

Trumpism Today:  
Conspiracy Theory and Alt-Right Apocalypse

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Reversing while confirming Marx, we now see that Trump emerged first as farce only to culminate in deepening tragedy.

In a recent paper published outside of our collected volume here -- in Jack David Eller's, *The Anthropology of Donald Trump*, also now out from Routledge -- I suggested, ahead of the curve when first written, that we need to understand the so-called success of Trump and Trumpism through the lens of millenarianism, the belief in apocalyptic collapse from which only an all-knowing and all-powerful prophet or messiah of the Armageddon-to-come can rescue us.

I got my start in anthropology decades ago publishing a comparative study of twenty Melanesian cargo cults. I had no idea the larger issue of how quickly millenarian cultism can mushroom – and how difficult it is to combat its fervor – could be so relevant to mainstream American politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so different from the fears of Jimmy Carter's born again Christianity in the late 1970s. Leon Festinger showed in his analysis of flying saucer cults in rural Western US back in the mid-1950s that evidence which disconfirms millenarian – that the flying saucers will come this Saturday at 5pm, or that the Trumpist Messiah would be installed last January 6 -- can fuel and expand rather than deflate apocalyptic belief. The current apocalypticism in Trumpism has now gone from covert to open, not just among erstwhile fringe types like Marjorie Taylor Greene in my home state of Georgia.

The most virulent and violent expressions of almost any radical millenarianism are very hard to predict. Months before the 2020 election, I penned a piece suggesting we were heading for a newly distinctive American Civil War. But I couldn't predict exactly how Trump would contest the election – and exactly how his follows would parse the cryptic tea leaves of his thinly veiled apocalyptic message. As Kenelm Burridge said of Melanesian cargo cults long ago, millenarianism chews up positivist theory with plenty of spit left over. The same could be said, incidentally, of positivist polling numbers, Nate Silver notwithstanding.

I see the present situation, to be brief and bare, as a combination of “Blame the Victim” and “When Victims Become Killers.” Trumpist recourse to racism and xenophobia as a way to preserve threatened white prestige is now common knowledge – though this was much less well accepted before, though clearly evident to some of us. *The New York Times* recently

documented how racial white majority-becoming-minority demographics vis-avis BIPOC people accurately predict by congressional district the distribution of alt-Right extremity across Republican House members. But as my piece in our collected volume suggested, this is but half the picture: the other half is the ideological alliance – crazy on the rational face of it – between working class and poorer whites, on the one hand, and the ultra-Rich Americans that we know are not just overwhelmingly conservative but fully funding of alt-Right news and regressive policy support and lobbying (see brilliant analysis by Page et. al. in their book *Billionaires and Stealth Politics*). This cross-class alliance between poorer and ultra-rich Whites – the upper 2% - is virulently polarized against BIPOC peoples, especially Blacks, and also, importantly, against what I call the Blue Bourgeoisie – the educated middle and upper-middle class professionals that tend to inform and reflect progressivist liberal views in the US. The Blue Bourgeoisie are opposed, hated really, by alt-Right pundits and Trumpist followers -- as much as if not more than are Blacks and other people of color. The Blue Bourgeoisie is “the Swamp” that will be drained from politics on Trump Judgment Day. Increasingly, the apocalyptic enemy of Democrats goes beyond Q-Anon and is associated with the Devil.

In blaming ostensibly unfair advantage given to blacks, immigrants, and BIPOC people generally, Trumpists are obviously blaming the victim. But here I would extend the analysis through the lens of what Mahmood Mamdani called, in studying the Hutu slaughter of Tutsi's in Rwanda, “When Victims Become Killers.” We know historically that victims, when they ultimately gain some modicum of power, are not immune from turning the tables and being vicious, including against their previous or supposed suppressors. Think of the history of immigrant violence in the US as depicted by Martin Scorsese in “Gangs of New York.” Or how Jews who survived the Holocaust now virulently suppress Palestinians in the West Bank, now again re-affirmed in Netanyahu's re-ascendance.

Of course, working and lower class whites in the US have hardly been suppressed by any such measure, especially vis-à-vis blacks, immigrants, and people of color generally. But as authors such as the political turn-coat JD Vance exposed, they perceive themselves to have been degraded, condescended to, and stigmatized as well as economically disadvantaged relative to the liberal American political and economic elite – the Blue Bourgeoisie. The depth of resentment and hatred by working class white Americans at having their American Dream left behind if not crushed is an incredibly powerful and pervasive present force. Perception of *relative* deprivation is key here.

On *cultural* grounds, working class Trumpists have some justification for claiming being the victims of stigma – being perceived and treated as white trash, hillbillies, rednecks, undereducated and hence underemployed. And given skyrocketing income inequality, their economic status *has*, along with the American dream and the decline of US global economic hegemony generally, greatly declined in recent years.

In revenge, in apocalyptic and millenarian riposte, Trumpists now foresee the coming of political Judgment Day in which the blinding strictures of what we call fair democracy are forceably removed, once and for all.

How much these ostensible Trumpist victims will now become killers is at once an open and a devilish question. The sliding line between playful belief, full belief, and commitment to violent action is highly fractured, splintered, and diverse among individuals with eccentric individual mosaics of conspiracy theory and ultimate confrontation. They may kill American democracy, full stop, and, in addition, some are fully prepared to kill actual people if they perceive their power to be stolen at the ballot box. The US has a long helical history of apocalyptic and increasingly politicized evangelicalism, ever since Plymouth Rock was colonized by Puritans.

This is not to suggest a broad-brush doomsday scenario. This would simply adopt, from a progressive side, a one-sided scenario, all-or-nothing, about Trumpism. The future specifics of rabid millenarianism are extremely hard to predict, including exactly who, how, and where. Its success and continuity are not inevitable, but neither is its assuagement or dissipation.

Both as scholars and as progressively engaged people, we need, I think, to redouble our efforts to understand *across* this divide as well as our own side of it. Seriously considering and understanding the cultural alterity of Trumpism within the US may seem as distasteful as it may seem impossible. (Some chapters in Eller's edited *The Anthropology of Donald Trump* begin to do just this.) To do otherwise is only to make Trumpism, as James Scott might put it, yet more illegible to the received democratic state. Otherwise we are stuck in what Ortner dubbed Dark Anthropology – and what might now be more aptly called “Woke Anthropology” -- we will stay continually myopic and unrelativizing of alt-Right developments in our own country, including the white subalternity that is nowhere as strong as that of BIPOC peoples but perceived to be at least as strong if not stronger than this by Trumpists themselves. That this now includes a significance range Hispanic men in the US is especially troubling, including as Hispanics are the fastest growing racial/ethnic demographic in this country.

Amid all this, we cannot give up a critical and yet sensitive study of alternative subjectivities – the linchpin of cultural anthropology. This not just in spite of but because these issues seem so very unpalatable while being so very close to home. In a sense, our future of who we know or think our country to be depends on it.