

BY DAVID NEIWERT

Trump and Right-Wing Populism

A Long Time Coming

Most Americans surveying the wreckage of the national political landscape amid the 2016 presidential election are startled, most of all, by the ugliness and violence that has suddenly returned to our electoral politics thanks to the prominence of racist Far Right ideology in the Republican contest. And they shudder at the prospect of what that might mean for the nation's politics long after *de facto* Republican nominee Donald Trump departs the scene—whenever that may be.

Almost as suddenly as Trump himself emerged as a major player in the race, so too did an array of White Nationalists and supremacists, conspiracists and xenophobes, and even Klansmen and skinheads. For decades these figures had been relegated to the outskirts of right-wing politics, and many mainstream observers seemed to think they'd gone extinct.¹

The brashly offensive statements made by Trump about any number of minority groups or other individuals have likewise confounded observers.

"He is defying the laws of political gravity right now," exclaimed mainstream political consultant Michael Bronstein in January. "Inside the presidential race, any one of these lines, if they were associated [with] another candidate, it would've ended the candidacy."²

But the normal rules simply do not apply with Trump. Although he presents himself as a truth-talking business conservative—having emerged largely from these ranks—Trump has transformed himself into a creature of the populist Hard Right, the movement to which he owes his electoral success. The ideology that is identifiable through the candidate's braggadocious and at times



The crowd goes wild at a Donald Trump rally in Dallas, Texas in September 2015. Credit: Jamelle Bouie via Flickr.

incoherent speaking style is the “producerist” narrative,³ which pits ordinary White working people against both liberals—who are cast as an oppressive class of elites—and the poor and immigrants, who are denigrated as parasites.

Producerism has historically been tied to far-right movements, whether the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s or the Patriot/militia movement of the 1990s and today. The rhetoric of the militia movement, which arose during the Bill Clinton administration, served to help mainstream the Radical Right. Most of these militias initially presented themselves as ordinary civic organizations devoted to protecting people's rights and property, even as they gathered a large number of violent militants within their ranks. But any positive spin on the movement was derailed by acts of terrorism associated with the movement, like the Oklahoma City bombing. Marginalized, the Patri-

ots largely went into hiatus in the early part of the new century, during the conservative Republican administration of George W. Bush, but the motivations that fueled their movement remained very much alive.

During the same years that militias were first organizing, right-wing media simultaneously arose as a separate propaganda organ that demonized liberals and presented conservatives as the only true American patriots. The following decade, during the Iraq War, conventional right-wing rhetoric on outlets like Fox News became vociferous and eliminationist: liberals were derided as “soft on terror,” and any criticism of Bush and his administration was denounced as “treasonous.” Meanwhile, conspiracist elements of the Far Right found fuel in the aftermath of September 11th, which produced an entire cottage industry devoted to proving the terror attacks part

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of a conspiratorial plot, giving fresh life to the already-hoary “New World Order” theories of the 1990s.

During the Bush years, the Far Right largely declined from their 1990s levels of organization but remained active and bubbling along on these conspiracist fringes. The candidacy and election of President Barack Obama in 2008, however, changed all that, sparking a virulent opposition. The mainstream Right, after years of right-wing media conditioning during both the Clinton and Bush years, seemed no longer able to abide the idea of sharing power with a liberal president and set out to delegitimize Obama by any means possible. And it was through that shared hatred that the mainstream Right and the Far Right finally cemented their growing alliance in the loose assemblage of conservative activists known as the Tea Party. Ostensibly a movement for low taxes and small government, in reality the Tea Party represented the mobilization of right-wing groups to oppose any and every aspect of Obama’s presidency.

In the rural and suburban red-voting districts where the Tea Party organized itself, the movement became the living embodiment of right-wing populism, evoking and popularizing producerism’s twin demonization of both liberals and the poor and immigrants. As with most varieties of right-wing populism, many elements of the Tea Party embraced conspiracism, the supposed “tyranny” of the president and ideas that bubbled up from the Far Right, including “constitutionalism,” “nullification,” and even secession. The Tea Party became the main conduit for passing ideas that originated with the Patriot movement, and its far-right cousins, into the mainstream of American conservatism: the beliefs, for example, that the Constitution prohibits any form of gun regulation, federal land ownership, or federal law enforcement.⁴ It’s from these corners of the Right that the idea of the county sheriff as the highest legitimate law-enforcement entity in the land emerged.

Hand-in-hand with these beliefs about the Constitution came a panoply of conspiracy theories: that a nefarious New World Order is plotting to enslave all of mankind; that President Obama was born overseas and plans to institute

Sharia law; that climate change is a scam dreamed up by land-planning environmentalists and leftists seeking to control every facet of our lives.

This is a universe in which facts, logic, reason, and the laws of political gravity do not apply. And early on, Donald Trump identified its politics with his own.

“I think the people of the Tea Party like me,” he told a Fox News interviewer in 2011, “because I represent a lot of the ingredients of the Tea Party. What I represent very much, I think, represents the Tea Party.”⁵

Trump in action has certainly delivered on that. The opening salvo of his campaign, in which he castigated Mexican immigrants as criminals and rapists

Make America Great Again, I’m telling you folks.”⁶

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Before the Trump campaign, these true believers of the Hard Right were thought to comprise the margins of the Republican Party, a tiny subset that had no voice and even less power. What the Trump campaign reveals, unquestionably, is that they are no longer so tiny, nor so powerless.

Even if Trump were to fade away after 2016—something that is becoming an

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and promised to erect a border wall, was straight out of the Tea Party’s hardcore nativist playbook. And his subsequent positions and rhetoric—attacking “the Establishment,” Black Lives Matter and “political correctness,” vowing to outsmart China on trade, promising to protect the Second Amendment, promising to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and suggesting that women who get abortions could be jailed—were similarly straight out of the far-right populist milieu.

Most of all, his claim that his personal wealth would make him, as president, immune to the demands of the wealthy and other special interests, formed the foundation for his populist appeal, as someone who would look out for the interests of “ordinary Americans.” That appeal was bolstered by his promises to get the nation’s economic engine into high gear, voiced in common terms: “We’re going to get greedy for the United States,” he told a crowd in Las Vegas. “We’re gonna grab and grab and grab. We’re gonna bring in so much money and so much everything. We’re going to

ever more unlikely event—those who support him will not, nor will their alternative universe shatter and fall. What they will become after the election will depend on how radicalized they are becoming during the election process, and on how the rest of society responds to the violence that emanates from their ranks. It will be a serious and significant challenge.

After all, the reality is that they have been around for a very long time—buried deep in the American psyche—and are now springing forth with renewed vigor, thanks to the encouragement that Trump is giving them. ☞

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