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Trumpism and the future of democracy in America

Carlos de la Torre

Donald Trump brought populism from the margins to the center, and he is an inspiration for right-wing European populists. Like the European populist right Trump politicized fears to immigration, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism. Once in power Trump used a populist playbook to manufacture and confront enemies. What does this all mean for the future of American democracy?

Defying the predictions of pollsters, pundits, and even common sense Donald Trump won the presidency of the United States. Contrary to the surprise and shock in the U.S., commentators and even scholars in Africa and Latin America suggested that Americans should seek advice from experts of these regions on how to understand the political strategy and appeal of Donald Trump.

Perhaps they were right. After all before Trump American right-wing populist politicians like George Wallace, Ross Perot, and Sarah Palin challenged the political establishment but were confined to the margins of the political system. Trump brought populism from the margins to the center, and he is an inspiration for right wing European populists. Geert Wilders considered that Trump's election was a "revolution", and Marine LePen talked about the "emergence of a new world"^[1]

The enemies of Trump's people

Trump used populist strategies and discourses to run against the political establishment. He claimed that "the establishment, the media, the special interest, the lobbyists, the big donors, they are all against me". Appropriating left-wing and nationalist critiques to globalization, Trump's final campaign TV adds indicted the "failed and corrupt political establishment" for giving up America's sovereignty to global and greedy elites that brought "destruction to our factories". With images of the predominantly white crowds that attended his rallies he concluded his campaign add saying, "The only thing that can stop this corrupt machine is you. I am doing this for the people and for the movement."



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Trump meets with President Ronald Reagan at a 1987 White House reception, 30 years before taking office

The enemies of Trump's people, the real working and middle class Americans or the forgotten majority as he said, are not only detached global political elites whose policies that favoured globalization led to the destruction of manufacturing jobs in the United States. The enemies are also those who according to Trump do not produce wealth and live from the hard work of law obeying taxpaying citizens. To stigmatize African Americans as freeloaders who do not work and live from welfare, right-wing populists represented them as "Welfare Queens" and as criminals who lived from taxpayer's money. The Tea Party expanded the list of undeserving people who took advantage of the system to "illegal immigrants", viewing them as freeloaders who are draining U.S. taxpayers by using social services and government funds.

Echoing these xenophobic tropes Trump launched his campaign from the headquarters of his business empire in New York, boasting: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best... They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some I assume, are good people." He continued, "I will build a great wall, and nobody builds better walls than me, believe me, and I'll build them very inexpensively, I will build a great, great wall on our southern border. And I will have Mexico pay for that wall."^{2]} He expanded his racist platform by calling Muslims terrorists and promising to monitor Muslims within the U.S. and banning those who want to enter this country.

'The American people' versus Mexicans, Muslims and Black militants

Like the European populist right Trump politicized fears to immigration, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism. True Americans are racialized as white citizens with a producerist work ethic. Elites above and the undeserving poor below mark the boundaries of who is a real

American. Trump explicitly constructed his notion of the American people as different from three out-groups imagined as the dangerous other, i.e. Mexicans, Muslims, and Black militant groups like Black Lives Matter.

The image of the *Mexican*, as most Latinos in the U.S. are nowadays called, is built on long nationalist stereotypes that marked them as lazy, dangerous, and as the ultimate outsiders to the U.S. nation. Regardless of whether or not Mexicans and other Latino populations had lived for long periods in the U.S, or even before this country was built, they are regarded as recent and passing immigrants. The notion of the *Muslim* terrorist is not only a xenophobic reaction to 9/11. It is also built on the legacies of the image of the U.S as a protestant nation that after many years of seeing Catholics as Papist and not real Americans finally adopted a broader notion of Christianity. Differently from Latinos and Muslims who could be attacked with blatantly racist words, Trump like the Tea Party and other conservatives used code-words of law and order to mark the unruly *black militant* as a criminal and as the opposite of the law abiding and taxpaying citizen.



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George Wallace used notions of law and order that painted Blacks as criminals or terrorists to appeal to white fears of African American equality after the Civil Rights Movement.

Trump's successful use of race to mark the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion to the U.S. national community should not come as a surprise. Scholars have demonstrated that right wing populists, starting with George Wallace in the 1960s, used notions of law and order that painted Blacks as criminals or terrorists to appeal to white fears of African American equality after the Civil Rights Movement. The right also used tropes of family values to oppose the demands of feminist and LGBT social movements.

Whereas African Americans and other poor people of colour were represented as freeloaders or criminals, feminists and LGBT activists represented the sinful and the unmoral threat to the American Christian heterosexual and patriarchal family. Trump became the new embodiment

of the rejection to the struggles in the 1960s and 1970s for equality and democracy. His nostalgic slogan ‘Make America Great Again’ could be read as a dream to recreate a society where nonwhites, women, and gays and lesbians knew their proper subordinate places.

Trumps promise to bring manufacturing jobs back to the U.S.

Trump ruptured America’s neoliberal multicultural Republican and Democratic consensus based on globalization and the limited recognition of minorities’ cultural rights. He opposed NAFTA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement. He linked national decline with the absence of industrial production. He told crowds, “‘We don’t win anymore.’ ‘We don’t make anything.’ ‘We are losing so much.’”^[3] Trump singled out corporations like Ford, Apple, Nabisco, and Carrier for moving factories overseas. He promised to bring manufacturing jobs back to the U.S. In July 2015 he challenged Ford’s plan to build a new \$2.5 billion car and truck plant in Mexico. He said that he would call “the CEO of Ford and threaten him with a 35 percent tax on every car and truck that Ford shipped across the border”^[4]

Trump might be able to at least symbolically slowdown manufacturing outsourcing, and he might be able to keep some manufacturing jobs in the U.S. Yet his nationalist policies will not stop automation and other structural sources of industrial job depletion. While rejecting globalization he put millionaires in key positions of power in his administration. His government aims to privatize and dismantle all vestiges of the welfare and regulatory state.

The Tea Party

Trump was the inheritor of the Tea Party, a right-wing insurrection against the first non-white president and to his limited policies of redistribution such as universal health care. Neoliberal deregulation of the financial system resulted in a housing boom that crashed in 2008. Millions lost their homes, and financial institutions were at risk of collapsing. Barack Obama was elected with the hope that he will help citizens over bankers, yet his policies prioritize the financial system. Nonetheless Obama introduced a stimulus package and a bill to help homeowners. In addition he launched a national health insurance plan.

Once in power Trump used a populist playbook to manufacture and confront enemies

Conservatives created the Tea Party in 2009 to resist his policies. The Tea Party was a collection of grassroots organizations, the right-wing media – especially FOX News – and elites that funded conservative candidates and ideas. They opposed Obamacare and mortgage relief as an attack by liberal elites against hard working citizens to give handouts to the undeserving poor. The Tea Party was also a conservative reaction to the first African American president. Obama was perceived as a foreigner, “an invader pretending to be an American [...] His academic achievements and social ties put him in league with the country’s intellectual elite whose [...] cosmopolitan leanings seemed unpatriotic”^[5]



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Donald Trump reached beyond the Tea Party social base, appealing also to the white working class.

Donald Trump, a Birtherist that denied Obama’s Americanness, reached beyond the Tea Party social base of white older, wealthier, and more educated conservatives, appealing also to the white working class. Trump’s message made sense to white voters’ feelings of economic anxiety and racism. His base of support was not only made up of the losers of globalization and uneducated white males.

Middle class white men and women also supported him because many felt they were not getting their fair share, and that they faced economic insecurity in their lives. They felt that women, blacks, Hispanics, and gays were empowered by unfair policies of affirmative action and political correctness that negatively targeted white heterosexual males. Many “felt culturally marginalized: their views about abortion, gay marriage, gender roles, race, guns, and the Confederate flag all were held in ridicule in the national media as backward. And they felt part of a demographic decline [...] They’d begun to feel like a besieged minority.”^[6] Trump in sum was “the identity politics candidate for white men”^[7]

President Trumps populist language

Once in power Trump used a populist playbook to manufacture and confront enemies. He argued that the media are the enemies of the people, he confronted civil rights groups like Black Life Matters, he attacked the intelligence community and nonpartisan civil servants, instead of reaching to the Democratic Party he charged against them, and even without proof accused Barack Obama of wiretapping and spying on him. Pundits interpreted his politics of confrontation and polarization as proofs of his lack of a plan of government, and poor skills to be the president.

However his populist rhetoric of politics as a war between friend and enemy, and his manufacturing of rivals as enemies are similar to the strategies of other populists in power. Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, and Victor Orbán in Hungary attacked the media and NGOs, they did not face political rivals but enemies, and they even changed their countries' constitutions or created new ones to grab power in the presidency. As a consequence they attacked liberal democracy from within, and displaced democracy towards authoritarianism.

Liberal political scientists argue that strong democratic institutions, a vibrant and active civil society, and strong media would stop Trump's undemocratic policies, and as a result American democracy would not be undermined from within as in nations with more fragile institutions, civil societies, and public spheres. The outburst of massive demonstrations against Trump two days after his inauguration, and against his Muslim travel ban that was temporarily halted by the courts, are sources of optimism. Yet U.S. liberals should pay more attention at how populists undermined democracy from within in other parts of the world.



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Trump speaking to Russian president Vladimir Putin at the Oval Office on January 28, 2017.

A very plausible scenario is that Trump will follow the populist playbook of controlling all state institutions. With the Senate and House in Republican hands, Trump has significant influence in Congress and the ability to name ultra-conservatives to the Supreme Court. He has already threatened Republicans who did not support him wholeheartedly during the campaign. It is not inconceivable that he might want to transform the Republican Party – an institution to which he does not have any long lasting loyalty – into his personalist venue.

Americans could learn from populism in other world areas that the fabric of democracy can be threatened from within

Like other populists, Trump antagonizes media corporations critical of his administration. He leads his followers at Trump rallies to heckle journalists who sat in a separate section and threatened to use libel laws to sue newspapers. He said, “The *Rolling Stone* magazine should be put out of business,” and threatened to sue *The New York Times*. During the campaign, “journalists who opposed Mr. Trump^[8] received photos of themselves—and in some cases their children – dead, or in gas chambers. Jewish and Jewish-surnamed journalists were particular targets [of Trump supporters].” Trump as president has not softened his anti-media stance. He tweeted that *The New York Times*, NBC, ABC, CBS, and CNN are the enemies of the “American people”^[9]

With regard to NGOs, Trump uses coarse language to describe civil rights groups such as Black Lives Matter. Some of his close collaborators talk about^[10] reviving the Committee on Un-American Activities, a relic of Cold-War era McCarthyism. These tactics, meant to undermine civil rights groups, will give Trump room to advance his campaign promises of mass deportation, stop-and-frisk in poor and predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods, surveillance of American Muslims, and rolling back gender and LGBTQ rights.

Trump’s victory reminds those who believe in the modern, liberal consensus that this progress must never be taken for granted. Americans could learn from populism in other world areas that the fabric of democracy can be threatened from within. In the name of returning power to the people, Erdogan, Orbán and Chávez undermined civil society’s independence and the democratic public sphere. Even if the institutional framework of democracy does not collapse under Trump, he has damaged the democratic public sphere. Hate speech and the denigration of minorities are replacing the politics of cultural recognition and tolerance built by the struggles of feminist and civil rights social movements since the 1960s.

A stronger and active civil society, and independent democratic institutions will hopefully not allow Donald Trump to kill the dream of an inclusive, tolerant, and pluralist America. Yet a crisis of national security provoked by a terrorist attack or war could give Trump the excuse to crackdown dissent in order to impose his autocratic nationalist policies. The future of American democracy is certainly uncertain under Trump. Hopefully the dream of an inclusive, tolerant, and pluralist democracy will not die with the likes of Donald Trump, Marine LePen, or Geert Wilders. Right-wing populism is the biggest threat to democracy, cosmopolitanism, and in the U.S. even to the legacies of the enlightenment.

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[10] 'Newt Gingrich wants new House Un-American Activities Committee (<http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/14/politics/newt-gingrich-house-un-american-activities-committee/>)', *CNN*, June 14, 2016.

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