best. He has cracked down on peaceful demonstrations . . . Yet if we were to use traditional measures for understanding leaders, which involve the defense of borders and national flourishing, Putin would count as the pre-eminent statesman of our time . . . Why are American intellectuals such ideologues when they talk about the “international system”? Probably because American intellectuals devised that system, and because they assume there can never be legitimate historic reasons why a politician would arise in opposition to it. They denied such reasons for the rise of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. They do the same with Donald Trump. And they have done it with Putin. They assume he rose out of the KGB with the sole purpose of embodying an evil for our righteous leaders to stamp out. Putin did not come out of nowhere. Russian people not only tolerate him, they revere him . . . So why are people thinking about Putin as much as they do? Because he has become a symbol of national self-determination. Populist conservatives see him the way progressives once saw Fidel Castro, as the one person who says he won’t submit to the world

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that surrounds him . . . Putin has become a symbol of national sovereignty in its battle with globalism. That turns out to be the big battle of our times. As our last election shows, that's true even here.

Caldwell speaks here for many on the American right—the Center for American Greatness, Stephen Bannon, Stephen Miller, Michael Anton, and many others linked to the Trump administration—in discerning the distinctive features of Putinism as a global phenomenon, which set it against liberal democracy and which place it in close ideological proximity to Trumpism. Again, this does not mean that current geopolitics represents a struggle between the forces of darkness and the forces of light. But it does mean that there is a difference that matters, ethically and politically. In a 1957 interview, Albert Camus was asked: “In the struggles dividing the world today, must we really be willing to forget all that is bad on one side to fight what is worse on the other?” He answered by citing a famous statement by Richard Hilary, who died fighting Hitler: “We were fighting a lie in the name of a half-truth,” and then continued: “He thought he was expressing a very pessimistic idea. But one may even have to fight a lie in the name of a quarter-truth. This is our situation at present. However, the quarter-truth contained in Western society is called liberty.” This is our situation at present as well. Like Camus, I believe that the difference liberty makes is worth defending. At the same time, like Camus, I believe that this is but a fraction of what is worth seeking, and that our liberty can only be fully redeemed through our constant efforts to exercise it in the name of greater freedom and greater justice in the world at large.

THESIS 10: THE VALUES OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY ARE

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UNDER ASSAULT BY TRUMPISM, AND THEY NEED VIGOROUS DEFENSE LINKED TO AN EQUALLY VIGOROUS OFFENSE

It is important to state frankly that this does have a world politics and a “foreign policy” dimension. But it is equally important to underscore that the primary issue is one of political values. What links Trump and Putin, and Orbán and Le Pen and Erdoğan, and their many ideologists, is a conception of the world as a collection of nations that have been degraded by liberal internationalism and human rights and cultural pluralism, and that need to reassert their sovereignty as nations, reclaiming their national histories and ethnonational identities, solidifying their borders to protect against “foreigners” from without, and strengthening executive authority and police power to protect against “enemies” from within. Democracy, on this view, is about the blunt assertion of power by ethnic or national majorities. Of course, this very general frame is interpreted differently in each particular setting. And of course, precisely because the value being exalted is the nation as something distinctive and in need of reassertion, the articulation of this frame involves global tension rather than global harmony. This national-popular authoritarian way of thinking is all about the accentuation and not the erasure of differences. This makes leaders such as Putin and Zeman and Erdoğan and Trump the most uneasy of ideological “allies.”

At the same time, there is an overarching commonality and even intellectual community involved in this way of political thinking, and it can be traced to interwar fascists of the twentieth century, and especially to the writings of Carl Schmitt, who declared that all politics is about the distinction between “friends” and “enemies,” and that sovereignty, the most fundamental political concept, was about defending one’s friends and

opposing one's enemies in a world of danger. For Schmitt, and for his contemporary epigones, the greatest enemy of national sovereignty is not any particular nationalism, but liberalism, precisely because it insists upon universal values and open borders and human rights. Liberalism waters down attachments. It effeminizes society. It values ideas over blood and soil. It is divisive. It is tolerant. It is thus dangerous, and its supporters the most dangerous of all.

Trumpism is merely the American version of this. But if you have any doubts that Trumpism is a version of this, then re-read Trump's Republican convention speech of 2016, or his inaugural address or 2017, or his State of the Union speech of 2018. Or listen to the way he talks at his rallies. That is not all there is to the Trump administration. But it is the distilled essence of Trumpism (William E. Connolly brilliantly captures this in his 2017 book *Aspirational Fascism: The Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy under Trumpism*). And it is dangerous. Because it is xenophobic and implicitly, when not explicitly, racist (and also masculinist). Because it is anti-intellectual. But most of all because it rests on a dangerous myth—the myth that nations are discrete and homogenous communities and that there are singular ways of being a national, such that those who are otherwise are dangerous, Other, and enemy. “Make America Great Again” does not mean “let us work together as citizens of our constitutional democracy to deliberate about and to address our common problems through democratic means and thereby to improve our country.” And it does not mean “let us honor our common history, and the heroes of our past who struggled to achieve the freedom that we enjoy, by seeking to realize our best traditions under new circumstances.” It means “let us wear idiotic red ‘Trump’ caps that say ‘Trump’ or ‘Make America Great’ or simply ‘MAG,’ and

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let us give unquestioned support to Trump, and shout ‘Lock Her Up’ on cue, and hate journalists (especially when they criticize Trump), and celebrate police brutality, and look kindly on the racists and neo-Nazis among us and the heroes they worship, and support border walls, and harass and attack those among us who refuse to go along or who raise a voice to question or to protest.”

Liberal democracy is an imperfect political system prone to inequality and corruption. It solves nothing, and the very differences that it permits make it especially difficult to solve anything. At a time of mounting challenges, this makes liberal democracy a deeply frustrating form of politics. But, as Hannah Arendt once quipped—and she knew whereof she spoke—in politics, the only final solution is death. And that is why liberal democracy deserves defense. Because it promises not a solution but an ongoing process of inquiry and questioning and dissent and contestation and remedy, a process without end. It is a flawed process. It is entwined with injustice. It can be better. It should be better. The best way to make it better is to improve it. This means exercising the rights that it affords to organize support for a better world.

This is not simply a matter of “values.” It is a matter of concerted action to support, to enact and to realize values. This involves support for projects of public education and civic nationalism and the reform of governing institutions. It involves support for social movements and political initiatives that advance, in contentious ways to be sure, egalitarian values. It involves efforts to reinvigorate political parties of the democratic left broadly speaking, which in the context of the U.S. two-party system means the reinvigoration of the Democratic party. It involves creative social democratic-type public policies designed to mitigate the insecurities and inequities of capitalism, to promote dignified work, and to expand opportunities for

self-development for all citizens. It requires some attention to questions of global justice, acknowledging the ethical and political limits of borders in an interconnected world, and at the same time working to remedy conditions throughout much of the world that displace millions of people and generate crises of migration. And it means serious attention to questions of environmental sustainability in the face of global warming and looming environmental crisis.

In other words, liberal democracy today faces many interconnected and reinforcing challenges on a global scale. There is no blueprint for addressing them all. There is no way to engage some that does not also potentially involve exacerbating others. There is no “natural base” on which one can pin hopes for an effective political coalition capable of addressing the challenges ahead. And there is no existing form of global governance capable of engaging pressing problems that exceed the boundaries of the nation-state. This means that we are in for a period of real contention and real experimentation. And that while the values of liberal democracy—equal rights, social autonomy, meaningful self-government—will continue to be severely tested in experience, it is ever more important for us to promote these values in our political praxis, and to keep them foregrounded as what John Dewey once called “ends in view.” Promoting liberal democratic values requires liberal democratic political engagements. But only if these engagements are animated by a strong ethical commitment to liberal democratic values are they likely to move us forward.

THESIS 11: TRUMPISM IS A CLEAR AND PRESENT
DANGER THAT WE MUST RESIST

Trumpism is dangerous because it threatens liberal democracy

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in the United States and weakens it throughout the world. Trumpism is not the only danger we face. But it is a clear and present danger to political freedom, social justice, and basic civility. To be in support of political freedom, social justice, and basic civility is not only to be Against Trump. But it most definitely is to be *Against Trump*.

About Jeffrey C. Isaac

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