
Ship of Fools: What Trump Teaches

15/11/2016



Yes, I was surprised. Since I spend a lot of time in western Pennsylvania, I knew there was more support for Trump than the media let on, but he just seemed too incompetent, incoherent, and disorganized a candidate to defeat the Clinton machine. I enjoyed torturing my friend who has been very close to Hillary for decades with scary stories about Trump surging. But in our early election day texting, I confessed that I thought it would be called for Hillary by 11PM at the latest. I was as wrong as everyone else.

I did not vote for either Hillary or Trump, and was resigned to taking my chances with either horrible outcome, but I was implicitly anticipating the dangers of a Clinton administration. I also thought, however, that there might be one positive effect of Hillary's presidency. Contrary to what might be considered the usual leftist line that electing the explicitly ultra-reactionary Trump would foment the revolution, or at least radical discontent, I thought that, in the American context, Hillary being president would help the left the most.

If Trump wins, I argued, and his policies fail miserably and obviously, Democrats and liberals would spend the next four years saying: "See, you should have voted for Hillary," and channeling oppositional energy into a familiar anti-Trump, anti-Republican, "Let's make sure we elect a Democrat in 2020" politics—as we saw after Bush's election in 2000. The Democrats would once again present themselves as the system's way out.

On the other hand, I thought that, if Hillary were to win and wreak her expected havoc on America and the world, Democrats and liberals would not be able to blame the Republicans. It would be the left that could say "See what you voted for?" The system would have failed in its Democratic guise. Because this might finally persuade more progressive-minded people to break with the Democratic Party once and for all. It was Hillary's presidency, not Trump's, that would open new paths for the left.

Now we have Donald Trump as president. His election is a disgrace, and we know what a disaster his administration will be for the country and the world. Mr. Anti-establishment, "drain the swamp," tribune of the forgotten, is already filling up his clown car cabinet with the same-old tired Republican reactionaries and

incompetents (Sarah Palin, Giluliani, Christie, Bolton), not to mention turning to industry and Wall Street lobbyists (and here) and, of course, Goldman Sachs (Steven Mnuchin) to run the Treasury. As business news site Quartz so aptly headlines: Trump criticized Clinton for her Wall Street ties, but he's the best thing to happen to big banks.

Just as with Hillary, there's the (fake) public position, and then there's the (real) private position, and Trump's betrayal of whichever working-class voters thought he would be their savior has already begun. Let's hope they don't cling to their illusions about him as long as foolish liberals have clung to theirs about Obama.

So the task for the left is to organize and fight—against every piece of crap policy Trump and his crew try to foist on us, and for a different political world. No doubt. But here's where my fears about President Donald as opposed to President Hillary are already making me shudder. If our idea of organizing is to spend the next four years in a hashtag "opposition" movement (#FightTrump), managed and funded by the Democrats and their favored oligarchs, in order to mobilize support for the 2020 candidacy of an Elizabeth Warren, a Cory Booker, or a Lin-Manuel Miranda (Who can't see that coming?)—the next capitalist-imperialist identity-politics candidate—then we will have learned nothing.

As I write, the pressing question for many is whom to name as the next DNC Chair: Howard Dean or Keith Ellison. Who the hell cares? If our idea of organizing is to reform the Democratic Party—get the right guy or gal in charge—we will have learned nothing. The Democratic Party is a counter-revolutionary center-right capitalist party, and the DNC Chair is an employee of the donors. The problems we are facing, and the solutions we need to fight for, are way more radical than anything the Democratic Party will ever consider. If we haven't learned this, we've learned nothing.

Even just considering electoral politics in the most basic democratic terms, we need to fight for the elimination of the electoral college, a transparent and trustworthy voting system, some form of Instant Runoff Voting, an end to voter caging and suppression, public financing, and access of third parties to debates, the media, and ballots in all states. Is the Democratic Party going to fight for any of that?

Did nobody notice that Trump, for whom only 27% of the eligible electorate voted, actually lost the popular vote by more than 500,000, and maybe more than two million, votes? By the only salient democratic measure of the people's will, Hillary Clinton won the election. So how is the country all racist and/or sexist? If the Electoral College didn't exist, would any of Hillary's supporters be excoriating the 2016 voting electorate for its racism and misogyny, or would they be congratulating that electorate—the very same electorate with the very same result—for its embrace of diversity? White Supremacy didn't defeat Hillary; the Electoral College did.

Wouldn't it make more sense for Hillary supporters, instead of complaining about the imputed racist and/or misogynist attitudes of those who didn't vote for her, to champion the cause of the majority who did, and focus on agitating for the reforms that are needed to make our electoral system actually democratic?

This is not revolutionary, but simple democratic, politics, but it implies the need for a difficult fight for serious changes. Does anyone think the Democratic Party, which so worships the system that it respectfully accepted having a couple of presidential elections stolen from it, is up for even that?

And that's not counting the hard problems, the socio-economic problems.

Yes, there's plenty of racism, misogyny, and xenophobia all across the United States, including among those low-income rural white voters in Pennsylvania who voted for Obama in 2008 and flipped to Trump this year. Trump personally has a history of trafficking in such vile attitudes, and his campaign certainly did. Everyone must fight them whenever and wherever they appear, and they will be a central target—along with his militarism, imperialism and authoritarianism—of left opposition to the Trump administration.

But those attitudes existed in western Pennsylvania and the rest of the country in 2008 and 2012, too. Why were there five million fewer votes for Clinton this year than Obama in 2012? Why did over 90% of counties that voted for Obama either in 2008 or 2012, and one third who voted for him in both elections, vote for Trump this year? Six states flipped from Obama to Trump. Is the only salient fact about this Obama-Trump voting bloc that it's racist?

Trump got a whole 1% more of the white vote than Romney. Why did Hillary get a lower share of African-American (-7%) and Latino (-6%) votes than Obama did in 2012, while Trump got a higher share of both (+2%) than did Romney? Most importantly, why did 45% of the electorate stay home?

If we don't seriously confront the fact that many of those millions of voters who switched from Obama to Trump, or to their couches, did so because of the failures of eight years of a Democratic administration, we will learn nothing.

This wasn't a sudden switch, and it wasn't personal. As Nicole Aschoff and Bhaskar Sunkara point out, over the eight years of the Obama administration, "Democrats have lost almost a thousand state-legislature seats, a dozen gubernatorial races, 69 House seats and 13 in the Senate." This year, they lost the presidency and the Senate.

That's an extended slide into disaffection. It would be foolish to think it was because voters took a few years to notice the color of Barack's skin. It would be supremely foolish not to consider that white working-class voters in Rust Belt states switched to Republican—and black and Latino working-class voters stayed home—because eight years of the Obama administration did nothing to stop the ongoing destruction of their lives and communities. It would be foolish not to recognize that Obama did not deliver the change he was promised, the change those voters of all races voted for—in 2008 and in declining numbers in 2012. It would be foolish to refuse to consider that this year's rejection of Hillary was because they knew she was going to continue ignoring them in the same way.

Do we notice what's happened to Detroit and Flint, and to the hundreds of exurban communities surrounding cities like that? Or do we just notice how mellifluously and rhetorically correctly it was done? Do we really think five million people who voted for Obama, some twice, did not vote for Hillary because they all want to go around grabbing pussy, rather than because of what's been happening to them for the last eight years?

Sure, there are plenty of pissed-off white people. Should there not be? Should working-class whites—and every other working-class constituency, and all of their progressive allies—not be furious that their lives have been destroyed over the past thirty years by what Paul Street calls "a relentless top-down class war on their livelihoods, unions, and standard of living," and over the past eight years by the largest transfer of wealth in the history of the country to the top ten-thousandth of the population? Should they not bridle at the infinite increase in military spending and the endless series of wars to which their children are sent, which have no discernible interest for them? Should they not be livid at the utterly corrupt private health insurance system, now called Obamacare, that is flaying them to death with increasing premiums, co-pays, and deductibles, for fewer coverage options?

Should middle-aged white Americans not object when they have been struck by one of the starkest indicators of a group that's been relegated to the social wastebin: "Unlike every other age group, unlike every other racial and ethnic group, unlike their counterparts in other rich countries, death rates in this group have been rising, not falling." As two Dartmouth economists remark: "It is difficult to find modern settings with survival losses of this magnitude....Only H.I.V./AIDS in contemporary times has done anything like this."

This is the kind of scourge that happens when a population has been discarded and has lost hope, as have "Millions of once 'productively employed' white working class people ... [who have] become 'surplus Americans' in a time when Silicon Valley geniuses soberly design the near total elimination of manual labor and intellectuals debate the coming of 'a world without work.'"

Liberals delight in perplexing about how working-class Republican voters can be too ignorant to realize how they're being conned by oligarchs in populist drag. It's the process Christopher Hitchens, in his better days, called "the essence of American politics...the manipulation of populism by elitism," and Paul Street restates as: "the cloaking of plutocratic agendas, of service to the rich and powerful, in the false rebels' clothing of popular rebellion." We've seen this repeatedly, and Trump is the latest example.

But perhaps those liberals should perplex in the mirror. As Steve Hendricks points out:

For decades now, we liberals have been shaking our heads in wonder at the working stiff who give the rich pashas atop the GOP their votes. There's hardly a liberal alive who can't recite what's the matter with Kansas: the parable of the downtrodden whites in their double-wides, so enraged by their dwindling slice of the American pie that they vote for hucksters...[who] go off to D.C. and sock it to the suckers who sent them there — shipping their jobs abroad, rigging the tax code against them, gutting their schools, taking swipes at their Social Security and Medicare.

But here's an equally pathetic farce you don't hear about much: Democrats are just as conned...Ask a group of liberals what they want in a candidate, and you'll get a sketch of a champion who will fight for income equality, rein in big banks, defeat ruinous trade agreements, restore our battered civil liberties, look to diplomacy before war, and

stop the devastation of our climate. Sure enough, in every election year Democratic candidates come along peddling such wares as these, and the winners go off to D.C. and sock it to the suckers who sent them... Any leftist who wonders why her voice isn't heard in Washington shouldn't be asking what's the matter with Kansas. She should be asking what's the matter with New York.

Conservative Kansans fall for a plutocratic, imperialist agenda cloaked in patriotism, religion, and nostalgia for the good old Ed Sullivan days; liberal New Yorkers fall for the same plutocratic, imperialist agenda dressed up in multiculturalism, identity politics, and celebration of the good new Caitlin Jenner days. Who's the bigger fool? How's that working out for everybody? For the millions of victims of that top-down, plutocratic class war — in the ghettos of the cities and the hollows of Appalachia? For the Syrians, Iraqis, and Libyans, whose countries have been destroyed? Ad infinitum.

Yes, the voters who switched from Barack to Donald are fools for thinking that Trump is going to help them in any way, but they are not fools for thinking that Hillary Clinton would not have.

And how smart or foolish is it to think the thing to do now is to try and persuade them on the next version of Hillary, Clinton 3.0 (Obama was 2.0)—which is all the Democratic Party is going to offer them. This bouncing back and forth between phony, mendacious saviors—from “hope and change” to “make America great again”—while ignoring, or posing false solutions to, the fundamental socio-economic forces ripping the country apart, is the characteristic of American liberal-conservative, Democratic-Republican, politics. It suffers a lot of fools.

The problems that America faces, that cause so much frustration and rage, are now deep and persistent, and will require solutions that will be very radical in the American context. But they'll have to be, as the man said, as radical as reality. American workers are not suffering just because of trade agreements and offshoring. By some measures, 88% of jobs were lost to robots and other labor-saving devices. Tax incentive might bring some factories come back, but neither the Donald nor the Democrats can bring back jobs from China that don't exist. China now has “zero labor” factories that run 24/7 with the lights off. When thousands of truck drivers lose their jobs, those self-driving Uber vehicles will still be zipping around American interstates, and the profits will be driven into pockets in Silicon Valley, without a pit stop in Beijing. As Barry Lando points out, we are in the midst of a “perfect storm of technology” that “will lead to a net loss of over 5 million jobs in 15 major developed and emerging economies by 2020.”

So it's the entire architecture of capitalism that has to be questioned—the whole issue of who produces wealth and who appropriates it, and what kind of social order would do that justice. All the issues raised by that pesky guy who keeps returning, “yesterday and today.” There is no avoiding it. This is a moment requiring very radical thinking and action. No more half-assed tinkering.

The radicalism will come, either from the right or from the left, but it will come. Correction: It is coming from the right; the left better make another kind of radicalism real. And this is going to require—not, pace Barack, an “intramural scrimmage,” but a knock-down fight on behalf of everybody in the bottom 90% of the country, a fight in which we must force the ruling class to lose wealth and power.

That's also going to require the American left, such as it is, to make a serious examination of the relationship between identity politics and class politics—a relationship that, for the last thirty years, has been a function of most of the American left's management by, and submission to, the Democratic Party as a party of capital. The effective hegemony of the Democratic Party over left-liberal discourse and strategizing has created and enforced, as Adolph Reed, Jr. puts it, a “moral economy” that implicitly accepts as just: “a society in which 1% of the population controlled 90% of the resources..., provided that roughly 12% of the 1% were black, 12% were Latino, 50% were women, and whatever the appropriate proportions were LGBT people.” This is equal-opportunity capitalist identity politics, and it's been pursued—time to be honest—at the expense of class politics. Or, as Reed puts it more sharply: “it is [itself] a class politics, the politics of the left-wing of neoliberalism.”

To fight Trump and all he represents, we need to join the well-honed commitment to racial and gender equality with an invigorated, inclusive, and pointedly anti-capitalist class politics, which will hurt ruling class interests, prerogatives, and power, and which the Democratic Party will therefore do everything in its power to steer us away from.

The intensification of inequality—which even a mainstream Keynesian economist like Piketty understands is an intrinsic tendency of capitalism—will only get exponentially worse, given the dynamic of automated productivity

discussed above. In this context, we're facing questions that might seem utopian, but they are urgent necessities for any kind of just society. Why should the wealth deriving from the fantastic new sources of productivity not be appropriated and distributed socially, allowing for less work and greater social security for everyone?

There will, in fact, be no way to substantially and permanently improve the lives of the discarded and enraged—of all colors and genders—without changing our social economy from one in which the first priority is that individuals are entitled to accumulate as much wealth as possible, to one in which the first priority is that everyone has economic security and social dignity. And that's a radical change that will demand a fight.

We have to start by fighting for things like: universal single-payer healthcare, steep, frankly redistributive progressive taxation (as we had in the 50s, bordering on a "maximum income" policy), a complete overhaul of the electoral process, expansion of Social Security, free public higher education and a cancelling of student debt, and an end to ceaseless wars for the defense industries and for Israel (and, yes, you have to say that last bit, or go back to scrimmaging). Then we have to go on to demand guaranteed jobs and income for all.

These demands have to, and can, be made in a way that's direct and easily understood. Single-payer is simpler to explain than Obamacare because single-payer isn't hiding conflicting popular and profit interests. Sure, there will be fights over how to pay for them, and those fights will be opportunities to learn about and dispel economic myths (including the myth that taxes pay for government programs, but that's another story). These measures do not add up to socialism, but they will move toward a socialist reorganization of society, and should be promoted frankly as such.

Yes, it is time for affirmative action for the entire working class, and that is socialism.

Tell me how impossible all this is, how the entire ruling class and establishment media will mobilize against it. You mean like how impossible it was for Donald Trump to become President?

Here's the first lesson everyone on the left should learn from Donald Trump: All these formidable establishment powers are not as omnipotent as they have fooled us into thinking they are. If you have a movement and a leadership which actually, forthrightly, fights for the things that will improve the lives of everyone except the top 10%, and mobilizes the bottom 90%, things suddenly become possible.

That kind of leadership will never come from the committed-to-capitalism Democratic Party (yes, including Elizabeth Warren).

Of course, we will not get all of these things at once, but getting even one would be a major reversal of fortune—a step, finally, in the right direction. Let's take the one example of single-payer healthcare. You couldn't ask for a better issue. Obamacare is collapsing on its own deceptive contradictions, and Trump and the Republicans are promising to "replace" it. But the only thing you can replace it with that won't be worse is a single-payer system. This is not that hard to explain. Medicare, an enormously popular program, is right there as an example. Indeed, the fight for single-payer is going to be the way to prevent the privatization of Medicare.

There can be no left progressive movement of any worth in the United States that doesn't start fighting right now for a single-payer, universal coverage health insurance program. And no movement that's managed by Hillary and the "Never, ever" Democrats will do that. That's why progressives and leftists should spend zero minutes fretting over who will become Soros and Saban's next towel boy or girl at the DNC. Ignore them, and just wage the damn fight.

The second lesson that Trump has shoved our face into is more sobering: The left has failed. As Reed puts it, again: "The crucial tasks for a committed left in the United States now are to admit that no politically effective force exists and to begin trying to create one." For the reasons cited above and many others, the left in America is a political non-entity. When the Libertarians, led by Mr. "Who's Aleppo?" win three times the vote of Jill Stein and the Greens, it's telling us something about the extensive hold of capitalist ideology. It's that thing I hear when my working-class Latino Facebook friend and my renowned female doctor in one of the nation's premier medical research facilities, both tell me they voted for Trump because: "He's a business man, and he knows how to create the jobs. He tells it like it is." That's the pop-culture, Apprentice-Shark Tank flavor of capitalist ideology that helped to elect Trump, and that we are a long way from overcoming.

Of course, this is not a fixed position. The success of the Bernie Sanders campaign, and the increasing

attractiveness of the socialist idea to millennials, demonstrate that there are real possibilities. But Bernie's capitulation, and his refusal to run on the Green ticket, betrayed what I think was a very real possibility to spread left-oppositional ideas across the political map. It's very possible that Bernie could have beaten Trump. And even if Bernie had lost on a third-party line, he would likely have gotten enough of the vote to change the political conversation going forward in important ways.

That opportunity for the American left was lost to Bernie's TINA conviction: There Is No Alternative—to the Democratic Party. His choice was a trailing shadow of the opportunity that Syriza lost in Greece last year, because, as I pointed out in previous essays, the Syriza leadership could not imagine their way out of the European version of TINA (explicitly: No Alternative to capitalism).

In Europe and America, the capitulation of an incipient populist left paves the way for a populist right. Political actors like Bernie and Syriza are so convinced that if they fight for the left they'll lose to the right, that they revert to fighting for a center that no longer exists—and the right wins anyway. It doesn't make one terribly hopeful. We've already lost a couple of precious opportunities. Let's not lose any others.

Ironically, it is Donald Trump who has demonstrated—albeit in a Bizarro, demented way—the political truth of the old May '68 slogan: Demand the impossible

If we don't want to do that? Well, America is now a ship of fools, with Donald at the helm. Enjoy the ride.
