Trump's "Muslim Ban": A Symptom of White Nationalism in US Politics

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"When Trump touts his 'beautiful wall'," observed Elinor Langer a few months before the 2016 US presidential election, "he is fanning a flame lit by white nationalists David Duke and Tom Metzger in their 'patrols' of San Ysidro-Tijuana border crossing in the 1970s."[1] Langer, author of one of the best accounts of the rise of Neo-Nazism in the United States,[2] saw in Trump's campaign strategy signs of how racial nationalism continues to shape American politics and society. His executive orders for "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorists" (popularly known as "the Muslim ban") make a similar political appeal to racial and religious prejudices to exercise exclusionary, nationalist power.

There is no doubt that racism—historically institutionalized in slavery, the bloody colonization of Native Americans, Jim Crow, exclusionary citizenship and immigration laws—has had an enduring effect on US social, political, and economic structures. It may even be said that it has been integral to their historical development. Over the last few decades, US society has become more diverse and global than it has ever been in its history. Many racist laws, immigration policies, and institutions have been overturned as US politics and economy have become increasingly globalized. Mattias Gardell, who writes on religious racism, defines racism as the belief that race determines who people *are*.[3] In his historical work on (religious) racist movements, Gardell draws out how the explicit racism that was completely un-noteworthy in America's past was "dethroned," downgraded to an ideology of opposition, as "public society made a decisive shift toward a multicultural America."[4] Explicit racism went underground. People like David Duke and Tom Metzger, who in the 1970s had been influential and dangerous figureheads of movements clinging to the explicit racism of the past, became fringe lunatics. Even as Americans strive to acknowledge the legacy of racism, the public discourse on racism today approaches it as a moral flaw or the ravings of racist individuals rather than as a power relation that politically and economically shapes culture and society.

As the United States became more diverse and global in its orientation, many Americans who benefited from past racist laws and policies and are, today, vulnerable to economic vicissitudes of globalization have experienced not only a change in their social status and circumstance but also a loss of economic and political power. As institutionalized racism diminished, they felt dethroned. There is no direct or causal relation between these social and economic conditions and racist ideologies, but since the 1970s, racist movements have actively sought to connect them by attributing the anger, resentment, and sense of helplessness "dethroned" white Americans feel to abstract forces, such as the civil rights movement, multiculturalism, immigration, and globalization. They have personified these forces as Jews, blacks, gays, feminists, liberals, Mexicans or other immigrants, and, increasingly since 9/11, Muslims. This is what white supremacist activism has primarily consisted of since the 1970s: "educating" whites on the causes of their anger and disenfranchisement.

This racist activism went underground by masking its propaganda as "information" and "education" aimed at resisting state-sponsored multicultural "programing." These efforts resulted in what could appropriately be called "white nationalism." White nationalism preys on a sense of political and economic loss among those who were the beneficiaries of racist institutions to posit a nationalist ideology based on race that opposes the reality of the nation, in all its diversity and complexity. Its ideological opposition to reality requires an idealization of the past to which it aims to revert society: "Make America Great Again!" White nationalism is certainly no less racist than the racism of the

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past, but it is not as focused on the "other" (be they people of colour, Jews, or Muslims), instead directing attention to what it means to be white. In the explicit racism of America's past, whiteness was neutral, the norm that only became visible in contrast with colour. For white nationalists, the past reveals a whole array of meanings associated with white skin. As the political theorist Etienne Balibar has argued, "Theoretically, speaking, racism is…a *historiosophy* which makes history the consequence of a hidden secret revealed to men about their own nature and their own birth."[5] By subjugating one's nature and identity to a racist ideology, white nationalism makes racial identity essential to any process of self-realization and empowerment. To be white is to be powerful; any opposition to this projection of the self is a personal threat that is felt viscerally. As a feeling, the threat and the fear it engenders do not need to be corroborated by objective analysis or other people's experiences. Any account of the past or the present that does not accord with this race-based ideological reading of the world feels like "fake news," the mutterings of an out-of-touch establishment, or the machinations of the enemy.

Because white nationalism in the United States opposes the actual demographic makeup of the nation, it has had to develop both its own accounts of the world and media through which it could disseminate them. Such accounts include: denial of the Holocaust, conspiracy theories about Jewish plots for world domination, the attribution of civilization and progress to white Christians, and stories and pseudo-scientific statistics of crimes committed by blacks and immigrants. The Internet has been an absolute godsend for white nationalists eager to educate others on what it *really* means to be American and encourage white people to demand the power that is their birth right. Explicit racism may have been "dethroned" and ran underground, but this new effort to disseminate white nationalist conceptions of identity far and wide was very successful. However, most Americans did not fully recognize their potency in contemporary US politics until the election of Donald Trump.

Prior to his entry in the 2016 Presidential race, Trump was already loosely enmeshed in the world of white nationalist paranoia and conspiracy theories as evidenced by the leading role he played in the "birther movement," which sought to delegitimize President Obama by questioning his natural-born citizenship. Trump's position vis à vis white nationalist discourses became clearer when he announced his candidacy by evoking the tropes of loss and civilizational failure commonly found in white nationalist propaganda. He described the United States as a country "in serious trouble" that no longer has the "victories" it used to enjoy. He followed this by pointing to how the Chinese, the Japanese, Mexicans, and Middle Easterners are beating America and taking advantage of "us":

The U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems…. It's true…. When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best…. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. But I speak to border guards, and they tell us what we're getting. And it only makes common sense…. They're sending us not the right people. It's coming from more than Mexico. It's coming from all over South and Latin America, and it's coming probably—probably—from the Middle East. But we don't know. Because we have no protection, and we have no competence. We don't know what's happening. And it's got to stop, and it's got to stop fast. Islamic terrorism is eating up large portions of the Middle East. They've become rich…. So now ISIS has the oil, and what they don't have, Iran has…. And we have nothing…. And every time we give Iraq equipment, the first time a bullet goes off in the air, they leave it…. Last quarter, it was just announced our gross domestic product—a sign of strength, right? But not for us. It was below zero. Whoever heard of this? It's never below zero, horrible labor participation rate. And our real unemployment is anywhere from 18 to 20 percent. Don't believe the 5.6. Don't believe it. That's right. A lot of people up there can't get jobs. They can't get jobs because there are no jobs, because China has our jobs and Mexico has our jobs. They all have jobs.[6]

As fact checkers immediately pointed out, Trump trampled facts left and right in this speech,[7] but to point out his falsehoods was to miss the point he wanted to communicate. His intended audience was less concerned about the truth of what he said than about his validation of their intuitions about the world, which have been cultivated for the past two decades by white nationalist efforts to "educate" the white public about their "disenfranchisement" in a multicultural America. He showed his non-college educated, rural, and working class white followers that even though, he grew up as a wealthy New Yorker, he saw the world, at least in part, as they did. He made his sympathies with white nationalists more blatant when, a day after a black activist was physically attacked at one of his rallies, he tweeted false statistics about the number of whites murdered by blacks in America.[8] According to the FBI, 15% of

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whites murdered in 2014 were killed by blacks,[9] but Trump tweeted a graphic of a white man in army fatigues with a bandana over his face, standing with a pointed gun next to a column of false "USA Crime Statitics~2015" furnished by a fictitious "Crime Statistics Bureau of San Francisco" that cited "Whites killed by blacks~~81%." When he was confronted about the inaccuracy of his tweet on the show *The O'Reilly Factor*, Trump explained that he "re-tweeted" these statistics himself without checking them because they "came out of a radio show and other places…sources that are very credible."[10] White nationalists regularly post such statistics on online forums to give their racist beliefs, in the words of the late anthropologist Clifford Geertz, "an aura of factuality."[11] An example of these forums is reddit.com/r/truenews, which claims to offer news "free from opinion and bias." The news section on Voat.co often includes similar "objective" statistics and facts, while /pol/-PoliticallyIncorrect on 4chan.org is likely the most popular forum of this sort. Spreading such content in hopes that they get mentioned by more established sources of news is central to white nationalist activists' efforts to "de-program" the media for the white public with "neutral information" on what the world is really like.

Those who missed the point of Trump's speech or were simply stunned by his fallacious "re-tweet" viewed his racism mainly as a character flaw. They wondered, how can such a person run for the highest office of the land? They did not focus on how white nationalism represents political relations in US society, even though this is what Trump was strategically manipulating to advance his campaign. Trump thus did not mainstream white nationalism but rather he recognized its influence to his advantage. The white nationalist clout was already there. White nationalists as well as out-and-proud racists—who, unlike white nationalists, make little effort to present their racism as mere "information"—immediately recognized this and celebrated the influence they had steadily achieved online, under the radar of the general public.

Twelve days after Trump announced his candidacy, a popular Neo-Nazi site agreed with his statements about Mexicans, and it touted Trump for confronting "the fact that the government openly lies about [the unemployment rate]."[12] It urged its readers "to do whatever they can to make Donald Trump President" because he is "the only candidate who is even talking about anything at all that matters." A few weeks later, a white nationalist news site celebrated Trump for "going full populist on issues that matter" and noted, "White Americans can finally express themselves on what kind of country they want to live in."[13] "If Trump wins," another white nationalist site opined, "then it will mean the SPLC [Southern Poverty Law Center], the media, the subservient cuckservative establishment, all the experts and intellectuals, and the Democratic Party will have thrown everything they had at him—especially the race card—and lost to a popular revolt by White America. The powerful won't look so powerful anymore to all those aggrieved people, will they?… Don't underestimate the power of the presidency to legitimize marginalized people and deviant movements. If Barack Obama can legitimize gay marriage and transsexuals, Donald Trump can legitimize the Alt-Right."[14] Today, following his election, white nationalists refer to "the Donald" as "our God-Emperor" in online forums; most prolifically, on the Donald Trump subreddit.[15] The moniker started as a facetious *nom de guerre* during Trump's candidacy and became increasingly less ironic as the election unfolded.

In *A Hundred Little Hitlers*, Langer reports that one of her white nationalist interviewees identified "three stages in the development of a racist skinhead: hatred, which came naturally; education, which had to be cultivated; and violence, which was the point."[16] To bring the world in line with their nationalist ideologies, militant white supremacists resort to violence. Given white nationalist backing for Trump and the fact that many of his political tactics are out of the white nationalist playbook, it is not surprising that many have become more alert to the presence of hate crimes and bias-related incidents in the United States. There have been numerous media reports of such incidents since Trump's election.[17] It is difficult to know with certainty, however, if these incidents are increasing or if more people have become sensitized to their power and are thus going out of their way to report them to the media and relevant authorities. What is clear is that white nationalism, and its articulate, consistent presentation of whiteness as right to power, creates political relations that, if not immediately violent, carry the real possibility of violence.

In contemporary US politics, the threat of national violence is most evident in public discourses and policies related to Muslims. The racist underpinnings of violent threats against Muslims are often masked by being directed toward "Radical Islamic Terrorists" rather than Muslims in general. Trump, for example, in his inaugural address vowed to "unite the civilized world against Radical Islamic Terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the Earth."[18] How "Radical Islamic Terrorism" could be distinguished and targeted among Muslims for "eradication" is

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not at all clear. Nor does it need to be made clear for Trump's intended audience. Trump went on to assert, "At the bedrock of our politics will be a total allegiance to the United States of America." Clearly, the "eradication of Radical Islamic Terrorism" is not a statement of actionable policy but an assertion of what Balibar has called "nationalism of might." In a white nationalist frame, the question is not whether violence against Muslims is right but whether it demonstrates power.

Trump's executive orders for "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorists" are examples of this demonstration of nationalist power. The first order, issued on January 27, 2017, suspended visas and entry into the United States for nationals of seven Muslim-majority countries—Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Sudan, and Yemen—for 90 days in order to give the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Secretary of State, and the Director of National Intelligence time to review their security screening procedures and report to the president. At a time when the Syrian refugee crisis was on the international media circuit, Trump also ordered the suspension of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program for 120 days in order to give the above mentioned officials time to review their agency's refugee application and adjudication process and recommend additional procedures to ensure refugees do not pose a security threat to the United States. He also limited the number of refugees the United States would accept to 50,000 annually.[19] When the federal courts ruled this executive order unconstitutional because of its targeting of a specific religious community in violation of the Establishment Clause, Trump issued a revised executive order on March 3, 2017. The new order removed Iraq from the list of affected countries because of the presence of U.S. military in Iraq and their coordinated effort to fight ISIS. Otherwise the order remained substantively the same. It simply made an effort to justify its targeting of these countries for reasons other than "animus toward any religion."[20]

The policy aims of these orders—to review visa issuance and refugee admission procedures—could have been achieved without the controversial suspensions they mandated. Despite claims to the contrary, the actual purpose of these orders was not to enact better policies through a realistic assessment of the threat foreign terrorists pose to the US homeland. Their import was in their demonstration of nationalist will and power by which the United States under the Trump administration can have its way with Muslims. The orders cite from anti-Muslim tropes used by white nationalists and Islamophobes to signal that their target is Islam and its adherents:

In order to protect Americans, the United States must ensure that those admitted to this country do not bear hostile attitudes toward it and its founding principles…. In addition, the United States should not admit those who engage in acts of bigotry or hatred (including 'honour' killings, other forms of violence against women, or the persecution of those who practice religions different from their own) or those who would oppress Americans of any race, gender, or sexual orientation.

"Acts of gender-based violence against women" and "Honor killings" are again mentioned in the revised executive order as reasons for which certain groups of people should not be admitted to the United States. That the reasons cited for the ban immediately connote Muslims in the minds of even the most casual consumers of media today is largely the result Islamophobic activists' success in associating Islam, over and above any other religion, with violence against women and intolerance. The fact that almost all white nationalist media are virulently anti-feminist does not seem to have detracted from this message. Trump's supporters hear in these orders a rallying cry in defence of their culture, which elevates the culture of "white Christian America" above others as the only culture with the "civilized" values and the strength of will necessary to "make America great again."

By targeting the U.S. refugee program, the orders also show that humanitarian considerations will not affect the Trump administration's nationalist resolve. The racial and religious makeup of "the nation" they conceptualize is belied not only by their borrowing of anti-Muslim tropes found in Islamophobic and white nationalist discourses but also by the injunction in the orders that the United States "prioritize refugee claims made by individuals on the basis of religious-based persecution, provided that the religion of the individual is a minority religion in the individual's country of nationality." When the courts objected to this injunction as a targeted barring of Muslims in violation of the Establishment Clause, Trump's administration argued that the order applied to religious minorities in all countries, even those where Muslims are a minority, as well as to minority sects. But again, the intent of the order to target Muslims was belied by the fact that the injunction was embedded within a document targeting foreign terrorists from Muslim-majority countries, and its message of exclusion and nationalist power was driven home, not by the content

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of the order, but by the Trump administration's dogged determination that it become policy despite mass protests and legal challenges to its constitutionality.

When we begin to view racism not as a moral flaw on the part of individuals but as political relations that shape society culturally and economically, the question that needs to be asked in light of Trump's reliance on racist foundations to claim power is: What sort of claims in a multicultural democratic society might counter racist politics and the potentiality of violence embedded in them? To answer this question, it is helpful to contrast Obama's and Trump's campaign slogans. Obama's politics of "hope" saw the U.S. nation as a project in the making and called upon all Americans regardless of their varying backgrounds to participate in its making. His approach alienated many white Americans who thrived under the America of yesteryear and celebrated it despite its exclusionary understanding of civil rights. Trump's politics of revival, "make America great again," alienates those Americans who celebrate the multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism found in the United States today. One is a politics of the past and the other of the future, and as the current partisanship in the United States demonstrates, they do not see eye to eye. Thus, the challenge may not be to overcome racism in society but to face the daunting reality of the enormous complexities that accompany diversity. The religious, cultural, ethnic, racial, and gender diversity of the United States today is a reality that is irreversible. There is no ideology that could successfully reverse this reality. No nationalist vision of the past nor of the future can overcome the current political impasse, as there seems to be no direction in which a "nation" can be imagined without groups feeling like they stand to lose the right to their identity in this new vision of the nation. The democratic challenge of the United States in the mediatized and globalized world of the twenty-first century may thus be to figure out how to govern by problem solving, rather than nation building.

Notes

[1] Louis Michael Seidman, Ted Gup, and Elinor Langer, "Is Donald Trump Actually a Threat to Democracy?" In*The Nation* (June 23, 2016); available at https://www.thenation.com/article/is-donald-trump-actually-a-threat-to-democracy/ (last accessed on July 25, 2017).

[2] Elinor Langer, *A Hundred Little Hitlers: The Death of a Black Man, the Trial of a White Racist, and the Rise of the Neo-Nazi Movement in America* (New York: Picador, 2003).

[3] Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism,* (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 29.

[4] Ibid., 45.

[5] Etienne Balibar, "Racism and Nationalism" in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* by Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Verso, 1991), 55.

[6] Donald Trump's announcement of his candidacy for President of the United States of America on June 16, 2015; available at http://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/ (last accessed on July 25, 2017).

[7] Brooks Jackson, "Trump Tramples Facts," FactCheck.org: A Project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center (June 16, 2015); available at http://www.factcheck.org/2015/06/trump-tramples-facts/ (last accessed on July 25, 2017).

[8] Jon Greenberg, "Trump's Pants on Fire Tweet that Blacks Killed 81% of White Homicide Victims," PolitiFact (November 23, 2015); available at http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2015/nov/23/donald-trump/trump-tweet-blacks-white-homicide-victims/ (last accessed on July 25, 2017).

[9] Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reporting 2014*, available at https://ucr.fbi.gov/ crime-in-the-u.s/2014/crime-in-the-u.s.-2014/tables/expanded-homicide-data/expanded_ homicide_data_table_6_murder_race_and_sex_of_vicitm_by_race_and_sex_of_offender_2014.xls (last accessed on July 25, 2017).

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[10] Donald J. Trump Interview with Bill O'Reilly on *The O'Reilly Factor* (November 23, 2015); available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NE7sKmyysng (last accessed on July 25, 2017).

[11] Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System" in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* by Clifford Geertz (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

[12] Andrew Anglin, "The Daily Stormer Endorses Donald Trump for President," *The Daily Stormer* (June 28, 2015); available at https://www.dailystormer.com/the-daily-stormer-endorses-donald-trump-for-president/ (last accessed on July 25, 2017).

[13] Kevin MacDonald, "Donald Trump's Breakthrough Statement on Immigration," *Occidental Observer* (August 17, 2015); available at http://www.theoccidentalobserver.net/2015/08/17/ donald-trumps-breakthrough-statement-on-immigration/ (last accessed on July 25, 2017).

[14] Hunter Wallace, "The Case for Trump: Visibility, Eroding Taboos, Coming Out," *Occidental Dissent* (August 21, 2016); available at http://www.occidentaldissent.com/2016/08/21/the-case-for-trump-visibility-eroding-taboos-coming-out/comment-page-1/ (last accessed on July 25, 2017).

[15] https://www.reddit.com/r/The_Donald/

[16] Langer, *Hundred Little Hitlers*, 176.

[17] An aggregate catalog of media reports of hate crimes and bias-related incidents could be found at http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2016/12/hate_in_america_a_list_ of_racism_bigotry_and_abuse_since_the_election.html (last accessed on July 25, 2017).

[18] Donald J. Trump, *Inaugural Address* delivered on January 20, 2017; available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural-address (last accessed on July 25, 2017).

[19] Donald J. Trump, Executive Order 13769: "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States," issued on January 27, 2017; available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/27/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states (last accessed on July 25, 2017).

[20] Donald J. Trump, Executive Order 13780: "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States," issued on March 6, 2017; available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/03/06/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states (last accessed on July 25, 2017).

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