

After the Election, the Reaction

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Trump le Monde

The final Presidential debate of 2016 was a gala event in Las Vegas pitting a reality TV star against the latest representative of a political dynasty. It was set up as a symbolic clash between business and politics, with the roles cast so convincingly that it was really possible to imagine the two categories to be at odds. The antagonism of the candidates was still more believable because everyone shares it: these are the most unpopular Presidential candidates in history, at a time when both business and politics have lost their credibility. But these are our choices—right?

“Just remember, you are not a participant here,” the Fox News anchor reminded us. “At the end of the debate, you can applaud all you want, but in the meantime, silence, please—blessed silence.”

A cursory reading of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* is enough to decipher this scene. Trump is the harbinger of the apocalypse, yes, but the apocalypse is not on the horizon. It’s here.

“Armageddon has been in effect,” as Public Enemy put it in 1988. “Go get a late pass.”

The Trump threat serves to distract us from what is *already happening*. “I don’t want to rip families apart,” Clinton insists, in reference to immigration policy, when the administration she serves under Obama has deported over 2.5 million people—as many as all the US presidents of the 20th century put together. Mothers of the Movement promote Clinton as the candidate to curb racist policing—when police murders of black and brown people have only escalated since she got into office, and the most liberal politicians and prosecutors have failed to challenge the impunity of the police. Trump is dubbed the first demagogue of the Anthropocene—but does any candidate in the election have a realistic proposal to halt catastrophic climate change?

The same good cop/bad cop routine is playing out all around the globe. Explicitly leftist parties like Syriza and Brazil’s Workers Party have implemented the same policies they accused their right-wing counterparts of pursuing. Today, the only remaining justification for continuing to support Syriza, the Workers Party, or Clinton goes something like this: “If the left doesn’t screw us, *the right will!*” If the left doesn’t privatize water—if the left doesn’t militarize the police—if the left doesn’t expand the prison-industrial complex—if the left doesn’t silence dissent...

This strategy has served to cover a steady bipartisan drift to the right for at least half a century. If Clinton now has a shot of winning even Texas, that just shows how Republican her platform is.

There’s a flip side to this, too: *if the left doesn’t rise in revolt, the right will*. Outraged at the prevailing political class, Donald Trump’s constituency seems primed to reject the legitimacy of the electoral process. Mind you, they’re not calling for a black bloc at the inauguration or marching around with a banner reading “WHOEVER THEY VOTE FOR, WE ARE UNGOVERNABLE” yet, but if things continue in this direction, renegade Republicans will be understood as the chief adversaries of the ruling order.

The Price of Defeat

“If there’s voter fraud, this election will be illegitimate—we will have a constitutional crisis, widespread civil disobedience and the government will no longer be the government.”

-Trump adviser Roger Stone

When revolutionary movements fail, reactionaries adapt their tactical and rhetorical innovations. This should come as no surprise: practically every aspect of our lives, from the buildings we live in to the music we listen to, represents the appropriation of ordinary people's efforts and innovations.

The social movements of 2011—the Arab Spring, the movement of the squares in Spain and Greece, Occupy, and subsequent uprisings from the Balkans to Hong Kong—ran aground as a consequence of violent state repression and their own built-in limits before they could pose a significant threat to globalized capitalism and the governments that oversee it. Since the end of 2013, we've seen right-wing efforts seizing the initiative where these movements failed, reframing the causes of popular suffering and the objectives of revolt in their own terms.

First, nationalists and fascists used the Occupy model to topple the Ukrainian government. Then, in Brazil, some of the momentum of an autonomist movement against a neoliberal leftist government carried over into reactionary unrest that brought millions to the streets. Rather than a left social movement like Occupy, Germany produced Pegida. Meanwhile, racists around Europe attempted to appropriate feminist themes to smear migrants and Muslims. Others are doing the same thing with gay rights, while atheist discourse has become a breeding ground for Islamophobia. Nationalists are hailing the Brexit vote as a triumph of direct democracy, with the German and Dutch far-right parties *Alternative für Deutschland* and *Partij voor de Vrijheid* promising regular referendums as a plank in their platforms.

This trend reached the United States with the runaway candidacy of Donald Trump. Trump's campaign appropriated the language of the anti-globalization movement, right down to the rhetoric of "fair trade" rather than "free trade" and the allegation that a global financial elite is benefitting at the expense of working people.

It is instructive that the narratives of a movement founded by radicals and anarchists could serve a nationalist billionaire in his Presidential bid: at the least, it reveals the ways that those narratives were vulnerable to cooptation all along. Indeed, there has long been a far-right opposition to globalized capitalism, which Trump embraced more and more openly as his campaign proceeded. Fascism was originally modeled on left-wing movements: it was a way to channel rightful indignation about class inequalities into violence directed down the social hierarchy, rather than revolt that could threaten it. As in the 1920s, so today: the price of revolutionary failure is reactionary momentum.

The Reaction to Come

Clinton protests too much when she claims that Trump is besmirching the legacy of democracy in the United States by threatening to reject the results of the upcoming election. Didn't the US actively orchestrate coups to overthrow democratically elected governments in Brazil, Chile, Guatemala, Iran, and the Congo, to name a few? The interplay between elections and states of exception in which ordinary political processes are suspended has always been central to democratic governance. It's the exception that proves the rule.

In any case, Trump is not going to lead an insurrection. He's more of a weathervane than a whirlwind; his genius, such as it is, consists of giving all the other bigoted narcissists in Middle America someone to identify with. He doesn't have what it takes to seize power.

So Clinton will be President. And then what?

This is not a good time to stand at the helm of the state. It didn't work out for Morsi or most of the other politicians who came to power in the revolutions of 2011. Syriza was exalted throughout Europe when they won the elections of 2015, but they burned up all their credibility as soon as they took the reins. Only apathy, despair, and the threat of even worse rulers—like Trump—currently shore up the positions of unpopular leaders like Clinton.

In a nutshell, the double bind facing governments in globalized capitalism is that open markets and austerity measures accelerate the processes by which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, but closed markets and state spending drive away investors and drain resources. Consequently, people tend to blame individual governments for economic woes that state structures can do precious little to solve. In this context, the election cycle will likely produce alternating waves of hope and disillusionment as long as the anarchist proposal to abolish government and property remains unthinkable.

But if this is a bad time to hold power, it is a great time to be in the opposition. For a burgeoning far right nationalist movement, a Clinton presidency is good fortune: that's four more years of the liberal left taking the heat for whatever happens, four more years during which the far right can claim to have a political program that would work if only they could implement it. After the initial post-election disappointment dissipates, this will be an ideal context for far-right recruiting.

Clinton looks unstoppable now, but that will change once Trump is out of the picture. Who knows what other scandals have yet to break? The next wave of right-wing momentum is bound to look rational and well mannered by comparison with Donald Trump; while he has brought opprobrium on himself, his strong personality has offered cover for others who share his agenda. The next demagogues will have no trouble proclaiming all manner of reactionary ideas, because Trump has shifted the window of legitimate political discourse so far. Right-wing strategists are doubtless discussing how to cast a slightly wider net; if they have any sense, they will shift from old-fashioned white supremacist narratives towards a nationalist discourse of law and order that could mobilize a large number of people even in a demographically diverse US. And although Trump isn't prepared to orchestrate an uprising, he certainly has helped set the stage for autonomous nationalist movements to come.

If all these pieces fall into place, then when Clinton inevitably fails to solve the problems that originally drove people to support Trump and Sanders, the far right will be in a much stronger position to build street-level power and perhaps even make a grab for the state.

Don't believe it? Consider what happened to Dilma Rousseff and the Workers Party in Brazil.

Rousseff rode to office in 2011 on the coattails of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, one of the most popular politicians in Brazilian history—a left icon who spent his time in office advancing a neoliberal agenda, taking advantage of an influx of investment dollars to dampen the immediate consequences on poor Brazilians. Powerful autonomous protest movements erupted against Rousseff and the Workers Party in 2013, drawing mass participation and achieving some temporary victories. At the peak of these movements, many people with no previous protest experience or radical politics poured into them; when the Brazilian government outmaneuvered the autonomists by the usual combination of state repression and cooptation, many of these new participants moved on to right-wing mobilizations.

Like countless politicians, Rousseff was vulnerable to charges of corruption. At first, the right-wing populist movement calling for her impeachment—and in some cases the return of the military dictatorship—seemed laughable enough, as reactionaries from the middle class clumsily attempted to appropriate the organizational methods and tactics of the autonomous movements.

Then the movement gained momentum in the streets, plunging Brazil into massive right-on-left violence. In the end, Rousseff was impeached. Today, Brazil's government is controlled by the right wing.

For those who consider horizontal grassroots efforts the best hope for social change, the most dismaying part of this story is that the autonomous movements that seemed so strong in Brazil in 2013 have been completely marginalized. The participants have been forced to choose between sitting on the sidelines or mobilizing behind the Workers Party they opposed three years ago.

To recap: a controversial female candidate inherits the Presidency from a popular left leader amid charges of corruption, as reactionary momentum gains steam in the wake of defeated autonomous movements. Sound familiar?

In the context of a Clinton victory, the most significant danger is that the entire political spectrum will be divided up between a statist neoliberal left and an opportunistically antigovernment nationalist right. Each of these adversaries needs the other; each will seek to absorb those who fall outside this dichotomy or else push them into the opposing camp.

If we don't want to be marginalized the way our comrades in Brazil have been, we have to debunk the idea that either nationalism or the state could solve any of our problems, and organize to take on both the authorities and their reactionary opposition. This means breaking with the narratives of the left as well as the right. Otherwise, as the Clinton administration inevitably fails to resolve the economic crises of everyday life, more and more ordinary people will run into the arms of the reactionaries—and as these reactionary movements gain steam, the people who should be our comrades will respond in ways that shore up neoliberal democracy. There has to be another way.

If it becomes impossible to talk about how the system is rigged or how the corporate media is implicated without advancing the discourse of the far-right—if NSA surveillance, drones, international finance, corporate profiteering, and the subtle control exercised by social media algorithms become understood as right-wing issues—then all prospects of real liberation will be off the table for another generation or more. Today, even Wikileaks is bolstering right-wing narratives; grassroots outrage is assuming the form of reactionary populism. Anarchists and other partisans of liberation will be sidelined by the popular appropriation of our own tactics and slogans unless we get our bearings quickly.

We have our work cut out for us.

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