

DONALD TRUMP'S VICTORY AND THE RISE OF NATIONALISM

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Abstract

The paper is aimed at analyzing Donald Trump's victory in the elections with a view to revealing its ties to the current rise in the nationalistic trend we see all over the world, as well as gauge the possible contribution such a system of thought might have on the further weakening of an already frail European project, exposed to repeated blows brought about by the 'exit' paths chosen, or contemplated, by some of its members – be them voluntary – as in the case of Brexit or suggested by others – as in the case of the discussed, yet not materialized Grexit.

Keywords: nationalism, electoral campaign, political discourse, politics, multiculturalism, globalism

1. Introduction

The study has as a target the analysis of Donald Trump's victory, trying to clarify its ties to the current rise in the nationalistic trend spreading throughout the entire world. Moreover, we would like to ascertain whether such a system of thought might have a connection with the increasing weakening of the European project, which is subjected of late to repeated dangers coming from various directions. We have in mind the 'exit' paths chosen, or contemplated, by some of its members – be them voluntary – as in the case of Brexit or suggested from the outside – as in the case of the discussed, yet not materialized Grexit.

The first part of the paper will be concerned with 'setting the scene', in an attempt to explain how the 'outsider', the eccentric figure of the American billionaire managed to beat the odds and win the elections, in spite of the aggressive campaign led by what he terms in his speech 'the system', embodied by the most influential parts of the mainstream media, and to discuss the mechanisms lying at the basis of such an unexpected victory.

In what follows, we shall explain the connections between concepts like multiculturalism, nationalism and globalism, and discuss in more detail multiculturalism and its ties to politics.

Furthermore, we shall briefly analyze Trump's inaugural speech, by trying to take an as objective as possible stance to what we think is a very well writ – and well delivered – discourse, prepared with a clear audience in mind and which fully reaches its target.

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Lastly, we shall attempt to make the connection to Romanian realities, and see whether the new American administration seems to make a (positive) change in its approach to one of its allies, and what the change in Washington might bring to one of the countries which are very far from America geographically, but might be quite close in terms of common interests.

2. An unexpected victory – the context

Trump's victory was certainly unexpected, being a bitter disappointment to many of the neo-liberals who saw in his winning a threat to an entire system of thought – and subsequent action – put in place by the Clinton administration, continued by the Obamas and which was supposed to be further put into practice by the former First Lady, a veteran of American politics and the media's favorite – Hilary Clinton.

Trump was in this context the wild card, the unpredictable challenger to a very well-oiled machinery which, while advocating change (see the slogan used by Obama in his campaign², "Change we can believe in") was actually carefully continuing on the same lines (to mention just one of the issues on which "change" was just part of the campaign mechanism, quickly discarded once the victory in the elections had been secured: Obama made a point in his campaign of saying he would reduce the number of American troops fighting in the various theatres of war opened by the previous administration. First order of business once in office: more troops deployed in Afghanistan³).

Thus, Obama relied heavily on the lack of interest of the American public in politics, coupled with a rather unstable memory and a tendency to be easily swayed in the direction desired, if the proper mechanisms were used and the same message was repeated often enough (following successfully a rather undignified line of thought, attributed to Joseph Goebbels, the Propaganda officer for Adolf Hitler: "A lie repeated often enough becomes the truth"). The question that arose at that moment was whether this would work again, and whether the huge mechanism of propaganda used by the Democrats would be successful once more. Would they manage to put in office another figure defining for the times and coming just at the right time? After the world premiere represented by an African-American in Washington, the first president of the kind – at that moment, an immense beacon of hope for the African-American minority in the US, as well as, by association, to other minorities hoping to be represented by the extremely charismatic figure of Barack Obama – they were setting the scene for a new premiere: the first woman becoming the most powerful president in the world, "the leader of the free world". The odds seemed to be in their favor, as all the media supported with all its might the new beacon of (we would say) false hope. Would this work?

Short answer: no. The reasons behind the victory might seem (and are) complex, but they boil down, in the end, to a rather simple answer: however naive, as a rule, the American public could not fail to see that the Clinton campaign was actually all too familiar: same faces under different masks, the same kind of politics under different guises. They finally realized that it was impossible for the candidate to go in the opposite direction to that of the fundraisers – as Trump pointed out in one of the presidential debates, Clinton was tied to the interests of those who had backed her up in the campaign, and simply could not keep her promises, and fight Wall Street (as she was claiming), while being financed by the very same extremely unpopular bankers. Follow the money, they say: and the American public finally did.

² Obama actually used an wide array of slogans playing on the idea of change, to mention but a few: "Yes We Can", "Change" versus "More of the Same", "Vote for Change", "Change We Can Believe In", "Our Time for Change", "It's about Time. It's about Change", "Stand for Change" etc.

³ "Troop levels remained roughly constant under U.S. president Barack Obama's predecessor, former president George W. Bush, with around 30,000 American troops deployed in Afghanistan. In January, about 3,000 U.S. soldiers from the 3rd Brigade Combat Team of the 10th Mountain Division moved into the provinces of Logar and Wardak. The troops were the first wave of an expected surge of reinforcements originally ordered by George W. Bush and **increased by Barack Obama**",
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Withdrawal_of_U.S._troops_from_Afghanistan, our highlighting

What is largely unknown though, we think, is just how close the race was⁴. The election ended in a virtual tie, as did the election of 2000. “Approximately half of the voters selected each of the two major candidates. According to the New York Times, Clinton may have received as much as two million more votes than Trump. This may turn out to be an exaggeration, but she certainly won the popular vote. Trump received more electoral votes. If 70,000 more of Clinton’s popular votes had been cast in Pennsylvania, 120,000 more in Florida, and 15,000 more in Michigan, she would have had more than the 270 needed to win the presidency.”

The author of the fragment quoted above, Professor Alan Dershowitz, makes the connection to the Brexit vote, pointing out the fact that “Virtually all the polls including exit polls that asked voters who they had voted for – got it wrong. The financial markets got it wrong. The bookies got it wrong. The 2016 presidential election is more like the Brexit vote in many ways than it is like prior presidential elections. Both Brexit and this presidential election involve raw emotion, populism, anger, **nationalism**. (Britain First, America First), class division and other factors that distort accuracy in polling. So anyone who thinks they know who will be the next president of the United States is deceiving themselves.” (Dershowitz, 2016, our highlighting) He goes on to say: “One reason for this unique unpredictability is the unique unpredictability of Donald Trump himself...” and to explain the role played by the FBI Director, Comey, in the result of the elections (in a nutshell, he talks about a letter to Congressional leaders on October 28, telling them, and the voters, that new emails had been discovered that might be “pertinent to the investigation.” He is, of course, referring to the famous leaked e-mails of Hilary Clinton which can be said to have cost her dearly – more exactly, cost her the presidential seat.) (Dershowitz, 2016)

James Comey, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), was afterwards dismissed by U.S. President Donald Trump on May 9, 2017. Comey had been under public and political pressure as a result of both the FBI’s role in the Hillary Clinton email controversy and the FBI’s investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. elections.⁵ The reasons for the dismissal are not completely clear, but Trump called Comey’s investigation a “witch hunt” and was reportedly “enormously frustrated” that Comey would not publicly confirm that the president was not personally under investigation⁶. This would point to a possible reason for Trump’s letting go of the FBI director whose behavior, while immensely beneficial for Trump in the elections (see above), seems to be rather ambivalent, raising questions as to the real motivations behind the director’s actions.

To conclude, Trump’s victory implied the overcoming of many obstacles, some obvious, some less so. The obvious obstacles include fighting against what could be termed a media lynch, as all the greatest figures on TV and in American – and not only American – newspapers – tried to stop his ascent as much as they could, supported also by some of the most popular figures in Hollywood – to give just an example, we probably all remember DeNiro’s stand against Trump⁷, in connection to the allegations regarding the then candidate’s misconduct when it came to women – one of the many extremely low blows dealt by the Democrat campaign, and further proof that the lowering of the standards did not worry in the least the campaign managers, happy to do whatever it took to secure the Clinton victory, regardless of the moral swamp in which the American public was dragged in order to do so. The less obvious obstacles refer to underground movements meant to stop the ‘outsider’ – and we think that the Comey example presented in detail above fits into this category.

3. The rise of nationalism and multiculturalism

We suggested in the beginning of the paper a connection between Trump’s victory and the rise of a movement which becomes more and more prominent in today’s world, namely the **rise of nationalism**.

We should highlight the fact that nationalism is never a problem in itself, but it is rather a reaction to the complex array of problems posed by globalism. The gigantesque project of a unified world, one in which

⁴ <https://www.newsmax.com/AlanDershowitz/election-history-trump/2016/11/11/id/758449/>

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dismissal_of_James_Comey

⁶ Idem 5

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFpFDyKeqyA>

all the countries are connected and mutually dependent is as dangerous as it is ambitious: the connection we already see and experience plays a double role, acting as a catalyst both for the obvious advantages (free movement of people and capital, more cumulated development) and for the bitter downside: loss of religious and national identity, movement towards a secular and more and more controlling state, unceremoniously peering in the most private aspects of its citizens' lives, and operating further and further reductions of the most basic rights to privacy and freedom regular citizens might claim.

Critics of the movement try to pin nationalism down as the problem, rather than the solution we think it is.

We shall try to explain briefly in the following why this is an approach fraught with logical contradictions, and shed light on one of the issues we think is crucial to the understanding of today's world, influencing political scenes across the globe and ultimately affecting all of our lives.

One of the main tenets of globalism was (and continues to be) **multiculturalism**.

3.1. Multiculturalism

We think a brief discussion on multiculturalism is needed here. We shall resort to some of the ideas presented in a book we wrote, *Highlights of contemporary literature in English*⁸, in which the concept is studied and illustrated in detail.

“Cultural studies – multiculturalism – promote the idea of multiple cultures – which is an extremely seductive concept, and one that cannot be avoided in today's eclectic world. However, when it comes to literary criticism, the notion is riddled with pitfalls – as it insidiously introduces the concept of **cultural relativism**.

At first view, cultural studies seem to support and consolidate the idea of national identity (and other associated concepts like cultural heritage, national and minority languages, and so on). But the effect is actually the opposite – the discipline, as practiced in the leading universities of the West, and from there, expanding all over the world, leads to globalization, to the erasing of boundaries between cultures. Paradoxically, while built on the foundation of cultural difference, multiculturalism ends up with a victory of similarity – thus actually eroding the idea of national culture until the latter is ultimately dissolved.”(Ionciă, 2013, p.9)

This might seem like a rather bold assertion, hard to take in by academics nurtured and formed in an environment in which the very questioning of some of these concepts (multiculturalism, among them) could make someone an outcast, a Trump, as it were, of the academic world. And in an ultimately very pragmatic academic environment, where survival (translated into such terms as tenure, grants, financing, and so on) is tough, conformity ends up being the winning card.

But we would like to appeal to the readers' logical thinking and to their open mindedness in further following our line of reasoning.

“So, what is the goal of cultural studies? Is it to support minority cultures? As we have argued previously, no, as it rather contributes to a dissolution of cultures – beginning with the dismantling of one very important cultural institution (in its wider sense) – that of literary criticism. Is transforming literary studies into cultural studies an enrichment of literary studies? Proponents of multiculturalism would definitely answer ‘yes’ – maybe naively assuming that cultural studies broaden the literary field, and add areas of culture not traditionally considered as a proper subject for academic research (such as pop culture or film studies).

We would say that what cultural studies actually do is to introduce the idea of politics as being essential to literature (following Gramsci's ideas). They support the idea of activism (of the radical kind) and of meaning being subordinate to political context (and restricted to it). Thus, we will have studies on

⁸Diana Ionciă, *Highlights of contemporary literature in English*, Uranus Publishing House, Bucharest, 2013

Shakespeare, to illustrate this – unfortunately – with the very center of the literary canon – that will be made from a strictly political perspective. What is wrong with such an approach? Is it good to take into account the political and social context when studying a work of art – especially one of such importance? Yes, that cannot be bad in itself. What is terrible, though, is restricting the work of art – and implicitly, the author – to the political context – and thus, ultimately, making it a slave to the political objectives of the critic.” (Ionciã, 2013, p.10)

To conclude our short, but, we think, pertinent, incursion into multiculturalism, we would like to say the following:

“Multiculturalism is anti-essentialist, in the sense that it excludes criteria of value (aesthetic value) in favor of others, like gender, race, nationality, trying to argue, seemingly, against discrimination. The effect is though disconcerting: rather than introducing in the curricula of universities, for instance, great authors, like Shakespeare, this leads to the focus on other authors, chosen on the criteria we mentioned above. Why is this wrong? Is it an attempt to ‘open up’ the literary canon? While the intentions may be good (though we doubt it), the results are devastating – instead of enriching the canon, this actually destroys it. When it is not the value of the work that counts, but the profile of the author, then all is lost – in literary criticism. It is not surprising, we think, that cultural studies originate from a left-wing ideology. The discipline applies socialist or – dare we say the word? – Communist principles, making the ‘healthy origin’ of the writers more important than such elitist criteria as artistic value.

Given the arguments presented above, we would like to state our position: we prefer to remain subversive, in the sense of the word used by Harold Bloom, one of the last true literary critics:

To read in the service of any ideology is not, in my judgment, to read at all.”⁹

3.2. Multiculturalism, globalism and nationalism

One might wonder at this point how *multiculturalism* connects to *nationalism* and why a discussion of multiculturalism has its place in a paper about very down-to-earth topics, like politics and winning the elections.

The connection is the following: just as *multiculturalism*, as we hope to have proven above, erodes the very idea of *national cultural values* and *national specificity*, in a very insidious manner, *nationalism* is discarded by its opponents, and turned into a veritable scarecrow, the scapegoat to blame for all the problems of the modern world, by resorting to a twisted logic. The scenario is the following: the world is thrown out of balance, by gradually replacing its old, stable values: namely, national identity, the sense of belonging to an, overall, homogenous national culture, the sense of sharing common values, religious identity, common customs and traditions, folklore, passed down through generations, and so on, so these values are replaced by hollow concepts, like multiculturalism, and its numerous hybrid, derivatives, like cultural studies, gender studies, etc., all pervaded and directed by *political correctness*, this kind of newspeak instilled in all leading universities and centers of culture. Why is this wrong? Because the concepts mentioned first, national and cultural identity, religious values, are *nurturing concepts*, full of the concentrated lives of the peoples from which they naturally stemmed. The second set of concepts, multiculturalism, gender studies, hybridity, are artificial constructs, engineered in the laboratories of the makers of the ‘new world’; their very nature is destructive, as they are based on opposition, they do not have a real foundation, they are negatives: multiculturalism opposes the solidity of a culture allegedly formed only by an ‘oppressive’ majority (the culture of the ‘heterosexual white male’) to the minority cultures that seemingly need to be supported and moved to the center of the canon.

How does this connect to politics?

“Cultural values”, as we were trying to prove, are not formed in a vacuum, nor do they live in one. As abstract as they may seem, they have an extremely concrete existence, and visible consequences to all of our lives. To put it simply, and illustrate this by examples, it is about Halloween being now celebrated

⁹ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (London: Macmillan, 1994) 28, quoted in Diana Ionciã, *Highlights of contemporary literature in English*, Uranus Publishing House, Bucharest, 2013

in countries like Romania, with an overwhelmingly Orthodox majority, despite the opposition of the Orthodox church; it is about our food culture being replaced by American imports (the so called “fast-food culture”), at the cost of our health and our well-being; it is about the dramatic change in youth culture, taking place all over the world, and replacing books, which are always culturally specific (we study in school both local literature and universal literature, and normally learn to see the differences, the specific), with visual media, the Facebook culture, empty of content and featuring a flitting world of moving images, which restrict people’s attention span, until they limit their reading to the swift perusal of titles, quickly approved of by hitting the like button and passing them on, without any critical analysis of the contents.

This “new world” thusly formed creates a new kind of public for politics: the kind of public that is easily moved in a direction or another by resorting to very simple tactics and to manipulation.

The truth is not important anymore, what counts is the image, the package in which you wrap up the candidate: Obama – the cultured, charismatic, humorous African-American, with the perfect family and the strong, role-model wife; Hilary Clinton – the spokesperson for feminism, able to have a family (with its inherent problems, swept swiftly under the rug) and a fulminating political career, while maintaining her poise and perfect composure; and finally, the bad guy – Trump, the vicious, womanizing billionaire, out to cheat the American public and steal the elections, a “punk”, as De Niro unceremoniously called him.

So why did the “punk” win? How did he convince the public that the many voices of the press and of Hollywood, the voices in politics and on the many kinds of screens were wrong?

We are getting back to the question that opened our study.

4. Brief analysis of Trump’s inaugural speech

He won, we think, because he played the risky card of *nationalism*, and played it well, aggressively, maybe, but with conviction, and with something that had been missing in American politics for a very long time, something the public obviously needed and reacted to: *honesty*, being able to tell the truth and expose the liars. This is what he did in his inaugural speech, and we shall quote him here:

“For too long, a small group in our nation’s Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost.

Washington flourished – but the people did not share in its wealth.

Politicians prospered – but the jobs left, and the factories closed.

The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country.

Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs; and while they celebrated in our nation’s Capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land. That all changes – starting right here, and right now, because this moment is your moment: it belongs to you.

It belongs to everyone gathered here today and everyone watching all across America.

This is your day. This is your celebration.

And this, the United States of America, is your country.

What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people.”¹⁰

We shall briefly analyze this part of Trump’s inaugural speech, by trying to take an as objective as possible stance to what we think is a very well writ – and well delivered – discourse, prepared with a clear audience in mind and which fully reaches its target.

What he says here is extraordinary not because of its contents – the fact that Washington has, for a very long time, been ruled by lobby groups, defending the interests of corporations, of the people funding the

¹⁰ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural-address>

electoral campaigns and the politicians, rather than the interests of the American people is an 'inconvenient truth' hiding in plain sight; everyone with a little common sense and some knowledge of American politics could have guessed as much; what is extraordinary is the setting, the fact that this fragment is part of the inaugural speech of a candidate – now president-elect – who had fought hard for a victory against the system he now exposes, the fact that these truths are now being uttered from the highest office in the US, and come together with a promise to end this state of affairs, that has too long benefited the 1% to the disadvantage of the 'silent majority' who, as Trump justly says, has borne the costs of their more or less intentional mistakes all this while.

No more bailouts, he implies, no more hidden ropes.

Dare we hope that this might actually happen? This kind of hope is not restricted, we think, to the American public and American politics. If things actually changed in the US, there is hope of change for other – smaller – countries suffering from the same long-drawn illnesses and bad habits, destroying the very roots of the nations and the spirit of the people. So, were it true, it would be no small matter – it could be a new beginning.

5. Instead of conclusions: what Trump has done with his victory

We think it would be interesting to see, as a conclusion to our study, whether Trump followed in the (unfortunate) footsteps of his predecessor, as far as the keeping of promises is concerned.

According to a very recent article, Donald Trump made a string of promises during his long campaign to be the 45th president of the United States. "Many of them made headlines - from banning all Muslims entering the US, to building a wall along the border with Mexico."¹¹ But has he shifted his stance on a number of key issues?

We shall begin with the issue quoted in regard to the Obama campaign, namely **Troops in Afghanistan**. "Long before he ran for president, Trump posted a number of tweets calling for an end to US involvement in Afghanistan." Afterwards, he has committed the US Army to the open-ended conflict, saying his approach will be based on conditions on the ground and will not have time limits.

As far as the Paris climate deal is concerned, as a candidate, Trump derided climate change as a hoax concocted by China, and the regulations of Paris as stifling to American growth. After three months of prevarications behind the closed doors of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, the president came down decisively on the side near the exits. Quitting the Paris deal, signed by nearly 200 countries, will take a few years but this is unequivocally a promise kept.¹² Regarding Obamacare, one of the most important changes made by Obama to the American healthcare system, this is what Trump has done: one of his trademark rally pledges was to repeal and replace Obamacare – his predecessor's attempt to extend healthcare to the estimated 15% of the country who are not covered. Within two days of his election he softened his approach, saying he wanted to keep the "strongest assets".¹³

Lastly, the famous border wall paid for by Mexico. His vow to build a wall along the US-Mexican border was one of the most controversial of Trump's campaign promises. Trump also insisted that Mexico would pay for it. Mexico maintains it will never pay for it, and even the president has conceded that the US will have to pay up front and then seek reimbursement in some way.¹⁴

To conclude, Trump has already defaulted on some of his campaign promises. However, he did hold to his guns in some respects (see above – the Paris climate deal), which, however questionable his premises, is worthy of respect.

Finally, are there any advantages Romania might have from the Trump victory?

¹¹ *Trump's promises before and after the election*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-37982000>, 19 September 2017

¹² *Idem* 16

¹³ *Idem* 16

¹⁴ *Idem* 16

We would say yes, considering we shall have a more outright and dependable partner. But also no, since our longtime ally will probably keep to the known course: protecting American interests first. Maybe there is a moral to the “fable”: choose patriotic leaders who will defend your country’s best interest – a lesson Romanian voters have yet to learn.

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