

INTRODUCTION

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When Donald Trump unveiled his *America First Energy Plan* while on the campaign trail back in 2016, he summoned coal miners to stand at his side. Flanked by these brawny emissaries from a bygone age of American industrial might, Trump announced his plan to “end the war on coal” and promised to use the resulting revenues to rebuild the nation's roads, schools, bridges and public infrastructure (Lakely 2018). The miners may have helped legitimate Trump's rollback of Obama-era efforts to fight climate change, but they functioned above all as symbols of an American working class betrayed and abandoned during more than four decades of bipartisan support for neoliberal globalization (Davenport and Rubin 2017). When Trump stood surrounded by these men and proclaimed that “We will unleash the full power of American energy, ending the job killing restrictions on shale, oil, natural gas and clean, beautiful coal,” he seemed to promise to elevate not simply coal country but all of the country's willfully forgotten workers.

But Trump's promises to the failing coal industry have proven to be hollow. Opening federal lands to coal mining has not brought jobs back to economically depressed communities in coal country, where mechanization of the industry began to destroy jobs as long ago as the 1970s (Climate Nexus 2017). The real reason for the coal industry's decline, however, is that power plants have been abandoning coal for natural gas as the price of gas has plummeted following the fracking revolution, a bonanza that began under the Obama administration (Fears 2017). Over the last seven years, over half of the coal-fired power plants in the US have either shut down or announced plans to retire, and natural gas is now the biggest source of the nation's electricity. It should be no surprise that Trump's promises to revive coal have failed, since they are incoherent: his *American First Energy*

Plan promises support for natural gas as well as coal, despite the fact that the former is the main reason for the death of the latter.

Trump's unbridled support for fossil fuels has, however, helped the US achieve and indeed surpass the goal of “energy independence” that Presidents since Richard Nixon have promised but failed to achieve. The explosive expansion of fossil fuel production under Trump has turned the US into “Saudi America,” generating what Trump and energy-industry minions in his administration celebrate as “energy dominance.” Trump has successfully fomented a new oil bloc – consisting of the US, Russia and Saudi Arabia – which has effectively replaced OPEC as the dominant global energy superpower.

Notwithstanding his populist rhetoric about saving the American working class, Trump's hyper-nationalism actually serves the interests of a corrupt ruling oligarchy. As is the case in the other countries with which the US now finds itself in a baleful triumvirate, Trump's hyper-nationalism is a very thin fig-leaf covering the monstrous appetites of a self-interested, globe-trotting elite. Hyper-nationalism might thus be said to be the current mode of post-nationalism; the former should be seen not so much as an antithesis of the latter as the means of securing hegemony for a parasitic elite under contemporary conditions of crisis-ridden capitalism. That is, if Trump – and counterparts of his in nations such as Hungary, the Philippines, and Brazil – have come to power by sensing and articulating popular rage at the manifest failures of a neoliberal capitalist order that has been globally hegemonic for nearly three decades, they do not offer any significant solutions to the resulting crisis but rather seek to exploit it for their own narrow interests. In the process, they pile up the contradictions of the system ever higher.

We have been here before. At the outset of the current era of conservative counterrevolution in the late 1970s, Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Britain analyzed the onset of what they called popular authoritarianism in response to the crisis of the postwar Keynesian capitalist order (Hall et al. 1978). On the eve of Margaret Thatcher's electoral victory, Hall and his colleagues anatomized the rise of what they termed a “moral panic” over mugging in Britain. According to the police, the courts, and the media, the culprits for this crime wave were

Britain's Black and Asian British population, who at the time constituted less than 5 percent of the national population. Hall and his comrades showed that the mugging scare was in fact generated not so much by a real rise in crime but rather, by growing anxiety about eroding social consensus as the postwar Keynesian economic order frayed. The crisis of this model of accumulation and the social quietus it helped secure manifested itself most clearly, Hall and his colleagues argued, in fears among the British police and judiciary about the transatlantic spread of “American mugging” and other social crises such as unrest in urban ghettos, which in turn led to targeting of Black and Asian communities by these organs of state power, which then led to heightened statistics about crime, in a ramifying feedback loop. Media coverage of the purported “crime wave” of the era helped generate a sense of an implied dominant, consensual, and homogenous national body under threat, one said to be characterized above all by respect for law and order. The result was the consolidation of an authoritarian popular consensus in which the majority of the British public consented to the erosion of their collective rights in the name of cracking down on social scapegoats – the country's racialized populations – who were blamed for the economic downturn and social disorganization that generated public anxiety in the first place (Hall et al. 1978, 157). This racist moral panic culminated in the Thatcher regime's Nationality Act, which intended to terminate the rights of subjects born in the British colonies to citizenship.¹

Donald Trump's public persona was crafted during this era of capitalist crisis, racist moral panic, and conservative counterrevolution. His public pronouncements continue to reflect this genealogy of racist authoritarian populism. Indeed, his campaign for president was characterized by a paroxysm of authoritarian populist rhetoric that sought to suture the sort of scapegoating tactics that Hall anatomized so effectively to mendacious promises to make the white working-class whole. As was true of Thatcherism, Trump's policies have only inflamed the gaping social wounds that they promised to heal. Although it should be noted that many Trump voters were actually quite well-heeled, and it is therefore a fallacy

¹ For a more extended discussion of how this politics of racial scapegoating played out in Britain, see my book *Mongrel Nation* (2007).

to blame the working class for his victory, Trump's rhetoric nonetheless resonated with significant numbers of people in the US precisely because the material conditions of the working and middle classes have deteriorated significantly since the crisis of the 1970s. Since then, elites have overseen the creation of a new international division of labor that has shipped much – if not all – industrial production abroad. In the US, a bipartisan consensus among the established political parties in favor of “globalization” has meant little opposition to these trends, no matter who is in office. In tandem, as economists such as Thomas Piketty have documented, economic and social inequality have ballooned grotesquely (2014). Elites have dealt with the gargantuan fortunes they have accumulated thanks to this counterrevolution by investing in the stock market and in real estate, leading to forms of financialization and galloping gentrification that have added to the deterioration of the life conditions of the majority. Elites have dealt particularly harshly with traditionally excluded portions of the American population through the establishment of carceral gulags and militarized policing.

The primary salve to this parlous situation has not been any creative new economic and ideological dispensation, but rather fresh rounds of authoritarian populism yoked to the inclusion of ever-greater segments of the American population in credit-fueled asset bubbles. The extension of housing mortgages to African Americans, who had previously been denied access to this – the most significant form of government subvention to the US middle class – is the most telling example. But in 2008 this creditocracy came crashing down (Ross 2014). We have lived since then in a state of perpetual unacknowledged crisis, one of secular economic stagnation and the increasingly patent ideological bankruptcy of neoliberalism. Hyper-nationalism is the result of these worsening contradictions: liberal elites who have embraced neoliberal governance that benefits the 1% are everywhere being displaced by a strident authoritarian populism, whether in the form of the election of Donald Trump, the Brexit vote in the UK, or in the slide towards explicit fascism evident in the rise of figures like Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Matteo Salvini in Italy, and parties like the *Front Nationale* in France and *Alternativ für Deutschland* in Germany.

Given the bankruptcy of most “mainstream” thinking about this crisis, it is not clear what the exit from the present cul-de-sac will be, but there is one overarching factor that suggests that another round of savage dispossession will not solve the increasingly intractable contradictions of the global capitalist system: the climate emergency. The ultimate bankruptcy of an economic system predicated on ceaseless expansion on a finite planetary natural resource base is becoming increasingly clear to masses of people, not least because the climate emergency is generating “natural” disasters and slow-onset tragedies that affect increasing numbers of people, including those in the wealthy nations. In this regard, the destructive impact of Trumpian oligarchy is epic. Under Trump regulatory agencies charged with protecting the environment and public health have been turned into subsidiaries of Big Oil, the EPA has dismantled the Obama Clean Power Plan and eliminated rules regulating methane emissions and coal ash waste, Congress has opened up drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Preserve, and the Interior Department has rescinded rules designed to make offshore drilling safer after the Deepwater Horizon tragedy – to name but a few of the elements of the Trump administration's full-throttle attack on the environment. In the process, the Trump regime has overseen a significant expansion of carbon emissions, thereby helping to condemn the planet to catastrophic climate change (Juhasz 2018). We are confronted with nothing short of planetary ecocide, although, as the movement of climate justice constantly reminds us, the impact of the climate emergency will be borne first and foremost by the people of the Global South and by dispossessed peoples in the wealthy nations. In other words, those who are least responsible for carbon emissions will bear the heaviest brunt of the climate emergency.

Fortunately, there are countervailing tendencies, heroic activists and movements around the world who are fighting against the Right-wing surge and planetary ecocide. While it might be easy to conclude that the upsurge of hope that accompanied the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, and the rise of radical parties like *Syriza* in Greece after 2008 was misplaced given the rise of the far Right, progressive struggles against the contradictions of the neoliberal order have in fact intensified over the last decade. Movements in the US such as Black Lives Matter, the struggle of the Standing Rock Sioux

and their allies against the Dakota Access Pipeline, the Women's March and #MeToo movement, and movements against Islamophobia and for immigrant rights have proliferated despite the heavy repression meted out to them under both the Obama and Trump administrations. Although there have been tensions within and between these movements, they are nonetheless striking for their solidarity. Indeed, it is in these movements that truly radical forms of transnational affiliation are gestating. The rise of global Indigenous solidarity that was evident in the mobilization at Standing Rock is an obvious example. Another clear example of this transnational ethic is the enduring solidarity between Black Lives Matter activists and Palestinians.

These movements are definitively not post-national, at least not in the sense of the term that enjoyed prominence in discussions of globalization in the 1990s and early 2000s – including among radicals such as Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in *Empire* (2000). In the case of Indigenous peoples, the insistence on national sovereignty in the face of settler colonialism and the repeated abrogation of treaties by countries like the US and Canada is a constant. But the determination to engage with and remake existing structures of national governance is equally clear among other contemporary radical movements. Take the movement for a Green New Deal. This notion has been in circulation in the US and Europe at least since the onset of the Great Recession in 2008, but it has recently reignited as a result of the efforts of newly elected US Congressperson Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Working with the Sunrise Movement, Ocasio-Cortez has insisted that the Democratic leadership in the House of Representatives constitute a committee to develop a plan for rapid and sweeping climate action. As its name suggests, this plan would entail a massive program of investments in clean energy jobs and infrastructure that would transform not just the energy sector but the entire US economy, making it far more egalitarian and just. The proposal for a Green New Deal has caught fire in the US because of its sweeping ambitions to remake a country whose people have been devastated by decades of neoliberal austerity, who are angry with the political status quo, and who are hungry for climate action plans that constitute genuine responses to the unfolding climate emergency. This desire for transformation is, in other words, the same one that Donald Trump tapped, although it

is of course intent on countering the odious bigotry embedded in Trump's "Make America Great Again" rhetoric. Like the Depression-era programs for which it is named, the Green New Deal would remake the American economy, but would also allow the US to export cutting edge renewable energy technologies in order to ensure a global just transition. The Green New Deal, in other words, aims to be a genuine program of national uplift that would also be part of a progressive internationalism aimed at averting planetary ecocide.

JAm It! debuts and must inevitably be shaped by this context of political extremes and radical movements of various stripes in the US and in Italy and other European nations. While American Studies in Italy has, according to a commentator such as Maurizio Vaudagna, largely retreated behind the walls of the academy, this is decisively not the case across the Atlantic (Vaudagna 2007, 57). The last decade or so in the US has seen not just the politically inspired transnational turn in American Studies but also the public support of the American Studies Association for the Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions movement. The ASA's courageous public stance in a country where public statements challenging Israel's policies towards Palestinians have long been anathema is mirrored and augmented by recent scholarly work in American Studies scholarship on settler colonialism, decolonization, critical prison studies, queer studies, and similar topics.² These trends have only intensified during the Trump years. The politicization of American Studies in the US has also been propelled by the job market, which, as in Italy, is terrible. In the US, it is clear that the lack of openings for younger scholars is in significant part a result of political decisions: on the part of state legislatures to cut back support for public education, and on the part of university presidents to hire cadres of handsomely paid administrators and ill-paid adjuncts rather than tenure-track professors. Such transformations of the American university are animated by decades of Right-wing attacks on "identity politics" and the interdisciplinary programs (American Studies, Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies) that

² Recent issues of *American Quarterly* offer ample testimony to the radical bent of contemporary American Studies in the US.

social movements have managed to establish within the US academy.³ Critical university studies has therefore also become an important branch of US studies.⁴

JAm It! will no doubt bring a lively awareness of this terrain of struggle to American Studies in Italy. It promises to offer younger Italian scholars of American Studies an important venue for publication and intervention, a key intervention given the relative sclerosis of the field that the dismal job market in Italy has precipitated. It is not too much to hope that the journal will also play a role in catalyzing and solidifying new circuits of progressive transnational solidarity, both within academia and in broader public life. After all, we know that despite their bellicose nationalist rhetoric, leaders of the extreme Right like Steve Bannon are organizing transnationally. The malignant presence of fascist organs like *Breitbart* in the US and multiple European countries demonstrates this clearly. The task of all those opposed to the fascist creep must be to develop new stories of radical political and social possibility, and to learn from and support one another through new bonds of solidarity. I very much hope that *JAm It!* will play an important role in this great struggle against the contemporary onslaught of barbarism.

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³ On the history of these attacks, see Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Beacon Press, 2003).

⁴ See, for example, Roderick A. Ferguson's *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

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