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Fire and Fury in the Time of Trump

An Anarchist Review of Michael Wolff, Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House.

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and things will return to “normal.” It is true that the peculiarities of Trump’s behavior will be over. But the crazy right-wing politics of the Republicans will continue. The wishy-washy but pro-corporate capitalist politics of the Democrats will continue. And the underlying economic decay and stagnation and ecological catastrophe will continue. The system will escalate its attacks on the working class and the environment, and, through wars, on people around the world. No part of the political or economic system can be relied on; as with the weather under conditions of global warming, there is a “new normal.” Those of us who believe in ecological sanity, freedom, mutual aid, and radical democracy had better do all we can to build a popular movement for these goals.

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climate change, or the danger of nuclear war. It makes the Democrats look patriotic and proudly chauvinistic. It lets the liberals wallow in patriotic hypocrisy. The imperialist U.S. state intervened in 81 national elections and supported about 36 attempted military coups, from 1946 to 2000. (McCoy 2017) Who is the U.S. to denounce foreign intervention in elections?

The Republicans can fire up their middle class base. While these people may get out of hand and elect a Trump, they do not threaten the system. But the Democrats never could fire up their historic base of workers and People of Color. The demands of the working class and the oppressed for better standards of living and more public services immediately threaten the profits of the corporate rich. Brought to an extreme, their demands threaten the very basis of capitalism. This is why liberals constantly complain that the Democrats do not stand up to the conservative Republicans, and why the Democrats were so willing to turn away from the working class, the poor, and People of Color, in favor of the professional middle class.

According to Wolff, Trump and his campaigners never expected to get elected; he expected to improve his “brand” while he prepared to claim that he had been cheated. With the election of this accidental president here has been a major increase in popular struggles and movements. (Price 2016b) This includes forming thousands of local anti-Trump clubs, enormous mass demonstrations, and local demonstrations at “town hall” meetings and at airports. At this time, most of the movement has been channeled into electoral activities, electing more Democrats, especially women. Probably this was inevitable for now, but it is a dead end. There needs to be a radical, libertarian-socialist, wing of the anti-Trump movement, which rejects the Democrats in favor of independent, mass, direct action.

Many liberals and Democrats look forward to when Trump is gone (through losing the next presidential election or even being impeached). They think that the evil days will be gone

her to win a thin majority of the popular vote, but then to lose in the archaic Electoral College.

For years the Democrats had been deliberately turning their backs on the unions and the working class in favor of appealing to the professional-managerial middle and upper classes. Thomas Frank had warned that this would have electoral and political costs (Price 2016a). In the event, many white workers and their families who had voted for Obama, now voted for Trump. Many others stayed home. (A little less than half of eligible voters did not vote.) Meanwhile large sections of African-Americans were disaffected; they would not vote for Trump but, again, many who had voted for Obama also stayed home. Latinos knew that Trump was viciously against them, but they also knew that “*the Obama administration had been quite aggressive in deporting illegal aliens.*” (63) Many Latinos also sat this one out.

For years the liberals had been opposing the greater political evil by supporting the lesser evil. Sometimes they won and sometimes they lost, but overall the greater evil got more and more evil, and so did the lesser evil. That is, the Republican Party became completely committed to far-right ideology, while the Democratic Party moved to where the “moderate Republicans” used to be. (For example, for a health care program they did not advocate the liberal “single-payer” approach but adopted the program developed by Mitt Romney when he was Massachusetts governor.) In brief, the politics of “lesser evilism” has not worked.

The liberal Warren-Sanders wing of the Democrats has no power. It serves as a shill to bring young people, labor, progressives, African-Americans, feminists, environmentalists, etc., into a party really ruled by corporate politicians such as the Clintons. Liberal Democrats and the MSNBC talking heads like to focus on the issue of Trump’s ties to Russia and his efforts to cover them up. While this is a real issue, it also has the effect of distracting from such U.S. matters as inequality,

If not the best book on the crazed Trump administration, this is certainly the most popular. Perhaps because it focuses on Donald Trump’s personal peculiarities rather than the political context, it has become a top best seller. It has been criticized because the author, Michael Wolff, says that he sometimes listened to contradictory reports of various events, given by the unreliable members of the administration, and then used his own judgment in integrating these reports into unified accounts. While this may lead us to wonder how accurate his reportage of specific White House events may be, there is no doubt that his overall account is accurate. It fits very well with what we have seen of Trump and his agents as they have acted out in public, in front of cameras and newspaper reporters.

Through his own observations of the president, and through the reports of Trump’s allies, supporters, family members, and minions, Wolff draws a picture of his behavior and personality. Trump is thin-skinned and easily hurt by criticism, desiring always to be liked and admired, yet insensitive to others’ feelings, desires, and needs. He is impulsive, and easily aroused to anger. He is highly distractible, unable to concentrate for extended periods, and readily bored. He has a need to constantly be winning. Women are seen by him as merely sex objects or as aides to his work if they are sufficiently obsequious—but then he sees everyone as objects, useful to him or not.

Trump knows very little and is generally incurious, including about what he should know to manage the presidency. He lies constantly, not necessarily for specific purposes but just for the sake of it. However, he may not know when he is lying, since he lives in a fantasy world of his own making, an alternate reality which is immune to facts. Most of those around him regard him as stupid (although it is hard to say if this is due to limited intelligence or to a personality-based unwillingness to think—or both). “*Trump didn’t read. He didn’t really even skim...Some believed that ...he was no more than semiliterate....Some thought him dyslexic....He didn’t listen. He preferred*

to be the person talking.” (113-4) He develops his views mostly through watching right wing television.

“Rupert Murdoch [was]...certain Trump was a charlatan and a fool.” (19) “The people who knew him best” regarded him as “careless, capricious, disloyal, far beyond any sort of control.” (223) “...Senior staff believed the president had a problem with reality...” (242) Rex Tillerson, the Secretary of State, called Trump “a fucking moron.” The Treasury Secretary, Steve Mnuchin regarded him as an “idiot.” H.R. McMaster called him a “dope.” (304) All the senior staff belittled Trump’s intelligence, openly or quietly. “Everyone...struggled to express the baldly obvious fact that the president did not know enough, did not know what he didn’t know, did not particularly care, and, to boot, was confident if not serene in his unquestioned certitudes.” (304) “...Staffers [were] concerned that his ability to stay focused, never great, had notably declined...” (309)

These observable traits have led some mental health professionals—and other people who could pick up a psychiatric manual—to diagnose Trump with various personality disorders, even though they have not personally examined him. I am not going to do that, precisely because I am a licensed psychologist (although I would love to see his responses to the Rorschach Inkblots). His publicly observed behavior is terrible enough for us to say that he should not be in office. Trump has responded to these reports by asserting that he is really “a stable genius.”

Wolff focuses almost entirely on these personal traits of Trump and of those around him. These others are also more or less batty in behavior, the administration being full of crackpots, clowns, ignoramuses, right-wing ideologues, and other strange people. “Few in the thin ranks of Trump’s inner circle....had almost any relevant experience. Nobody had a political background. Nobody had a policy background.” (25) They pride themselves on being saner and smarter than Trump but

white racists...he instinctively resisted...and he continued to be stubborn about not doing it.” (293-4)

The “Lesser Evil” Democrats

If the Republicans were Trump’s “enablers,” as Paul Krugman has suggested, then the Democrats were the enablers of the enablers. After eight years of Barrack Obama’s presidency, there was more inequality than ever and continuing de-industrialization throughout much of the nation. This was even though the economy was in a long, slow, and shallow “recovery” from the Great Recession—which continues now, and will continue until the next crash. A not-very-good health plan was passed. More immigrants were deported than ever before. Climate catastrophe was recognized in words but an ineffectual minimum was done about it. Wars were continued and expanded abroad.

The two-party system encourages a certain type of amoral maneuverer, for whom political programs are not goals to be achieved so much as means to personal success. “A close Trump friend who was also a good Bill Clinton friend found them eerily similar—except that Clinton had a respectable front and Trump did not.” (23)

The Democrats ran the most business-as-usual figure they had, Hillary Rodham Clinton. She and her husband Bill had gotten rich in their years of “public service.” She was paid big bucks for speaking at gatherings of the biggest capitalists. She was known as the most hawkish member of the Obama administration. (There were also bad reasons for disliking her, including sheer misogyny, and the way a mountain was made out of a molehill over her emails.) The only reasons for voting for her came down to breaking the gendered presidential glass ceiling and that she was not Trump. These were reasons enough for

pro-business term, “tax reform,” instead of the accurate “big tax cuts for the rich.”)

Some sections of Trump’s popular base have become disillusioned with him, but polls have shown that the rank-and-file of the Republican Party overwhelmingly still supports Trump. (For the general public, he is the most unpopular first year president in the history of polling.) The Republicans have lied to a section of the population (white middle class and upper working class, especially males, in the suburbs and rural areas). These people have responded to real grievances of growing poverty and inequality, de-industrialization, loss of jobs, de-unionization, and rural stagnation—but mostly responded with false and misleading politics, being called on to blame African-Americans, immigrants, Muslims, Mexicans, environmentalists, feminists, and the “liberal elite.” The Republicans have whipped these people up to a nihilistic frenzy of despair. Then the Republican leadership was surprised when this hyped-up mass did not follow their lead but instead voted (in the primaries and in the general election) for the most unqualified person available, since he said what they believed. However, many other Trump voters were not attracted to his overt racism and nativism, but rather voted for him for change and because of a dislike of the Democratic candidate. But even these did not object to Trump’s racism, not enough to reject voting for him.

While the modern Republican Party, as well as Trump himself, leans far to the right, neither it nor he are fascist. Neither Trump nor the party leaders will ban all other political parties, shut down the newspapers, cancel elections, or declare Trump president-for-life. If the system seems increasingly repressive, well, that is what we have in the limited democracy of capitalism. Yet Trump has opened the door for the real fascists, given them a bit of respectability. After the Charlottesville march of Nazis and Klanspeople, “*the president’s sympathies were muddled. However easy and obvious it was to condemn*

cannot keep him from engaging in bizarre and self-destructive behavior.

Besides personal behavior, Wolff looks at the court tensions among Trump courtiers. He observed three main factions: (1) family members, mainly son-in-law Jared Kushner and daughter Ivanka Trump, whom he peculiarly describes as New York “liberal Democrats”; (2) establishment Republicans, who were then represented by Reince Priebus, now fired. The pressure continues from the Republicans who lead in the House and Senate; (3) Steve Bannon, reflecting the extreme nationalist, nativist, right-wing. Bannon has also been let go, and since this book came out (with Bannon’s criticisms of Trump and his family members), has lost much of his influence—at least for now. But others carry the torch, such as Steven Miller, encouraging Trump to stick to his worst anti-immigrant policies. There is also the on-going influence of the ultra-right Mercers, father and daughter, who are described as among the “*difficult, even sociopathic, rich people*” pushing their agenda on Trump and his entourage. (177)

Beyond this, there is little consideration of politics or of the political context. These only come up in relation to the personal quirks or cliquish conflicts in the White House. For example, Trump’s decision to withdraw from the international climate treaty is discussed as a victory for Bannon and a defeat for Ivanka, rather than as an attack on the global climate. Trump’s continuation of the war in Afghanistan is considered in relation to his reluctance to make decisions as well as the differences between the generals’ desire to expand the war versus Bannon’s isolationist desire to withdraw.

Wolff downplays the issue of Russian collusion, looking more at Trump’s inept reactions. He speculates that Trump’s resistance to the investigation has mostly to do with the fear that it would uncover various illegal financial shenanigans by the family businesses (which may certainly be one aspect of Trump’s reaction). Trump has “*come out of the real estate*

business; ...based on substantial debt...it often...is a preferred exchange currency for problem cash—money laundering.” (17) “...If the unraveling began [it] would likely lead to the messy Trump (and Kushner) business dealings.” (102)

However, Wolff does describe the now-notorious meeting of Trump’s people with Russian agents as “*one of the most preposterous meetings in modern politics*” (253) and an “*imbecilic meeting.*” (254) He quotes Bannon as regarding the meeting as “*treasonous or unpatriotic.*” (255) Wolff expresses certainty that Donald Jr. would have told his father about it.

Much of what Wolff describes, while not completely new, is still fascinating. However, it is weak as a guide to understanding the political situation. While Wolff may be some sort of liberal, there is nothing in the book that a “Never Trump” Republican would disagree with. Wolff repeatedly describes the mainstream media as the “*liberal media.*” He accepts the right-wing view that most of the newspapers and television news programs are “liberal,” left versions of Fox News and right-wing radio talk shows. Actually, if we compare the views of really liberal journals (The Nation, Mother Jones, etc.) with most of the press and TV news, the mainstream comes off at least right-center. (The exception is the mildly liberal evening MSNBC shows of Rachel Maddow and others.) Noam Chomsky has demonstrated the pro-capitalist, pro-imperialist, bias of the media, and this has not changed. However, Trump is so bizarre in his behavior and so far to the right that the media cannot report on him without appearing hostile. As has been said, “Reality has a left bias.”

Trumpism is Republicanism

Much of President Trump’s politics and behavior is idiosyncratic, unique to him. His constant lying, bragging, misstatements, and other peculiarities, would not have ap-

peared if other Republicans had been elected president—such as Mitt Romney, Jeb Bush, or even Mike Pence. His reluctance to criticize Nazis is not a typical Republican attitude. (The U.S. ruling class is not ready for fascism.) The whole Russian imbroglio would not have appeared with any other politician. There are sections of the U.S. capitalist class which are for better relations with Russia (represented by Tillerson, the former head of Exxon). But even these would not have been so in denial about the Russian interference in the U.S. election. Also most of the U.S. capitalist class favors more “free trade” agreements with other countries and a more flexible immigration policy; they want to benefit from cheap labor. On these points they (and their hired politicians) have been in disagreement with Donald Trump.

Yet in many ways, Trumpism is a symptom of the reaction by Republicans and Democrats to deep problems in U.S. and world society. These have caused a drastic turn to the right, to attacks on the working class. There is economic stagnation, increased inequality, and pressures on real profits (as opposed to financial speculation and overvaluation of stocks and bonds).

Basically, Trumpism is an extension of modern Republicanism. The Republican party is the cutting edge of the attack on the working class and the environment. This was pretty clear when virtually all the Republican politicians supported the unpopular Trump tax cut for the very rich. It is also apparent when almost all the Republican Representatives and Senators have doubled down on defending Trump against the Department of Justice investigation. They are attacking the investigators and trying to distract the public.

Big capitalists had not supported Trump in the election and had preferred Clinton. But with his election, there “*was a surprising and sudden business and Wall Street affinity for Trump....An anti-regulatory White House and the promise of tax reform outweighed the prospect of disruptive tweeting and other forms of Trump chaos....*” (87) (Note that Wolff uses the