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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Trump Studies: The Double Refusal and Silent Majorities in Theoretical Times

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Abstract

This article builds on the embryonic inter/trans/anti/disciplinary Trump Studies to generate a theoretical framework for understanding the Brexit outcome and Trump's victory. The consequences for researchers operating in a post-expertise political sphere means that new theories are required to create innovative interdisciplinary solutions to difficult, defiant and troubling social and economic problems. Using Jean Baudrillard's theorization of banality and the double refusal, we consider how higher education researchers remain engaged in public discussions of, about and with 'the silent majority.'

Keywords

Donald Trump, Trump Studies, Brexit, Brexit Studies, neoliberalism, alt-right, globalisation, interregnum, Jean Baudrillard, Stuart Hall

New phrases jut from our complicated present. Innovative tropes. Transgressive theories. Provocative slogans. Defiant knowledge.

Extreme Anthropology. Deviant Leisure Studies. Ultra Realist Criminology. Brexit Criminology. Trump Studies.

Such terms and tropes open red wedges, disruptive interdisciplinarity and dangerous intellectual opportunities. These spaces are available to enter and expand for radical and progressive scholars post-GFC, post-Brexit and (maybe) post-Trump. At such a moment, banality rules but theory beckons. We certainly live, interestingly, in theoretical times.¹ Previously we lived, theoretically, in interesting times. In the last decade, studies on and by the global left have attached themselves to ‘theory’ and ‘theorists.’ But there has also been a mining of popular culture, high and low.² The celebrity intellectual culture which has developed over the 2000s has produced open access online journals devoted to theorists such as Jean Baudrillard³ and Slavoj Žižek.⁴

Combining high theory and high pop, radical, edgy, cold, hard scholarship is emerging in this brittle time. Yet this potent knowledge is not emerging from the Ivy League, Russell Group or the Group of Eight universities. Instead, this dangerous knowledge is pulsing from unstable, dangerous institutions. Deviant Leisure emerged from Plymouth University. Ultra realist criminology derives from Teesside University. Extreme Anthropology originates from Oslo. This is not centred and safe knowledge. This is discourse from the edges. It is pervasive and promiscuous knowledge that does not abide by disciplines. It does not abide by sociological mantras or assumed truths of identity politics. It is not only highly theoretical but anti-empirical. Its relationship with science, and scientific methods, is similarly critical. While there are multiple marches for science,⁵ there are no protests for thinking, learning and intelligence. While empirical (even empiricist) science is a worthwhile fight in an environment of climate change deniers, where is the public support—or discussion of—tough, non-empirical knowledge? In these theoretical times, theories and theorists matters. The Brexit result and the Trump victory cannot be studied in a laboratory. The silent majority will not sit in a petri dish, waiting to be viewed under a microscope. Different locations, positions and strategies are required.

This is an article of attack and intervention in the political economy. It is not interested in media ‘representations,’ technologies or platforms. In building a relationship between Cultural Studies and Trump Studies, this article is angular, rough, brutal and sharp. It titters at the weakness of textual analysis, discourse analysis and content analysis. It shakes its head at simple connections between race, gender, class and politics. Instead, it creates space for Trump Studies, with a distinct and distinctive political and theoretical imperative. A significant, passionate and powerful edition of *Cultural Anthropology* emerged in mid-January 2017 to explore the intellectual, personal and professional consequences of the Donald Trump campaign and election victory. Michael Taussig opened this edition with the phrase and discursive flourish of ‘Trump Studies’, arguing that ‘there is no normal anymore’.⁶ Powerfully, Taussig posed the key intellectual question: How can scholarly research engage with, understand and transform the Trump presidency? He asked, ‘Can Trump Studies match its object of study?’⁷ Similar questions and problems are emerging in media studies, cultural studies and sub-disciplines such as fan studies. The changes to media platforms are more exciting than the scholarship in media studies. Fan behaviour is more innovative and incisive than fan studies can capture or recognize. The intellectual problem remains understanding the political economy in late capitalism. The meta intellectual problem is how to ‘be’ an expert in an era of post-expertise, or how to manage ‘the mastery of nonmastery’.⁸ This post-expertise

ideology is also post-consciousness and post-experience. Being black, a migrant, a woman, gay or lesbian is no longer—was it ever?—the basis of credibility and authority in academic life and beyond. Ageing white men and women ‘whiteout’ the lived experience of disempowered communities that have negotiated the consequences of discrimination, prejudice and oppression.

This article asks: why Trump? Such a question summons provocative subordinate inquiries, such as why Brexit? This project is not following Stuart Hall’s ‘Great Moving Right Show’. We have already arrived at this temporality and location. The question is what scholars will do with this reality. We grasp Jean Baudrillard’s theorization of ‘banality’ and ‘the end of the social’ to offer a strategy to place knowledge in anti-intellectual times. At the end of empiricism juts brutalizing Trump Studies to probe how and why citizens do not vote in their own best interests.

Trump Studies provides, as Bessire and Bond have confirmed, ‘a much-needed corrective to many conventional explanations of the contemporary’.⁹ Yet is Trump—Brexit, the burning Grenfell high-rise flats—a confirmation that the left has few solutions or answers to injustice? The surprising (non) victory of Jeremy Corbyn in the May 2017 election suggests that socialist goals and policies are re-connecting with a wider constituency. The volatility and agitation of the political landscape is clear. Donald Trump tweets. There is an ‘Oh Jeremy Corbyn’ ringtone.¹⁰ These movements are operating in a space where scholars and scholarship are silent, decentred and denied. Is this disconnection between politics and scholarship a recognition that ‘experts’ have failed to move, to cite Antonio Gramsci, from commonsense to good sense?¹¹

The disconnection from participatory politics is clear. Less than one quarter of the US population voted for Donald Trump. The low voting turnout created conditions where disillusioned, white men and women could treat a presidential campaign with the gravity and significance of a tweet, responding emotionally and impulsively to deep, historical economic injustices. The necessity to understand the unemployed or underemployed white working class, which has been one of Michael Moore’s key projects, is gritty and crucial. Bessire and Bond recognized that, ‘is it not a caustic irony that the “working class” emerges as an explanation or politics just after it ceases to exist as an organized force in politics’.¹² Sherry Lee Linkon summoned an evocative phrase and argument when she stated that, ‘the half life’ of deindustrialization is longer than ‘expected’.¹³ Guy Standing’s conceptualization of the precariat confirms the analytical and theoretical accuracy of that analysis.¹⁴ He shows that class is not configured through a lack of education, but by job insecurity.

Trump is to the presidency what *50 shades of grey* is to pornography: weird, unintentionally funny and all the body parts seem to be in the wrong place. Trump occupies space and squeezes alternative voices and views into unproductive boxes like ‘Mexicans’ and ‘Muslims’. But further, there is a profound question of not only progressive politics, but also the state of political debate. While gay rights, women’s reproductive rights, childcare and environmental protection may seem like the bedrock for social change, they are also the talisman for the disconnected and disempowered to gain from the blaming of others for their social and economic conditions. As Brandi Janssen realized, ‘while farmers mostly voted for Donald Trump, much of his platform is not favourable to agriculture’.¹⁵ When Trump focused on jobs, they are in the manufacturing sector, rather than working through the intricate post-fordist economies of rural and regional development.¹⁶ Similarly, the constituents of agricultural regions of Great Britain voted for Brexit. They gained from the Common Agricultural Policy. Therefore, why would voters vote against their own best interests? To understand selfish politics that do not operate in self-interest, it is necessary to poke and probe silent majorities.

Shadowing the silent majorities

Baudrillard died in March 2007 from cancer, but his work continues to be published a decade after his death. His posthumous publications have been significant in shifting the long term view of Baudrillard—from a banal postmodern theorist to a global scholar with a mature system of thought which made sense of modern banality. His most recent posthumous publication (in a new English translation) from the 1980s, *The Divine Left: A Chronicle of the Years 1977-1984*,¹⁷ shines a light on the politics in France (and elsewhere) of the 1970s and early 1980s. Only French language versions existed during his lifetime. This collection aligns with his illuminating but misunderstood work of the time on what he called ‘the silent majorities’ in books like *In The Shadow of the Silent Majorities*¹⁸ where he investigates the role of the masses in the ‘end of the social’. He predicted a moment where a Brexit could emerge. Banality refused to cleanly hook into the hegemonic cloth. If scholars or citizens are interested in why the Brexit vote occurred in June 2016 in the UK,¹⁹ or why Donald Trump defied electoral odds in the USA, or why Pauline Hanson’s right wing One Nation party can call for a Royal Commission into Islam in Australia, then they can locate answers in Baudrillard’s texts from the early 1980s, exploring notions of ‘the divine left’, ‘the end of the social’ and ‘in the shadow of the silent majorities’. The chronicle of the years 1977-1984 in Baudrillard’s writings in *The Divine Left* show the scale of social, economic and political change in the years after punk.

Baudrillard’s mature system of thought was already in train by the time the Sex Pistols, Clash, Slits and the foundation for new wave emerged on the scene in 1976.²⁰ By 1976, a key book in the Baudrillard oeuvre was written: *Symbolic Exchange and Death*.²¹ It was published in 1976 in French, but not really fully appreciated by English-speaking readers until translated. A 1993 English publication helped reorient readers but even today his work is deposited into an intellectual dustbin labelled postmodernist. Crucially, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* contained the theory of reversibility which would become so important to Baudrillard’s writing until his own death. As Sylvere Lotringer, publisher of Semiotext(e) and long-time friend of Baudrillard, stated in the introduction to a posthumous Baudrillard book called *The Agony of Power*,²² ‘reversibility is the form death takes in a symbolic exchange’.²³ In 1976, the year zero of punk in global popular culture, punk cultural stirrings were embracing antecedents that Baudrillard shared—the pataphysics of Alfred Jarry and Pere Ubu. In the mid-1970s a Cleveland punk band emerged with the name Pere Ubu to globally popularise the drama of writer Alfred Jarry from the late nineteenth century which had so fascinated Baudrillard since the 1950s. Baudrillard’s first short book explored Jarry and Pataphysics. As popular music historian Clinton Heylin noted, musician David Thomas in 1975 in Cleveland, Ohio named his band Pere Ubu after Alfred Jarry’s caricature king because, to Thomas, it added a texture of absolute grotesqueness, a darkness descending over everything within mid-1970s America. In his own lifetime, Baudrillard never declared any awareness of this popular music culture/Ubu connection, though he did once appear in a ‘punk’ costume of his own. He appeared in a gold lame jacket with mirrored lapels reading the text of his own self-penned 1980s poem ‘Motel-Suicide’, backed by a rock band at the Chance Event held at Whiskey Pete’s in Las Vegas in November 1996. The only surviving photo shows the short, balding, academic Baudrillard appearing as if he was auditioning for a place in a mid-late 1970s punk band.²⁴

Baudrillard’s attitude to power, law, culture, sovereignty and politics changed in this mid-1970s ‘punk’ period. The agony of power was as much about the power of agony. In his own agonising introduction to *The Agony of Power*, Sylvere Lotringer claims powerfully

and correctly, that Baudrillard's two key ideas throughout his work were that, firstly reality had disappeared and became replaced by simulacra and secondly that there was a potential symbolic challenge in this disappearance. This mid-1970s period is crucial for understanding Baudrillard's work for the remainder of his life, and especially its political implications for the post-GFC and post-Brexit as we enter what Slavoj Žižek has hailed as a 'new dark ages' and 'trouble in paradise'.²⁵ What can be seen in hindsight as Jean Baudrillard's 'post-punk' work is revealed in *The Agony of Power*, a book praised from within by Sylvère Lotringer as nothing less than Baudrillard's 'final intellectual testament'.²⁶ *The Agony of Power* offers a different view of sovereignty and power from the classical legal conception of power often reproduced in major works of legal philosophy and sociology of law. Baudrillard's perspective is a form of the 'patasociology' (echoing Alfred Jarry's pataphysics) hailed by French theorist of 'the social' Jacques Donzelot who worked with Baudrillard at the University of Nanterre in France.

In all this posthumous work, especially in *The Agony of Power*, Baudrillard offers a unique theory of power, incorporating what he calls 'a double refusal' by which he means the sovereign's refusal to dominate as well as the subject's refusal to be dominated. As he conveys in another posthumous book, *Carnival and Cannibal* in a passage repeated from *The Agony of Power*, the radicalism of his thinking is in the argument that power must be abolished. For Baudrillard,

*it is power itself that has to be abolished—and not just in the refusal to be dominated, which is the essence of all traditional struggles, but equally and as violently in the refusal to dominate. For domination implies both these things, and if there were the same violence or energy in the refusal to dominate, we would long ago have stopped dreaming of revolution. And this tells us why intelligence cannot—and never will be able to—be in power: because it consists precisely in this twofold refusal.*²⁷

The refusal to dominate, or to exercise sovereign power, according to Sylvère Lotringer seeking to illustrate Baudrillard's theory at its most banal, can be seen in the agonies of those involved in the revolts of May 1968 or the activities of the self-proclaimed 'post-political' Italian Autonomists in the 1970s, or the failure of the Communist Party and other parts of the left in the late 1970s and early 1980s in France. They were, in Baudrillard's theory and enhanced by Lotringer's interpretation, less than confident in wanting to dominate. They agonised about power, in both their resistance to sovereignty and their unwillingness to become involved in its exercise. Indeed, as Baudrillard has written emphatically, 'power itself is an embarrassment and there is no one to assume it truly'.²⁸ It is this configuration of power that punctuates Trump Studies. Power is embarrassing, an ill-fitting suit, an ill-timed Tweet, an unfortunate phrase. The reversibility as connoted by Baudrillard affirmed the commitment in not maintaining commitments.

Banality is important to our analysis, as is the double refusal. Best revealed in the horror and embarrassment of the successful Brexiteers and the snap resignation of David Cameron, there is both a refusal to dominate and a refusal to be dominated. The double refusal provides a framework to understand the irrationality—and denial—of power. Brexit and Trump's victory confirm the change. Brexit and Trump are embarrassing, shameful, banal and ignorant. There is something sordid and impotent in these victories. The racism and xenophobia are too overt, distasteful and grotesque. While Brexit Studies is a potent intellectual sibling to Trump Studies, the anti-intellectualism of the latter provides the most productive fodder for a revisioned Cultural Studies.

Return of the repressed amidst the double refusal

The double refusal—the denial to dominate and the denial to be dominated—lives in our current period which usefully has been described as an interregnum, following on from Gramsci. Before moving into a discussion of this term and its applications, it is important to theorizing why Trump was able to summon, frame and succeed in this social order of gaps, pauses, endings, refusals and instability.

Trump was able to capture and tame the two key political movements of the 2010s that have been masked by the rise of the right generally and the alt-right specifically. These two processes are linked to political ideologies. They are, on the one hand, neoliberalism and globalization and on the other, economic nationalism/protectionism. The populist argument over the recent period (Donald Trump, Brexit, Marine Le Pen, Pauline Hanson) has been rhetorically pressed into favouring the second process and ideology. The neoliberal globalists from the centre and left are represented by politicians like Emmanuel Macron and Justin Trudeau. They configure a relationship between neoliberal globalism and specific social movements such as feminism, anti-racism and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights. But the former neoliberals and globalists from the right (Theresa May, Angela Merkel, Malcolm Turnbull) now have swung towards the centre²⁹ and promised what used to be seen as social democratic programmes which help their populations survive the current dark times and continuing effects of the 2007/8 Global Financial Crisis. Trump and others who were elected on the populist manifesto manage the contradictions of both ideologies. Upon his election, Slavoj Žižek termed Trump merely a centrist liberal.³⁰ However Nancy Fraser, more accurately, described his election as ‘a collapse of neoliberal hegemony’.³¹ Her other example of this collapse was the Brexit vote.

Brexit involved an argument between the ‘Blairite’ Tories (Cameron, Osborne) and the ‘Powell-lite’ Tories (Johnson, Gove). Theresa May straddled the two positions, opportunistically assuming the Prime Ministership after Brexit. These are ideological arguments within the right: neoliberalism versus protectionism. Therefore, the left must develop an argument to completely separate from these two poles of debate. Wolfgang Streeck described ‘The Return of the Repressed’³² and argued that the battle between neoliberals and protectionists, globally, is set to last many years with great global uncertainty and danger to follow. He calls it an interregnum, borrowing the term from Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci confirmed 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’.³³ This is a key and important term to reclaim and understand. Scholars gain from understanding these ‘morbid symptoms’ and interpreting this gap or cessation in conventional discourse. This is not a war of position. This is a deathly vacuum that kills the ideas and the people that enter this space. The morbid vacuum was described by Zygmunt Bauman’s as a separation of power and politics, ‘institutional disparity’.³⁴ Such an argument was based on Giorgio Agamben’s analysis that showed the interregnum is a suspension of social, political or legal systems in anticipation of new systems, structures and rules.³⁵ For these Gramsci-enabled scholars, the interregnum is more than the cessation of routine. It is the destruction of one framework and a pause before a new system emerges. Importantly for this article and understanding this current period, Baudrillard’s double refusal exists in the interregnum. The ruler does not rule. The ruled do not wish to be.³⁶

What such positioning demonstrates is the few options that were available for Hillary Clinton to manage neoliberal globalization and nationalist protectionism. Her husband

had deregulated the banks, freeing international capital. This decision was the foundational moment for the Global Financial Crisis. Therefore, trying to find a workable globalization from the centre left that was feminist, anti-racism, pro-gay, pro-abortion and regenerative of disempowered working class regions was not possible through Trump's hyper-protectionist ideology.³⁷ The remarkable reconfiguration and reimagining was most clearly visualized through the triumphant defeat of Jeremy Corbyn, where he won the British election while losing it. Not having to manage gender or race-based variables—being a white man—he was able to present a socialist and anti-austerity agenda.

The modality through which Donald Trump chose to express this agenda was remarkable. Twitter mattered to the US election in a way never seen in international politics.³⁸ But Trump's use of Twitter was also aligned with his public speaking, saying the unsayable in a truncated microphone drop. But the vocabulary choice was also profound. Name calling of opponents, abusing women's weight and discussing sex tapes were part of a wider linguistic portfolio. It is rare to hear such parataxis in public discourse. The use of phrases and clauses without grammatical alignment and often without connection between the ideas presented in a sequence was a stark differentiation from Obama who pondered and considered each word with caution and reflection. Described as 'the crisis in our public language'³⁹ by a former Director General of the BBC, he argues that there is gulf between the language and world view offered in policy and by the public. Yet was this gulf or separation new to the 2010s?

These debates and movements, or lack thereof, since Bill Clinton and Tony Blair were enabled through the lack of a genuine left. Neoliberalism and financialization have not and will not deliver social justice. In recognition of this reality, Bernie Sanders erupted through the political process as a key figure in genuine opposition to Donald Trump. These two figures—Sanders and Trump—shredded the delicate dance between centre right and centre left, but also rendered Donald Trump's interregnum volatile and unstable. The double refusal—the denial to dominate and the denial to be dominated—was revealed through an election campaign that almost exceeded the oddity of Trump's victory. Pilloried by the press, Jeremy Corbyn managed to deliver strong public speeches and work well with individuals, while maintaining his thirty years of commitment to peace, redistribution of wealth, the National Health Service, housing and free education. While the 'victorious' Theresa May summoned armed police on the streets of British cities to manage bombings and vehicular threats in Manchester and London, the Grenfell Tower fire performed more than any other social event the disregard and neglect of public good, public housing and the poor. Such a stark realization—confirmed by the death of residents and the shroud of a burnt building in the middle of London—meant that Jeremy Corbyn could maintain the higher ethical ground and confirm peace, cooperation between communities and the necessity for a greater good in life and politics. This disparity was starkly revealed on the weekend of 24-26 June 2017. Theresa May was at a military event in Liverpool. Jeremy Corbyn was in Glastonbury. This is interregnum politics.

The banality of racism

I have people that have been studying [Obama's birth certificate] and they cannot believe what they're finding ... I would like to have him show his birth certificate, and can I be honest with you, I hope he can. Because if he can't, if he can't, if he wasn't born in this country, which is a real possibility ... then he has pulled one of the great cons in the history of politics⁴⁰ — Donald Trump

It is intemperate and incorrect to suggest that every individual that voted for Donald Trump is racist and ignorant and everyone who voted for Hillary Clinton was benign, vegan and progressive. In our analysis, we are attempting to understand the moment, the intellectual framework and the cultural momentum that enabled the election of Trump and some of the influences of these ideological standpoints. How does the double refusal apply to this context? In this article, we are probing and testing the assumption that Brexit voters and Trump voters had an identity to protect, and racism, misogyny, xenophobia and homophobia are merely attendant othering strategies to tightly align whiteness and nationalism. The banality of that identity, whiteness, colonizers and the ambiguity of the phrase ‘middle class’ (rather than ‘working poor’), created a ‘values- driven’ movement. Our theorization of whiteness is capturing a defensive, retracting, brittle and brutalizing ideology. It does not portray the early delicacy of Gerard Early⁴¹ or Robert Miles.⁴² It is a whiteness that grows and spurts in the spaces of the double refusal to create havoc, chaos and confusion.

These values were nostalgia, nationalism and colonial order. Doug Kiel described this movement with clarity: ‘The shift from an Obama presidency to Trump demonstrates that social justice can be sidelined when people who call themselves white prioritize their own needs over the needs of others’.⁴³ The idea that after the Global Financial Crisis that a businessman—active in real estate and banking—would be considered a possibility for president of the United States demonstrates that the wound created by the collapse in the economy had been forgotten or displaced. Unemployment was managed effectively by Obama. But the structural problems of finance capitalism and real estate capitalism unbalancing the global economy into unpredictable and volatile cycles meant that the ‘threat’ of nations that maintained a balance of industrial and post-industrial goods—like China, Germany, India and Mexico—was recognized and promoted by Trump. Trump spoke of protectionism and the greatness of the United States. There is no excuse for racism or ignorance, but denial and displacement of uncomfortable theorizations of whiteness do not enable an understanding of the shift that has occurred.

The election of Donald Trump solidifies that the shift to right wing political ideas is not coming or emerging. It is here. We wish to be clear: Trump is not the carefully calculating, natural leader of the Right. Controversial as it might be, Donald Trump was a chancer that captured conservative anxieties about the weak and weakening ties between nationalism, whiteness and power. Prior to 2012, Trump was never a voice of the right. He had been aligned with Democratic political views.⁴⁴ Donald Trump as an unwitting, ignorant vessel, filled with racism, fear and loss, was a response to President Barack Obama as a threat to the American political system. We choose this position for reasons that are two fold. Firstly, there is danger in over-philosophizing Trump as a lone calculating and executing individual. Instead Trump should be viewed as a puppet, albeit a powerful one, in the larger context of global politics. Secondly, by using President Barack Obama and his ‘powerful symbolism of black advancement’,⁴⁵ we can come to understand the steady rise of the Right. Gilroy noted that a new type of racism was arising in political discourse. He argued that it avoided being recognized as such because, ‘it is able to line up “race” with nationhood, patriotism and nationalism ... homogenous in its whiteness yet precarious and perpetually vulnerable to attack from enemies’.⁴⁶ The disdain for President Obama slots into this fear. He was the enemy within. He was educated, Christian, successful and heteronormative. He was the Sidney Poiter of politics. He fulfilled all the requirements of the American Dream: success on white terms. Yet his skin, his packaging, summoned fear, confusion, anger and irrationality. The delusional narratives about his birth certificate highlighted the irrationality.

In this bleak time for American politics, scholars must not deflect what it means for Trump to succeed Obama as president. Barack Obama embodied the loss of power from whiteness, which was particularly poignant for the far right wing of the Republican Party. His messages of hope and change were motivational, passionate and eloquently delivered. However it is the body from which these views were expressed that performed the decline of white power. President Obama's election came on the heels of the Global Financial Crisis, which emerged from the neo-liberal and anti-regulatory Republican administration that developed a bailout package to large banks because they were 'too big to fail'. In the minds of some economic and socio-political scholars, Obama was heralded as the saviour of the American economy.⁴⁷ Perhaps the expectations stacked upon him were unrealistic in both foreign and domestic policy, yet he was seen as a beacon of change when compared to the serious economic and military errors made by the previous Republican government. Trump's now infamous campaign tagline of empowering the white working class seems like a twisted joke considering it was people like Trump who benefited from the declining financial power of blue collar workers. In 2007, the working class were not angry with the Democrats, but instead demanded to know how their Republican government had failed them. Nine years later the message has been manipulated and blame removed—whited out—from the Republican government and placed on the Democrats. This inversion was irrational, but potent in its banality. For the first time in the history of American politics, the dominant white population was being ruled by the 'lesser' race.⁴⁸ As expressed by Boris Johnson, America was being ruled by a former colonial subject: 'Some said it was a snub to Britain. Some said it was a symbol of the part-Kenyan President's ancestral dislike of the British Empire —of which Churchill had been such a fervent defender'.⁴⁹

This crystalized the fate white America was facing: they no longer had control of *their own* country. Obama was the manifestation of past injustices that aligned, regrouped and gained power. His black body captured colonial history. In this context, racism could no longer be minimized, displaced or disguised as a dog-whistle. It was overt and nasty: 'Make America Great Again' and 'Take our country back.' The 'Again' in the MAGA slogan matters. The criteria by which America was ever 'great' are debateable.

What makes the United States unusual is that liberalism has remained the punctuation for significant historical moments, beginning with Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. Freeing three million slaves destroyed the foundation of the southern economy. That was the cost of social justice and this new order was enforced by the Union Army. This was the first of a series of liberal responses to structural injustices. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in 1933, Harry Truman's Fair Deal in 1948, that offered universal health care, John Kennedy's New Frontier that guaranteed federal funds to create a post-segregation education system, and Johnson's Civil Rights Act in 1964 all created, built and captured a distinctive pathway through liberalism. Obama's presidency built on this foundation. But the key sociological absence in this history is a discussion of the white working class, a group that was socialized through American history to feel powerful through the colour of their skin, but was socially, geographically and economically immobile through a lack of education and regional injustices. Bonnie Greer captured the impotency of this group and how Trump was able to summon their vote for one last presidency.

Liberalism has become the consensus, the voice of reason, the beacon of civilization itself. But it forgot another group, just as needy, whose skin colour gave it privilege and safety, but not mobility. For them, liberalism took its eye off the ball. Now the American white working class is being conned by the present occupant of the Oval Office with promises of the return of 'King Coal,' steel plants, shipping, the land itself. But the future is robotics, AI, nanotechnology, biotechnology and other technologies ... This reality, along with ageing demographics, means that time is literally running out for 'Trump America' and its equivalents in the UK and Europe, as indeed the arrival of Emmanuel Macron already suggests.⁵⁰

'Protecting' borders and pretending that the fordist industrial revolution is still a functional model for production is not only nostalgic, but wrong. Similarly, the assumption that Christian white people are better, greater, more intelligent and benevolent than atheists and members of other faiths and races is not only ignorant and foolish, but enacts active forgetting of a white Catholic who promulgated the genocidal final solution through Europe. When Theresa May could only form a government through a partnership with the DUP, the political arm of the Unionist organization, a corrosive reality became clear. The problem or issue is never the alleged terrorism or connections with violent military extremists. The problem is race. White, protestants with an history of hate speech from Northern Ireland are worthy of a coalition, risking the highly volatile peace process in the region at the very point that Brexit negotiations evaluate the territorial border with the Republic.

Such an unthinkable coalition required some groundwork during the Brexit campaign. Trump's victory was not an isolated ideological car crash. Like Trump, Trump Studies arches beyond one man and one nation to capture the consequences of the double refusal in the interregnum. In light of the United Kingdom Brexit vote, the role of Nigel Farage, the leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (Ukip), requires attention. He was fighting for the same social group and 'problem' as Donald Trump: the loss of white power.⁵¹ After championing the controversial, xenophobic and racist vote, he travelled to the United States and actively endorsed Donald Trump. It is startling that such a minor figure gained such a profile. He hooked profoundly racist ideas back into British politics.⁵² It was Enoch Powell-esque or Powell-lite. Unlike other conservative British politicians before him such as Margaret Thatcher, Nigel Farage was (re)activating 'white men's burden'. Both Farage and Trump have been accused of overt and damaging racism yet they have risen in profile, steering a significant turn in global politics. In their rhetoric, both Trump and Farage fought to maintain the power of their white identity that is in danger of being compromised by progressive views.

Farage created false equivalence between the experiences of the colonizer and the colonized, minimizing the profound damage enacted to the languages of Indigenous peoples, faith structures, family structures, and relationships with the land. This false equivalence balances the 'benign and really rather good' parts of colonization, which significantly are not mentioned by name, and the people who are still reconciling with the consequences of invasion, genocide and dispossession.

It's just that you know people emerge from colonialism with different views of the British. Some thought that they were benign and really rather good, and others saw them as foreign invaders that kept people suppressed. Obama's family come from that second school of thought and it hasn't quite left him yet.⁵³

In such a statement, race is seen to ‘perform a double function’.⁵⁴ Firstly, it signifies geographical origins but perhaps more in line with cultural studies analyses, it also responds to Obama’s blackness as an othered and othering identity that gained power. The superiority of the white race is confirmed only through a colonial gauze. Farage viewed Barack Obama through a colonial lens, therefore deemed him inferior and dangerous.

Barack Obama presented a direct contestation to white superiority. Obama through his presidency challenged what it meant to be black in the United States of America. The multiple mentions by Trump of ghettos⁵⁵ and crime in Chicago were an attempt to wrestle the ideology from blackness as power to blackness as problem. Through his visible difference, Obama also ‘called into question the dominant coding’ of what it meant to be American.⁵⁶ The fact that Farage had to position Barack Obama in colonial history reveals that race and cultural background play a pivotal role in who can hold power without questioning birth, religion or qualifications. In the construction of American identity, Pehrson, Brown, and Zagefka maintain that nationhood becomes linked with essentialist racial definitions, which summon an anti-immigrant prejudice.⁵⁷

Barack Obama fuelled the merging sparks of whiteness, nationalism and racism. Reviewing Trump’s campaign as compared to Obama’s previous campaigns, Trump did not emphasize issues of policy and governance. Instead, his focus was more on nationalist sentiments and how he could be seen as the savior of the white race. The multicultural nature of the United States was viewed as a danger to the imagined singular whiteness that narrativized the nation’s origins and actively erased indigenous dispossession. As Gilroy confirmed, ‘We are living through a profound transformation in the way the idea of “race” is understood and acted upon’.⁵⁸ This has been seen in countries such as Australia with the re-emergence and re-election of the right-wing nationalist party One Nation, in France with Marine Le Pen being a serious contender of the French presidency, and in the United Kingdom with the controversial Brexit vote. As a direct response to strengthen and perpetuate a singular bundling of nationalism and racism, invented fears and threats pull voters into ignorance and irrationality. Race and racism are now being viewed as something that has to be preserved through regular, banal and everyday topics of conversation.

Stuart Hall termed this process ‘the great moving right show’.⁵⁹ When he wrote these words, he was wrong. It was a mis-reading of Margaret Thatcher’s first term, which was much more volatile and unclear in its political directives than emerged after the Miner’s Strike. Thirty five years after he published these phrase, events have now caught up with his analysis. Hall argued that the, ‘Radical Right does not appear out of thin air. It has to be understood in direct relation to alternative political formations attempting to occupy and command the same space.’⁶⁰ Political discourse, summoning fear and horror towards the visible other, has damaged the multicultural project, which was a ‘small l’ liberal and progressive policy, rather than a radical change. Kovel argues that the more abstract the language that is used to describe minorities in society, the more alienated and dehumanized they are, and the easier it is to control the types of discourse that they occupy.⁶¹

What is startling is the similarity of language in this racialized project, even when statements are separated by place and time. Compare Margaret Thatcher’s commentary before her election as Prime Minister with Michael Fallon nearly forty years later.

People are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture and, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in.⁶²

The Germans haven't seen our proposals yet and we haven't seen our proposals yet, and that's still being worked on at the moment to see what we can do to prevent whole towns and communities being swamped by huge numbers of migrants. In some areas of the UK, down the east coast, towns do feel under siege, [with] large numbers of migrant workers and people claiming benefits, and it's quite right we look at that.⁶³

The hostility towards outsiders who do not respect 'the British character' either take the work or claim benefits that should be preserved for British-born citizens. The use of the word 'swamped' remains significant.

Pauline Hanson's One Nation ideology has a 'plug in and play' modality, where speeches can be separated by 20 years and the feared other can merely be replaced by another disempowered target.

*I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians,
They have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate.
Now we are in danger of being swamped by Muslims who bear a culture and ideology that is incompatible with our own.⁶⁴*

The word 'swamped' is a racist talisman, an epistemological power surge. It activated a swarm, but is also colour-activated. Whiteness is swamped, infiltrated, by colour.

Such sentiments fuse when Nigel Farage and Donald Trump met. Trump expressed his enthusiasm, obviously, through a tweet.

Many people would like to see @Nigel_Farage represent Great Britain as their Ambassador to the United States. He would do a great job!⁶⁵

The false consensus, through phrases like 'many people', summon a 'silent majority' where none exists. In these comments, fierce effort is being exerted to protect whiteness from the un(der)defined other, migrants, who corrode national whiteness.⁶⁶ The fact these words are being repeated in an almost viral fashion shows the banality of racism. When repeated often enough, even racism becomes acceptable. Twitter is the enabler to this conversation. Charles Krauthammer described Trump's 'need to dominate every news cycle feeds an almost compulsive tweet habit'.⁶⁷ Language truncation, the use of images and hashtags, results in inappropriate, inaccurate or mis-judged commentary in 140 characters. Decades of accepting this language has created Donald Trump and enabled tweets. He summoned a campaign that was littered with fascist comments that were unchallenged. Through this great moving right show, the appointment of Steve Bannon as White House Chief Strategist was the most concerning of all the president's choices. While he lasted less than a year in the job, the discursive framework was built.

Trump summoned a politics of grievance, rather than solutions. There was no audacity of hope, but angry howling at perceived injustice emerging through 'fake news', 'positive discrimination', feminism and alternative modes of masculinity beyond the heteronormative and procreative. To observe how these perceived injustices were applied, Larry Schweikart, member of the Trump campaign, stated, without footnote or reference:

Over the next six years, it became virtually impossible to criticize Obama or his policies without risking charges of racism. In fact Obama was very much a 'ruling class' president, having attended an Ivy League college, and having received special considerations and favors throughout his career because of his race. He had very little in common with the millions of Americans who worked forty-hour-a-week jobs or ran their own small businesses, or who served in the military.⁶⁸

The idea of a black man having intelligence, working hard, striving and succeeding had no place in such an ideology. The child of a single mother, from a mixed raced family, committed to education and community service did not function for the alt-right. Race was pivotal to the Trump victory. Trump was an answer (back) to Obama. This was a relational, fortress whiteness that drowned difference in its moat.

Schweikart went further, broadening the critique to the wider fight for black rights: 'Black Lives Matter had no interest whatsoever in all 'black lives,' only in the relatively small number of blacks killed in police shootings that they could turn into anti-cop propaganda'.⁶⁹ This statement confirms the challenge in the Trump discourse. While there appears to be nodes of reason, commentary and evidence-driven debates in some of these arguments, the jump to racist, sexist and homophobic ideology is rapid and ruthless. Black men have been killed by police when they have committed no crime. This is not 'anti cop' propaganda. This is a recognition that black men are killed at a higher rate than white men by the police.⁷⁰ The hard lines on gun freedom and immigration control were undergirded by a disrespect of men and women with alternative lives outside of heteronormative, procreative, white experiences. Joel Pollak and Larry Schweikart stated that, 'Trump was the best candidate possible for the times, while Clinton was possibly the worst'.⁷¹ Beyond hyperbole, what did this statement mean and—most importantly—was it accurate?

Whiteness matters to the answer of this question. George Lipsitz's evocative phrase, 'the possessive investment in whiteness'⁷², resonates with the Trump victory. Lipsitz argues that this *possessive* investment emerges through the collision of 'public policy and private prejudice'.⁷³ The reinvigoration of nationalism as a white, colonizing, project is key to Trump's victory and Brexit. Making America Great Again and 'taking back' Britain from Europeans is a way to invest and align two (seemingly) disparate ideologies: protectionism and neoliberalism. Joel Pollak, member of the Trump team, stated that 'to Trump supporters, the candidate was the antidote to the twenty-five-year consensus in Washington about free trade, open borders, and transactional politics'.⁷⁴ The alternative—protectionism, walls and unbridled ideology—are attempting to continue economics undergirded by finance and real estate capitalism. Yet both are founded on the free movement of people and capital. This paradox powers the double refusal.

Intellectuals in the interregnum

Much of Trump and Brexit can be described as an anti-intellectual turn in politics and daily life. Intelligent people, offering evidence-driven commentary and contributions to debate, were dismissed as irrelevant. Trump Studies returns the intellectual to anti-expertise times. Racism, sexism and homophobia are irrational. The only way to enable these discussions is to dismiss intelligence, scholarship and evidence. Michael Gove captured this remarkable turn in public discourse on *Sky News* on 3 June 2016: 'I think the people in this country have had enough of experts from organisations with acronyms, saying they know what's best and getting it consistently wrong'. The irrationality of Trump and Brexit are breathtaking. It is expected in

a neo-liberal age that voters would behave selfishly, or at least in their own best interests. Yet the areas of the UK that most gained from European subsidies voted to leave. The areas of the United States most impacted by Trump's version of finance and real estate capitalism, from the 'rust belt', voted for him. In this context, Ian Dunt's commentary is convincing:

At the core of Britain's current dilemma is a refusal to engage with objective fact. The debate about Brexit was lost, almost as soon as it began, in a tribal and emotional dogfight which bore little relation to reality.⁷⁵

The key debate was a racist one: freedom of movement. The British voter wanted the right to live in Spain, Portugal, France or Germany, but did not wish European workers to have the right to live in the UK. The European Union is run by four freedoms: goods, capital, services and people. These four freedoms cannot be separated. Cornish cream cannot be sold without tariff in France while blocking French workers from managing a bar in Manchester.

Nationalism is a damaging and debilitating ideology. Benedict Anderson's intricate historical theorization of 'imagined communities'⁷⁶ was more than a cliché or motif. He demonstrated the role of language, religion, the military, education and law in summoning arbitrary and artificial barriers, borders and limitations. The European Union was an imagined community. So is Welshness, Englishness and Scottishness. The arrogant assumption that Britain is somehow better than other members or the European Union will pose profound consequences for the Brexit 'negotiations.' The British, like Americans, are not great, special, distinctive or worthy of special attention or relationships. The negotiations will end badly if the British negotiating position is based on their 'special place' in the world. As Dunt confirms, 'most of the time in politics, the simplest explanation is the best one. And the simplest explanation is that the Brexit ministers have come to believe their own nonsense.'⁷⁷

Article 50 is the punishment clause from the EU. It is meant to be a warning to any member nation considering leaving the Union. It is also incredibly complex. There is no single Brexit. It requires very specific changes and challenges for administration, law and economics. After half a century of enmeshed European, English and Welsh, and Scottish laws, simple repeals and reorganizations will not suffice. The 'Great Repeal Bill' will create a cascade of consequences that will take decades to correct. Michael Ashcroft and Kevin Culwick showed the assumptions behind British dominance and Brexit: 'Three things conferred clout, people thought: size, wealth and being a longstanding part of the European establishment. In other words, Germany ran the show'.⁷⁸ Whether or not Germany 'ran the show,' alongside the idea that this is a rational reason to leave, demonstrates the presumption that Britain should 'run the show.'

Brexit was so stunning because citizens did not act in their own best interests. Craig Oliver, the Director of Politics and Communications for David Cameron, confirmed that, 'our campaign was based on the simple proposition that electorates don't vote against their own pockets'.⁷⁹ Reflecting on the failure of this project, Oliver could only offer that, 'we struggled to communicate a complex truth in the face of simple lies'.⁸⁰ Yet Cameron's truth with Brexit is much more complex. In 2007 he gave a 'cast iron guarantee' to hold a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. Referenda had been held previously. After Ted Heath's Britain moved into the Common Market, 67% of the voting population confirmed in 1975 that they wished to stay in the EEC. Significantly, instead of posing a question on the Lisbon Treaty, an 'all or nothing' question was posed to the population. This summoned the Eurosceptic forces in the Conservative party.⁸¹ Significantly, the Brexit confirmed after the referendum was of a much greater scale and severity than predicted, or perhaps even desired, by the Brexiteers.⁸²

Because of the vote and because of how it was framed, all the dog whistle topics erupted during the campaign. With Ukip strengthening and saying the unsayable about immigration, more reasoned discussions that did not activate xenophobia and nationalism became lost in a debate where bizarre equivalences were enacted, particularly with regard to the cost of EU membership and funding for the NHS. These dog whistles summoned a very complex group of just-majority voters,⁸³ carefully configured by Tim Shipman:

*The referendum represented a revolt of the provincial classes—ignored, maligned and impoverished—against the cosy metropolitan consensus on Europe, the benefits of immigration and the belief that national economic prosperity trumps personal experienced of hardship.*⁸⁴

The problem is that this group will only suffer further through disconnection from the EU. Costs of basic goods will increase and tariffs will be imposed on British goods.

US Senator Elizabeth Warren, in response to the Brexit-Trump nexus, stated that ‘the truth is that people are right to be angry’.⁸⁵ Those who enacted the Global Financial Crisis through their greed and carelessness have not only fled responsibility, but gained from public subsidies of their excesses. Private profit was propped up by public subsidies of risk.⁸⁶ Yet other variables such as deindustrialization, pollution, neglect of former industrial heartlands, increased cost of education and the structural inattention to both preventative health and primary care, has meant that righteous rage has been displaced into improper blame. The phrase ‘too big to fail,’ which was used to justify public bailouts of privately-run corporations, now applies more widely to the United States. If the lessons of the GFC are learned, then this time, there will be a realization that the US can fail, and the world will recover. Donald Trump signifies this interregnum, where US military, economic and political power has declined. Trump, who holds no government experience, displays an uneven temperament and hires his family in key positions, is the ‘outsider’ to manage this culture of angered, ill-focused blame. Brittany Packnett was clear: ‘White people handed us Donald Trump. White people did this’.⁸⁷

White people—angry, frightened and xenophobic white people—are (mis)managing the consequences of decolonization and postcolonialism. The clichés of our language—it is as clear as black and white, black sheep, white wedding—demonstrate the connotations buried deep in our language. The clustering of nationalism, protectionism, militarism and Christianity means that anyone that operates outside of these parameters, no matter how judiciously or carefully, is ridiculed and harpooned with a breath-taking harshness. The treatment of Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour Opposition Leader in the UK, demonstrates that the pillaring of Hillary Clinton was not simply a gendered outlier attack. Corbyn’s anti-racist activist career, fighting apartheid, alongside his pacifism means that his name, like Hillary’s, is a dog whistle on both the left and the right. The Blairites in his own party will not serve on his front bench. The conservatives abuse his suits, his speech and his gentle but considered commitments. The *Daily Mail* screamed a headline on June 3, 2017, less than one week before the British election. ‘Corbyn’s Nuclear Meltdown’, featured on the first page, emerged because, ‘Jeremy Corbyn last night refused to say whether he would defend Britain from nuclear attack’.⁸⁸ The assumption that there is a way to defend any nation or person from a nuclear attack is muted. But significantly, an article on page two, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) charging Craig Mackinlay, a Conservative candidate, with electoral expenses fraud did not attack the candidate, but the CPS. The headline—‘Why now?’—did not probe the spending of tax payers money, but simply undermined the credibility of the CPS.⁸⁹

Jeremy Corbyn has managed a scale of personal attacks equivalent to Hillary Clinton, which is a rare treatment for a heterosexual, white man. But he has a policy that is even more

dangerous than Clinton's portfolio: pacifism and deep caution when considering military solutions. Violence has been justified since 11 September 2001 as preventing terrorism. Yet in such an environment, the brutal murder of Jo Cox, a Member of Parliament on the campaign trail arguing for the value of the European Union to the British people, was enacted not by a follower of Islam, a migrant, a refugee or a radical. Cox was killed by Thomas Mair. Mair was a Nazi sympathizer who was aggrieved by Cox's support for refugees. He appeared at her constituency surgery in Birstall, shot her with a shotgun and repeatedly stabbed her. Expressed clearly, a white man killed a white woman while she was at work. The foundation for this murder was her affirmation of anti-racism and anti-xenophobia. The avoidance of these facts and interpretations must be addressed.

This is a tragic story. But Thomas Mair's words after shooting Cox remain resonant and gritty in their horror: 'Britain first. Britain will always come first'.⁹⁰ Britain, the United States, Australia, Canada must not come first and allow the global issues of climate, work, homelessness, education, health and injustice to remain a suppliant to raw, vulgar nationalism. Trump Studies stands as an intellectual reminder that the cult of personality, conducting foreign policy via Twitter, and fetishizing arbitrary borders to configure social and economic policy is not – and has never been – sufficient for democracy, let alone scholarship.⁹¹

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