What's he building?

Activating the utopian imagination with Trump

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President Trump revels in his reputation as a builder. 'Nobody,' he said during his campaign, 'builds walls better than me.'
(Heathcote, 2017)

Maybe Trump is a kind of cry for help from the Earth, a human flare.
(Boyle, 2017)

We must look the beast in the eyes if we want to find a way out.
(Berardi, 2017)

Abstract

Can one sell any positive value of Trump's presidency to an academic audience? The editors of this special series invited polemical essays (Robinson and Bristow, 2017), but maybe asking readers to consider the merit of Trump is going a little too far? We put forward the argument here that as critical scholars we simply cannot allow ourselves to be swept up in the *bien-pensant* tide of Trump-trashing, which has almost become as addictive as the current reality-TV quality of the US presidency itself. As Roitman (2014: 9) has suggested in a different context, 'the concept of crisis is crucial to the "how" of thinking otherwise'. Thus, we believe it crucial to seize the crisis of the Trump presidency as an opportunity to activate the utopian imagination, rather than an occasion for moralizing judgements or regressive nostalgia which would effectively mean aligning ourselves with the neo-liberal consensus many of us spent our careers critiquing. We further argue that Fredric Jameson's (2009) notion of the dialectic may go some way to refreshing our critical conceptual arsenal in these disorienting times. This dialectical approach is meant to alter not only how we see reality, but also what we think we can do with it. It enables us to see the traumatic event of Trump's election as providing a form and space through which contradictions that have been locked firmly into place in our socioeconomic set-up over the past few decades have become much more malleable, partly because of their increased visibility.

What's he building?

We have borrowed the title of our essay from a nasty little tale which finds its inspiration in the darker recesses of Americana: the morally ambiguous Tom Waits song *What's he building?*[i] which is about lurking horror, but also about paranoia and irrational fear of the unknown. Just as Tom Waits opens up to us a window on the psychosphere of the age in which we are living, perhaps we should also pay serious attention to the world that Trump makes visible for us, the world that he is projecting, 'because it is part of the (despairing and sad) world in which we dwell' (Berardi, 2017: 81). But the song is also about a certain obsession and fascination with the dark and perverse, and we suggest that in developing a critical position

vis-à-vis our current predicaments we have to acknowledge this 'fascination with and excitement at everything perverse and suspicious, unclean and scurrilous, about the beast itself' (Jameson, 1998: 149). The Trump administration has certainly not lacked in aggression (e.g. the 'Muslim travel ban'), obscenity (e.g. Scaramucci's gleefully reported comments on his White House colleagues) and sheer nastiness (e.g. Trump blaming 'many sides' for the Charlottesville violence). Perry Anderson's (2017: 58) description of the Trump cabinet of 'bankers and businessmen, generals and a couple of politicos of right-wing stamp' as having stepped straight out of a George Grosz painting[ii] seems a painfully accurate description of the key men – and men they mostly are – surrounding Trump as he continues his increasingly surreal building project. And yet, there is a real danger of being swept away in the torrent of Twitter feeds and thus pushed into a simple ritualistic moralizing response of being 'Anti-Trump'. What we advocate here is a moral complexity, which, to repurpose a favourite Trumpian turn of phrase, involves wading into the swamp and getting intimate with discomfort (Nelson, 2011).

We believe that our task as a CMS community is to search for and apply concepts and percepts that somehow can capture and develop an immanent possibility in the reality of Trump. Our possible actions are only identifiable as such in terms of the language in which we describe them, and this essay, therefore, attempts to cultivate a more radical understanding of the Trump presidency than is put forward by its main critics. In proceeding thus, we take our inspiration from Jameson's dialectical treatment of current societal phenomena, in particular his key work *Valences of the Dialectic* (2009) in which he performed a dialectical reading of the giant retail corporation Wal-Mart, thinking the negative and the positive together at one and the same time. The premise is that even the most obnoxious of phenomena can serve as a springboard for unsuspected utopian impulses. It is a rebuke to those whom Jameson polemically calls 'moralizers', who want 'to have the luxury of condemning this evil without particularly imagining anything else in its place' (Jameson, 2009: 421). Jameson's initial characteristic of Wal-Mart is very much reminiscent of the considered academic opinion of Trump these days: 'The picture is unappetizing, and the prospects for the future… are positively frightening and even, particularly if you have a bent for conspiracy theory, dystopian in the extreme' (Jameson, 2009: 420). He conceives of Wal-Mart as the negation of the negation in the Marxist vocabulary; as a 'peculiar contradiction… not an aberration or an exception, but rather the purest expression of that dynamic of capitalism which devours itself, which abolishes the market by means of the market itself' (Jameson, 2009: 421). Yet, Jameson (2009: 423) is able to express an 'aesthetic appreciation… for this achievement' (and indeed, did Trump not confound general expectations with his quite astounding electoral victory?), but such 'admiration and positive judgement must be accompanied by the absolute condemnation that completes the dialectical ambivalence.'

Let there be no misunderstanding: we have no expectation whatsoever that anything 'positive/progressive' can come from Trump's presidency; yet to apprehend the Trump phenomenon in 'positive/constructive' terms is to enable a move away from the status quo and to open up the currently dominant social order to potential reconfiguration. It can thus provide an impetus for moving beyond present constraints rather than a mere occasion for moralizing judgements with its attendant hopes of 'containment' and pleas for a quick return to

the status quo. Thus, we may use the destabilising quality of Trump's building project as an opportunity for activating the intellectual capacity that Jameson calls 'utopian imagination'. For Jameson (2009) this does not mean drafting alternative blueprints of some ideal social system, as

> …what is important in a Utopia is not what can be positively imagined and proposed, but rather what is not imaginable and not conceivable. Utopia… is not a representation but an operation calculated to disclose the limits of our own imagination of the future, the lines beyond which we do not seem able to go in imagining changes in our own society and world (except in the direction of dystopia and catastrophe)… What is essential in Utopianism is not the ingenious economic scheme… so much as it is collectivity as such (413-414).

In what follows, we will seek to use two aspects of the Trump phenomenon to disclose and push beyond current limits: post-truth and populism.

Reconfiguring post-truth

Publications as politically far apart as the *Financial Times* (Luce, 2017) and the *London Review of Books* (Crewe, 2017) *or New Left Review* (Anderson, 2017) have pointed out that the events of Trump and Brexit are a reflex to the state of our social system and its economic structure, and thus a symptom rather than a cause. There seems to be a broad agreement that the past quarter century of liberal triumph and consolidation effectively prepared the individual ingredients that enabled the events of 2016. Whether one calls it global capitalism, neoliberalism or 'just-the-way-things-are going', it is clear that a certain proportion of the population felt so disenfranchised that they engaged in a nihilistic rebellion against a system that had routinely blamed them for their own plight. Indeed, as Hochschild (2016) shows through her impressive voyage into the heartland of white America, a significant part of the people we have come to know as Tea Partiers, Alt-Righters, or Trump Supporters – or, in Hilary Clinton's infelicitous phrase, 'basket of deplorables' – are not just driven by malign sentiment, but by a deep-felt sense of cultural marginalization and economic downfall (see also Ashbee, 2017 for an account emphasizing the structural character of US anti-statism).

So far, so consensual; where we get a little more controversial is where it concerns Trump's post-truth regime. While we agree that the regime is outrageous, does Trump not stumble upon a dark kernel of truth? This kernel may open up a space to re-consider how, for many decades, presumptive stability has already relied on post-factual politics. People needed to be convinced that the capitalist system worked – and that is how politicians from Bush to Obama, from Blair to Cameron, scored it: 'Increased prosperity for all'! Precisely because neoliberal globalization was far from actually delivering the 'prosperity for all' that it promised, it had to develop 'the propagation of illusions into the fine art of democratic government' (Streeck, 2017: 9). Yet, the words that described and conceptualized the social and economic spheres seemed to coincide less and less with the actual experience of many human lives (Tally, 2014). Should we, therefore, not welcome Trump's 'fake news' mantra as it makes us consider the unreality of much of the information provided by the traditional media and institutions of global capitalism? Did 'facts' and 'truth' prior to the US presidential

election and the Brexit referendum not also connote a largely unexamined set of assumptions about the way politics works and the degree of change it allows for – assumptions largely shared by the media and politicians, on the right and the left (Crewe, 2017)? Asking these, admittedly rhetorical, questions does not imply agreement with anything Trump says, but it does suggest that the post-truth era neither originated with Trump's election nor will end with him[iii]. Trump propagates outrageous lies, but that is not quite the point. The Trump spectacle in a perverse way makes strange the very acts of thinking, articulation and representation we have become accustomed to, allowing us also (but not necessarily) to envision and, perhaps, implement new and better criteria of socioeconomic and political judgement.

Zevin's (2017: 38) sarcastic description of Silicon Valley business executives who are now treated by *The New York Times* 'as if they were sites of resistance on a par with the *maquis*' is apposite in this context as are expositions of the profound irony of the liberal press putting their faith in the wisdom and prudence of the intelligence community and military in order the save the country from Trump's excesses (Shatz, 2017; Bromwich, 2017). A dialectical reading would suggest that something can be factually incorrect and misleading (i.e. what Trump actually says) while also pointing to an affective truth which people instinctively 'get' (i.e. the entrenched privileges of the press as part of the apparatus of state and their role in perpetuating it). The trendy notions of 'post-factual' and 'post-truth' are problematic concepts in so far as they presuppose the existence of universally shared, accepted 'truths' pre-2016 which shroud the pre-Trump, pre-Brexit period in a myth of munificence and objectivity. However, was it not neoliberalism and its attendant postmodern cultural logic that made meaning and coherence relative, loosely accountable to facts? Would it not be particularly ironic for the CMS community that after championing for years a constructivist position in opposition to mainstream functionalism, we would get seduced by 'a sudden rediscovery of objective truth for the purpose of insulting non-academic fellow-citizens,' as Streeck (2017: 9) puts it? In fact, has 'denaturalization', that merciless task of 'deconstructing the "reality" of organizational life or "truthfulness" of organizational knowledge,' not always been a core principle in critical management research (Fournier & Grey, 2000: 181)?

Reconfiguring 'post-truth' as a place of opportunity does not imply an 'anything goes' approach. It asks us not to dismiss facts, but alerts us to how facts are configured and to how Trump extends and enhances existing figurations rather than breaking with them. Hence, we should resist the temptation of wanting to restore the status quo ante Trump, which not so long ago we perceived to be pretty grievous. Instead, we should, amidst all the high-pitched media-drama of the Trump presidency, become more attentive to what is borne at the 'the lower frequencies' of human experience: the quotidian humiliations, 'inflected at an insistent pace, or punctuated, mercilessly, in non-verbal registers' (Ellison, 1952: 579). Tuning into such deeper channels may make us more vigilant as to what is excised from the imagined order of things and what is always affirmed as clear, reasonable, and common sense (Stoler, 2016). Such attunement would require a different kind of 'truth' where trauma and suffering are considered a state of being that saturates ordinary life rather than an exception to it (Berlant, 2011; Povinelli, 2011). What Shatz (2017: 17) sees as paradoxical, we

should consider dialectically; 'that a cipher of a man has revealed the hidden depths, the ugly unmastered history, of the country he claims to lead.'

The masses against the classes

Seeing the revelation of post-truth as a moment of opportunity, implies an extension of the concept of populism, which has been used by the media and institutions of liberal internationalism as a strongly negative polemical term, expressing a suspicion of politics formed through mass democratic mobilization (Streeck, 2017). For example, a recent hedge fund report on populism – like everything else, populism represents an investment opportunity whilst requiring risk management, of course – described it as 'a political and social phenomenon that arises from the common man, typically not well educated, being fed up… a rebellion of the common man against the elites' (Dalio et al., 2017: 2). We should not underestimate the danger of any claim to be speaking for 'the common man'; there is no straightforward constituency that comprises 'the people' (Laclau, 2005a) and claims as to 'what the people want' or 'what the people believe' must be seen as brazen attempts to dress up one sectional view as having a larger legitimacy than others (Judis, 2016). Furthermore, the re-emerging cult of nation and ethnicity – expressed in terms such as 'heritage populism' (Reynié, 2016) or more straightforwardly as the 'Euro-American anti-global racist front' (Berardi, 2017: 41) – is deeply troubling indeed. Yet, if we are to push beyond Trump, we must find ways of dealing with the 'ugly side' of the populist affinities in the CMS community as the editors of this special series implied (Robinson and Bristow, 2017: 435).

Again, we must try to read a noxious phenomenon as also having a positive valence. As Müller (2016) has suggested, it is far too facile to describe a large part of the population as emotional basket cases waiting to be seduced by a charismatic demagogue; or even worse as some kind of 'racist front'. People were and are angry and anxious for good reasons as they are looking for a matrix to make sense of their lives in a world that says their views don't count and which can no longer sustain their organizing fantasies of 'a good life'; a world where social structures have become increasingly unstable and unreliable and therefore uninstructive to people living in them (Berlant, 2011). Pain forces 'people' (in the plural) to look desperately for an order to the world that they cannot find, because it does not exist. In paying better attention to the 'lower frequencies' of human experience and framing them as trauma and suffering, rather than *only* racism and resentment, it may become possible again to imagine the notion of mass solidarity; that famous 'collective actor' of classical Marxism that, one day it hoped, would replace capitalism (Kunkel, 2014) – or, perhaps more accurately, it may confront us with our inability to imagine this 'collective actor' in our times which are precisely characterised by the 'disappearance from the modern scene of the masses as a homogeneous body of social existence' (Berardi, 2017: 112) and the 'pulverization of collective agency in the course of the neoliberal revolution' (Streeck, 2016: 13). It is inevitable there will be tension and antagonism (such as aggressive nationalism) within the masses nursed on descriptions of a society in which everything is, and ought to be for sale and who are 'deeply embedded in bourgeois culture and incorrigibly wedded or indeed addicted to its benefits' (Jameson, 2016b: 106), even when they scarcely enjoy them; but this is still no reason to give up on these 'masses'.

The craving for order and recognition explains the persistent devotion of what has been described as 'the core Trump voter'. At a bizarre re-run of his election rallies in Virginia in August 2017, one of his supporters put it pithily: 'He was the first person who cared about us. He's very much in touch with the ordinary neighbourhood person that's trying to make a living' (Smith, 2017). In offering swagger and the illusion of certainty Trump feeds on and fortifies a deeply emotional rejection of existing social elites, constantly affirming he will not stop at anything in the defence of 'his' people; be it by building a 'beautiful' wall, reviving 'beautiful, clean' coal or protecting 'beautiful' Confederate statues. This is an aestheticization of politics at its most basic level.[iv] More than anyone, Trump is instinctively aware that the masses are 'always dangerously prone to break loose like a cannon across the deck, to wreak havoc' (Jameson, 2016b: 106) and that their delight can easily turn into fury should they feel betrayed. In that sense, cultivating his own idea of himself is more important to Trump than running a government.

Fight populism with populism

As Trump turns inwards in an ever more bizarre display of self-contentment that has gone well beyond the level of narcissism we have come to expect of anyone in power (McAdams, 2016; Lee, 2017), one may question our insistence on his utopian potential. In denouncing Trump, how can we but return to a former saner world? Surely, the positive value of Trump has nothing to do with the actual content of his aggressive policies, but everything to do with the political dislocation that these policies express. Let us recall, Trump is a symptom, not a cause; his value lies *not* in the alternatives he offers, but in the *desperate need* for real alternatives he reveals. In all its awfulness, the Trump administration reminds us that social 'truths' and 'facts' are provisional products of ongoing power struggles, and that none of these are irreversible. Trump reminds us that change is possible – for better *and* worse. But how do we heed this lesson without running the risk of corroborating its content as well as its form? How do we learn from Trump without colluding in his project? In other words, is it possible to adopt his building strategy without using his bricks?

There are no hard and fast recipes for translating negative critique into a positive force for change without simultaneously accommodating the logic of the dominant order. Indeed, as Parker and Parker (2017) suggest, striking a balance between antagonism and accommodation is one of toughest but most pertinent challenges facing critical management scholars today. In the case of Trump, we believe that one place to start is by accepting Hochschild's (2016) argument that the wrath of the disenfranchised masses should be read as unacknowledged grievances in search of political representation. There is no necessary connection between the feeling of cultural and economic marginalization that many Trump supporters experience and the solutions offered by Trump. Whether the marginalized articulate their grievances within a discourse of xenophobia and misogyny or within a discourse of liberty and equality is inherently contingent. This is arguably the reason that some former members of the Occupy Movement ended up backing Tea Party candidates in the 2012 election – and have since wandered ever further into the wilderness of the alt-right (Nagle, 2017: 16-17)**.** Furthermore, it explains why the white working-class presumably voted against 'its own

interests' when electing Trump for president (Zeit, 2017). Hochschild (2016: 8) calls this 'the great paradox', but it is only paradoxical if interests are seen as objectively determined by socioeconomic demographics – and if the causal direction of political representation follows this logic of objective interests from represented to representative. However, interests are not independent and stable substances, but are at least partially determined by discourse, and representation runs both ways. If we begin from these premises, a new horizon of possibilities emerges.

For one thing, we can appreciate that Trump is really good at mobilization, not in the sense of getting people to take to the streets (his inaugural speech made that painstakingly clear), but in the sense of unifying an otherwise irreconcilable constituency – often known as 'the people' – against a common enemy[v]. By most accounts, this is the basic definition of populism (Bossetta and Husted, 2017). Populism is – like its opposite, elitism – typically used as a pejorative term one may hurl against political opponents. As such, populism is regularly associated with demagogy, intellectual backwardness, authoritarianism; it is perceived as an ideological force that is 'always detrimental to democracy' (Boel et al., 2017: 72). However, in the work of Laclau (2005a; 2005b), this is not the case. Instead of viewing populism as a type of inconsistent ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017), a theatrical aesthetic (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014), or as an undemocratic movement personified by Trump, Farage, Wilders, and the likes (Müller, 2017), Laclau (2005b: 33) conceives of populism as a specific 'logic of articulation.' According to him, a discourse is more or less populist depending on the degree to which its political contents are articulated in 'equivalential chains' and positioned in an 'agonistic' (Mouffe, 2013) relationship vis-à-vis the established system. This means that those grievances that are represented by a populist discourse are not tied together by any substantial similarities, but by a common opposition to an adversary, often known as 'the elite' or 'the establishment'. As Laclau (2005b: 47) puts it: 'Populism means putting into question the institutional order by constructing an underdog as a historical agent – i.e. an agent which is an *other* in relation to the way things stand.'

Thus conceived, populism need not be condemned *tout court*. Rather, it should be seen as *the* mode of articulation by which counter-hegemonic projects are built and organized. Stripping the notion of populism of its ideological heritage allows us to see that it is, indeed, possible to separate Trump's building *strategy* from his building *project* – as politicians like Bernie Sanders and parties like Podemos have already demonstrated in practice (Errejón and Mouffe, 2016). Trump's strength consists in his ability to unite interests that seem worlds apart and to construct the 'idea of Trump' – a reality star and real estate tycoon – as an *other* in relation to the 'the way things stand'. In his first year of office, the academic left has been asking itself to provide progressive *answers* to Trump. Perhaps the time has come to begin looking for a progressive *version of* Trump. What would our counter-hegemonic project look like, and how might it represent some of those grievances that Trump so skilfully mobilized during his electoral campaign? Fighting populism with populism may not seem like the most attractive solution, but at least it moves us beyond our 'dumbfounded mesmerization by the empirical state of things' (Jameson, 2009: 42).

Post-Trump - or, what are we building?

There are already some positive indications that the mobilization of populism against populism holds potential for activating the utopian imagination; for instance, in the form of mass demonstrations (the airport rallies, the women's march, the immigrant marches, the march for science), which may energize swathes of the public into a sense of possibilities (with contingent and potentially negative as well as positive outcomes). The very fact of Trump's election (and the same goes for Brexit) certainly has made many more aware of the strangeness of reality as such. The Nobel prize-winning economist Paul Krugman (2016), for example, admitted on the night of Trump's election victory that 'people like me, and probably like most readers of *The New York Times*, truly didn't understand the country we live in.' People across the political spectrum are beginning to question more what is *actually* going on and why life is the way it is. But there is a danger that this re-awakening of the need for alternative futures, repressed and paralyzed for so long, gets drowned in the descent into verbal violence without precedent. Trump's election has certainly created "a permanent emergency in the liberal imagination" (Lears, 2018: 15); the liberal opposition to the very idea of Trump has been growing ever shriller and indiscriminate during 2017, to the point that it has become very difficult to tell the difference between those who would like to contribute to the project of replacing a social order bent on economic polarization and ecological ruin with something better, and those who simply aim to restore America (and with it, the world) to where it was two years ago.

Indeed, as his presidency is chaotically unfolding and failing to achieve much, it has become clear that Trump's programme is short on ideological elaboration. He is certainly not an ideologue of interwar vintage as some vitriolic liberal commentators seem to imply, warning us that fascism is around the corner if not already in charge (Anderson, 2017). A more accurate, and we believe appropriately dark, interwar description of the empty transactional worldview that typifies Trump, the man, is the one provided by Bertolt Brecht in his *Threepenny Novel* from 1934, through the character of the businessman Peachum as quoted by Fredric Jameson (1998: 67) in his book on Brecht:

> After all, the intention of any businessman to deceive other people is an honourable one. Yet the world was even more rotten than one could imagine. There were no limits to its rottenness. This was Peachum's deepest conviction, indeed his only genuine conviction.

This is not to trivialise the significance of Trump's election by any means – quite the opposite. Without any doubt, the result will be a long-lasting trauma in its own right, the effects of which cannot yet be estimated. Possibly, institutional inertia will get the better of Trump and we will have some return to business-as-usual (Anderson, 2017).Yet, political reversibility might prove impossible now popular rage has been directed into nationalist and racist channels (Berardi, 2017). The widespread cynicism amongst vast swathes of the population seems to rule out a seamless recovery of normative legitimacy for capitalism as a just society offering equal opportunities for individual progress (Streeck, 2016). When we talk about activating the utopian imagination in this context, we are certainly not suggesting that the spaces opened up by Trump are utopian in any sense. They are simply reconfigurations of the existent (and sometimes the darkly

antediluvian). Yet, the Trump presidency in all its unpredictability has somehow (for better *and* worse) shifted the weight and persistence of the present as such, and thereby offers us the potential to see in our given reality something *other* than what simply is supposed to be and to consider afresh the deeper currents and contradictory tendencies within our social order. Trump's alternatives of dystopia, regression and appeals to 'Greatness' confront us with the limitations of our tried and trusted modes of thinking; with our own historical inability to imagine utopia. This should make us realise, riffing on Walter Benjamin's essay *On the Concept of History*, that 'the catastrophe is not something awaiting us, but is simply the fact that all this goes on, continues to go on, exactly as it does' (Jameson in Buchanan, 2006: 130)*.* Activating the utopian imagination requires then, as Jameson put it rather poetically, 'a psychotherapy of anti-utopian fears and draw them out into the light of day, where the sad passions like blinded snakes writhe and twist in the open air' (Jameson, 2016: 54). It is precisely this space Trump has opened up and where we should direct our energy.

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Endnotes

[i] The song can be found on his *Mule Variations* album and in this link as a YouTube clip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMqxNPsfN50.

[ii] The painting can be found at the Nationalgalerie in Berlin and in this link: https://mydailyartdisplay.wordpress.com/2011/01/22/the-pillars-of-society-by-george-grosz-3/

[iii] Maggie Nelson already wrote back in 2011 (p.131): 'it has become an almost comedic phenomenon, that as mainstream news reporting in the United States continues its slide away from fact and into a partisan cesspool of spin, invective, and infotainment, news programs have started to blanket themselves with a "just the facts ma'am" brand of sloganeering'.

[iv] The tombstone with the words 'Everything was beautiful, and nothing hurt' from Slaughterhouse 5 (Vonnegut, 1991: 122) can perhaps serve as iconic image for this demand that the present abolish itself, making way for a return to a gentler, less confusing imagined past in which American Greatness is restored.

[v] It is important to note, however, that Trump did *not* win the popular vote and his victory is, at least partially, due to structural discrimination built into the US electoral system (see e.g. Campbell, 2018), and thus his mobilization of 'the people', as we address it here, is more of a rhetorical than a political feat.