

Revolt Against Democratic Modernity: The Unholy Marriage of Trump and his Base



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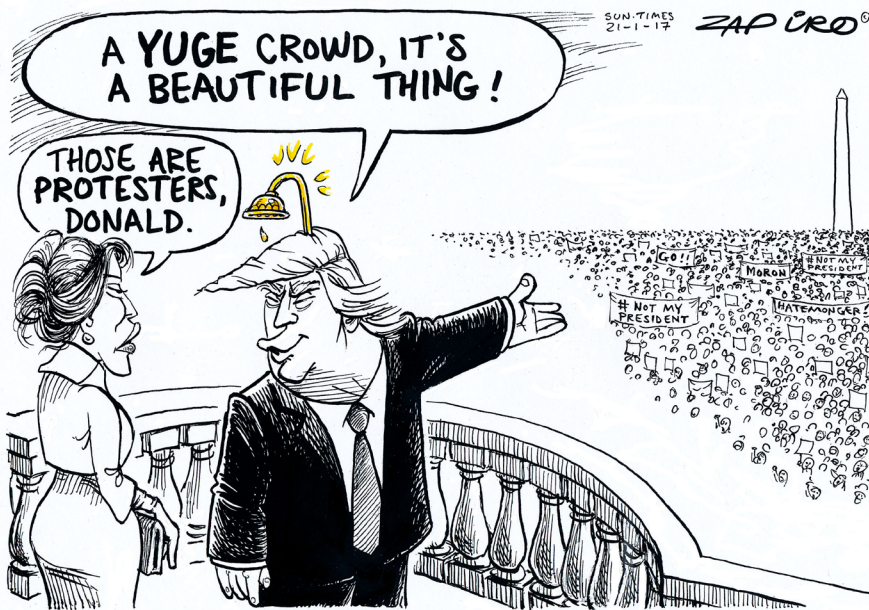
Van Andel Arena in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is one of the places where the history of our time is being written. On stage a few dozen people wait, nearly all white, many wearing red MAGA caps and T-shirts and holding signs praising Trump. The crowd goes wild as he comes up the stairs, beaming, mingling, clapping, giving thumbs up to those who will face the cameras and cheer as he speaks. Everyone in the hall is applauding, taking cellphone pictures, waving their signs. Trump and his "base" are greeting each other lovingly. They are there for him, and he is there for them, in a way that has simply no parallel in American politics.

This nondescript man with the dyed orange hair and red tie exudes an odd sort of magnetism, absorbing the adulation as is due without hesitation or any obligatory touch of shyness. As four years of rallies and tweets reveal, Trump has not simply been imposing himself on a passive audience, but he and his base have been shaping each other. And doing so in the service of a cause. This cause, which brings him to them and them to him, has a name: "Making America great again."

The Trump Phenomenon

Explaining his rise has led to scholars looking into a number of themes the United States has in common with other advanced societies: the current explosion of populism and its contemporary forms; the nature of fascism and signs of its possible revival; shifts in working-class political loyalties; the weaknesses of democratic states and constitutions; the revival of authoritarianism; ethnic nationalism and hostility to immigrants; the consequences and contradictions of neoliberal globalization; and the end of the post-World War II economic boom. But as we focus on the United States and the movement to "Make America Great Again," one of its most remarkable features is how these themes combine with uniquely American ones: a reality television star sounding very much like a patent medicine huckster who has magically gotten people to follow him. Beneath this lie deeper American realities such as the force of evangelical religion and its recent amalgamation with the Republican Party and the unique right-wing politics they generate. And beneath this present lurk unresolved issues and persistent disorders of American life going back to the beginning. Certain features of our history make Americans especially maladapted to cope with contemporary stresses and give their consequences a unique American cast.

Trump rallies have become community gatherings, entertainment events, love-fests between the man and his followers, and group hate rituals aimed at political opponents ("Lock her up!"), the media ("enemies of the people"), and all those in the "elite" who criticize or make fun of Trump and his people. The rallies are also warnings against Others who are threatening America: drug-runners, rapists, killers, and thieves among the would-be Mexican immigrants ("Build the wall!") and terrorists among Muslim and Central American asylum-seekers. They are statements that "we" are taking back



"our" country. These rallies stoke anger and fear as they develop the driving theme of Trumpism: "us versus them."

"Us" rather than "we" fits Trump's audience, even though he often uses the term "movement" to describe what he has created and what they belong to. And of course there are many movement aspects to Trump's rallies: the t-shirts and caps, the sense of belonging to a common cause, the friendliness the members of his base feel for each other as they wait for the rallies to begin, the radio and television personalities they enjoy, sharing hatred of the media at the rallies (the "enemy of the people"), the fact that they often drive hundreds of miles to get to the rallies, which are as much about being together for their shared cause as listening to Trump and loving him. And there are the collective experiences of cheering in appreciation and booing in anger. But Dylan Riley is right to invoke Sartre's notion of *seriality* to describe the way in which they are present together: not to act collectively, but in the fundamentally passive and separated form of listening, watching, jeering and cheering, united by "the image of Trump."¹ Trump works the crowd who is not there to do anything else.

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Trump's Grand Rapids rally, on March 26, 2019, was noteworthy because it was Trump's mass event celebrating Attorney General William Barr's declaration that the Mueller Report gave no grounds for prosecuting Trump for a conspiracy with Russia. Grand Rapids had been the site of Trump's late-night rally just before the beginning of voting on November 8, 2016 and so returning there was a symbolic way of kicking off his campaign for reelection. As usual, Trump read his main lines from a teleprompter, adding his own flourishes and riffs, many of them in interaction with his audience. Although he might conceivably have been triumphant, in *The New Yorker* Susan Glasser observed that Trump actually sounded "angry and victimized; undisciplined and often incoherent; predictable in his unpredictability; vain and insecure; prone to lies, exaggeration, and to undercutting even those who seek to serve him." As Glasser says of every one of Trump's

appearances that week, Trump as usual displayed “a weird combination of perpetual victim and perpetual bully, whose one constant is to remain on the attack.”²

Which means that “us versus them” remains his strongest theme. Trump attacked the press corps as the “fake news” media, and singled out the “deep state” and the Democrats responsible for the “single greatest hoax in the history of politics in our country.” He revisited with great enthusiasm his pre-election rally in 2016, spoke of expanding automobile production in Michigan, and with no advance notice announced his support

for a major initiative to restore the Great Lakes, touting one achievement after another and attacking his critics while careening incoherently from topic to topic as if he was drunk. While his audience enthusiastically or dutifully cheered everything he said and booed the members of the media (“Fake news!”), the strongest applause lines were about immigrants (the lottery system allows countries to send their “worst people”), closing the southern border (“Build the wall!”), and ending abortion.

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We can learn something about who these people are not by comparing Trump’s rally with the one that kicked off Bernie Sanders’s 2020 campaign three weeks earlier in Council Bluffs, Iowa. There too a strong “us versus them” mood prevailed, but about a very different “us” and a very different “them,” and with a very different tone. Despite the affectionate “Bernie, Bernie” chant that broke out at least once, there was little personal interaction between Sanders and the crowd, and his one-hour speech, although frequently cheered, was fully written, much drier, and more analytical. When the crowd chanted his name, he broke into his text and said: “It ain’t Bernie, it’s you. It’s not me, it is us.” The crowd responded with a new chant: “Not me, us! Not me, us!” He explained: “The truth is that the powers that be, they are so powerful, they have so much money, that no one person, not the best president in the world, can take them on alone. The only way we transform America is when millions of people together stand up and fight back.”³ This focus on building a movement, especially given the long list of changes Sanders is calling for, is the opposite of Trumpism, which is after all being treated by many researchers as a case study in authoritarianism. While Trump once said, “I alone can fix it,” Megan Day wrote about Sanders: “No viable presidential campaign has ever been so encouraging of agitation from below.”⁴

Despite the many problems discussed by Sanders, his words convey no sense of personal grievance from Sanders towards “them,” but rather a series of systemic and political criticisms of America’s rising inequality and proposals for lessening it. The “them” after all was the capitalist system, and the domination of American society by the largest corporations and the wealthiest billionaires, unregulated by the government and in opposition to “us,” the vast majority. Sanders focused on the power and riches of the corporate elite, Wall Street, the pharmaceutical industry, and the billionaires, including by name the Koch brothers. Beyond these criticisms the speech was a series of policy proposals, all oriented on increasing the democratic political power of the vast majority, improving their health and material well-being, and curbing the power and riches of the “one percent.” It was intellectually far more demanding than a Trump rally, and also far less entertaining. Trump is a showman, Sanders is not. And more important, Trump’s base is simply not interested in the kinds of issues Sanders raises, although by talking about the auto industry Trump was indirectly gesturing towards the “jobs” theme that he had made so much of in 2016.

When Sanders talks about “wealth” he always has in mind a criticism of those who have too much, done in the name of those who have none at all or far too little. The contrast

on this score couldn't be greater with a man whose career as a reality television star was based on his role as a jet-setting all-powerful mogul, and in a sense was all about his personal wealth. Contrary to the unspoken norm in American politics, Trump and his base seem to think that stressing great wealth is an advantage. Thus, after singling out several political figures in Grand Rapids, Trump gave a shout-out to one Stanley Cher, "a friend of mine who's very rich. He shouldn't be shy. He's one of the biggest builders and real estate people in the world, one of the biggest owners of property. I shouldn't introduce him because you guys won't like him, because he's a big owner of property. But you own property, he just owns more of it than you do. . . Stanley, how much did you make this month?"

Acknowledging a supporter in this crass way would have been bizarre any place other than a Trump rally. Obviously, Trump and his people are not remotely motivated by the widening gap between the rich and everyone else that characterizes the Sanders campaign. Whatever considerable resentment they feel, it is not resentment about class or privilege. This suggests how far Trump and his base are from the concerns that have motivated three generations of embattled progressive Americans: beginning with the labor movement of the 1930s and then the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, and in the years that followed, out of a sense of solidarity and mutual struggle, movements of women, Hispanics, student activists, and gays and lesbians. It was this history that Barack Obama took as the meaning of American life when he leaned on it on the campaign trail in 2008. His use of "Si se pueda - Yes we can" situated his groundbreaking candidacy for president in relation to such movements.⁵

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Trump's base

Who then is Trump's base? Today's white working-class? One of the most widely trumpeted conclusions after the 2016 election was that Trump won because the white working-class voted for him. Article after article told this story, based on exit polls, anecdotal evidence, and then research. This line of analysis suggested that eight years after Obama's first election, Trump's victory was the result of a working-class defection from the Democratic Party owing to its support for neoliberal globalization and its resulting deindustrialization. Trump promised to reverse this and bring back industry and jobs. Article after article used a kind of class analysis that begins with the transformation of the American economy over the past generation and focuses on the devastation of the industrial heartland: Western Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Those who tell this story from the left emphasize that Trump is after all, a capitalist who campaigned by appealing to industrial workers hurt by deindustrialization, railing about the "elites" who ignored their suffering and calling for government action to aid them, but who, upon being elected, moved towards tax cuts for the rich and corporations, deregulation, austerity, right-wing economics, and massive corruption. This was smoke and mirrors from the multi-billionaire who happily advertised his wealth while claiming to be responding to the damage wrought by neoliberal globalization and successfully seduced the "left behinds", the industrial working-class. A recent analysis along these lines was done by Marxist Vincent Navarro, who follows the same thread on both sides of the Atlantic through several national instances of today's "populism." He cites a worsening of workers' conditions due to neoliberalism and the rise of nationalist and populist parties. Accordingly, for Navarro, the task for the left is to win back working-class voters from the populists of the right with an authentic left response to the crisis.⁶

Evidence for the working-class wave was broadcast widely immediately after Trump won on November 8, 2016. Nate Cohn's "Why Trump Won Working-Class Whites"⁷ appeared the next day in the *New York Times*. Later Cohn succinctly summarized what has become the standard conclusion: "Mr. Trump's strength among white working class voters, particularly men, put him over the top in the decisive battleground states in 2016."⁸ Cohn is here repeating the conclusion of the research conducted by *The Atlantic* and the Public Religion Research Institute, which showed that Trump won white working-class swing voters over Clinton by a margin of two to one and then proceeded to explain how this happened.

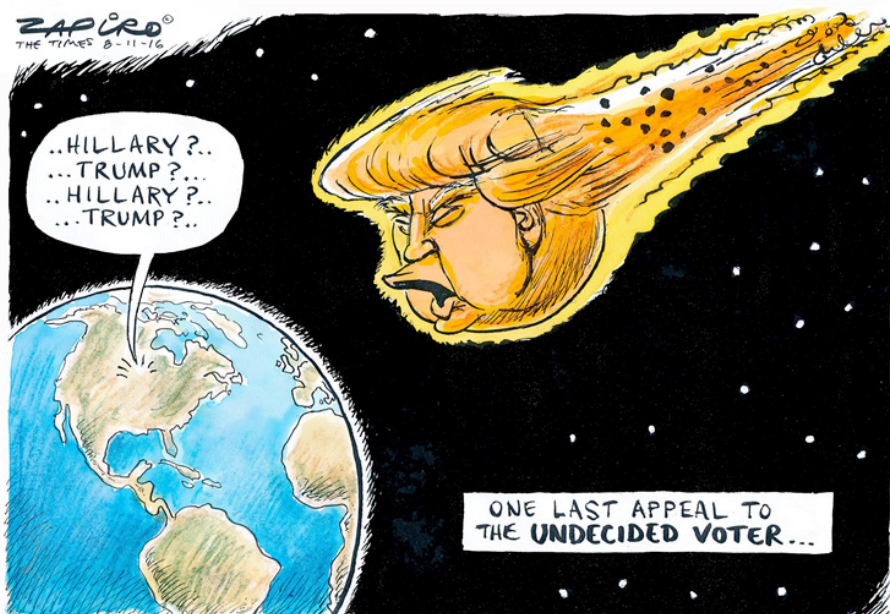
Nationally union households did indeed shift towards Trump from Obama, but by how much? Davis replies: "The phenomenon is real but largely limited to a score or so of troubled Rust Belt counties from Iowa to New York where a new wave of plant closure or relocation has coincided with growing immigrant and refugee populations."

But it did not happen. Pundits made far too much of what Mike Davis describes as the "modest and localized defection of working-class Democrats to Trump."⁹ The confusion was helped along by the distorted (and condescending) definition of "working-class": anyone without a college degree. As Kim Moody points out, this 70% of the population, 135 million American adults without degrees, includes nearly fifteen million white small business owners with an average income of \$112,000. Since over 90% of these say they vote regularly, and nearly two-thirds consider themselves conservatives,

along with spouses the math reveals that they amount to a majority of Trump's thirty-five million white non-college degree voters. To them must be added millions more white non-degree holders who tend to vote as conservatives (managers, supervisors, police, real estate and insurance salespeople). Clearly, the fact that a huge number of Trump's voters are without college degrees tells us nothing about his working-class support.

The other place to look, as Moody points out, is the union household vote, with the caveat that many union members want to see themselves and are widely regarded as middle class, such as teachers, government employees, and nurses. Nationally union households did indeed shift towards Trump from Obama, but by how much? Davis replies: "The phenomenon is real but largely limited to a score or so of troubled Rust Belt counties from Iowa to New York where a new wave of plant closure or relocation has coincided with growing immigrant and refugee populations." There was considerable anecdotal evidence of union members and locals supporting Trump, and his narrow victories in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan were decisive in winning a majority of the Electoral College. But as Moody and others point out, Trump did not win an extraordinary share of union household voters. The reality is that in most elections over the past forty years, around 40% of union workers and family members have voted Republican.¹⁰ This may be an anomaly compared with Europe, but it is a persistent feature of American political life. The union household figure for Trump in 2016 was a much-ballyhooed 43% of the total union vote, but in 1980 Ronald Reagan won 45% of union household votes, in 1988 George H. W. Bush also won 43%. Forty percent voted for Romney in 2012, and four years later Trump's share was 3% higher. That three percent swing is not shocking – the swing from Carter to Reagan was 7%, and the 2004 election also saw a 3% swing for the incumbent George W. Bush. Thus there was no white working-class landslide for Trump.

Still, the numbers demand further analysis, in two ways. First, white working-class swing voters amounted to over eight hundred thousand union family voters nationwide. Michigan's Macomb County, home of the heavily unionized "Reagan Democrats" of 1980, saw a shift of 32,000 from Obama to Trump, which was more than enough to swing the state for Trump. Trump won Wisconsin by 23,000 votes and Pennsylvania by 44,000, and in each case a 3% union voter swing towards the Republican makes up a



considerable share of the winning margin, although not all of it. A second figure is no less important, and accounts for the rest of the winning margin: the drop of 7% in the Democratic union household vote was much greater than the rise in the Republican vote. As Moody says, many "union household members defected to a third party, refused to answer the question when surveyed, or didn't vote and weren't surveyed." Without the Republican gain in union voters over 2012, and the Democratic loss of even more, Trump would not be president.

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So the hotly contested question of the working-class vote for Trump must be resolved by the numbers. Are there "Trump" Democrats? Mike Davis answers: "Several hundred thousand white, blue collar Obama voters, at most, voted for Trump's vision of fair trade and reindustrialization, not the millions usually invoked."¹¹ The relatively small shift in the union vote was not a landslide, but was a significant contributor to Trump's paper-thin victory. This evidence about labor support for Trump needs to be balanced with other evidence from 2016 suggesting that what Davis calls "the *Sturmtruppen* who mobbed the rallies"¹² were far more middle-class than working-class. He quotes an *Economist* journalist who, at more than a dozen rallies during the year before the election "met lawyers, estate agents, and a horde of middle class pensioners, and relatively few blue collar workers."¹³

Religion and Trump supporters

What did these Trump supporters – and those cheering him in Grand Rapids – have in common? The most remarkable, most uniquely American, fact about Trump voters, as revealed by exit polls, is that 81% of them selected "white born-again or evangelical Christian" as their religious identity. They turned out on election day at higher rates than their share of the population, and provided Trump with nearly half of his votes. What does it mean to identify in an exit poll with the intense and decentralized Christianity that has displaced the shrinking mainline denominations since the mid-1970s? Answering this may turn out to entail as many difficulties as talking about who is working-class. For

example, unlike Catholicism or any of the large old-line denominations, evangelicals have no central authority or agreed-upon creed. The Southern Baptist Convention, by far the largest gathering of Evangelical churches, is radically decentralized by comparison and considers "strong believers" to be those who accept the Bible as the highest authority, Jesus as their savior, and his death on the cross as their path to eternal salvation, as well as a duty to encourage others to follow Jesus. Of course, many of those who call themselves evangelicals are not strong believers, and still others may consider themselves to be "born again" through Jesus but without necessarily following any other tenets of belief or behavior. For many rooted in local communities, a high value is placed on church attendance as a core life-activity, but others attend only sporadically or not at all.¹⁴

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Given the numbers (over thirty million voters) and their range of beliefs and practices, it might be tempting to take the label with a grain of salt, indicating a vague identification with a broad community and its culture.¹⁵ But this is immediately dispelled by looking at the patterns of belief and the political profile of white evangelical or "born-again" Christians. According to the Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study, white evangelicals have a very distinct religious and political profile. When compared with other major religious traditions among whites, they believe in God much more, pray much more,

go to church much more, believe much more in the literal truth of the Bible. On hot-button religious-related issues, many more of them oppose evolution, abortion, homosexuality, and same sex marriage, and on political issues, many more of them oppose climate regulation, large government, and government aid for the poor.¹⁶ And they have acted on these beliefs since the mid-1970s. No American can fail to notice their presence in a political world roiled again and again by issues of abortion, contraception, school prayer, equal rights for women, homosexuality and gay marriage, and controversies over the teaching of evolution and climate change. In the process, those religious believers most exercised by these issues have managed to pass legislation and elect school board members, state legislators, members of Congress, senators, and presidents, to the point where "evangelical" has become as much a political as a religious identity.

Their political loyalty follows the generational alignment among Christian conservatives (discussed at length by Kevin Phillips in *American Theocracy*¹⁷), who since Ronald Reagan have formed the base of the Republican Party and, in Frances Fitzgerald's pithy summary, "favored the rich in exchange for opposition to abortion and gay rights."¹⁸ The 81% vote for Trump was only a slight increase over the already high numbers that had gone for Mitt Romney, John McCain, or even born-again George W. Bush. And even in the face of the Democratic wave in the 2018 mid-terms, under Trump's urging, 75% of white evangelicals still voted Republican. Still, 2016 surprised many people who have anticipated decline and discouragement among right-wing Christians, whether for organisational, demographic, or historical reasons. After all, the days of Jerry Fallwell and the Moral Majority are behind us, the Supreme Court has ruled conclusively in favor of gay marriage, sympathetic and even evangelical Republican presidents have proved to be a disappointment, and the intransigence of evangelical moralizing about such issues as gay marriage has turned away many in the younger generation. It is said that the negative political associations have led many African Americans to shun using the word "evangelical" to describe themselves. On the one hand, white evangelicals clearly seem to be on the downturn, as forcefully summarised by the title of Robert P. Jones's 2016 *The End of White Christian America* and analysed at length at the end of Fitzgerald's *The*



Evangelicals. On the other hand, candidate Trump was clearly no model of Christian living. How then to explain his highest-ever share of evangelical votes and their high turnout?

Was this spurred by their ultra-conservative leaders? In fact, the question of supporting Trump created a dilemma for many evangelical leaders. During the Clinton years one of them, James Dobson, had spoken of a "profound moral crisis" because that Democratic president had lied to Congress about his affair with an intern, arguing that no "person who lacks honesty and moral integrity is qualified to lead a nation and the world!"¹⁹ How then is liar and bullshitter Donald Trump, author of endless un-Christian actions both personal and political, including, since his election, separating immigrant families at the southern border – how is such a candidate strongly supported by leaders like Dobson? Despite notable early defections on moral grounds from among prominent evangelicals (notably Russell Moore of the Southern Baptist Convention), key leaders such as Dobson, Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell, Jr., and Robert Jeffress backed and continue to strongly back Trump. They have often cited specific reasons such as his opposition to abortion and appointment of conservative Supreme Court justices, but it seems as if their support is more than transactional. These leaders' enthusiasm for Trump seems to mirror, perhaps even follow, the fervor among those who have flocked to his rallies.

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This relationship, unlike anything ever seen before in American politics, was built during the primary season. Before the primaries began, a meeting of national evangelical leaders agreed to support Ted Cruz, openly devout and son of a pastor himself. Sounding as a preacher as much as a politician, very early in 2016 it was thought that Cruz would draw strong support from white evangelicals. And at first, many did indeed favor him as some in the national Republican and church leadership initially criticized Trump as unfit to become president. But the first few primaries showed Trump's strength and the

beginnings of the relationship that can only be called “Trumpism.”

A look at the South Carolina Republican primary exit data is revealing about Trump's strengths over Cruz: while only a small number (8% for Trump to 34% for Cruz) agreed that he “shares my values,” most of the voters (78% for Trump to 8% for Cruz) liked Trump because he “tells it like it is” and a very high proportion thought that he “can bring needed change” (45% compared with 19% for Cruz). Obviously not being a politician was one of his advantages. His greatest area of policy support was immigration. Trump won the primary with 32.5% of the vote, followed by Marco Rubio with 22.5% and Cruz with 22.3%.²⁰

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The South Carolina primary was Trump's breakthrough. Two weeks later, after Super Tuesday, he became unstoppable. By June Trump met with over a thousand evangelical leaders, and soon after formed an evangelical cabinet of advisers. As Mike Davis said, Trump still had to line up the “big battalions of the GOP, especially the evangelicals who had supported Ted Cruz. Trump's stroke

of genius was to let the religious right, including former Cruz cheerleaders David Barton and Tony Perkins, draft the Republican program and then, as surety, to select one of their heroes as his running mate.”²¹ That platform was noted by the *New York Times* to be “the most extreme Republican platform in memory.”²²

By that point, Trump's base had been built and their leaders followed. Interestingly enough, the base was moved by different concerns than the evangelical leadership. As Myriam Renaud points out, in their relative indifference to the “amped up” issues of abortion and appointments to the Supreme Court, there was indeed an “opinion gap between the people in the pews and their clergy.” While the clergy was concerned about abortion and the Supreme Court, in contrast to their pastors, a huge percentage of the rank and file showed greatest concern about terrorism, the economy, immigration, foreign policy, and gun policy.²³

But no list of conventional issues could capture what was sweeping across the land. Trump's relationship with his supporters was becoming cult-like. His audience went to hear him say the unexpected, reject established politenesses of politics, speak dogwhistle racism, and flirt with violence. What explains the fact that Americans could elect a candidate, and then get behind a president, who enthalls people with his anger and delights them with nasty personal attacks on his opponents? Something is afoot that has led tens of millions of people to respond to his special intensity and love him for his outlandishness. What is that?

Trumpism

This leads to discussions of fascism and authoritarianism, and to a related obsession with the man himself, as by religion writer Stephen Mansfield: “Donald Trump is an undisciplined man of unguarded tongue, ill-focused mind, and turbulent soul. He has been ruled most of his life by rage and the will to win, by the animal forces competition surfaces in him.”²⁴ Yet how is it possible that he has become the man fitted to the moment, his angry disorder becoming normalized because it fits the angry disorder in the country? To answer this, we must free ourselves from the prevailing fixation on Trump as the explanation for Trumpism. True enough, Trump has a peculiar kind of charisma: very ordinary bearing and diction, repeated chest-thumping references to being very rich, a sense of his own genius, possessed of a near-total freedom to say and do anything, and a con man's ability to know his audience. But these traits can become charisma only insofar as they express the historical moment. Trump's charisma is generated when his

traits resonate with his audience's disposition and needs, including their values, angers, and evasions. The question is, how is Trumpism produced in his "base"?

Long before Trump, white evangelical Christians felt alienated from most of the society's main trends. Since the latter part of the nineteenth century they have evolved as a religious force in opposition to many features of modern American life. Indeed, as scholars of fundamentalism and evangelicalism often point out, their alienation has been at the core of their theology. While discussions of Trump's base often stress that they have been "left behind" by both political parties and their commitment to neoliberal globalization, fundamentalists and evangelicals have always felt "left behind" by modernity: its culture, its science, its commercialism, and its ever-more-relaxed morality.

Those Dayton, Tennessee townspeople who cheered William Jennings Bryan's attack on evolution in 1925 were described by arch-modernizer H. L. Mencken in his nationally-syndicated reports to the *Baltimore Evening Sun* as "yokels," "morons," "Babbitts," "hillbillies," and "peasants."²⁵ From beginning to end (and ever since) the sensational Scopes Trial was regarded by Mencken's mainstream as being about living in the present versus clinging to the past, science versus irrationality, enlightenment versus prejudice, and education versus ignorance. The prosecution and Bryan were almost

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universally regarded as having undergone a humiliating defeat. As the story goes, in the face of their national embarrassment, anti-evolution fundamentalists withdrew for a generation from arenas of competition against religious modernists and slowly built their congregations, networks, seminaries, and churches as well as increasingly popular forms of mass outreach.²⁶ But the lenses through which the secularized mainstream see and judge all experience make no sense to believers whose formative religious experience is to be "born again" through accepting Jesus into their hearts. As evangelical premises grow more and more remote from the mainstream, evangelicals cannot help but feel judged and criticized, and unfairly, by the dominant outlook. For one thing, miracles and individual illumination have no standing as scientifically testable and replicable forms of evidence. The norms of a scientific-minded, knowledge-centered, and secular culture have to provoke constant defensiveness among those who are centered in the Bible, whether or not they are being explicitly criticized. Moreover, Supreme Court decisions against religion in public places, prayer in public schools, and laws mandating the teaching of creationism, make it seem that the separation of church and state is really a form of war against religion. Those who see it that way wage "culture war" as a form of self-defense. Furthermore, even in softer forms, mainstream arrogance towards Bible-believers is never far away. Barack Obama: In small-town Pennsylvania "they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations." Hillary Clinton: half of Donald Trump's supporters belong in a "basket of deplorables" characterized by "racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic" attitudes.

Whatever other indignities anti-evolution, Bible-believing white evangelicals may experience in today's America, their resentment towards highly educated, globalizing, multicultural elites of the large cities who dominate mainstream culture is constantly being stoked, even if no one intends to do so. At every turn, they encounter sophisticated, self-congratulatory, future-oriented, multicultural, global forces and individuals, the society's insiders. Inevitably feeling awkward in their America, no wonder they talk about "taking back our country." They have found their champion in another resentful outsider.

What the man says and how he says it create a powerful bond with his “people,” who experience him as honest, supporting them, and determined to change things. “He tells it like it is” is a common refrain, meaning “how we *really* feel” beneath all usual restraint and politeness. He is expressing and legitimizing “us” and our feelings about

“them.” As William Davies points out in *Nervous States: Democracy and the Decline of Reason*, this is not peculiar to Trumpism, but contemporary societies are increasingly characterised by “individuals and governments living in a state of constant and heightened alertness, relying increasingly on feeling rather than fact.”²⁴ Unwaveringly behind him and not troubled to think, they devour each outrageous statement and eagerly anticipate the next. As in “shithole countries,” “They’re rapists,” “Grab them by the pussy,” “Our country is full.” Them: immigrants, terrorists, Muslims, angry women, blacks, Democrats, liberals, elitists.

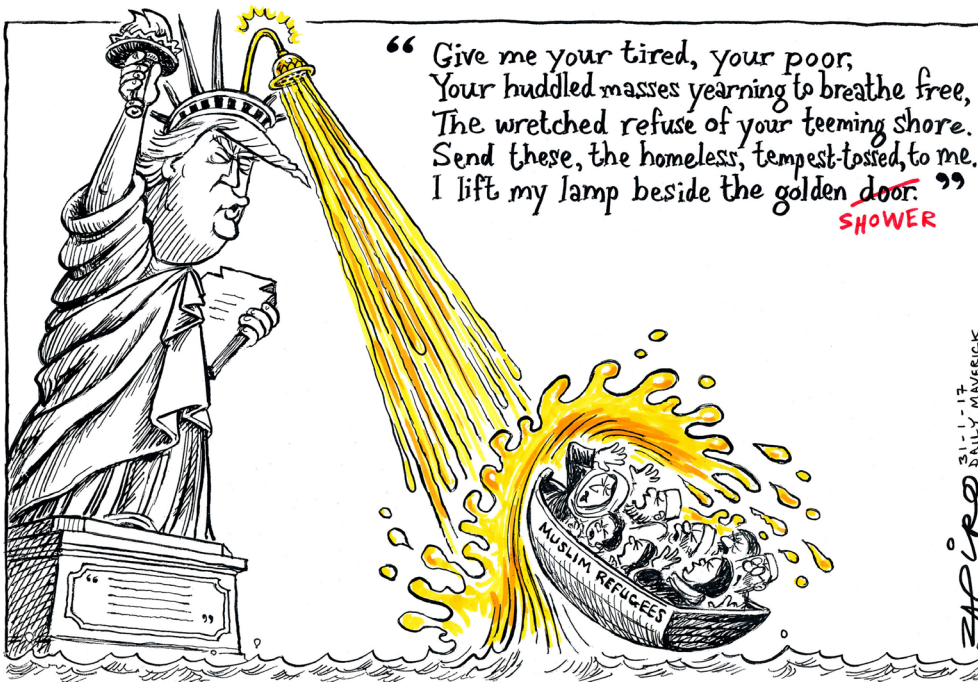
Trumpism is a response to a crisis. The upheaval lying behind the intense embrace of Trump is suggested in a survey taken before the 2016 election: a majority of whites (56%) said that American culture and way of life has mostly changed for the worse since the 1950s, compared with a huge majority (over 60%) of African Americans who believed it had changed for the better.

What brought this resentment to a boiling point in 2016?

Trumpism is a response to a crisis. The upheaval lying behind the intense embrace of Trump is suggested in a survey taken before the 2016 election: a majority of whites (56%) said that American culture and way of life has mostly changed for the worse since the 1950s, compared with a huge majority (over 60%) of African Americans who believed it had changed for the better. Among the whites, evangelical Protestants were the most dissatisfied of all, 74% of them agreeing that things have gotten worse.²⁷ Another study gives a major reason why: a majority of whites believe that whites are being discriminated against in American society today.²⁸ Whatever other reasons evangelical Christians may have for gloom – abortion, homosexuality, pornography – more of them (57%) say that there is discrimination against Christians in the United States than acknowledge discrimination against Muslims (44%).²⁹

Amid the explosion of multicultural and secular America, white Christian America has been experiencing shrinking numbers and shrinking importance. This is the central theme of *The End of White Christian America*, published in early 2016. In it, Robert P. Jones makes an extended analysis of the historical displacement of white Christians, and especially those considering themselves evangelicals.

Jones begins with descriptions of three great twentieth-century monuments to White American Protestantism, the mainline United Methodist Building in Washington, D.C. (1928), the ecumenical Interfaith Church Center in New York (1960), and the evangelical Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California (1980), all of which have since been abandoned either to other owners or other purposes. After replacing mainline churches as the demographic center of White Christian America in the late twentieth century, and after a generation of dominance, including wielding considerable power in the Republican Party, evangelical Christian churches, most notably the Southern Baptist Convention, are now themselves losing numbers and importance. Jones’s study³⁰ takes off from two significant events: the launching of “Black Lives Matter” in 2014 and the 2015 Supreme Court decision legalizing gay marriage. He might also, of course, have mentioned the transformation of the role of women in much of America, which focused the evangelical mind over the past generation on the issue of abortion. A wholly unanticipated drop in relative and absolute numbers of white evangelicals is being caused by a steep falling off of churchgoing among those age 18 to 29. Moreover, they are following in their parents’ religion at a far lower rate than mainline Protestants and Catholics. On the one hand “nones” – those professing no religion – have risen steeply compared with any time in the



past, and now are approaching 40% of the entire younger generation. On the other hand, while white evangelical Protestants now comprise perhaps one-sixth of the U.S. population, they make up only 8% of 18 to 29-year-olds, meaning that white evangelical children are half as likely to follow their parents' religion as mainline Protestants.

During the high tide of white Christian evangelical political presence between the Reagan and Obama presidencies, all Americans became aware of its doom-laden messages of moral decline allegedly caused by feminism, abortion, and homosexuality. Jones strikingly captures the contrast between its social, political, and cultural nostalgia and the forward-looking struggle for increasing equality symbolized by Obama's election. A Happy Thanksgiving email was sent out by the right-wing Christian Coalition shortly after Obama's reelection in 2012. It features a black and white photograph of a white family around a dining-room table with the caption: "Saying grace before carving a turkey at Thanksgiving dinner, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., 1942." Jones comments: "The multiple layers of meaning in this single image make it a nearly perfect exhibit of the lost utopian world of white Christian America."³¹

The contrast couldn't be sharper with Obama's second inaugural address the following January, when the African American president brought the Declaration of Independence up to date by expounding a progressive vision of how American history expanded what it means to be "created equal." The litany included forming a government of, by, and for the people, ending slavery in a bitter Civil War, creating a modern market economy governed by rules to ensure fair play, providing transportation networks, schools, and colleges, protecting the vulnerable including through Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security and on and on, stressing above all the need for collective action to meet collective needs. By citing "Seneca Falls, Selma, and Stonewall" Obama paid tribute to past struggles, and then he ended by looking to a future where women and men

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will be paid equally, African Americans guaranteed the right to vote, gays recognised as equal, schoolchildren are protected from gun violence, and where immigrants will be received warmly. What could be further from the Christian Coalition's narrowly conceived nostalgia than Obama's vision of a hopeful future and his welcoming of collective struggle and government action?

The changing demography

Before the 2016 election Trump told his supporters: "This is our last chance to save our country and reclaim it for we the people. This is it. You don't have another chance." It should be obvious what he meant and how his audience heard him. Trump struck a nerve among white evangelical Christians in the wake of the Obama presidency. These people were angry about cultural and social changes that had been making most of them troubled about the present and fearful of the future. Jones's book, anchored demographically, focuses on the slow, steady *experience* of their displacement from being the essential people in a Christian country, the awareness that "America's religious and cultural landscape is being fundamentally altered."³²

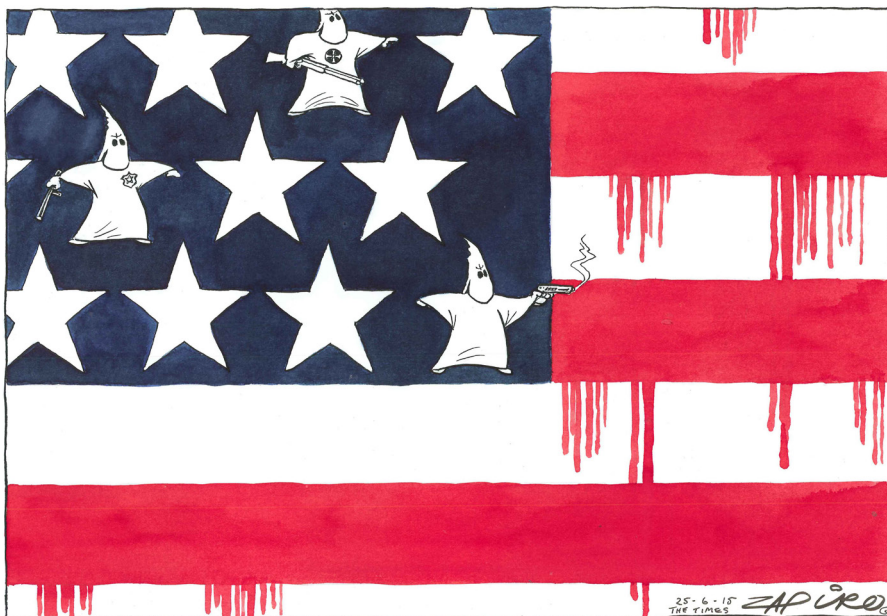
But there is also a uniquely American fact about Trumpism: those who voted most solidly for Trump are not whites in general but those answering to the label of "born-again or evangelical Christian." Indeed, a never-mentioned fact about 2016 is that, among non-evangelical whites, Hilary Clinton came surprisingly close to Trump, 33% to 36%.

According to research conducted by political scientist Diana Mutz, the 2016 election did not turn on the economic troubles of those who had lost jobs or who were unhappy with their wages. This supposed motivation is directly contradicted by the results of her post-election study:

Evidence points overwhelmingly to perceived status threat among high-status groups as the key motivation underlying Trump support. White Americans' declining numerical dominance in the United States together with the rising status of African Americans and American insecurity about whether the United States is still the dominant global economic superpower combined to prompt a classic defensive reaction among members of dominant groups.³³

In short, the white vote for Trump was about the "declining white share of the national population," a phenomenon leading the dominant group to feel threatened even if it still controls political and economic power. Living in a society whose entire national history has been structured around institutions and attitudes of the superiority of one group over another, as that group realizes that it will soon be a minority, as it sees members of the formerly inferior group as equal in positions of authority, it cannot help but experience racial status threat. An African American man becomes elected and the battle cry becomes "Take America back!" "It is not racism of the kind suggesting that whites view minorities as morally or intellectually inferior, but rather, one that regards minorities as sufficiently powerful to be a threat to the status quo." A change in the dominant group's relative position "produces insecurity." Similarly, as it becomes obvious that "The era of American global dominance is over," the sense of America being threatened internationally, especially by China, has increased, especially among Republicans.

Broadly speaking, this is the civilizational "*Whiteshift*" Eric Kaufman has written about which is mingling ethnicities and races around the world and especially creating insecurities among whites.³⁴ But there is also a uniquely American fact about Trumpism: those who voted most solidly for Trump are not whites in general but those answering to the label of "born-again or evangelical Christian." Indeed, a never-mentioned fact about 2016 is that, among non-evangelical whites, Hilary Clinton came surprisingly close to Trump, 33% to 36%. Although Mutz does not narrow her inquiry to evangelicals, she agrees



with Jones: white Christians, for all of American history the dominant population, now see dark-skinned Others almost everywhere they look – at work, walking around, driving around, on television, in medical offices and hospitals, restaurants, shopping, in colleges and universities. Most of the athletes they cheer are Others, and much of the music they enjoy comes from Others. Strange-sounding names are a commonplace. And the word is out: by 2050 or thereabouts, the U.S. Census predicts that whites will be a minority in America. Which means, in the words of Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, “it’s going to be a chastening, humbling moment for American Christians to realise that we’re going to be in the position across the country of speaking as a minority.”³⁵

Increasingly, as shown also by Arlie Russell Hochschild’s study of Louisiana, whites experience themselves as “strangers in their own land.”³⁶

Mutz emphasizes how deep is the experience of displacement, including generating irrational responses. While whites are not likely to lose their economic positions in reality, symbolically for some of them their looming minority status troubles their sense of social and political dominance. Evidence of African Americans’ racial progress threatens them, causing them to experience “lower levels of self-worth” relative to blacks. Accordingly, one defense mechanism to restore a sense of self-worth entails perceiving “greater antiwhite bias.”³⁷ Or should we say *inventing* antiwhite bias? Or *inventing* a threat from Mexican immigrants? Or *inventing* a Muslim threat? Or indeed vastly exaggerating the threat from foreign terrorists? Perhaps this helps us make sense of the issues raised by church members in contrast to the clergy in the survey of concerns mentioned earlier. In addition to the economy, most highly ranked were terrorism, immigration, foreign policy, and gun policy – all areas that indicate people feeling threatened from the outside.

Jones also worries about where things are headed for white Christians finding themselves in the minority, and then sketches a hopeful alternative to feeling this as an existential

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threat: that they may “find a way to integrate into the new American cultural landscape.”³⁸ Similarly, historian John Fea, echoing author John Inazu, calls for fellow evangelicals to learn, as an alternative to dominating others, “confident pluralism” as an approach to living together with humility tolerance, and patience despite deep differences.³⁹

But of course, something very different is happening: Trumpism. It is a refusal to accept being a minority. Its very existence tells us that neither the evangelical leadership nor the base possess the resources needed for coping with the issues raised by Jones, Mutz, and Fea: how do resentful evangelical Christians learn to become part of the emerging multicultural America? Think of Trump's own mania to dismantle every achievement left behind by America's first African American president. It is a sign that something

Think of Trump's own mania to dismantle every achievement left behind by America's first African American president. It is a sign that something more extreme than nostalgia is afoot. So is the strange fact that more white evangelicals believe Christians are discriminated against than believe that Muslims are discriminated against. As Davies has written, this is an example of “the rise of feeling” to the point where it not only overcomes reason, but shapes perception.

more extreme than nostalgia is afoot. So is the strange fact that more white evangelicals believe Christians are discriminated against than believe that Muslims are discriminated against. As Davies has written, this is an example of “the rise of feeling” to the point where it not only overcomes reason, but shapes perception. Above, I follow this statistic about evangelicals' false perception of being discriminated against with an exclamation mark, because it is generated by whites', and especially evangelicals', crazy sense of victimization rather than actual experience. There is more craziness in Trumpism, including its central project of constructing a wall with Mexico against criminals and rapists, cheered on by chants of “Build that wall!” Some of this may be due to the man's own individual dementia, but not all. He is giving voice to widely shared fears and resentments, or he would

not be president. But the wall is a magical solution to a nonexistent problem perceived as an existential threat. By what sort of magic will keeping out even ten or twenty million immigrants stop America from changing color and culture? Of course, Trump's base resonates as if in a trance with strikingly irrational, vicious, and foolish actions and proposals. They listen to him trying to recapture something that is gone, trying to “get our country back.”

Concluding observations

After more than a generation of listening to apocalyptic, fearful sermons about America going to hell, Trump's evangelical supporters have had plenty of training in thinking this way and few resources to confront their situation directly and honestly. Their churches have for years been preparing them to deny the present and to fear modern life as an existential threat. In *Children at Risk*, one of the founding documents of the Culture War, Dobson described today's Civil War of values: “Two sides with vastly differing and incompatible worldviews are locked in bitter conflict that permeates every level of society... And someday soon, I believe, a winner will emerge and the loser will fade from memory.”⁴⁰ In this war it is the believers in God who see themselves as the ones under assault. They have been trained by their religions, and have trained themselves, to ignore key parts of science and to reject many of the society's core values, even though they are people of today in every other respect. But they have diminished their faculties, as we can tell by listening to Jerry Falwell, Jr.'s incoherent insistence that he is unable to imagine Trump doing anything that would undermine his support by evangelical leaders. “I know that he only wants what's best for this country, and I know anything he does, it may not be ideologically ‘conservative,’ but it's going to be what's best for this country, and I can't imagine him doing anything that's not good for the country.”⁴¹ This abandonment of any

rational perspective echoes the feelings of Trump's base.

"Nostalgia" is Jones' polite way of describing their dominant mood before 2016, although after the election he also spoke of their "rage." But even that does not quite capture what happens between Trump and his base, the cult of his personality. As he announces that "I alone can fix it" his base agrees, and the Republican party, out of calculation, complicity, and cowardice, follows his lead. As if to top this comes the evangelical leadership's daffy koshering operation inspired by Benjamin Netanyahu, justifying Trump from pulpits as sent by God, reminiscent of the Hebrew Scriptures' Cyrus the Great, the pagan used by the Lord to deliver the Jews.⁴²

To the theme of resentment and the issues of white Christian identity raised by Jones and Mutz must be added other disorders of the time so dramatically described by Chris Hedges in *America: The Farewell Tour*.⁴³ the economic and social dislocations of neoliberal globalization, the end of postwar economic growth, growing inequality, as well as immigration and ethnic change and the increasing crisis of climate change. As Hedges catalogs only too depressingly, conventional politics has been incapable of addressing these issues, and indeed has only made them worse. While one response in the United States and the United Kingdom is a revival of thinking about socialism, more ominously authoritarian or "populist" electoral movements similar to Trumpism have been coursing through Europe, as well as the Philippines, Brazil, and India. Their common features, described in Roger Eatwell and Mathew Goodwin's *National Populism*, include distrust of elites, the breakdown of traditional political party loyalties, a revival of nationalism, and hostility to immigrants.⁴⁴

When a black president was elected, their representatives in Washington vowed to block him at every turn and make him a one-term president. Because of the color of his skin, they opposed Barack Obama. Soon after his inauguration they joined the Tea Party, vowing to "Take our country back."

In part, this is because Trump's supporters are the heirs of an earlier history. They contain other waves of defeat, resentment, and defiance accumulated over recent generations – drawn from those who defended segregation, supported the campaigns of Barry Goldwater and George Wallace, belonged to the anti-busing movement, were for the Vietnam war and against the peace movement of the 1960s, defended school prayer, refused to ever confront, and ask how to undo, the heritage of slavery, opposed the Equal Rights Amendment, give endless support for the gun culture under the theme of "Gun Rights," embraced the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition, oppose gay marriage, believe in "religious freedom" to discriminate, justify police killings of unarmed black men. When a black president was elected, their representatives in Washington vowed to block him at every turn and make him a one-term president. Because of the color of his skin, they opposed Barack Obama. Soon after his inauguration they joined the Tea Party, vowing to "Take our country back." Encouraged by none other than Donald Trump, the "birthers" doubted that Obama was born in this country, and accused him of being a Muslim. Trumpism has absorbed all of this history and brought it into the present: against Muslims, against women, against Mexican and Central American immigrants.

There is a related and deeper story that reaches well beyond the limits of this essay: how some of the roots of today's evangelical Christianity can be traced to the slaveholding South; how after the Civil War the defeated South restored white rule and overthrew Reconstruction; how its Redeemers kept the freed slaves at bay through Jim Crow and terror, including lynching, keeping them as near as possible to their former condition; how achieving this entailed systematic retardation of the South, keeping it as an isolated, impoverished backwater lacking industrialization, cities, education, and immigrants; how the white South eventually embraced the kinds of anti-modernist religion that fit its self-chosen backwardness; how its decentralized, evangelical Christianity spread north and

west with millions of white migrants seeking jobs; how these migrants and their churches "Southernized" American society between the end of World War II and the 1970s; how their religions embraced anti-Communism and unregulated capitalism during this time; and how the faithful of this religious tradition came to oppose the transformations being brought about by the Civil Rights movement, the women's movement, the anti-war and youth rebellions of the 1960s and, soon after, the gay and lesbian struggle for equality. In short, in the face of profound global stresses, Trumpism is the story of chickens coming home to roost: how the bitter resistance to modernity, equality, and democracy has spilled over from its starting point, slavery, to poison the rest of American life.

NOTES

- 1 In Riley's words: "Today, charismatic leadership polarizes a serialized public via the media, along the lines of Sartre's description of a bus queue: the unity of Trump's supporters consists in the image of Trump, just as the unity of those queuing consists in the bus for which they wait. But this is a standard postmodern format, exemplified by Obama and Berlusconi before Trump. Jean Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, London and New York 2004, p262." Dylan Riley, "What is Trump?" *New Left Review* 114.
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- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Delaware & Youngstown. 'What's going on', *The Economist* (5 November 2016)
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- 15 According to Bob Smietana at *Lifeway Research*, a Southern Baptist website, 15% of Americans strongly agree with evangelical beliefs, 24% self-identify as evangelical Christians, and 29% self-identify as born-again Christians. The great majority of all of these vote or lean Republican, at least half live in the South and the great majority are white. 'Many Who Call Themselves Evangelical Don't Actually Hold Evangelical Beliefs' (6 December 2017).
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- 18 Fitzgerald, F. *The Evangelicals* (New York, 2017), p878
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