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PASSING THE BATON

THE US ELECTION of 2016, confounding general expectations, has attracted a wide range of readings. Yet while significant further data are sure to come, sufficient figures are available for a preliminary assessment. What are the relevant bottom-lines? The first is voter participation. Overall turnout jumped 5.4 per cent in 2004 when Bush was re-elected, the major increase this century. A small further flicker upwards—1.4 per cent—followed when Obama won in 2008, cancelled with a 2.2 per cent drop when he was re-elected in 2012. This year turnout fell once again, by about 0.3 per cent. Increasing partisan polarization, in other words, has not been accompanied by any real electoral mobilization.

In the Electoral College, the scale of Trump's victory was larger than that of Kennedy in 1960, Nixon in 1968, Carter in 1976, and Bush Jr in both 2000 and 2004. In that sense it was not a close result. But as widely noted, it was the achievement of a tiny net margin of 77,744 votes in three states, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin, that produced it. Against this slither, Clinton lost the election with a lead in the popular vote—2.87 million—larger than that of Kennedy, Nixon I, Carter or Bush Jr I when each won the Presidency. Discrepancies between voter choice and electoral upshot are no rarity in capitalist democracies—regularly on display in Britain or Japan, more drastically of late in Italy; the current American case, reversing a 2.1 per cent margin between the two candidates, as a product of a federal system, is in no way an outlier. Taken by itself, the difference in the popular vote is arguably not much less misleading than Trump's sweep in the Electoral College, since in a money-driven system, Clinton paid twice as much as Trump to obtain

her votes, getting far less for her expenditure per dollar. This was in good part because she wasted so much time buttering up wealthy backers and flooding air-time in states like California and Illinois which she was bound to win anyway, piling up useless margins there, while Trump was concentrating on four or five decisive rustbelt states, by the end ignoring the big states—Texas, Georgia etc.—where he was safe, which could probably have generated equally pointless surpluses.¹

2

The sociological detail of the vote probably still contains some surprises. It is clear, nevertheless, that Clinton failed to corner the full crop of millennial, black and Latino voters she was counting on, while Trump squeezed an extra slice of white workers into his camp. But it is important not to lose sight of the forest for the trees. The big structural fact is how evenly the electorate remains divided, with small shifts in turnout or preference making the difference in end-result. What was unusual in 2016 is that both candidates were thoroughly disliked by large numbers of those who voted for them—the Democrats could probably have won with Biden or Warren against Trump, the Republicans inflicted a bigger defeat on Clinton with Kasich or Rubio. Striking in the balance of distaste for each party's standard-bearer is that distrust of Clinton went deeper than of Trump: independents who held their noses at both divided heavily against her.² So it is a mistake to over-interpret the result as a political earthquake. Ronald Brownstein's diagnosis of a close but deep cleavage in the party system—as opposed to either an at once wide and deep gulf, as in the time of McKinley or FDR, or a

¹ John Judis, 'On the Eve of Disruption: Final Thoughts on the 2016 Election', *Talking Points Memo*, 18 December 2016. Clinton piled up 5.8 million more votes than Trump in California and New York. In the other 48 states, Trump outpolled her by 3 million.

² Of those who had an unfavourable opinion of both candidates, Trump took 49 and Clinton 29 per cent; of those who said neither candidate had the requisite qualifications to be president, 82 per cent went for Trump and 18 per cent for Clinton; of those who said both candidates were temperamentally unsuited for office, 86 per cent voted for Trump. See Christopher Caldwell, 'Trump's Voters Knew Who They Were Pulling the Lever For', *Weekly Standard*, 21 November 2016: essential reading.

close but shallow division, as in the days of Eisenhower and Kennedy—stands confirmed.³

3

Mike Davis has long perceptively spot-lit the tightening Republican grip on state-level politics, and this time pointed to the displacement of the party's wealthiest backers—overwhelmingly Trump-averse—from its Presidential candidate to the funding of its Congressional and gubernatorial races.⁴ With eerie dollar-per-vote accuracy, the result in 2016 was to mirror all but perfectly Clinton's advantage in the Presidential vote—Republicans taking the House with a margin of slightly over 3 million (since only a third of the Senate was up for grabs, its contests yielded no national total). This still reflected only a 51.3 per cent majority of ballots cast, in line with the even balance of electoral forces overall, albeit one that suggests a Republican candidate other than Trump might have defeated Clinton even more decisively. Consistent, however, ever since Dole took the Senate in hand back in 1993, has been the much greater discipline and dedication of Republican cadres, forming something closer to what was once the European model of a political party than anything the bedraggled Democrats have been able to muster: an achievement all the more remarkable in a period when of the two parties, it is the Republicans who have become more ideologically divided. Moreover, as Davis has again underlined, dominance at state-level, unlike at Presidential level, is self-consolidating, as the ratchet effect of re-districting by state legislatures locks in partisan advantages for a long run. The current effect of this organizational superiority has been to give the Republicans control of the Presidency, Senate and House—though not the filibuster-proof supermajority in the Senate Obama enjoyed in 2009–10.

Looking at the 2016 results as a whole, for executive and legislature alike, it would be logical to conclude that Republican capture of the White House was always likely, if in the event the outcome was bent by a double, self-cancelling contingency: a GOP candidate of unprecedented

³ *The Second Civil War*, New York 2007, pp. 17–19 ff.

⁴ See 'The Last White Election?', *NLR* 79, Jan–Feb 2013, pp. 46–52, and 'The Great God Trump and the White Working Class', forthcoming in *Catalyst*.

background and character, performing worse than a regular would have done, narrowly overcoming a compromised and incompetent Democratic candidate, falling still shorter of a normal baseline. That equation ignores, however, the large supervenient factor of an outgoing President basking in levels of popularity rivalling Reagan's, and—unlike Reagan—campaigning ardently for his former colleague and successor-to-be. Why did this famous vote-getter not tip the scales? Obama's support was unstinting, and ought in theory to have been decisive. Yet it was unavailing. Even in the black community, not enough were moved to go to the polls. That does not mean Obama's contribution to the result was nil. The country that elected Trump was the one he had ruled for eight years, and which, according to virtually unanimous mainstream opinion, had been fortunate in possessing such a leader. What, by the end, did the sum of his Presidency then look like?

4

The impact of Obama's tenure can be looked at in three ways: as an agency of change at home; as a force of intervention abroad; and as a style of rule at large. Taking the first, what is the balance-sheet? Economically, a budgetary stimulus relayed by abundant quantitative easing and record-low interest rates pulled the US out of recession, gradually reducing official unemployment and generating weak—but still better than any European or Japanese—growth. Banks were bailed out, no reliefs extended to under-water mortgages, criminal executives left unpunished, and the workforce participation ratio sank still further, while the top 1 per cent of the population became proportionately even richer. Since there was no change at the Fed, and this course was already set in the last phase of the Bush Administration, not a great deal in this crisis-management was distinctive under Obama. By and large a defensive holding operation, it left the underlying impasse of the regime of accumulation in place since the eighties—declining productivity growth, long-term wage stagnation, deepening inequality, regional de-industrialization—essentially unaltered.⁵

Socially, the principal legislative achievement of the Presidency was the Affordable Care Act, which extended medical coverage to about 20

⁵ For the pattern and its inflexions: 'Homeland', NLR 81, May–June 2013, pp. 9–17.

million Americans, while leaving larger numbers—28 million—still uninsured. The limits of this improvement, and the opaque complexity of its machinery, have meant that what ought to have been the Democrats' main claim to social progress won so little popular support that it was shunned by many, perhaps most, of their candidates for office in 2016. Minorities benefited most from the Act, but a third even of them reported a negative experience of it. Among working-class whites, fewer than one out of eight had a positive opinion of its impact.⁶ The parameters of the distribution of health-care changed more than those of national income. But a market-driven system unique in the West, bloated in costs and meagre in coverage, remains structurally unaltered. Under it, also unique in the West, mortality rates among working-class whites—'despair deaths' from drugs or suicide, typically under conditions of financial pressure—have continued to rise.

Ecologically, unable to pass a market-friendly sale of licences to pollute through Congress, Obama fell back on a patchwork of executive regulation, to little effect, and a climate change accord in Paris that, like its predecessor at Kyoto, lacks an enforcement mechanism. Unable, too—like Bush—to get immigration reform through Congress, he sought by executive fiat to suspend expulsion of one past cohort of minors, a move blocked in the judiciary, while deporting some 2.5 million other illegals from the country, more than any other President in history. Racially, was there any significant improvement in conditions of Afro-American life? Certainly not in treatment by the police: black riots in response to shootings marked Obama's tenure, not his predecessor's. Economically, towards the end of his spell in office, the net wealth of median white households was thirteen times that of black, and nearly half of black assets had vanished.⁷ Did Black Lives Matter receive anything more than grudging expressions of sympathy from the White House? Delegates were told to be thankful for the privilege of an audience: after all, he reminded them, 'you are sitting in the Oval Office, speaking to the President of the United States'.⁸

⁶ Ronald Brownstein, 'A Cultural Divide on Obamacare', *Los Angeles Times*, 6 January 2017.

⁷ *Economist*, 24 December 2016; Signe-Mary McKernan et al., 'Impact of the Great Recession and Beyond: Disparities in Wealth Building by Generation and Race', Urban Institute, April 2014, pp. 2, 18.

⁸ Julie Hirschfeld Davis, 'How the Presidency Changed Obama', *New York Times*, 17 January 2017.

The contrast with Same Sex Marriage speaks for itself. There the Obama White House was flood-lit in rainbow colours, with much talk of historic progress, for a far smaller, but on average much richer, minority of the population, in a cause that (*vide* likewise Hollande or Cameron) is economically and socially costless, involving no loss to anyone.⁹ As for civil rights in any wider sense, Obama presided over the largest domestic (and, of course, foreign) surveillance programme in history, granted immunity to torturers while meting out savage punishment to whistle-blowers, eradicated Americans abroad without due process, and made a mockery of the War Powers Act. Constitutionally, the legislature was by-passed with a mass of *ultra vires* directives, even legal friends of the Administration complaining of Obama's way with presidential powers.¹⁰

5

Admirers of Obama excuse the domestic failure of his Presidency to represent anything like an 'audacity of hope' on the grounds of Republican obstruction in Congress. Abroad, the executive is essentially untrammelled. Predictably enough, like most of his predecessors since 1945—Johnson and Reagan were the exceptions—Obama was more consequential as a guardian of empire overseas than as agent of change at home, though it would be difficult to guess this from the tenor of liberal and most left discussion of it in the United States.¹¹ There his record falls into two major departments—operations in the Muslim

⁹ A potential political cost did exist, which deterred Obama from backing Same Sex Marriage through most of his first tenure, until chivvied by Biden in the run-up to his second. The LGBT community is reckoned to be about 3.8 per cent of the population; African-Americans amount to 13.2 per cent. There are nineteen LGBT billionaires, and one African-American—Oprah Winfrey.

¹⁰ See Garrett Epps, 'Obama Leaves the Constitution Weaker than He Found It', *The Atlantic*, 3 January 2017: 'Even for those like me who admire Barack Obama, the record is disturbingly mixed.' Lawrence Tribe of Harvard, counsel for Gore in the dispute over ballots in Florida of 2000, was blunter, remarking of Obama's energy regulation: 'He burnt the Constitution.'

¹¹ *Jacobin*, the outstanding periodical of America's newest left, published on 20 January 2017 a symposium, 'Assessing Obama', in which eleven contributors weighed up the record of the Administration across every aspect of it, save his handling of the economy and the Constitution, with a consistently well-informed and level-headed sobriety. The section on foreign policy, critical but essentially confined to the Middle East, comprised just 6 per cent of its collective attention.

world, and dealings with Russia and China (with Europe and Japan as respective helpmeets).

In the Muslim world, Obama inherited two declared wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and two undeclared wars, in Pakistan and Somalia. By the end of his second mandate, he had added three more. Of those he inherited, in Iraq Bush had signed an agreement with Maliki for withdrawal of all US troops by the end of December 2011. Three years later, as the deadline neared, the Obama Administration sought to revise this for continued stationing of an American military force in the country, but was unable to secure the immunity for its soldiers from criminal prosecution in Iraq on which it insisted. So withdrawal had to go ahead, only to be reversed two years later when Obama removed Maliki, dispatching bombers, missiles and—in undisclosed numbers—ground troops for a second war, this time against the ISIS threat to his replacement in Baghdad. In Afghanistan, Obama had trebled the size of the American army of occupation by the end of his first term, and by the end of his second, installed a Made-in-USA government like its counterpart in Baghdad, to be protected indefinitely by a force of praetorians from the Pentagon. In Pakistan, Obama escalated military strikes with a steep increase in the use of drone missiles to wipe out targets deemed hostile, with predictable civilian loss of life, while whisking CIA staff wanted for murder out of the country. In Somalia, where another customized government was set up, covert commando and drone strikes, assisted by a secret CIA base in Mogadishu, are routine, while AFRICOM has extended American military implantation across the continent, to some 49 out of 55 African countries.

Expanding this arc of operations, Obama launched an all-out aerial attack in Libya to overthrow the Gaddafi regime, plunging the country into such chaos that, five years later, not even a standard play-set of marionettes could be assembled to run the show. In Syria, he armed, trained and funded insurgents, relying on Saudi Arabia and Qatar to furnish them with heavier weapons and more money, in a bid to bring down the Assad regime, in the process fanning a civil war that has left half a million dead and five million displaced, without succeeding in dislodging his target. In Yemen, he supplied the weapons, guidance and strategic cover for a Saudi-Emirati bombing campaign that has reduced the country and its people to ruins, with a callousness that caused even his habitual barkers at the *New York Times* to flinch.

Nowhere has what Roger Hodge called ‘the mendacity of hope’ been more brazen than in these actions, Obama promising that his Libyan blitz would be just humanitarian assistance, ‘not regime change’, and that he was ‘proud of his decision’ not to launch a similar blitz on Syria, from which he was stayed only by the opposition of the British parliament and Congress. Elsewhere, arms and money have flowed to an Egyptian regime little different from the Syrian, simply more pro-Western; while Israel has received the largest military aid package in its history. In the imperial repertoire, a preference for air war, proxies and special forces rather than ground troops is no novelty: it was Nixon who introduced the type of ‘Vietnamization’ under way in Kabul and elsewhere. None of Obama’s seven wars have been won, in the sense of achieving a peace, though also none have been lost (as yet: the upshots in Afghanistan and Syria remain to be seen). One major success was registered. Concerted cyberwarfare, covert assassination and economic strangulation forced the clerical rulers of Iran to submit to an American diktat safeguarding the Israeli nuclear monopoly in the Middle East,¹² even if this has not been followed—as hoped—by cooperation from Teheran in putting an end to Assad.

6

Inheriting the arrival of a conciliatory Russian counterpart in Medvedev, and the second term of the low-key Hu–Wen regime in China, how did Obama handle America’s relations with its two former Cold War foes? After intervening in Kiev to set up a government to US specifications, he imposed sanctions on Moscow for responding with a recovery of the Crimea, dragooning Europe behind him, and bringing Western relations with Moscow to a post-Cold War low—so far with little to show for it, other than Russian blow-back in Syria, signs of increasing unease in Europe, and a trillion dollar ‘modernization’ of the American nuclear arsenal to come. In the Far East, the Administration worked to force out Yukio Hatoyama, the only Japanese premier to question the US military grip on Okinawa, and sought to isolate the PRC by rounding up Japan, the ROK and ASEAN for a Pacific trade pact excluding China, whose commercial prospectus was always subordinate to its strategic

¹² Backed by threat of military attack. In the spring of 2016, Obama reiterated that he had been quite prepared to launch a preventive strike against Iran if it failed to do his nuclear bidding. See his assurance to Jeffrey Goldberg, ‘The Obama Doctrine’, *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

purpose—seventeen illustrious retired admirals, generals and former defense secretaries signing a letter to Congress declaring it vital to ‘national security’.¹³ The scheme fell apart as Obama’s tenure petered out, leaving Washington–Beijing relations in neutral at the end of it. In the dying months of his rule, when there was no longer any political cost to him, diplomatic relations were restored with Havana and a UN motion condemning Israeli settlements awarded an abstention: departing gestures designed to gild his memory, along with holding hands in Hiroshima and dancing the tango in Buenos Aires. The embargo on Cuba and the US carceral base in Guantánamo remain.

7

Overall, Obama’s performance in office looks like most American presidencies since Reagan, not altering all that much at home while pressing ahead with imperial tasks abroad—in effect, a largely conventional stewardship of neo-liberal capitalism and military-diplomatic expansionism. No new direction for either society or empire emerged under him. Obama’s rule was in this sense essentially stand-pat: business as usual. On another plane, however, his tenure was innovative. For he is the first celebrity President—that is, a politician whose very appearance was a sensation, from the earliest days of his quest for the Democratic nomination onwards: to be other than purely white, as well as good-looking and mellifluous, sufficed for that. Catapulted into the White House on colour charisma and economic crisis, and commanding the first congressional supermajority since Carter, Obama in office continued to be an accomplished vote-winner and champion money-raiser. But celebrity is not leadership, and is not transferrable. The personality it projects allows no diffusion. Of its nature, it requires a certain isolation. Obama, relishing his aura and aware of the risks of diluting it, made little attempt to mobilize the populace who cast their ballots for him, and reserved the largesse showered on him by big money for further acclamation at the polls. What mattered was his personal popularity. His party hardly counted, and his policies had little political carry-through.

¹³ To contain China, administration officials were also hoping to install an American base in Vietnam: for this, see too Goldberg, ‘The Obama Doctrine’. Obama’s 2011 ‘pivot to Asia’ foresaw 60 per cent of US air and naval assets transferred to the Asia-Pacific region. ‘Close reconnaissance’ surveillance patrols around China’s border by US ships and aircraft rose from 200 in 2009 to 1,200 in 2014.

The result was a debacle at each mid-term election. By the end of his rule, Obama's personal approval ratings were touching 60 per cent, while the Democratic Party had lost close to 1,000 seats in legislatures across the country, was down to 18 governorships and 12 state houses out of 50, and in public opinion the Affordable Care Act was more albatross than catnip. Celebrity dazzled, but didn't convert. To keep it intact, Obama shunned press conferences where he might be challenged, preferring instead to commune with obsequious talk-show hosts, confide to a circle of chosen sycophants in print (Goldberg, Remnick, Wenner and company—see box overleaf) and surround himself with star-dust from the pop charts on state occasions. In this universe, the most important official in the White House became Obama's ghost-writer, the first in American history to be promoted straight from boiler-plate to bombardier as Deputy National Security Advisor.

8

With the end of his Presidency in sight, homages came thick and fast across the media. Leading the field, the *New York Times* published a series of six extended encomia, lavish visuals of the President adorning each—'The Regulator', 'The Threat to the Planet', 'Fractured World Tested the Hope of a Young President', 'Finding His Voice on Race', 'The Health-Care Revolution', 'A Changed Man'—followed by full-dress *Sunday Review* treatment of 'The Obama Years', topped off with an affecting study of 'How Reading Nourished Obama in Office'.¹⁴ Little of empirical substance was to be found in any of these. Their most significant contribution, signalled in the title of the third, was to add to the standard case that Obama had been frustrated from still greater achievements at home by obstruction in Congress, the claim that noble aims abroad had likewise been thwarted by the recalcitrance of a backward and barbarous world, incapable of living up to his enlightened objectives.¹⁵ But for the most part, in keeping with the style of the ruler himself, the emphasis of a tidal

¹⁴ Sample nourishment: books 'gave him a renewed appreciation for the complexities and ambiguities of the human condition', Michiko Kakutani explained.

¹⁵ 'The arc of recent history did not bend towards Mr Obama's cosmopolitan vision of an interdependent world'—so 'despite the best of intentions', his 'enlightened cosmopolitanism increasingly looks like an anachronism': Adam Shatz, 'Obama vs. the World', *New York Times*, 15 January 2017. The one regrettable blemish on his record was a failure to intervene more robustly in Syria.

wave of threnodies fell elsewhere. Logically, their leitmotif was simply the luminous sheen of the person, rather than anything he actually did. In the words of a Nobelist in the *Financial Times*—but the refrain, without its proviso, was all but universal—‘The man has a lot of class’, even if ‘he may not have been a very effective president’.¹⁶ An extended symposium in the *New Republic*—professors from Princeton and Harvard, writers from the *Nation* and Brookings—gives the note. A sample:

Question: *What did he do that’s going to survive?*

JAFFE (*Nation*): That’s such a hard question. After Trump, I think we’re going to look back at Obama and be like, ‘Oh, this was such a decent human being in the White House.’

GORDON-REED (*Harvard*): And no scandals.

JAFFE: Right! Even the people who are the angriest at Obama post pictures of him and his family on Facebook and go: ‘Look at how great they are.’

All of you have studied Obama closely over the years, and several of you are historians. Which presidents will history compare him to?

SULLIVAN (formerly *New Republic*): My heart has gone out to him so many times. I get emotional just thinking about what they did to this man. What a beautiful American. [*Begins to choke up*] . . . He means what America means, what it can mean—the dignity, the fusion of the races. He has a great temperament and great pragmatism, and he has great Midwestern decency. I’m in awe of this man. God bless him. I mean it. Thank you, Mr President.

How much responsibility do you think that he himself bears for creating the conditions that allowed Trump to get elected?

PAINTER (Princeton): I don’t think it has anything to do with him personally, except that he’s a black man. The election of Trump was a gut-level response to what many Americans interpreted as an insult eight years ago, and have been seething against ever since. The only way you can see Trump as somehow Obama’s fault is Obama’s very being. It’s ontological.

GORDON-REED: I agree with Nell. There’s nothing he could’ve done in this climate other than be somebody else.¹⁷

¹⁶ Angus Deaton, *Financial Times*, 22 December 2016.

¹⁷ ‘Beyond Hope: Taking the Long View’, *New Republic*, 13 December 2016.

A BOUQUET OF O-SCHLOCK

‘A leader of rare talents, anointed with his nation’s dreams.’

Economist, 22 December 2016

Jeffery Goldberg, ex-prison guard of the Israeli Defence Force, in his 17,000 word, multiple colour-photo hymn to the President, ‘The Obama Doctrine. How He’s Shaped the World’, *The Atlantic*, August 2016, ‘informed by our recent series of conversations, which took place in the Oval Office; over lunch in his dining room; aboard Air Force One; and in Kuala Lumpur during his most recent visit to Asia’:

He has a tragic realist’s understanding of sin, cowardice, and corruption, and a Hobbesian appreciation of how fear shapes human behaviour . . . who will hand to his successor a set of tools an accomplished assassin would envy . . . And yet he consistently, and with apparent sincerity, professes optimism that the world is bending toward justice . . . ‘I am very much the internationalist’, Obama said in a later conversation. ‘And I am also an idealist insofar as I believe that we should be promoting values, like democracy and human rights and norms and values, because not only do they serve our interests the more people adopt values that we share—in the same way that, economically, if people adopt rule of law and property rights and so forth, that is to our advantage—but because it makes the world a better place.’

David Remnick, ex-chronicler of Russia’s days of freedom under Yeltsin and Gaidar, in *The New Yorker*, 28 November 2016:

On the way out of the pavilion, Obama signed a few books, posed for some pictures, and seemed distinctly pleased with the way things were going. ‘I’m like Mick Jagger’, he said. ‘I’m old, I’m grey, but people still turn out.’ In the car, riding back to the Charlotte airport, Obama slumped in his seat and read a few e-mails on his phone. Then he brought up a video of the White House Halloween party . . . He never loses his capacity to be the scholar of his own predicament, a gently quizzical ethnographer of his own country, of its best and worst qualities . . . Here was the hopeful vision of diversity and dignity that Obama had made his own.

Jan Wenner, ex-ditcher of Hunter S. Thompson, in *Rolling Stone*, 26 November 2016:

Rolling Stone has had a wonderful relationship with Obama over the years. I first met him at the beginning of his 2008 campaign, when he came up to my office for dinner. We backed him when he was up and when he was down. He viewed Rolling Stone readers as part of his base. A year ago, we went to Alaska with him and toured the melting glaciers. With extraordinary pride, we watched him ride the wave of history . . . I had hoped to look back on what he had achieved over eight years and the issues that mattered the most to him and to the readers of Rolling Stone, hear his advice for Hillary and about the road ahead. It was to be the 'exit interview', his tenth cover for Rolling Stone, our fourth interview together.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, James Baldwin of the blogosphere, *The Atlantic*, January–February 2017:

On this crisp October night, everything felt inevitable and grand. There was a slight wind. It had been in the 80s for much of that week. Now, as the sun set, the season remembered its name. Women shivered in their cocktail dresses. Gentlemen chivalrously handed over their suit coats. But when Naomi Campbell strolled past the security pen in a sleeveless number, she seemed as invulnerable as ever. Cellphones were confiscated to prevent surreptitious recordings from leaking out . . . The Obamas are social with Beyoncé and Jay-Z. They hosted Chance the Rapper and Frank Ocean at a state dinner, and last year invited Swizz Beatz, Busta Rhymes, and Ludacris, among others, to discuss criminal-justice reform and other initiatives.

Michiko Kakutani, literary arbiter of the newspaper of record, *The New York Times*, 16 January 2017:

There is a clear, shining line connecting Lincoln and King, and President Obama . . . It's a vision of America as an unfinished project—a continuing, more-than-two-century journey to make the promises of the Declaration of Independence real for everyone—rooted both in Scripture and the possibility of redemption, and a more existential belief that we can continually remake ourselves . . . He had lunch last week with five novelists he admires—Dave Eggers, Mr Whitehead, Zadie Smith, Mr Diaz and Barbara Kingsolver. He not only talked with them about the political and media landscape, but also talked shop, asking how their book tours were going and remarking that he liked to write first drafts, long hand, on yellow legal pads.

It was just such a presidency that paved the way for another celebrity to capture the White House, paying still less attention to the party that was a vehicle for getting him there. Obama's share of responsibility in Trump's path to victory was not, of course, confined to this. It was he who made Clinton's wife his Secretary of State, without any need to do so other than to gratify the couple and their wealthy establishment backers, and he who appointed the DNC which laboured to ensure she was the Democratic candidate to succeed him. The notoriously damaged and unpopular second Clinton was his choice, foisted on primary voters reluctant from the beginning to accept her, and shielded by his Department of Justice from the penal consequences visited on the humblest of leakers in his Administration, unlike her acting for public-spirited reasons, not arrogant personal privilege. Finally and decisively, of course, it was his insensibility to growing popular distress—white and black—and collusion with the financial and commercial order responsible for it that created the conditions of a vehement political revolt against the establishment of which he had become so prized an ornament.¹⁸ Hopes that Obama would bring transformation with any ounce of audacity were always illusory. Fears that Trump will bring disaster with tons of bigotry and brutality may be more realistic, though they could prove exaggerated too. One thing, however, is clear: productive resistance to the second can have no truck with the cult of the first, which requires cold demolition.

IO

Trump's victory belongs, as generally noted, to a widespread pattern of populist reactions against the neo-liberal order regnant in the West since the eighties. Erupting later than in the Old World, the American outbreak—like the European—produced two versions, one on the right headed by Trump, the other on the left by Sanders. As for the most part in Europe too, the former has proved more powerful than

¹⁸ For a devastating frieze of the social conditions of the country as Obama left office, see the demographer Nicholas Eberstadt's bitter report, 'Our Miserable 21st Century', *Commentary*, 15 February 2017.

the latter.¹⁹ Distinctive in the US case is the scale of the success of an uninhibited populism of the right. In the last EU-wide election, the three highest scores of any anti-establishment party were around 25 per cent of the electorate, while across Western Europe, the average figure in national elections for all such—right and left—forces combined is about 15 per cent. So far only one such movement, Syriza, has ever formed a government, thanks to an artificial electoral premium, only to become an orthodox establishment party overnight. Trump's 46.5 per cent is a different order of magnitude. Acquired without any organizational build-up, it was possible because—unlike any comparable phenomenon in Europe—it was achieved through the capture of one of the two establishment parties themselves by an outsider to both of them. Trump was an independent in the mould of Ross Perot in 1992, seizing control of the Republican Party in a manner like that of a commercial take-over, deploying a rhetoric that was anathema to its traditional leadership and alien to its organizational cadre. But once he had gained its nomination, he reaped the advantages of entrenched partisan polarization and Republican discipline to scoop a victory still inconceivable in Europe.

II

In the Old World, the principal reason why populism of the right typically outpaces populism of the left is widespread fear of immigration; and the principal reason why this has not carried it to power is greater fear of economic retribution if the euro—detested as an instrument of austerity and loss of sovereignty though it may be—were not just denounced, as it is by populisms of the right and left alike, but actually discarded. In the UK alone, though nowhere near forming a government, a populism of the right did achieve, in the referendum on British membership of

¹⁹ The votes won by Trump and Sanders in their respective primary contests were close enough—14 million for the first, a little over 13 million for the second—for many Sanders supporters to feel their candidate could have done better than Clinton against Trump and defeated him, as indeed some opinion polls suggested during the primaries. This was a misreading of the balance of forces. As Judis has observed, in Colorado—a state Clinton won—single-payer health-care was rejected this November by 79 to 21 per cent in a referendum where Sanders campaigned for it.

the EU, a score exceeding even Trump's. The victory of Brexit, Trump announced from the start, was an inspiration for his own battle in the US. What light does it throw on the unexpected outcome of the election in 2016? Fear of mass immigration was whipped up relentlessly by the Leave campaign, as elsewhere in Europe. But in Britain too, xenophobia on its own is by no means enough to outweigh fear of economic meltdown. If the referendum on the EU had just been a contest between these two fears, as the political establishment sought to make it, Remain would have no doubt won by a handsome margin, as it did in the referendum on Scottish independence in 2014.

Over-determining the contest, however, were three further factors. After Maastricht, the British political class declined the straitjacket of the euro, only to pursue a native brand of neo-liberalism more drastic than any on the continent: first, the financialized hubris of New Labour, plunging Britain into banking crisis before any other country of Europe, then a Conservative-Liberal administration of a draconian austerity without any endogenous equal in the EU. Economically, the results of this combination stand alone. No other European country has been so dramatically polarized by region, between a bubble-enclosed, high-income metropolis in London and the south-east, and an impoverished, deindustrialized north and north-east: zones where voters could feel they had little to lose in voting for Leave, a more abstract prospect than ditching the euro, come what may to the City and foreign investment. Fear counted for less than despair.

Under the largely interchangeable Labour and Conservative regimes of the neo-liberal period, voters at the bottom end of the income pyramid deserted the polls in droves. But suddenly granted, for once, the chance of a real choice in a national referendum, they returned to them in force, voter participation in depressed regions jumping overnight, delivering their verdict on desolations of both. At the same time, no less important in the result, came the historical difference separating Britain from the continent. The country was not only for centuries an empire dwarfing any European rival, but one that unlike France, Germany, Italy or most of the rest of the continent, never suffered defeat, invasion or occupation in either World War. So expropriation of local powers by a bureaucracy in Belgium was bound to grate more severely than elsewhere: why should a state that twice saw off the might of Berlin submit to petty meddling from Luxemburg or Brussels? Issues of identity could more

readily trump issues of interest than in any other part of the EU. So the normal formula—fear of economic retribution outweighs fear of alien immigration—failed to function as elsewhere, bent out of shape by a combination of economic despair and national *amour-propre*.

In the United States, to these were added the native factor of race, as distinct from, and additional to, immigration. But otherwise, such were also the conditions in which a Republican candidate abhorrent to mainstream bipartisan opinion, making no attempt to conform to accepted codes of civil or political conduct, and disliked by many of those who actually voted for him, could appeal to enough disregarded rust-belt workers to win the Presidency. There as in Britain, faced with a leap in the dark, in de-industrialized proletarian regions desperation outweighed apprehension. There too, much more rawly and openly, immigrants were denounced and barriers—physical as well as procedural—against them demanded. Finally, and decisively, in this case empire was not a distant memory of the past but a vivid attribute of the present and natural claim on the future, felt as cast aside by those in power in the name of a globalization that spelt ruin for ordinary people and humiliation for their country.²⁰ Make America Great Again—prosperous in discarding the fetishes of free movement of goods and labour, and victorious in ignoring the trammels and pieties of multilateralism: Trump was not wrong to proclaim his triumph was Brexit writ large. But it was a much more spectacular revolt, since it was not confined to a single—for most people, entirely symbolic—issue, and was devoid of any layer of establishment respectability or editorial blessing. There was no American Gove or Johnson, nor any *Daily Mail* or *Sun*. Across the length and breadth of the land, just two newspapers of any local significance endorsed Trump. Neither was exactly a household name: the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* in Nevada, which he lost, and the *Florida Times-Union*, smaller than six other papers in a state that he won.

²⁰ 'Above all, Trump appeals to Americans afflicted by a not-inaccurate sense of comparative national decline', Benjamin Kunkel has written, in the most striking single analysis of the election and its background we have to date. 'For much of Trump's constituency, personal ageing has coincided with a loss of international stature for the country with which they identify, as well as the swift if incomplete erosion, within the US itself, of the caste status of whites. (You might say they are downwardly mobile in status more than income.) Trump's promise to reverse these developments possessed much of the fraudulent appeal of an elixir of youth': 'Celebrity Apprentice: Notes on the US Election', *Salvage*, no. 4, p. 65.

The Republican Party that Trump commandeered was one already increasingly divided, as its electoral base shifted downwards to white working-class voters, its evangelicals rose up against moral and multicultural laxities, its tax activists agitated for ever smaller government, and its financial and industrial elites split along ideological and regional lines. This was the landscape of *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, the Family Research Council, the Tea Party, Koch and Adelson or latterly Mercer, alongside the *Wall Street Journal* and the *National Review*, the Cato Institute and Romney. The party had become a paradox: more externally disciplined than the Democrats, yet more internally polarized. The toppling of its House leader Eric Cantor, a die-hard foe of social expenditure of any kind, by an obscure militant in his electoral district has had no Democratic counterpart; nor, on the other hand, the capacity of evangelicals to rally *en masse* to a creature as blatantly anomic as the lord of Miss Universe and the Taj Mahal casino, not to speak of Hollywood videos and the like. Yet as a candidate, Trump broke virtually every policy taboo of even this Republican diversity, let alone of a mainstream consensus uniting both parties. On four issues, he defied everyone who counted politically: denouncing bipartisan hostility to Russia and dismissing NATO; repudiating (not quite so complete) bipartisan commitment to free trade; talking up the need for a massive infrastructure programme, implying deficitary spending (anathema to fiscal conservatives); and abandoning any verbal decorum or traditional circumlocution in calling for wholesale expulsion of illegal immigrants and the building of a Great Wall to keep out further arrivals. The anger with which this set of messages was met by neo-conservatives, the intellectual cutting-edge of the Republican establishment, matched if it did not actually exceed the outrage of Democrats, on both sides compounded by loathing of its carrier, expectorated as a disgrace to the nation.

Once installed as President, with no prior ties to the Republican party or political experience of any sort, Trump was virtually bound to put together a government at variance with most of what he said on the campaign trail, drawing on bankers and businessmen, generals and a couple of politicos of right-wing stamp, to produce a cabinet out of George Grosz.

His few intimates lurk in the background, within the White House or on the National Security Council. The incompatibilities between Trump and the party he shanghaied have been on display from the start. Before even their confirmation, his defence and foreign ministers were publicly contradicting him on the need for a swift understanding with Russia, the most incendiary of his themes, to which Washington as an imperial hub is most sensitive. Further along, conflicts over tariffs, deficits, health-care, are predictable. Immigration too, since unlike any European country, the US is historically a land of immigrants, where the kind of xenophobic backlash swelling in the EU and UK is off-set by a powerful ideology of welcome for newcomers, one that for equally historical reasons does not exist in Europe, as integral to, rather than a problem for, national identity. Passionate opposition to any all-out repression and expulsion of illegals has already sparked demonstrations in the streets and blockage in the courts, causing jumpiness in Republican ranks in Congress. The only domains in which there would appear to be a frictionless overlap between the President and his party are deregulation, where executive orders are already pouring forth, with legislative repeal of Dodd–Franks to follow, and judicial appointments, where unity over the Supreme Court is assured. Otherwise, even taxation, given talk of border adjustment charges, is proving contentious.

Overlaying these structural tensions, themselves disabling policy coherence, is the personal style, impulsive and erratic, of the tyro at the helm of the state, spreading disorder in the conduct of its affairs. To all appearances, an Ubu Roi has been let loose in the White House. Nowhere more so, given virtually complete executive leeway, than in dealings with the outside world. Looking forward to the break-up of the EU, moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, tearing up the submission of Iran, threatening to upgrade relations with Taiwan, hinting at termination of sanctions on Russia, publicly browbeating Mexico—is there any rhyme or reason in such reckless trashing of received Atlantic wisdom? Or is it, as every indication would suggest, all random bluster, as easily retracted as vented? Plainly, it is too soon to say. Could some reverse edition of Nixon's embrace of Beijing to put pressure on Moscow, an entente with Russia to squeeze China, so far the prime object of Presidential ire, yet emerge from the morass of ongoing confusions? The speed with which the security bureaucracy in Washington, with the press in full cry behind it, has moved to discredit any prospect of such a diplomatic somersault speaks for itself. Constitutionally, the power of the US Presidency in foreign

affairs has few legislative restraints. But its condition is hierarchical discipline in the executive itself. Once this is freely breached, as in the encirclement of the West Wing under way, autonomy contracts and policy tends to revert to autopilot. The only reliable assumption is that American greatness requires the American empire, for whatever occasional ends it sets itself and with whatever tactical means necessary to pursue them. Institutional continuity will inevitably enfold and undoubtedly enfeeble individual caprice.

14

Structural contradictions and personal instabilities, lack of policy coherence and absence of administrative competence, present obvious opportunities for a Democratic opposition that may have lost formal control of all three branches of government, but knows it possesses deep layers of loyalism in the federal bureaucracy, won a popular majority in elections for the executive in six out of the last seven contests, and could have taken the White House in 2016 with a smidgeon more tactical intelligence. Aware of the need to close ranks and reproduce something of Republican discipline, some in the party establishment could see that it would be unwise to provoke its Sanders constituency with another Clintonesque DNC, and were prepared to throw convivial sops to it, as the endorsements of Keith Ellison, a black Muslim, for chairman of the DNC by Senate majority leader Schumer and other bigwigs showed. But too few to stop another Obama apparatchik, his Secretary for Labour, being parachuted into the post.²¹ A consolation prize could still be graciously offered the loser: keeping those who disliked the Clintons onboard with a modicum of gestures, while pulling up the party's organizational socks,

²¹ In a trailer for operations to come, 'distaste for [Ellison's] approach and profile helped push former President Barack Obama to urge Perez into the race—and continue the support all the way through', purred an insider. 'He called DNC members himself, and had aides including confidante Valerie Jarrett, former political director David Simas and his White House director of political engagement Paulette Aniskoff working members by phone through the votes on Saturday afternoon': see *Politico*, 26 February 2017, while the *Los Angeles Times* noted that 'Perez was encouraged to run against Ellison by some Obama allies who stood to lose lucrative party contracts in a take-over by the Sanders faction'. In the same gathering of Democratic functionaries, 'delegates voted against reinstating a ban on corporate donations to the party'—Sanders supporters exploding in shouts of 'Party for the people, not big money!'.

is common sense for 2020. But given how narrowly the party lost in 2016 even with such a deficient candidate, and how brittle the incumbent regime looks, the same kind of common sense suggests that little more need be changed. Assuming that in the interim Trump, unable to deliver better jobs or faster growth, has stumbled all over the place, any half-way decent standard-bearer of a traditional stamp should be able to romp home. Such, at least, is the calculation of the Democratic establishment. Not all sympathizers agree. It underestimated Trump once; for some, it risks doing so again.

15

Where does this scene leave the left that has emerged in the US since 2011, and expanded to dramatic effect in the Sanders campaign of 2016? What is likely to be the impact on it of Trump's Presidency? In the first instance galvanizing, as resistance to the Administration broadens and deepens, putting mass demonstrations and militant actions back on the agenda, ensuring that the momentum of the Sanders experience does not fade, and offering freer space for a radicalization of political culture at large. Yet also ambiguous, since liberal opposition to the Republican regime has already reached such a pitch of intensity that it potentially renders all but invisible any demarcation from it by a left that has only just emerged into daylight as a modest critical mass. The cultural establishment of the country, beside itself with fury and disbelief at his victory, assails Trump day-in, day-out with a violence without precedent since Reconstruction. *The Second Civil War* was no more than a figurative title for the partisan polarization traced in Brownstein's fine book of 2007. *Mutatis mutandis*, his subject was scarcely even a Kansas-Nebraska. In the pages of the *New York Times* and its consorts, the atmosphere of 2017 is closer to Harper's Ferry. The hysteria of the Krugmans and Friedmans, not to speak of the Brookses and Cohens, may be mimicked but not outdone on the left. Trump serving as a common ogre, it risks being drowned in the *bien-pensant* tide.

Still, the galvanizing effect will be real. The particular question it poses is organizational as much as ideological. The framework of the Sanders insurgency was the Democratic Party, whose presidential nomination in the end it failed to capture. Does Trump's success in his parallel enterprise, from a position much more extraneous and alien to

Republican than Sanders to Democratic tradition, offer a model for victory next time, with a better and more radical candidate, and a stronger and more tested base? If a hostile take-over of one capitalist party from the right was possible, could the same be done to the other from the left? Couchéd in more roseate language, such has of course been the perennial hope of the greater part of the American left since the New Deal. Today, the hollowing out of the party form in the West makes abrupt twists of it, coming out of the blue, look more realistic: witness the Corbyn phenomenon in Britain. Critical, however, in the cases of both Sanders and Corbyn was the element of surprise: the Democratic and Labour apparatuses were caught off-guard by a radicalization neither they, nor anyone else, expected. In the US, the Democratic establishment will not be napping next time. In its eyes, any significant shift to the left would compromise the prospects of electoral revenge in 2020, and it will move to block it. In *Jacobin*, Seth Ackerman has proposed a one foot in, one foot out strategy for avoiding absorption or neutralization of radicals by the DNC: the creation of an independent socialist party at once supporting better candidates and causes in Democratic ranks, and where conditions are favourable, fielding its own candidates in Democratic primaries, or simply running them as independents.²² Whether such a strategy—in effect, Sanders-plus—is compatible with any chance of speaking the truth about the character of the Democratic Party, or must lead to the kind of soft-soap euphemisms ruinous to any radical politics, is plainly open to question.

16

There is a further, obvious obstacle to reconfiguring the Democrats with even the weakest ‘social’ and hyphen before their name. Standing in the way of that is not only the whole history of the party since the inception of the Cold War, and its contemporary machinery of billionaire donors and fixers, but its principal icon. Obama, still resident in Washington, will be active—behind the scenes or from a cloud above them—in lending the party he neglected in office suitable guidance and energy to ensure the Democrats remain a congenial, avowedly

²² ‘Blueprint for a New Party’, *Jacobin*, 8 November 2016, where Ackerman argues that Citizens United offers the possibility of overcoming traditional constraints on financing such a strategy.

middle-of-the-road vehicle for capital in 2020. He, not Trump, is likely to be the leading impediment to any expansion of a Sanders-plus insurgency uniting downwardly mobile millennials, hard-pressed workers and restive minorities on any more radical and genuinely internationalist platform of a sort that would merit the term left. Without keeping him steadily in its sights, there is small chance of that. Not only because of the position he will continue to enjoy within the party, but the legend that has accrued around him. The panegyrics of his departure, combined with the execration of his successor, risk a political padlock on anything better than what he supplied. The traditional reason always given for left accommodation to the DP was that it was a lesser evil. With Trump converted into evil of an unimaginable magnitude—fascism round the corner, if not already in charge—the halo around Obama annuls the argument: this is good against evil, pure and simple. How far this ideological effect reaches, and how long it persists, are beyond current calculation. But certainly, penitent nostalgia for a ruler criticized in power, now rued out of it, is liable to afflict much of the left for some time.

The best antidote to it can be found in a powerful retrospect of Obama's career by Aziz Rana in *n+1*, who writes:

At a moment when the country faced convulsive social crises, and more and more of his supporters called for a fundamental reconstruction of American institutions, Obama marshalled his personal story and oratorical gifts to defend hollow tenets: the righteousness of American primacy, the legitimacy of global market liberalism, the need for incremental reform, the danger of large-scale structural overhaul. The consequence—intensified by a virulent right—was that fundamental problems continued to fester and became harder to ignore: mass incarceration and structural racism, dramatic class disparities in power and opportunity, interventionism abroad, and national-security abuses at home.

Obama's domestic reforms 'all fell within the same philosophy that long informed the "American century": faith in markets and in technocratic and national security experts (despite the repeated and catastrophic failures of all three), and suspicion of politics formed through mass democratic mobilization'. In the end, 'Obama's most remarkable accomplishment therefore was not the achievement of any specific policy objective—the passage of the Affordable Care Act, the killing of Osama bin Laden—but the way he infused an exhausted American centrism with new energy

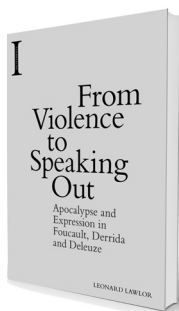
and attractiveness, coating a familiar brand of American liberalism with the sanctity and power of his own personal biography.²³

It is a telling verdict. But in concluding that ‘the Obama era feels increasingly like the last days of a now moribund centrism’, and ‘as he leaves office, Obama’s inadvertent legacy has been to help bring back the very American radicalism he once rejected’, it risks taking a wish for a fact. American centrism is far from its death-bed: to believe otherwise is to prolong its life-span even further. There is no hint of exhaustion in the ferocity of its siege of Trump, and little probability that the legacy it is busy consecrating will have anything to do, even inadvertently, with a vigorous radicalism, rather than perpetuating a devout conformism. In such conditions a clean break is required with celebrity culture and its fixation on the alternative political incarnations of it. Writing before the election, Benjamin Kunkel observed of Clinton’s outlook: ‘Trump himself became the national emergency, rather than the stagnation, inequality and perceived decline that made Trump and Bernie plausible candidates in the first place.’ *A fortiori* today.

²³ ‘Decolonizing Obama’, *n+1*, 27, Winter 2017, pp. 22, 27. As sanctity implies, less biography than hagiography: for the privileged realities of Obama’s Hawaiian jump-start to success, see ‘Homeland’, p. 19.

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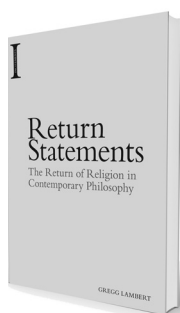
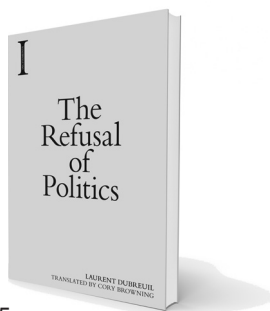
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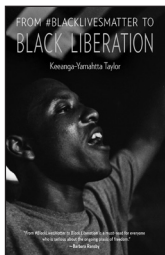
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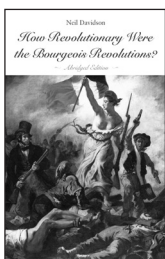


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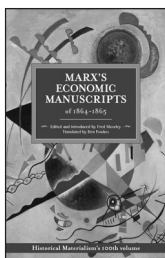


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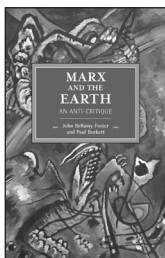
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