



Wendy Brown

Apocalyptic populism

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Delivering this year's Democracy Lecture, organized by 'Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik', Wendy Brown describes how neoliberalism has fomented a populist revolt that, in the figure of Trump, culminates in a plutocratic authoritarianism.

I want to bracket the chaos and the calamity, the horror and even absurdity of the Trump regime to ask this: how was it brought into being from a popular base that stands to gain so little from it?

As many have noted, all Trump voters did not and do not line up with everything he says and is, any more than all Clinton voters (this one for example) lined up with her corporate cronyism, neoliberalism, militarism, and political opportunism. Some Trump voters were mad about the cost of their health care, their lost jobs, their declining communities and standards of living. Some were ardent, unqualified supporters of Israel. Some longed for a time before the challenges of globalization and climate change, and they basked in his promise to vanquish both by fiat.

Some hoped that a Trump presidency would better their prospects as business owners, investors or workers. Tax cuts have been at the top of the conservative agenda for more than 30 years: during the campaign, Trump spoke more often about cutting taxes than he did about bombing ISIS, or building a wall, or banning Muslims. Some Evangelicals and Catholics voted only on abortion, while objecting to much else about Trump.

Some voted for the Republican candidate because they always have. Some mainly recoiled from Hillary and were fortified in this of course by rightwing



news sites and bloggers. Some white nationalists (Klan and Nazis) voted for the first time in over forty years, not because he was exactly their guy, but because he threw them more bait than any viable candidate since George Wallace in 1968. And some, already politically fearful, were recruited by Trump's fear-mongering.

It's important to remember that Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were two of the most disliked presidential candidates in American history. Even the 50 per cent of eligible voters who did make it to the polls did a lot of nose holding.

All this said, who voted for Trump?

Eighty-eight per cent of his support was white. This included two-thirds of white voters without a college degree; over half of white female voters; two-thirds of white male voters, and three-quarters of white voters over the age of fifty. Trump received more Latino votes and votes from the well-off and college-educated than most had expected, but his mass support came from working and lower middle class, thirty-five-and-older *uneducated whites*, especially white men. This in a country that is now just over 60 per cent white. Moreover, of Trump voters, nearly 25 per cent interviewed in exit polls said that they did not think he was qualified for the presidency and that Clinton was.

Together, what these figures suggest is that we are not dealing mainly with the politically abandoned working and lower middle class, but *dethroned whites*, especially white men who have lost not just economic but also social power and cultural pride of place in the conjuncture of four historical developments:

First, four decades of neoliberal policies and practices that have gutted wages, benefits, pensions, job security, infrastructure, and easy access to higher education – hence, any kind of social mobility – among the working and lower middle classes.

Second, three decades of financialization – that is, the shift of an economic engine to financial markets that exacerbated the redistribution upwards of wealth. This included a real-estate driven financial crisis that took very heavy casualties in the group that supported Trump, especially through home foreclosures and savings meltdowns.



Third, globalization that transformed both the economies and the populations of the global north, draining them of large-scale industry and of whiteness.

Fourth, a *perceived* liberal political trajectory understood by Trump-voters to have demoted them and promoted historically excluded groups – women, racial and sexual minorities, the disabled, new immigrants and, above all, African Americans.

Two-thirds of Trump supporters believe that whites are not getting what they deserve in the US while blacks are getting more than they deserve. In fact, African Americans as a population, both urban and rural, have suffered far greater declines than whites since the 1970s: unemployment, underemployment and rising housing costs, the decline of union jobs, diminished public services and educational funding, skyrocketing incarceration rates – all of these have combined to lower the standard of living and devastate black neighbourhoods far more than is the case for whites. But this decline and this devastation constitute a broken promise. It is not the stuff of raging resentment at lost entitlement and pride of place.

Now, did all of these white people who voted for Trump blame minorities and immigrants for their own felt deprivations or those of the nation? No, but obviously the Trump campaign facilitated that displacement – taking a page from Nietzsche on *ressentiment* and Freud on narcissistic wounds, where one seeks an object, any object, on which to displace one's humiliation or suffering. But even here, we need to consider the heterogeneous character of white Trump support. I want to suggest that it has at least three different strands or energies, each of which we need to weigh, as we contemplate left strategies and alternatives to the present.

The first strain yearns for protection, stability and order. It is motivated by anxiety and fearfulness, it responded to the strongman, the wall builder, the decider, the enforcer. These are especially the middle-aged white suburbanites. They might be recoverable.

The second strain yearns for disruption and revenge. These are the apocalyptic populists I'll be discussing. They are animated more by humiliation and rage than by fear. They responded to the boorishness, the bravado, the swagger, the willingness to blow things up without caring where the pieces would land. These are the thugs, the trolls, the



provocateurs, and they will hang on the longest.

The third strain yearns for a fix. It is motivated by socio-economic frustration, it responded to the promise of tax cuts, of protectionism, of bringing jobs back. These are classic republicans and the swing voters.

All three strains or energies converge on the threat of the demonized immigrant. All three reject 'globalism' and foreignness. So all three can be rallied by the 'America First' sentiment. But there are also non-convergences, investments in different aspects of Trump: some want order and protection, some want payback and a white nation, some want restored futures.

But if they are not all raging enthusiasts of a plutocratic, authoritarian, racist regime, can they be recruited into it? By marination in the discourse, by rightwing news and social media, by a single major terror attack, by liberal and left mockery, by seductions of political libidinal freedom, by the anti-democratic soil tilled by neoliberalism? Or might they be recruited for a different future? Can we transform them or only hope to overwhelm them demographically and strategically? Before addressing this, let me say a little more about each of these three energies.

We start with 'Anxious Authoritarians'. There is quite a bit of recent social science on those drawn to authoritarian rule. It tells us that they - 100 per cent of whom when polled voted for Trump - have deeper fears than the rest of the electorate. They are especially anxious about disorder and change, figured, say, by feminism and by gay marriage, by multiculturalism, but also by technology, by finance, by globalization or ISIS.

So, they respond to depictions of the world as disordered and dangerous - the spectre of drugs, crime and terror, and even rapid change, crashing the gates of their homes, their neighbourhoods, their nation, their races, or their psyches. They want the law and order, but also the strength, the decisiveness, and the willingness to use force that Trump campaigned on. Politically and socially, they prize protection and stability achieved through the exercise of power and hierarchy, and they do not value *democratic procedure or institutions*.

Now, the key question for critical theory when it draws on this kind of social science research is: are these so-called 'authoritarian personalities' hard-



wired, just waiting to be activated by a leader or a threat? This is refuted by the fact that, in 2011, long before Trump, 44 per cent of US non-college graduates but only 28 per cent of college graduates approved of having a 'strong leader who doesn't need to bother with Congress or elections'. You see the same split on abortion and homosexuality - college education literally halves the number rejecting these practices as upsetting traditional order and values. Or to approach the matter another way, the number of Americans who think it would be a good idea for the army to rule has doubled over the past two decades. It was 6 per cent two decades ago, it's 12 per cent now.

So devotees of authoritarianism are made, not born. Moreover, even the social science acknowledges that 'non authoritarians can be scared into authoritarian views'. So Trump's brilliance rests in stoking the fears that would amplify the desire for walled security and eviction of disruption and danger, a desire he would satisfy with his take-no-prisoners personality and politics. That's why he kept at the 'dark picture' during his campaign - the picture of carnage, invasion, and disaster that so many pundits thought was an over-the-top tactic.

What of the second strain, the Apocalyptic Populists? For the resentful and the humiliated, the socially castrated and enraged, fear and danger are not the animating thing. Rather, they seek restored white male entitlement, or at least its political affirmation, even if it can't be materially restored, even if it's all they've got as the world goes to hell and they help take it there.

For this strain, with 'Make American Great Again' barely masked as 'Make America White Male Again', Trump converted social and economic castration into a disinhibited grab for that white male entitlement - a grab by the pussy or racial slur, by xenophobia, by denigration of the weak, by affirming the 'poorly educated', by attacking the cosmopolitans and urban elite.

Trump is tonic for this group's damaged potency and place: he is unreconstructed and unapologetic about the power of his whiteness and wealth, and the unbridled rights of his penis.

If not a man of the people in his billions, he is in his bluster and boorishness, his impulsive, opinionated, uninformed, and insulting style, his indifference to facts, to evidence, even to consistency. These qualities constitute his lack of qualifications for the presidency, but are what made him Everyman - they



were not irrelevant but crucial to his appeal.

His style also produced a versatile and far-reaching political-personal metaphor, a promise to throw America's weight around as he throws his own - nuking, busting NATO, bringing Mexico and China to heel, bombing ISIS, insulting all who disagreed with him; reviling feminism, multiculturalism, Islam, intellectuals and policy wonks. The danger of such conduct in the presidency is irrelevant to the pumping up and restored potency it signifies - and again, is why his patent lack of qualifications for the presidency worked to his advantage in obtaining it.

In short, Trump reasserted the entitlement, politically and personally, to be a bully and a bomb thrower because bullying and bomb throwing remains the right of white maleness, no matter how little else it has. Importantly, no other configuration of human in the United States - female, brown, black, queer - could talk or conduct itself this way, especially but not only in politics, without immediate self-destruction if not criminalization and incarceration.

Trump's rude, bellicose, ignorant and insulting talk and behaviour, however, relicenses it in whites, which in turn relicenses white supremacy. Moreover, as Trump re-legitimated bellicose white maleness and bellicose Americanness, he sutured them back together, offering the classic populist rallying cry: 'you alone are the real Americans; far from forgotten, you are its essence'.

Again, the liberal head-scratching about how Trump's unchecked impulses and ignorance could carry the promise of order and protection misses how Trump's own entitlement to disinhibition anointed the wound of castrated white masculinity in the twenty-first century. And it misses, too, the provocation that Hillary Clinton represented: well-spoken, smart, knowledgeable, tough, ardently if conventionally feminist, circulating in worlds of power, knowledge and connection, she was and remains everything this group feels dethroned and castrated by, and is why they hated her so.

So, fear and danger for the authoritarians; bullying, bellicosity and political incorrectness for the resentful and angry white dudes, and then 'carnage and decline', 'hemorrhaged jobs, wrecked cities and towns' for that third energy emerging from dethroned whiteness, the one despairing over its



economic decline or deracination.

Clinton, of course, ignored the first energy, revolted the second, and alienated the third with her basic campaign message: 'America's already great, we need to keep on the path, there's more to be done... progress, progress, progress.' This message targeted the professional class and the young, but also those who were socially and politically recently enfranchised: racial and sexual minorities, the disabled, older women, new immigrants. Meanwhile, felt and actual decline framed midlands middle-aged and older white working and lower middle class experience. Her message underscored that population's sense of being dethroned and disdained by new groups and professions; by cosmopolitans, multiculturalists, tech, finance, hipsters, rappers, slender green juicers and global governors.

Alright, so we have an unstable, dangerous, vengeful know-nothing in the most powerful position on the planet because of aging white Americans freaking out about terror, crime, and immigrants, about fading racial and gender status and the promise of economic well-being that goes with it - abetted by rightwing media and the wrong Democratic candidate for the times.

But how and why does this take the shape of anti-democratic authoritarianism, and license a resurgent plutocracy, a government by and for the rich? Especially when that authoritarianism and that plutocracy was not what mobilized or motivated all of these energies?

Here we need to take a turn towards neoliberalism understood both as policy (free trade, regressive taxation, deregulation, unbridled capital, leashed labour, diminution of the welfare state, privatized public goods) and as a form of rationality. With the latter, every human activity is cast as properly submitted to market reason - economized in value and conduct. Human beings themselves become responsabilized entrepreneurs of their lives or self-investing bits of human capital. Political, personal and social relations are rendered by neoliberal reason in market terms, everything from learning to eating become matters of speculative investments - ranked, rated, balanced in your portfolio. And democracy itself is devalued and transformed.

In what way did neoliberal policy and rationality, a global economic order



and a novel order of reason, produce or bring about the current regime?

Formally, of course, the recent election, like the referendum ushering in Brexit, represented a rejection of global free trade and the free movement of capital and labour. Plenty of pundits have declared neoliberalism dead in the aftermath of Brexit and the American election. Yet neoliberal policies of privatization, deregulation, and tax and welfare cuts have been put on steroids by the Trump regime. Moreover, Trump's rise – from the protectionism to the authoritarianism, from the xenophobia to the NATO-knocking, from the permanent campaigning to the reduction of politics to deal-making – is nothing but neoliberalism's effects.

Most obvious in this respect are the declining wages, job security, retirement provisions, school quality and more generated by neoliberal economic policy. Then there's globalization. Here, I think, inchoately, until Trump made it choate, many dethroned American whites imagined a link between the decline of American economic power, the decline of white power, the decline of male earning power, and the decline of nation-state sovereignty – control of its own fate. They are right: from offshored union factory jobs and disappearing affordable housing to unprecedented flows of migration, and finance and capital, the stable white male working- and middle-class provider, nation state sovereignty, and American economic supremacy are all finished. This cannot be reversed, but it can be politically instrumentalized – which is where the figure of the immigrant is so important, where the Arab Muslim fuses with the undocumented Guatemalan or Mexican, where the wall at the southern border of the US merges with the travel ban, where the false promise of good jobs mixes with the false promise of protection from crime and terror. This is where eroded boundaries and barriers, where economic power and security are braided together in a racialized causal logic, *and* braided together in an economic redress – good deals will replace bad deals. And this is where the implicit promise to whites of 'Make America Great Again' casts all justice-oriented and all ecologically sustainable concerns as compromising and selling out the nation, just as angry whites feel compromised and sold out.

In short, if the policy turn is away from international free trade, the reasoning, the frame and the effects remain neoliberal. Let us dive deeper into this for a bit.

In addition to casting every activity and every sphere in an economic frame



- casting markets and market conduct as appropriate for all human and organization - neoliberal reason has a specific antipathy to politics, and even to democratic power sharing (apart from voting). It treats politics and democracy as at best ruining markets and at worst leading toward tyrannical social justice programs and totalitarianism. It solicits in the place of politics and democracy a form of statism based on business principles and the support of markets - a statism that includes law and policing, and a strong measure of authority.

The point here is not the familiar one that, within neoliberal rationality, market justice replaces social and political justice, and thus legitimates ever greater inequalities and exclusions. That is certainly the case. But the point I am making is that within neoliberal reason, politics is cast as the enemy to freedom, to order and to progress. A little is necessary, but never for purposes of social justice or planning - that's where coercion is wrongly used to oppose freedom and dampen its capacity to produce innovation, spontaneous order, progress, and individual responsibility.

This challenge to politics and democratic policy as distorting and obstructing at best, totalitarian at worst, has sunk deep into neoliberal cultures. It has helped foment an anti-democratic populist revolt that calls simultaneously for freedom and authoritarianism - market-style freedom, secured by statist authority to protect, to exclude, to secure as necessary on the basis of business principles.

Business principles and practices should subtend if not replace Constitutionalism or other democratic institutions to decide everything from Muslim bans and indefinite detention, to environmental and economic policy. Thus, Trump dismisses 'as politics' judicial checks on his Executive Orders, Congressional resistance to know-nothing cabinet appointees, Congressional inquiries, mainstream media and everyday popular protests against him.

Similarly, deal-making and executive diktat should replace democratic procedure and principles. His constant characterization of his predecessors is that they made 'bad deals' which he will replace with good ones - with China, Russia, the EU, NATO, Fiat, Ford, the energy industry and more. And like a good CEO, he will reward supporters and punish detractors or competitors, whether these are cities or states, groups or individuals, nations or international organizations.



Trump's promise to, as he famously put it, 'drain the swamp' was not a promise to get Wall Street or wealth out of politics – it was a promise to get politics and politicians out of politics. Here he is drawing on the neoliberal common sense that politics, including democratic institutions and requirements, interferes with business conduct, aimed at securing competitive advantage.

If this reproach to politics is one important strand of neoliberalism's assault on democracy, equally important to generating support for plutocratic authoritarianism is what I call neoliberalism's economization of everything, including democratic values, institutions, expectations and knowledge.

The meaning and practice of democracy cannot be submitted to market semiotics and survive. Freedom becomes reduced to advancing in markets, keeping what one gets, hence legitimating growing inequality and indifference to all social effects. Exclusion is legitimate as strengthening competitiveness, secrecy rather than transparency or accountability is good business sense. Popular sovereignty is literally incoherent – it has no place in markets – so citizenship is reduced to voting in what our Supreme Court routinely calls 'the political market place', when talking about democracy. In that marketplace today, voters are treated just as consumers are – analyzed, subsected, targeted, manipulated, hoodwinked. They are not educated, called to think, deliberate, participate or share power. They are not called to self-rule.

Neoliberalism of course also weakens democratic culture though privatizing public goods, making the very notion of concern with the common incoherent. And, it attacks the notion of social justice as the tyrannical imposition of political norms where only private liberties and values ought to prevail.

And, finally, as neoliberalism has privatized higher education, it restratified access to it *and* transformed what education is for. It narrowed higher education to job training and eliminated the value of generating educated democracy. This reminds us that that 'educational divide' that brought Trump to power isn't a timeless class divide but a distinctive neoliberal effect.

Together, the open neoliberal disparagement of politics; the assault on democratic institutions, values and imaginaries; the neoliberal attack on



public goods, public life, social justice and an educated citizenry generate a novel anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian, libertarian, authoritarian political formation. This formation now burns on the fuel of the three energies we considered earlier: fear and anxiety, sliding socioeconomic status and rancorous wounded whiteness.

At the same time, neoliberal common sense permits the Trump regime to press forward with three fundamentals of neoliberalism: deregulation, as it takes aim at laws concerning climate change, wilderness protection, labour exploitation, health and safety, equal rights, and the unbridled power of finance; privatization, as it moves to slash what is left of public funding for the arts, sciences, media, education, provisions for the poor and of course, healthcare; and tax cuts, which it seeks for business and the wealthy.

All three promise to enhance liberty by reducing politics. But again, this anti-politics is not anti-state. Trump is eager to wield the power of the state, but as a tough businessman overseeing the nation as firm, rather than as an executive of the people's will in a democracy. He's eager to clear out what hamstringing any business: regulations, procedures, checks and balances, separation of powers, internal opposition or disloyalty, demands for transparency, an independent press – all which Trump disparages or seeks to end-run or lock out.

This is how a populist revolt animated and shaped by neoliberalism culminates in anti-democratic plutocratic authoritarianism.

That said, if neoliberalism generated this revolt by decimating livelihoods and neighbourhoods, by evacuating and de-legitimizing democracy, by eroding national sovereignty, by devaluing knowledge apart from job training and business expertise, this doesn't mean that the political formation taking shape today was intended by neoliberal intellectuals or policy makers.

To the contrary, the nationalism, the protectionism, the fusion of corporate, financial and government power, exhibited in the Trump regime, and the mobilization of hate groups – these are nightmares for neoliberals.

Corporacracy, plutocracy, authoritarianism are what the neoliberals from Freiburg to Vienna to Chicago were arrayed against. They opposed them as fiercely as they opposed socialism and believed markets propped by



carefully formatted state policy would be their antidote. They dreaded corporate power in political office, and other ways of rigging markets or lashing together economic, political and social power.

There were lots of differences among the original neoliberals. But what binds them together is their commitment to separating political from economic power and diminishing the former in favour of the latter. They were as nervous about rent-seeking plutocrats as they were about Keynesian technocrats. And what they also dreaded – especially Hayek and the Ordoliberals – was political life influenced by the deluded, manipulable masses, the theatre in which Trump and other rightwing nationalists are now playing. They thought this too could be prevented by governing rooted in economic principles.

So while neoliberalism tilled the soil for racist anti-democratic authoritarian populism, it is not neoliberalism's natural *telos*. Neoliberalism was not inherently ethnonationalist, authoritarian, or plutocratic.

Rather, I'm suggesting, it is neoliberalism's Frankenstein:

On one hand, neoliberalism generated the socio-economic frustrations, the instabilities, the precarities, the loss of national horizons, and the social disintegration that have fomented nationalism, racism, xenophobia and desire for authoritarian rule. On the other hand, neoliberalism generated the hostility to politics, to social justice and even to democracy in favour of market justice and rationales combined with heavy statism.

On a third hand, it yielded – Picketty for a moment – capital accumulation that outruns growth, yielding increasing concentrations of wealth at the top. This produced skyrocketing inequality – eight men on earth now have as much wealth as the 3.6 billion humans in the world's bottom half – but also rent-seeking, especially in the FIRE sector (that's Finance, Insurance and Real Estate), whose titans populate Trump's cabinet. Rent-seeking – which, again, the original neoliberals abhorred – requires political power to enable it, hence plutocracy.

Neoliberalism, in short, has an unintended spawn, just as Weimar did.

I want to conclude now. We are obviously witnessing a ferocious eruption of right wing xenophobic nationalism in almost all western democracies. I've



been arguing that neoliberal globalization – as policy and as a form of governing reason – has been important in organizing its character. Neoliberalism has produced a reaction against the declining power and significance of the nation-state as an economic container or actor, and as a site of homogenous identity. It's produced a furious death rattle of white male rule and entitlement, at a cultural, social, economic and political level. It's produced a populist roar against political and cultural elites but not so much against economic elites or capitalism. It's produced fear of precarity, volatility and terror in a world increasingly dominated by finance, rocked by violence, but controlled by no one. It's produced the challenges of an unprecedented 70 million human beings displaced from other parts of the world, seeking refuge wherever they can. And it's produced exploitation of all of the above by politically ambitious, economically powerful forces keeping this rebellion from turning either anti-capitalist or radically democratic.

This leaves us with a nest of questions:

First, what are the dangers of preserving the shell of electoral democracy when so much that makes popular rule and democratic institutions viable is now in tatters?

Second, how might we address the deep, unavowed nihilism and despair of our time? A nihilism that has been growing for a couple of centuries as Nietzsche promised, abetted by neoliberal reason. A nihilism that makes truth and reason into a plaything, that makes values fungible, that vitiates conscience and felt responsibility for the present or the future by the powerful and the powerless alike. And a despair that the political, economic, social and ecological catastrophes on the near horizon emanate from humans' unique capacity to think, create, speak, and inhabit complexity, and also to organize violence and cover the earth with refuse and detritus.

What is to be done with this nihilism and despair?

Third and related, how do we address the apocalyptic dimension of this political uprising? Apocalyptic populism is willing to blow things up without any care for the future. It was expressed by Brexiteers who said: 'Yeah, I know Brexit will take us over a cliff, but this is insufferable' and by Trump supporters who said: 'Yeah, he might destroy the world but I'm so angry' or 'I know he can't run the country, but what the hell!' Nihilism and despair are



at work here, but so also is the tacit recognition that the future, if there is one, involves an end to white male rule. There are always those willing to take the world with them as their domination comes to an end.

Fourth, how, in the current context, to advance left aims – modest egalitarianism and self-governing; relief of gross injustices, violence and suffering; and the development of a sustainable, democratic mode of production and consumption? These aims comport badly with neoliberal reason. They are dismissed as political goals by centrists and rightists, by realists as well as authoritarians. They entail an end to the history of whiteness as an immense entitlement and power. And they are so difficult to realize: impossible to bring about on a global scale yet intensely vulnerable when organized locally.

Indeed, never in human history has the deep transformation of social, political and economic arrangements seemed more challenged, more complex, more remote, and yet more essential to securing a future for this planet and all life on it.

How might the centrist willingness to accommodate existing arrangements or the apocalyptic impulse to blow up the future be recruited into other orders of desire?

How might the nihilism resulting from the death of God be converted to appreciation that the world is in our hands – that values are chosen, not given from some deep fundament or from above; that governing truths are constructed which requires that we construct them conscientiously; that capitalism, like state communism, has probably run its course, and that its domination by finance today is probably final proof of its incompatibility with human need provision and ecological sustainability?

How might we recall justice to the place where resilience now rests, and thriving to the place where merely surviving reigns? Finally, how might the left be persuaded not to abandon democracy because its promise has always been unrealized? How might we renew its status as our best hope for conjoining freedom, equality and self-rule?

Thank you.



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