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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

## *Making Trump History*

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Historians seem to have a problem with Trump. I do not mean by this the dominance of partisan hostility to Trump in the ranks of the historical profession, or even the way in which many historians have been offended by the way in which the president has treated history as a resource to be exploited, rather than a reality to be respected or understood. The more substantial problem posed by Trump is that for many historians he simply should not exist. The possibility that the conclusion of the evolution of the United States across the half-century since the 1960s could be the election – albeit against the weight of individual votes – of a man who boasts of his distaste for the goals of racial equality, wider health-care provision, and a narrowing of income differentials, seems to many historians to be somewhere between an institutional outrage and an absurd accident of history. But the political is supplemented by the personal. Trump’s swagger, and his disregard for bureaucratic procedure and legal constraints, stands as a refutation of deeply-held assumptions among historians about how the democratic politics of the U.S. are supposed to work. The complexity of institutional procedures, the careful reconciliation of competing interests, and above all the prestige of the presidency as the symbol of democratic legitimacy, have all been bulldozed by a man whose personal qualities – or lack of them – seem like an insult to the historical narrative.

However, as the narrow scale of the victory of Biden in 2020 amply demonstrates, these responses are not adequate. The Trump phenomenon is here to stay, if not the man, or indeed his position of power. His attempt to manipulate a crisis sufficient to enable him to ride out his electoral defeat provoked a circumstantial mobilisation in defence of institutions, and through that a wider assertion of the established norms of political debate. But crises recede, and (as the outcome of the impeachment process probably pre-figured) realities return.

Whether or not Trump recovers his personal momentum to become the Republican candidate in 2024, it is already clear that the successful candidate who emerges from the Republican primaries ahead of that election will be defined, in policy terms at least, by the heritage of Trump. Consequently, the recognition that, win or lose, Trump is not a parenthesis, has become part of the new orthodoxy that has emerged since November.<sup>1</sup> This presents a challenge to those whose job it is to analyse where U.S. politics might go over the coming years, but also to those who would pretend to understand the past from which he emerged.

Nor is this a specifically American problem. Trump has provided the West European political class with ample opportunity to find in the corruption and charlatanry of the Trump presidency familiar demonstrations of the crudity of American politics, contrasted against the supposed sophistication of the European model. Their grounds for doing so are, however, distinctly insecure. The Brexit referendum result in 2016, and the electoral victory of Boris Johnson in the UK in 2019, are just two of the most visible manifestations of the much wider vulnerability of European democratic structures to challenge from below, through the emergence of movements of economic and political protest across southern and central Europe, or from above, through – as in Hungary and Poland – the dismantling of constitutional and judicial structures. French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen may for now be the custodians of political legitimacy, but they risk becoming the *ancien régime* as the rumble of a new European 1848 draws closer.

How then might historians seek to understand this? Probably they should start by throwing away the templates and narratives of the twentieth century. Yes, of course, there was much in the actions and rhetoric that surrounded the chaotic invasion of the Capitol on 6

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Moyn, ‘Biden Says “America is Back.” But Will his Team of Insiders Repeat their Old Mistakes?’, *The Guardian*, 1 December 2020.

January 2021 that recalled the street violence of the Nazi Party; but such analogies can easily be stretched far beyond the plausible. Occasional favourable references among right-wing politicians to the fascist past in Germany, Austria and Italy aside, there is little to suggest that the new politics has its origins in Europe's mid-twentieth-century past. That of course is one of the secrets of its success. Like Trump's approach to the U.S. Civil War, Europe's populists wear their history lightly, seizing opportunistically on the injustices of the Treaty of Trianon in Hungary, the legacies of Communist rule in Poland, or the supposed grandeur of Benito Mussolini's Fascist empire to invest their present-day campaigns with a little three-dimensional depth. But this is not the main story. Their politics is part of a new history, that of the twenty-first century.

Historians therefore need to bury their narratives of the twentieth century. They can squabble politely over whether its endpoint lay in the demise of the socialist regimes in eastern Europe in 1989, the great implosion of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, or the new challenges so powerfully expressed by the attack on the Twin Towers on 9/11, and the subsequent surges of radicalised Islamic violence.<sup>2</sup> But what matters, in Europe as in America, is less the choice of dates, than the way in which these events form part of a larger process: the emergence of a new era, that we might term the History of the Present.

There are multiple aspects to this new historical era: the financial crash of 2008-9, the emergence of an authoritarian China with massive economic power, and the sudden and disruptive transition from a print and televisual culture rooted in languages and national borders, to a global and digital world. But, to understand the new politics of Trump and his European equivalents, three elements provide the trig points from which we can map the uncharted landscape.

The first is the demise of stable meanings of democracy, or indeed of the political. The creation of a formal and disciplined political sphere was one of the great legacies of the modernization of Europe from the 1860s to the 1960s, giving birth to the complex organisational charts of European and American government which illustrated political-science textbooks of the later twentieth century, rather in the manner of guides to install central-heating systems.<sup>3</sup> But that has now gone. The old politics continues to happen, but it does not rule. Power has shifted from parliaments, parties, and the conventional institutions of political debate – notably the political press – to new spaces, some community-based, others digital, which lack the organisational skeleton of the old politics of the twentieth century. They are amorphous and fast-changing currents, which can carry individuals and issues such as Black Lives Matter and QAnon to transitory prominence; but, after their demise, leave little trace behind them. This is the new unpredictability of democratic politics, and yet it is not obviously democratic or political. Instead, it effaces the divisions between the political and the wider worlds of communication and the entertainment media, creating a new world where footballers, tv celebrities, and rap artists communicate more directly and effectively with the public than do those who remain constrained within the label of politicians. It is easy to bemoan these changes, and to see in them the demise of the democratic politics of old.<sup>4</sup> But it is also pointless to do so. Democratic politics has burst its banks, and has become part of a much wider public sphere, in which the democratic process has been adulterated through the addition of a much wider range of emotions, grievances, but also forms of identity, and dreams of a better world, collective and individual.

The second trig point is therefore the emergence of new citizens. That term too is part of the legacies of the Age of Revolutions, redolent with the language of the American and French constitutions of the late eighteenth century. But it has proved to have a long life. It was challenged fundamentally by the comradeship of the Communist revolutionary project, and by the racial identities of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*, and yet it proved sufficiently resilient to resurface in the second half of the twentieth century as the definition of the democratic citizen of modern societies. The duties of these citizens were manifold: they were required to vote soberly and with due decorum, to pay their taxes, to obey the laws and the comprehensive regulatory structures of modern societies, and in the case of young men in many states, to serve in the conscript armies. But that, of course, was only half of the deal. The other half was the provision by the state of a predictable universe, through an ever wider range of social goods in the form of housing, education, and transport infrastructures, and the safety nets of welfare and health provision which mitigated the anxieties that had haunted previous generations. That model reached its high point around the 1970s, with the construction in the U.S. and Europe of larger and more complex

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<sup>2</sup> See, notably, Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994); Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> I have written about a characteristic example of these texts, Herman Finer's *The Major Governments of Modern Europe* (London: Methuen, 1960), in Martin Conway, "Democracy in Western Europe after 1945," in J. Kurunmäki, J. Nevers and H. te Velde, eds., *Democracy in Modern Europe: A Conceptual History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 231-256.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, A.C. Grayling *Democracy and its Critics* (London, 2017).

institutions of government that anticipated the needs of citizens, and provided solutions which it would be far beyond the resources of citizens to bring about themselves.<sup>5</sup>

But, since the 1980s, that model has been in retreat. Government – as we have learned painfully through the current pandemic – has lost the means to provide reliably for the health of its citizens. Under the pressure of the newly fashionable languages of neo-liberalism and marketization, state institutions have been replaced by the new politics of the bazaar, in which rival companies and a range of semi-public and semi-private institutions compete to supplant provision by the state. Few citizens positively willed this change, but they have adapted rapidly to its reality. If the state provides so much less, so they are less willing to pay its taxes, obey its laws, or respect its leaders. This is the mentality of what is often called the new populism – a term which seems inescapable in describing the politics of the present, but which simultaneously risks defining it in too narrowly political terms.<sup>6</sup> What is different about the politics of a Trump, Matteo Salvini, Vladimir Putin, or Viktor Orbán is not that they seek to use mendaciously the language of the common man (or woman) – the real majority – against some form of privileged elite. Most of their supporters can see such claims as the all too transparent forms of marketing that they are. But they make considered decisions that they would prefer to support the charlatans and adventurers against those whom they know to be more sober and qualified.

Historians underestimate the seriousness of that decision-making by citizens at their peril. Their decisions might be distracted at times by the slogans and emotions of outmoded nationalist or ethnic languages, but at heart most twenty-first-century citizens know what they want, and indeed what they do not want. If there is one conclusion that emerges loud and clear from the great weight of studies that have been undertaken on the electorate of the *Rassemblement national* in France since the 1980s, and the studies of subsequent surges in populist political movements up to Trump and Brexit,<sup>7</sup> it is that the electors who voted for them knew what they were doing, and why they were doing it. Three themes dominate: security, control, and the primacy of the personal. These citizens want protection from crime, immigration, and its perceived socio-economic consequences, and from the alien threats – racial, environmental, and cultural – which stalk a much less predictable world. They consequently also want control: control of their local neighbourhood and their national society, but also the control to decide what they want for themselves, rather than what others might deem to be good for them. These are not proud Know Nothings, but they are deeply impatient of Know Alls. They therefore also want the right to make their own decisions – call it freedom, if you want – be that in terms of their identity, sexuality, or values, or, more prosaically, in how they live their daily lives. Political commentators often focus on the authoritarian and intolerant aspects of the new politics, as reflected in protest campaigns against the rights of gender or of race, but at the core of the new politics is often a surprising willingness to accept diversity, as long as it does not prejudice the wider unity of society.

This, then, is the third trig point of the new politics. The agenda of politics has disappeared, and has done so in ways which exclude any simple return to the political frontiers of left and right of the twentieth century. Many of the old issues have not gone away: in a time of economic insecurity, present and future, the mobilising power of class will remain evident. But its force manifests itself not through the representative institutional hierarchies of old, but through the new protest campaigns of factory gates and direct action, as well as the denunciation of the oligarchical wealthy through the tools of social media. Class, moreover, is no longer the reliable determinant of political identity that it once was. As the chaotic exuberance of the movement of the *gilets jaunes* in France in 2018-19 demonstrated, it co-exists with the other bearers of identity, be they ethnic, gendered, or community-based: the intoxicating solidarity of the imagined “we” against “them.”

The new politics therefore lacks what would have been regarded until recently as a coherent agenda. The short attention span encouraged by a digital universe is replicated in politics through the shifting shapes of a rapidly moving succession of primarily visual images. This, of course, is what Trump understood quicker than most. Coherence and policy-making matter much less than the empty gesture or the transient announcement: declaring you are going to build a wall does not require you to build one. Indeed, one suspects that very few of his supporters thought that he would build the wall, just as one might question how far those who voted leave in the Brexit referendum

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<sup>5</sup> I have written about this in Conway, *Western Europe's Democratic Age, 1945-1968* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 199-254.

<sup>6</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Pascal Perrineau, *Le symptôme Le Pen: radiographie des électeurs du Front National* (Paris: Fayard, 1997); Harold D. Clarke, Matthew Goodwin, and Paul Whiteley, *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, “The Grip of Populism,” *The Sunday Times*, 7 October 2018.

campaign actually intended to bring about the departure of the UK from the EU. Political action too is more about the participants than the end result: the *gilets jaunes* occupying roundabouts on the edges of French provincial towns is rather different from the storming of the Bastille. But to regard such actions as naïve or ineffectual is to misunderstand their purpose. They are the means of expressing an identity or grievance, rather than the conventional pursuit of a goal, still less a wish to take power. The era when political and ideological affiliations were for life has largely evaporated. Instead, increasingly large numbers of citizens lend their votes and support to a series of diverse causes – often through a momentary liking of a tweet, or a signature on a digital petition – which respond to their emotions, group identity, or aspirations.<sup>8</sup>

There is much that is disconcerting in the new politics, but it would be wrong to dismiss it as the rise of a new barbarism. The devil has not once again acquired all of the best tunes, and the new political world is one which can generate a wide range of outcomes. Nor will it be necessarily as radical as it currently seems. With time the disruptive impact of figures such as Trump may be channelled within new norms, enabling a continuity of institutional structures to reassert itself, within or without the Republican Party. But, for now, it suffices to recognise that the mentality of incremental reformist change which was embedded in the machinery of West European and American politics in the later twentieth century has in large part disappeared. The future could be many things, but it seems highly unlikely that it will be social democratic.<sup>9</sup> This requires historians to change their focus. Institutional structures, ideological traditions, and indeed democratic norms, have been replaced by a less disciplined and more open politics, in which the aspiration to save the planet and end racism can co-exist alongside the wish to re-assert the nation-state and to control immigration. The multiple incoherences between and within such attitudes matter less than the pervasive sense of a daily referendum in which new practices of direct democracy co-exist with a visual theatre of rhetoric and gesture. With greater skill than his many detractors would readily admit, Trump provided a first sketch of the character of the new politics. But he too will quite rapidly come to seem out of date. The unpredictable history of the present has only just begun.

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<sup>8</sup> The concept of voters lending their support to a political party was articulated explicitly by Boris Johnson on the night of the result of the 2019 election, to describe the votes gained by the Conservative Party in areas of the North of England that had formerly voted for the Labour Party: “You may only have lent us your vote, you may not think of yourself as a natural Tory and you may intend to return to Labour next time round.” *The Guardian*, 13 December 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Tony Judd, *Ill fares the Land: A Treatise on our Present Discontents* (London: Allen Lane, 2010).