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Donald Trump and the Liberal Intelligentsia: a View from Europe

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A new specter haunts the American elites: the candidacy of Donald Trump in the US President election and his success so far in the Republican primaries. The Republican establishment itself hopes to block his rise, even as he is drawing huge crowds into the party. As for the Democrats, they are hoping that his repugnant image will make the election of Hillary Clinton that much easier.

Let's start by admitting what seems obvious: Trump is vulgar, insulting, demagogic. He says one thing and then the opposite, and shows distinct signs of megalomania.

That much said, the anti-Trump campaign is typical of the rhetoric of the dominant political class.

Our indignant elites resort to one of their favorite arch reflexes: warnings against "fascism" and yet another "new Hitler". Ever since Nasser was "Hitler on the Nile", when he nationalized the Suez Canal, "new Hitlers" spring up in the Western imagination like mushrooms in an autumn woods: Milosevic, LePen, Putin, Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein, Assad have all been subjected to such comparisons.

But in fact a President of the United States is not a dictator and there is no insurrectional movement backing Trump. Should Trump seriously attack the rights or privileges of the elites, he would be rapidly put back in his place. After all, Richard Nixon had recently won an overwhelming victory in the 1972 Presidential election when he was forced to resign, not for having brutally bombed the peoples of Indochina, but for being implicated in attempted espionage of the Democratic Party headquarters (Watergate).

In reality, if Trump seriously tried to apply his extremist measures against illegal immigration, not to mention the protectionist aspects of his program, he would be confronted by all the power of transnational corporations, most of the media and the Congress. If he tried to be truly neutral in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as he has sometimes claimed, the pro-Israel lobby would waste no time in letting him know that things don't work that way in the United States.

The Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders, who is also an outsider, has at least warned his voters that he could not succeed as President without a popular movement behind him (which is the truth). But the same goes for Trump, except that Trump presents himself as the providential leader who can manage everything by himself. The real risk of a Trump presidency is not a "fascist threat", but the likelihood that he would not do much of anything

that he has promised his voters but instead would pursue the standard policies with more vigor.

Another amusing aspect of the respectable left's anti-Trump campaigns is to present him as scandalously unique and unacceptable because of his "racism". But what is racism after all? A bad attitude toward people who are different? Trump speaks wildly of excluding certain categories of people from the United States on the basis of who they are. But for decades respectable U.S. leaders have been excluding millions of people who are "not like us" from life itself. How would a Trump presidency be worse than the Vietnam war, than the bombing of Cambodia and Laos, than all the Middle East wars, than support to apartheid in South Africa, than to Suharto's massacres in Indonesia or to Israel in each of its wars? How would it be worse than massacres in Central America or the overthrow of governments in Latin America or in Iran? Or worse than the embargos causing hardship to the peoples of Cuba, Iran, Iraq, as well as the arms races imposed on countries obliged to try to defend themselves from US hostility and threats?

American liberal intellectuals who are horrified by Trump are quick to forget what their own country has inflicted on the "ROW" – that rest of the world where it is okay to kill masses of people, not out of "racism", oh no, that is not nice. But killed because they have bad leaders, or bad ideas, or even – the story goes – because they need to be protected.

As commentator John Walsh asked, which is worse, denigrating people because of their race or religion or killing them by the hundreds of thousands? Who among the liberal intellectuals will denounce Hillary Clinton's policy as racist? But can anybody believe for a second that Clinton would have supported the devastation of Iraq, Libya and Gaza, or that her friend Madeleine Albright would have considered the deaths of 500,000 children in Iraq to be "worth it", if either of them considered the victims of those policies to be really human?

But since we live in a culture where words matter more than acts, and Clinton is perfectly politically correct in her way of speaking, such racism is invisible. Of course, what finally matters is not to know whether all those people were killed out of "racism", but the fact that they were killed in avoidable, non-defensive wars waged by the United States.

One might reply that precisely because of his "racism", Trump would be even worse. But there is no sign of that. He is the first major political figure to call for "America First" meaning non-interventionism. He not only denounces the trillions of dollars spent in wars, deplores the dead and wounded American soldiers, but also speaks of the Iraqi victims of a war launched by a Republican President. He does so to a Republican public and manages to win its support. He denounces the empire of US military bases, claiming to prefer to build schools here in the United States. He wants good relations with Russia. He observes that the militarist policies pursued for decades have caused the United States to be hated throughout the world. He calls Sarkozy a criminal who should be judged for his role in Libya. Another advantage of Trump: he is detested by the neoconservatives, who are the main architects of the present disaster.

Even though he is far from being a pacifist (impossible among Republicans), the left has been so thoroughly taken in by the delusions of humanitarian imperialism that Trump's program ends up looking like the most progressive on the political scene in a long time. (Even Bernie Sanders has not denounced the intervention policy so sharply.)

In light of his unorthodox views on foreign policy, it is a bit too easy to attribute all his

success to the supposed racism of his supporters. As Thomas Frank explains, if millions of Americans support Trump, it is because they see in him the embodiment of their own revolt against the establishment, right and left, in their perfect division of labor. The right wants to ensure access to markets, as its neoconservative branch promotes endless wars against supposed threats, while the left provides "human rights" arguments as pretexts.

The issue of protectionism versus free trade is complicated, but the class aspect cannot be denied. For people with stable incomes, it can be advantageous to import goods produced in low-wage countries or to use services provided by workers from those countries. But for those who would otherwise produce those goods or provide those services, that competition is a problem, and they are bound to respond favorably to Trump's speeches in favor of protectionism and of limiting immigration.

The intellectual left (who mostly enjoy stable incomes, for example in universities) has totally ignored this problem by viewing the issue solely in moral terms: wouldn't it be marvelous to live in a world open to others, without racism or discrimination? In short, the message to the white worker who lost his job as a result of delocalizations, with no better prospect than delivering pizza, that he should be delighted to live in a multicultural world where one can eat sushi, listen to African music and take vacations in Morocco. He is told that he must absolutely not make any racist, sexist or homophobic remarks, that gay marriage is a huge progress and that the ideal society is not one aiming at relatively equal conditions for all, but rather an "equal opportunity" society in which there is no limit on economic inequalities so long as they do not result from discriminations against minorities. All is well if one can find a good number of women, blacks and homosexuals among the billionaires.

That is essentially the way of thinking that has dominated the left for decades. The working class has been totally forgotten, most of all the white working class which, as Chomsky recently stressed, is the big loser in all this wonderful globalization – so much so that its life expectancy has begun to decline, more than any other ethnic group in the United States. Once the left abandons relative equality of condition as its goal in favor of equal opportunity, it is also playing the card of identity politics, by focusing above all on what makes us different from each other. By emphasizing minorities, by showing concern for whatever is supposed to be different, or marginal, economically privileged intellectuals are unaware of the class aspect of this discourse, in which the bad guy is inevitably the ordinary guy, who must be racist, nationalist, stuck in his narrow outlook.

The implicit contempt expressed for the white Christian majority, supposedly eternally privileged thanks to the hazards of birth, at a time when it is in fact in total disarray, in economic and moral crisis, was bound to produce a reaction. Trump's campaign can be partly seen as a "white identity" reaction to identity politics, which elicits cries of indignation from the well-thinking left. The problem was to start playing the game of identity politics.

In many respects, the success of the Sanders campaign, even if it is weaker among Democrats than that of Trump among Republicans, also expresses the revolt of the masses against the elites, but without the "white identity reaction" (which remains totally politically incorrect on the left) and with fewer isolationist tendencies, since while Sanders stresses the need to rebuild America, he has in the past shown a weakness for the notion of humanitarian intervention.

Finally, we must ask what the Trump campaign means for us, the vassals, European citizens

of the Empire deprived of the right to vote in the United States. First of all, that popular revolt in a country which is supposed to be the vanguard of all that is for the best, and which our “European construction” strives to imitate while following its lead, is a problem for our elites. Jeremy Corbyn’s election as head of the British Labour Party as well as the rise of various parties labeled “extreme right” in continental Europe are somewhat analogous to the Sanders and Trump phenomena in the United States. Here too, the ruling class consensus in favor of maximum opening of markets as well as confrontation with the rest of the world in the name of human rights is beginning to collapse.

As things go from bad to worse, our political class grasps at a single straw, a single hope for salvation: Hillary Clinton. And it still looks likely that the mobilization of mass media, of transnational business, of the great majority of intellectuals, entertainment celebrities, human rights activists and churches will succeed in defeating Sanders and, with help from the latter, in defeating Trump in November. We shall then be faced with four, or perhaps eight, years of even more militarism, threats of war and war itself, while our self-styled left celebrates the latest victory of democracy, feminism and anti-racism.

But popular discontent will continue to grow. Those who fear seeing it culminate in the rise of someone worse than Trump should not count on the “Queen of Chaos” but rather go on from the movement for Sanders to build a more radical alternative.

Translated by Diana Johnstone.

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