War and Identity: The Path to Trump and Beyond

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Americanism and Neoliberalism

America's path to Trumpism emanates from the central tenets of American identity – racial modernism, patriarchy and providential history – and how these are reproduced through periodic recourse to war (Hixson 2008). Trump's project of "Make America Great Again" is a resurfacing of deep America. For IR theorists, this discussion is a reminder of how domestic identity – "inside" – is formulated in relationship to the "outside" (Walker 1993). This relationship traverses the spaces of domestic and international politics. In both domains, internal and external enemy others provide the negations around which American identity (or Americanism) reconstructs and reasserts itself (Campbell, 1992). In the process, Americanism marginalizes alternatives that might otherwise emerge in its place.

But that is not all. In recent decades, Americanism has also been reproduced by progressive neoliberals who reject its prejudices but not the inequalities that are part of American capitalism. Historically, neoliberalism was the alternative posed to the crisis of Fordist capital accumulation during the 1970s, which proceeded through the mobilization of state power to remove barriers to the restructuring of capitalist production, financial flows and consumption patterns (Streeck 2016). While the neoliberal project has had, for some, an unquestionable ideational appeal, it must ultimately be assessed in terms of its underlying interests, which is the restoration of capitalist wealth and power, institutionalized in a new organization of state/society relations (Harvey 2005).

This restructuring project was initiated under neoconservative auspices to contain the disorder associated with protest movements of the 1960s and generate political support expanding market freedoms (Garland, 2001). By the early 1990s, conservative neoliberalism was overtaken by progressive neoliberalism, led by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, which sought "to rid first wave neoliberalism of its neoconservative accretions – hyper-patriotism and militarism, attachment to antiquated family values, disdain for multiculturalism and neglect of ecological issues" (Steger and Roy 2010, p. 51). Since the 1990s, political conflict in the United States has revolved around the terms under which neoliberalism is to be implemented. This narrow pattern of contestation is the path to Trump, which we have been for some time because our recurring ideological conflicts keep us from getting off it. The point where this path begins is with the relationship between war and identity, which is as old as America itself.

War and Identity

As Walter Hixson (2008) explains, the recurring function of war in American history has been to reaffirm the bonds of white male solidarity and to expand the boundaries of whiteness while upholding economic, racial, and gendered hierarchies of American society. Several examples of the relationship between war and identity illustrate this point.

- The 1846 U.S. invasion of Mexican territory recruited Irish and German volunteers, particularly from the American South. Territorial expansion through war diffused tensions associated with economic inequality while promoting the American conception of Manifest Destiny.
- The Civil War divided the United States, but its ceaseless commemoration in the years afterward created a white brotherhood of patriotic struggle. Reconciliation between white men became the basis for re-imposition of Jim Crow and the more general reassertion of racial modernism (the view that whites are modern and progressive and non-whites are backward). This renewed racial modernism took aim at new

waves immigrants, Indians, Blacks and Mexicans. It revolved around an opposition between American individualism (the unity of whites) and collectivism in both its primitive (Indian) and modern (communist) variants. This opposition pointed to a clash between the forces of civilization and barbarism, which served, in turn, to justify deployments of state violence in order to manage the class and racial conflicts of gilded age capitalism.

- World War One became a pretext for smashing the socialist party and the International Workers of the World (IWW) because they resisted the war and the draft. The U.S. entry into the World War One also became a pretext for attacking immigrant groups suspected of disloyalty to the United States while reasserting white supremacy over non-whites and male supremacy over women. Men would support the war or have their manliness questioned.

Another key moment in the consolidation of American identity was the Cold War. The Great Depression had shattered the legitimacy of laissez faire capitalism. With American identity weakened, counter-hegemonic discourses emerged – union rights, feminism, civil rights – in conjunction with the growth of the Communist Party in the United States. These were all categories of people that were repressed by hegemonic American identity. War against Germany and Japan reasserted American identity. The Cold War further strengthened American identity by regarding any deviation from conservative morality as a token of communist sympathy and disloyalty to America.

If you supported racial equality, you were suspect. If you did not attend church, suspect. If you supported the UN, suspect. If you supported women's rights, suspect. If you were or rumored to be homosexual, suspect (Campbell 1992). Under these auspices, progressives were banned from labor unions, universities, government, and entertainment industries (Robin 2004). One major consequences of this reassertion of American identity was the termination of domestic reform and the intensification of militarization. Expanding the labor movement and developing social democracy in the United States (similar to social democracy in Europe) was displaced by developing of the military industrial complex and projecting American power globally (Katznelson 2016). Domestic Militarism sustained imperialism and counter-subversion abroad (Hixson 2008).

Internal Wars

But the repressions and exclusions of American identity could not hold for long. The 1960s initiated several liberation movements: the Civil Rights movement, the feminist movements and anti-war movements. These movements not only questioned the tenets of Americanism, but they also provoked a conservative backlash in the United States, which lead to new kinds of wars. Wars, not against foreign others that threatened American expansionism, but metaphorical wars fought against internal others (Elkins 2010). One such war was the War on Poverty, which regarded poverty as an external enemy of the United States rather than a condition produced by an internal organization of American capitalism. When the War on Poverty failed to abate urban unrest in the black ghettos, it gave way to the War on Crime (Hinton 2016).

More police would need to be deployed to the inner cities in order to control hardened criminals who refused to respond to the opportunities of advancement associated with the War on Poverty (Hinton 2016). The war on crime similarly externalized crime. Crime was not something that was produced by American society because, quintessentially, American society was law-abiding. Americans did not cause crime; they were rather crime victims that needed to be protected by a modernized and heavily militarized police forces (Balko 2016). According to this logic, Jeremy Elkins observes that a nation of law-abiding white citizens becomes constituted in opposition to not only individual criminals, but also to criminals conceived as a class of persons that act "like a hostile army in our midst" (Elkins 2010, p. 225).

One way to understand the reality of the War on Crime is to think about it in terms of the title of Chris Hayes' recent book, *A Colony in a Nation* (2017), which distinguishes between two kinds of social spaces in the United States. The space of the nation is a realm of citizenship where people can be secure in their rights without any fear from the threat of violence from either the police or criminals. The colony, on the other hand, refers to spaces where people are treated as if they have no rights, where the police are an occupying army and people are subject to an arbitrary and externally imposed rule. These are the spaces in which impoverished African American, immigrants and poor

whites live, where people are subject to police violence and arbitrary arrest and endure extended periods of incarceration both before and after conviction. They have shorter lifespans and live them enmeshed within the criminal justice system. The denizens of the colony in the United States have become custodial citizens (Lerman, et al. 2015).

The United States has become a society of control (Garland 2001). Government is not concerned with the common good, understood in terms of the provision of both economic and national security to citizens, but with control. An important element of control has been the War on Drugs. When Richard Nixon declared the War on Drugs in 1972, recalls Nixon's aid, John Haldeman (Baum 2016), his administration had two enemies: hippies and blacks. They could not outlaw the counterculture or being black, but they could criminalize both groups through fighting a war on drugs that would enable raiding their homes, arresting their leaders and embarrassing and discrediting them in the media. The Nixon backlash against the protest movements of the 1960s would be continued under Ronald Reagan and redirected toward a non-white urban underclass. The same logic was used here: drugs and drug users are external enemies of the true nation.

The Age of Trump

In many respects, Donald Trump today is a more grotesque version of Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and the two Bush presidencies. Trump's Justice Department is intensifying policies of drug prohibition. It wants to impose heavy criminal sentences on lower-level drug users and drug dealers. It regards the colony – in Chris Hayes' sense of the term – as a profound threat to the nation. The colony consists of the black ghettos and immigrant neighborhoods, which must be heavily policed (Balko 2016). There are all kinds of the other adversaries of American identity that Trump – like other Republicans before him – is combatting: black criminals, women who complain about sexual harassment, people from Muslim countries, immigrant hordes infiltrated by criminal gangs (e.g. MS 13) and "Middle Easterners," protesters that are forming into unruly mobs and the "lying media." Trump's rhetoric is extreme, but it is not substantially different from Nixon's, Reagan's or Bush's (the first and second) in terms of mobilizing fear of the other to build support for economic policies that redistribute wealth and power to the upper classes.

Trump is a continuation of a reactionary politics of recognition that would like to roll back the rights revolutions of the 1960s and put women, racial minorities, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, and liberal elites back in their place (Fraser 2017). Trump's main constituencies are the aging baby boomers – born into the relative affluence of the 1950s and early 1960s – who are fearful of demographic change (the browning of America), angry about the spread of secular values (many hold the belief that America is a Christian nation) or dislocated by economic change. One this latter point, it is worth considering how Trump enables his followers to make nationalist sense of globalization (Stiglitz 2017). The structural unemployment that many communities of the white working and middle classes have begun to experience since the onset of neoliberalism is occurring not because of the U.S.'s internal problems or contradictions, but on account of America's adversaries (China, Mexico, the European Union). These countries practice unfair trade, dump surplus goods into the United States, and offload unwanted people.

Trump is the latest of a series of anti-globalization leaders and protest movements that have emerged in the United States. American populism has been a recurring phenomenon since the late 19th century. A recent list of populists would start with Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan protesting NAFTA in 1992 and 1996 respectively (Judis 2016). Buchanan did not have social media or right-wing propaganda apparatuses such as Fox news, AM talk radio, Breitbart News, and Info-Wars. If he had, his political insurgency might have developed much further. In any event, the history of American populism suggests that Trump is not a *sui generis* figure. As innumerable commentators have noted, he is a symptom of a disease and not the cause of it. The disease, I would suggest, is American identity – this deep identity that has reproduced itself over the centuries by means of wars of one sort or another.

Democrats – Old and New

But these condemnations of conservative white nationalism – which is what links Trump to his Republican predecessors – are not enough to understand our current political reality. They do not account for the complicity of the Democratic Party in helping to bring about the turn to neoliberalism in the United States during the 1970s and the

way in which the Democratic Party has continued to function as an adherent of neo-liberalism, albeit with a different set of ideological justifications. The Democratic Party used to be the party of white working class. The New Deal reforms championed by Democrats systematically excluded African Americans and women. The exclusion of farm work and domestic work from the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 kept blacks and women from being able to form unions (Katzenstein 2016). Most of the welfare reforms passed during this period were administered by states according to formula and procedures that excluded blacks (Piven and Cloward 1997).

But these were the old Democrats, who opposed to the Civil Rights movement and supported the war in Vietnam. They embodied a somewhat progressive version of Americanism that is attractive to whites and to those who subscribe to the notion of mass production and mass consumption characteristic of Fordism. But then the Democrats underwent a generational change as college educated baby boomers came of age during the 1970s (Stoller 2016). This was the decade that witnessed the crisis of Fordist capital accumulation. The crisis was manifested in the form of low growth and high inflation, also known as stagflation. The New Democrats decided that the roots of the crisis laid with big unions and big government, both of which were blocking the competitive restructuring of capitalism. Big labor was using its strike power to extract wages and benefits from employers that, from an economic perspective (defined in terms of marginal productivity) it did not deserve (Stoller 2016). Big labor was also politically toxic. It was racist, pro-war, and anti-feminist. And, finally, it was not (in the minds of the new Democrats) the future, which belonged to rising generation of college educated young people (Frank 2016).

The New Democrats implemented electoral reforms that marginalized the influence of organized labor in the Democratic Party. They embraced policies of deregulation, including, crucially, the deregulation of finance. They were opposed to the enforcement of anti-trust regulations. Allowing corporations to acquire more and more market power in the interest of economic efficiency reflected their utilitarian conception of economic progress (Stoller 2016). Thomas Frank, in his book *Listen, Liberal* (2016), encapsulates the ethos of progressive neoliberalism in what he calls the “the blue state model”. The blue state model (encompassing the major urban centers of the West and East coasts) rejects sexism and racism in favor of a meritocratic conception of equality. Let the best and brightest emerge, regardless of their gender, sexual preference, nationality, or socioeconomic status, and claim whatever income and wealth that they can produce. High achievers from around the world are attracted to New York, Boston, and Silicon Valley. They attend elite universities and earn graduate degrees, predominantly in STEM fields. They form the center of an entrepreneurial culture of innovation associated with firms such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon – as well as financial firms like Goldman Sachs that are constantly churning out new financial innovations in order to discover new ways to make money out of money. The people who are excluded from this model of economic growth are then exhorted to embrace change or endure economic privation (Steger and Roy 2010).

Neoliberal capitalism has operated under one of two ideologies (Fraser 2017). Reactionary neoliberalism embraced the tenets of white nationalism. It opposed the welfare state as a giveaway to minorities, praised the market as the cornerstone of both morality and prosperity, shifted public resources from welfare provision to mass incarceration in order to maintain law and order (where police are always heroes that protect the community) and celebrated Christianity as a moral framework for American society. The election of Bill Clinton in 1992 initiated a second wave of neoliberalism that was less xenophobic and even openly cosmopolitan, but no less hierarchical in terms of advancing the concentration of income and wealth in the United States. The Democrats advocated a progressive neoliberalism, which meant diversifying economic inequality, not getting rid of it.

Both parties maintained a core consensus around neoliberalism. Both supported NAFTA, CAFTA, the WTO and numerous other trade agreements. Both supported the financial bailout of Wall Street in 2008. Both supported Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative (in terms of Mexico’s war on drugs) which functioned to pry open more space for transnational investment (Paley, 2014). Democrats and Republicans simply packaged neoliberalism differently. But the bi-partisan neoliberal consensus is getting harder to maintain. In 2016, both the left and the right broke with the neoliberal consensus. Bernie Sanders developed a class-based critique of neoliberalism, which held that the problems of the United States were rooted in plutocratic domination of both government and the economy. On the right, Trump defeated a host of conservative globalists, from Jeb Bush to Marco Rubio to Scott Walker, by arguing against free trade and American military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. For a moment, it seemed like “the neoliberal cat was out of the bag” (Fraser 2017).

The political difficulty that we face in the United States is to advance a progressive, anti-neoliberal political agenda that does not retreat into either reactionary or progressive neoliberalism. Trump's economic nationalism almost instantly receded into reactionary neoliberalism. In this respect, Trump is not so different from his Democratic predecessors – Clinton and Obama – whose opposition to neoliberal policies (such as NAFTA, for example) vanished once they assumed office (Frank 2016). Trump's regression to the neoliberal belief system became apparent with the cadre of corrupt plutocrats that he appointed to run the federal government and his approval of massive tax cuts that Republicans passed for corporations and high-income households. Following in the footsteps of his Republican predecessors, Trump has undermined the economic interests of his base, but has satiated their cultural desire for a militant national identity, mobilized against both internal and external enemy others. And similar to his predecessors, Trump sustains this identity by drawing on the vast reserves of white fear and resentment that exist in American society (Hayes 2017).

What distinguishes Trump is his unique capacity to divide Americans. His attacks on racial minorities, Muslims and women – as well as globalization and American foreign policy of global leadership – tend to generate a reassertion of progressive neoliberalism. We see this, for example, in the results of the 2018 midterm election in which Democrats won back control of the House of Representatives by appealing to the sensibilities and interests of suburban Republicans disenchanted with Trump's bombast. The difficulty is that reactionary neoliberalism and progressive neoliberalism reproduce the same neoliberal consensus that has existed in the United States since 1970s. What we need, politically, is a critique of neoliberalism that builds a progressive alliance of whites and non-whites against neoliberal policy (Fraser 2017). Such a critique must be understood in terms of neoliberal interests (the further enrichment of the wealthy) rather than ideology (freedom). Such a critique would move us beyond the parameters of our deeply embedded national identity. A truly progressive America would be an America that finally breaks with its past.

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