

PARANOIA AND DELUSION

OLIVIER JUTEL LIBERALISM'S DESCENT INTO COLD WAR FANTASIES

The sense that one's time is inferior to what has preceded it is a lament that propels history and allows one to vicariously experience past glories. As Marx wrote in his essay 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon', we 'anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language.'

In this centenary of the October Revolution, gesturing towards the ideal of communism runs the gamut from dank memes and internecine online struggles to the odd meeting (or, futilely, writing and reading Lacanian Marxist tracts about the necessity of a Leninist party). In these efforts, it's hard not to feel hapless conspirators in the stupidity of a post-ideological age, one in equal parts risible and perilous. And yet, in 2017, 'Russia' – as a metonym for both communism and a

range of contradictory evils – is once more at the centre of American liberal consciousness as an existential threat to all that is holy.

The election of Donald Trump is a catastrophe that no accelerationist hypothesis can justify. The principle of internationalism, neoliberal or otherwise, has been dealt a devastating blow at a time when the world faces spiralling climate and migration crises. Domestically, he has mobilised, however chaotically, the most retrograde forces in American society, who experience through him a carnivalesque transgression in ‘Making America Great Again’ one tweet, post and triggered liberal at a time.

While Trump-cheering suburbanites may lack a Brownshirt discipline, reinvigorated domestic forces of repression – from the police to Homeland Security agency ICE – give his fascism some legs. Events in Charlottesville and the pardoning of Joe Arpaio underline the empowerment of ethno-nationalists and Trump’s willingness to incite violence when his back is against the wall. Trump is useful in demonstrating the libidinal truth of the conservative movement: a desire to wield an oligarchic power as part of an exceptional group licensed to lash out at their enemies, whether they be minorities, feminists, migrants or the left. Trump has no particular political talent other than to act as a pure medium for these unrestrained conservative pathologies; as such, he offers the left our historic moment.

At this juncture, it would seem that some version of ‘socialism or barbarism’ would be the undeniable political calculus. Instead, the left has been thwarted by a liberalism more invested in preserving its fantasies and nightmares than confronting a responsibility to history. A resistance of sorts has been born, but one that reveals the libidinal deadlock between liberalism and its enemy. For the American liberal, Trump’s election has universalised a struggle between

educated, science-loving, progressive technocrats and all of the beasts of base political passion – from populists, fascists and the alt-right to social democrats, self-described ‘dirt-bag leftists’, antifa and communists. Nothing best captures this fallacious political division than the coinage ‘alt-left’ used by liberals and Trump alike to render socialism analogous to fascism. Against these imagined political forces liberals cling to the fantasy of rational compromise and adorn themselves with the moniker ‘the resistance’ as exercises in negative identity only made meaningful by the urgent threat of Trump as an unprecedented evil.

The impossibility of Trump, realised by staggering liberal political incompetence, doesn’t simply torment those of a liberal persuasion, but engenders a neurosis in which the ghosts of history return as a form of fetishistic disavowal necessary to protect liberals from their own culpability. And so, in these stupid times, we have a legion of super-libs crafting their Edward R Murrow affectations in the service of a new Red Scare.

THE CRISIS

Conversations about liberalism inevitably run into the trouble of the unique deployment of the term in the American context; namely, that, in the absence of a US labour party, ‘liberalism’ and ‘the Left’ have generally been conflated. This confusion indulges the fantasies of the current crop of Democrats who see themselves as the inheritors of progressive Left struggle while effacing the contribution of radicals, communists, populists and social democrats. In this liberal universalism, the values of merit, process and markets are seen as the driving forces of history and progress. While the liberal pursuit of equality before the law has been key to past struggles, in the aftermath of the 2016 Democratic presidential primaries we can now observe a clear distinction between these forces and a

youthful, diverse left – one that antagonistically demands the use of state power in the economic sphere for socially just ends. Yet a liberal ideological stagnation persists, as if appeals to Republicans’ patriotic decency, instead of an antagonistic left-wing response, will suffice in this moment. In this sense, they embody Michael Kazin’s maxim that America is both ‘the most idealistic and the most conservative nation on earth’. This American exceptionalism engenders stasis, reaction and a uniquely paranoid style, treating its institutions and norms as immutably sacred and its challengers as alien and subversive.

At present, American liberalism is in a crisis approaching psychosis, both racked by nightmares and incapable of absorbing fundamental political lessons. Lacanian psychoanalytic political theory is useful here in understanding liberal libidinal investments in an end-of-history post-politics.

For Lacan, identity and politics are cut through with antagonism, trauma and the quest for lost enjoyment. There is a fundamental lack in identity analogous to symbolic castration – we have been torn from some primordial unity that we are driven to reclaim. Fascism is thus a pure politics of the libidinal, as its subject fully identifies with, say, American or German ‘greatness’ as a reconciled whole threatened by a parasitic enemy.

However, this concept of lack need not confine us to the mother and breast analogy; consider the historical lament at the heart of the triumphant significance of October 1917. The desire to recapture that sublime revolutionary essence has driven past Left movements in their hope of creating a new world, without any guarantees of success. The Left-universalist negotiation of the libidinal is to make an antagonistic ethico-political gamble towards emancipation by dividing the social space, as in the rhetoric of ‘the 1%’ versus ‘the 99%’. While this negation is a wager that

has led to all of the deadlocks in twentieth-century left-wing thought, it is still essential in the face of fascism or the liberal substitution of procedure for politics.

Liberalism turns its disavowal of antagonism, passion and the political into an identity; thus, its appeals to rationalism, consensus, civility and process as ends in themselves is a hyperactivity aimed at covering over this lack. The liberal approach to politics – 2000 page bills, means-tested government benefits, concern for ‘the discourse’, data fetishism, scientism and the reverence for wonks – provides a libidinal release by solidifying an otherwise unstable identity. The displacement of politics creates a drive in place of a political identity proper and a negative dependence upon the political forces it claims to transcend; as such, the libidinal reward of post-politics is a cynical knowingness, one that understands how politics ‘really works’ and wields a wonksplaining cultural superiority over those lost to ideology.

The disaster of Trump is a precise rendering of the nightmare that crawls out of the void of liberal political identity. The Clinton campaign was entirely dependent on the spectre of Trump for a sense of meaning. Clinton enthusiasts wrote that ‘Liberals should be rooting for Trump’, while the campaign engaged in the ‘Pied Piper’ strategy of elevating Trump in order to stage a defence of liberal values as well as to rally supposedly noble moderate Republicans (who, it turned out, didn’t exist). Trump’s professed solidarity with people’s anger and promise of transgressive enjoyment were far more effective than any appeal to our better nature in the service of Clinton’s historic ambitions. The inner working of the campaign, detailed in Jonathan Allen and Amie Parnes’ journalistic account *Shattered: Inside Hillary Clinton’s Doomed Campaign*, revealed this crisis of vacuity, with Clinton regularly lashing out at staff for failing to craft her message – in what was, according

to a Wesleyan Media Project study, the least policy-driven run for the White House in the last four cycles. Likewise, her party's latest attempts at acknowledging the pain of workers merely rehearses the Third Way palliative of business tax breaks for worker retraining with a tortured slogan: 'A Better Deal: Better Skills, Better Jobs, Better Wages'.

In reality, the liberal resistance is incapable of making an ethico-political delineation that confronts its class interests, and so must construct a non-political division of the smart versus the duped or the patriotic versus the subversive.

THE RUSSIA PANIC

But what happens when the processes and redemptive institutions lauded above all else produce the monstrosity of this moment? It's not simply a political crisis, but rather the collapse of the liberal symbolic universe, in which the educated, tech-savvy and data-informed 'geniuses' are revealed to be fools ruled by their irrational investments. In Foucauldian terms, the liberal technocratic regime of truth, with its recourse to 'facts' as a mechanism of cultural and political validation, has collapsed.

For Clinton – a deeply flawed, passionless candidate with a unique ability to both misread and condescend to the electorate – there could only be one narrative to preserve a sense of history thwarted: Russian subversion. The overwhelming liberal response to this trauma has been one of complete fetishistic disavowal: 'I know very well we lost an unlosable election, but nevertheless, Russia!' The failures are externalised, the identity is preserved and the hyperactive drive is deployed towards exposing a vast network of corrupting agents. And so an empire in search of an enemy and liberals looking to snuff out the remnants of history have stumbled across the eternal treachery of 'the Russian'.

In a truly horrifying turn, Washington spooks – with their impeccable anti-demo-

cratic bona fides in both the domestic and international arenas – have become lauded by liberals as a means to reconstitute their regime of truth. And so James Comey has been rehabilitated by Clintonites, while liberal pundits like James Wolcott are openly cheering 'Go [Deep] State, Go!'

If one needed an example of how the affectation of expertise can function to negate a deep psychic crisis, then the rise of the 'Russia expert' is illustrative. It's unsurprising that Twitter cranks exist, casting their internal paranoias as matters of global intrigue, but it speaks to the collective crises of liberal identity when these ravings and transparent forgeries are lauded as 'The New Federalist Papers', published in *The New York Times* and promoted by Democratic Party leaders. Richard Hofstadter described the American paranoid style as intensely rationalistic, wherein elaborate information ecosystems feed a conspiratorial drive to plumb the depths of the enemy's depravity. The intellectual resources of lib-wonkery have been deployed with a near singular focus on The Russia Question. The grandiloquence of Rachel Maddow and Keith Olbermann has been used in pursuit of endless scenarios of subversion. Folks at home can play along too, in what is a crowd-sourced Red Scare eliciting a liberal libidinal drive in the name of 'resistance'. As a recent *BuzzFeed* headline described, 'I'm One Of The People Investigating Trump On Twitter. You Should Work With Us, Not Mock Us.' On Twitter, a simple reference to loose constructs such as 'kompromat', 'dezinformatsiya' or 'active measures' is all that is necessary to denounce your enemy as fifth columnists, communists or Bernie-Bro dupes.

All of this would be humorous if it were not for the liberal war rhetoric and calls from Clintonites to 'blow up the KGB', which at least would have the upside of inventing time travel.

The substance of the Russia story is secondary to the role it plays in preventing a radi-

cal confrontation with the lack at the heart of the liberal political identity. The irrationality of the investment in the Russian enemy should be self-evident on its face: the world's most powerful empire has apparently been brought to its knees by a decaying second-rate power reconstituted from the dustbin of history.

It is useful to ask just what a communist or a Russian is in the current liberal imaginary. There is no ideological content in the designation; it simply denotes an agent of corruption, subversion and transgression. Here we are confronted with what Slavoj Žižek calls the Other as agent of jouissance, whose desire is ceaseless and contingent upon the theft of our own 'social jouissance' (that is, our essence or 'greatness').

Mark Ames' recent profile of former US senator and culture warrior Jeremiah Denton in *Naked Capitalism* makes clear that this paranoid politics is based on a libidinally potent and reprobate foreign enemy. So, while conservatives like Denton saw sexual liberation as a communist plot, liberals in our present moment are haunted by the enjoyment of Putin and the servile Trump. With every policy debate, liberals are racked by the notion that Putin is 'enjoying' their demise, as if he were Heath Ledger's joker, with no particular agenda other than to collapse the liberal order through agents as diverse as Trump, UKIP, Marine Le Pen and even American opposition figures such as Jill Stein and Bernie Sanders. The nature of Russian treachery has been endlessly pathologised in a manner analogous to antisemitic conspiracy theories. Former NSA director James Clapper has suggested that Russians are 'genetically driven to co-opt, penetrate, gain favor'; while, in *The New York Times*, Russian history professor Michael Khodarkovsky has described Vladimir Putin as a gleeful synthesis of Joseph Goebbels and a timeless Russian perfidiousness that can supposedly be traced from the Tsar's creation of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to commu-

nist disinformation and today's 'fake news'.

In this libidinal politics, liberals are caught between the terror of a potent Putin, whom their neuroses have overdetermined, and Trump, the perverted subject of enjoyment worthy of derision. In this case, Trump *really* is a sexual predator and agent of jouissance, whose success owes to engendering a public identification with his gaudy lifestyle, vulgarity and corruption. However, rather than understanding the necessity of fostering an antagonistic political division aimed at undercutting Trump's libidinal appeals, liberals choose to derive pleasure from him instead. The humiliation of losing to a truly contemptible incompetent is dissipated by the enjoyment of late night comedy. What started with #Drumpf has seen *Saturday Night Live* and political comedy drawn into the ranks of the resistance. As *Chapo Trap House's* Matt Christman has observed, comedians are the liberal troops wielding the powers of humiliation and evisceration – which is to say, very little power at all.

The libidinal deadlock of politics as comedy manifests itself in the bizarre fixation on portraying Trump as a sexual deviant. From Fiona Apple's 'Tiny Hands' anthem, and *The New York Times* observing that he is Olivia Newton-John in *Grease* to Putin's John Travolta, to the endless homophobic references to knee pads, there is a collapsing of a cultural superiority and enjoyment with a view of the enemy as a perverse foreign agent within the body politic.

It's in this way that the Steele Dossier and the alleged 'Pee Tape', a involving Trump and sex workers in a hotel room, are perfect. They offer both endless memes and enjoyment while solidifying the liberal conception of Trump as a depraved enemy. Trump is both driven to obscenity and fetishism by his wild insecurity in the shadow of the liberal hero Barack Obama (whose own legacy has been undone in a matter of months), which in turn makes him politically and sexually

dominated by Putin. It is worth remembering with this piece of opposition research that human intelligence is rarely this precise and perfectly aligned with one's political and libidinal fantasies. Steele's report is telling a different kind of truth here.

THE HACK

As a world historical event, the Trump and Putin affair lacks the grandiosity the liberal resistance would give it. It is hard not to be struck by the stupidity of the actors involved in a larger conspiracy of criminal and political incompetence. We have the tale of two rival heirs and 'good boys', the cretinous Donald Trump Jr and the son-in-law he pays second fiddle to, Jared Kushner, whose entry into Harvard is rumoured to have been secured only by his father's \$2.5 million donation.

The dastardly Russians include carnie Rob Goldstone, promising documents from Russia's 'crown prosecutor' Natalia Veselnitskaya, a freelancing Linda Litzke (*Burn after Reading*) figure profiting from the stupidity and hysteria of it all. Not to be outdone, the Democrats have also contributed some wonderful *Thick of It*-esque characters to this farce. Clinton campaign chair John Podesta, given the task of managing the chaotic power struggles between Clintonland and the party now sits atop the 'Pizzagate' conspiracy all because of his inability to identify a standard spear-phish email. This is made all the more painful by his previous role on Obama's White House cyber policy team.

The Russia panic works, as we've seen, in a libidinal sense, but also to cover up inexcusable political failures. None is greater than the Clinton data guru and wunderkind Robby Mook, who epitomised the campaign's 'no yard signs' heartlessness and its 'smart', economising strategy of not venturing outside the cities or spending big in Michigan and Wisconsin. Defiant in his failure, Mook is currently working on a bipartisan, Facebook-

funded project at Harvard to 'defend digital democracy' from hackers and fake news.

The concept of hacking has been asked to do an awful lot of work here – perhaps unsurprisingly so, in the context of a Silicon Valley hegemony in which drinking juice is a 'life hack'. It indicates a liberal crisis of technocracy and data. Where Clinton stood for Silicon Valley boosterism and the promise of the internet as a space of discourse, economic opportunity and collaboration, Trump realised the libidinal logic of the online world. The utter chaos of his campaign and Clinton's massive spending advantage were overcome by channelling the online energies of conspiracy, free labour and the transgressive subcultures of the alt-right.

What of hacks that are actually hacks? The official and media narratives show a profound misrepresentation of cyber-warfare and the problems with the political economy and science of cyber-attribution. The DNC's firm of choice, CrowdStrike, is a national security contractor, involved in what journalist and former editor of *The eXile* Yasha Levine describes as a 'multibillion-dollar boondoggle, employing shoddy forensic techniques and politicized investigations'. With a founder who is a fellow at the neoconservative anti-Russian Atlantic Council, CrowdStrike has been afforded something approaching the power of the state to define this story. The FBI has relied exclusively on the firm, which has refused to hand over its servers, presumably as a matter of intellectual property.

The quality of the reporting itself has come under serious criticism. Claims that the attack used the same software signature of a GRU attack on the Ukraine military, have been rebuffed by the Ukrainians who say this attack never occurred. The attribution of the hack to the monikers 'Cozy Bear' and 'Fancy Bear' rests on an inverse forensics in which profiles are constructed and filled out with corroborating evidence pulled from a range

of dispersed attacks. One of the key claims of CrowdStrike was that the Bears operate within 9–5 Moscow time zone. It's a very Soviet bureaucratic image of hackers that conforms nicely to the interests of CrowdStrike's clients, the state and its own bottom line.

In July, the group Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, led by NSA whistleblower William Binney, published what has been described as an 'unassailable' case that DNC data was leaked not hacked. The public metadata reveals a transfer rate of 22.7 Mb per second, a speed double that of any potential remote hack.

It's not impossible that Russian state actors hacked the DNC. They have an increasing geopolitical ambition and the motivation, having been subjected to heavy-handed American interference since the collapse of the USSR. However, cyber-attribution is somewhere in the range of devilishly difficult to impossible, in large part because of sophisticated tools developed by the NSA's cyberwarfare unit itself. From Stuxnet to Vault 7, there has been a substantial proliferation of cyber-weapons developed by the US government for offensive ends that have fallen into the hands of rivals and non-state actors. Nevertheless, what has so far been presented as proof by the US intelligence community is ludicrous. Perhaps there is some more substantial evidence, but it suits the national security state's geopolitical purposes to sustain the panic. Meanwhile, we know from former NSA and CIA director Michael Hayden that the US has long had tens of thousands of implants on foreign computers; one of Obama's last actions in office was to authorise what the *Washington Post* has described as planting 'the digital equivalent of bombs' in Russian infrastructure.

The function of the current Russia panic is to monopolise the energies of resistance for a project restoring post-politics, liberal identity and American exceptionalism. However perverse, Trump has created a historical rupture

from which an unbridled xenophobia and politics of jouissance has emerged. The current resistance is incapable of fulfilling its historical obligations, as that would require formulating a politics of antagonism with emancipation and materialism at its heart, not simply feeding a libidinal, cynical knowingness.

Resisting Trump in the name of a real politics should be as easy as it would have been to beat him in the election. He lacks discipline, is incapable of governing and will break every populist promise he made on the issues of social security, infrastructure and jobs. Trump is a grotesque gangster-capitalist caricature, an image that has been politicised by the Russia investigation in the name of patriotism as opposed to any kind of anti-oligarchic politics. Resistance through impeachment alone allows liberals to elide a traumatic confrontation with their absent political core, while also empowering the FBI and surveillance state to protect the republic from all future threats – including, presumably, a social-democratic left. This politics of the void is the only thing that could possibly save Trump, furnishing him as it does with a righteous struggle against a reviled political class.

The impeachment of Richard Nixon had an enduring legacy not because of an elite heroism, but a real politics and movement that supported the roll-back of executive and government surveillance powers. If, on the other hand, the impeachment gambit is successful, it is likely to produce a natural alliance of neoliberal democrats and national security Republicans, strangling a fledgling Left and creating the potential for an even more embittered fascism. The pre-emptive calls for civil war on the far-right have already been made, while liberals condemn antifa and homeland security declares them domestic terrorists.

This is a historical disaster produced from a deep libidinal crisis in contemporary liberalism. It cannot help but reproduce its own nightmares.