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In 2017, Fusing Identity and Class Politics in “Trumpland”

By Zoltan Grossman
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Like millions of other Americans, I was shocked, but perhaps not entirely surprised, by Donald Trump’s victory on election night. His blatant racism and misogyny, cynical exploitation of economic populism, and ties to fascist ideology have generated enormous fears. Yet if we stop at the point of those fears, and let fatalism or blame games drive our response to the Trump regime, then we have already ceded our power to him.

Yes, Trump carries the whiff of fascism, and many of his followers indeed hold racist and misogynist beliefs. But we cannot stop thinking at that point. We should begin to ask ourselves: if we lived in Europe during the rise of fascism in the 1920s or early 1930s, what would we actually do to stop it? In that era many progressives were defending tepid establishment politics,

and radicals were making boring speeches, while the fascists were forming chorale groups, hiking societies, and theater troupes to reach and inspire people on an emotional level.

The European left at that time didn't effectively speak to large numbers of working-class and middle-class citizens, particularly in small towns and cities, and created a vacuum that the far-right was all too eager to fill. In fear of alienating the majority, leftists also failed to defend the rights of Jews, Gypsies, and others who were targeted as the economic scapegoats for the Depression. They failed to have a sense of their own power and their ability to go on the offensive, and went into a reactive mode, defining themselves by what they were *against* rather than what they were *for*.

We can see these trends today, as many white progressives propose stepping back from defending so-called "identity politics," in order to gain more votes from the white, straight majority. Many progressives and radicals likewise seem to be stepping back from class-based "unity politics," by writing off huge areas of the country's interior as a backward and hopeless "Trumpland." Both knee-jerk reactions are enormous, strategic movement-killers at this moment in history.

The ascribed identities of race, ethnicity, and gender, and the achieved status of economic class, have always been inseparable this country's history. Whether your politics are centered primarily on racial, ethnic, or gender identities, primarily on economic inequalities, or hopefully on both, our common enemy is the white elites from both parties who currently hold power.

"Identity politics" (or particularism) and "unity politics" (or universalism) are not mutually exclusive, and do not have to detract from each other. To clip either wing of our movement is to cripple its ability to fly, and fails to recognize—as Bernie recognized midway through his campaign—that both identity and economic messages can be strengthened *at the same time*. But in order to do so, we need to recognize our existing strengths, and expand the geographical scope of our social movements into unlikely places.

Our Strengths

First, we should become more confident of the strengths that we have in January 2017, (despite Trump's Electoral College victory), and compare them to January 2001, when Bush came to power under similar clouded circumstances. Back then, the only recent mass movement that had united different constituencies was the opposition to the World Trade Organization, and the WTO protests in Seattle had only occurred a year before. We weren't prepared for Bush's war on civil liberties and Iraq, partly because our capacities were so low.

In contrast to January 2001, we are far more prepared in January 2017. Since then, we've had under our belts the antiwar movement, Occupy, climate justice, marriage equality, Black Lives Matter, the Bernie campaign, and Idle No More (expressed most recently at Standing Rock). We weren't as resilient then against Bush and 9/11 as we are now against Trump and whatever comes next.

We now have far more young people with movement experience, hooked up with each other through social media. Polls show that demographics are in our favor, with younger people far more critical of capitalism and accepting of a diverse society than previous generations. The future looks bright—it's just the present that sucks. History may view Trump as the last gasp of the racist and misogynist dinosaurs, but only if we view ourselves as the comet that finally wipes them out.

Rural Challenges

Second, the election confirmed our need to confront urban-rural divides in the country like never before. As a geographer, I'd highlight the *New York Times* map that shows the Democratic vote as a limited "archipelago" along the coasts (with some interior cities and college towns), and the country's vast interior as a Republican "sea." It may be easy for urbanites to blame white racial homogeneity, but even some relatively diverse interior areas voted for Trump (in Washington, for example, Republican Yakima County is more diverse than my Democratic city of Olympia). In seeing how we got to this point, let's examine Wisconsin and Iowa, both states with many rural counties that voted twice for Obama, but went this time for Trump.

Rural Democrats in Wisconsin begged their party leaders in Madison for yard signs, but were told the campaign funds had to be put into TV ads. Hillary Clinton failed to visit Wisconsin even once, and her campaign rebuffed Obama when he volunteered to stump for her in Iowa. The urban-based Party's arrogant and elitist decisions created a Democratic vacuum in rural areas, isolating its own supporters. The resulting "sea" of Republican yard signs swayed undecided voters with an illusion of their neighbors' consensus, in counties that actually voted only narrowly for Trump.

Again, asking the question about what could have been done in Europe during the rise of fascism, we have to look to U.S. models that have actually included rural whites in a common cause with marginalized communities. There is perhaps no better example than the Cowboy Indian Alliance, which has so far blocked the Keystone XL Pipeline in the deep-red states of South Dakota and Nebraska. The unlikely alliance combined the treaty rights of Indigenous nations with the populist grievances of their historic enemies: white farmers and ranchers. People power fused identity and economic values, and strengthened Native sovereignty, by defending the land and water from corporate power.

The leader who brought forward the Cowboy Indian Alliance name from earlier groups was Faith Spotted Eagle, an Ihanntonwan Dakota elder who more recently fought the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock. On December 19, Washington Puyallup elector Robert Satiacum gave his vote to Spotted Eagle for president, and to Ojibwe activist Winona LaDuke for vice president. Their names came up in my conversation with Robert a month before, partly because they were Indigenous women leaders fighting oil pipelines, and also because they had built bridges with rural whites. Their most effective approach for cross-cultural organizing has been through social movements, rather than electoral politics, and they will continue the fight under Trump.

As Faith Spotted Eagle said in 2014, “The model of capitalism is trying to suffocate us, because with capitalism you need an underclass. Capitalism cannot survive without poor farmers, without poor Indians, without poor people in the cities who are selling their souls.” When Keystone XL was blocked in 2015, she commented, “We stood united in this struggle, Democrat, Republican, Native, Cowboy, Rancher, landowners, urban warriors, grandmas and grandpas, children, and through this fight against KXL we have come to see each other in a new better, stronger way.”

The Cowboy Indian Alliance was not a fluke, but part of a rich tradition of rural social movement organizing. Community organizers in the South have opposed Klan and police violence, and point out that social programs won by the civil rights movement have also benefited rural whites. Groups such as the Rural Organizing Project in Oregon and Northern Plains Resource Council in Montana are trying to fill the void, but need more funding and resources to compete with far-right politicians and militias for the hearts and minds of rural whites. The success of such alliances fighting *for* justice and the land weakens the appeal of racist groups fighting *against* economic scapegoats.

Potential in Small Cities

Third, the election also exposed how our movements have become over-reliant on large urban areas. Progressive/radical movements have long been concentrated in particular urban neighborhoods, and college towns such as Madison, Berkeley, and Olympia. In large cities, movements possess a critical mass to hold large rallies, staff and fund organizations, and create intersectional ties between communities. But if these positive advances do not spread or reverberate in places where movements have fewer people and resources, they will not change the country as a whole, but reinforce the divides in our country.

This is not a criticism of urban-based movements, since historically social change has begun in large cities, but a criticism of keeping social change isolated in “safe” progressive enclaves. On one hand, some white progressives may feel more comfortable in a neighborhood with Co-Exist bumperstickers and Tibetan prayer flags, and activists of color may feel more comfortable in a large city than to support their counterparts in smaller communities. Yet on the other hand, we may come to realize that capitalism needs these enclaves. They keep radicals and progressives cloistered, talking only with each other, and not influencing or learning from other people.

It is a huge mistake for urban progressives and radicals to view rural areas or smaller cities as cultural-political wastelands, and create a vacuum that cedes these areas to the far-right. Just as identity and economic politics are not mutually exclusive, urban and rural organizing can work hand-in-hand. We can use our more open cities and neighborhoods as a base, but also stand in solidarity with movements outside them. For example, Olympia activists recently blockaded a train carrying oil fracking materials to North Dakota, and Minneapolis activists hung a NoDAPL Divest banner at a televised NFL game. We can also understand that the sparks of mass movements sometimes occur in smaller communities, such as Ferguson or Standing Rock, and not assume that urban activists have all the answers.

The greatest potential growth for our movements may not be in *either* large cities or rural areas. In large cities, residents have generally been exposed to social movements, even if only by

seeing headlines or riding past a rally, and have ample opportunities to express their views. On the other hand, residents of small rural towns are often afraid of rocking the boat, and being ostracized by their neighbors, so any movement growth there is bound to be slow and incremental.

But it is in small- and medium-sized cities where the battle for the heart and soul of America is taking place—in cities such as LaCrosse, Wis., Flint, Mich., or York, Pa. There is room for the movement to grow in these “in-between” places, for people to begin to express their views and find limited safety in numbers. But there is not enough support for groups doing the slow, unglamorous work of education and organizing in these smaller cities, where every small rally or leaflet actually counts.

Here in Washington state, for example, the hotspots for the fossil fuel wars have been smaller working-class cities, such as Aberdeen and Hoquiam, where residents have been fighting the proposed Grays Harbor oil terminal. Seattle-based environmental groups are not as successful in mobilizing residents of these former timber towns as local, frontline organizers. Smaller towns and cities such as Forks and Kelso have similarly become frontlines for immigrant rights organizers.

More resources and funds should be directed toward these communities, not only in episodic responses to police shootings or environmental threats, but to steadily build the capacities of local organizers. In Eau Claire, Wis., for example, social movements languished for years after local factories were shut down. But then community members put their energies into starting cooperatives and coffeehouses, working with student groups on the small branch college campus, and building a low-power community radio station. The new artistic venues generated a vibrant music and political scene, and the county stayed blue as the others in western Wisconsin turned red.

Building Hope in Unlikely Places

Our movements need both the *depth* we develop in large cities through activism among the already-aware residents, and the *breadth* we develop by diffusing progressive ideas outside the echo chamber, using grassroots education and organizing. By shifting resources to smaller communities, and enlarging our base beyond the progressive enclaves, we need to develop faith in the ability of people to change their views and actions. Urban residents often believe and internalize fixed stereotypes of people from smaller communities as simply “hicks” or “rednecks,” and thereby dismiss these places from the start.

Spanish is better suited than English when describing people and their beliefs. English only has one verb for “to be,” but Spanish verbs differentiate fixed identity from actions. People “are” (*ser*) a certain type of person, but also “are being” (*estar*) a certain way. When we hear the racism and misogyny of many Trump voters, we can assume they are (*ser*) racist, without seeing that the media and educational system have failed to educate them. We can also view them as being (*estar*) racist against people below them in the social hierarchy, and help redirect their anger against the white elites above them that are the actual source of their problems.

We can begin by switching in our minds from using *ser* to using *estar*, to see the possibilities of reaching and organizing unlikely people in unlikely places —particularly if we are from these places. We can try to communicate with our friends, family, and citizens who are attracted to the right-populist message, and offer a left-populist alternative they may not yet have heard in the business-as-usual morass of lies and commercialism.

There is potential hope in everyone, because everyone can change their opinions over time and with events. Social change is all about people changing their minds, and being inspired to act. If we assume their views are permanently fixed, we have already given up on making change. If we assume their views can shift, and they might have something to fight *for* alongside communities other than their own, we open up more possibilities for hope. In this way, we can enlarge the Rebel Alliance against the Empire.