

Anna Dimitrova*, February 20, 2017

The Risks of Trumpism

Donald Trump's stunning victory over ex-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in the 2016 US Presidential race has rocked America's political life and pulled down the pillars of the international liberal order, thus announcing, some commentators claim, the long-predicted break-up of the Pax Americana.¹ While political analysts are still struggling to imagine how the "Trump era"² will pan out, the term "Trumpism" has made its way, not only to the forefront of media attention, but also to the core of the current public and academic debate on President Trump's uniquely brash and impulsive style of politics, as well as his chaotic and reckless foreign policy strategy, or rather the lack of such.³ Although "Trumpism" has become a very fashionable concept, a closer look at its different interpretations will allow us to reveal the risks which lay behind it, risks which should not be ignored.

Trumpism: an anti-political rhetoric?

According to this interpretation, Trumpism is not a coherent set of policies, neither is it an ideology.⁴ Instead, it is seen as a provocative, anti-politically-correct style and strategy of communication intricately linked to Trump's narcissistic, egocentric and macho personality, his controversial reputation as a self-made real estate mogul and tough decision-maker, and his shocking behaviour, nourished by his TV reality-show celebrity. Celebrity, as some commentators underline, is one of the main features of Trumpism because it has empowered it in at least two ways.⁵

On the one hand, Trump has had no need to cultivate a positive image through the media because his celebrity preceded him. This explains why despite the numerous blunders made during his campaign⁶, which would have been fatal for any other mainstream candidate, his political image not only survived but was reaffirmed by his consistent dismantling of political norms. Neither Trump's insults directed at his political opponents, nor his blatant ignorance about foreign policy issues displayed on numerous occasions, could spoil his image. An example of this is an interview given to ABC in July 2016 in which he asserted that President Putin was not going into Ukraine before being

reminded by journalists that this had already happened and the result was the annexation of Crimea. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Trump's capacity for breaking taboos proved to be very appealing to his voters who took it as proof that he was a real outsider to the Washington elites and politics.

On the other hand, Trump's celebrity also helped him attract those voters traditionally disengaged from politics citizens whose disappointment and anger with the established economic and political system found its expression in Trump's stark rejection of this system.

Hence, Trumpism is also seen as "a personality-fueled movement"⁷ driven by the growing popular rage against the corrupt establishment and its incapacity to fix the US economy and strengthen America's role in the world. This movement has been mostly embraced by working-class, white, angry voters who feel exposed to the economic and existential insecurity caused by the downsizing effects of globalization⁸, who "took Mr. Trump seriously but not literally, even as his critics took him literally but not seriously"⁹. This explains to a large extent why although Trump's public discourses have been confused and contradictory, "coming as they do from a narcissistic media manipulator with no clear underlying ideology"¹⁰, they have nevertheless attracted a lot of Americans for whom Trump dares say what lots of people think but do not dare say out loud. The success of Trump's political communication is also related to the stark linguistic and substantive simplicity of his often extreme ideas, in line with his insistence that he addresses ordinary Americans rather than the elites.¹¹

However, the risk of such a style of communication is that it could easily turn into an empty antipolitical rhetoric and demagoguery and thus be harmful to US politics and democracy.

Trumpism: a unique form of populism?

In contrast with the above-presented definition, the second interpretation of Trumpism depicts it as a populist ideology on the radical right of politics.¹²

More specifically, Trumpism is defined as “a particular kind of American populism composed of a mish-mash of overt patriotism, economic nationalism, along with a vague commitment to the middle class and an aggressive but indefinite foreign policy.”¹³ The concept of “populism” has received numerous definitions and interpretations and has long been at the core of political analysis and debate, even more so since the Brexit vote and Donald Trump’s election as President. Cas Mudde’s classical definition of populism presents it as a “thin-centred ideology” which juxtaposes the “pure people” against “the corrupt elite” and holds that politics should be an expression of the “general will” (*volonté générale*) of the people¹⁴. Drawing on this definition, Inglehart and Norris conclude that populism rests upon three fundamental ideas: anti-establishment, authoritarianism and nativism.¹⁵

Populism is also considered to be “a monist and moralist ideology”¹⁶ because it draws a normative distinction between the concept of “people”, seen as “pure” and “virtuous”, as opposed to the “corrupt elite”, including governmental officials, big business, multinational companies and the mass media. Although the “people” is at the core of populist ideology, this concept remains vaguely defined, either as a purely rhetorical tool that is not associated with any particular group, or as a reference to a certain social class.¹⁷ Trump’s speeches are no exception in his use of this elusive concept, most often underpinned in such “boilerplate” terms as “working families”, “our middle class”, and, of course, the “American people” – a stark contrast to the vividness of his attacks, whether on Mexicans and Muslims or his political rivals¹⁸. A perfect example of how Trump employs populist rhetoric is in his Inaugural Address qualified by commentators as “populist in a way we haven’t seen in many years, if ever” as well as “the most bellicose inaugural address ever given”.¹⁹ Instead of talking about renewal and addressing his message to all Americans, as previous Presidents have done in their inaugural addresses, Trump openly attacks the Washington establishment by claiming that he is giving power back to the American people while at the same time embracing nationalist and protectionist ideas: “We will follow two simple rules: Buy American and Hire American”. Additionally, he pledges a new “America first” vision and announces that he will “eradicate completely from the face of the Earth” “Radical Islamic Terrorism” considered as the most dangerous threat for US national interests

and security.

Furthermore, by stressing the importance of “ordinary people” as opposed to the “others”, populism puts forward ideas related to nativism and xenophobic nationalism, as evidenced in Trump’s speeches. The latter are loaded with xenophobic messages aimed at depicting the “others” as a threat to the jobs of American workers thus provoking “feelings of resentment and disdain intermingled with bits of fear, hatred and anger.”²⁰ Already in his first days in office, President Trump started turning some of his nationalist promises into reality. At least two examples could be given here. The first one is the Executive Order (EO) of January 25, 2017 regarding “Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements” which aims to fight illegal immigration and drug trafficking by constructing a “physical wall” along the US-Mexican border. Signed two days later, another Executive Order “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States”, also called by the media “the Muslim ban”, proved to be even more controversial than the first one and has spurred a lot of debate and protests throughout the US. In fact, this EO bans all immigrants and visa holders from seven majority-Muslim countries, namely Libya, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen, from entering the US for 90 days. Furthermore, it stops all refugees from entering the country for 120 days, except Syrian refugees, who are banned indefinitely. Under the populist banner “Make America Great Again” these two policies embody the fear of foreigners, typical for nativism, the latter combining anti-immigrant sentiment with conspiracy theories about immigrants.

Additionally, some analysts also maintain that this style of conspiracy-mongering brings Trumpism close to Bircherism. The latter refers to the ideology of the ultra conservative far-right advocacy group named the John Birch Society (JBS) and founded in 1958.²¹ Indeed, Trumpism and Bircherism share common features such as the focus on an “America first” vision and Americanism instead of globalism. While the JBS has been working to get the US out of the United Nations for more than 50 years, Trump is similarly putting into question the efficiency of US participation in multilateral agreements and international organizations by declaring his will to withdraw the US from NAFTA, seen as a sovereignty-destroying trade deal, as well as from NATO, characterized by him as an “obsolete alliance”. Trumpism and Bircherism also have in common the rejection of the establishment and the fight against illegal immigration. Trumpism is thus directed not only at

Washington's political elites, but also at a wide range of others – Muslims, Hispanics, women, Chinese, Mexicans, Europeans, Arabs, immigrants, refugees, – all seen as a threat for “ordinary” Americans.

While some authors, like Robert Kagan, prefer not to associate the term “ideology” with “Trumpism” and rather speak of the “Trump phenomenon”, there seems to be a consensus on the idea that “the phenomenon that Trump has created and now leads has become something larger than him, and something far more dangerous.”²² Trumpism is grounded in the politics of exclusion, directed at “a wide range of “the others” whom he depicts either as a threat or as objects of derision.”²³ Moreover, Kagan contends that such a nationalist xenophobic approach could be very dangerous because it creates “mobocracy”, that is to say, the unleashing of popular passions against the “others” which might imperil democracy.²⁴

Trumpism: running government like a business?

There is at least one more facet of Trumpism that deserves some attention. It is one that interprets Trumpism as a unique vision of statecraft based on the idea that government could be run like a business. Of course, this idea has already gained some popularity with Republicans but has never been fully put into practice in the way President Trump obviously intends to do. One only needs to look at Trump's choice of cabinet members to realize that most of them have no government experience. Some of them come from big business and a few of them are even billionaires. Particular examples are Trump's Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, ex-CEO of Exxon Mobil, who owns \$151 million in company stock, known for his close business ties to Russian president Putin. Then there is Secretary of Treasury Steven Mnuchin, former economist at Goldman Sachs, named “the foreclosure king”, expected to implement the largest tax reform since Reagan, and Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross, named “the king of bankruptcy”, billionaire investor opposed to free-trade agreements.²⁵

The problem of assimilating statecraft with business and deal-making is, however, to turn upside down the entire logic of the relationship between the private and the public sector in so far as business is based on profit and efficiency whereas government agencies and departments have not much to do with profit, their main role being that of generating common social values. In other words,

“not everything that is profitable is of social value and not everything of social value is profitable.”²⁶ Moreover, politics cannot be simply treated as a business deal because it is more than a series of trade-offs. Politics, especially in the field of foreign policy, needs a purposeful set of concepts laying down a clear vision, i. e. a “grand strategy”, relating to a country's role in international affairs, as well as its interests, its goals and the means to be used by the government to achieve these goals.

Whether Trumpism is seen as a unique style of political communication, or as a populist ideology, or even as a new vision of governing along the lines of business practice, one could hardly disagree that all these different forms of Trumpism pose many hidden risks for people, democracy and politics both inside and outside the US. To put it another way, Trumpism in its essence is a very risky and dangerous experiment currently running in the US and is aimed at achieving three goals: 1) To break down the whole political system that has been established in the country for many years now and replace it with an anti-political demagoguery; 2) To install populism and xenophobic nativism as a new dominant ideology; 3) To implement an “America first” strategy, based on economic protectionism, extreme homeland security, extreme military strength and “amoral transactionalism”²⁷ seeking to replace multilateralism and international institutions with bilateral agreements based on a win-win rationale. The real question we should be asking today, then, is no longer “How to define Trumpism?” but “How to control the risks caused by Trumpism?”.

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