

Under the Cover of Chaos

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Trump and the Battle
for the American Right

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I

The Terror and the Beast

The most obvious and pervasive feature of Trump's highly visible and almost entertaining (think of Alec Baldwin on *Saturday Night Live*, a guilty pleasure if ever there was one) if also terrifying performance, is the normalization of a frenetic chaos and hyper-activism. His erratic control of the executive state apparatus, his constant policy shifts and contradictory statements, his various appointments and firings, have everyone not merely baffled but always uncertain as to what is going on. The sheer unpredictability of what he will do next, of how he will respond to any challenge or even question, heightens the fear and incomprehension. People seem to assume that this is a further sign of his dementia or incompetence, for surely, this cannot be his intention. And while I do not want to suggest that the chaos is his intention, we should take it more seriously, and think about whether there may not be some intentionality behind it, some reason for it. If nothing else, it seems to provide a context in which Republicans can blithely abandon many of the basic principles of conservatism in favor of a scorched-earth policy aimed at dismantling 150 years of social modernization.

The chaos also seems to have permeated the responses of those opposed to Trump as well, creating its own kind of frenetic hyperactivism, so that, e.g., proliferating numbers of marches are randomly announced (often online) with little time for organization, planning and preparation, or for evaluation and strategizing. People find themselves battered from one side to the other, so that the specific response we have one day seem

inappropriate the next (e.g., the left's relation to FBI director Comey). And it has permeated as well our efforts to understand what is going on. A chaos of power, opposition and intelligence! My hypothesis is, if you will, that the chaos is the productive and strategic ground for at least some of the political trajectories and projects at work today.¹

Of course, there are various possible and even credible interpretations of Trump's electoral victory, and the subsequent political and cultural developments that are taking the country, and less directly, many parts of the world, into an uncertain future. There are any number of different stories that could be constructed, and any number of still ill-defined futures that might be actualized, depending on subsequent actions and struggles. I want to offer one story, without any guarantees that it is necessarily the "right" one, or even the most likely outcome of current events; but it is perhaps the most frightening one (short of global destruction) and therefore worth considering.

If we are to understand what is happening, we should resist the all-too-common temptation to start by assimilating the specific to the general, making Trump into the U.S. version of something that is happening in many parts of the world: the emergence of nationalist (anti-global) and populist (anti-elitist and anti-establishment) formations, often expressed as discourses of racism (anti-immigration²) and forms of authoritarianism.

1. Recently, the historian of economics Philip Mirowski, in his book *Never Let a Good Crisis Go to Waste* (London: Verso, 2013), has argued that the contemporary experience of chaos, ignorance and doubt is a strategy of the Mont Pelerin Society (which included Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman amongst its members), a key source of neoliberal ideas of free-market capitalism and political libertarianism. Without disagreeing, such conspiracy theories ignore the complexities of history and context, and assume that intent guarantees success.

2. It is worth pointing out that, despite the headlines, the U.S. does not have an immigration crisis! We do not have "floods" of immigrants

(They have won in some places—Turkey and India, and appear to be on the rise in many other places, including parts of Europe and South America). These are often described as formations of demagoguery, authoritarian populism, neo-fascism, or illiberal democracy.³ But these developments, especially anti-elitist and nationalist populism, can find other political expressions: for example, they have also been attached to more democratic and progressive agendas (e.g., in Spain, Greece and previously, in South America, but also in the U.S., in Sanders’s presidential campaign). And they have fueled an even more radical, anti-establishment politics, dedicated to exiting, undermining or even “blowing up” the whole system, as in Italy’s Five Star movement and elements of Spain’s Podemos. While there are obvious relations amongst these different formations, I think it is more productive to start by examining the specificity of the contemporary U.S. context, in this case, of Trump’s electoral victory and subsequent administration.

This effort might also lead us to reflect on the relation or difference between populist and popular politics, as described by Stuart Hall. A populist politics is built upon a construction of a frontier or line of demarcation and difference between “the people,” which as a result is often a taken-for-granted and generally homogeneous entity, and the ruling bloc, which can be differently constructed but is almost always cast as “the elite.”

pouring into the country, or waiting to pour in even if illegally. Perhaps, some have argued, the problem is not quantitative but qualitative, i.e., it is a problem of current immigrants’ refusal to assimilate. This too is ill-informed, for the history of immigration in the U.S. suggests not only that it takes several generations for immigrants to adopt and adapt, but also that the processes of “becoming American” have never been purely assimilative, for immigrants do not give up their difference and the “American” culture does not remain unchanged as it adapts to immigrants.

3. Illiberal democracy generally refers to a nationalist politics defined by the rule of a majority without minority rights, and a rejection of political pluralism.

Populist politics is a politics of them versus us. Populist politics, in its rejection of the existing elite, can often fall back into purely affective or emotional appeals, making it susceptible to anti-intellectualism or to at least a marked decline in intellectual self-reflection.⁴ A popular politics, on the other hand, sees “the people” as the ever-changing result of struggles to create a unity-in-difference, defined neither by its opposition to an other, or by a single, shared politics. A popular politics engages people “where they are” to forge a common set of struggles.⁵

To look ahead for a moment, I want to take the chaos of the contemporary context seriously, to argue that it embodies a particular sort of crisis, a particular moment of transition, a turning point rather than a tipping point. And while I will argue that this moment has to be understood historically, it does feel like something new is happening. It does feel like the terms of struggle, of knowledge, history and feeling, are changing, that there is a shift in the “tectonic plates” that have defined modernity. The question that needs to be asked is not so much about Trump but about the complex forces that have constructed him and the possibilities that they have brought into the mainstream political culture of the U.S.

I will suggest, first, that for the most part, the issues that define contemporary political struggle (and to a large extent, Trump’s victory) have not significantly changed over the past decades, although the weight given to them and the ways they are rhetorically present have changed. I will contextualize the present moment by locating it in the continuing history of and struggle

4. However much one dislikes the “New Right,” it started out with brilliant intellectuals like William Buckley and, I am sorry to say, it has deteriorated ever since. I wonder if those on the right would say something similar about progressive intellectual work (e.g., from C. Wright Mills and Herbert Marcuse to Noam Chomsky and Naomi Klein)?

5. See Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988).

over, post-war conservatism, starting with the “New Right,” a shifting set of alliances among various conservative and neo-conservative fractions and pro-capitalist (neoliberal, globalizing) forces who have struggled for over fifty years to win control of the Republican Party and now have apparently succeeded in winning control of the federal state apparatuses, as well as the majority of more local state governments. Much of what is most frightening about Trump’s politics (both his strategies and at least some of his policies) is really the continuation and culmination of highly strategic struggles by which the “New Right” has, to a large extent, been able to prevent disagreements, however serious, from overshadowing the need to continually construct forms of unity, cooperation and even compromise that will enable it to realize its vision of another modernity, one that is significantly different from what the “New Right” takes to be the dominant “American liberalism” established in the post-war years. The results of this continuing effort will no doubt be devastating and frightening, and we must do all we can to mitigate the harm and ensure that it is short-lived.

But, ironically, just when the “New Right” seems to have succeeded, its control of the party has become problematic. Its sense of unity and control was fractured in recent years by the insurgency of the Tea Parties and the increasing visibility and power of the reactionary right. Over the years, there has been a broad range of “movement conservatives,” with varying distances from and relations to a Republican Party increasingly defined by the “New Right.” There have always been reactionary fringe groups, which occupied a position like the closeted relative whom one brings out on occasion; their very presence put pressure on others to accept as “normal” what might otherwise be seen as a form of abnormality or extremism.⁶ While groups such as the

6. We might compare this to the way the apocalyptic “Christian identity movement” was talked about during the administration of G.W.

paleo-conservatives—represented at times by Barry Goldwater and Pat Buchanan—achieved some national visibility, they were always treated as something of an embarrassment, always pushed to the outer reaches of acceptability by an increasingly conservative Republican Party. Other groups—white supremacists, militia, and neo-Nazis, for example—were excluded and denied any legitimacy or visibility, and yet, they continued to exist at the outer limits of movement conservatism. These reactionary conservatives—it is not quite clear in what sense they are conservatives—are extremely fractured⁷ and unwilling to compromise, but they share a broad hatred of modern forms of social and political life and organization, and modern commitments to critique, change and an openness to the new and unfamiliar. They are not merely anti-liberal modernists (the “New Right”), but anti-modernists or even pre-modernists. Perhaps they can be described as celebrating parochialism and tribalism (a kind of imagined pre-modern national-cultural fundamentalism) against cosmopolitanism and progress.⁸ And so, what we have on the right itself is a struggle over modernity itself, increasingly understood as globalism and

Bush. Many people thought that its adherents provided deep direction and unacknowledged motivation, but they were never allowed to sit at the public table.

7. I will later identify five major forms of reactionary politics that have become part of public political discourses: white supremacists, Tea Party populists, right-wing counter-culturalists, neo-reactionary intellectuals and what I will call “Trumpist” intellectuals. Some of these groups describe themselves as “alt-right,” a term that makes them sound too innocuous, like an underground rock band. The idea of the alt-right is even contested among the various groups, and ill-defined in the popular political imaginary.

8. For a wonderful re-reading of parochialism, see Meaghan Morris, “On the future of parochialism: globalization, *Young and Dangerous IV* and Cinema Studies in Tuen Mun,” in J. Hill and K. Rockett (eds.). *Film History and National Cinema: Studies in Irish Film 2* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), pp. 17–36.

multiculturalism, a struggle over what it means to be modern, and the attempt to wrest its definition out of the hands of those who are seen to have been in control for almost a century.

Trump's campaign and electoral victory has allowed these reactionary groups to enter the stage of mainstream politics and even, to some extent, has legitimated them enough so that they can enter the ruling bloc. Their position might be described now as at the popular fringe at the center of the right. It will not matter that Trump may eventually fire Steve Bannon—one of the key point men for some of the reactionary right in the Trump administration—and other figures of the various populist and anti-populist reactionary right, from the White House; he has brought them (and their cultural and communicative practices) onto the stage of popular and political culture. We have a war within the right! And even more frightening, the reactionaries seem to be winning, pulling many from the “New Right” into more reactionary statements and positions. This contradiction in the right is both responsible for, and possible because of, the chaos, as an unintended attempt to hold in tension two very different projects and formations of conservatism, to say nothing of different visions of capitalism and different forms of racism. It is this chaos that speaks simultaneously of “America” as catastrophe and as “great.”

Thus, the story I want to tell is not about Trump. I do not think that what's going on is all about Trump, that he is the main protagonist, or the driving force. Nor is he a malleable figurehead being manipulated by some master puppeteer (capitalism?). Nor is he simply an entertainer meant to distract us from the real story. Rather, assume that he is, like so many of us, caught by forces not entirely understood or controlled, but he has learned to “ride” or perform them as it were. For at least a moment, he is necessary, but neither sufficient nor guaranteed. But to what? And why is he seemingly indispensable? To a more complicated story about the

right than is often told,⁹ a story of a coming battle between two imaginations of the Right, of which Trump is the (accidental?) host? Is Trump the figure through which these contradictions could be played out in the fields of common sense and popular calculation? “Trump” holds together the opposing and often contradictory elements that are being articulated into a new political conservatism, embodying a variety of forms of nationalism, racism and capitalism. The sense of chaos that permeates his practices of governance is crucial, as is the ambiguity of his position as businessman, entrepreneur and entertainer who refuses even as president to give up these roles. The very complexity of his position enables him to live the chaos in the relations between family, nation and business on the one hand, and the relation of government and global corporate capitalism on the other, figuring himself as a crystallization of the crisis and the figure of a solution to the empire of chaos.

How Trump does this work takes me to the second argument I want to make, the second way I want to describe the current context, for it is accomplished in affective rather than ideological terms. What is affect? It is an essential dimension or ingredient of the messiness of human experience, and it is at least as complicated as the other dimensions—of biological bodies, social relations and structures, and meaning and consciousness (the latter having pre-occupied western philosophy at least since the Enlightenment).¹⁰ Like the plane of meaning, affect is the contingent

9. I have tried to begin such a complicated story of the contemporary left in my previous book, *We All Want to Change the World*. https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/free-book/we_all_want_to_change_the_world.pdf

10. There are many definitions and theories of affect, including, at one end of the spectrum, theories of the ontological differentiation of bodies according to their capacities to affect or be affected, or of affect as purely material or bodily intensities, or psychoanalytically inflected models of energetics flowing in and across bodies, to, at the other extreme, affect

product of human and non-human events, contradictions and struggles. It varies over time and place, and is unevenly distributed across populations. If meaning is how we make “sense” of what is going on, affect is the energy that permeates all our experiences and defines what it feels like to live in a moment. Like meaning, affect is always constituted in the space between individuality and sociality, between consciousness and materiality, between the knowable and the not-yet-articulated. Affect encompasses a variety of ways in which we “feel” the world in our experience, including moods, emotions, maps of what matters and of what one cares about, pleasures and desires, passions, sentiments, etc.

The current political context has been constructed by appropriating and articulating certain practices and discourses from/into an emergent, affective landscape (comprised of several structures of feeling—the socially defined organizations in which we experience our lives¹¹) that I will call “passive nihilism.” Affect—the lived texture of experience—is the medium and agency by which the old is rearranged and made new, even as the new is slotted into long-standing relations. Like the common-sense maps of meaning in which we find the sense of our experiences, affective landscapes are the effects, both directly and indirectly, of many events and struggles, although they are never completely within our control, never completely the expression of a singular conspiracy or victory.

as socially determined, individually experienced emotions. My own use of the term sees it in terms of social feelings, moods, sentiments, etc. It is a complex but essential dimension of the “messiness” and multidimensionality of lived social reality that is the embodied effect of a variety of forms of discursive or semiotic formations. Therefore, for the most part, it is not communicated through some unmediated transmission, touch, or contagion. It is characterized by, but not reducible to matters of intensity.

11. See Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), and *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

Trump seems to offer himself up as an uncompromising, partisan wrecking ball (to quote a different “working-class” voice) that has been sent in to blow up the establishment, defined by the occupation of political and cultural institutions by a liberal/left alliance of elitists and multiculturalists, which has produced “American carnage.” They are to blame for the fact that the state has (we might all agree) failed to solve the many problems facing our society. Hence, Trump’s very style is the message, which may explain why some of his supporters took his campaign promises literally, while others made fun of his critics precisely because the critics took his promises literally. The most quotidian social practices, and the most normalized political practices—the definitions of civility, respectfulness, propriety and reasonableness—are inseparable from the struggles between different groups for power, status and resources. Trump’s self-absorption, his lies, his personal attacks, his boastfulness, his vulgarity, his inappropriateness, his corruption, even his bodily presence—are the performance of his refusal of business as usual. But such practices of civility are precisely what represses the violent contradictions of our sociality. The fact that such norms, which define acceptable forms of social relations, are inoperative, may contribute to the increasing visibility and violence of racism, misogyny, etc. While Trump is not the first figure on the right to behave in ways that challenge the behavioral norms in which power hides itself—remember Pat Buchanan, Ann Coulter and Sarah Palin, all of whom are representatives of reactionary conservatism—he does not seem to allow anything to restrain or constrain his behavior. His performance of incivility is a political statement, a tactical and “white-washed” inversion of other (working-class and urban black street culture) performances of incivility. It is ironic that the left apparently does not remember that it has often been accused of acting inappropriately, in ways that were not “nice” and that it has, at times, championed such forms of “carnavalesque” behavior as a political tactic.