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## Donald Trump and the Triumph of White Identity Politics

By Eric Draitser  
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The renowned historiographer E.H. Carr famously compared the historian with his facts to the fishmonger with fish on the slab; the historian collects the facts, takes them home, and cooks and serves them in whatever style appeals to him. Naturally, the historian will add spices and other ingredients to draw out the precise flavor needed to make an average meal into a palette-pleasing feast for the senses. But, in doing so, there is the ever-present danger that the spices, the

tantalizing aroma, and the aesthetically pleasing presentation are merely an attempt to mask the fact that the fish has long since turned rotten.

And when it comes to the course of US politics, there is the distinct stench of putrefaction. And, while America's putrescent corpus decays further, the unmistakable rasp of circling vultures becomes inescapable, the smell overwhelming.

Enter: Donald Trump – the vulture made flesh. And, as the President-elect circles high above his prey, awaiting the moment that he and his Wall Street-Pentagon flock can begin their feast, it remains for the rest of us to consider just what we've lived through, and how the history of this low-water mark will be written.

A distinct narrative has already emerged from various corners of the media and blogosphere: Trump's victory was due to discontent with neoliberalism and the decades of economic neglect and exploitation of the white working class. And, of course, this makes sense and is undoubtedly a significant factor. However, is it entirely true? Was Trump's path to the Oval Office truly paved by the precarious economic existence of millions of blue collar white Americans?

But in answering that question, we're confronted with another, even more complex question: how is economic disaffection among White America actually expressed? And do those expressing that rage have any cognizance of the root causes of their socio-political outlook?

By examining the available data, it becomes clear that while seething anger from economic hardship brought on by neoliberalism may be an aspect underlying much of the core of Trumpism, it is not the dominant factor. Rather, Trump's win should rightly be understood as the triumph of white identity politics. And the data supports this conclusion.

### **Diagnosing the Trumpen Proletariat**

A recent study conducted by researchers at the University of Massachusetts Amherst entitled *Explaining White Polarization in the 2016 Vote for President: The Sobering Role of Racism and Sexism* found that “while economic dissatisfaction was part of the story, racism and sexism were much more important and can explain about two-thirds of the education gap among whites in the 2016 presidential vote.” The analysis used data from a national survey conducted during the final week of October (just days before the election), and concluded that the negative effects of neoliberalism and the rule of Wall Street were not the single most important factor in the victory for Trump. Rather it was “whiteness” and misogyny which played a pivotal role.

It must be stated that the Democratic Party has attempted to explain away its stunning collapse in the face of perhaps the weakest Republican candidate in generations by attributing it *entirely* to racism and misogyny, thereby absolving itself of any blame. This is, of course, laughable. Still, the question of whiteness looms large.

Scholars at the Universities of Michigan and Texas recently published a key study entitled *The Changing Norms of Racial Political Rhetoric and the End of Racial Priming* which, among other things, concluded that overtly racialized political rhetoric has become normalized, that it is no

longer taboo, and that the election of Barack Obama played a significant role in this process. While undoubtedly true, the researchers highlighted a far more important, and too often overlooked, engine of the Trump Train – “white oppression.”

The researchers noted that:

Whites’ perceptions of their group’s racial distinctiveness and disadvantage may be on the rise...[Studies have found] a rise in White identity over the last several election cycles, and especially since the election of the nation’s first Black president in 2008. Concerns about demographic shifts and economic stagnation may have led many Whites to increasingly think that their racial group is under external threat, and these pressures increase identification (Knowles & Peng 2005). These increases in *entativity* [sic] – the perception among group members that they belong to a coherent and unified collective – boosts the acceptability of explicit expressions of prejudice and anger toward outgroups (Effron & Knowles 2015).

While it is typical liberal media swill to portray all anger and resentment at Obama and his disastrous policies as racist reaction against the first Black president, there is still that underlying social illness of white supremacy which undeniably does fuel a good deal of the anger. And that rage had its political expression in Donald Trump who deftly employed racist dog-whistles throughout his campaign. From describing Mexicans as rapists and drug dealers to calling for a ban on Muslims, Trump managed to capitalize on the increased entativity of White America which, perhaps for the first time since George Wallace, had a political expression, an embodiment in one candidate.

None of this is to say that Hillary Clinton didn’t have plenty of white people supporting her, nor that Trump didn’t have support from non-white communities. But, taken *in toto*, it was the angry white vote which sealed the presidency for Trump.

As the researchers from Michigan and Texas (Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek) implied, it was the *perception* of a coherent and unified collective which truly unified the white working class around Trump. It was less his pandering to working class issues than his ability to both overtly and covertly employ racist overtones.

Another study, this one conducted by researchers from UC Santa Barbara and Stanford University (Major, Blodorn, Blascovich), found that personal identification with whiteness was directly related to the perception of oppression and future destruction of white people. Those respondents who were told that nonwhite groups will outnumber white people in the next three decades were more likely to support Trump.

Again, this conclusion illustrates the fact that a significant proportion of Trump’s support came from a fear of a loss of identity, a loss of dominance which translates into a loss of culture, morality, and greatness. Hence the need to recapture that 1950s feeling of white privilege or, put in the parlance of political sloganeering, the need to make America great again.

But let us not dismiss out of hand the claim that Trump’s victory was primarily due to his support from the working class, and that his candidacy fundamentally altered the political

identification of class. A useful method for interrogating this question is to examine the relative wealth and financial security of the Trumpistas.

According to an analysis conducted by the Urban Institute:

Among the 55 counties with residents with the highest average credit scores (720 and above), Hillary Clinton won just four of them: Falls Church, Virginia (with an average credit score of 729); San Juan County, Washington (722); Cook County, Minnesota (721); and Washington County, Minnesota (720). High credit scores are associated with long, successful credit histories and bills paid on time and are implicit markers of financial security and stability over a lifetime. High credit scores are also more often held by white consumers.

So, if Trump represented an upsurge in poor and working class political power, that was news to the tens of millions of affluent, employed, financially stable white people who voted for him. In fact, according to the data, the more financially secure the county, and the higher its average credit score and median income, the more likely it was to vote for Trump. Naturally, this is in large part due to racial inequalities that persist in the US as Blacks and Hispanics tend to have lower credit scores, less access to credit, lower median incomes, etc.

If anything, the question of class-based support has not been answered. Both Trump and Clinton captured rich people and poor people in their base. The difference is the overwhelming white support for Trump.

And this is borne out by what might be the most comprehensive demographic study on the Trumpen Proletariat yet. Gallup's Jonathan Rothwell conducted an in-depth analysis which revealed something profound: Trump's supporters are richer, not poorer, than average. Moreover, he concluded that the overriding factor determining support for Trump was not economics (NAFTA, Chinese competition, etc.) but rather segregation. Specifically, Rothwell found that the core of Trump's support came from people living in communities mostly or entirely unaffected by immigration.

Consider that for a moment. White people living in all white communities thinking that they are under assault from immigrants, Muslims and other minorities. It is, once again, that entitlement: the feeling that white people form a cohesive and singular group that is increasingly oppressed. It is not immigrants taking their jobs, it's the *idea* of immigrants taking their jobs. It's not Muslims moving in next door, it's the possibility that it *might* happen.

It's not so much that, like the angry citizens of South Park proclaimed: "Dey took er jerbs!!!" Rather it's that they're over there down the road, and soon they'll be here. This form of racism and white supremacy is manifested in the mind of the white racist as a lamentation for the despoiling of a once great white hope. America is under attack because whiteness is under attack. And who better to blame than the non-white?

**Trump, Brexit, and the Politics of 'White Genocide'**

Perhaps one of the most effective levers for mobilizing the white racist vote is the meme that has been popularized by fascists – be they of the hooded klansman or the Alt-Right variety – of ‘white genocide’. This idea is multiform as it can take any number of iterations. For some white supremacists, ‘white genocide’ is a conspiracy theory that refers to the literal extermination of whites through immigration, miscegenation, abortion, and other means. However, it can also be used in a broader and more loosely defined sense as simply the process by which non-whites integrate into, and alter the character of, white European and Anglo-American society.

Recently, the well-known leftist academic George Ciccariello-Maher became the victim of an online smear campaign waged by white nationalists and their supremacist allies after he tweeted a satirical comment which read “All I want for Christmas is white genocide.” The tweet, which was intended as a humorous jab at the lunacy of the very notion of white genocide, instead created a media firestorm after hundreds of social media users issued threats against Ciccariello-Maher, his family, and his employer Drexel University.

While it may seem a minor social media hullabaloo, the incident actually cuts to the very core of Trumpism: white identity. For it is only in opposition to the corrupting forces of multiculturalism and diversity that the white identity is constructed. There is relatively little that unites the Irish-Catholic in New York City with the rural Baptist in the South or the Methodist in the Midwest, except for their whiteness, the feeling that they are on the same side in a struggle for survival. Put another way, it is only through the shared delusion of white oppression that something akin to white entitlement – White America as a distinct group – is even possible.

Of course, this phenomenon is not relegated solely to the US. In Britain, 2016 saw the Brexit referendum which many interpreted not as a vote on membership in the European Union, but rather as a referendum on immigration. Indeed, according to The Migration Observatory at Oxford University, at least 77 percent of Britons believe immigration levels should be reduced, with roughly 45 percent of respondents ranking immigration/race relations at the top of the list of important issues – this was up from near zero percent 20 years ago.

In Britain, just as in the US, it is whiteness that is under assault, and it’s the sense of loss of dominance and control that is driving so much of the white anger. And in Britain, just as in the US, that sense of loss of power is manifested in the slogans attached the movement. Where for Trump it was “Make America Great Again” for Nigel Farage and the Brexit supporters it was “Take Back Control.”

With both slogans there is the obvious reactionary quality, the sense that the past was glorious and that if only it could be recaptured things would go back to the way they were. And while both slogans are ostensibly positive, the subtext is clearly one of racism and jingoism. For white Britons, “control” was embodied by the British Empire with its dominion over so much of the world. To “take back control” is to recapture the lost glory, to rekindle the flame. Similarly in the US, making America great again is not a far cry from saying “Make America White Again” as Trumpistas reminisce about the good old days when men were men and ‘Coloreds’ entered through the rear.

Once again these interrelated campaigns are rooted in white identity masked as patriotism. For Trumpistas, America is, by its very definition, white, and any attempts to make it anything else are seen as an existential threat. For Brexiters, national identity, as distinct from that of continental Europe and the EU, was the crux of the issue. But when one probes what exactly that national identity is, it becomes clear that the rocky island off the northwestern coast of Europe has its island status rooted in its self-conception: Britain, the island standing against the human tide.

As Dr. Tim Haughton, Head of the Department of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Birmingham incisively noted, “‘Take back control’ effectively combined not just a sense of a positive future albeit never defined or elaborated, but also suggested a sense of rightful ownership.”

Precisely. It is the sense of ownership that is really at issue on both sides of the Atlantic. For Trump and Brexit supporters, it is the white Anglo-European who ‘owns’ the country, and all the brown and black skinned people are mere infiltrators whose very presence taints and despoils the pristine nation.

This very same phenomenon is replaying itself over and over all across Europe. Perhaps the most ominous such development is the steady rise of Marine Le Pen and the National Front in France. According to many political experts, including French Prime Minister Manuel Valls, Le Pen will likely go to a runoff in the May 2017 presidential election where she could prove to be the culmination of the same process that brought us Brexit and Trump. And with Le Pen, whose fascist pedigree is well known both inside and outside France, the notion of white identity as the basis for a political movement will become a hard, inescapable reality.

Similarly, in Russia the fascist philosopher-cum-political operator Alexander Dugin has become a mainstream figure as he promotes his brand of fascism in Russia and throughout Europe and the US. Using powerful state-sponsored media platforms such as RT and Sputnik, Dugin has propagated his so-called “Eurasianist” vision throughout the West. In Dugin’s worldview, it is liberalism and multiculturalism that have corrupted contemporary life with their slavish devotion to modernity and secular liberal values, and only a reconstituted Russian Empire that would fuse together much of Northern Eurasia (with China noticeably absent) into one “civilizational” unit can provide a viable future.

A fundamental feature of Dugin’s Eurasianist vision is the fact that it is racially segregated. According to Duginists, there is a natural order to the world wherein Blacks stay in Africa, Arabs in the Middle East and so on in what amounts to a form of global apartheid. Duginism appropriates left wing economic and political ideas such as anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism within a fascist socio-cultural framework. And, at the core of that ideology is white supremacy and white identity.

Trump, Farage, Le Pen, and Dugin all appeal to a sense of loss of identity. In fact, it’s undeniably their most effective position. But it must be clarified, and shouted from the mountaintops, that it is not simply a loss of national identity as many movement supporters, and



political analysts alike, would have you believe. Rather, it is the loss of a *white* national identity that is at the root.

And so Trump, like his British and European analogues, has ridden a wave of momentum of white identity politics masquerading as pro-working class, pro-social safety net, anti-free trade, etc. But these are mere political chimeras, designed more for their reality TV appeal than ideological substance. In effect, Trump's appeal was to the white working class on racial lines; his purported position on the social safety net programs mere political posturing whose subtext was really that it's not going to be lazy blacks and "illegals" who will get their government benefits, it will be hard working whites.

It is almost painful, and certainly embarrassing, to have to explain that this has become the political reality in 2016, but it has. The rising tide of fascism under its many guises is unifying behind the concept of white supremacy or, as Alt-Right svengali Richard Spencer has called it, "racialism." And, in the US, Donald Trump has managed to transform white identity into a political framework in a way that very few had thought possible.

So we must return to the question of the historian as fishmonger and chef. Yes, it's true that the ingredients have been collected, the water brought to a boil, the apron and hat impeccably clean. And yet, there is that stench, that overwhelming, vomit-inducing putrid odor. So, what to do? Mask it with fancy spices, a good white wine, and some pungent herbs? Certainly it seems that's what the lazy and inept chef might do.

Are our analysts and historians equally lazy? Will they mask the stench of racism, xenophobia and white supremacy behind wave after wave of sweet-smelling, but ultimately inauthentic, narratives of anti-neoliberal reaction and working class resurgence? Or will they instead write the real history of this moment, in all its complexity?

If it is to be the latter, then we must demand that the history of this moment be the documentation of a radical rightward shift in US politics. Not because a right-wing Republican is in office, but because the far right has captured political, social, and cultural legitimacy. And white identity politics has been their vehicle.

Naturally, the Mussolini of Midtown will come and go with the structures of oppression and power intact, and indeed expanded in both scope and scale. But the movement that has congealed around him will live on long after he's ridden into the gold-encrusted sunset of his dreams. So too will the now fully formed socio-political concept of white identity.

This new chapter of struggle is much bigger than Trump, though he is undoubtedly the largest and orangest head on the hydra. This is now one of the defining political struggles of our lifetime.

And as our fishmonger-historian sits down to write the history of this period, what will he say? Will he record the story of the History of the Decline and Fall of the American Empire with The Donald as our Nero, tweeting while it all burns? Or will this be a story of redemption as millions

of people from around the world came together to defend the oppressed, the marginalized, the exploited, and smash incipient fascism?

I suppose it will be up to us, the actors in this tragicomedy, to determine that.