

Introduction

Trump: the problematic gift that just keeps on giving...?

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I.

This collection arises because as of yet, it has proven decidedly difficult for the standard opposition to Trump and all that Trump is taken to stand for, to gain a cohesive series of telling, insightful critiques. There are and have been many different ways to respond to and critique what can be termed Trump and Trumpism. Academics have taken to writing the usual scholarly texts, approaching Trump and Trumpism from a disciplinary perspective as an academic issue in need of academic answers. Then there has been the myriad of op-eds which seek to offer a different type of analysis, yet these tend to be isolated in whatever location they published. The belief of the existence of a readership across and between magazines, journals of opinion and newspapers is an increasingly nostalgic attitude. This is evermore so when access to such op-eds is primarily on-line, affected and impacted by pay-walls and data analytics. What is lacking is a type of open-access conversation between different approaches, views and styles of approaching the issue of Trump and Trumpism.

This collection gathers responses and critiques from a variety of authors who situate Trump as not only an American problem but also a global problem: the signal of a shift in politics and society that, this collection demands, must be resisted not only by bodies but perhaps, most importantly, by minds. To resist Trump and

Trumpism we must be able to re-think, to critique, to deconstruct Trump: to provide iconoclastic thought against Trump the man, the movement, the problem. For, even within religious thought, Trump is a problem that is wider than Christian nationalism or American evangelicalism.

As a journal of intellectual freedom, *CT&T* publishes this collection as a deliberately *intellectual* engagement, intentionally transgressive to the format and types of argument of standard and structured academic texts. This is an intentionally rhizomic collection of approaches and views that seeks to provoke a discussion and conversation both within its pages between the different readings of “The problem of Trump”, and also be the cause of discussion and conversation outside the readings with the readers of the collection – and by extension (and hope) provoke discussion and conversation by the readers with non-readers. To put this another way, this collection, as a special issue of a journal of ideas, includes differing voices and styles of writing. To understand what is occurring in this collection we must also approach it as an intellectual text not a scholarly text. While I am aware that many scholars and in particular many academics may dissent from what they might view as an arbitrary distinction, I do believe that intellectual engagement and expression does, and must, take various and differing forms to scholarly expression and forms. Therefore, in curating and collating and editing this collection my view was and is that purely academic texts on ‘Trump as a problem’ will fail because Trump and Trumpism cannot be solely reduced to or approached by traditional academic approaches. But neither can Trump and Trumpism be properly understood by accounts arising from journalism. Here, perhaps, between the two sits that intellectual approach which could be dismissed as intellectuals writing ‘op-ed pieces’ either in imitative format or as an approach within longer essays. This is a deliberative strategy of the collection precisely because Trump and Trumpism provoke strong opinions and intellectuals are allowed to have – and in fact should be encouraged to have – opinions; and to express them outside newspapers [op-eds] and blogs. Therefore, to present intellectuals’ opinions in a collection of responses to Trump and Trumpism challenges the increasingly marginalized orthodoxy of the scholarly text – and also that orthodoxy of the rarified pursuit of the objective criticism and scholarly detachment of the scholar that, in this age of problematic populism, has been tried and found wanting.

One way of thinking about these responses is that they broadly come from what has been described as ‘a leftist and vaguely Marxist perspective’.¹ The term

'vaguely Marxist' is an interesting one, as many contributors will identify themselves as more than vaguely Marxist, while others will identify more as being in the wake of Marxist thought and some will perhaps even choose to disassociate themselves from such a label. The same is true for the use of 'leftist' which can either be a claim of identity or a pejorative dismissal depending who is using it. Yet, to draw from Marx, all are writing and were asked to write because, in the event of Trump and Trumpism, this collection states that we should seek to not only critique the world but to change it; and to change it requires the input from radical theological and philosophical thought that can combine a grasp of the highest and most difficult theoretical ideas with a pragmatic and timely sense of what is important and communicable about them right now.

To put this all in a wider context, 'engagement' takes many different forms and is expressed in differing ways. All who contribute are in some way radical thinkers in either or both theology and philosophy. I deeply admire and respect their thought, their minds, their insights and therefore I respect how they choose to respond. The contributors were given the freedom to write on this issue as they wished because there is no one way, and especially no scholarly orthodox way, to respond to or deal with, 'the problem of Trump and Trumpism'. In fact, I would say the diversity of responses, the situating of the problem in different contexts and frames of engagement and the types of response points to the central destabilizing impact of Trump and Trumpism, an impact that occurs as at least a subtext in all of these pieces; a destabilizing impact that will continue after Trump himself has departed from the presidency. In fact, perhaps the long-term value and impact of this collection will be in that time 'after Trump' when that unleashed as Trumpism (perhaps renamed) continues to have its long-term impact. For in this collection, Trump and Trumpism are critically discussed and engaged with, and opposed, from a variety of perspectives that ask a series of explicit and implicit questions as to why the problem of Trump has arisen – and to what larger and deeper issues may it point to?

More importantly, as the sub-title qualification to this collection notes, these are *responses* from radical theology and philosophy and a response is a more open-ended possibility than a typically scholarly article or essay; a response is also often more personal and a form of writing from observation. To borrow from the social sciences, these responses can involve a form analogous at times to autoethography; for with Trump and Trumpism the political is (yet again and in new and old ways)

personal. A response is also open to more idiosyncratic approaches; here the rhizomic nature of the journal this collection appears within means radical rhizomes emerge in different ways and places, expressed in different forms.

One of the things I did when I started to think about this collection was begin to read widely across the myriad writings about Trump, reading those who supported, those who opposed and that ever-increasing body of those who sought to explain. A constant theme arose that Trump was a symbol of a crisis in American – and perhaps Western – democracy. Trump was described as “the embodiment of the electorate’s frustration with Washington dysfunction”²; or, “Trump is the first opportunity voters have had to re-enfranchise themselves and disenfranchise the globalist plutocrats”³; or, “Trump is like a nonpowerful person’s idea of what a powerful person should be”⁴. Steve Bannon saw Trump as what can be described as a totemic figure; being reported as “believing Trump is a transformational, historical figure, a disrupter, an agent of change. The man might be temperamental and deeply flawed, but his ability to connect to the forgotten man, to articulate the raw anger among the working class, is extraordinary.”⁵ This is because (supposedly) “Bannon had a better feel for the American electorate’s anxieties than almost anyone else in the arena, save perhaps Donald Trump.”⁶ The conservative historian and philosopher Victor Davis Hanson stated “frustrated voters in 2016 saw the unique absence of a political resume as a plus, not a drawback and so elected a candidate deemed to have no chance of becoming president... [whereby] Trump became the old silent majority’s pushback to the new, loud, progressive minority’s orthodoxy.”⁷ Brett Easton Ellis, another outsider to liberal orthodoxies, noted “the disrupter played with the rule book and blew up perceived truths about what *was* presidential, how campaigns should be run, how social media could be used to create supporters.”⁸ Cliff Sims, who for a time was a special adviser to Trump, noted of Trump’s tweeting that “the @realDonaldTrump account [is] inarguably one of the most powerful communication instruments in modern political history”⁹. This enabled “one of Trump’s core operating principles, which could probably be best described as *strong opinions, weakly held*.”¹⁰ Such a position could be viewed, even by his supporters, as the shift whereby “Trumpism then, was the idea that there were no longer taboo subjects. *Everything was open for negotiation; nothing was sacred.*”¹¹ Yet, at the same time “Trump argued that what was wrong was not America’s morality, but its spirit.”¹²

In a very strange way, this dovetails with the insight from Jared Yates Sexton's journalistic account and critique of the rise of Trump: "Trump wasn't the cause; he was the disease personified."¹³ Or, we could re-frame this as Trump was the personification of the dis-ease with America and the world felt by middle America; and this dis-ease is also evident in the wider global support for Trump by conservatives.

It would of course be easy to provide an over view of Trump and his presidency by selective quotation, playing off liberal and conservative, supporters and opponents, in a type of inverted dialectic where truth is not sought nor is reasoned argument undertaken. Part of this is due to Trump himself, for he is the gift that just keeps giving, a destabilising force that continually disrupts without resolution. In many ways he is the embodiment and challenge of Marx's famous aphorism on modernity from the *Communist Manifesto*: "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind." Or rather, Trump and Trumpism is a problem because we find ourselves in a form of modernity whereby there is no agreement as to what is involved in facing 'with sober senses' our 'real conditions of life' and our 'relations with our kind'. This is perhaps the basis of the problem of Trump and Trumpism.

II.

What therefore, is to be done? One answer is to think in new and different ways.

This collection is therefore a response to the problem of Trump and Trumpism, a problem which, in a deliberately provocative aside, can viewed as both crisis and KRISIS. In 1949 Will Herberg reminded his contemporary post-WW2 audience, that crisis occurred as two types. There was the contemporary sense of crisis, of seeking a truth but of which we cannot be sure we have reached – and the Greek KRISIS which is that of judgment.¹⁴ So we could perhaps state of Trump and Trumpism, the crisis of the culture is symptomatic of the wider KRISIS of the age and one way of thinking about the essays in this collection is that they exist as the twin interplay of crisis-event and KRISIS-judgement.

Of course, observant theological readers will recognize a strong echo of Karl Barth's *Rommerbrief* and I want to push this further as an unexpected side avenue enabling a way to engage with our time of Trump. Stephen H. Haynes has discussed the notion of 'between the times' in Weimar theology¹⁵ and from him can be taken the

understanding that *Romans* both exists and is read as a between times text and this means that the responses to it are themselves also 'of between times'. Further, I posit that 'the between' is itself the time of crisis-event that is reimagined and re-encountered as KRISIS-judgement, that is, the problem of truth re-encountered as time of judgement. As Haynes notes, in German theology post-WW1, the response to 'the Great War' was one that opened up possibilities of a new future wherein Barth, Tillich, Gogarten, Bultmann and Hirsch made use of the "the cultural motifs of crisis, renewal, and fulfilment."¹⁶ The echoes of this response, of the possibility of a new future (perhaps even more so, the *demand* for a new future – either with or without Trump) are widely available today, within a variety of responses to Trump, both for and against. What is important for our engagement with Trump is this sense that crisis as KRISIS-judgement is not a singular event but rather operates dialectically with renewal toward fulfilment. Such a dialectic operated in the Weimar period in a paradoxical atmosphere of "on the one hand, a mood of crisis and apocalypticism and, on the other, a sense of expectation and hopefulness about the future."¹⁷ This is what can be termed the tension of the dialectical hopeful apocalypse of modernity, a tension that has reached a new level of crisis and KRISIS Trumpian populism. Only by being reminded of the importance of KRISIS for dialectical thinking can we move past the crisis thinking that, without the counter of KRISIS, results in that inverted dialectic I mentioned earlier, the inverted, stalled dialectic of an interregnum. Barth is clear on centrality of dialectics for KRISIS:

...the reality to which life bears witness must be disclosed in the deep things of all observable phenomena, in their whole context – and in their KRISIS. Only dialectical human thinking can fulfil its purpose and search out the depth and context and reality of life: only dialectical thinking can lead to genuine reflection upon its meaning and make sense of it.¹⁸

As he further states, "genuine thinking is always strange to the world and sympathetic."¹⁹

I am not claiming that any of the essays in this collection are Barthian or sympathetic to Barthian dialectics, but I would argue that these essays are examples of genuine thinking both strange to the world of Trump and sympathetic in their desire for a new way past the problem of the interregnum. This is why I wished to add the disruption of the Barthian notions of crisis and KRISIS – and secularize and

radicalize them at the same time, by seeing them as a thread sitting under, within, and against radical theological and philosophical thought in modernity. For we are in a 'between time', a type of interregnum, an interregnum of crisis and KRISIS whereby Trump and Trumpism is a problem, precisely because he and his wider populism and agenda are viewed as either the solution to the interregnum or the central personification of the problem.

III.

The essays in this collection are offered as genuine, radical thinking; as ways to rethink the problem. They identify both the crisis of Trump and the KRISIS opportunity to rethink our times via Trump. There is no common core or thread except, as stated, that I thought the authors would have something interesting and worthwhile to say. They are voices who I value for their distinctive ability to force us to think in new ways; that is, for their ability to present and engage with the problem of Trump in new ways, acting as rhizomic thought both within this text to each other and within our reading and responses to what we read.

In briefly discussing what follows in this collection I want to just emphasize that what I am *not* providing is an explicit instruction and guide as to what to read or how to read these pieces; nor that sort of precis argument or reduced abstract so beloved in 'scholarly' text introductions. Rather, I trust the reader to be able to make their own sense of what follows – and happens. That said, there is an intentional curating and assemblage of these responses, that provides an internal relational narrative as they respond to the problem of Trump and Trumpism.

The first response is by the late Baudrillard scholar **Gerry Coulter**. It is an unpublished piece from just before his untimely death in 2016, written at the time of the early rise of the problem of Trump. It sets the scene for the discussions that follow as Coulter asks a series of what became (with the benefit of hindsight) both very prescient and troubling questions.

The essay by **Carl Raschke** draws on his deep and ever-expanding opus of political theology; for if this is not the time to write political theology then when is? For those familiar with Raschke's work then this essay opens up new Trumpian avenues to the death of God, for others this essay demonstrates the need to think Trump and Trumpism not just as a problem but perhaps more so as a symptom of issues identified by how and what to think within modernity itself.

If radical involves – via *radix* – getting back to the root then **Ted Stolze's** essay is, like Raschke's genealogy of thought, a very radical essay. Stolze uses Paul's 2nd Corinthians to demonstrate not only how the past impacts the world today but also what the misuse of past texts does to the present.

To discuss a populist problem requires the need to understand and discuss populist texts and sources that both gave rise to the problem and support the problem. **Christopher Rodkey**, in a direct echo of Zizek's famous text, and the film *The Matrix* does so, investigating how and why we experience the problem of the pop-science self-help theology that can position Trump as a messianic figure to deliver America into greatness (again...?)

Alternatively, **David Galston** presents a hope that the problem of Trump and Trumpism may occasion a reawakened and rethought Christian socialist left, resulting what may be proffered (though Galston is not so explicit) as a different type of American greatness; that is, a land deeply influenced and representing a socialist, Christian equity.

Paul Morris asks a very focused and direct question, "Is Trump good for the Jews?" because Trump and Trumpism claim that he is. To discuss this, Morris draws on a rich variety of texts, tweets, events and statements that enable a phenomenological discussion – and answer.

Trump as a historical phenomenon is discussed by **Peter Field**, positioning Trump as part of the American republican lineage; a lineage Trump, his advisers and supporters recognize and celebrate. Trump is a reminder that populism is a central root, a *radix*, of American political and intellectual self-conception and self-expression.

As was also addressed by Raschke, Trump and Trumpism can be rethought as a political theology problem – and expression. In his essay, **Mike Grimshaw** draws upon the on-going influence of Weimar on modern political thought and options, using Schmitt, Taubes and Jesi to situate Trump as both the radical theological *and* political problem of how to respond to a counter-revolutionary event.

Victor E. Taylor undertakes what could be termed 'radical theology as the social history of the present', providing a wider engagement as to what gives rise to populism and the populism of the present. Here Scaramucci's text, already too quickly dismissed as *passé* by many others, actually allows a nuanced and perceptive understanding of the problem of Trump – and the problems Trumps

allows to make manifest. This occurs because, to draw upon the Žižekian notion of the short-circuit, Taylor's reading of the minor text of Scaramucci on Trump actually throws new insight onto what can be termed major text of Trump and Trumpism.

A different type of textual reading occurs in **Todd McGowan's** analysis of why Trump's favourite film is *Citizen Kane*; an analysis whereby the failure of the logic of capitalism and the fantasy this engenders and enables Trump turn towards fascism. What we are presented with is the psychoanalytic reading of Trump via Trump's misreading of the film.

The use of psychoanalysis continues in **Rodrigo Gonsalves'** examination of Trump as the 'Buddy-boss' where yet again the problem of Trump is what he represents: the supposed answer to the symptom he translates – which is that occasioned by the logic of capitalism.

Cindy Zeiher completes this final triad of psychoanalytic readings of Trump and Trumpism by engaging in a rigorous discussion of the jouissance of Trump, noting that *The Apprentice* was Trump as the Master; and yet, as is clear here, the jouissance of Trump is directly tied to the conditions of late capitalism – and the spectacles engendered by late capitalism.

IV.

In conclusion, while this collection arises because of Trump and was written and assembled during the (first?) Trump presidency, even if Trump is not re-elected its value remains. For this collection actually describes, addresses, critiques and responds to that larger, more amorphous issue of what can be called Trumpism. That is, all those issues, ideas and forces that not only gave rise to Trump ascending to the presidency but have also been unleashed – and in the eyes of those espousing and undertaking them, validated – by Trump's rise to the presidency. Whether a one term or two term president, Trump has fundamentally changed not only America, but also the world, demonstrating that no democracy is immune to the dangers of populism, for such issues lurk everywhere within modernity and capitalism. In response, what follows are a set of serious reflections on what Trump and Trumpism represent – and threaten – in the world today.

¹ I thank the anonymous reviewer of the original ms collection for this description; while I note it was used in a dismissive tone I choose to own and celebrate it as discussed.

² Jack Sherma & Anna Palmer, *The Hill To Die On. The Battle for Congress and the Future of Trump's America*, (New York: Crown, 2019),p.43.

³ Ann Coulter, *In Trump We Trust*, (New York: Sentinel, 2016), p.24.

⁴ Allen Salkin & Aaron Short, *The Method To The Madness* (New York: All Points Books), p.89.

⁵ Vicky Ward, *Kushner Inc. Greed. Ambition. Corruption.* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019), p.101.

⁶ Joshua Green, *Devil's Bargain. Steve Bannon, Donald Trump & the Storming of the Presidency* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), p.xii.

⁷ Victor Davis Hanson, *The Case for Trump* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), p.1, p.2.

⁸ Brett Easton Ellis, *White* (London, Picador, 2019),p. 142.

⁹ Cliff Sims, *Team of Vipers. My 500 Extraordinary Days in the Trump White House* (New York: St Martin's Press/Thomas Dunne Books, 2019), p.40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.82 [*italics* in original]

¹¹ Victor Davis Hanson, *The Case for Trump*, p.277.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.225.

¹³ Jared Yates Sexton, *The People are going to Rise Up like The Waters Upon Your Shore. A Study in American Rage* (Berkeley, California: Counterpoint), p.94.

¹⁴ Will Herberg, "Has Judaism still power to Speak?' A religion for an age of crisis" (1949) in David G. Dolin (ed), *From Marxism To Judaism. Collected Essays of Will Herberg* (New York: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1989), p.50.

¹⁵ Stephen R. Haynes, "Between the Times": German theology and the Weimar 'Zeitgesit'", *Soundings. An Interdisciplinary Journal*/Vol. 74 no 1 & 2 (spring/summer 1991), pp.9-44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*,1p.0.

¹⁸ Karl Barth K (1975[orig. 1933]), *The Epistle To The Romans* (Oxford University Press, 1975 [Orig. 1933]), p.425.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*