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Trump, Populism, Fascism, and the Road Ahead

Harry van der Linden

Under review:

John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*. New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016. Paperback, 182 pp., \$12.99. ISBN 9780997126440.

Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: The New Press, 2016. Hardcover, 351 + xii pp., \$ 27.95. ISBN 9781620972250.

Douglas Kellner, *American Nightmare: Donald Trump, Media Spectacle, and Authoritarian Populism*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2016. Paperback, 109 + vii pp., \$21.00. ISBN: 9789463007863.

The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States left many progressives and liberals shocked and bewildered. During his election campaign, Trump promoted violence and appealed to racism, nativism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, ableism, and misogyny. And, as Douglas Kellner puts it, he brags, bullies, rants, displays extreme narcissism, and is a “bullshit artist” (49). So why did so many Americans vote for this “authoritarian demagogue” (57)? The books by Kellner and John B. Judis were completed after Trump’s Republican nomination but prior to his election as president, while Arlie Russell Hochschild’s book was completed during the Republican primaries. Still, they help to explain the rise and “success” of Trump. The works by Kellner and Judis also raise and help to address the question of how we should politically interpret Trump: Is he a rightwing populist or closer to a fascist? Relatedly, is he a threat to liberal or constitutional democracy?

Kellner argues that a crucial enabling factor of Trump's rise is that his presidential campaign became a "media spectacle." He writes: "By 'media spectacle' I am referring to media constructs that present events which disrupt ordinary and habitual flows of information, and which become popular stories which capture the attention of the media and the public, and circulate through broadcasting networks, the Internet, social networking, smart phones, and other new media and communication technologies" (3). Early examples of media spectacles are the O.J. Simpson murder trial and the Clinton sex scandals, both enabled by the rise of cable news networks. Trump's election campaign as media spectacle blends celebrity, entertainment, and controversial and inflammatory politics. The groundwork for his campaign as media spectacle was laid with his business mode of operation, as described in several of his books, involving a ruthless capitalist mindset of winning at all costs and the art of branding the Trump name, and with the development of his TV personality in "The Apprentice" and the subsequent "The Celebrity Apprentice." Trump kicked off the spectacle on June 16, 2015 with his dramatic announcement of running for president: In a staged manner, he (and Melania) came down the escalator in Trump Tower (an image rebroadcasted *ad nauseam*), and then he mentioned many American social and economic shortcomings that he as president would overcome, including that Mexico is "sending people that have lots of problems...They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" (10). Trump's media dominance and manipulation since then has been almost constant, aided by his incessant Tweeting.

A significant part of Kellner's short book offers a description of the Trump media spectacle from June 2016 to early October 2016. Here Kellner covers words and images of the campaign that are familiar and ingrained in the public consciousness, reflecting that the campaign indeed was a media spectacle: "America First," "USA! USA! USA!," "Radical Islam," "Melania's plagiarism," "praising Putin," "attacks on the Khan family," "the election is rigged," "release of tax returns," etc. In his description of the Trump campaign, Kellner does not hide his contempt for Trump, as shown in the section title "RNC Day 4: The Red Faced Orange Man Rants" (54). On a deeper level of assessment, he argues in some detail that Trump fits Erich Fromm's analysis of the authoritarian character, as exemplified by, among others, Hitler and Himmler, as "sadistic, excessively narcissistic, malignantly aggressive [as in his conduct toward 'losers' and women who challenge him], vengeably destructive [as in his criticism of bias by Judge Gonzalo Curiel presiding over the Trump University fraud case], and necrophiliac [his life

reflects Fromm's description of the necrophiliac as a person whose emotional emptiness needs to be filled with constant new acquisitions, conquests, etc.]" (29).

More broadly, Kellner claims that there are important parallels between the rise of fascism in the 1930s and the rise of Trump, writing that attending one of Trump's rallies reminded him of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (21) and that Trump's arrival at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland followed the scenario of Hitler arriving in Nuremberg as captured in Riefenstahl's movie (45). In my view, this imaginative association is a bit puzzling: one event shows the frightful discipline of hundreds of thousands of people in thrall of their leader, but the other event shows a banal celebrity festivity beamed across the globe. There is a difference between a spectacle in its own right and a media spectacle. At any rate, on Kellner's account, the Trump supporters display similar "anger and rage" toward the establishment as the Nazi supporters did, show similar "idolatry toward their Führer," have been similar victims of "economic deprivation, political alienation, humiliation, and a variety of hard times," and are similarly lured by "restorative nostalgia" and promises to make their country great again (21, 24). In terms of outer personality, though, Kellner maintains that Trump resembles the buffoonish Mussolini rather than the repressed and serious Hitler (27-28).

Kellner also notes some differences between Trumpism and Nazism, such as the lack of a party apparatus behind the rise of Trump, the absence of "disciplined cadres that the Nazis used to seize and hold power," and Trump's claim that "his deal-making skills as a supercapitalist billionaire ... credentials him to be the President" (22, 27). All in all, he thinks that Trump is best described as an "authoritarian populist" or "neo-fascist" (20, 26). Trump is a populist in that he presents himself as the "voice of the forgotten men and women," those left behind by corrupt elites (exemplified by Hillary Clinton and Goldman Sachs), and he scapegoats outsiders as a threat to the white majority. Historically, Trump was preceded by the populist Tea Party and rightwing populists such as George Wallace and Pat Buchanan (22-23). For Kellner, Trump's populism with its promise of improving the economic condition of his supporters is a sham and refuted by his exploitation of workers as well as by his lifestyle (21, 32, 33).

Kellner concludes that Trump's political success would burden us with a malignant and aggressive leader who has nuclear weapons at his disposal, constituting "a clear and present danger to U.S. democracy and an American Nightmare ... that threatens world peace and global stability" (39; see also 95).

A strength of Kellner's discussion is that he emphasizes a distinctive feature of Trumpism –the effective blending of celebrity politics and media spectacle – but a weakness is that he too quickly designates Trump's rightwing populism as a form of fascism.¹ Judis's book makes a strong case against this equation. He offers a more detailed account of American populism and, most importantly, gives it a different political and historical interpretation. On his account, populism in America is best understood as a response to a failure in democratic representation: significant groups in society, compromising the "people," no longer accept the prevailing view of the economic and political elites ("the establishment"), and finding that their voices are not heard by the establishment, they follow the populist leader who attacks the establishment in their name. Typically, populism emerges in a time of economic crisis and can lead to political realignment even when the establishment's fear of populist electoral success turns out to be ungrounded or disproportionate. For example, Judis discusses how the populist Huey Long gained a large following because of the Depression, and how President Roosevelt, out of fear of Long running for president on a third-party ticket in 1936, adopted in 1935 "the Second New Deal," addressing economic inequality (28-32). The populist challenge, however, never materialized since Long was assassinated in September 1935. Long represents what Judis describes as "leftwing populism," in which the bottom and middle contest the top, while "rightwing populists champion the people against an elite that they accuse of coddling a third group, which can consist, for instance, of immigrants, Islamists, or African American militants" (15). George Wallace represents rightwing populism and his campaigns in the 1960s and 1970s contributed to the Republican Party embracing the "middle" Southern whites, leading them to move away from the Democratic Party (32-38).

For Judis, the global financial collapse of 2008 led to Occupy and the Tea Party, and in their footsteps followed, respectively, the leftwing populist campaign of Bernie Sanders and the rightwing populist campaign of Trump, both challenging neoliberalism and global capitalism. More specifically, Judis argues (66-71) that Trump opposed the consensus foreign policy of Republicans and Democrats by questioning the relevance of NATO, that he was critical of free

¹ Kellner is not alone in this assessment. Bill Moyers, Robert Reich (see Judis, 154 and n. 154), and Carl Bernstein (see Kellner, n. 21) are some of the commentators who have called Trump a "fascist." The issue was raised early in the mainstream press – see, for example, Douthat, "Is Trump a Fascist?". Fascism is a contested and elusive concept, and this contributes to how quickly rightwing political opponents with illiberal tendencies are called "fascist."

trade, corporate outsourcing and offshoring, and tax inversion, and that he railed against immigration on both economic grounds (depression of wages and public costs) and social-cultural grounds (immigrants are a cause of crime). Accordingly, core Trump voters during the primaries, white working and middle class Republican voters, the “middle” left behind by global capitalism, sought to change the Republican business agenda. Judis says little about what the alternative agenda might be, reflecting Trump’s own lack of details and vague insistence that he will make much better deals for the American people. But from this angle “Making America Great Again” involves an agenda of a return to a less regulated and more nationalist capitalism.

In short, Judis holds that the historical and political meaning of rightwing populism (as well as leftwing populism) should be situated within electoral politics rather than in seeking its negation, as is true of fascism; it is an “early warning” (157) that the political mainstream is ignoring real problems and that a political realignment might be in the making. He writes: “Calling [rightwing populist] parties and campaigns ‘fascist’ ... does bring out what is most toxic about these movements – their scapegoating of other nationalities and religions and in Trump’s case, too, the encouragement of thuggery – but it is not helpful for understanding their actual role in contemporary history” (157). Judis adds: “Calling them fascist exaggerates the danger they pose – they don’t threaten to ... disband parliament [as did German and Italian fascists].”² And for Judis this is not only true of populism in America. He discusses in several chapters of his book recent populist movements in Europe, focusing on leftwing populism in Spain and Greece and rightwing populism in Northern/Western Europe, and his general conclusion of populism as corrective of representative democracy is based also on their historical record. Judis further argues that a distinguishing feature of fascism between the World Wars was that it was importantly directed against socialist and communist parties; it viewed democracy as a dangerous vehicle for promoting these parties; and, it justified and used violence to seek to destroy the revolutionary left (155-56). Also, fascism in both Italy and Germany was expansionist, while current rightwing populists are opposed to imperialist or globalist schemas, seeking instead an exclusionary nationalism and withdrawal from, or reduced participation in, transnational or global organizations (156-57). Finally, it may be noted (beyond Judis) that fascism is an elitist doctrine; its leader does not seek to express and realize the voice of forgotten

² To be sure, Trumpism has encouraged and strengthened American fascist groups, but this does not mean that Trumpism itself is a form of fascism.

citizens, as is true of the populist leader, but rather the fascist leader seeks to steer and educate the people toward a “new man” and a “holistic nation.”³

Even though Judis argues plausibly that recent rightwing populism in the United States and Western/Northern Europe should be situated within democratic electoral politics, rather than viewed as incipient authoritarianism, it does not follow that rightwing populism does not threaten to erode liberal democracy. We can find examples of rightwing populism in Latin American and Eastern Europe not discussed by Judis where populist leaders have opted for illiberal policies.⁴ Certainly, the logic of rightwing populism has illiberal components; it is bound to disregard the rights of minorities who do not belong to the “people,” and the populist leader, once in power, may also seek to curtail the judiciary or press when these are viewed as not in line with the political aims of the “people.” This threat of illiberalism is especially worrisome in a presidential system, as distinct from a parliamentary system, since it provides the elected populist with considerable executive power to pursue illiberal policies. Certainly, one should worry with Kellner about Trump’s anti-democratic personality as well as his admiration of “strongmen” (43). Trump displays hostility toward migrants, the judiciary, the “corrupt press,” and he does not share the liberal notion that political power should always be contestable. Instead, he responds to his critics with aggression and contempt.

So, should we worry about Trump gradually eroding liberal democracy? More accurately, will he significantly further undermine American democracy already flawed by the power of money, voting restrictions, and the like? Here it should be noted that the United States, unlike other countries where rightwing populism had an illiberal impact, is an established democracy with strong institutions limiting repressive majority rule (or what is constructed as the people). Indeed, we have seen (as of April 2017) the judiciary standing up against Trump’s executive ban on admitting refugees and citizens from selected Muslim countries. Also, Trump gradually

³ See Eatwell, “Populism and Fascism.” See also Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 33.

⁴ Mudde and Kaltwasser discuss the examples of Viktor Orban in Hungary and Alberto Fujimori in Peru. In Peru, democratic erosion was followed by a democratic breakdown and the emergence of a “competitive authoritarianism” (*Populism*, 91-92). More broadly, Mudde and Kaltwasser argue that populism within liberal democracy has both positive effects, such as improved representation and mobilization of excluded or neglected groups, and negative effects, notably, erosion of institutions protecting fundamental (minority) rights (*ibid.*, 82-84). Judis’s emphasis on the positive aspects of populism reflects the impact of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe on his understanding of populism. See *The Populist Explosion*, 165. See also Judis, “Rethinking Populism.” For an argument that populism is thoroughly antithetical to liberal democracy, see Müller, *What is Populism?*

became a rightwing populist during the campaign, and he might gradually turn away from it to become more a conservative establishment politician.⁵ Still, vigilance is necessary: there is a worrisome growing trend among citizens in the United States and Western Europe of skepticism toward democracy and freedom of speech, of openness to nondemocratic alternatives, such as military rule, and of indifference to politics, and this trend, especially in conjunction with some major security crisis, might facilitate illiberal measures taken by the Trump administration.⁶ Accordingly, the left should fight for liberal democracy without losing sight of the goal of moving beyond it towards a more extensive radical democracy.

In Judis's view, what primarily motivates the core supporters of Trump are economic concerns: they think that he will improve their condition. Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land*, a sociological study of the white working and middle class Republican right in the South, puts this motivational account in doubt. The inspiration behind her study was her being struck by the growing and increasingly hostile political divide between the liberal left and the conservative right, including a failure of mutual understanding and empathy. No doubt, Hochschild would see Kellner's view of Trump supporters as exemplifying this "empathy wall," and to bridge it she decided to spend a considerable amount of time during a five-year period in the region of Lake Charles, Louisiana, befriending and interviewing a small group (a total of forty individuals) of Tea Party advocates, many of whom later became Trump supporters. Lake Charles is heavily polluted by petrochemical industries, and fracking has recently contributed to environmental damage and deterioration in the area. Typically, the Tea Party enthusiasts studied by Hochschild enjoy the outdoors and are painfully aware of the decline of wildlife, the odious smell in the air, and the health risks of consuming local fish. Some of them have even been forced from their homes for environmental reasons, and one person reports widespread environmentally connected cancers in his family (44). Yet, the Tea Partiers object to more environmental regulation and favor the restriction or even elimination of the EPA. More generally, Hochschild and her students found that, across the United States, the higher the risk is by county of a person being exposed to pollution the more likely the person is to think that the government overreacts to

⁵ Mudde discusses this gradual turn by Trump to populism in Friedman, "What is a Populist?"

⁶ Recent trends toward illiberalism in The United States and Western Europe are discussed in Foa and Munk, "The Danger of Deconsolidation." It is significant to note that the trend towards illiberalism is more prevalent among young than elderly voters, while Trump was more popular among the latter. Remarkably, one in six Americans would support "army rule," while one in three would favor a strong leader who would not have "to bother the parliament and elections" (13).

environmental issues (253). Accordingly, it seems that Tea Party supporters by voting for politicians who are lax in enforcing environmental regulation are acting against their own self-interest. To be sure, they might believe that less regulation brings jobs, but this questionable belief cannot be motivationally decisive since most of them do not work for petrochemical or fracking industries.

This points to what Hochschild calls the “great paradox”: Many Tea Partiers work in small businesses or own them and, yet, vote for politicians favoring big business – they are like “the local book store owner voting for Amazon...” (10); they live in a state near the bottom of all states in terms of life expectancy, health, educational degree attainment, and personal earnings (9), and, yet, they want less federal assistance (Louisiana is disproportionately receiving more federal aid per person); and, again, they suffer disproportionately from environmental pollution and still want less governmental environmental regulation. To solve this paradox, and to bridge the “empathy wall,” we must grasp the “deep story” of the white “middle” Republican right. Hochschild writes: “A deep story is a *feels-as-if* story – it is the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgment. It removes fact. It tells how things feel.” She continues: “Such a story permits those on both sides of the political spectrum to stand back and explore the subjective prism through which the party on the side sees the world. And I don’t believe we understand anyone’s politics, right or left, without it. For we all have a deep story” (135).

The deep story of the Tea Party (and later Trump) supporters unfolds as follows. You are waiting in a long line going uphill toward the American Dream. You are in the middle of the line and seem to make little progress under the hot sun. You suspect that you might be even moving backward. Still, you find honor in working hard and trying to move forward. Then you see people cutting in line ahead of you. They are pushed forward by the government, and include minorities, women, special visa immigrants and even illegal immigrants, refugees, and even the brown pelican, Louisiana’s state bird, once it was on the endangered list (137-39). You see that one of the line cutters has now become the supervisor of the line; he is waving at the line cutters in front of you; his name is Barack Obama. He is their president, not yours. “If you can no longer feel pride in the United States through your president, you’ll have to feel American in some new way – by banding with others who feel as strangers in their own land” (140). And what adds to

you feeling like a stranger in your own land is that Hollywood and mainstream television tend to portray you as ignorant, white trash, red-neck, homophobic, and so on.

This deep story is one of resentment against the government and, so, the Tea Partiers, including those who come to support Trump, vote for Republicans seeking to dismantle most federal programs (favored by Democrats). The deep story is also one of racism, patriarchy, and xenophobia, but Hochschild hardly frames it in such terms. [Kellner (23) is more forthright in naming the prejudices of many Trump supporters.] Apparently, she seeks to understand, but not judge her new Tea Party “friends” (234), helping her to scale the “empathy wall.” She writes: “I feel great admiration for the people I’ve met on the other side of the empathy wall. And while my vote will surely differ from theirs, I wish them well” (237).

In a review of Hochschild’s book, Judis argues that she “overestimates the libertarian commitments of many Tea Party activists.”⁷ In his view, Tea Party supporters tend to support Social Security and Medicare (as programs that are deserved through a lifetime of work), and they also display populist hostility to global financial elites. Certainly, this seems correct regarding many Trump supporters, but this does not change the assessment that the resentment of this “middle” Republican right is significantly racist, xenophobic, etc., in nature. Now Judis grants that “rightwing populist campaigns and groups have held racist or nativist or xenophobic views,” but he argues that the politically more significant issue is that “their complaints point to genuine problems,” such as that “unskilled immigration has tended to pull down wages and burden the public sector” (159). Judis moves here on questionable empirical grounds, and there is no indication that such “genuine problems” were in fact significant in shaping the deep story of the “middle” Republican right: their anger is about line cutters or people who are perceived to be preferentially treated above themselves, the “real Americans.” Accordingly, they do not seriously consider solutions for wage depression, such as unionization and raising the minimum wage. For years, Trump played into this prejudicial anger of the Tea Partiers with his “birtherism,” and then later with his claim that Mexico would pay for building a “big, beautiful wall,” keeping out the criminal Mexicans. As Hochschild herself notes after visiting a Trump rally, he allowed his supporters “to feel like a good moral American and to feel superior to those they considered ‘other’ or beneath them.” Accordingly, “while economic self-interest is never entirely absent, what I discovered was the profound importance of emotional self-interest – a

⁷ Judis, “Deep Stories.”

giddy release from the feeling of being a stranger in one's own land (228). And what underlines the racism, xenophobia, etc., of these Republicans is that most of their assumptions about minorities and the federal government are factually incorrect. For example, the Tea Party supporters have highly inflated perceptions concerning the amount of welfare payments, the fertility rate of Black women, and the percentage of people working for the federal government and their income (see Appendix C). And, of course, Trumpism has raised culpable adherence to falsehood to new levels.

Hochschild's book tells many stories of hardship and injustice inflicted on the working and middle class of Lake Charles, and responses of courage and determination, and, in this way, she brings the people closer to us and we might feel empathy for them. But it is doubtful that the deep story itself of the Tea Partiers (and later Trump voters among them) will bridge the "empathy wall," since it is a story so clearly reflecting racism, xenophobia, patriarchy, and a morally objectionable failure to examine the facts. The prejudicial anger also has led some Trump supporters to launch vitriolic internet attacks against his opponents and cheer for violence against his protestors during his rallies. Correspondingly, it seems Hochschild offers little hope that the Tea Partiers, and the Trump supporters among them, might move in more progressive directions towards policies more supportive of their economic interest and well-being. Their deep story is one that obstructs the recognition that government may improve their lives and the lives of even more oppressed people at the same time. *Pace* Hochschild, it also seems that their deep story will prevent them from empathizing with the deep story of the liberal left, which Hochschild very briefly describes as pride in the public realm with great schools, museums, libraries, etc., open to all, and as anger at the privatization assaults on this public realm by the neoliberal agenda (235-36). In short, Hochschild offers no convincing practical recommendation of how to move away from the current political divide toward a more progressive America.

Judis's analysis is more promising in this regard. Even though his analysis clearly overstates the depth and significance of economic motivations of most core "middle" white American supporters of Trump, his motivational account may be true of those "middle" American voters in the industrial belt of the Midwest who have recently left the Democratic Party, in contrast to those studied by Hochschild who themselves, or their families, had switched

to the Republican Party sometime during the past few decades.⁸ Sooner or later these voters in the Midwest will realize that Trump will not restore their economic opportunities and they might flock to leftwing populism or Democratic Party voices not tone-deaf to their concerns. Still, most Trump voters might not come to reject Trump, including those who voted for him based on his promise to put originalist judges on the Supreme Court or are attracted to the “clash of civilians” ideologues surrounding him. The election of Trump and the broad electoral success of Republicans are serious setbacks for progressive politics, not to speak of radical politics, but the success of the Sanders’s campaign holds out future hope of constraining and modifying global capitalism and neoliberalism and moving toward greater local economic control and even economic democracy. Moreover, Trump’s expressions of doubt about NATO and the traditional American global military role can and should be brought on a higher plane, turning “America First” into “America global citizen.” Hope is also to be found in the growing local progressivism of recent months, the coordinated resistance from below. Considering Kellner’s discussion of the Trump campaign as media spectacle, another avenue of resistance needs to be emphasized: progressives need to greatly expand their own independent media with serious reporting, countering the much more extensive and widespread rightwing media and its much greater impact on mainstream coverage.⁹ Through resistance the damage inflicted by the Trump administration might be limited and even significantly undone in the future; the greatest challenge in this respect might be its denial of human-caused climate change. Trump’s view on this issue alone should have kept him from office.

⁸ These “Trump democrats” might not be racist, but they still voted for a candidate with a clear racist agenda and, so, in support of white supremacy. For a thoughtful discussion of this issue, see Mendoza, “Lantinx.”

⁹ See Hertsgaard, “Progressives Need to Build Their Own Media.”

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