

# Trumpism and the Dialectic of Neoliberal Reason

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Guided by the thesis that fascism was the outcome of a dialectic of instrumental reason, I argue that Trumpism is the result of a dialectic of neoliberal reason. The 2008 crisis revealed that widely distributed consumption could no longer be sustained through escalating debt, as it had been since neoliberalizing reforms in the 1970s. Economic crisis has been interpreted through a culture market in which pseudo-individual consumers choose what hyperreal public they prefer and participate in pseudo-activity through social media. Retreat into insular hyperrealities and hostility to dissonant alternatives reinforce each other in an escalating logic generating partisan incivility and fake news. The de-democratization of the state through subservience to private interests and political dysfunction has combined with the consumer's uncompromising mentality as a dissatisfied customer to channel politicization into populism. It aggregates negatively through shared dissatisfaction, driving escalating antagonism between technocratic responsibility and populist responsiveness. These escalating economic, cultural, and political contradictions heighten negative "freedom from" restraints while subverting positive "freedom to" relate meaningfully to the world. This intensifies anxieties and receptivity to authoritarianism as a self-defeating escape from neoliberal freedom. Trumpism exploits precarity, corrupts democratic norms, and licenses misdirected aggression. This neoliberal authoritarianism is inverted fascism. Trump's presidency is more effect than cause.

Unlike the usual advocate of social change, the agitator, while exploiting a state of discontent, does not try to define the nature of that discontent by means of rational concepts. Rather does he increase his audience's disorientation by destroying all rational guideposts and by proposing that they instead adopt seemingly spontaneous modes of behavior . . . The agitator does not spin his grumblings out of thin air [but from the] modern individual's sense of isolation, his so-called spiritual homelessness, his bewilderment in the face of the seemingly impersonal forces of which he feels himself a helpless victim . . . Even while he tells his listeners that they are a group of fools, the agitator lays claim to their confidence . . . His bad manners become a guarantee of his sincerity . . . One is tempted to say that the American agitation is a standardized and simplified version of the original Nazi or fascist appeal.<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

This portrait of the American agitator comes from *Prophets of Deceit*, written by Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman. The book was published in 1948 under the imprimatur of the *Studies in Prejudice* series, edited by Max Horkheimer, director of the Frankfurt School. Even a few years ago, their agitator might have sounded like an implausible caricature, and their analysis dated. But this character bears a startling resemblance to the sitting president of the United States. The specter of fascism seems reborn. There is a terrible seriousness to this farcical man and what he represents. We dare to utter the "F-word" without obviously falling into the specious *reductio ad Hitlerum*.

The Frankfurt School developed profound investigations into fascism that integrated analyses of political economy, culture, politics, and psychology. In their disciplinary breadth and intellectual depth, they offer insight and inspiration relevant for analysis of current affairs in the United States.<sup>2</sup> My argument reworks their core claim, developed in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that while "instrumental reason" was supposed to liberate humankind through mastery over nature, its development in fact made people increasingly into objects of social control and bureaucratic domination. At its climax, this led to subjugation to totalitarian power and genocidal aggression.<sup>3</sup> Guided by this bleak account of rationalization producing not liberation, but instead objectification, subjugation, and irrationality, I describe

a distinct and subsequent *dialectic of neoliberal reason*. It is also driven by an equation between a species of rationality and freedom. Neoliberal reason's imperial extension has provoked a cascade of escalating contradictions in political economy, culture, politics, and psychology. These contradictions give rise to Trumpism, which is the irrational outcome of this dialectic of neoliberal reason.

As I explain in the first section, neoliberalism is a governmental mode of reason that universalizes free competition as the norm of all social relations. It identifies rationality exclusively with market processes; instead of intervening directly in the economy, the juridical state actively maintains rules of competition. Neoliberal society is composed of economically rational enterprises, and the subjectivity of enterprising *homo economicus* is equated with human capital accumulated by investment choices. In the democracy of consumers, sovereignty is expressed through market choices.

The next two sections examine the neoliberalization of American political economy and culture. This has led away from the configurations of state capitalism and the culture industry that Frankfurt School thinkers had initially thought resembled fascism. But it has generated new contradictions and crisis tendencies. The second section begins by describing how rescue from the Great Depression initiated a novel social contract establishing terms of coexistence between capitalism and democracy. In exchange for a pacified citizenry and depoliticized regulatory authority, the state promised to sustain both capital accumulation and widely distributed consumption. Slowing growth and economic disturbances opened the door to neoliberal reason in the 1970s; capital accumulation was released from regulatory and redistributive restraints. To mitigate the inequality collateral to neoliberalism, the state bought time for the social contract by bolstering mass consumption through ever-deepening debt. The escalating disequilibrium of this system was unsustainable, and collapsed with the 2008 crisis. The ensuing political fallout is repudiating the social contract that had secured American liberal democracy in the twentieth century.

How crisis in the political economy is interpreted depends on culture. The third section outlines how neoliberal rationalization has transformed the pacifying culture industry into a politicizing culture market. It is composed of dematerialized signs and simulations, based increasingly on the Internet, constituting a self-referential hyperreality shorn from a reality of referents. The scramble to display signs differentially valued in the semiotic economy of prestige progressively displaces normative agreement as the linguistic basis for social coordination. What Adorno called "pseudo-individualism" is heightened by the *consumerization of publicity*: citizens grow able and willing to relate to the public as consumers selecting what version of

hyperreality they prefer. Entertaining sensationalism and insulated hyperrealities are selected over the accurate and broadly agreeable. Such sensationalism and insulation intensify intolerance of dissonance and magnify hostility against alternative hyperrealities. In a self-reinforcing logic of escalation, intolerance and hostility further encourage sensationalism and the retreat into insularity. Meanwhile, the easy activism that Adorno derided as "pseudo-participation" is performed today as *publicized consumption*—above all, through social media. This participatory virtual public augments the overabundance of media content. Social media thereby deepens competition for attention and necessitates curation by algorithms, amplifying yet further the logic of escalation. This escalation manifests itself in undermining democratic norms of community and expertise, provoking partisan incivility and enabling fake news.

In the fourth section, I show how these transformations of political economy and culture help explain why economic crisis has led so many to populism set against the regulatory state rather than to a countermovement against deregulated markets. Neoliberalism has underpinned reforms making public authority responsive to the market and private interests. It has also animated conservative retrenchment against regulation and redistribution, breeding partisan conflicts that have rendered the policy state dysfunctional and impermeable to principled reform. Meanwhile, the consumerization of culture fosters a mentality equating the roles of citizen and customer. The individualistic and uncompromising posture of the customer short-circuits other collective identities and makes pluralistic compromise insupportable. These configurations together channel politicization into populism, which aggregates individuals negatively through shared dissatisfaction with the "corrupt" state. This propels a logic of escalating antagonism between technocratic responsibility and populist responsiveness.

The fifth section shows how neoliberal reason's dialectical arc culminates in psychological anxieties that provoke receptivity to authoritarianism. The escalating economic, cultural, and political contradictions intensify what Frankfurt School member Erich Fromm called negative "freedom from" and diminish what he called positive "freedom to." Competitive markets free private choices from institutional restraints, but dissipation of debt-backed consumption undercuts positive capacity to engage with the world. Retreats into insular hyperrealities hostile to alternatives free consumers from disagreeable facts and opinions, but confound positive relations of recognition with outside social and material existence. Populists seek freedom from undemocratic technocracy, but do so by debilitating the responsible state necessary for positive self-government. As Fromm argued, negative freedom without positive freedom is psychologically burdensome, and authoritarianism promises a tempting

escape from freedom's strains. Tapping into these psychological anxieties, the agitator corrupts democratic norms of expertise and community through misinformation and transgression, and licenses aggression misdirected against scapegoats. But Trumpist authoritarianism does so in characteristically neoliberal ways; it is best characterized as *inverted fascism*. In contrast to the felt insignificance of the worker under monopoly capitalism exploited by fascism, anxieties in the neoliberal economy stem from precarity and insecurity. Trumpism destabilizes the knowledge necessary for democracy by manufacturing doubt and distrust rather than by suppression. Its assault on community norms—exemplified by the alt-right—are more about transgressive defiance than building a jingoistic mass movement. Finally, Trump licenses his anxious followers to forge reassuring community by unleashing repressed instincts and directing aggression against racialized outsiders. For the fascists, this had to be the Jew, who was both marginalized and personified the invisible powers behind industrialization: the “illegal immigrant,” who lacks human rights yet personifies the threat of globalized capitalism, is today's indispensable out-group. Sharpening economic anxieties enhance the temptation to escape, but by offering only irrational and self-defeating emotional release, the amplification of authoritarianism only distracts further from the economic conditions causing anxiety.

I conclude with the overriding contention that Donald Trump's ascendancy is more an effect than a cause. Neoliberal reason reigns hegemonic over American economy, culture, politics, and personalities. The contradictions it engenders are producing accumulation crises, partisan insularities, populist irresponsibilities, and authoritarian neuroses. Trump himself will one day be in America's past. But so long as neoliberal hegemony persists, so too will the dangerous potential for dialectic and unreason.

## I. Neoliberal Reason

As Michel Foucault and others have argued, neoliberalism entails far more than an economic doctrine favoring deregulated markets.<sup>4</sup> It is a novel form of governmentality—a rationality linked to technologies of power that govern conduct, not just through direct state action but through liberty itself.<sup>5</sup> Not isolated to the traditionally demarcated sphere of economics, neoliberal society entails a whole economic-juridical order.

The central program of neoliberal governmentality is the absolute generalization of competition as a universal behavioral norm. Whereas in liberal thought, the root principle of capitalism was exchange of equivalents, for neoliberal reason it is competition entailing inequality. The key result of market processes goes from specialization to selection. The competitive market is the exclusive site of rationality. It processes information, indicated by price, and is the only mechanism of producing knowl-

edge, defined as what is profitably utilizable. Because consumers are free to refuse inferior goods or services, the price mechanism of the market system ensures optimal solutions and maximal satisfaction of preferences.

Liberal capitalism, as Karl Polanyi argued, required the construction of “fictitious” commodities like land and labor.<sup>6</sup> These abstract, exchangeable factors of production had to be disembedded from concrete non-market social relations, norms, and values. Instead of merely disembedding commodities, neoliberalism intervenes to make competitive mechanisms regulate every moment and point in society. It strives to build an empire of market choice that invades every domain of life, and deposes all other social, political and solidaristic institutions and values.

Neoliberalism does not allege that markets are natural; competition must be constructed. Rather than endorsing laissez-faire overseen by a night watchman, it stipulates a strong state engaged in permanent vigilance, activity, and intervention to maintain artificial competition. It must not plan outcomes, which would upset the market's innate rationality, and must be insulated from political disturbances. Economic interventionism leads down the road to serfdom; fascism and unlimited state power are its necessary results. A “minimum of economic interventionism” on the “mechanisms of the market” must be accompanied by “maximum legal interventionism” on the “conditions of the market.”<sup>7</sup> Fixed, formal rules make up an economic constitution that inhibits planning, repulses political disruptions, and impartially safeguards competition. The state is the executor of the market and growth is the basis of public legitimacy. Governance depoliticizes public power, promotes ostensibly post-ideological technical problem-solving by experts, and relies on “best-practices” that dissolve the distinction between public and private organization.<sup>8</sup>

Unlimited generalization of competition yields an enterprise society in which calculations of supply/demand and cost/benefit become the model of all social relations. Neoliberal reason renders *homo economicus*, based on this model of the enterprise, the exhaustive figuration of human subjectivity. The center of economic thought shifts from labor and processes of production, exchange, and consumption to human capital and rational decision-making under conditions of scarcity. Capital is everything that can generate future income; wages are reconceived as income from capital. Labor is no longer comprehended as a commodity exchanged for a wage, but as a combination of human capital (the worker's education and abilities) and the income stream it generates. This neoliberal subject is an aggregate of human capital who invests in his own income-generating abilities.

Neoliberalism replaces the invariant identity of the moral person as a rights-bearing citizen with a formally empty receptacle filled up through enterprising choices. It brushes aside models of freedom as self-rule achieved

through moral autonomy or popular sovereignty.<sup>9</sup> In the neoliberal “democracy of consumers,” individual consumers together constitute the sovereign that monopolizes the issuance of legitimate commands.<sup>10</sup> Sovereign will is expressed not through political channels, but by choices in the “plebiscite of prices.”<sup>11</sup> Whereas producers have particular interests like protectionism, consumers have a consensual and common interest; all favor the impartial functioning of market processes. In the neoliberal free society, consumers exercise their right to choose in complete independence.

## II. From Keynesian State Capitalism to Neoliberal Deregulation

Situating the 2008 crisis in a historical account of American political and economic development clarifies its broader significance. The early twentieth-century Progressives were disdainful of what they took to be the chaos and waste of *fin de siècle* laissez-faire society. They strove to build a new American state that would replace the structural and rights-based formalisms of the nineteenth century with direct democracy and expert administration. It took the Great Depression and New Deal to bring into full bloom the Progressive commitment to pragmatic rationality. Thereafter, the “policy state” was authorized to pursue designated social goals and develop the means to accomplish them.<sup>12</sup> The slew of New Deal innovations included state oversight of labor negotiations, invigorated antitrust, Keynesian countercyclical deficits to stimulate demand and increase purchasing power, an expansive public sector sheltered from the business cycle, aggressive banking regulation, and social insurance. Regulation and redistribution ensured the conditions necessary for an economic system based on capital accumulation, private property, and corporate profit to endure.

To many, the differences between the New Deal and Nazi political economies appeared less significant than their common response to monopoly capitalism. Both erased boundaries between state and society by politicizing the private sphere and authorizing public bureaucracies to rationalize crisis-prone economies. Frankfurt School member Friedrich Pollock suggested that this common “state capitalism” had solved the contradiction between the forces and relations of production, and thus overcome the economy’s crisis tendencies. It seemed to him that management had become merely technical and “nothing essential” had been “left to the laws of the market.”<sup>13</sup>

Worries abounded that the private law sphere of property and contract was necessary for individual freedom. Despite salient differences between Nazi and New Deal state capitalism, many feared that intervention into society was a waystation to domination. Unease about the specter of American despotism motivated development of mechanisms to ensure that intervention-

ism did not devolve into arbitrary rule.<sup>14</sup> Expertise was one justification and limitation of the policy state. Authority could be safely delegated to a new corps of public-spirited administrators because their scientific knowledge would not only make them effective, but also counsel restraint. Enduring misgivings led later to new laws of administrative process. The procedural state was legitimated by its defenders as being a substantively value-neutral and instrumentally rational machine serving goals set by society. Regulatory decision-making was shunted into the abstruse procedures of courtrooms and bureaucracies. Defenders of the state emphasized that its processes of allocating authority were neutral, impartial, and open to all. The balanced accommodation of all interest groups seeking to exercise influence would yield an equilibrium corresponding to the public interest.<sup>15</sup>

The intermeshing of state and society through interest groups, agencies, and professionalized parties marginalized the public. The sovereign public opinion that Progressives had hoped would rationalize government gave way to the rationality supposedly inherent in processes of public law, public-private negotiation, and regulated markets. The state was endowed with a diffuse legitimacy in exchange for a growing economy, broad distribution, and ongoing household capacity to consume.<sup>16</sup> The Keynesian welfare settlement pacified the working class, protecting the market economy from more radical political pressures. Newly available, mass-produced commodities encouraged leveled-down notions of citizenship as welfare clientelism and privatistic consumption. As the state expanded and routinized, the initial politicization of private property relations through public intervention developed into depoliticized economic management by lawyers and social scientists organized by administrative and judicial processes.

The terms of the social contract preserving the co-existence of capitalism and democracy had been set. In exchange for a pacified citizenry and depoliticized regulatory authority, the policy state promised to deploy instrumental reason to sustain both capital accumulation and widely distributed capacity to consume (supported, always, by the exclusion of African Americans). During the decades of postwar growth, these twin responsibilities seemed attainable and compatible. Capitalism functioned smoothly enough and potentially delegitimizing inequality was clipped by inflation, tax-based welfare, and collectively negotiated wages. But in the late 1960s and early 1970s, weakening growth, stagflation, trade deficits, and the collapse of Bretton Woods revealed that state capitalism had not solved the problems of economics. As the Great Depression had enabled construction of the instrumentally rational policy state, economic disturbances in the 1970s opened the breach into which neoliberal reason entered to reconfigure the political economy. Rather than shielding rational policy-making from

political pressure and assuring broadly distributed welfare, neoliberalism promised growth driven by depoliticized markets freed from regulation and downwards redistribution. Believing in the optimal rationality of competitive markets, neoliberals sought to reinvigorate capital accumulation through deregulation, lowered taxes, financialization, privatization, and market expansion.

Liberating accumulation from the restrictions and obligations incurred under state capitalism might have imperiled capitalism's peace treaty with democracy. For deregulation to proceed without impairing the system's legitimacy, the quid pro quo—depoliticization for consumption—had to continue. Over the ensuing decades, as Wolfgang Streeck explains, the state "bought time" by finding new ways to generate illusions of widely distributed prosperity that prolonged the capacity of the lower and middle classes to consume.<sup>17</sup> Each successive attempt exhausted itself, leading to new and escalating disturbances. In the 1970s, inflation safeguarded social peace by compensating workers for inadequate growth until stagflation ended this mode of buying time. A subsequent reliance on public debt enabled the government to pacify conflict with borrowed money. Rising debt and balking creditors delimited this phase, which was brought to a definitive close with the Clinton administration's social spending cuts and balanced budgets. In a final stage that dawned in the 1980s but grew increasingly paramount over time, debt-based support of purchasing power was privatized. Household spending was financed through mortgages, student loans, and credit cards. This "privatized Keynesianism" buoyed consumption up through 2008, despite cuts to social spending, falling wages, and tightening employment markets.<sup>18</sup>

Each device for upholding spending maintained the legitimacy of the depoliticized political economy, even as liberalization continued to strip the wage-dependent population of regulatory and redistributive safeguards. The end of the inflation era brought structural unemployment and weakened trade unions. The passing of the public debt regime meant cuts to social rights, privatization of social services, and a trimmed public sector. Growing private debt enabled people to hold on despite lost savings, and rising under- and unemployment. At every step, the neoliberal project was "dressed up" as a consumption project.<sup>19</sup> Continuing consumption ensured legitimacy long enough to enact total transformation of the political economy.

The state could not buy time indefinitely. The 1970s had already witnessed the beginning of the transition from a manufacturing, production-oriented economy that exported surpluses to an import-based, finance and services economy focused on consumption. As the United States went from creditor to debtor, a system of "balanced disequilibrium" took hold.<sup>20</sup> With impunity granted as

the world's reserve currency, the United States ran mounting budget and trade deficits. To finance them, it absorbed surplus capital from abroad, much of which wended its way to Wall Street. Banks used these profits to extend credit to the working- and middle- classes. Household debt funded consumption of imported goods, returning the surplus capital abroad, and completing the circuit of global trade. This system depended on the unsustainable condition of ever-increasing debt-based consumption. Consumption was notoriously reinforced by secondary markets in what was essentially private money (securitized derivatives and collateralized debt obligation) that was much riskier than assumed. Because increasingly irresponsible lending was integral to continuing the consumption that stabilized the macroeconomic system, it became a sort of vicious collective good that progressively magnified the scale of the inevitable crash.<sup>21</sup> When in 2008 the debt finally proved unserviceable and the housing bubble burst, the private money disappeared and the disequilibrated global economic system fell into crisis.

Consumption based on private debt had provided an unstable bridge over the yawning inequality brought about by deregulation, financialization, globalization, and the diminished welfare state. When the 2008 crisis dried up credit, it revealed a divided "dual economy."<sup>22</sup> On one side is the primary sector of elite, highly-educated professionals who are collected in coastal urban centers and tied in to corporate management, technological innovation and oversight of global capital flows. On the other is the secondary sector of low-skilled workers primarily fixed in the heartland, for whom deregulated competition has brought under- or unemployment, job instability, depressed wages, exploding debt, and diminished prospects.

Unable to buy more time, the state's breach of the postwar social contract has been exposed. The neoliberal system of capital accumulation was entrenched at the expense of broad and sustainable consumption. The results have been the politicization of defrauded citizens and a political economy plunged into legitimization crisis. Time has belied the premature conclusion that contradiction and crisis potential had been overcome by state capitalism. Contradiction was relocated into cross-cutting imperatives for the state to enable capital accumulation and distribute consumption. In hindsight, we find only a window of stabilization of an enduring crisis potential built into capitalist political economy. As Nancy Fraser puts it "on the one hand, legitimate, efficacious public power is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other hand, capitalism's drive to endless accumulations tends to destabilize the very public power on which it relies."<sup>23</sup> The political fallout from the 2008 crisis marks the end of the postwar social contract that had established

conditions ensuring the continued coexistence of capitalism and democracy.

### III. From Culture Industry to Culture Market

Contemporary consumer culture has shaped how this crisis of political economy has been interpreted. In analyzing the mid-century culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer built upon Georg Lukács's argument that reification had moved beyond the sphere of production to encompass everyday experience, where it made social relations among humans look like objective necessities and inhibited critical consciousness. The rationalized mass production of culture yielded a stream of easily digestible, but empty morsels of entertainment that "infected" everything with stultifying "sameness."<sup>24</sup> Entertainment distracted workers from dissatisfaction and provided them with the leisure necessary for return to productivity. The entire world was "passed through the filter of the culture industry."<sup>25</sup> The "emphatic and systematic proclamation of what is"—the "cult of fact"—trained acceptance of social fate, and made "existence itself" into a "surrogate of meaning and justice."<sup>26</sup>

The culture industry had to conceal that it was mass producing homogeneity. The "sacrifice of individuality" required a "pretense of individualism."<sup>27</sup> Something was "provided for everyone so that no one [could] escape" despite the "mechanically differentiated products" being "ultimately the same."<sup>28</sup> The illusion of selfhood, "pseudo-individuality," misrepresented the self as natural, despite it really being a "socially conditioned monopoly commodity."<sup>29</sup> Made complicit in their own reification, "arrogantly ignorant" conformists would "reject everything unfamiliar": "again and again and with stubborn malice," they would demand the "one dish they have once been served."<sup>30</sup> As in fascism, individuality was liquidated by exposure in "authoritarian fashion to the same programs" with no "mechanism of reply."<sup>31</sup> The "mechanical repetition of the same culture product" was "already that of the same propaganda slogan."<sup>32</sup> Any revolts against this "fetishism" served only to "entangle" more deeply. Those who "attempt[ed] to break away from the passive status of compulsory consumers and 'activate' themselves. . . succumb[ed] to pseudo-activity."<sup>33</sup> Pseudo-activity entailed the "attempt to preserve enclaves of immediacy" amidst a "thoroughly mediated and obdurate society." This "leap into praxis" was "paid for with the secret knowledge" that it was a false substitute for genuine satisfaction.<sup>34</sup> Anything that seemed "in easy reach" was "regressive."<sup>35</sup>

To reckon with pseudo-individualism and pseudo-activity in our very different neoliberal *culture market*—characterized less by monopolistic production from above, and more by extreme competition and participation from below—some further theory must be introduced. Likewise engaging with Lukács, Guy Debord suggested that where

Marx spoke of the degradation of "being" into "having," a new stage of commodifying abstraction transformed "having" into "appearing."<sup>36</sup> In Debord's "society of the spectacle," shimmering abstractions withdrawn from lived experience suffused culture and mediated human interactions. An illusory social unity through shared consumption spackled over isolating alienation even as it perpetuated it. The "directly lived" was becoming "mere representation."<sup>37</sup> In turn, Debord's Marxist analysis of the mass spectacle has drifted into Jean Baudrillard's postmodern rendering of a yet higher stage of reifying abstraction in the "political economy of the sign."<sup>38</sup> Baudrillard describes how in the high-tech information and communication economy, processes of production, exchange, and consumption are increasingly conducted not through material objects, but abstract signs. Rationalizing abstraction generates semiotic commodities divorced from physical use and characterized by "sign-value." Their conspicuous display confers standing and prestige within a comprehensive and differentiated political economy of sign-values.

Without having to accept Baudrillard's claim that postmodernity has transcended the economy of material objects, we can follow his suggestion of a shifting centrality from the mode of production to the code of signification.<sup>39</sup> Immaterial signs are reproduced with an ease foreign to material objects. Unlike the dismal scarcity traditionally ascribed to the material economy, the semiotic economy—especially in the Internet age—is one of overabundance. The "culture of reality" is "collapsing beneath the excess of reality."<sup>40</sup> Whereas Debord distinguished between spectacular appearances and a veiled objective world, Baudrillard portrays a burgeoning stock of signifiers unanchored in a material reality of referents. "Simulation" generates "simulacra"—immaterial signs, digital images, virtual spectacles—that supplant, drown out and "devour" representations of reality.<sup>41</sup> The boundary between representation and reality "implodes." Reproduced copies "precede" any original; increasingly autonomous "hyperreality" presents itself.

Consumer participation in this semiotic economy becomes central to social organization. Increasingly displacing what Jürgen Habermas describes as the coordination of action orientations through normatively secured or communicatively achieved consensus, language-based coordination occurs instead through the scramble to display signs differentially valued in the semiotic economy of prestige. Values coded by language thereby integrate society through competition rather than reason-giving oriented towards agreement. This enhances the pathology described by Habermas as the "colonization of the life-world."<sup>42</sup> This consumerist colonization of culture—and, with it, the public sphere—has two interconnected sides; Baudrillard paired the "introjection of all exteriority" with the "extraversion of all interiority."<sup>43</sup> Along these lines, I

describe, first, the *consumerization of publicity*: citizens relate to the public as consumers selecting what versions of hyperreality they prefer, heightening pseudo-individualism. This generates an escalating logic in which retreat into insular hyperrealities and hostility to dissonant alternatives reinforce each other. Second, I characterize the *publicization of consumption*: the pseudo-activity of social media participation. This amplifies the escalating logic of insularity and hostility, undermining democratic norms.

In contrast to the homogenization of culture mass produced from above emphasized by Adorno and Debord, the neoliberal economy offers an overwhelming variety of cultural products from which to choose. This amplifies each consumer's capacity, at least in principle, to select what hyperreality to inhabit. Citizenship itself is refracted through consumer choice; publicity is taken as a product like any other. News becomes entertainment. Pseudo-individual preference for the easy and familiar endures—today depicted by social psychologists as natural deviations from rational judgment like confirmation bias and cognitive dissonance reduction.<sup>44</sup> Consumers sort into echo chambers and news siloes that present internally homogenous and unchallenging hyperrealities.

The media is “the spiritual Mirror in which a people can see itself, and self-examination is the first condition of wisdom.”<sup>45</sup> Fragmented media consumption not only makes the people blind to itself; it also leads it to believe it is wise about itself. Following the logic of the Dunning–Kruger bias, belief in self-knowledge grows in proportion to self-contemplation declining. The more eclipsed the public becomes, the more citizens come to believe in their omniscience. Self-contemplation through pluralistic public discourse—necessary for genuine public self-knowledge—is regarded as superfluous. Reassured by cognitive biases inculcated by the culture market that they already understand the world and themselves, pseudo-individuals prefer consuming opinions that they already agree with over facts they believe they already know. Because opinion is more entertaining and sells better than dry evidence, news producers favor the former, and blur the lines distinguishing it from the latter.

Retreat into spurious self-knowledge and entertaining, agreeable opinion offer counterfeit and dissatisfying public autonomy. In pluralistic democracy, consensus is not possible and the subjects of public authority will not be fully its authors. As a second best, the right to participate in forming public opinion yields the legitimacy of “responsive” democracy.<sup>46</sup> Consumerized citizenship preempts even this engagement. The result is neither a genuinely unified public nor a tabulation of separated private interests. It is an uncanny in-between: a disjointed assortment of privatized simulacra of a public. These communities of consumption are nevertheless all subject to the same sovereign power; their simulacra may not be bound to reality, but they cannot fully secede from each

other. The endeavor to escape firsthand cognitive dissonance by consuming homogenized publicity exacerbates alienation from public authority responsive to heterogeneous elements with differing worldviews.

Being bound to unrecognizable hyperrealities that cannot be dispelled induces an unhappy consciousness in the publicity consumer. Since knowledge about the world and the public interest is self-evident, those who inhabit different hyperrealities must be delusional or immoral. Entertaining news caters to this torment with sensationalism, passion, and conflict. The culture industry had traditionally disguised sources of discontent and entertained to depoliticize; now this culture market thrives with politicizing entertainment focused on discontent. Such media intensifies intolerance of dissonance and magnifies hostility against alternatives, which encourages retreat into even more insulated, homogenous hyperrealities. Latent within consumerizing publicity is this self-reinforcing logic of escalating partisanship and insularity among pseudo-individuals alarmed that their hyperrealities must coexist with dissonant alternatives.

The second mode of consumerist colonization of culture—the publicization of consumption—has been revolutionized by the Internet. During the centuries of the printing press, radio, and television, culture was a palimpsest largely scripted from above. The twentieth-century public sphere had a “refeudalized” structure: public opinion manufactured from above through advertising and public relations supplanted opinion derived from critical participation of the bourgeoisie.<sup>47</sup> Today, the mainstream media exemplifies top-down public representation. By contrast, the Internet is a participatory, interactive medium with widely available inputs from below. By closing the “Gutenberg parenthesis,” it breeds a digital culture reminiscent of the orality predominant before the printing press.<sup>48</sup> Mutating content can spread horizontally without coordination by centralized nodes of authority. It is this restructuring that is most aptly described as the present-day refeudalization.

The Internet has been hailed for desegregating the public from the private sphere by erasing barriers to entry and enabling idea crowdsourcing.<sup>49</sup> Participation has been taken furthest by “Web 2.0” (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) based on user-generated social media. The “prosumption” of social media content takes consumer sovereignty to its limit where consumer and producer collapse into each other.<sup>50</sup> The culture market has become a sharing economy; hyperreality has become interactive. The economic engine of Web 2.0, platform capitalism, consists of digital infrastructures that encourage interactions to capture lucrative data.<sup>51</sup> Competition over acquiring data encourages platforms to make participation as cost-free, entertaining, and all-encompassing as possible. Network effects ensure that the more users accrued by

a platform, the greater the incentive for others to participate.

In flight from the “desert of the real,” consumers constitute their identities by acquiring, constructing, and displaying simulacra.<sup>52</sup> Increasingly, cultural reproduction and social integration occur online. But virtual hyperreality remains a thin plane governed by the political economy of signs. Mutual alienation results not just from mediation by commodified objects, but also from online interactions mediated by self-made, but artificial simulacra of subjectivity locked in semiotic competition. This “subjectivity fetishism” expresses the “commoditized reality” of the increasingly virtual “society of consumers.”<sup>53</sup>

Social media participation is the digital version of the “do-it-yourself syndrome” that Adorno derided as pseudo-active “nonsense,” which “fires itself up for sake of its own publicity.”<sup>54</sup> Especially as political slacktivism, simulated participation consists largely of ritualized performance, virtue-signaling, venting, and mutual reassurance. Its superficial and compulsive qualities are closely linked: “The need to speak, even if one has nothing to say, becomes more pressing when one has nothing to say.”<sup>55</sup> In the social media cosmos, “nothing takes place and yet we are saturated by it.”<sup>56</sup>

By overwhelmingly multiplying the inventory of signifiers, publicized consumption further amplifies insularity and hostility. It intensifies competition over attention, which is increasingly marketized, and becomes the principal scarce resource in the culture market.<sup>57</sup> This hinders the discrimination among accumulated information necessary for knowledge: “the space is so saturated, the pressure of all which wants to be heard so strong that I am no longer capable of knowing what I want.”<sup>58</sup> In lieu of shared discourse and reality as touchstones to judge representations, hyperreality is curated by algorithms.<sup>59</sup> They learn to provide content akin to what the consumer has previously liked. Merely by consuming, each acquires her own unique, progressively refined algorithms. Distillation tends toward the unchallenging, homogenous, and entertaining content of the “daily me.”<sup>60</sup> The governmentality of algorithms hides in plain sight as a mechanism of digital autonomy. Swept up into “cyber-cascades” of information-sharing within insulated communities structured by algorithms, pseudo-individuals unintentionally collaborate in fabricating self-reinforcing hyperrealities that reflect their own fantasies, fears, and hostilities back at them.<sup>61</sup>

Marshall McLuhan’s dictum that “the medium is the message” is confirmed as competition for attention between mainstream and social media becomes a clash over democratic values.<sup>62</sup> Aside from outright censorship, the cost and scarcity of economic and technical resources traditionally imposed restrictive gateways selecting what was published or broadcast. Of course, gateways to public availability were apparatuses of control; gatekeepers pos-

sessing the requisite resources wielded enormous power in determining how reality would be publically represented and interpreted. But these gateways also helped set normative parameters regulating public discourse. Now the conspicuous centralization of mass media appears authoritarian in contrast with the invisible, individualized algorithms regulating social media. Condemnation of feudal representation as illegitimately truncating public conversation sweeps up these regulative norms. Guilty by association, they are branded as authoritarian offenses against democratic values. This attack especially challenges norms of community and expertise that have supported credence in shared opinions and objective facts. It further amplifies antipathy to alternative opinions and insulation of hyperrealities.

The first onslaught involves democracy’s intrinsic tension between the “aspiration to be free from the constraints of existing community norms (and to attain a consequent condition of pure communication)” and the “aspiration to the social project of reasoned and non-coercive deliberation.”<sup>63</sup> A degree of civility is a precondition of public deliberation, but to protect it, community norms exclude speech that is outrageous or offensive. Of course, yellow journalism is over a century old and talk radio has been a clear precedent of participatory media encouraging uncivil antipathy.<sup>64</sup> But today universal competition for attention fed by social media expands the scope of conflict beyond quarrels among dissonant alternatives. The regulative ideal of impartiality beyond partisanship is itself swept into the eddies of hostility. Even the attempt to identify commonality with competing worldviews becomes insupportable. The competitive pressure for conflict undermines the very notion of a conventional mainstream. Its voices are caught between affirming unprejudiced fairness to increasingly deaf ears or adopting partisan incivility to survive the cacophony.

The frontiers of a second struggle exacerbated by social media are also set by a constitutive tension of democracy.<sup>65</sup> “Freedom of opinion is a farce,” says Hannah Arendt, “unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute.”<sup>66</sup> But an unrestricted freedom of opinion stipulates liberation even from facts and the disciplinary expertise of those who establish them. This contest is also not entirely new. The professionalization concomitant to cultural rationalization can lead to an “elitist splitting-off of expert cultures” like science, where accrued specialized knowledge “does not come as a matter of course into the possession of everyday practice.”<sup>67</sup> This can result in “cultural impoverishment” and has been an opening for science denialism. Neoliberal reason contributes further by equating truth with the outcomes generated by the democratic marketplace of consumers. Everyone has a right, equated with democracy itself, to choose everything, including facts, for herself. This newly proclaimed entitlement feeds demand for the same



legitimate pluralism among true enough “alternative facts” as among opinions.<sup>68</sup> Discipline by social, historical, or scientific facts is authoritarian inequality. The overwhelming abundance available on the participatory Internet and the algorithmic governmentality that filters it let demand be met with the online supply of deliberately fake news.<sup>69</sup> Lost acknowledgment of referents beyond the hyperreal products of the culture market makes, for many, the revelation that news is fake no scandal. The immediate and indisputable reality of the feelings that news elicits simply matters more than the evidence on which it may or may not be based. The consumerist colonization of culture generates escalating insularity and hostility impelling one-sided realizations of these normative ambivalences intrinsic to democracy. Climaxing in generalized partisan incivility and fake news, the culture market undermines democracy from within.

#### IV. Neoliberal Populism against the Policy State

The previous sections help us approach the question of why an economic crisis caused by neoliberalism has led so many to populism set against the policy state rather than to anti-neoliberalism. Ever since the state took responsibility for the economic system, the penalty for the failure to administer it has been withdrawal of legitimation: economic crises have become political crises.<sup>70</sup> The ramification of legitimation crisis is political reactivation of a betrayed populace. Reactivation’s normative content is underdetermined. Discontents could target either of the jointly complicit systems of public administration and market. In the interim decades since capital accumulation was unchained, neoliberal reason has colonized both the American state and culture. This has carved channels directing mobilization into populism against the state.

Neoliberal reason has restructured the state in two ways: it has increasingly become the servant of the market and private interests, and the partisan politics stemming from conservative efforts to deregulate have rendered it dysfunctional. First, neoliberals have found staging grounds throughout the government. With fiscal policy falling into disrepute, the central device of macroeconomic management has become monetary policy set by an insulated central bank staffed by orthodox economists. International treaties and intergovernmental organizations like the WTO have codified free trade rules and capital flow protections amounting to a “new constitutionalism” beyond democratic control.<sup>71</sup> Since 1980, the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) has sat at the crown of the administrative state, subjecting all proposed major rules to “regulatory impact analysis” based on cost-benefit assessment. This exemplar of “governance” blurs the line between public and private and makes the state conform to the logic of market enterprise.

The very financialization that helped precipitate crisis renders the neoliberal state insensate to those most damaged by it. The “tax state” was supported by receipts from citizens; the “debt state” is largely funded by investors to whom it owes fealty.<sup>72</sup> Movements against the state by capital, not labor, now most directly threaten destabilization. This politics of public debt appears in arguments for consolidated budgets and austerity, and in fraught show-downs over the debt ceiling and government shutdowns. Ratcheting campaign costs also ensure shifted allegiances of politicians to the economically powerful. *Citizens United* elides the distinction between money and speech, tethering the political process more closely to the outcomes of market competition. Parties connect the state to a base of corporate interests. Because only candidates and positions that are financed can become visible to voters, parties come to resemble bank accounts as much as civic associations, focusing as much on amalgamating capital as people.<sup>73</sup>

The Democratic Party once identified with Keynesianism has been transformed by neoliberalism. Though it has remained shakily married to a redistributive and social insurance agenda opposed to more radical deregulation, “progressive neoliberalism” made its way into the third-way Clintonism of welfare reform, solicitude for bond markets, trade liberalization, and focus on economic growth.<sup>74</sup> Today, the mix of pragmatic policy-making and neoliberal reasoning is exemplified in the “nudge” conceit hatched by Obama’s OIRA czar Cass Sunstein. The Democratic Party has connected its ethos of problem-solving by elite administrators with the promise of harnessing individual choice for efficient policy and an eagerness to partner with interests seeking liberalized markets. Thwarting a deeper relationship between progressivism and populism, Democratic elites have endeavored to protect this reign of reason from the uneducated whims of the masses. The “basket of deplorables” who do not play by these technocratic rules are often met with a haughty and flippant disregard.

By becoming interwoven with neoliberalism and lacing this upside-down skein between managerial rationality and deregulated capitalism, the policy state has tangled itself up in a contradictory bind. It has drifted towards the marketization of public power and emphasis on growth rather than distribution, growing beholden to financial and corporate clients. But its brittle legitimacy still depends on its original promise of maintaining a crisis-free social order of sustainable consumption. It is thereby accountable for a liberalized economy that it has largely relinquished control over. This bind was at its most vivid during the first, critical months of the economic crisis when President Obama prioritized the restoration of business confidence over aid to insolvent homeowners. The use of public

money to bail out banks that were “too big to fail” demonstrated the subservience of the state to finance, sparking the Tea Party movement.

Second, neoliberal reason has also fueled the conservative movement’s decades-long reaction against the liberal policy state, draining coherence and legitimacy from each branch.<sup>75</sup> The vast expansions of the policy state in the 1960s and 1970s contributed to the breakdown of the postwar consensus and laid the roots of the Republican Party’s “asymmetric polarization.”<sup>76</sup> The preeminent effect of polarization, congressional gridlock, has made the sort of public problem-solving decried by neoliberals almost prohibitively difficult. Although parliamentary lawmaking exists in principle, substantive governing decisions and reformist initiatives tend to take place in the judicial and executive branches.<sup>77</sup>

Conservative judicial appointees have used courts in the most persistent and forceful retrenchment against the regulatory state. Implementing the neoliberal commitment to constitutional formalism, a revived jurisprudence of federalism has been the boldest line of resistance. But the result of efforts to enforce constitutional limits on policy-making has not been a more legally constrained and rationally principled state. Rather, the Supreme Court has been deeply inconsistent; its structural constitutionalism appears an “empty formalism.”<sup>78</sup> Its purported effort to limit policy-making has revealed itself as little more than a program for making alternate policy choices. This and other controversial judicial assertions have resulted in a Court plunged even further into the political fray despite its insulation from democratic accountability and legitimacy.

The formalist effort to rationalize administrative structure through rules—especially doctrines allocating interpretive authority like the *Chevron* test for granting deference to an agency’s statutory interpretation—has also been a “mess.”<sup>79</sup> As the rules regulating institutional arrangements grow more complicated, they become less decisive. Open to a wider field of possibilities, the state is less likely to be fastened to any one of them. The ensuing paradox is “more rules and less regularity.”<sup>80</sup> This “sprawling, multifaceted indeterminate architecture of administration” favors interests with the resources to take advantage of it.

Overall, constitutional retrenchment against the policy state has not retrieved a coherent “containment structure.” Rather, the Constitution has become even more of an “opportunity structure” in which rules are little but “resources to exploit and obstacles to overcome.” The ensuing political stalemate is manifested institutionally through an “acceleration of the structural free-for-all.” The state has been caught up in a “perpetual churning” feeding accusations of “derangement.”<sup>81</sup>

Subservience to capital and incoherent structure drive a widening cleft between policy and politics. The

president at the helm of the policy state has had a two-fold role as an agent of democratic transformation that tears down through “redemptive ground-clearing exercises” and as a prudential “policy entrepreneur” who builds up through “responsible accommodation.”<sup>82</sup> In bridging between the state and the people, parties, too, have had dual commitments. They have served as “responsible” participants in government that abide by extant practices and commitments, but have also been “responsive” to public opinion and civil society.<sup>83</sup> It is increasingly difficult for both to fulfill their dual vocations. The “thickening” institutions of the policy state have made transformation prohibitively difficult for presidents, counseling accommodation as the pragmatic leadership course.<sup>84</sup> No one can promise change more convincingly than presidents, but the more emphatic their plebiscitarian responsiveness, the greater becomes either their hypocrisy when they capitulate to the status quo or their irresponsibility when they try to disrupt it. Meanwhile, with meaningful decision-making pushed back from the legislature into courts and agencies, responsible participation in party government is identified with a depoliticized rationality that can only be exercised effectively in fora accessible primarily to privileged functionaries and corporate interests.<sup>85</sup> The result is that the state’s democratic form remains, but is hollowing out into an “empty shell” impermeable to programmatic, popular reform.<sup>86</sup> Relieved by the policy state of responsibility for even distantly overseeing decision-making, the people’s erstwhile “semi-sovereignty” is “slipping away.”<sup>87</sup> Instead of being the vehicle for effectuating political mobilization, the state has become its adversary. Policy-making appears to be the problem rather than the solution.

Alongside the de-democratized state, cultural resources have helped determine how the economic crisis has been interpreted, and what sort of mobilizations it has generated.<sup>88</sup> The consumerist colonization of culture encourages relating to the state as a customer and expecting public goods to fit the model of individualized provision of diversified commodities.<sup>89</sup> This dissolves the civic solidarity on which communal goods depend. Neoliberal thinking also equates moral and economic behavior, and identifies economic failure with immoral irresponsibility. The traditional family is the only valid social safety net.<sup>90</sup> The state is prejudged as intruding on individual liberties to reward undeserving others.

Despite the economic crisis disproportionately affecting the indebted secondary sector of the dual economy, neoliberal thinking has impeded formation of class-based consciousness and unifying discourses of privilege, subordination, and exploitation that might otherwise become bases for collective identity and action. Those disillusioned with the political system are not integrated by positive programs into coherent coalitions.<sup>91</sup> Their common denominator is negative: aggregation as customers

sharing tremendous dissatisfaction with the services rendered by the state.

Together, neoliberalized state and culture have fed populism's "logic of equivalence," which assembles disparate demands unmet by the political system.<sup>92</sup> A popular subject is constituted through dichotomous opposition against the inadequate political system. The establishment is corrupt rule by an elite minority that puts favored interests before the people's welfare. Populism's "logic of articulation" then elevates a demand or symbol as the hegemonic signifier representing this aggregate. The more the chain of equivalences is extended and the more robust the populist articulation becomes, the weaker will the universal signifier be tied to any specific demands. Populist unity is stabilized by "empty signifiers": motifs that lose their specificity and come to stand for the fiction of the people as a homogenous whole.

For populists, all opposition is sectarianism undermining the unified will of the popular sovereign.<sup>93</sup> The same emptiness that lets populism include so many also ensures that it cannot concede the legitimacy of those whom it excludes. The neoliberal matching of the roles of citizen and customer guides politics towards this exclusionary logic of articulation. The only common denominator among customers is an expectation of unfettered satisfaction of their preferences. This is inimical to the requirement of pluralistic politics to compromise, which appears intolerably corrupt. Whereas state capitalism's interest-group model of politics blurred the lines between private and public in a fashion well suited to compromise, the privatization of publicity in the customer model is incompatible with it.

Given the link between neoliberalism and de-democratized technocracy, contemporary anti-technocratic populism might appear anti-neoliberal.<sup>94</sup> But populism lacks value- and class-based collective identities and deems processes of compromise corrupted by arbitrary partiality. This is particularly fitted to a culture composed of atomized citizen-customers distrustful of public authority. Despite its animus towards the neoliberal state, today's populism has an elective affinity with neoliberal reason. Technocrats and populists both decry intermediate structures that stand between the unitary common interest and the power required to achieve it.<sup>95</sup> Both share a fundamentally anti-political mentality and oppose the pluralism of party democracy.<sup>96</sup> As neoliberal reason takes hold, their commonality sets in motion a vicious spiral of "mutual withdrawal" between them.<sup>97</sup> The hegemony of neoliberal reason strengthens oppositions to solidarity, social regulation, and pluralism, thereby reinforcing populism. As responsive populism grows increasingly irresponsible, proponents of responsible governance endeavor to further insulate authority from popular forces.<sup>98</sup> This makes it harder for insurgents to "resolve their redemptive message in a categorically different way of

governing"; instead they settle in for "a permanent siege" and "persistent assault on the legitimacy of the policy state."<sup>99</sup>

## V. Trumpism and the Escape from Neoliberal Freedom

Here I complete the map of neoliberal reason's dialectical arc. Anxieties induced by the economic, cultural and political contradictions described earlier have unleashed repressed instincts and motivated a flight from deficient neoliberal freedom towards authoritarianism. Trumpism is the effect of this dialectic of neoliberal reason.

Erich Fromm worried that although bourgeois modernity had granted the individual negative "freedom from" traditional restraints and domination, it had severed ties among individuals.<sup>100</sup> Isolation conjoined with submission to ends determined by outside forces like the economy fostered feelings of insignificance and powerlessness. This interfered with the innate need to relate to the social and material world with meaning, direction, and a sense of belonging. Absent a path to this positive "freedom to," these anxieties could become intolerable, and lead towards irrational self-destruction. People might seek escape from freedom by "fusing" with somebody or something in the world. Alongside compulsive conformity, authoritarianism was the primary mechanism of escape.

The basics of Fromm's analysis hold today. Precisely what has been examined above is the intensification of "freedom from" and diminishment of "freedom to" driven by the escalating economic, cultural, and political contradictions of neoliberalism. Competitive markets free private choices from institutional restraints, but dissipation of debt-backed consumption undercuts positive capacity to engage with the world. Retreats into insular hyperrealities hostile to alternatives free consumers from disagreeable facts and opinions, but confound positive relations of recognition with outside social and material existence. Populists seek freedom from undemocratic technocracy, but do so by debilitating the responsible state necessary for positive self-government.

Fromm's account of authoritarian escape from freedom brings the argument back to the opening depiction of the agitator. In a society of dislocation and isolation, the agitator "play[s] on very real anxieties and fears." When he offers his followers a "sense of belonging, no matter how counterfeit it is, and a sense of participation in a worthy cause, his words find response only because men today feel homeless and need a new belief in the possibility of social harmony and well-being."<sup>101</sup>

Instead of offering clarity and potential solutions, the agitator purposely sows confusion. He "hardly seem[s] to take [his] own ideas seriously" and evokes a "quack medicine salesman."<sup>102</sup> While "moving in a twilight zone between the respectable and the forbidden, he is ready to

use any device, from jokes to doubletalk to wild extravagances.”<sup>103</sup> By implying that the “masses are eternal dupes and the victims of a perennial conspiracy,” the agitator makes the “distinction between truth and lies” appear “inconsequential” and undermines “those values by which it is possible to distinguish democracy from its opposite.”<sup>104</sup>

Above all, the agitator secures for his audience permission to vent aggressive emotions on scapegoats. The “explicit content of agitational material” is incidental because “the primary function of the agitator’s words is to release reactions of gratification or frustration.”<sup>105</sup> The “whole idea of objective cause tends to recede into the background, leaving only on one end the subjective feeling of dissatisfaction and on the other the personal enemy held responsible for it.”<sup>106</sup> Relief from malaise is promised through the discharge of aggressive impulses. But this only “perpetuates the malaise by blocking the way toward real understanding of its cause.”<sup>107</sup> The real function of the release of gratification and frustration is “to make the audience subservient to his personal leadership.”<sup>108</sup>

Point-by-point similarities with Donald Trump are easy to adduce.<sup>109</sup> But whereas the mid-century American agitator presented a “standardized” version of the “fascist appeal,” Trump’s neoliberal breed of authoritarianism is better characterized as *inverted fascism*. A decade ago, Sheldon Wolin foresaw “the specter of inverted totalitarianism,” which continued to trumpet democracy while detaching actual practices from what they were proclaimed to be.<sup>110</sup> Whereas fascism manifested the overgrowth of instrumental rationality, Trumpism issues from the hypertrophy of neoliberal reason. In a profound irony, the governmentality proffered as fascism’s antithesis and antidote ultimately reiterates inverted fascist elements. Each of these three aspects of agitation—tapping into real anxieties, corrupting democratic norms through misinformation and transgression, and enabling misdirected aggression—arises in Trumpism, but in characteristically neoliberal ways.

First, because the Frankfurt School inquiries into fascism were specific to the political economy of their times, revisions are necessary to understand neoliberal anxieties. Monopoly capitalism restricted individual initiative, destroyed economic independence and alienated workers from the products of their labor. Workers felt like insignificant cogs in vast enterprises, serving distant and threatening powers. By contrast, the “new spirit of capitalism” revolves around the short-term “project” and the flexible employment of enterprising nodes of human capital.<sup>111</sup> The social manifestation of this “gig economy” is a new class, the “precariat”, characterized by a lack of economic security due to underemployment, unemployment, and blocked avenues of advancement.<sup>112</sup> Because work-based identity and community depends on a measure of security, the precariat remains a class without a con-

sciousness. They are “charged with the all but unfulfillable task of finding, individually, solutions to socially produced problems.”<sup>113</sup> Vast sectors of the economy, especially people who borrowed to pay for education, are saddled with insurmountable debt. Even meritocratic elites are affected; their value is their human capital, accumulated through years of educational and professional training. It requires labor of Stakhanovite proportions to realize the earnings their human capital enables.<sup>114</sup>

Professed to replace disciplinary society, “achievement society” is presented as a regime of freedom.<sup>115</sup> But when each is individually responsible, all must engage in perpetual work on the self. Relentless pressure to perform means that one cannot afford to leave any aspect of life conduct unaffected. This is true at all levels, from the meritocratic elites who must manage themselves as portfolios to the “indebted man” whose subjectivity is rationalized under the governmentality of debt.<sup>116</sup> Competitive failure, an ever-present possibility, threatens the integrity of the entire self. Those who fail are deviant losers. This breeds a range of psychological afflictions. Depression is the hallmark affliction of “burnout society.”<sup>117</sup> Financial debt is equated with moral guilt.<sup>118</sup> Above all, precariats, are beset by “anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation.”<sup>119</sup> “Deaths of despair” due to drugs, alcohol, and suicide have skyrocketed among middle-aged, ill-educated white Americans in isolated regions who have precarious employment.<sup>120</sup>

Second, Trumpism undermines democratic norms differently. Wolin saw that democracy could be subverted without suppression of opposition, imposed ideological purity, monopolized propaganda or mass mobilization. Instead, a pluralistic configuration of private media could corrupt it from within in the name of democracy itself. Continuing the earlier analysis, norms protecting knowledge can be broken down by challenging the authority of facts, and community norms can be assaulted as intolerant speech restrictions.

Trumpism sabotages knowledge in characteristically neoliberal ways. Trump is a “master of media spectacle” adept at “disrupt[ing] ordinary and habitual flows of information” and “captur[ing] attention.”<sup>121</sup> He has lived a life as “Donald Trump playing Donald Trump”; with a striking “unreality” about him, the reality TV star personifies the glitzy but hollow simulacrum.<sup>122</sup> While his compulsive disregard for truth is notorious, it is merely the avatar of a culture dissatisfied with truth being anything other than what we would like to consume it as. He represents the “thoughtlessness of the entire culture.”<sup>123</sup> But in backing democratic values like non-conformity and dissent, however hypocritical, Trumpism distinguishes itself from the fascist project of total state control. Fascists needed censorship and propaganda to monopolize public representation and suppress truth. The fascist crowd was fused into a de-individuated, obedient

unity. Trump may constantly bluster against the press, but he has no need to suppress speech to foster an irrational public. Unreason results from confusion and mistrust rather than domination. The “digital swarm” retains the individuality of “anonymous somebodies” who are unstably, incoherently, and fleetingly joined together.<sup>124</sup> Farrago and bedlam, where every fact is greeted by an alternative fact, subvert deliberation and destabilize knowledge. The “agnotological” manufacture of doubt is especially effective when produced from a multiplicity of sites.<sup>125</sup> Trump’s own legitimacy is unthreatened by this; it derives not from coherent ideological commitments, but from charismatic connection with his followers—forged in 280-character installments. His scattershot, self-contradictory, and superficial proclamations are neither anomalous nor weaknesses. They faithfully represent populist disdain for the condescending rationalism of technocrats and dovetail with the program of “deconstructing” the “deep state.” Not striving for total control, Trump rests satisfied with pandemonium distracting from the steady corruption of public administration for private enrichment.

Trumpism also directs transgressive speech against community norms undergirding public discourse. Like a rebellious “punk rocker,” Trump himself willfully violates even the most conventional civility norms.<sup>126</sup> The most extreme onslaught against community norms comes from the alt-right. They have been Trump’s “shock troops” and he their “mascot.” The alt-right is composed largely of young, straight, white men filled with anomie and purposelessness, who feel left aside by efforts to recognize marginalized groups amidst shrinking opportunity for all. They are soaked in a “neo-reactionary” philosophy of “dark Enlightenment,” which conceives of itself as ditching the moribund legacy of the Enlightenment by opposing democracy, egalitarianism, and multiculturalism.<sup>127</sup> The future, its intellectuals and publicists allege, lies in a combination of ethnic nationalism, social Darwinism, and authoritarianism where the state becomes a corporation which owns a country led by a CEO superman.

Despite affinities and borrowings, the alt-right is situated in an altogether different society than were fascists. Their rebellious performances are more about chasing transgressive frissons than building a mass movement through the “aesthetic politics” that Walter Benjamin thought led inexorably to war.<sup>128</sup> Born in obscure locales of the online ecosystem, the alt-right was initially a cultural phenomenon having more to do with video games than electoral politics. The Internet has provided a virtual forum for playing out fantasies and voicing urges otherwise unacceptable offline. Discourse is dominated by conspiracy theories like QAnon and Pizzagate, childish inside jokes, nerdy slang, obsessions with IQ, gory violence, suicide fantasies and, above all, male fixations

with sexual potency and frustration.<sup>129</sup> Nietzsche’s maxim, “the true man wants danger and play,” is its rallying cry.<sup>130</sup> Hiding behind mazes of irony and vitriol, trolling culture avoids articulating definitive views that can be engaged with constructively. Memes like Pepe the Frog are edited and refined, as responses become responses to responses. This culture is a “blog with no posts and all comments.”<sup>131</sup>

In the 1960s, it was the New Left that rebelled against the repressions of what Herbert Marcuse called the totally administered society. Today the alt-right thinks itself the iconoclastic avant-garde. The main targets of opprobrium are newspapers of record like the *New York Times*, Ivy League schools, and elite cadres of civil servants. These constitute the “Cathedral”: the “self-organizing consensus” that enforces leftwing orthodoxy and tamps down “heretical” views.<sup>132</sup> Provocateurs like Milo Yiannopoulos defy civility restraints and say what is taboo, precisely to transgress. This is justified as free speech defying authoritarian political correctness that polices language and demands recognition of proliferating identities. Their avowed aims are to shock, disgust, and offend older, conventional observers and younger members of “generation snowflake.”

This transgressive aesthetic sets Marcuse against himself. He infamously recommended “repressive tolerance”: an intolerance of speech buttressing the unjust, dominating establishment.<sup>133</sup> He also decried the “repressive desublimation” of liberal culture.<sup>134</sup> Sublimation, the argument went, deflected socially unacceptable instincts into higher cultural pursuits that transcended and opposed society. Art could facilitate critical, negative thinking with transformative import. By contrast, liberal society could accommodate or commodify gratification of almost any instinct. This desublimation looked like emancipation, but was stealthily repressive. It dissolved “artistic alienation” and “liquidat[ed] the oppositional and transcending elements” of culture.<sup>135</sup> Mediated art was replaced by immediate gratification. Desublimation ensured a culture incapable of anything but affirming the status quo.

What Marcuse did not foresee was how neoliberal culture would enforce its own scheme of repressive tolerance. Neoliberal civility is coming to include individual entitlements not to be exposed to anything uncomfortable, to deem disagreeable ideas offensive, and to censor speech labelled as harm. These repressive excesses help transgression of even basic toleration norms appear as transcendent opposition. From this perspective, “disruptive characters” can challenge one-dimensional society through an illiberal aesthetic that releases repressed aggression.<sup>136</sup> Fifty years ago, libertinism qualified as sublimated transgression; today, racial chauvinism, xenophobia, religious intolerance and misogyny seem to the alt-right to bear an aura of artistic alienation.<sup>137</sup>

Third, despite a similar psychological logic, Trumpism misdirects hostility differently than fascism.<sup>138</sup> Economic dislocations, then and now, isolate individuals left at the mercy of destructive social forces. To survive today, each must take responsibility for rationalizing conduct and must repress instincts incompatible with competitive success. It is still true that the “more loudly the idea of rationality is proclaimed and acknowledged” and the more anxiety and repression each thereby experiences, the “stronger is the growth in the minds of people of conscious or unconscious resentment against civilization and its agency within the individual, the ego.”<sup>139</sup>

Senseless frustrations and resentments lead toward the “stunted, irrational mentality” of the authoritarian character.<sup>140</sup> Its essence lies in the simultaneous presence of sadistic and masochistic drives. Masochism motivates “dissolving oneself in an overwhelmingly strong power and participating in its strength and glory,” while sadism aims at “unrestricted power over another person more or less mixed with destructiveness.”<sup>141</sup> Together they promise “symbiotic” relationships that overcome aloneness and license the reemergence of “repressed resentment.”<sup>142</sup> The masochistic bond is based on the gratification of merging with a group. This is done by casting off the repressions of unconscious instincts demanded by modern individuality.<sup>143</sup> By acting out repressed urges, the agitator forges a group of followers by letting them vicariously partake in a “revolt of nature” against civilization.<sup>144</sup> The stereotyped thinking still inculcated by today’s culture market dissolves positive content on which to base the collective bond. Instead, an out-group serves as a symbol on which to focus the projection of “impotent rage against the restraints of civilization.”<sup>145</sup> Sadism directed outwards against difference forges the communal identity of an in-group, and enables feelings of self-affirmation and security among its otherwise dispirited, lonely, and rudderless members.

This rage’s target is not arbitrary.<sup>146</sup> Those persecuted must be weak enough to be equated with mere nature; a group without equal rights can more easily be identified with subhuman bare life. A “pseudo-natural criterion” like race works best.<sup>147</sup> “The term ‘another race’ assumes the meaning of ‘a lower species than man and thus mere nature.’” Against this target, the in-group can “carry out with fury what the personal ego has been unable to achieve—the disciplining of nature, domination over instincts. They fight nature outside instead of inside themselves.”<sup>148</sup> But the out-group must also personify the abstract, invisible, omnipotent socio-economic powers compelling repression. Violence against the scapegoat must appear as a plausible solution to the distressing social upheavals. The out-group must at once be identifiable with the concrete and weak, and with the abstract and powerful. The in-group’s repressed nature can then be let loose against the personification of both the worldly forces subjugating it and its own inadequacies in responding to them.

Jews were at once members of a vulnerable ethnic group segregated from the nation and the “personifications of the intangible, destructive, immensely powerful, and international domination of capital” driving dislocating industrialization and bureaucratic domination.<sup>149</sup> The Jew could be confused with both concrete nature and abstract capital. The scapegoat in neoliberal America is different from that of fascist Germany because the economic anxieties differ. Today’s axis of domination is between the winners and losers in globalized markets. It is now the migrant who can be reduced to the mere nature of bare life and personify all-powerful economic forces. Immigrants are vulnerable, racialized outsiders lacking resources and rights. They are also entrepreneurs responsive to globalization who invest in themselves by crossing borders to become disembedded commodities. As a commodity, migrant labor confronts domestic labor as a powerful object rather than as a mass of vulnerable people. It appears as an alien force capable of driving down wages and further imperiling the competitively disadvantaged domestic worker’s standard of living. Migrants become “rapists” bringing “drugs” and “crime,” linked to gangs of “violent animals, not people,” and threatening invasion through a coordinated “migrant caravan.” “Illegal” bodies must be concentrated in detention centers and, above all, we must “build that wall” to protect the integrity of an insecure nation. Alongside misogyny, racism against African Americans, Muslims, and Jews are, of course, present in Trumpism. But it is the “illegal immigrant,” above all, that fits into the psychological logic of scapegoating in response to the anxieties of the neoliberal economy. They are the indispensable out-group constitutive of Trumpism.

Escape into authoritarianism cannot properly reunite individuals with the world. Authoritarianism is like a neurosis: both “result from unbearable psychological conditions and at the same time offer a solution that makes life possible. Yet they are not a solution that leads to happiness or growth of personality. They leave unchanged the conditions that necessitate the neurotic solution.”<sup>150</sup> The agitator’s followers settle for the pleasure of identifying with his narcissistic self-idealization. As a “great little man,” he is both worthy of love and relatable.<sup>151</sup> By idealizing his leader, the follower can love himself, while purging the “stains of frustration and discontent which mar his picture of his own empirical self.”<sup>152</sup> To meet his audience’s unconscious dispositions, the agitator “simply turns his own unconscious outward. His particular character syndrome” lets him “make rational use of his irrationality.”<sup>153</sup> The result is “expropriation of the unconscious by social control.”<sup>154</sup> Those who are dominated “readily identify themselves with the repressive agency.” Their “reaction to pressure is imitation—an implacable desire to persecute. This desire in turn is utilized to maintain the system that produces it.”<sup>155</sup> Fascism let its

supporters simultaneously resign themselves to submission already familiar from economic subjugation and identify with the total power obedience enabled. The individualized neoliberal subject identifies with celebrated capitalist “winners” like Trump in the same all-encompassing marketplace that has left him insecure and anxious. Both share self-defeating identification with those most empowered by the very institutions—mass organization or individualized competition—that produce their vulnerability and distress.

## Conclusion

It is not accidental that neoliberal authoritarianism has taken special hold in the United States. Bourgeois individualism and distrust of administrative government have been enduring themes of the American liberal tradition. They helped protect Americans from twentieth century dictatorship, but are now the ground on which neoliberal authoritarianism grows. The historical sociological argument that late economic developers without established bourgeois institutions were more prone to fascism may also have been inverted. Neoliberal rationalization has proceeded furthest in the United States. Economic and technological developments have laid the foundations for the America’s neoliberal breed of populist authoritarianism. Erstwhile strengths have become weaknesses, and advancement is degenerating into regress.

Wolin drew a contrast between fascist regimes that “lost no opportunity for dramatizing and insisting upon a radical transformation that virtually eradicated all traces of the previous system” and the contemporary inverted system, which has “emerged imperceptibly, unpremeditatedly, and in seeming unbroken continuity with the nation’s political tradition.”<sup>156</sup> The dictatorships of the twentieth century were “highly personal.” Each was “peculiarly the creation of a leader who was a self-made man” and “was inseparable from its *Führer*, or *Duce*.” Today’s regime is “largely independent of any particular leader and requires no personal charisma to survive.” The “leader is a product of the system, not its architect; it will survive him.”<sup>157</sup>

This is the ultimate significance of framing Trumpism as an outgrowth of neoliberal reason. Trump’s ascendancy is epiphenomenal. His defeat would end a symptom, but not the disease. So long as the hegemony of neoliberal reason endures, the authoritarian tendencies he personifies will too. Single-minded focus on his foibles, excesses, and dangers distracts from the real issue: neoliberal reason has suffused our economy, culture, politics, and personalities; and it is driving escalating contradictions yielding crises, hostilities, irresponsibilities, and neuroses. Subduing fascism required the destruction and reconstruction of Europe; unlike fascism, Trumpism does not drive towards mass mobilization or totalitarian control, but defeating it might require no less—perhaps more.

Neoliberal reason erroneously identifies the consumer’s Robinsonade with liberation. It serves accumulation rather than distribution; severs consumers from common facts and opinions; channels mobilization into populism against the policy state; and makes freedom a burden to escape. Such a one-dimensionally rationalized society is not a rational society. By displacing public deliberation and pragmatic policy-making, neoliberal reason imposes a false, contradictory, and irrational unity. This irrationalism is now personified by the agitator serving as president of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump. It is still very much true today that

in the television show of competing candidates for national leadership, the juncture between politics, business, and fun is complete. But the juncture is fraudulent and fatally premature—business and fun are still the politics of domination. This is not the satire-play after the tragedy; it is not the *finis tragoediae*—the tragedy may just begin. And again, it will not be the hero but the people who will be the ritual victims.<sup>158</sup>

Donald Trump will eventually exit the set of his reality TV presidency. But so long as we continue to distract ourselves with the irrational effects of the dialectic of neoliberal reason rather than confronting its deeper causes, the American tragedy will continue.

## Notes

- 1 Löwenthal and Guterman 1948.
- 2 Abromeit 2016, Gordon 2017, Kellner 2016, Wolin 2016, O’Kane 2017, Bernstein 2017.
- 3 Horkheimer and Adorno 2002.
- 4 Foucault 2008, Brown 2017, Mirowski 2014, Dardot and Laval 2017.
- 5 Foucault 2008, 186, 192.
- 6 Polanyi 2001.
- 7 Foucault 2008, 138, 167.
- 8 Brown 2017.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Dardot and Laval 2017, 87.
- 11 Foucault 2008, 162.
- 12 Orren and Skowronek 2016.
- 13 Pollock 1982, 77.
- 14 Purcell 1973.
- 15 Horwitz 1992, 250-258.
- 16 Habermas 1989.
- 17 Streeck 2017, 40.
- 18 Crouch 2011.
- 19 Streeck 2017, 4.
- 20 Varoufakis 2015.
- 21 Crouch 2011, 117.
- 22 Temin 2017.
- 23 Fraser 2015, 159.
- 24 Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 94.
- 25 Ibid., 96.
- 26 Ibid., 119.

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- 27 Adorno 2001, 40.  
28 Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 97.  
29 Ibid., 125.  
30 Adorno 2001, 51.  
31 Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 95-6.  
32 Ibid., 133.  
33 Adorno 2001, 52.  
34 Ibid., 200-201.  
35 Ibid., 202.  
36 Debord 2000, Thesis 17.  
37 Ibid., Thesis 1.  
38 Best and Kellner 1999, Baudrillard 2019.  
39 Kellner 1989, 51-53.  
40 Baudrillard 2008, 18.  
41 Baudrillard 1994.  
42 Habermas 1985.  
43 Baudrillard 2012, 30.  
44 McIntyre 2018.  
45 Marx 1842, 165.  
46 Post 1993.  
47 Habermas 1989.  
48 Sauerberg 2009.  
49 Benkler 2006.  
50 Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010.  
51 Srnicek 2017.  
52 Baudrillard 1994, 1.  
53 Bauman 2007, 14.  
54 Adorno 2001, 200-201.  
55 Baudrillard 2012, 31.  
56 Ibid., 34.  
57 Wu 2016.  
58 Baudrillard 2012, 28.  
59 Pasquale 2015.  
60 Sunstein 2017.  
61 Ibid.  
62 McLuhan 2001.  
63 Post 1990, 642.  
64 McIntyre 2018.  
65 Post 2012, 33-4.  
66 Arendt 2006, 234.  
67 Habermas 1985, 326, 330.  
68 Manjoo 2008.  
69 McIntyre 2018, 105.  
70 Habermas 1973, 69.  
71 Gill 2015.  
72 Streeck 2017.  
73 Ferguson, Jorgensen, and Chen 2018, 23.  
74 Fraser 2017.  
75 Orren and Skowronek 2017.  
76 Mann and Ornstein 2012.  
77 Gluck, O'Connell, and Po 2015.  
78 Orren and Skowronek 2017, 93.  
79 Eskridge and Baer 2008, 1157.  
80 Orren and Skowronek 2017, 122-123.  
81 Ibid., 17, 118-119, 35.  
82 Skowronek 2014.  
83 Mair 2009.  
84 Skowronek 1997.  
85 Streeck 2014, 126.  
86 Crouch 2004.  
87 Mair 2013, 2.  
88 Fraser 2015.  
89 Streeck 2016.  
90 Cooper 2017.  
91 Crouch 2004.  
92 Laclau 2007.  
93 Müller 2016.  
94 Judis 2016.  
95 Caramani 2017.  
96 Müller 2014.  
97 Mair 2013, 16.  
98 Mair 2009, 16.  
99 Skowronek 2014, 804.  
100 Fromm 1994.  
101 Löwenthal and Guterman 1948, 139.  
102 Ibid., 4.  
103 Ibid., 5.  
104 Ibid., 30.  
105 Ibid., 9.  
106 Ibid., 7.  
107 Ibid., 18.  
108 Ibid., 9.  
109 Barany 2017, Kellner 2016, Wolin 2016.  
110 Wolin 2017.  
111 Boltanski and Chiapello 2018.  
112 Standing 2011.  
113 Bauman 2017.  
114 Markovits 2019.  
115 Han 2015, 8-11.  
116 Lazzarato 2012.  
117 Han 2015, Ehrenberg 2009.  
118 Lazzarato 2012, 30.  
119 Standing 2011, 19.  
120 Case and Deaton 2017.  
121 Kellner 2016, 3.  
122 McAdams 2016.  
123 Gordon 2017, 50.  
124 Han 2017.  
125 Proctor and Schiebinger 2008.  
126 Parker 2016.  
127 Land 2012.  
128 Benjamin 1968, 241-2.  
129 Nagle 2017.  
130 Ibid., 50.  
131 Ibid., 15.  
132 Moldbug 2009.  
133 Marcuse 1970.  
134 Marcuse 1991.  
135 Ibid., 56.  
136 Ibid., 59, 78.



- 137 Love 2016.  
 138 Gandesha 2018.  
 139 Horkheimer 2004, 74.  
 140 Adorno 2001, 50.  
 141 Fromm 1994, 220.  
 142 Ibid., Horkheimer 2004, 81.  
 143 Adorno 2001, 136.  
 144 Horkheimer 2004, 81.  
 145 Löwenthal and Guterman 1948, 88.  
 146 Postone 1980.  
 147 Adorno 2001, 144.  
 148 Horkheimer 2004, 82.  
 149 Postone 1980, 112.  
 150 Fromm 1994, 237.  
 151 Adorno 2001, 142.  
 152 Ibid., 140.  
 153 Ibid., 148.  
 154 Ibid., 151.  
 155 Horkheimer 2004, 79.  
 156 Wolin 2017, 45–46.  
 157 Ibid., 44.  
 158 Marcuse 1991, 104.

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