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## The U.S. Political Scene: Whiteness and the Legitimacy Crisis of Global Capitalism

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The U.S. political scene has been undergoing a facelift in an effort to restore the decreasing legitimacy of the transnationally-oriented capitalist class. This transformation has been characterized by a rightwing that has sought to portray itself as economically nationalistic in an attempt to expand support among the working class (primarily, among working class whites) whose economic stability has dwindled during the neoliberal era.

Why is this the case?

Beginning in the 1970s, faced with declining rates of profit and accumulation, as well as rising international competition capital needed to break free from the national constraints that had been put on it during the fordist-keynesian “new deal” era. One of those “constraints” had been the responsibility of ensuring the social reproduction of its national labor force. “Going global” has allowed capitalists to do away with this concern, as they now could tap into an ever-growing global pool of marginalized workers.

### Rise of Capitalist Globalization

By the late 20th century and into the 21st century new technologies and organizational advancements allowed companies to more easily operate across borders. New transnational networks of production and finance began to form.

Capitalist globalization had a major impact upon workers, not just in the global south, but in the ‘developed world’ as well. As is often the case, the most marginalized workers feel the effects of anti-worker policies earlier and deeper than those in more stable and better-paid positions. Yet as globalization deepened it also began to undermine many of the once-stable unionized industries.

The neoliberal order resulted in a new reality for many white workers, who previously were guaranteed a set of benefits that they had come to expect (benefits that were both material and ideological). Global capitalism and neoliberal policies resulted for many of them job insecurity and wage stagnation, but also in a reduction in the “wages of whiteness”: the subjective feeling of superiority over negatively racialized groups—one of these has been rage against workers from other parts of the world perceived as the culprits.

### **The U.S. Political Scene**

Within the U.S. political scene into the 1990s conservative and liberal establishments together developed new mechanisms of capital accumulation while chipping away at the power of labor, such as NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement). On the conservative side: xenophobic candidates like Pat Buchanan and anti-NAFTA business leaders such as Ross Perot were sidelined. On the liberal side the remnants of strong labor voices were silenced. A grand bargain was struck between a conservative militaristic establishment and a liberal establishment espousing a sort of anti-worker multiculturalism (with its growing identitarian acceptance of peoples from different ethnicities and sexual orientations, alongside viewing workers as cogs to be seamlessly integrated into a new globalized economy). Under these circumstances profits grew tremendously for transnational capital (aided especially by newfangled financial mechanisms). Meanwhile workers faced stagnation, dispossession, and heightened job insecurity.

In the wake of the biggest financial crisis for generations (2007–2008) and with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan raging on (2001– ), the liberal establishment failed to make any substantial adjustments. Rather than alter the course (or ideology), the response of the liberal establishment has been to engage in an amplified multiculturalism under the umbrella of the system—to call on hope, to engage in some limited reforms (such as the affordable healthcare act, which while a positive first step only went a small part of the way toward the health care access that the population needs). Even these reforms (to partially offset the growing unaffordability of health care for lower income Americans) were fought tooth and nail by conservative forces. On other issues such as foreign policy, the Democrats in power largely locked arms with their Republican counterparts: promoting interventionist policies abroad and the swelling tentacles of a global intelligence apparatus.

This brings us up to the 2016 Hillary Clinton candidacy and her salivating over policies of military interventionism and new supranational treaties (like the TPP, the Trans Pacific

Partnership). This essentially set her campaign up as a defender of the status quo, a fact strategically exploited by the xenophobic come-populist rhetoric of the Donald Trump campaign. While losing the popular vote by close to three million, the electoral arena (the best one that money can buy) played out through the country's undemocratic Electoral College system (impacted as well by decades of gerrymandering and mass voter suppression), allowing the Republican Party's astonishing return to power; with the flipping of only a few rust-belt districts tipping the scales in Trump's favor.

It is important to understand how the forces behind Trump (and their ideological mechanisms) are now operating through the U.S. political scene. It is within this context that we need to make sense of the political reversals that have taken place for the Democratic establishment, and the GOP's current domination of the country's federal branches.

We wish to argue that the reason for which Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again" and rhetoric resonated with so many white workers and middle strata is because the ideological terrain had in part already been prepared for it. The field in which Trump planted the seed of xenophobia and hatred among white people had been tilled by neoliberalism and fertilized with money from the Koch brothers, Rupert Murdoch— and other ruling elites. In fact it has roots also in the nation's formative history, through the violence against negatively racialized populations, most notably against Native and African Americans. In this sense, Trump's slogan and campaign promise to "Make America great again" is not new or original at all, but merely the newest iteration of the Tea Party's plan to "take the country back", tapping into the same sentiment of aggrieved entitlement.

The Trumpian-right also mixes into this sentiment a rightist populist critique of globalization. Yet, Trump's election has not come to represent a rupture but rather a continuation of strategies deployed by the transnational capitalist class (TCC), with a different guise.

Beneath the surface of the U.S. political system one can see how power is entrenched. Barack Obama's inner circle was made up largely by members of the Council on Foreign Relations, while Hillary Clinton's campaign was backed by "enlightened" finance tycoons and liberal-hawk leaning sectors of the TCC, such as Warren Buffett, George Soros, Michael Bloomberg and others. While the populist rhetoric of Trump's inner circle may sound more anti-establishment, its members are blatantly ultra-elitist and are thoroughly entwined with global business interests.

With recent U.S. wars unpopular and disastrous, during his election campaign Trump criticized some of the wars and interventions launched under George W. Bush and Obama. He differentiated between what he described as "smart" and "dumb" wars. One brief sliver of hope was the possibility of detente, in which the world's two major nuclear-armed powers could have begun to roll back tensions. Yet, criticized ceaselessly by his liberal opponents and in the mainstream media as "Putin's puppet", by Trump's third month in office his foreign policy had largely fallen into line with the military-industrial-security-state apparatus.

Trump today boasts of improving the lives of U.S. workers, but there is little indication that he intends to materially improve conditions for anybody other than his ruling elite buddies—just the opposite— as his proposed plans seek to dump billions more into the Pentagon budget, while

eliminating state subsidized lunches for impoverished youth, privatizing education, and stripping subsidized healthcare from tens of millions of lower income people.

His electoral win in the rust belt states though was an indication of the discontent among many white workers. To hold onto this support he will need to keep them on board. Here he appears to be trying to convince capital not just by his rhetoric but also through various tax breaks and subsidies to engage in some limited labor-capital compromises in the rust belt, in Michigan, Ohio, and even Wisconsin. Holding these states could help to ensure GOP victories on the national level for many years to come. A South-Mid-West-Rust-Belt Electoral College strategy clearly appears to be the GOP's best winning strategy.

### **Right-populism as a strategy for offsetting legitimacy crisis among aggrieved white workers**

The ruling class is engaging in various ideological strategies to renew its legitimacy. Key among these are ideological mechanisms of splitting and disorganizing the working classes, including the old tried-and-true racism, jingoism and xenophobia. And as under Trump a wing of the transnationally oriented elite sings the song of protectionism to confuse and recruit. With this in mind, his administration is attempting to make inroads with some labor unions especially those present in the rust-belt.

The pressures and structural features of the U.S. political scene bend heavily in favor of capital, and in particular transnational capital. State leaders need access to capital, and capital is in the hands of transnational business people tied into the global economy. Politicians must still appeal to their home audiences, through constant declaration of patriotism and other theatrics. This is the constant juggling act of major political actors in the country – attempting to hold legitimacy whilst deepening practices that will allow transnational capital's continual profitability.

In apparent contradiction, Trump's strategy of rejecting the TPP, has helped to varnish himself as an "economic nationalist", a fighter for U.S. workers. This was key for his winning the Rust Belt, where so many manufacturing jobs have been lost over recent decades, many that had been held by white workers.

The TPP symbolized the most unconstrained attempt by transnationally oriented elites to impose policies on an array of countries (including the U.S.) where the major beneficiaries are transnational corporations. Does Trump's opposing the TPP mean that he opposes transnational capital? Quite to the contrary, it represents an alternative strategy: while a partial pump on the breaks, he extends at the same time many other factors beneficial to the TCC (lowering taxes, gutting of regulations and environmental protections, expanding military-industrial-prison contracts, while promoting a host of new bilateral agreements that can aid cross-border accumulation). All of this entails reproducing the dominant order, and under a refurbished conservative ideology.

The intensifying crisis of legitimacy has become highlighted by the emergence of various political currents, and not just on the right. Prominent amongst these new entities are the movement that evolved around the presidential candidacy of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders

(supported by anti-war politicians such as Tulsi Gabbard), which showed that a social democrat could obtain a large number of votes in the U.S. The Sanders' campaign was inspiring in many ways, however, he failed to make a systematic critique of U.S. militarism. Also, while he criticized "crony capitalism", a deeper structural critique of capitalism was of course absent.

Yet the fate of the 2016 presidential election was rooted partly in the broader crisis of legitimacy of global capitalism. As Clinton and Obama were standard-bearers of the status quo, Trump was able to exploit this through his populist rhetoric and rightist critique of globalism.

In early 2017, following Clinton's defeat in the Electoral College, Sanders' emboldened progressive current attempted to wrestle away the party's leadership. Yet the establishment within the party prevailed – one that can mock Trump, but not provide even a social democratic alternative. The power-brokers within the DNC wager that growing revulsion with Trump, as his fake populism is exposed, will be enough to rejuvenate them and that fear-mongering and guilt-tripping will ward off any challenge from the likes of Sanders.

By no means accidentally, the calls to take the country back (to "make it great again") come at the expense of already racially oppressed groups, and at the cost of women and children who will be hurt by cuts to social programs. Scapegoating is important in the U.S. political scene, especially as the transnational capitalist class will not easily reverse the policies that benefit them. The Trump-right has sought to make up for the loss in the material wages of white workers through an increase in their "public and psychological wage" (as W.E.B. Du Bois described it) —via the promotion of racism and xenophobia.

As the anti-migrant rhetoric intensifies, such as reflected in the rise of a neo-fascistic "alt-right", the goal of increasing the value of citizenship and whiteness can be observed when we compare Obama and Trump's immigration policies. Obama became known as the "Deporter-in-Chief" because he deported so many people. It is possible that Trump may deport more people than Obama did, but, even if not, he will do this in a much more visible and dramatic way – similarly to what he attempted with the Muslim ban. The effects of the policies will have real consequences for migrants, just as Obama's did, but a large part of the harm will come from a more blatant normalization of bigotry.

## **In Conclusion**

Relying upon recycled mantras of xenophobia and nationalism, the Trumpian right seeks to head off the legitimacy crisis of transnational capital. However rather than propose an alternative to transnational capital, they propose an alternative strategy for reproducing it. Also disconcerting are the growing threats of war, as neo-conservative groups (so heavily involved in the U.S. war crimes of recent decades) appear to have reasserted their influence over the white house.

Progressive, left, and social movement forces in the U.S. need to build on successes of the past as well as move beyond them, taking on, for instance, a more pro-active position against militarism and a deeper critique of capitalism. Reaching out across racial and gender lines to working and lower income people, such a movement cannot allow for itself to fall under the

hegemony of corporatist political actors. Rather it must be a project that provides a real fight back to the Trumpian right and the permanent war state it now inhabits.