

Trump's New Face of Power in America

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Abstract: This article proposes that the advent of Trumpism was an historical moment of danger that compels us to analyze the micropolitics of the present. In the first part, I describe the constellation that gave rise to Trumpism. In the second part, I recall Goffman's concept of face-work and discuss how it remains relevant for describing Trump's aggressive face-work. In the third part, I take Deleuze and Guattari's concept of faciality as a point of departure for understanding micro-fascism. As an abstract machine, Trump's faciality engendered and diffused fascisizing micropolitics around a messenger/disruptor in chief. It worked in connection with a landscape and relative to a collective assemblage of enunciation that extracted a territory of perception and affect. In the micropolitics of the present, the defining feature of Trumpism was how the corrupt abuse of power and the counterforces limiting his potency collided on an ominous, convulsive political reality TV show that threatened US democracy.

Keywords: Trumpism, micropolitics, face-work, faciality, assemblage, landscape, impeachment, micro-fascism

We are all sufferers from history, but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well.
– Richard Hofstadter (1964)

When a man unprincipled in private life desperate in his fortune, bold in his temper, possessed of considerable talents, having the advantage of military habits—despotic in his ordinary demeanor—known to have scoffed in private at the principles of liberty—when such a man is seen to mount the hobby horse of popularity—to join in the cry of danger to liberty—to take every opportunity of embarrassing the General Government & bringing it under suspicion—to flatter and fall in with all the non sense of the zealots of the day—It may justly be suspected that his object is to throw things into confusion that he may “ride the storm and direct the whirlwind.” – Alexander Hamilton (18 August, 1792) quoted by Rep. Adam Schiff (20 January, 2020) in his opening argument for President Trump's Senate impeachment trial

Introduction

2016 was a tumultuous year in US politics and the turmoil continued since Donald Trump was elected president. His rhetoric and demeanor in the political theatre of struggle prompted a range

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of views on whether fascism has already happened, is on the rise, or cannot happen in the US. In this debate, the difficulty is that whatever fascist traits we see, echoes we hear, or themes we interpret, depends on how we define “fascism.” Paxton (2005) tackled the problem of definition and noted that the language and symbols of a future, popular American fascism need not resemble historical European fascism. Amid all the chaos after Trump’s election, Grossberg (2018) claims that the similarities between Trump’s administration and fascism as a form of political behavior do not warrant the conclusion that he is a fascist. Paxton offers a comparative analysis of historical stages that begins in Europe while Grossberg emphasizes the cultural particularism of the contemporary US political context. Their accounts come close to converging when theorizing the link between choices, actions and “mobilizing passions” or political struggles and the “affective landscape.” Likewise, in a genealogical study, Connolly traces “aspirational fascism” by attending to affective flows of communication and contagion. His approach gives due weight to “multiple resonances between words, techniques, bodily demeanor, facial expressions, fears, images...” (Connolly 2017, p. 5). Colasacco (2018), however, suggests that fascism and Trumpism have a few features in common: “radicalism, populism, and perhaps above all, what Griffin calls ‘paligenetic ultranationalism’ (paligenetic denoting renewal or rebirth—or ‘making great again’)” (p. 28). Gounari (2018) describes a shift in discourse that took a “neofascist authoritarian turn” while Lebow (2019) and Morris (2019) make parallel cases that Trump’s “neoliberal authoritarianism” is best characterized as “inverted American-style fascism.” Relatedly, many other observers and commentators have noted how Trump’s affective political communication promulgated post-truth politics, intensified political polarization, deepened fear and hostility, and encouraged violence.

What remains to be explored is how Trump’s shock politics spread like a contagion in the direction of micro-fascism. One starting point is Deleuze and Guattari’s observation that “What makes fascism dangerous is its molecular or micropolitical power...” (1987, p. 215). If, as Guattari (2016, p. 104) suggested when he was working with Deleuze in the 1970s, “micro-fascist conjunctions of power can spring up all over the place,” then this article proposes that such a conjunction sprang up in the US. In this conjunction, Trump’s political performances are for all to see, read about, react to, and to rate. And as Garcia (2018) remarks:

Trump’s political performance must be taken as a possible opening, as a symptom capable of generating ethical repositionings that would lead the American community to genuinely ask about its political order (p. 332).

Trump’s fascisizing micropolitics threw the US political order into disorganization so he could wield more power in the executive branch. In October 2019, House Democrats voted for a formal impeachment inquiry that led to a momentous vote on whether the president acted ethically and legally, or jeopardized the constitution by usurping Congressional power and undermining the system of separated powers. But after Senate Republicans acquitted Trump, it would be up to voters in the next presidential election and the courts to check and balance his efforts to consolidate power.

In the first part, I describe the constellation of Trumpism. In Benjamin’s (1969) sense, an historian “grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one” (p. 263). Looking back at what happened, we can see how Trump’s politics surged up from historical tendencies and past events. But there was also a rupture in historical patterns and unprecedented presidential actions that disregarded democratic norms, rules, practices and laws. Going beyond the boundaries of other presidents, Trump learned to *ride* the storm and *direct* the whirlwind. As Adorno (2020, orig. 1967) once warned, meteorological metaphors can naturalize the very real political problem of right-wing extremism.