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Our Weimar Moment, Part One

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I, like many worried about the rise of Fascism in America, thought Hilary Clinton would, by however modest a margin, buy us a few years to confront it more effectively. Now that I have been disabused of this hope it is time for sober reflection. Clinton has lost an election now she would otherwise have lost in four years. The populist wing of the Republican Party would simply have found a slicker, more intelligent candidate who is not a walking gaffe machine. 2020 was going to be theirs anyway. The extra time would have been nice but the reckoning has come now instead of later. So be it.

A populist politics of racial and ethnic resentment has triumphed; xenophobic, anti-intellectual and contemptuous of institutions and the rule of law.¹ This politics either points towards or currently embodies a Fascist ideology depending on whether you are an optimist or a pessimist.² Here are some reflections I have prepared on this crisis and though academics generally hate to be proven wrong I sincerely hope (for once) that most of what I say is unduly pessimistic.

The west, it seems, is having its ‘Weimar’ moment: its feckless elites are incapable of resisting the rising tide of right wing authoritarianism. This is not an American problem; it is a global problem. This is so firstly because America’s problems are *ipso facto* the world’s problems. There is no place to hide from chaos in the U.S. unless one disengages from the global economy completely. Secondly, the forces that have propelled Trump to success in the United States are active in Europe as well and no doubt his victory will only encourage the forces of reaction there.

If a renascent Fascism wins electoral success in both the US and Europe will Canada hold out long as the lone island of sanity? Our own Conservative party will no doubt learn its lessons from La Pen and Wilders if they or their ilk follow Trump to electoral success. Indeed, when in 8 to 10 years the Liberal Government has run its natural course there will be no stopping them. They will succeed in the way extremist parties always succeed: by waiting for a protest vote to sweep them into power. Fascism (proto or otherwise) will then come to Canada too.

It is hard to feel sorry for the Clintons, Blairs and Bushes who have made this possible. They and the neo-liberal doctrines they shilled for are now in the place that Orthodox Communism was in the 1980’s. They have no credibility with the people they govern and

¹ Whether or not individuals who voted for Trump did so for these motives or not they voted for a movement which embodies them. All extremist parties really need to succeed is a base and one other chunk of voters, fellow travelers, who simply want to ‘throw the bums out’.

² By Fascist I here refer to a populist movement which sees its will as thwarted by constitutional and legal restraints and embodies that will in a demagogue who promises to overthrow them, usually as part and parcel of some myth of national redemption. I think this applies rather well to the Trump movement. Others may differ but I will not quibble over a word. Trump is a destructive figure whether he can be successfully categorized as a Fascist or not. Thus, how closely his Fascism maps onto other historical Fascisms may be left to specialists to determine. There are, however, grave dangers to the ‘Hitler’ analogy which will be noted below: for this reason, it is well to note that Trump’s ‘Fascism’ is very much his own.

cannot move them a millimeter towards the good. Who really wanted another Clinton in the White House? Who wanted more trade deals, more 'humanitarian' military interventions, more bailouts and bloated profits for the financial sector? Who wanted more 'restructuring' and 'rationalization'? More wage stagnation and the continued decline of the middle class? The main pillars of the New World Order, trade liberalization, privatization, and perpetual austerity summon as much enthusiasm now as the Soviet Union's last five- year plan.

Of course these things were never meant to be political or subject to democratic control. That is why they were enshrined in international agreements and enforced by the IMF and World Bank. Politics, indeed history itself, was supposed to be over and done with as people like Fukayama assured us in the 90's. Clinton, a child of this era, would never have done anything 'political' in the sense of disturbing these global economic and security arrangements. She would have simply administered them (one suspects fairly competently) while trying to sell the results to an increasingly alienated public. However, anyone who thinks this kind of bland administrative talent benign should study the ugly history of the Clintons' dealings with Haiti and Honduras, those whose appointed station in the Global order is to provide cheap, immiserated labor in perpetuity.³

This system, of course, will not change under Trump, it will only become more chaotic. The neo-liberals at least offered *some* measure of order and predictability along with basic constitutional guarantees (unless of course you happen to be young, male and Muslim or a Black victim of police violence). Trump however faces a task even less manageable than Clinton. Capital under Trump will be more aggressive and unfettered than ever. Ordinary people will be poorer and unhealthier than ever. To keep the latter engaged increasingly ugly racial rhetoric will be necessary. At the same time Trump will not have the gift of another Clinton in four years. He will have to keep certain aspects of the post war liberal consensus in place to please independents.

The result will be a farrago of mismatched policies. There will be great pots of money for homeland security, police and the military. At the same time there will be 'fiscal responsibility' promised house Republicans. Abortion may be out but gay marriage will be in. Muslims and Hispanics will be subject to various forms of legal (or extra-legal) harassment but corporations who benefit from them will be given their open borders and cheap migrant workers. Infrastructure will be massively expanded but of course there will be tax cuts for all. A gifted politician might pull this off for a time but of course Trump is in the White House precisely because he is a political innocent.

As a result, Trump is unlikely to please the constituencies whose expectations he has raised. His ramshackle transition team of racists, millenarian weirdos, neo-con creeps and corporate hacks already embodies every aspect of this incoherent program. When the inevitable disappointment sets in will Trump's base decide that he has been co-opted by the system he

³ For starters see Edwige Danticat "Sweet Micky and the Sad DeJa Vu of Haiti's Presidential Elections" (*New Yorker*, Dec.3, 2015), Dana Frank "The Thugocracy Next Door" (<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/02>). Matthew Pulver "Bill and Hillary's Hyper-Capitalist Disaster: how the Clintons can apologize for a Decade of Deadly Policies" (<http://www.salon.com/2015/05/06>) In fact the Clintons critics on this matter include the Clintons themselves: "'We Made a Devil's Bargain': Fmr. President Clinton Apologizes for Trade Policies that Destroyed Haitian Rice Farming" (<https://www.democracynow.org/2010/4/1/>).

was elected to shake up? Will they decide that they simply did not elect someone radical enough? If so, should we prepare for David Duke in 2020?⁴

As some context for understanding this however we might try to define the idea that runs through Trump's and other far right movements: this idea might be labeled 'particularism' which gets at the common core of the far right more than comparisons to Hitler, Franco, Mussolini or whoever (illuminating as these might sometimes be). This idea is based on the failure of two cosmopolitanisms: that of Neo-Liberalism and international Communism. In place of this it offers nationalism and ethno-identity politics as the third way.

Of course, this is nothing new. The wars in the Balkans have already showed us ethnicity is a powerful force in contemporary politics. Far right movements have existed for decades in the United States and Europe even after the defeat of Germany. However, it is now clear that the same forces have moved from the periphery into the heartland. The United States, France, Germany, and Great Britain are the new Balkans in that fundamental questions of the nature of politics are now mooted there rather than in the hinterlands of Europe. So, where Neo-Liberalism saw universality embodied in a vision of as humans as consumers and Marxism saw universality embodied in a vision of humans as producers the new right emphasizes humans as embedded in relationships and identities that are fundamentally local or at most national.

Thus, it rejects any effort to globalize trade and invokes the virtues of protectionism. As it opposes the free flow of capital so it opposes the free flow of people: refugees are now 'economic migrants' (read 'moochers') at best and terrorists at worst.⁵ As in the old European right there are no 'rights of man' but rather rights of Englishmen, Frenchmen and Americans. Thus 'others' of various kinds can freely be tortured, denied habeas corpus and so on. At the extreme end this rejection of a universal moral language of rights becomes a narcissistic celebration of 'whiteness' or 'European identity'. At its most benign (if one can call it that) it expresses itself in a nostalgia for old national identities perceived to be under threat from 'globalism' and 'multiculturalism'.

On the face of it this all seems grossly unfair: if capital can migrate about the globe seeking the best deal why can't workers do the same? Moreover, much of the current refugee crisis can be laid at the feet of Western nations and their blundering 'humanitarian wars' which have created chaos and displaced multitudes. At any rate such people show no awareness that the reason people emigrate to the West is that our current global power arrangements ensure that the West is the site of economic privilege and that most people who aspire to a higher standard of living have to move to attain it. One might as well battle the tides as try to

⁴ Since I wrote these words it has become clearer that plutocrats and interventionists are the most likely winners of the ideological struggle going on in the Trump regime. What will happen to the populist movement he courted when this becomes too plain to deny is anyone's guess. More hopefully though the far right, for now at least, has been checked in France and Holland.

⁵ Of course in the real world poverty and violence go hand in hand rendering the supposed distinction between 'economic migrants' and 'genuine refugees' pretty much meaningless.

stop labor from going where money and opportunity reside: again we have accepted this proposition with respect to corporations so why not workers?

I doubt the far right would be impressed by this plea however: after all, they seem to think neither labor nor capital should go anywhere. They would no doubt say Globalism in any form must be dismantled and national identities along with national institutions must be reinforced. Many on the left share this vision at least where buttressing the nation state is concerned. At the same time though they still envisage a post-modern fluidity where identity is concerned oblivious to the fact that globalized economic and political institutions are the lynchpin of any such vision and that to restore the nation state is to restore the ethnic, cultural and perhaps even sexual identities that underwrite it. It is the resurgent right that shows more consistency here as at the core of their vision lie not the rights of persons but the rights of citizens understood, as in antiquity, in an exclusionary sense.⁶

Here we are then, with our political options reduced to three nostalgias. We can invoke the glory days of Reagan and Thatcher though the ecological and social externalities of neo-liberalism are not manageable. We can turn back to the ghastly regimes of international socialism and view them through a haze of false nostalgia. Finally, there are 'identity politics' and 'victim culture' invented by the left but now fully and freely appropriated by the right.⁷ This movement (in its current form) would restore the nation state as an ethnic, cultural and economic monolith and at its extreme looks back to the fascist movements of the 20's and 30's. Are we really so out of ideas? Is there no viable future but only increasingly desperate revivals of a failed and discredited past?

Resistance is heartening and it is largely to the political left that we must look for opposition to what is perhaps the most corrupt Oligarchy in the history of the planet. It would be equally heartening to think the left is ready to undertake this task. Alas I am not fully convinced it is. The only left leaning party in North America (outside the fringe parties) is the NDP and it is shackled to the centrism imposed by electoral politics. Nor can it seem to mobilize the urban and rural poor who are among its natural allies. There are more radical elements of the party but many of these are composed of current or former student leftists who are as much a hindrance as a help. Students go to university to find and forge identities and so it is natural that they will tend to form cliques (a tendency magnified ten-fold by social media). They will stake out stark positions and uncompromising attitudes, issue unconditional demands rather than working proposals, and use jargon culled from the social sciences to reinforce in-group identity.

⁶ Perhaps this is less than fair to the ancients: after all the rights of strangers and exiles were the province of *Zeus Xenios* and were hedged with the complex etiquette of the guest/host relationship (see Aeschylus, *The Suppliants*). Similar notions of sanctuary in the contemporary world are, alas, the object of contempt on the far right.

⁷ If some implied moral privilege is attached to victimhood, then of course everyone will claim to be a victim. There is nothing at all to prevent Christian Fundamentalists or campus conservatives from casting themselves in this role once the narrative has been established. Further, even the *perception* of a double standard in these matters will only re-inforce their conviction. None of this is to say that there are no victims or that 'identity politics' has not improved overall civility in many crucial ways: anyone who remembers the eighties blushes at certain things that were routinely said. Everything, though, is subject to the law of unintended consequences.

The point of a political *club* is to be small and confer a sense of status on those who belong. However, the point of a political *movement* is the exact opposite: its task is to be *large* and this is incompatible with cocksure dogmatism and a censorious tone that turns off potential allies. Growing a movement entails brokerage, forging alliances with people NOT our immediate allies to organize rallies, sit ins, mass strikes, defections and so on. This is not an activity for a self-righteous minority who, of course, want only to *distinguish* themselves from less enlightened folk. What works in Graduate school does *not* necessarily work outside the academy.⁸

This sectarian attitude reaches its peak among the proponents of ‘black bloc’ tactics: encouraging private militias and paramilitary violence is an idea so devastatingly misconceived that it is astonishing to still have to argue the point. It is also an idea beloved of the far right who use the exact same language to justify it. As the sole resistance to the current unsustainable regime the Left more than ever has to put its childhood things away and resist the romanticized and fake glamour of ‘revolutionary’ violence.⁹

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⁸ Current discussions surrounding ‘white privilege’ illustrate this point. When activists invoke this concept they think, naturally enough for university educated people, that they are conveying the *denotation* of the phrase: an unearned social advantage adhering to a particular race. As advertisers are aware, however, the general public hears *connotation* as much or more than denotation and ‘privilege’ alas connotes posh schools and delicate lace tea cozies. As these things are part of the experience of a tiny minority even of white people the phrase is dead on arrival. Rhetoric (in the ancient sense) needs to be attended to as much as social science.

⁹ And here, to be frank, I must confront what I call ‘performative’ leftism: the notion that policing simple everyday speech acts somehow *is* the revolution, or at least an easy way to put one’s commitment to it on constant public display. The North American left is obsessed with words, no doubt as befits a movement whose milieu is the university, but apart from some real (though modest) gains in civility what have we gained from this obsessive focus but a spate of brutal neologisms? Environmental devastation and income inequality are getting worse not better and splitting hairs over vocabulary will not alter that fact. It may be the case (though in fact I doubt it) that linguistic usage embodies in a straightforward way *current* oppressive social structures (as opposed to Anglo-Saxon ones!) but I see no evidence at all that altering the former will have any significant effect on the latter. I support any linguistic change that makes for more civil or respectful interchange (obviously we are well quit of words like ‘retard’ or ‘faggot’) but focusing on this should never be confused with manning the barricades and becomes contemptible as a self-righteous display.

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