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Rhetorical Aftershocks of Trump's Ascendency : Salvation by Demolition and Deal Making

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Stunned, frightened, and elated. These were three of the principal emotions experienced by US citizens after Donald Trump's astonishing ascendency to the presidency. Months after the election, many of the stunned remained disoriented, large numbers of the frightened had declared their unflagging resistance, and the hardcore of the elated counseled everyone else to give the guy a chance.[1] An already polarized electorate had become hyperpolarized, with a dazed residue of the citizenry stymied somewhere in the grey areas between. One side's dystopia was the other's utopia in the making.

On the one hand, Trump's first months in office were marked by an excess of scandal, little progress on legislation, understaffing of executive positions, an obscure and incoherent foreign policy, and uncommonly low public approval ratings (Leonhardt 2017). On the other hand, his supporters looked forward to starving the beast. An earthly paradise would follow the dismantling of outsized and overreaching government, except for the military establishment and the rest of the security-state apparatus. The scent of apocalypse pervaded a shattered political landscape and a highly partisan start to Trump's presidency. At the end of the first 100 days, he was "still a mercurial and easily offended provocateur capable of head-spinning gyrations in policy and politics" (Baker 2017).

Trump's election was a seismic event with continuing rhetorical aftershocks. Regulatory policy and enforcement, healthcare programs, environmental protections, civil rights safeguards – all seemed destabilized and subject to effacement. Racism, nationalism, xenophobia, and militarism were the four horsemen of the Trumpian apocalypse. The administration's polarizing rhetoric was coarse, non--deliberative, illiberal, deceitful, and destabilizing. After three months in office, Trump's average job approval rating of 41% was the lowest by 14 percentage points of any first-quarter public opinion rating of a US president since World War II, according to Gallup (Jones 2017), with 87% approval from Republicans

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1. The first 100 days of Trump's presidency occurred on April 29, 2017. On the resistance movement, see Mascaro (2017).

and only 9% approval from Democrats. Trump was methodically undermining the accumulated credibility and moral authority of the presidency (Kris 2017), and he was not about to change his unconventional and unpredictable ways. The "vertigo presidency," as one early observer (Stephens 2017) dubbed it, was quickly becoming a product of "its own paranoia, incompetence and recklessness." Yet, the support of his base of voters remained steady (Balz and Clement 2017). Trump loyalists still believed their president would "make America great again."

Demolition was the guiding trope of Trump's apocalyptic rhetoric. "The Wrecking Ball," *Time* magazine's (2017, 1) tag for the president's war on government, verbally reinforced its cover image of a giant-sized Trump knocking down the Washington monument with jarring tweets. The editorial board of the *Los Angeles Times* agreed that Trump saw himself as a wrecking ball seeking to fix things in an authoritarian way by undermining the courts, the media, the Congress, and the federal bureaucracy (The Times Editorial Board 2017c, 2017d). The demolition motif carried over to Trump's "desire to unpick Obama's legacy – without a clear picture of what would replace it" (Borger 2017). This impulse to undo or knockdown was reflected in Trump's jarring accusation (after a gas attack on Syrian civilians, following the new administration's apparent shift away from Obama's determination to remove Assad from power) that the "heinous actions by the Bashar al-Assad regime are a consequence of the last administration's weakness and irresolution" (Borger 2017).[2]

The spectacle of presidential incivility – the bull in the china shop – raises the question of whether a fragile US political culture was broken beyond repair. At best, a fix would be difficult to achieve because Trump rose to office on a groundswell of popular discontent with the establishment. One sympathetic supporter (Davidson 2017) identified Trump as the champion of forgotten millions, insisting that his popularity stemmed from "a deep sense of disconnection in American society," which began years before the 2016 election because so many "felt left behind by an economic recovery that largely excluded them, a culture that scoffed at their beliefs and a government that promised change but failed to deliver." The election was "a rejection of the entire political system," Davidson insisted; a splintered polity fostered a "revolt" against "a corrupt political establishment"

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2. The Trump administration quickly reversed its position on Assad by suggesting there was no future role for him to govern Syria (Shabad 2017) and launching Tomahawk missiles to demolish Syrian military aircraft as a signal that additional force would be used if Assad should continue to resort to chemical weapons (Gordon, Cooper, and Shear 2017). This was a righteous act of Trump asking for "God's wisdom," praying for "the souls" of Assad's victims, and hoping that "as long as America stands for justice, then peace and harmony will, in the end, prevail" (Trump 2017d). In short, salvation follows demolition. The shock-and-awe symbolism of Trump's militarist foreign policy was apparent in his authorization of the dramatic use of a MOAB (Mother of all Bombs) to explode a tunnel complex used by Islamic State fighters in Afghanistan (Hennigan 2017). One thing that is "crystal clear," according to reporters Greg Jaffe and Jenna Johnson (2017), is that President Trump "loves a big show of military force." MOAB was exactly what he talked about so enthusiastically as a candidate, saying in reference to Islamic State terrorists, "You gotta knock the hell out of them. Boom! Boom! Boom!" (Jaffe and Johnson 2017).

of distrusted elites (see also Baskin 2017). Trumpian discord was symptomatic on the right, especially among white working-class men, of a political fissure that extended, although in a different form, all the way to Bernie Sanders on the left. After Trump's unexpected election, dueling discourses of rebellion and resistance seemingly precluded any credible appeal to common ground or any reasonable gesture to restore the political order.

Addressing the question of repair, assuming that such an inquiry is not hopelessly occluded, occasions a thoroughgoing entanglement in the phantasmagoria of political rhetoric. There is no way out of the rhetorical surround, no non-rhetorical solution, despite the public's alienation and post-truth cynicism reflected in the language of alternative facts and fake news. Politics in some measure is an ongoing process of composition, of choosing one trope over another. Replacing the present narrative of demolition is a necessary remedy to Pandemonium, although a partial one at best. The triumph of Trumpian chaos, observes John Feffer – author of the dystopian novel *Splinterlands*, which begins with a tale of ruin by "Hurricane Donald" in a world already fractured by globalization and "market authoritarianism" (Feffer 2016, 3-4, 15) – ultimately will be forestalled by writing a better plot, one that does not "just leave us with explosions, screams, and fade to black" (Feffer 2017).[3]

Demolition Narrative

The explosion of rightwing populism in the US coincided with a technologically induced transformation of political culture from the logic of print to the seduction of imagery. As Neil Postman (1985) observed, television changed news into a spectacle, one that could amuse us to death. His insight was prescient. The smart-phone innovation at the beginning of the 21st century supplemented TV's entertaining sound bites with the micro-narrative intoxication of memes, tweets, and viral videos (Zhang 2015, 267). The pixel revolution featured speed over nuance. The news, delivered in fleeting images, was more engaging, provocative, and entertaining than true or false. As the public became more and more distracted, political issues were increasingly trivialized. Public discourse devolved, Andrew Postman

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3. The immanence of a fade-to-black scenario within the Trumpian discourse of demolition was evident in the nuclear standoff with North Korea, which some compared in seriousness to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Richard Wolffe (2017) called Trump's approach a dangerous act of "buffoonery." Trump was "a man who bluffs and blusters his way through international crises . . . a nuclear-armed president who knows nothing about foreign affairs . . . who just fires off tweets and Tomahawks after watching TV." Whether "dumb or duplicitous," Trump was "a man who looks like a "fool" and puts on an act of being "cunningly mysterious."
Columnist Eugene Robinson (2017b) characterized the dynamic in mid-April as Donald Trump, the America-first populist championing the forgotten working class now sounding like "a garden-variety globalist, defending the 'rigged' system he denounced during the campaign. Then again, who knows how he'll sound next week?"

(2017) observed, into the optics of raucous, violent, and childish "attention-cra-ving gestures." The content of political speech no longer mattered, only its enter-taining imagery, the gist of which was militant – a recurring fantasy of destruction and violence.

Trump was a perfect fit for the new media culture's politics of spectacle and seduction. "Creatures of politics" failed to understand that Trump was a "creature of television," observed a Republican critic (Parker and Costa 2017). Candidate Trump manipulated the mainstream media that opposed him; President Trump "consumes a steady diet of cable news" throughout the day; he is a "showman" who is "obsessed with television" and quick to applaud a "particularly combative" performance by his press secretary (Parker and Costa 2017). Trump's obsession with television and proclivity for tweet storms based on what he views in any given day grounds him in "a medium geared more for entertainment than actual policy making" (Parker and Costa 2017).

Trump's rhetorical militancy, both in his twitter attacks and his combative speeches, reflected what *Time* correspondent Massimo Calabresi (2017, 28) ter-med a "battle plan." The plan, according to White House chief strategist Stephen Bannon, called for the "deconstruction of the administrative state." Bannon, on be-half of Trump, promised members of the Conservative Political Action Conference that every day would be "a fight" to take back the country, by which he meant dismantling taxes, government regulations, and trade agreements that impinged on the country's "economic sovereignty" (Rucker and Costa 2017). Bannon, who "sees everything as a war" and encourages Trump to play the role of "disrupter" (von Drehle 2017a, 27, 30), extended the battle to the press, which the president duly branded "the enemy of the American People" (Grynbaum 2017). The press was just one more enemy in Bannon's apocalyptic war chant (Reilly and Heath 2017) echoed by Trump's dark inaugural vow to "unite the civilized world against Radical Islamic Terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the earth" (Trump 2017a).

This militant motif shaped the administration's initial outline of an "America First" budget. A $54 billion cut to non-defense agencies would fund a $54 bil-lion increase in the military budget. It would eliminate "dozens of long-standing federal programs that assist the poor, fund scientific research and aid America's allies abroad" (Paletta and Mufson 2017), while making a $2.6 billion down payment on a wall to seal the US-Mexican border. The hardest hit entities inc-luded the Environmental Protection Agency and the Departments of Agriculture, Labor, and State. Funding would be reduced by nearly $6 billion for the National Institutes of Health and either reduced or eliminated for affordable housing, home heating, homelessness assistance, job training, clean energy, foreign aid, and UN

peacekeeping. Cultural agencies were also targeted for elimination, including the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the Public Broadcasting Corporation. The budget blueprint, supposedly structured to reflect Trump's campaign promises, extended deep cuts to domestic programs serving the working-class voters of his populist base (Przyzbyla 2017). Complete with contradictions, as one commentator observed, "President Trump's first budget is an attempt to reshape the federal government in his own image – crass, bellicose, short-sighted, unserious and ultimately hollow" (Robinson 2017a). The prospect of busting up the government might feel good to his core supporters, but eliminating services, removing regulations, and cutting taxes (supposedly to stimulate economic growth) would serve immediately and primarily the interests of the wealthiest class (Date 2017; Ehrenfreund 2017a; Ehrenfreund 2017b; Rushe, Jacobs, and Siddiqui 2017).

As bad as it seemed, Trump's dramatic proposal to demolish non-military spending, whether or not it passed Congressional scrutiny, was a diversion with a deeper significance. His un-presidential frolics displaced public discontent and distorted democratic politics. The post-inaugural clown act was well practiced throughout an unconventional run for office and, prior to that, a stint on reality TV. It attracted immense media attention before and after his election, diverting the public view from vexing issues facing the country and the world by playing to the nostalgic nationalist fantasy of bootstrapping individualism and unfettered capitalism. Denying global warming, blaming immigrants, fighting an open-ended war on terrorism, and developing a new generation of nuclear weapons would not produce more and better jobs or provide greater national security. Yet, supporters wildly cheered and detractors loudly booed – sometimes even engaged in fisticuffs – rather than engage in substantive deliberation.

The sordid entertainment of Trump's disruptive persona warped public discourse in the way that funhouse mirrors distort and the magician's illusions rely on misdirection. His carnivalesque house of mirrors comprised a politics of delusion by distracting the wary and deceiving the gullible. By tweeting the unsubstantiated claim that former President Obama had wiretapped Trump Tower (Shear and Schmidt 2017), for instance, he played to post-9/11 suspicions that, regardless of legal restrictions, the NSA, CIA, FBI, and various military intelligence agencies of an Orwellian state were covertly monitoring citizens, a presumption reinforced just days prior by a WikiLeaks revelation that the CIA was hacking into smart phones and smart televisions worldwide to record private sounds, images, and texts (Timberg, Dwoskin, and Nakashima 2017).

Intentionally or not, the spectacle of Trump's outbursts, which channeled his supporters' outrage, also displaced constructive criticism of the system of economic privilege that he (as well as Sanders) insisted was rigged against the working and middle classes (Long 2016). Lurking in the background of Trump's deception – by design or default – were initiatives to lower taxes for the super rich, dismantle Wall Street regulations, reduce health care and other safety-net programs for people in need, defund public education, and minimize job-creation projects (Dionne 2017), all framed within an emotionally charged demolition narrative. Even Trump's campaign promise to rebuild the American infrastructure was compromised by Bannon's war on the administrative state (von Drehle 2017b, 24). He was "a President who ran as a populist and arrived in Washington surrounded by captains of industry" (Vick 2017, 35).

The tension between Trump's populist persona and his corporate capitalism was even reflected in the instability of his relationship to Bannon. By mid-April, the man who had been called the shadow president was struggling to keep his job as chief strategist while Trump began flipping populist positions he had taken in the campaign, saying for instance that China was not a currency manipulator after all. Bannon's battle with the business leaders and centrist financiers in Trump's White House put him at odds with the President's influential son-in-law (Parker Costa, and Phillip 2017; Rucker, Parker, and Costa 2017).[4]

Whether Trump's mercurial style and political clownery was a means to an end or an end in itself – no one was quite sure – it dominated the public agenda with its proclivity for demonizing opponents and fingering scapegoats. Economic dislocation – real and perceived – was and is a profound challenge for managing equitably the impact of globalization. Handled poorly, a tiny fraction prospers at the expense of everyone else while outsiders and outliers become convenient scapegoats for an aggrieved public: distrust, intolerance, and militancy abound; global warming is dismissed as a ruse; immigrants are blamed for economic decline; terrorism legitimizes militarism and endless warfare. Trump's antics infuriated his critics and managed difficult issues poorly, but they reinforced his political capital with a core of supporters who felt they had been victimized. Complaining about the guy whom many thought represented their concerns sounded to them like defending the very establishment they blamed for their plight.

Besides mishandling the exigency of economic dislocation, Trump's illiberal displacement of public discontent exacerbated a deeply rooted distrust of democracy. His dark inaugural tale of "American carnage" invoked a haunting image of demagoguery and mobocracy. The trope of carnage, together with a promise to

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4. Columnist Eugene Robinson (2017b) characterized the dynamic in mid-April as Donald Trump, the America-first populist championing the forgotten working class now sounding like "a garden-variety globalist, defending the 'rigged' system he denounced during the campaign. Then again, who knows how he'll sound next week?"

transfer power to "a righteous public," condensed much of Trump's campaign rhetoric into a lament of Washington elites flourishing at the expense of the American people ("Their victories have not been your victories"). He painted a dismal picture of "mothers and children trapped in poverty . . . rusted out factories scattered like tombstones . . . and the crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential." He would put a stop to the carnage immediately and, in the name of the people, pursue the nation's "glorious destiny." There would be no more enrichment "of foreign industry at the expense of American industry," no more subsidizing other countries while "allowing for the very sad depletion of our military." A "new vision" of "America First" would govern every decision on trade, taxes, immigration, and foreign affairs. America would start "winning again" (Trump 2017a).[5]

The inaugural's gloomy vision of glory restored rested on tacit assumptions previously expressed in Trump's campaign discourse (itself an exercise in political noir) and renewed in his post-election tweet storms. Candidate Trump frequently targeted illegal immigration across the US-Mexican border, for instance, promising to build a wall to prevent more undocumented immigrants from coming into the US and pledging to deport those already in the country. His position paper on immigration and border security declared that Mexico would pay for the border wall and that "all criminal aliens" would be rounded up and returned to their home countries (Sullivan 2015). He would deport the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the US, whose numbers included "a lot of bad people," "bad dudes," "criminals," and "rapists"; "they have to go" (Diamond 2016). He insisted, too, that Muslims must be banned from entering the US.

Trump's anti-immigration posture – its combative tone and gloomy tenor – was set at the beginning of his campaign, when he announced his candidacy from Trump Tower on June 16, 2016:

> Our country is in serious trouble. We don't have victories anymore . . . . When do we beat Mexico at the border? They're laughing at us, at our stupidity. And now they are beating us economically. They are not our friend, believe me. But they're killing us economically. The U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems . . . . When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best . . . . They're sending people that have lots of problems . . . . They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. (Trump 2015)

Similarly, on the matter of his Muslim travel ban, President Trump tweeted it was "about keeping bad people (with bad intentions) out of country"; there were "a lot of 'bad dudes' out there," (Scott 2017). His tweets and speeches in defense of the ban, a FOX News analyst observed, were "dark warnings" that painted

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5. No one could tell, for instance, whether President Trump's militant threat of a "major, major conflict with North Korea" was tactical posturing or just impulsive (Sanger 2017).

an "increasingly ominous picture of the danger posed by Islamic extremists," an enemy that "celebrates death and totally worships destruction" (Tucker 2017).

Critics readily regarded the crude populism of Trump's demagoguery, with its xenophobic scapegoats and racist innuendos, as an illiberal outbreak of raw democracy. The *Los Angeles Times* editorial board lamented the "cynical assaults" on truth by "our dishonest President" (2017a), his demagogic embrace of untruth and embodiment of the "populist notion" that popular leaders can provide valid substitutions for verifiable truth (2017b), his effortless embrace of the entertaining but treacherous lie that "targets the darkness, anger and insecurity that hide in each of us and harnesses them for his own purposes" (2017b). It was easy to conflate rightwing populism with all forms of populism and to reduce democracy to the blight of populism (Lukacs 2005. 45-47; Laclau 2005, x, 16). Populism signified a democratic descent into fascism and ruination of the republic. Trump's many violations of liberal democracy's norms – his willingness to assert that elections are rigged, the media are corrupt, judges are biased, and political opponents should be jailed; "his tendencies toward nepotism, crony capitalism, and vengeance"; "his oft-stated admiration for authoritarians in other countries"(Klein 2017) – constituted a chilling threat, "the most dangerous challenge to the free government of the United States that anyone alive has encountered" (Frum 2017).

The Founders had feared demagogues and charismatic populists, Klein (2017) observed. They took steps to protect against such threats but failed to prevent the scourge of partisanship, a political toxin that dulled congressional desire to constrain the presidency. By this reckoning, the Republican congressional majority most likely would succumb to Trump's will to power. With his hostile takeover of the party, he held hostage both their reelection and their legislative agenda. Of course, the countervailing force of factionalism within the party could reduce somewhat the odds of presidential control over legislative outcomes, such as the at least temporary setback encountered by President Trump and House Speaker Paul Ryan on March 24, 2017 when, "facing a revolt among conservatives and moderates within their ranks" (Pear, Kaplan, and Haberman 2017), they were forced to withdraw legislation to repeal Obamacare (the Affordable Care Act), one day after the seventh anniversary of the ACA being signed into law.[6]

The reaction to Trump's illiberal persona and polarizing antics, while understandable, risked making democracy, rather than globalization, into the primary

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6. True to form, Trump initially blamed Democrats for the setback, not the failure of Republicans to gain sufficient support from their own side, and immediately shifted the focus from health insurance to taxes, saying "We're probably going to start going very strongly on big tax cuts. Tax reform that will be next" (Jacobs and Smith 2017). "The best thing politically," Trump dramatically declared, "is to let Obamacare explode" (Goldstein and Eilperin 2017). A few weeks later, he suggested that tax cuts would have to wait until after Obamacare was repealed and soon after began pressuring the House of Representatives, unsuccessfully as it turned out, to reconsider a bill to repeal Obamacare within the first 100 days of his presidency (Cunningham, Snell, and Wagner 2017).

issue. Popular democracy was not the problem. Bernie Sanders led a spirited and nearly successful populist campaign for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination without resorting to demagoguery, racism, xenophobia, or militarism. As a democratic socialist, he challenged an economic and political system of elite rule without singling out Muslims, illegal immigrants, or other convenient scapegoats. His focus was on changing policy to achieve a more equitable adjustment to globalization. He would address the widening inequality of income and wealth by requiring wealthy individuals and corporations to pay a fair share of taxes, breaking up huge financial institutions, making it easier for workers to join unions, increasing the minimum wage to $15 per hour, reversing trade policies that drive down salaries, providing affordable housing, expanding Social Security and Medicare, providing universal child care, pursuing gender equality and racial justice, making higher education affordable, transitioning away from fossil fuels and investing in clean energy, making the immigration system more humane, and emphasizing diplomacy over war (Sanders undated; Leopold 2017).

These policy priorities, which engaged a sense of exigency over injustices caused or exacerbated by globalization, expressed an attitude of solidarity and concern for the commons rather than divisiveness, fear, greed or animus toward vulnerable parties. The tone of Sanders' rhetoric reflected its substance. His democratic dissent from the system's "slide into political and economic oligarchy" (Sanders undated) carried a sharp edge while gesturing to common ground. Deliberation, not apocalyptic demolition, was the import of his discourse.

The contrast between Sanders' deliberative dissent and Trump's provocations was evident in the way each addressed the problem of free-trade agreements.[7] True to form, candidate Trump "made blistering attacks on trade his primary economic theme," the *New York Times* reported. He vowed to "rip up trade deals and start an unrelenting offensive against Chinese economic practices." The US was losing a trade war with China, he asserted. His "percussive pronunciation" of China conveyed his combative stance toward other trading partners, especially Mexico. Threatening to withdraw from the North American Free Trade Agreement and decrying the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact as a "rape of our country," he declared his faith in nationalism over globalism, "arguing that 'globalization helped the financial elite,' while leaving 'millions of our workers with nothing but poverty and heartache'" (Corasaniti, Burns, and Applbaum 2016; see also Needham 2016).

While Trump lambasted free-trade deals, channeling worker frustration into an amalgam of nationalist ire, Sanders said he favored trade but would "rewrite" agreements that sanctioned "unfettered free trade" and fostered unfair competition

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7. See Ivie (2015) for a discussion of deliberative dissent.

(Gaudiano 2016). He framed the problem as an issue of economic fairness (Alcindor and Healy 2016). Trump's and Sander's opposition to NAFTA and other free-trade agreements overlapped one another, but the rhetorical emphasis of Sander's approach was to compose rather than shred. He wanted to redraft agreements, to "transform" US trade policy so that it "works for the middle class and working families, not just large multinational corporations" (Sanders 2016). US workers should not have to compete against grossly underpaid workers in other countries. The ethos of Sander's transformative position on free trade, unlike Trump's wheeler-dealer pose, was part and parcel of an overall, long-held commitment to a progressive, egalitarian political agenda.

Two populist campaigns, both expressing public dissatisfaction with the inequities of the economic system, one democratic and the other authoritarian, one deliberative and the other demagogic – the issue was not populism versus democracy so much as it was the negative impact of neoliberal policies of privatization, deregulation, and free trade. Trump's demolition narrative confounded rather than furthered a productive debate, exacerbating and capitalizing on public dissatisfaction by flailing at the system, a system he promised to beat with more privatization, deregulation, and free trade by spectacular deal making. Pounding on the system vented public anger directed at convenient scapegoats instead of focusing critical reflection on neoliberal economics.

The rhetorical shockwaves of Trump's un-presidential demeanor, or at least his unorthodoxy in office, sustained the illusion that he was bringing down the system of privilege, which actually he was enabling. His disrupter role was played to perfection, not just in tweet storms but also in post-inaugural, campaign-style rallies where his freewheeling speeches continued to incite and misguide avid supporters. His March 20th rally in Louisville, Kentucky, for example, reverberated the themes of discord on which he had premised his election to office. Donald the dismantler was in full form. The rhythm of his speech emulated the swing of a sledgehammer, conveying the sheer delight of demolishing a despised political order:

> . . . we are going to take power back from the political class in Washington, and return that power to you, the American people. It's happening. It's happening. It's happening.
> . . . we inherited a mess. It's a mess.
> . . . really terrible trade deals. Horrible trade deals . . . . Not going to happen anymore.
> . . . We are going to drain the swamp of government corruption in Washington, D.C. . . . We are going to massively reduce your taxes . . . . We are going to reduce very substantially rising crime.
> . . . Clean coal, right? Clean coal. I have already eliminated a devastating anti-coal regulation.
> . . . We're working to remove regulations on our auto industry.
> . . . We've also cleared the way for the Keystone and the Dakota Access pipelines.
> . . . We're going to be doing free trade deals as soon as we get the healthcare finished.
> . . . Do not worry, we are starting on NAFTA very soon . . . . Somebody said to me, when are you starting on NAFTA? I said, wait a minute, I did this, this, this. I knocked out unbelievable numbers of regulations.

. . . drug dealers, robbers, thieves, gang members, predators, killers and criminals of all types preying on our citizens . . . one by one they are being tracked down and thrown the hell out of our country, and we will not let them back in.

. . . we will stop radical Islamic terrorism. We will stop it. Not going to let it happen. Not here. Not going to let it happen.

. . . we want a very big tax cut, but cannot do that until we keep our promise to repeal and re-place the disaster known as Obamacare. . . . This is our long-awaited chance to finally get rid of Obamacare. It's a long-awaited chance. We're going to do it. We're going to do it.

The economy would be "unleashed," regulations would be "eliminated," taxes would be "cut," and Obamacare would be "repealed" – all of this because, Trump added gleefully, "It's a disaster, fellas. It's a disaster." Here, in a nutshell, was the narrative of demolition for a politics of delusion, which promised a swift, simple, and complete renovation of a "system stacked against the American people" (Trump 2017b).

A Democratic Corrective

One alternative to Trump's deception – to his apocalyptic script of salvation by demolition and deal making – was a straightforward defense of neoliberal econo-mics. This was the preferred option of the economic and political establishment. David Davenport (2016), a fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution writing in *Forbes* magazine, allowed that the alignment of Trump on the right with Sanders on the left in opposition to free-trade pacts, "albeit for somewhat different reasons," reflected "a lot of misunderstanding and misleading rhetoric," when "in fact, free trade agreements bring significant advantages and most of the low-wage job loss is more part of ongoing modernization and globalization than a consequ-ence of the trade agreements themselves." Trade deficits are not a bad thing, he ar-gued, and most economists think the benefits of free trade outweigh any problems it creates. Tim Worstall (2016), a fellow at the Adam Smith Institute in London also writing in *Forbes*, worried that the emergence of "populist economics" was "not a good sign" because "folk economics" clash with "actual economics."

A difficulty with neoliberal persistence, as even Hillary Clinton came to under-stand, is its insensibility to democratic values and politics. It ignores a substantial problem felt by a majority of the public and neglected by "an intransigent elite" (Judis 2016, 17). Recalcitrance risks an even deeper fissure of the political cul-ture. A more responsive stance seems imperative, both for pragmatic reasons of political process and for democratic principles of accountability and respect for public concerns. A deliberative necessity, wedged between the poles of schismatic politics, awaits a suitable response from the elected representatives of the people and those who aspire to positions of leadership.

Sanders demonstrated the potential of channeling public sentiment into a deliberative process. Liberal and moderate voices within the Democratic Party seemed to take notice. Together, for example, Senator Elizabeth Warren on the left and Senator Joe Donnelly in the center penned an opinion piece in the *Washington Post*, which expressed both the enduring mythos of the polity and the existing need for a course correction. The language of Sanders' deliberative dissent framed the Senators' joint call for economic responsibility and reform, starting with holding President Trump's nominee for the chair of the Securities and Exchange Commission accountable to the interests of "hard-working Americans," not "short-term corporate profits" and "shortsighted corporate executives" whose decisions are "squeezing the middle class." A basic premise of "the American Dream," they argued, is the "social contract between businesses and workers . . . the idea that the success of one relies on the success of the other." But "the middle class has shrunk and the American Dream has come under attack" by "shortsighted corporations chasing quick profits at the expense of their workers and the long-term health of their companies." Federal regulators, including the SEC, must step up to protect American families from "corporate short-termism" (Warren and Donnelly 2017).

The alternative to demolishing the system and renting the fabric of polity is to articulate the exigency of dislocation (specifically, the displacement caused by neoliberal economics and felt by the public at large) within a narrative of fairness. This is a point that Senator Bernie Sanders has taken to heart even after a lost election, arguing that the Democratic Party must transform itself from a party of economic centrists into, what John Nichols characterizes as, a party that provides "a clear and coherent progressive alternative to the 'billionaire populism' of a president who never was – and never will be – committed to advancing the interests of workers, farmers, small business owners, students, and retirees," in short, a Democratic Party that embraces "economic and social justice" (Nichols 2017).

A narrative of fairness that balances interests and locates points of interdependence (Ivie and Giner, in press) would create room for debating options credibly and crafting policy equitably. At this early point in Trump's polarizing presidency, the lesson to be drawn by those who would restore and enrich democracy is to pursue rhetorical correctives to his misrepresentation of the people or, more precisely, to the distorted version of the people he professes to represent.

Ernesto Laclau believed an alternative version of the people could be constructed rhetorically, one that is both democratic and liberal. An enriched and robust discourse of popular democracy, as he envisioned it, operates within a heterogeneous political context to hold political elites accountable to the diverse demands of a people. It is a hegemonic rhetorical act in which an ensemble of unmet demands is articulated into a chain of equivalences consisting of contingent, metaphorical

links (Laclau 2005, 161-62). The result is a provisional totalization, or conditional narrative of connected claims, rather than a closed account, complete represen- tation, or dogmatic and narrow truth (Laclau 2005, 90, 93). The tension between tenor and vehicle is never fully resolved, leaving openings in the narrative for argumentation that ranges from dialogue and discussion to debate and struggle (Laclau 2014, 202-203). Laclau built rhetorical contingency into his model to re- sist non-negotiable confrontations and the complete exteriorization of adversaries into enemies. Beliefs held strongly but provisionally, as a matter of perspective, do not prompt demonization or polarization.

In Kenneth Burke's terms, the damage to the body politic from Trump's spec- tacle of chaos is tragic and cause for a comic corrective (Burke 1984, 37-43). Trump trades in polemics and caricatures, a method of rhetorical burlesque that is wholly debunking and that lacks a well-rounded frame, an incompleteness that reduces politics to an exercise in absurdity, a frame of rejection rather than accep- tance, a discourse that undermines democratic relations (Burke 1984, 43-44, 54- 55). A Burkean comic corrective to the debunking strategy is not "wholly euphe- mistic," but instead a resolve to act with "maximum consciousness" (Burke 1984, 166, 171, emphasis in original). Widening the frame of motivation requires a more complete grammar of motives (Burke 1969a, xv) on which to base a rhetoric of identification that compensates, rather than substitutes, for social and political di- visions (Burke 1969b, 44-46, 55).

The point is not to pretend to an easy or quick fix to the dangerous distraction of Trumpism or the thorny challenge of economic displacement by neoliberal glo- balization. It is instead to gesture in the direction of a rhetorical response more conducive to a healthy democratic politics. The work of articulating a democratic narrative of fairness or some other alternative to a *Splinterlands* scenario is well worth the undertaking. Feffer's warning looks to the near future, a few decades into the 21st century, at untoward developments that appear too plausible:

> The electorate collaborated in its own disenfranchisement. In the public's view, all politicians were corrupt, all civil servants inept, and every government little more than a Mafia plus an army. Once the public had been persuaded to cut the state down to size, the real Mafias took over. (Feffer 2016, 92)

Hurricane Donald should not have come as a surprise. The fracturing of community was decades in the making. We may well have arrived at an exigent and kairotic moment, an urgent and opportune time for pursuing more equitable persuasions.

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