

Article

On the Political Genealogy of Trump after Foucault

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Abstract: How would Foucault have viewed Trump as President, and Trumpism in the US more generally? More realistically, how can we discern and insightfully apply genealogical insights after Foucault to better comprehend and act in relation to our current political situation in the US? Questions of factuality across a base register of asserted falsehoods are now prominent in American politics in ways that put assertions of scholarly objectivity and interpretation in yet deeper question than previously. The extent, range, and vitriol of alt-Right assertions and their viral growth in American media provoke progressivist resistance and anxiety, but how can this opposition be most productively channeled? This paper examines a range of critical perspectives, timeframes, and topical optics with respect to Trump and Trumpism, including nationalist, racist, sexist, class-based, and oligarchical dimensions. These are considered in relation to media and the incitement of polarized subjectivity and dividing practices, and also in relation to Marxist political economy, neoliberalism/neoimperialism, and postcolonialism. I then address the limit points of Foucault, including with respect to engaged political activism and social protest movements, and I consider the relevance of these for the diverse optics that political genealogy as a form of analysis might pursue. Notwithstanding and indeed because of the present impetus to take organized political action, a Foucauldian perspective is useful in foregrounding the broader late modern formations of knowledge, power, and subjectivity within which both Rightist and Leftist political sensibilities in the US are presently cast. At larger issue are the values inscribed through contemporary late modernity that inform both sides of present divisive polarities—and which make the prognosis of tipping points or future political outcomes particularly difficult. As such, productive strategies of activist opposition are likely to vary under alternative conditions and opportunities—including in relation to the particular skills, history, and predilection of activists themselves. If the age of reason threatens to be over, the question of how and in what ways critical intellectualism can connect with productive action emerges afresh for each of us in a higher and more personal key.

Keywords: Trump; Foucault; genealogy; politics; modernity; critical theory

1. Introduction

How would Foucault have viewed Trump as President, and Trumpism in the US more generally? More realistically, how can we discern and insightfully apply genealogical insights from Foucault to better comprehend our current political situation in the US? The present contribution is both a research paper and a scholarly editorial, a practical application that draws on my previous article in *Genealogy* (Knauff 2016).

In this presentation, I sketch alternative perspectives and temporal scales or periodicities for a genealogical construction of Trump's Presidency. Drawing on Foucault's tendency to deepen our understanding through alternative historical reading, I explore complementary issues of knowledge, power, and subjectivity that are suggested by different genealogical framings of Trump/ism. Aspects of political economy are then engaged to augment the analysis and to put it in larger theoretical as well as historical and genealogical context. Finally, toward the end of the paper, I address the limit points of Foucault, including with respect to engaged political activism and social protest movements, and I

consider the relevance of these for the multiple and multiperspectival optics that political genealogy as a form of analysis could be encouraged to pursue.

My tone and register of presentation throughout are informed by the very nature of the Trumpist beast, the circumstances of our present immediate time, in which the very issue of multiperspectival understanding begs the counter-assertion of 'alternative facts.' These are now employed with political effectiveness on the American alt-Right in ways that postmodernists could hardly have imagined several years ago—and in ways that Foucault himself might have found both understandable and ironic.

Questions of factuality or facticity—what it is for a portrayal to be taken as a valid depiction of something that objectively occurred, that actually happened—now confront an unprecedented base register of patently false assertions by the President, his advisors, and his supporters (e.g., [Leonhardt 2017](#)). Climate change doesn't exist, Trump won the popular vote as well as the Electoral College, Barack Obama wasn't born in the US, Trump didn't say what he actually did say, and on and on. Among other things, this aspect of Trumpism risks putting any scholarly assertion into deeper question—and subject to further de-funding as a public good or collective resource. To a degree that we should not underestimate, all of us so-called liberal or leftist academics are now subject more generally to the politics of de-legitimation. A reasoned factual account that builds on objectivist assertion of presumed facts as buttressed by scholarly documentation can be thrown into question to begin with. The debunking of realistic comprehension or effective analysis as conspiratorial, globally dominating, satanic, or simply irrelevant and beside the point brings to a newly poignant register the question, "What Is to Be Done?" ([Lenin 1902](#)).

Challenges to intellectual understanding are not just conceptual. A PEW poll found that 58% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents in the US now think that college education has an overall negative impact in America ([Fingerhut 2017](#)). Accordingly, the federal tax changes now passed by the U.S. House are projected to penalize college and university students by \$65 billion over the next decade ([Hess 2017](#)). Provisions include a new federal tax, the first in history, on the endowment income of elite private colleges and universities—while creating windfall tax benefits for businesses and the wealthiest ([Green 2017](#); [Hartocollis 2017](#); [Meyers and Read 2017](#)). Though the present bill may or may not proceed to Presidential approval without modification, its bellwether is clear.

Meanwhile, amid the deepening investigation of Trump campaign collusion with Russian interests, the Trumpist state of exception confronts its opposition with escalating cycles of Presidential lashing out, misinformation, and political precarity. The string of ongoing national political crises can seem so omnipresent, entrenched, and refractory to reasoned argument that there may seem little solid ground on which to gain critical intellectual leverage; each response we might consider seems dated already by the exceptionalist turn of events in the following day's national political news. At current writing, Trump is at war with MSNBC, through which the escalating edge of liberal media drives as well as reflects presidential outrage—including thinly veiled threats by Trump to rescind MSNBC's federal broadcasting license. CNN may also be at risk: following Trump's complaints about its media coverage, the Justice Department has pressured its parent companies to sell it—which would put the CNN news service at the potential mercy of the political proclivities of a new owner ([NY Times Board 2017](#)). Echoing Breitbart News and FOX, the alt-Right billionaire Koch brothers are spending mega-millions for new media acquisitions ([Ember and Sorkin 2017](#); [Mayer 2016](#)). Per FCC approval, alt-Right Sinclair news is poised to reach 72% of American households via *local* TV news channels ([Kroll 2017a](#); [2017b](#)). Where this will lead by the time the present paper is published is impossible to know. Eighty-three percent of Republicans presently give Trump a favorable approval rating, an increase over the previous two months ([Gallup News 2017](#)). In this context, analysis beyond transient captivating details seems as difficult as it is important.

2. Trumpism and Foucault

Where, as progressive liberals and potential radicals might ask, is the tipping point beyond which Trump's Presidency, much less his general Bannionist politics now outsourced and unleashed and orchestrated beyond himself, might cause what used to be called a revolution: the decline or crashing down of government in its previous form? On one hand is the campaign for Trump's impeachment—which in just two weeks gained almost a million and a half petition signatures (Tolan 2017; Steyer 2017). But this merely ratifies for conservatives their distain for liberalism, as pumped up in conservative social media. A case in point is Sean Hannity, whose radio show has 13.5 million weekly listeners—the highest of talk radio except for Rush Limbaugh, at 14 million—and his TV program, which is, as of fall 2017, the most highly watched cable news show in the US (Bauder 2017). It is no longer possible to dismiss Hannity's views as those of a fringe crackpot. A catch-of-the-day illustration is his extended plumping of the book recently published by Edward Klein (Klein 2017): *All Out War—The Plot to Destroy Trump*. Chapter One on “The Cornerstone of American Democracy” begins:

In America you are entitled to your own opinion, but you are not entitled to overthrow the democratically elected president of the United States That, however, is what Donald Trump's enemies on the Left and Right are doing. Through a variety of underhanded tactics—lies, leaks, obstruction, and violence—they are waging an all-out war to delegitimize President Trump and drive him from office before he can drain the swamp and take away their power. Who are these determined and ruthless villains?

Various chapters of the book consider “This is What a Coup Looks Like”, “A Breach of Public Trust”, “The ISIS Connection”, “The Vulgarians”, “A Red Flag”, and “Villains' Report Cards”. As reflected in these titles, many of the chapters are striking inversions of liberal critiques themselves, mocking the various criticisms of Trump—“Fake News”, “The Trump Derangement Syndrome”, “A Nationwide Orgy of Rage and Spite”—as themselves a malignant and traitorous conspiracy against which an all-out war must be waged by taking up arms.

Accordingly, intervening segments of Hannity's broadcast warn that “the Democratic Party shoots people” and urge listeners not just to own a concealed gun but practice with a free instruction manual how to most proactively use it. Sixty-five percent of American gun owners already believe that the purpose of their right to bear arms is, “to make sure that people are able to protect themselves from tyranny” (Lankford 2016b, p. 189). The CDC reports that rising American gun deaths now annually claim more than 33,000 lives (Hauser 2017). The mass gun killings that have also been escalating in the US (e.g., Rounds 2017; New York Times 2017) powerfully and convincingly correlate with the massive number of guns that Americans presently possess: 270 million (Fisher and Keller 2017; Lankford 2016a). It does not take a conspiracy theorist to worry that growing political tension in the US could foment increased civil violence. No other country in the world has more than one-sixth the number of guns—or more than one-fifth the number of mass shootings—as does the U.S. Though American mass shootings are overwhelmingly by whites, blacks and persons of color are enormously overrepresented in the prison population. And the incarceration rate in the US is the highest in the world, 50% higher than any other country. Foucault might have appreciated books by Jordan Camp (Camp 2016) and Michelle Alexander (Alexander 2012), among others, that document the growth of the American carceral state through its persecution of racial minorities, opponents, and protest movements.

Beyond a criminal war against underclass opponents, an explicit goal of Trump is the casting out of liberal government, including by systematically dismantling and hollowing out previous government functions and their personnel (e.g., Friedman et al. 2017). The larger question may thus not be the demise of Trump himself, or an irreversible change in governance, but social divisiveness on a scale that the US has not seen since . . . when? The 1960s? The US Civil War? If a Democrat were again elected President, not to mention following a Trump impeachment, one can only imagine the resistance to federal authority among dedicated Red states and alt-Right conservatives.

How should we engage in, attack, or refuse, this climate of divisiveness? I contend here, in line with Foucault, that the terms of asking such questions have themselves become problematic and should be reconsidered. Even across the May 1968 fulcrum in France, even in the throes of what was perhaps the most viable Western political Marxism of the 20th century, Foucault refused it, refused Marxism, refused the fanciful specter of revolution, the organized pursuit of institutional opposition in hopes of decisive change. In large part, this is because it risked becoming not a sea change but the older kind of revolution, the revolving around and return to what came before. Change easily reinstates what it seems to oppose—another false guise, the siren of utopia reinscribing another version of the same, Marx's 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (Marx 1851), tragedy now trumped as farce.

In retrospect, how could we have thought that the challenges of postmodernism in relativizing knowledge and maligning truth would stay cloistered within an academic or philosophical closet? As if the revenge of the Political Right would not invent a radical performance theory far more propagandist to serve its own regressive agenda (cf. Williams 2017; Wilber 2017)? We are now well beyond the neoliberal statism of Reagan's and Thatcher's 1980s "The Empire Strikes Back" (CCC—The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982). The colonization of consciousness has taken a more 21st-century media savvy and subjectively insidious turn, as if recasting Lukács (1923), Horkheimer and Adorno (1947), and even Harvey (1989, 2007).

Perhaps just because of this, the present seems a time for more rather than less caution about the limits of what we can currently "know." We do not yet have the luxury of history to put the significance of the present in context—what kind of transition the present is enacting or portending or merely pretending to augur from one or another imagined past. Foucault would warn us strongly on this point.

3. Time and Periodicity

How long is the political generation that Trump is upending (or upholding) and what optic do we take to view its line of nominal descent; what time frame of genealogy should we choose? One presidential cycle versus another—comparing Trump's Presidency to others; and if so, over what period of time?

A single cycle foregrounds Trump's ultra-Right whiteness as the racist backlash against Obama's reasonable center-left multiethnicity, with its Black Lives and even Puerto Ricans who might actually matter. (Against this are Trump's disparaging comments about Caribbeans and what he has called the "shithole countries" of Africa (Davis et al. 2018)). Following the presently chaotic Trump-after-Obama cycle, should we expect a middling out between their post-facto polarity, or another concerted backward-looking attempt to make America *liberal* again—what Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman 2017) would call yet another recourse to retrotopia? Like Trump's pining for a glorious American past that has been abandoned as nonexistent but not yet dead, this would be a retreat from advancing modernity not by rejecting it but by embracing the nostalgia of yet another version of its past projected facsimile. It is hard to imagine that deep American divisions—now ricocheting and reinforcing across so many cultural, religious, and politicoeconomic registers—will be easily papered over much less dissolved by a subsequent return to "government as usual". Rather, Trump's Presidency seems integral to the larger "The Great Regression" of our times (Geiselberger 2017)—a world that seems to be suddenly moving backwards across so many progressive or at least liberal fronts—politically, ethically, environmentally, culturally, and in economic equality (cf. Luce 2017).

Within this regressive panoply, should we be foregrounding the racism of Trump's incitement—or its sexism and homophobia? Comparison of Trump with Obama would emphasize race; comparison with Hillary Clinton, sex and gender. Clearly, Trump's white exceptionalism cannot be divorced from a larger and deeper history of American racism, as Coates (2017a, 2017b) and Rosa and Bonilla (2017) have emphasized. The same could also be said of his resurgent sexism and homophobia, amid which Trump seems immune from the "reckoning" that is currently bringing down powerful

male sexual harassers and abusers (e.g., [Twohey and Rutenberg 2018](#)). As [Ruiz \(2017\)](#) asks, “Now can we admit sexism was a factor in the 2016 election?” Yet, more than half of white women voters in the US cast their ballots for Trump. How do we mediate, orchestrate, and analyze the gendered dimensions of Trump and Trumpism—and their deeper punitive history in the US (e.g., [Lancaster 2011](#))—vis-à-vis racial, religious, class-based, and other discriminations?

Should we be considering Trump’s election and tenure historically against the caustic politics, dirty tricks, and deceptions of 19th-century American elections and presidencies, which until recently seemed so far behind us? Social movement theorist Doug McAdam ([McAdam 2017](#)) documents that US Congressional polarization is now greater than at any point in the past 135 years. Should we compare Trump to non-establishment Presidents like Andrew Jackson and his acolyte James Polk, the former banishing Native Americans from their own land and the latter conquering and stealing one-third of what was then Mexico? Jackson is still lionized in American history, enshrined on the twenty-dollar bill.

Or should we take a yet longer optic to consider the *longue durée* of political economy in relation to social media and subjectivity? To be late Gothic, we could take as both parallel and inversion of our tumult the challenges of 16th–17th century central Europe during the Reformation ([Gorbis 2017](#)). These included the explosion of alternative social media via the printing press and Luther’s Bible, virulent divisiveness of alternative beliefs, the strategic stoking of these by competing political interests, a refiguration of cultural status and authority, and ensuing chaos of prolonged cultural-cum-civil war ([Osnos 2016](#)). What changes in consciousness and politics are now informed by mind-melded devices and apps through which we see the world, facsimiles of facts from a never-ending stream of niche posts and twitter feeds? Should we follow César Rendueles ([Rendueles 2017](#)) and see in the current politics of social media the sociophobia and dystopia of our present digital era?

[The Economist \(2017\)](#) recently analyzed how new social media drive and reinforce political polarization. Based on a viewer’s own viewing history, addictive-by-design media employ sophisticated algorithms in tandem with iterative targeting to keep viewers riveted to their devices through a reinforcing chain of emotion-laden connections. These, in turn, channel, shape, and reinforce a particular sense of subjective identification and, ultimately, identity. Bots drive this process by generating content that is taken as true or genuine. (In the 2016 presidential campaign, one of every five political opinions or commentaries posted on Twitter was generated by a bot (*ibid.*, p. 20). One should expect this frequency to increase in the future.) To a growing extent—including per the recent rescinding of net neutrality laws by Trump’s FCC (e.g., [Kang 2017](#))—social media seems increasingly influenced and dominated by the money of moguls and oligarchs (e.g., [Mayer 2016](#)). Especially on the alt-Right, these explicitly cast the issues and stances taken to inform what it means or should mean to be “American”.

In presidential politics but more widely, how can we connect developments to the political incitement of reactionary white nationalism and sexism, not just in rural or suburban America but in the West more generally, including the alt-Right in growing parts of Europe and Brexit in the UK ([Gusterson 2017a](#); [Polakow-Suransky 2017a, 2017b](#))? Or, perhaps we should reach yet deeper in history and compare the American shift from democracy to autocracy to the ancient Roman transition between Republican and spectacularist Imperial eras, auguring the latter’s banality of power (cf. [Mbembe 1992](#)).

4. Taking Exception to Exceptionalism

Foucault would warn us against viewing the above alternatives as mutually exclusive—as if we could find “the right optic” to establish the best and most critically “true” history of the present. Rather, we would be better advised to question the deeper assumptions that inform framings of political genealogical to begin with, to interrogate not only how different optics themselves differ but, at least if not more importantly, what they share—what they share by way of fundamental assumptions about progress and human development and entitlement, notwithstanding and even especially amid the seemingly ironclad opposition between Rightist and Leftist views.

A non-Hegelian *longue durée* that transcends the chimera of diametric polarizations (much less their synthesis) was indispensable for Foucault; as a genealogical historian, this was one of his greatest strengths. As such, he likely would not privilege one or another scale of temporal analysis, and certainly not one or another event or specific grand or terrible person of influence. He looked in a different register, for ways to expose more fundamental assumptions of worldview by looking at specifics that push our envelope from its margins.

How, then, would Foucault view the fact that we now find social media seeding alternative world-views as conspiracy theories of ostensible fact? Do we see these as a violently emergent genie from the 21st century bottle of angry alterities, perhaps strong enough to rip apart the US as we know it—or *thought* we knew it? Or is this view itself short-sightedly alarmist—as if we could identify “the problem” and then “avoid” or “prevent” it if we pushed strongly and effectively enough in one or another strategically crafted political direction? Should we support or join American antifa (anti-fascist) protest movements to combat the rise of neo-fascist nationalism (e.g., [Bray 2017](#); cf. [Hawkins 2017](#))? But more immediately, as if trumping this very question, how do we respond to the way such antifa initiatives are themselves portrayed in the alt-Right press—an interspliced dimension of actual Intifada terrorism and ISIS beheadings germinating in the heart of America (e.g., [DeLisi 2017](#))? Alt-Right portrayal by [Alton \(2017\)](#), among others, asserts that newly dubbed American Antifa-da aims for not just the “extermination of non-progressive expression” but a terrorist “extermination of people”. How does one respond to the paranoid projections of Rightist violence that legitimize their own, especially as these views gain audience?

On the other hand, polarization includes ratcheting up fearful Leftist as well as alt-Right perspectives. Each of these serve as the punching bag of the other’s Otherness—and pump up the viewer ratings of both in the bargain. Perhaps in spiraling result we really *are* experiencing a continuing crisis in the MSNBC mode—each day a newly-fanned flame of political outrage, a crisis of one hurricane upon another that portends some Armageddon of political collapse. And *then* what, on Trump’s tattered coat-tails? Michael *Pence* as President? The state of exception may become not so exceptional after all. In this regard, reconsidering new dimensions of critical theory from the Frankfurt School is especially timely (e.g., [O’Kane 2017](#); [Ross 2016](#); see [Knauff 2013](#)).

One a larger scale, we could view the presidential present as cultural and social rather than narrowly political: Trumpism beyond Trump, Bannon as Robespierre, the hollowing out of modernity’s cultural *zeitgeist* from the inside—at once Luddite, socially mediatized, conspiracy on steroids, post-factual, post “news”, and virulently anti-liberal across the board. But does this portend a new dark age of divisive, pernicious anti-humanism, a new variety of the Thirty Year’s ([Osnos 2016](#)), either in the US, in the West, or more generally? Or are we merely witnessing a transient revenge of self-interest against liberal communitarianism—a regressivism that will, in the longer run, be outrun by the larger benefits of liberalism, ultimately yielding a neo-Westphalian acceptance and management of polarized diversity?

In about three decades from now given current trends, the racial composition of the US will be dominantly non-white: the present minorities will be a collective majority ([Census Bureau 2015](#)). Will American politics hence become more liberal over time, fueled by changing racial demography and the thriving fiscal dominance of Blue state economies (cf. [Burns and Johnson 2017](#))? Are we overweighting the significance of the present? Will the reactionary Right effectively sap and tax Democratic states, making them part of a yet more apartheid national formation, inscribed, among other things, by greater racial and political bias in electoral procedures amid selective cross-ethnic conservative alliances? It is difficult to know.

5. Political Economy

From one vantage point, the Trump presidency is simply the logical culmination of cutthroat capitalism at its most unfettered, subjectively insidious, digitized, and manipulated—controlled not by feudal lords but by capitalist oligarchs as overlords, now including Trump in the US. Indeed,

it seems that what Trump really pursued was not the Presidency itself but the uber-oligarch status that a hotly contested and highly lucrative but failed presidential bid would afford (see Wolff 2018a, 2018b). This would have provided an enormous and even more unfettered anti-liberal media pulpit plus gargantuan new influxes of money to Trump personally (against which he refused to give away even a single cent of his own money to fund his campaign—or release his tax returns). For Trump and his team, high-price economic and cultural goals seemed more important than the mere political prize of the Presidency itself. Accounts of Trump's election night and its aftermath suggest not only how amazingly unprepared he was for the Presidency but that he and his team had a palpable and shocked sense of cost if not catastrophe in the final results. By winning the election, they felt they had unexpectedly lost—and were saddled with the onus of the Presidency itself (Wolff 2018a, 2018b; cf. Martin 2018; Kruzel 2018).

To pursue a Marxist perspective, we can re-theorize the larger links between economics, politics, and media in Trump and Trumpism, including how newly dominant modes of digital production galvanize not just new means of production but new *relations* of socially mediated production. Influential control over mediated self-production insinuates and incites subjectivity in new ways that are easily reinforced by virulent ideologies and paranoid lies. These intensify and escalate highly profitable cycles of *ressentiment*. The result is not just a technological change but a change of political economy: the accumulation through dispossession of a subjective *attention* economy.

With the average American clicking on his/her smartphone more than 2600 times a day and having the TV on five hours a day, notions such as “ideology”, “propaganda”, “hegemony”, “identity”, and “truth” beg critical reformulation. In the same way that Marx saw through the veneer of “free wage labor”, the ostensible freedom and democracy of digital social and mass media, now increasingly influenced by capitalist oligarchs, can be critically reconsidered. As the ability to channel our attention becomes the ultimate capitalist commodity, potentials for more considered critical understanding, especially among the underclass, are easily obliterated—and the insights of progressive intellectuals masked, trashed, and de-funded.

In a more conventional geography of global political economy, we can see present developments as an escalated internal backlash against America's declining international hegemony (see Knauff 2007).

Whether or not the US hit its high-water mark as a neo-imperial power in 1989, with the Soviet collapse, or earlier, in the 1970s, the 1990s and since have seen a groundswell of counter-hegemonies against America and its Western allies. These have come most obviously from China but also of course from Russia, Muslim extremists, and other venues. Even the *Economist* (title story, 11 November 2017), now considers the US to be endangered as a global power. Following the pattern of past world powers, the fomenting of divisive conflict could now be considered expectable in the US, as it supplies a ready means of intensifying nationalist fervor and attempting to reclaim an imagined glorious past. However, detailed analysis of previous world powers passing their peak reveals that such fomenting of conflict does not work: its heavy economic and social costs accelerate rather than forestall hegemonic decline (Arrighi 1994; Arrighi and Silver 1999; for 20th century Europe, see Ferguson 2006).

Accordingly, Wallerstein writes in his *Decline of American Power* (Wallerstein 2003, p. 27) that, “the real question is not whether US hegemony is waning but whether the United States can devise a way to descend gracefully, with minimum damage to the world and to itself”. From a world systems perspective, the biggest beneficiary of the current turmoil in the US is China—and yet moreso insofar as China's ascendancy is backgrounded by America's self-preoccupation (cf. Frank 1998; Arrighi et al. 2003; cf. Rudolph and Szonyi 2018). In this respect, it is particularly remarkable that Trump in his recent state visit to the Middle Kingdom “projected an air of deference to China that was almost unheard-of for an American President. Far from attacking Mr. Xi on trade [as he had done relentlessly during the electoral campaign] Mr. Trump saluted him for leading a country that he said had left the United State ‘so far behind.’” (Landler et al. 2017).

Declining American hegemony has already included extremely costly and unprofitable Gulf Wars I & II as well as the escalating hyperbola of its “war on terror” (see Ali 2002; Harvey 2003; Knauff 2007). Unsurprisingly, Bauman's “retrotopia” (Bauman 2017) is commonly found in failing hegemonic or

imperial states. More generally, as Appadurai (2017) suggests, loss of economic sovereignty in current nation-states increases their compensatory emphasis on *cultural* sovereignty—which in turn fuels the rise of authoritarian populism. In the US, the sense of failed national prowess is marked clearly if not enshrined in Trump’s reactive attempts to “Make America Great Again”.

In fact, from the standpoint of global political economy, Trump is doing just the reverse—burning down the world’s largest-ever superpower from within by deconstructing, de-legitimizing, and imploding its own government. This both by explicit curtailing and cutting back of government services and fomenting the resignations and retirements of career national employees (e.g., Harris 2017; Friedman et al. 2017). From *that* perspective, the really committed postcolonial radical might ask whether we should be *supporting* Trump’s deconstruction of American government, speeding its descent. In the mix, however, Leftist radicalism then stands alongside pernicious White nationalism: the Leninist circle closes.

In larger register, it could be argued that current events actually signal continuity rather than rupture between conservatism and neoliberalism (cf. Harvey 2007). In this critical view, their apparent differences merely ratchet to a higher amplitude their combined oscillation. Some of us are old enough to remember how retrograde the US electorate seemed to be in electing Richard Nixon, including a second time, or Ronald Reagan, including a second time, or George W. Bush, including a second time—interspersed with Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and then Barack Obama. What exactly is now different, and worse, in the continuing specter of Trump and his aftermath?

One difference is the increasingly virulent disaffection with progressivist values among those parts of the US left economically and culturally behind, our own Weimar curse. Popular support for Trump—and the key electoral votes that enabled him to win the Presidency—came especially of course from economically depressed swaths of the US that have been systematically left aside by advanced education and income growth, especially in rural and struggling urban areas. The anger of those underemployed, less educated, less urbane, and viewed as regressive by the progressive elite now seems as malignant as it was previously overlooked.

6. The American Postcolony

In some ways, what we now see are the geopolitics of third world failure and resistance, however twisted, among the attempted and failed bourgeoisie within the US itself. Many parts of rural and undereducated America now experience life under liberalism as their own “Desert of the Real” (Zizek 2002): deeply felt economic despair, cultural abjection, and political meaninglessness (e.g., Kendzior 2015/18; cf. Hochschild 2016). Are these now so deeply inscribed and stoked as *ressentiment* as to be reminiscent of the paranoid desperation experienced so poignantly in 1930s socialist Germany? Pushing yet further, what, if any, similarities are there, amid huge differences, to the despondency of the world’s bottom billion—and the anti-establishment revolts of the wretched of the earth (Collier 2008; Fanon 2005)?

The very point here is *not* to equate the economic plight of left-behind Americans with those who are truly immiserated in so many developing countries—not to occlude chasms of difference in privilege, wealth, and opportunity. The so-called poverty level in the U.S. is still an individual annual income of \$12,060—as opposed to those many in the world’s poorest countries who earn less than two dollars or even one dollar a day. The point is rather to underscore that oppression as a *felt* and *perceived* condition is importantly cultural and psychological.

The subaltern middle class that Pandey (2015) finds operative among both African Americans and Indian *dalits* also seems applicable in some ways to rural white Trump supporters, including just how and why in a neo-liberal world “the cultural and class markers of the subordinated have been particularly difficult to shed” (ibid., p. 340). Writing prior to the election of Trump, Ortner (2016, p. 53) presciently suggests that, “the American working class [has] basically collapsed, economically and politically”. Further, she sees, “beyond deindustrialization a kind of active war on the poor”, including “a kind of contemptuous attitude toward the working classes and the poor beyond the necessity for profit” (p. 54). This selective similarity to the subaltern is poignant even though and perhaps just

because the reactions and politics of underprivileged American whites have become so warped and regressive (compare also afflicted *dalit* politics in some parts of India).

At issue is whether and how the threads of modest privilege amid relative deprivation beg *ressentiment* that is or can be driven to deeper and more pernicious levels of reactionary lashing out. An extreme example can be taken by considering the increasing incidence of mass shootings in the U.S. (e.g., [New York Times 2017](#)). If mass shooting is defined as the firearm killing of four or more people, then whites, blacks, and Latinos commit mass murders no more or less frequently than their proportion in the population. But while blacks are more likely to kill multiply in robberies or crimes, white mass shooters are much more likely to kill far larger numbers of people indiscriminately in public. As [Lankford \(2016a\)](#) suggests, it is the structural *advantages* of disaffected and disillusioned subaltern whites—benefits of agency, means, sophisticated weapons, and opportunity—that seem to explain this racial difference. We can be tempted to rethink Mamdani's *When Victims Become Killers* ([Mamdani 2002](#)), in a radically new guise. The revenge of reactive modernity is no less and can indeed be greater when those in positions of modest privilege who deem themselves deserving and destined to be highly successful . . . are not.

We can consider, then, how the risks of the empowered subaltern rebound and are co-opted so regressively in the world's most powerful superpower—Mbembe's ([Mbembe 2001](#)) postcolony come home to roost in the heart of the hegemon. At a minimum, there seem selective resonances between geo-capital inequality *within* the US and the spatial geographics of inequity internationally—complementary sides of Capital Difference (cf. [Harvey 2001](#)).

7. Modernity Is Dead, Long Live Modernity

Given the indeterminacy of eventful specifics, a larger view is warranted. This can lead us to reconsider in a new key the *zeitgeist* of our broader epistemic regime, the *longue durée* of its continuity beyond fanciful diagnoses or tactics for its presumed end or transformation. This was one of Foucault's most important and enduring interests. In our present circumstance, it is hard to avoid or ignore the power of opposition between humanist and anti-humanist modernism. Yet both of these seem unable to give up tropes of ultimate or deeper or greater progress against which the present is hopelessly unfulfilled—whether due to retrograde rightist politics, on the one hand, or liberal leftist pandering, on the other. In his day, Foucault was confronted with seemingly analogous stark choices—between the “establishment” and one or another shade of 1960s and 1970s Marxism—and then, in the later 1970s and early 1980s, between his private sexual proclivities and his refusal to publicly identify with a Gay identity or political agenda. He consistently refused categorical alternatives and the choice between them.

Ultimately, Foucault was an empirical continualist rather than a categorical absolutist. Though he identified in hindsight the portent of big epistemic breaks and ruptural transformations—especially classic to modern regimes of European knowing in the late 18th and 19th centuries—Foucault shied from the hubris of claiming or portending major cleavages in the present. Such claims easily become another version of “crisis news”, the mechanical reproduction of the very cataclysmic change that is lamented and resisted as caused by those “on the other side”. Amid the drumbeat of daily crises, it is now all too easy to be riveted to and ultimately co-opted by their flow. How and when do we cut the network and turn off our devices—suppress our fear and curiosity and excitement that today's crisis or tomorrow's may be yet bigger and more calamitous than yesterday's—addicted to a daily fix of Trumpist contestation? How do we turn down the volume, stop, and find a stable fulcrum of external perspective? And in the bargain, how do we do something more than just symbolic or ignorantly short-sighted?

Using genealogy against history, Foucault did not attempt to predict or project whether, when, and how May '68 would or could or should turn into political revolution—or what its outcome could otherwise be. His answer was not to become a Leftist champion or Marxist, even and perhaps especially at its apparent high tide ever in Western Europe. To him, the fight was to put one's own

personal actions on the line (including on the very literal line of protest) in ways that did not seek grand publicity or assume or validate the pleas or paradigms of one or another political movement or party. An ultimate anarchist (cf. Graeber 2004, 2014), Foucault did not ask the Marxist or even the Gramscian question of when the time would be right to mobilize the pilot light of critical intellectualism, its own small war of position, into one of frontal opposition or political maneuver.

Especially in his later work on ancient Greek and Greco-Roman subjectivity, but also consistently earlier, Foucault kept the freshness of a more deeply refractory view in focus, not recouring to claims and projections of some then-current or now-current crisis, of proclaiming the end of history or the limit point of current political structures and economic structures. Against this, he continually warns us Other Victorians against projecting a historical trajectory of meaning or value or crisis that augurs to validate some grander prediction or design, intending to transform the present, but concluding in fact by reinscribing it in yet another false guise. Indeed, “modernity” for Foucault was itself “often characterized in terms of consciousness of the discontinuity of time, a break with tradition” (Foucault 1984, p. 39).

As such, Foucault might well dodge the Trump in Trumpism altogether. In viewing tectonic shifts of epistemic regime, he deemphasized the role of supreme rulers, prominent intellectuals, or canonical thinkers. He was more interested in the myriad features of the overlooked, the details of personal accounts and institutions that revealed the contours not only of epistemic *zeitgeist* but of the subject’s self-relationship, what he latterly called subjectivation. Rather than slavishly following the daily news, he might have been more interested in the oppositional *mentalité* of J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* (Vance 2016), or Kathleen Stewart’s *A Space on the Side of the Road* (Stewart 1996), or Sarah Kendzior’s *The View from Flyover Country* (Kendzior 2015/18). Or some apparently random overlooked detail in the life or actions of Stephen Paddock, the Las Vegas mass shooter who has been so refractory to psychological or cultural understanding (cf. Goldman and Medina 2018). What are the facets, lineaments, and depth of modern anti-modernism in the US? And how does this resonate with Christian Evangelicalism, the sense of identifying with Jesus in direct communication with God (e.g., Luhmann 2012; cf. Hochschild 2016, chp. 11)?

Beyond this, Foucault might ask how the current political tumult and its progressivist opposition *both* draw upon a bedrock faith in the entitlements of modernity—that we all deserve not just the right to *pursue* happiness but the right to *be* happy, to have a continually better, more developed, and more actualized future. As if having favorable conditions that actually bring about personal happiness are themselves a core political right. This is arguably a precondition for the retro-regressive tendency to move backward through divisiveness, to seek forward glory by refraction from an imagined perfect past by debunking the present. In the mix, one finds an inability to give up the entitlements of continual betterment despite and even because of their experienced absence and seemingly hopeless future.

Everyone happy, and happier all the time. Stepping back, how, even in God’s name, could we ever expect such an odd and frankly irrational system of cultural value—with all its accumulated capitalist political power—to become an actual reality, much less save us from the existential dilemmas of being human? In the US, at least, a major revision to Weber’s *zeitgeist* of capitalism in relation to current Protestant ethics seems sorely needed (cf. Weber 1958). No amount of economic growth, no reduction of unemployment and underemployment, can ever topple such a curse of value; we will always be hopelessly deprived against our inflated holy grail of capital desire. In social terms, we may always be impoverished, in relative deprivation, against those who are richer and better off. Conversely, we may always be vulnerable to regressive co-optation, the stoked *ressentiment* that is all the deeper and pernicious because it can never be ameliorated, much less contravened, by objective improvements in empirical or economic terms.

Against our entitlement to a continually better future, we arguably now have at once, simultaneously, the spiraling failure and yet inescapable desire for the modern after the modern, the after-modern, the yet better and yet less and less actually feasible beyond any present horizon of expectation or knowability. Maybe this is what links rather than divides us all: the expectation of endless improvement and betterment that can neither be actualized nor given up, either by those of us

in the degraded cultural elite or by the oligarchs and underclass of less well-educated, poorer, rural, and generally discontented white and white-associated Americans.

8. Critical Theory, Social Movements, and the Limits of Foucault

In one or another form, the past century and more of critical Western intellectualism has identified, problematized, and theorized many if not all of the above issues. In the Western academy, such critical understanding increased importantly following World War II and especially during the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. (Following this, critical Marxist and political economic perspectives were increasingly confronted—and often superceded, sidelined, or hybridized—with hyper-relativizing postmodern sensibilities and their sequelae (see [Knauff 1996](#).) In this sense, a present view much less a Foucauldian one has no privilege of original discovery concerning the intricate workings of industrial and post-industrial capitalism, nationalism, racism, sexism, class-based oligarchy, and the degradation of both social life and the physical environment on which it depends. And yet, this is somehow just the point: many decades of keen and critical intellectual work seem somehow now at risk of disconnection from our present political moment. This seems the case specifically as well for our understanding of modernity and its alters, which were so actively and critically explored during the late 1980s and 1990s (e.g., [Harvey 1989](#); [Gaonkar 2001](#); [Knauff 2002](#)), but which seem so relatively left aside today (e.g., [Povinelli 2016](#); [Tsing 2017](#)).

Recursively, this can lead us to more actively consider the relationship between critical theory and engaged social action—which leads us in turn to the limit points of Foucault.

Though Foucault was a political activist in personal terms, his actions were fairly ineffectual in a practical sense. To be uncharitable, one could even say that the power and contribution of his critical thought were inversely related to its lack of pragmatic application. In a shorter-term perspective, this was perhaps Foucault's intention, as intimated further above. But in the longer term, this risks reinscribing a rarefied intellectualism divorced from practical engagement. In anthropology, at least, the tendency to shun rather than seek practical engagement runs against the field's dominant current trend, which is the critical exposure, examination, and amelioration of inequity and other challenging human problems (e.g., [Low and Merry 2010](#); [Robbins 2013](#); [Ortner 2016](#)). And yet, as is also widely noted, these objectives are seldom met beyond cultivating critical intellectualism per se. As such, they risk tacitly demurring against the agendas critiqued by [Gusterson \(2017b, p. 455\)](#) whereby academic work in fields such as economics and international studies extend as if naturally the political and policy agendas of the rightest American state.

Much has been written of late about the handmaiden capitalism of the contemporary neoliberal university (e.g., [Gusterson 2017b](#); [Tejani 2017](#); [Cottom 2017](#); [Caanan and Shumar 2011](#); cf. earlier work by [Readings 1997](#); [Bourdieu 1988](#); [Bourdieu and Passeron 1990](#)). This includes how money and power configure the construction of value in knowledge; the gatekeeping, reinforcement, and reproduction of valued knowledge and skills; and how these reflect and reinforce inequities if not firewalls of socioeconomic division by means of differential debt, advancement, and highly paid professional success. Increasingly, the war over the university is also a war of explicit politics. To take just one example, the George Mason University Law School received \$10 million from the Charles Koch Foundation in 2016—following a decade in which the university received more than \$95 million from the Foundation. Simultaneously, an anonymous \$20 million donation was received—contingent on the school being renamed “The Antonin Scalia School of Law” ([Kotch 2017](#)).

In the 1960s, universities, including elite universities such as Columbia, Berkeley and Michigan, were hotbeds of widespread social protest and opposition. This is far from the case today.

The causes and conditions under which social movements effectively grow and develop is widely debated. Progressive political scientists such as McAdam (e.g., [McAdam 2017](#)) suggest that a scaffolded triumvirate of structural, political, and emotionally activated motivation are in play, including conducive or unconducive political opportunities, the availability or viability of mobilizing organizational structures, and affective priming such as anger at perceived injustice or fear of perceived

threat. Key here is the perception that collective social action has a realistic chance of redressing or overturning current trends or practices. As such, McAdam (McAdam 2017; McAdam and Kloos 2014) suggests, based on historical research, that progressive social movements in the US are *less* likely to develop at times such as the present when the Republicans control Congress, as opposed to when an at least relatively-more-sympathetic Democratic party is in power.

A more critical view is taken by Cini et al. (2017, pp. 429–30), who argue that social movement studies have “not paid enough attention to the dynamics of capitalist transformations”. More generally, they suggest that social movement studies emphasize meso and micro-practices that tacitly assume the presence and continuation of political institutions and regimes in their present form—rather than considering the larger-scale and longer-term trends (especially those of capital dispossession and differential accumulation) that presage and provoke movements of opposition if not transformation.

Negri (2017) goes so far as to suggest that the definition of social movements in our contemporary era is itself changing and malleable—not conditioned or constrained by received organizational parameters. Rather, contemporary social upheavals mark a “liberation process” of subversion against larger capitalist conditions. He thus suggests transforming Marxist notions of class struggle into ones of “entrepreneurial opposition” based not on wage labor but on “living labor” that is often immaterial. As such, expressions of resistance are changing and not necessarily repeatable as an identifiable social movement over time.

Culminating this line of thought is perhaps the work of anarchist activist and anthropologist David Graeber (e.g., Graeber 2004, 2014). For Graeber, the *lack* of a social movement’s achievement as an organization actually indicates its larger success: “As an anarchist, he believes in what he calls ‘prefigurative’ politics; protests are not meant to extract concessions from the existing system, but to give people an idea of what the world would be like if there was no system and individuals were free to make their own choices” (Runciman 2013). As such, the Occupy Wall Street movement that Graeber helped foment “showed that real democracy can break out almost anywhere given the chance” (ibid.) even though the movement itself has spawned little organized or institutional legacy.

Amid the diverse perspectives above—from a structured theory of social movements that borders on being historically static or tautological, to the privileging of undefined and ephemeral expressions of protest that leave little legacy—there seems little ground on which to stake a strong current claim to social activism by means of organizational or institutional commitment. This is not to say that newly progressive social movements (e.g., MoveOn.org) are unlikely to be possible or important in the American future—nor that such developments should be considered misguided or unfruitful. It is rather to suggest, as with the genealogy of politics more generally, that alternative productive strategies are likely to vary under different specific conditions and opportunities—including in relation to the particular skills, history, and predilection of individual activists themselves. This does not eulogize the particular kinds of action (and inaction) that happen to have been favored by Foucault, but neither does it debunk the potential that all of us have for pushing as assertively and consistently as possible in the directions we find ourselves most critically and productively poised to pursue. If the age of reason threatens to be over, the question of how and in what ways critical intellectualism can connect with productive action emerges afresh for each of us in a higher and more personal key.

9. Political Genealogy

A genealogical rather than a historical view would urge or at least allow for perspectives that do not and should not add up to a singular view of political periodicity or political commitment, including with respect to our present crises and what we can expect or realistically hope to change. As Michael Clifford (Clifford 2013, pp. 33, 123) suggests, political genealogy not just encompasses but necessitates a wide diversity of lenses and fames to trace the lineaments of power, knowledge, and subjectivity. At the same time—and this is perhaps the more important point of a truly genealogical analysis in the Foucauldian sense—*this is not at all a mandate much less a license for nihilism or giving up*. It is not at all an excuse or a rationale for doing nothing personally or politically. It is rather a deeper commitment,

critical fascination, and radical curiosity for newly creative understanding. This is, as Clifford (2013, pp. 12–13) suggests, a deeper kind of empowerment.

Perhaps this is the grounding for what Gramsci (1971) would call a continuing war of position in a more strongly subjectified sense—one that understands more intricately the terms and conditions of knowledge, power, and self-relationship even as one does not pretend to know or forecast their immediate temporal outcome. Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will. In the practical mix, an embrace of diverse routes and sensibilities of critique and activism seems appropriate. Intellectually, we can incubate juices of critical sensibility more productively and profoundly. During the 1960s and 1970s, this is certainly what occurred in French intellectual life across a range of registers, including in the work of Foucault himself.

As factuality is itself increasingly contended, it is important to employ what might otherwise be a depressive view of the present to fuel rather than dampen our own best objective and subjective potentials (cf. Latour 2004). As Marxists would say, crises are also opportunities to see laid yet more bare the underlying contradictions of the era. These presently include the continuing role of modernity, an epistemic regime whose ideology draws upon destructive creation as well as creative destruction in the context of 21st century digital capitalism and political power (cf. Berman 1982; Knauff 2002).

Political genealogy allows us to gain both broader and more specific purchase on the diverse optics, lineaments, transitions, and periodicities of this power. This includes for American politics how to view our current chaotic situation across different temporal scales of genealogy that may variously compare millennia, centuries, decades, ongoing four-year cycles, and politics as an American institution vis-à-vis the political economy of a portended after-modernity that we can barely yet glimpse much less know. This includes but is not reducible to the current regressive recourse to American white racism, sexism, and overclass domination. These continue to darken the contours of modernity's owl-of-Minerva horizon in ways that beg more than simple intellectual or conceptual critique.

Foucault and the genealogy of the political as applied in the American present should allow an opening of larger questions that have strong traction, both intellectually and practically (see Appendix A). These can be engaged without being mortgaged to one or another definitive view of when and in what form political change will take place or should be pursued. This, I think, is Foucault's contribution to the present. Amid competing voices and increasingly chaotic alternatives, this to me provides an ironically important stabilizing force for those who would cultivate a seriously critical set of optics to actively engage what is presently going on and to configure, in our various ways, what we can actually do about it.

[G]enealogy retrieves an indispensable restraint: it must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history—in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts; it must be sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to trace the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles Genealogy . . . requires patience and a knowledge of details, and it depends on a vast accumulation of source material In short, genealogy demands relentless erudition . . . [I]t rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies. It opposes itself to the search for 'origins.' (Foucault 1984, pp. 76–77)

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Appendix

If one wanted to be categorical—taking on board the caveats that categorical divisions carry, especially for Foucault—genealogies of the American political present could be parsed into perspectives reflecting his major emphases (cf. Clifford 2013, pp. 26–34), including the following:

1. Knowledge—explore the margins of transition between modern and after-modern sensibilities. Document and analyze present regimes of asserted truth and untruth, and how these contest each other vis-à-vis objectively discernible facts of history and the present. Analyze the attempted reformations and counter-reformations that both reinscribe a self-interested Western modernity of indefinite betterment and progress. Explore the overlooked margins of alternative as well as mainstream and ostensibly subaltern subjectification, including in areas of media, sex, religion, art, and culture—as well as in politics and political economy per se.
2. Power—how subjects are incited through evolving forms of sovereignty, governmentality, and social media; how altered types of self-relationship are fomented, including in relation to newly-reinforced dividing practices concerning race, sex, religion, and nationality. Investigate how diverse corporate and political institutions of power and influence—and their increasing connection—canalize and fuel social divisiveness, including across differentiated spaces of capitalism that grate against each other so rawly in current American polarization. Consider how and through what means of capital and political reinforcement the interests of overclass America are linked with underclass vulnerabilities and anxieties. Consider these in relation to counter-hegemonies that contend to provincialize America vis-à-vis other world areas, peoples, and countries. Analyze how institutions of power, social media, and the trail of corporate money classify, stigmatize, and sequester differently ascribed categories of people and personhood.
3. Self-relationship—examine emerging vis-à-vis received regimes of subjectivity and subjectivation, including in relation to social media and money. How and in what way are reifications of selfhood newly reconstructed and reinforced, including through digital social media; what are the larger patterns through which new identities and rigidities are forged, asserted, reinforced—and divided? What informs opposition between differently asserted forms of subjectivity, including modern and anti-modern, progressive and reactionary? How can we attend to the dynamism and impact of contended subjectivity without bleaching their differences or reifying larger prognoses, either cataclysmic or ultimately utopic? And how, in the process, can we push against or beyond the false hope for greater dialectical improvement and “progress”?

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