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Intuitive Action and Popular Culture in Trump's Alternative Facts Age

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MEHMET EVREN EKEN, APR 20 2017

When a gas attack struck Syria 4 years ago, the response from the US was one of inaction – suiting both the Obama Administration's avoidances and the American public's war-weariness. Apparently, much has changed as when a similar situation arose in 2017 the Trump administration bombed Syria without much hesitation. Yet, such *act first, think later* logic is not unprecedented. As Walter A. McDougall argues “a pervasive but radically changing faith that “God is on our side” has inspired US foreign policy ever since 1776” (McDougall, 2016). Likewise, as Satia contends, (2008) intelligence gathering efforts of British spies in the 19th century Middle East were also driven by gut-feelings. Therefore, decision-making procedures have always been complemented by intuitions. Nevertheless, such faith-based and intuition driven institutional inspirations manifest themselves more overtly, recklessly and unapologetically today. Despite the belief that politics should be contained with facts and run by logical actions (Haass, 2017), the action-filled first weeks of Trump's presidency showed that we may be teetering towards a time where the arbitrary use of power holds sway over politics (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Roth, 2016) and that we should be wary about the emerging logic of intuitive action in the post-truth age.

The Intercept released an article penned by Matthew Cole (2007) on the war crimes of the Seal Team Six. Officially known as the Naval Special Warfare Development Group (DevGru), it is one of the most well-known special operations forces of the US military. It is “[t]he clandestine global force capable of striking anywhere, killing anyone, the tip of America's military spear” (Cole, 2017). Yet, contrary to its surrounding celebratory aura, as a good example of investigative journalism, Cole's piece details the other side of the story: the menacing conducts of the DevGru operators in the front lines. From hacking body parts with hatchets, to scalping head skins, to the volatilised killings of unarmed civilians – the article showcases the inadmissible and habituated war crimes of elite US soldiers. More importantly, Cole's piece underlines the way these unruly actions are inveterately covered up within the military sphere as “the command has proven to be incapable and unwilling to hold itself accountable for war crimes” (Cole, 2017). Another response came from the History Channel which re-publicized the subject through the show ‘Six’. Depicting the story of the DevGru operators, the series covers the allegations put forth by the article through common tropes: humanisation and victimisation of the operators, and giving a civilian-soldier face to the war effort. According to the storyline, Rip Taggart is a former team commander. Despite his professionalism, he gradually goes off-the-track and begins going berserk in some operations. We see him slitting an enemy's throat, scalping a man's head, and killing unarmed and surrendered people. Soon after, we learn that he had to leave the military as he was ratted on by another junior team member on the basis of his undisciplined actions. Thereafter he starts working as a mercenary and is taken as a hostage while guarding a businessman in Nigeria. And to rescue their former commander, team six embarks on an operation. Yet, the internal dynamics of the team seems to be damaged with the quarrelsome background of the internal exposure. One of the team members ‘Bear’ constantly blames the insider, ‘Caulder’, for what happened to Rip. Though Caulder defends his action as Rip crossed the line and lost his self-control, Bear retorts “[t]he only line that I care about is between good and evil, and Rip was on the side of good. You've seen everything we've seen, and you still think it's that simple? You betrayed your troop chief. You might as well have gut-shot him”. The undertone of this quote reminds us the basis of American exceptionalism in a disturbing way. No matter whether it is right or wrong, if it is done by ‘good guys’ against ‘bad guys’, it should not be judged and there is no need to argue about it. In another scene, Caulder's daughter challenges him: “Well, maybe we're making more bad guys than we're killing. It's bad math.” Nevertheless, he frames his warrior mindset to his daughter: “I can't

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think about that. So I don't. Doubt creates hesitation. Hesitation gets you killed. So... I can't".

'Six' encapsulates the emerging intuition driven action logic of the US foreign policy discourse. Accordingly, this way of uninhibited and unreserved intuition-based action reasoning furthers the pre-emptive strike logic to a new edge. As, while the discourse around the pre-emptive action was still having a need, a sense of obligation to show proof and a sense of logic behind actions, as they are based on anticipations (Arend, 2003) this new unbridled intuitive action illogic will not need any sense of obligation to posit an argument to justify lethal action. Instead, driven by intuitions and atavism, fuelled by populist imaginations and covered with self-victimisation and exceptionalism claims, it will only require and prefer "deadly actions" to solve geopolitical problems. This is why, both the timing and the content of the series is important. The undertone of the series' discourse, in this vein, first, unapologetically humanises what was going on in the teams, second, does not refute any of the allegations, third, introduces us the new recourse of American exceptionalism on taking action as a new self-fulfilling and unaccountable international knowledge source. It is the unruly world of intuitive action, wherein every actor finds its strength and logic through actions, not through consistent reasoning and reflection.

According to a well known joke, the difference between a fascist and a leftist is based on the way they act and think. While fascists act first and think later, leftists think first and never act at all. The writings of Umberto Eco could be enlightening in this regard as populist leaders tend to see action as a better option to inaction. Eco, who born and bred as a fascist in Mussolini's Italy, wrote many short pieces about populism in the 1990s and 2000s. For him, the advance and omnipresence of the media brought about a new form of populism in Italy through the Berlusconi years (Eco, 2007). To identify the elusive logic and the much confused forms of populism, he wrote another short piece for the New York Review of Books in 1995: Ur-Fascism. His intention was to uncover the sometimes contradictory yet constantly present features of a political synecdoche. He teases them out in fourteen features. Yet among them the third one, irrationalism is central to explaining intuitive action. "Irrationalism also depends on the cult of action for action's sake. Action being beautiful in itself, it must be taken before, or without, any previous reflection. Thinking is a form of emasculation. Therefore, culture is suspect insofar as it is identified with critical attitudes. Distrust of the intellectual world has always been a symptom of UrFascism, from Goering's alleged statement ("When I hear talk of culture I reach for my gun") to the frequent use of such expressions as "degenerate intellectuals," "eggheads," "effete snobs," "universities are a nest of reds." The official Fascist intellectuals were mainly engaged in attacking modern culture and the liberal intelligentsia for having betrayed traditional values" (Eco, 1995).

Similarities with this can also be seen in Trump's action-based tenure. From the Muslim travel ban to the Mexican border wall project, to his first special forces operations authorised with weak intelligence, to recent Syria attacks and to many of his quick resolves – he stimulated an international backlash. Yet, as both Eco (2007) and Lakoff (2016) put it, expected critiques in the form of repetitive backlash were only supplementing his power by mirroring it. Hence, from his very first days in the office, he signalled that he was going to use his power with crude actions. And, he did so without containing his actions with facts and backing them with veritable arguments. As he put 'America first', he does not need to be seconded. Nevertheless, he can second-guess others' actions with second sight and take action without a second thought. In this sense, as Phil Cole argues, "[n]one of the old rules apply, because under Trumpism rules are for losers. Realism has returned, and liberal internationalism is, for now anyway, dead". Accordingly, the seemingly peace-oriented world order was going to be run by a just institution: the UN, which was backed by equally sovereign states. It was going to oversee the conduct of international relations based on certain precepts of geopolitical decency. While hard-power was coming handy in some cases, the UN order was established to give diplomacy a chance. Globalised trade and finance were also underpinning this order. Hence from an order of battle, an order of diplomacy among the equal sovereign states was in place. In it, international institutions were going to run and oversee the checks and balances. Yet the current disrespect towards international institutions and their inability mean that the order created to buffer and hinder the atavistic and egotistic acts will no longer be overseen by any morality. The only morality for actors will be the ones they prefer. In terms of the US, it is the American exceptionalism, as a heroic and intuitive guide to action.

The similarities of this intuition guided action logic can be tracked via the subtexts of some recent films as well. For instance, in Zero Dark Thirty, while 'Maya' was certain on her lead, she was surrounded by unconvinced, restraining and unwilling bureaucrats. Maya trusts her gut-feelings and complements certainty with her intuitions. As Asay notes,

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actually “[n]o one’s sure if bin Laden’s in there, not definitively. He’s still invisible to the CIA’s spying eyes, silent to its prying ears. But Maya knows. In her gut she knows” (Asay, 2016). Everything needed to reveal it is taking action. Similarly, when asked by one of the SEAL Team members regarding the reliability of their intelligence, she cannot give a certain answer, and hours before the raid, one of the SEALs asks the other: “what part of the story convinced you?”. The response is a mischievous confession: “her confidence. That’s the kind of concrete data point I’m looking for”. Despite institutional and rational setbacks, the mission is accomplished thanks to Maya’s gut-feelings that are complementing her reasoning. “Maya’s conviction is the product of what she sees and feels, the immediate knowledge that comes from her senses” and “viewers are supposed to trust her instincts: when Maya’s fellow agent Dan accuses her of pushing a theory [based on her intuitions] ... Maya emphatically agrees, as if it were is a point of pride” and “we do not see Maya guessing wrongly” at all (Evans, 2014, p.365). She always reaches certainty through her feelings. However, for instance, in reality, earlier raids conducted by Seal Team Six and other military assets to kill or capture Osama bin Laden led to various civilian massacres. These operations were similarly based on visual-cue-driven “suspicions” (Cole, 2017) as well. Still, they are entirely overlooked in the film.

In concluding, it is clear that popular culture offers a window into seeing our current predicament in which alt-right groups and populists support their inclinations through alternative facts – which are actually self-serving mendacities, prophecies and wishful-thinking games. In many films, American heroes reign supreme by drawing upon their intuitions. Thus, Americans can supplement reasoning with feelings, act upon it and can then estimate results and causalities later. Suitably, as one former top SEAL officer put it: “Do I think there was more killing than should have been done? Sure. I think the natural inclination was, if it’s a threat, kill it, and later on you realise, ‘Oh, maybe I over assessed the threat” (Mazzetti, et al., 2015). In another instance, in the miniseries ‘Six’, we hear Bear also saying: “We get in. We get out. We ask forgiveness later”. Hence, no matter whether it is true or not, no matter what is fact or fiction, no matter what is right or wrong, what is needed is merely to *take action*. As the exceptional American follows its path intuitively without any need to draw on agreed upon facts, guns can be drawn upon alternative facts driven by intuitive knowledge. Thus, without the need for actionable intelligence, action is praised as the more effective geopolitical knowledge source. Hence, intuitive action can be considered as the new illogic that further transforms the transgressions of pre-emptive action. As a result, the distinction between fact and fiction have fallen prey to non-fiction in this era of post-truth.

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