
President Donald Trump – We’ve Seen Worse, Haven’t We?

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[Note: this is one of the last essays written by Gerry Coulter; it appears courtesy of Mary Ellen Donnan. It was written at the very beginning of the Trump presidency and of the very end of Gerry's life. Gerry died suddenly at the age of 57 on November 24th 2016 from a massive pulmonary embolism.]

I. Introduction

The emergence of Donald Trump as a legitimate contender for the Presidency of the United States of America has left this Baudrillard scholar amused. Personally, as someone who detests politicians, I'm tickled by "the Donald's" rise – what better person to incarnate everything I have come to loath about politicians? Yet, for a

Baudrillardian scholar, Donald Trump's quest for the presidency raises interesting questions concerning Baudrillard's work on the silent majorities and the transpolitical. After dealing with these I will offer the opinion that the Americans have already had at least one president who was worse, with far more unsettling long term effects, than even Donald Trump may be capable of generating.

II. What Silent Majority?

Trump is a key moment in what Baudrillard identified as the transpolitical – a time in which politics is uncertain – when it barely resembles how it has traditionally looked and when it might mutate into just about anything. For Baudrillard politics lacked nothing but a future. With Elias Canetti (1973) he believed that we have collectively passed a point where we can any longer know what is going on (Baudrillard, 1987: 113). The supporters of Donald Trump mostly claim to come from the “silent majority” which induces a smirk from those of us who know Baudrillard's work. For Baudrillard the silent majority had opted out of the political process and their power was wedded to their silence – their refusal to play the game of being willingly represented and manipulated by politicians. The silent majority's withdrawal from politics was part of a larger departure from the social and from history (Baudrillard, 1990: 57). Trump's supporters today are merely the most extreme manifestation of the transpolitical conjuncture disappearing into the news the moment they appear (Baudrillard 1993a: 79; 2001: 133). What they lack is the proper political indifference of the true silent majorities – perfectly indifferent and undifferentiated (politically) beings (1993a: 25).

The first problem with Trump's “silent majority” is that they are really very noisy. What everyone seems to have underestimated is not as much Trump but rather how many really stupid people belong to the Republican Party. Trump's supporters, much like the great reality television star himself, have failed the challenge of silence. Baudrillard observed that reality television challenges silence by forcing people to speak (1997: 22) – regardless of how uninteresting what they may have to say actually is (see Donald Trump's show: *The Apprentice* for example).

The true silent majority remain silent today, we never hear from them on television and that is how they maintain the power of their indifference – a power devoted to not contributing to political meaning – only to putting an end to it (1993b: 87). The silent majorities in Baudrillard's reckoning make a massive reply only

through their very withdrawal. They have had their silent impact – today it takes just over 26 percent of all American adults eligible to register as voters to elect an American President]¹. Indeed, if the true silent majority were to actually unify they could easily register and support a third-party candidate into office (“Silent Bob for President?”)². Trump’s (not so) silent majority, are slaves to noisy meanings, with no power other than to voice their frustrations – the principle one appearing to be that white high-school graduates (and drop-outs) don’t control things in small town America anymore.³ Trump’s supporters are completely unable to practice the paradoxical silence of the true silent majority which refuses to elect others to speak in its name (Baudrillard, 1983: 22, 29).

The true silent majority may ultimately have succeeded in toppling the political and the social into hyperreality by way of their very withdrawal (and little is more emblematic of the hyperreal⁴ than Donald Trump running for President). The fact that only about fifty percent of eligible voters actually vote may be precisely what has allowed this false silent majority to come to the fore. What Trump’s supporters want is not an end to the social but a revision of the social – the true silent majority resist the social (1983: 41). Whatever else they may be, Donald Trump’s failed silent majority point to the depths of the transpolitical which envelopes us.

IV. We’ve Seen Worse?

It is likely that the rise of Trump as a presidential contender finds many roots throughout the depth and length of American history. To pinpoint one moment which was absolutely essential for the present condition to manifest itself, we need look no further back than Ronald Reagan. Reagan was the beginning of the desocialization of the state in America (Baudrillard, 1993a: 79). With his preference for cheap labour zones in the Southern United States, Mexico (the Maquiladoras), and elsewhere, Reagan can claim to have gutted much of the hopes of the white middle and white lower class (“white trash” as they are known in the USA); ensuring that the vast majority of them would become precisely the undereducated and very vocal white majorities who support Trump. The success of equity movements in recent years has only (ironically) fueled the fires of their racism.

Reagan raises a question for me: Have we seen worse Presidents than we can even imagine Trump becoming? Today the Western world is permanently poised on the brink of financial collapse due, in no small part, to the deregulation of the

financial sector which began under Reagan. The world of junk bonds and trading in debt, huge banks and investment firms “too big to [be allowed to] fail”, and skyrocketing consumer debt – the three pillars of salt upon which Western economies today stand, were born out of Reagan-omics. Is the world we live in, constantly under threat of economic collapse, a better place than the slow moving but better regulated economy of the early 1980s? Further, Reagan and his CIA savvy George Bush Sr. (as Vice-President) were fond of secret wars and the excesses of secretive cloak and dagger operations overseas. While the Republicans claim that Reagan’s Star Wars military initiative bankrupted the Soviet Union and led to the end of Communism, we might ask if the world today is a better place with Putin than it was with Brezhnev? (It may well be the case that Trump’s racial politics are a better fit for Russia today). Finally, we need to look into some of Reagan and Bush’s excesses. One of these was a billionaire’s son from the Middle East whom they supported in his very adept fighting against the Soviet Army in Afghanistan. Reagan and Bush backed his efforts (and those of his “lean, mean mujahedeen”) only to discover on September 11, 2001 that one man’s freedom fighter can indeed become the same man’s terrorist. His name was Osama bin Laden.

Today as we assess all of Reagan’s chickens come home to roost – deregulation of the banking sector, the current “mob” economy of Russia, and the activities of bin Laden’s brain child – Al Qaida, we can only wonder what terrible chickens of a Donald Trump Presidency may come home to roost two or three decades on. We may have to wait and see but the mantle of “worst President ever” may be beyond even the Donald’s abilities. We’ve seen worse and not so long ago (without even stooping to ponder the deeds and legacy of “W”). Of course, we should keep in mind that Americans may come to like President Trump more in retrospect. In a Gallup poll (November 7-10, 2013) Reagan finished second only to JFK among “outstanding” presidents since Eisenhower⁵.

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¹ According to the U.S. Census Bureau (for 2012): 220 million Americans were eligible to vote. 126 million did vote in the Presidential election. Obama became president with a popular vote of 58.7 million votes or 26.6 percent of all eligible voters. U.S. Census Bureau, 2015: "Voting and Registration in the 2012 Presidential Election". One could add that if we take Obama's popular vote in 2012 and add it to Romney's the remainder would represent the true silent majority [about 49 percent of Americans eligible to vote in 2012] (<http://www.fec.gov/pubrec/fe2012/federalelections2012.pdf>).

² Silent Bob is a fictional character portrayed by Kevin Smith who has appeared in many of the films, comics, and television programs written and produced by Smith, beginning with *Clerks*. He never speaks and is constantly at the side of a character named Jay. Together they are known as "Jay and Silent Bob". There is no evidence to suggest that Jay and Silent Bob will not run for President in a forthcoming election.

³ The majority of Trump's "silent majority" are white people without college or university degrees.

⁴ Hyperreality – the more real than real – is a term used by Baudrillard to describe the merger of simulation and reality – such as when a Billionaire land developer cum reality TV star runs for President of the USA.

⁵ The poll asked Americans: "How do you think each of the following Presidents will go down in history", as an 'outstanding president', 'an average president', or 'below average president'?" (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/11887/ronald-reagan-from-peoples-perspective-gallup-poll-review.aspx>).