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State of Fear: Trump v. Clinton

By Vijay Prashad
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Shudders of fear emanate from the institutions of the United States establishment as Donald Trump claims the leadership of the Republican Party. *The Washington Post*, one of the leading national newspapers, ran an editorial with a clear headline: “Donald Trump is a unique threat to American democracy” (July 22). *The Post* is owned by Amazon.com’s Jeff Bezos, who had previously run afoul of Trump. The Republican leader had accused Bezos of anti-trust violations; the allegation was that he had used his paper to push for a corporate tax policy that would benefit

his retail company. Such behaviour has become normal in U.S. society, where large firms see it as their right to influence state policy. Trump's unpredictable stances have meant that on occasion he goes after his fellow billionaires for the way they have crafted the system (he has admitted that his real estate deals have also been advantaged by such coziness with elected officials). A characteristic Trump conspiracy theory might now assume that Bezos' paper is going after Trump only because of this dust-up earlier in the year. Trump, his supporters say, is a "blue-collar billionaire", a rich man with a poor man's sensibility. The billionaires do not like him because he is willing to criticise them.

That unpredictable part of Trump has meant that he has seized upon several criticisms of U.S. policy that have become standard in the U.S. Left. First among these is his position against the kind of free trade agreements—such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)—that allow U.S. firms to move to parts of the world where labour costs are lower than in the U.S. Even *The Post* had to acknowledge that this part of Trump's appeal "has resonated with many Americans whose economic prospects have stagnated". This is also why the Democratic Socialist candidate, Bernie Sanders, was able to appeal to so many Americans who had seen their aspirations reduced to dust. This large segment of American —from West Virginia coal miners to Michigan factory workers—"deserve a serious champion", says *The Post*, "and the challenges of inequality and slow wage growth deserve a serious response. But Mr Trump has nothing positive to offer, only scapegoats and dark conspiracy theories."

Here *The Post* is correct. Trump's diagnosis is to blame immigrants and other countries for the caprices of his fellow billionaires. He has dug into the seam of racism that sits just beneath the official rhetoric of the Republican Party. It is peculiar to watch the Republican leadership implode when Trump has only shouted out what they have said at lower decibels. Since the 1960s, the *modus operandi* of the Republican Party has been to appeal to a disgruntled white population that has seen its privileges get slowly eroded by the Civil Rights movement. It was this "Southern Strategy" that brought the Republicans to power, and this is what maintains their hold over large sections of the white vote. Fox News, which came into its own in the late 1990s, was the mouthpiece of this politics, expressing dismay at the slow gains made by non-whites and women. Fox television anchors shouted down concerns about racism and sexism, making it acceptable for a conservative white male view to dominate the Republican Party. Trump is merely heir to that dynamic. It is fitting that as Trump ascended to the Republican Party at its convention, Fox's leader Roger Ailes had to step down over allegations of sexual harassment. What Ailes is being accused of is in the DNA of the conservative movement.

Whatever is of interest in Trump's agenda—criticism of unfair trade, foreign wars —is overshadowed by the racism and sexism of the Republican Party. The ethos of the Trump campaign lies not in the issues that it brings up, which are open to discussion, but in its macho sensibility. It is this machismo that leads Trump to disregard dialogue and to insist on action. There is a great deal of Mussolini in Trump—the fist thumping the table, the argument against intellectual debate and for disciplined action above all else. Even here Trump is not alone. The anti-intellectual strain of Italian fascism has long found a home in the Republican Party, where thinking is seen as the pathway to socialism. Antipathy to the literature on climate change, disregard for the evidence on women's reproductive health: these are just two of the areas where the Republicans have refused to consider logic and discussion above attitude. When Senate

leader Mitch McConnell said that his party would simply deny President Barack Obama's agenda a chance in the legislature, he took refuge in this anti-intellectualism. Why have a discussion around policy when you could simply block your opponents with power?

The Republican convention in Cleveland that anointed Trump to leadership had no time to reiterate even these themes. It was trapped by the amateurism of the Trump campaign. His wife's speech was seen to have been plagiarised from a speech by Michelle Obama. Trump's own speech—said the wags—sounded better in the original German. Even the protests seemed tame. Only CodePink, the fiery group created during the early years of the Iraq war, bothered to come out in force. Its leaders, Medea Benjamin and Jodie Evans, bravely came into the convention hall with signs that protested against Trump's racism. But most of the convention went by without a major protest. "It was weird how few protestors there were at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland," said Medea Benjamin. "Eerily empty." Trump's opponents do not expect him to win. They take refuge in the general consensus that he cannot win. If *The Post* says he is too dangerous to be President, how can anyone vote for him?

That is precisely the view of his opponent Hillary Clinton. She is running on an "Anyone But Trump" ticket. Her own limitations, she suggests, are irrelevant. Forgotten are her promises to the left wing of her party. Bernie Sanders ran as their standard-bearer. He raised questions of inequality and unfair trade deals. Sanders raised the very issues that Trump raises but offered a richer account of them. He did not take recourse to scapegoats or racism. Hillary Clinton had pledged to take Sanders' views into account for her own campaign. She had promised to reach out to his supporters. But Hillary Clinton's choice of a running mate, Virginia's Tim Kaine, is a sharp indicator that she will not turn to the left. Kaine is for these trade deals and is close to the banks. He is also ambivalent on women's reproductive health. The issues of the Democratic Party's left flank have been set aside. Hillary Clinton knows that this part of the electorate will vote for her regardless. She is not Trump. That, she wagers, is sufficient.

Danger lurks with this assessment. Will those who supported Sanders back Hillary Clinton in the election because they fear Trump? Or will they stay home and decide not to vote at all? It is this lack of enthusiasm that could hurt Hillary Clinton. How will she be able to bring Sanders supporters to the polls, when it appears—through a Wikileaks cache—that the Democratic Party had planned to sabotage Sanders' campaign and that Hillary Clinton herself has turned to a "moderate" like Kaine for her running mate? Enthusiasm is in short supply. This has been a problem with Hillary Clinton's campaign from the beginning. She could have turned to a Latino politician to draw in excitement about the first Latino on a mainstream ticket. It is precisely the kind of identity politics that operates in the U.S. But Hillary Clinton instead went for a white man whose political history is saturated with calculations of career rather than principle. When it became clear that he might attain national office, Kaine began to move away from his harsh anti-abortion views. He is now open to anything. He stands for little. It is hard to create enthusiasm for careerism.

Demography suits Hillary Clinton. Even if Trump wins the white male vote, he cannot win the presidency. The non-white vote and the white female vote stand against him. Hillary Clinton hopes to benefit from fear. This is her main campaign strategy. Anyone but Trump is the slogan. It is what John Kerry tried to use in 2004—Anyone but Bush. Kerry failed. It is not a guaranteed

path. Hillary Clinton's choice of Kaine might make sense to the professional political consultants. It will not excite the electorate. Could Trump win an election that he should not win?