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“Bigly” Interpellations: Trump and the Crisis of American Ideology

David O. Hanson

The election of Donald Trump to the presidency sent shockwaves throughout the political sphere both domestically and internationally. The intrusion of such a volatile and abnormal political figure led to lacklustre analyses of the populism that buoyed his rise. This article will show how American populism is both a direct reaction to and an outcome of a dominant ideology upheld by the institutionalised American political class. After first outlining what type of ideological framework will be utilised, this article will then show how Trump is a symbolic representation of the crisis that American ruling ideology is undergoing.

Political pundits privy to and part of the American establishment publicly proclaimed their shock that America, upon the election of Trump, could supposedly deny its values and elect an openly “xenophobic, racist, misogynistic, serially mendacious narcissist”.¹ Op-eds in America’s most illustrious newspapers opined about how the “white working class” had brought to power a man intent on undermining American democracy and prosperity in order to institute superficial populist goals.² It created a burgeoning public discourse about what this “populist uprising” truly wanted. Populist came to mean undemocratic and subversive, blind to the norms and institutions of the American political system that kept democracy running smoothly.

Generally, Trump was seen as a disruption to the normal functioning of American politics. Conventional political wisdom dictated that the presidency would switch between the two major parties, but there would only be a modicum of difference between each candidate. Continuity of norms was paramount and presidents were expected to act “presidential”: stately and refined. Trump was none of that. Mainstream pundits and cultural critics attributed his rise to malcontent sectors of society blind to the benevolent hegemony of the political establishment—populists—who helped Trump “by staging something like a coup against [Republican] leadership”.³ The system, rather than being inherently problematic itself, was given an improper input with Trump that, given time and political manoeuvring, would eventually be averted and fixed, with normal functioning returning after one political cycle.

Truly a disruption to the system, Trump is a highly complex and nuanced intrusion. This essay explores Trump as a disruption to American ideology, particularly the ideology of the institutionalised political establishment. The initial rejection of Trump by Republicans and the wholesale disgust of Democrats indicates that he is viewed as a bumbling outsider by the political establishment. The “political establishment”, a somewhat vague and confusing term, in this essay refers to the electoral and party systems that inform and dominate the American political scene. Thoroughly embedded in

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¹ Jelani Cobb, “Donald Trump and the Death of American Exceptionalism,” *The New Yorker*, 4 November 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/donald-trump-and-the-death-of-american-exceptionalism>.

² Peter Goodman, “Trump Rides a Wave of Fury That May Damage Global Prosperity,” *New York Times*, 9 November 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/business/economy/trump-rides-a-wave-of-fury-that-may-damage-global-prosperity.html>.

³ Geoffrey Kabaservice, “Wild populism has a long history in US politics, but Trump is surely unique,” *The Guardian*, 15 January 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/15/wild-populism-long-history-us-politics-trump-surely-unique>.

the American democratic process, these systems and the various actors within them constitute the political establishment. The prevailing ideology of this political establishment—unable to cope with arising crises within its own ideology and American society generally—lacks political imagination and efficacy to deal with the paradigmatic shift that Trump represents. While not directly responsible for the rise of Trump, I will explore how the political establishment’s ideology laid the groundwork for a subversive figure like Trump to rise to power.

Ideology as interpellation

Before explaining how ideology enabled a figure like Trump, a framework and method must be chosen to describe what ideology is and does. Terry Eagleton, in his *Ideology: An Introduction*, gives sixteen different possible conceptions of ideology, from “a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class” to “socially necessary illusion”; this analysis leans toward the former.⁴ Describing ideology as conceptualised in the Marxist tradition by the French philosopher Louis Althusser, I utilise Argentinian political theorist Ernesto Laclau’s post-Marxist rearticulation. In this vein, ideology creates a system of meaning which allows for individuals to make sense of their lived existence. Central to this theory of ideology is the priority of the philosophical subject, outlined by Althusser in his seminal *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Formatively, “ideology is made possible only by the subject”; ideology functions by turning individuals into subjects, giving individuals a perceived sense of personal autonomy.⁵ Through a complex web of social interactions, subjects are given agency that is on one hand real and on the other imaginary, for “represented in ideology is not a system of real relations which govern existence of individuals, but the imaginary relations of those individuals to the real relations in which they live.”⁶ This imaginary subject-making system is what Althusser calls interpellation. He describes interpellation as similar to the process of hailing someone; a literal “hey, you there!” The literal and symbolic act of speaking at an individual makes them a concrete subject; it is a form of socialisation born from the act of recognition. The individual you have hailed/recognised in turn recognises you and you are both no longer concrete individuals but instead concrete subjects by nature of your social interaction.

This individuated conception of ideology explicitly rejects the “post-ideological” consensus of much of post-war American sociology.⁷ Ideology is not just the grand political narratives of Nazism or Soviet Communism. Ideology is a way of making sense of the world, providing subjects with set narratives that allow for practical simplification of highly complex discursive trends. The attendees in the thrall of a Trump rally are just as much under the sway of ideology as the political pundits sneering at what they see as mass hysteria. Ideology is distinctly manifested in social, religious, and political discourses, creating a map for the subject. Summatively, Althusser says, there is “1) no practice except by and in ideology and 2) no ideology except by the subject and for subjects.”⁸

To maintain subjectivity, ideology must constantly adapt and reproduce, ameliorating its contradictions, of which every ideological system has. However, an ideology falters when contradictions in the social space become too great to ignore and the ideological problematic can no longer accommodate or explain them. When the crisis takes hold, the crisis of confidence its subjects experience is “translated into an exacerbation of all the ideological contradictions and into a dissolution of the unity of the dominant ideological discourse”.⁹ Since individuals are transformed into subjects, when ideo-

⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 2007), 1–2.

⁵ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2012), 128.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁷ Eagleton, *Ideology*, 4.

⁸ Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” 128.

⁹ Ernesto Laclau, “Fascism and Ideology,” in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism* (London: Verso, 2011) 103.

logy splinters the crisis is not just an ideological crisis, but an identity crisis. Opposing social sectors, fundamentally pitted against each other due to power imbalances, attempt to disarticulate the opposing ideology by narrating a “reconstitution of a new ideological unity”.¹⁰

Whether an ideology is dominant or undergoing a crisis, it is constituted and reconstituted through discourse. Laclau’s major contribution to political theory has been the introduction of the conceptual framework of discourse theory to the Marxist canon (he and his partner Chantal Mouffe refer to their contribution as post-Marxism).¹¹ Grounded in Saussurean linguistics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Derridean deconstruction, Laclau and Mouffe explore how political discourses function. Firstly, discourse is the practice of articulation, which Laclau and Mouffe define as “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice.”¹² As such, discourse is “the structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice.”¹³ Discourse theory largely encompasses Althusser’s idea of interpellation, but presents a more developed model of how social and political identities are constructed within an ideological framework. In societies, there are a plurality of social actors constituting a social space holding demands that must be met by the existing social institutions. How society and its structural institutions respond to demands relies on the particularity of the demands and how the variety of competing demands are equated and differentiated. In the advent of a social/political movement, a particularity, a specific demand, “assumes the representation of an incommensurable totality” amidst a whole variety of demands.¹⁴ This representation, the privileging of a certain particularity in the position of a master-signifier, is what Laclau and Mouffe call hegemony. Hegemony, a key concept definitive of their post-Marxism, pulls from the Gramscian idea of hegemony, but in a significant departure realises the social totality as a system of discursive relational identities.¹⁵ While ideology functions as interpellation, ideology represents and constitutes its subjects through discursive signs. Ideology may be dominant, but it is not infallible. It is in ideology’s fallibility, that the “hegemonic identity becomes something of the order of an *empty* signifier, its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness.”¹⁶ This emptiness of the hegemonic identity is the point around which populist ideology revolves.

The populist interpellation

Individuals within western societies are interpellated as subjects into a capitalist system, fed a narrative, and provided with a discourse. All are in the throes of ideology. But as to how individuals and social actors are interpellated into certain ideologies varies. Marxist theory, with its “determination in the last instance by the economic base”, boils down antagonisms to class conflict.¹⁷ While a class-centric analysis of political movements is vital, it cannot explain why individuals contradict their class interests. Middle-class small business owners and rural working-class whites have differing class motivations, but they both predominantly voted for Trump.

Traditional Marxist analysis, while correctly pointing out contradictions inherent in a capitalist social formation, ultimately boils all conflict down to class struggle. For Laclau, especially in his early theoretical work, class is still the basic bloc through which society organises itself and through which we can analyse social struggle; but instead of every contradiction being an instance of class

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, “Post-Marxism Without Apologies,” *New Left Review* 0, no. 166 (1987): 106.

¹² Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed, (London: Verso, 2014), 91.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, (London: Verso, 2007), 70.

¹⁵ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 120.

¹⁶ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 71.

¹⁷ Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” 105.

contradiction, “every contradiction is overdetermined by class struggle.”¹⁸ Class antagonism is not articulated as class struggle because of a deficient interpellation. Laclau outlines two major contradictions and their subsequent interpellations. On the first level, centred on the dominant modes of production—between the capitalist and the worker—there is the basic Marxist premise that the capitalist class appropriates the surplus labour-value of the working class. As such, on the ideological level, agents within the system are interpellated as a class as a result of recognising the material relations between unequal subjects.¹⁹ The second contradiction arises out of the “political and ideological relations of domination and not just the relations of production”.²⁰ Instead of being interpellated by class, agents are interpellated by general, populist terms—the “people”—as there is a lack of ideological problematic mapping or making sense of the imbalance of power present to them. It is this misrecognition of their material relations, determined by the dominant modes of production, that interpellates agents through class contradiction but not as class antagonism. Focused against a small, minority elite, agents attribute the apparent contradictions of the social formation to a deficiency in the democratic system, defying Marxist dogma that all articulated antagonism is class-based.

Before elaborating on the populist interpellation, it must be noted that there are preconditions for populism, which Laclau outlines in his 2009 book *On Populist Reason*. Before the “people” can articulate an antagonistic stance toward the small, minority elite, the generalised social category of the “people” must be formed. Firstly, there must be “the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the ‘people’ from power.”²¹ There must be a basic form of antagonism that is definable in ontological terms, distinguishing within the social space the various forms of actors. Secondly, there is “an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the ‘people’ possible.”²² As mentioned above, before a demand is privileged, adopting the hegemonic position, demands at some level must be equated. In the formation of the “people”, who have a variety of demands, the particularity of each specific demand must be diminished before a more coherent and unified rhetorical demand can be made against those in power. When this is attained through political mobilisation, there is finally “the unification of these various demands [...] into a stable system of signification”.²³ At this point, the “people” have been formed into a more distinguishable group, though as Laclau is keen to remind us, this stable signification is an empty signifier, the demands of the “people” do not constitute a fully realised ontological political identity, but merely the appearance of one.

In this instance, the “people” are now formed into a moderately stable entity pitted against an antagonistic power. The demands against this power constituting populism can stem from outside the capitalist paradigm, but in many cases these other democratic deficiencies can be traced back to forms of economic injustice. Ruling bourgeois ideology in modern capitalism is distinctly linked with the democratic liberal tradition, such that the “bourgeoisie’s successes in asserting its ideological hegemony, is the consensus it has achieved [...] that many of the constitutive elements of democratic and popular culture are irrevocably linked to its class ideology.”²⁴ By co-opting the popular-democratic tradition and discourse, bourgeois ideology interpellates subjects into a populist discourse that negates the class element that ultimately underpins the nature of the contradiction bringing about the crisis. This is itself a transformation or reproduction of ideology. When the ruling classes attempt to reassert the established power relations, they do so by “reconstituting the ideological unity”. Laclau, in a reformulation of the Marxist critique, posits that ideologies transform “through class struggle,

¹⁸ Laclau, “Fascism and Ideology,” 106.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

²¹ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 74.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Laclau, “Fascism and Ideology,” 111.

which is carried out through the production of subjects and the articulation/disarticulation of discourses.”²⁵ The popular-democratic interpellation is one such attempt at disarticulation. As class antagonisms rise to the surface, they are articulated/disarticulated into a more manageable form of crisis.

The resolution or overcoming of a crisis of capitalism comes from two factors indicative of the relative placement of different social sectors or classes within an ideology. As Laclau says:

- (1) The more separated is a social sector from the dominant relations of production, and the more diffuse are its ‘objective interests’ and consequently, less developed its ‘class instinct’ - the more the evolution and the resolution of the crisis will tend to take place on the ideological level.
- (2) The more central is the role of this type of sector in the social formation in question, the more central will be the role of the ideological level in the final resolution of the crisis on the part of the social formation as a whole.²⁶

Since in modern capitalism, social sectors are more dispersed and alienated and therefore less likely to collectively organise, the resolution of a crisis will come about through the articulation/disarticulation of social antagonisms. There will always be contradictions in the system—a certain sense of ambiguity that can never be fully explained—but the predominant ideology will continually “absorb and neutralise its contradictions” through popular-democratic interpellations.²⁷ These contradictions, which the “people” respond to with demands, will nonetheless still be confined to an ideology that manifests itself in an “institutionalist discourse [...] that attempts to make the limits of the discursive formation coincide with the limits of the community.”²⁸ More simply, political imagination is stifled by keeping possible solutions within the narrow bourgeois democratic tradition.

Trump as Populist Vessel

It is the populist interpellation through which we must look at Trump. The initial analysis of the 2016 election and the popular narrative running through mainstream media sources was that Trump was riding a populist insurgency to the top, a “populism cut[ting] across party lines like few others before him” and “appeal[ing] to many less-educated voters in the white working class who hadn’t previously taken much interest in politics.”²⁹ This populist insurgency was initially deemed to have come from the white working class centred in middle America. An economically and socially disenfranchised social group, the elite consensus deemed that the white working class had genuine cultural anxieties that were inappropriately channeled into a populist firebrand such as Trump. *New York Times*’ best-selling books such as *Hillbilly Elegy* attempted to explain to coastal liberals the alienation that white working class people were feeling. Tellingly subtitled *A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, *Hillbilly Elegy* hinted at the alienation felt by these once secure American communities but tellingly attributed it to a deficient culture rather than the dire economic conditions they were subject to. As Bob Hutton in *Jacobin Magazine* retorted in a review of the book, “the American hillbilly isn’t suffering from a deficient culture. He’s just poor.”³⁰

It is precisely this diagnosis of Trump’s ascendancy that outlines the predominant ideological discourse in American politics. Devoid of any class consideration, the explanatory power of both con-

²⁵ Ibid, 109.

²⁶ Laclau, “Fascism and Ideology,” 104.

²⁷ Ibid, 115.

²⁸ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 81.

²⁹ Michael Lind, “Donald Trump, the Perfect Populist,” *Politico*, 9 March 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/03/donald-trump-the-perfect-populist-213697>; Kabaservice, “Wild populism.”

³⁰ Bob Hutton, “Hillbilly Elitism,” *Jacobin Magazine*, 1 October 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/10/hillbilly-elegy-review-jd-vance-national-review-white-working-class-appalachia>.

servative and liberal rationales is lacklustre. There seems to be a consensus in American political circles that there is some form of crisis, though few agree on what the nature of it is. What is for certain is that there is a crisis of the ruling class. Trump was not only maligned by the Democratic Party but also by the Republican Party in the early stage primaries of the 2016 election. Party elites on either side assumed that Trump could never clinch the nomination, let alone go on to win. The veneer of respectability that political elites worshipped and Trump eschewed hints at the ideological similarity of the American political class regardless of party lines. For both parties, politics must be conducted within the bounds of respectable discourse, no matter how progressive or reactionary the policies are. Made up of cultural and business elites with different but intersecting political rationalities, they nonetheless constitute the ruling class. Laclau's observation that there is always a "sense of ambiguity" within the dominant ideology holds. While there may be tension between market-oriented neoliberalism and moral-statist neoconservatism they still both constitute a relatively dominant ideology, one that is keen to uphold a capitalist social formation.³¹

If Trump is the rejection of politics-as-normal, then Trump is a rejection, consciously or not, of the dominant ideology. In Marxist terms it is a rejection of bourgeois ideology. Trump himself is not a clear manifestation of Laclau's first contradiction, highlighting the contradictions between a ruling class that benefits from a rising stock market and exacerbated income inequality while the working class suffers from stagnating wages and precarious job security. He is himself part of this ruling elite, "a plutocrat denying plutocrats".³² Instead, Trump embodies the second populist contradiction: a symbolic figurehead of a populist movement that decries the effects of global capitalism while refusing to name it as such, or as Inderjeet Parmar labels him, a "pluto-populist".³³

The populism that helped drive Trump to power was a clear example of Laclau's popular-democratic interpellation. Actual economic and cultural anxiety resulting from globalised capitalism and changing demographics were channeled into anger at a faceless and careless elite. Trump's rhetoric denied the class element of his voters anxieties, or at least never affirmed it, articulating instead a vision of a resurgent America where they could once again regain their privileged status. This vision was particularly attractive to the white working and middle classes, who needed a discourse which catered to their specific demands. The established political rhetoric of both Democrats and establishment Republicans could not satisfy these demands, because in an "institutionalist discourse [...] all [demands] are considered equally valid within a wider totality."³⁴ The normal political rhetoric was too broad to satisfy the particularity.

Part of what made Trump's populist discourse appealing to both classes was the particular anxieties that Trump answered to: that of both a racial and economic scope. Any analysis of right-wing American political trends cannot ignore race and, as the political theorist Corey Robin has shown in Trump's political rhetoric, Trump played blatantly to that racial anxiety, to the idea that people of colour were being given unfair advantages via policies such as welfare and affirmative action. However, this racial anxiety, which for many people was enhanced by the "tormenting symbolism of a black president and the greater visibility of black and brown faces in the culture industries", stemmed from "a combination of stagnating wages, rising personal household debt, and increasing precarity".³⁵ Racial anxiety—to varying degrees a popular-democratic interpellation in certain parts of

³¹ Wendy Brown, "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization," *Political Theory* 34, no. 6 (2006): 691.

³² Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*, 2nd edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 246.

³³ Inderjeet Parmar, "The legitimacy crisis of the U.S. elite and the rise of Donald Trump," *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 3 (2017): 9.

³⁴ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 82.

³⁵ Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, 243.

America—masked over the material problems facing people, though it was most certainly not the cause of this deep-rooted historical racism.

The support for Trump to some extent came from the working class, but it also came from the middle classes as both were interpellated via popular-democratic means in slightly different ways. Like the working class, the middle class—petite bourgeoisie in Marxist terminology—has antagonisms with the capitalist social formation. Laclau shows that the middle class's "contradictions with the dominant bloc are posed, not at the level of the dominant relations of production, but at the level of political and ideological relations."³⁶ Distinctly hailed outside of their class position in capitalism, the middle classes adopt a populist discourse to air their grievances with the the dominant class and its ideology. Trump's populism, infused with economic nationalism aimed at the dominant classes, "rejected the central tenets of the bipartisan neo-liberal agenda that has impoverished segments of the middle and working classes."³⁷ Economic anxiety was real to these relatively well-off classes. Their dissatisfaction with the system, channeled into populist aggrandising which had roots in the anti-government ethos of the Tea Party Movement in the early Obama presidency, needed an outlet which Trump, to an extent, provided.³⁸ But middle-class ideological discourse was not singular in that it was unique to their economic position. It "incorporated its own elements into the ideological discourses of the basic classes", articulating material anxiety in class-absent terms not directed toward any specific economic system but instead at an antagonistic social formation of elites against the "people": in Trump's language, "the silent majority"³⁹

The working class, subject to the same battering of economic forces, were similarly not given an discourse to make sense of their increasing precariousness. The Democratic Party, never truly a working-class-based party like the British Labour Party, has over the decades slowly loosened its ties with major labour unions in favour of donations from the capitalist elite such as banks and large corporations; Hillary Clinton received 92 percent of corporate contributions in the 2016 election cycle.⁴⁰ The working class lacks a party to articulate and address its needs. Politically unrepresented, the working class's "objective, structural position [...] under capitalism provides the basis for collective, solidaristic radicalism *and* individualist, sectorialist, and reactionary politics."⁴¹ In the case of Trump they opted for the latter, as the dominant ideology disarticulated any sense of solidarity by pitting workers against each other, designating them as competing "individual sellers of labour power".⁴² The lack of class interpellation leaves workers as pawns within an atomised labour market, leading them to the understandable conclusion that their lack of economic power is a result of some "other" force. Reactionary politics latches on to this "other", designating it as even more marginalised and down-trodden groups such as people of colour, LGBT+ people or immigrants as its source.

Trump and the Splintered Left

The rise then of reactionary politics—politics latching onto the cultural and economic anxieties of the working and middle classes—stems partly from this lack of "class consciousness". In other words, there is a lack of a strong, genuine, left-wing movement interpellating working class agents as subjects cognisant of the structural deficiencies of modern capitalism. Traditional working-class institutions such as trade unions have only lost members in the face of global capitalism that due to structural changes is making many organised shop floors irrelevant. There are fewer and fewer ideologic-

³⁶ Laclau, "Fascism and Ideology," 114.

³⁷ Charles Post, "Roots of Trumpism," *Cultural Dynamics* 29, no. 1–2 (2017): 102.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁹ Laclau, "Fascism and Ideology," 113.

⁴⁰ Post, "Roots of Trumpism," 103.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴² Johanna Brenner and Robert Brenner, "Reagan, the Right, and the Working Class," Verso (blog), Verso, 15 November 2016, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2939-reagan-the-right-and-the-working-class>.

ally explicit organisations willing or capable of fostering the “collective, solidaristic radicalism” needed to disarticulate the ideology of the dominant class. Trump’s seemingly incoherent rhetoric and intellectual deficiency Corey Robin notes, indicates an absent left and a vacuous right: “when the left is ascendant and genuinely threatening, the right gets tough, intellectually and politically; when the left is in abeyance, the right glows sclerotic and complacent, rigid and lazy.”⁴³ Trump is clearly not the best that the right has to offer, but he is representative of a faltering ideology increasingly incapable of intellectually buttressing the contradictions inherent within it. The left, mostly absent from the Democratic Party besides Bernie Sanders and his supporters, has been unable to articulate increasing social and economic precarity into popular universal struggle. Breaching the divide between working and middle classes, though they face similar issues at different degrees, is difficult because of the lack of institutional structure able to articulate class agitation as a popular-democratic goal.

Reading Trump in light of this crisis of capitalism leads to varying interpretations, some more drastic than others. Trump is a terrifying figure, a break from American political norms that makes many worry about the efficacy of American democracy and its institutions. In light of that, a key historical takeaway from Laclau’s “Fascism and Ideology” is that fascism arises in modern capitalist societies out of a dual crisis. There is:

- 1) A crisis of the power bloc which was unable to absorb and neutralize its contradictions with the popular sectors through traditional channels.
- 2) A crisis of the working classes; which was unable to hegemonize popular struggles and fuse popular-democratic ideology and its revolutionary class objectives into a coherent political and ideological practice.⁴⁴

In Trump we see this dual crisis. The political establishment, made up of both Republicans and Democrats at the highest echelons of power, are still coping with the election of Trump and the crisis it means for their power structures. While Republicans have mostly fallen in line with Trump and his cabinet, they represent less and less of the actual population. Democrats continue to struggle for ideological coherence, with mainstream Democrats fighting against Bernie Sanders and the populist-left movement that he represents. Hillary may have won the popular vote by almost 3 million votes, but American electoral systems are peculiar and changing them would require constitutional amendments which needs a bipartisanship not present in current American politics. To win the Democratic Party has to respond to populist demands, “but signals [...] as to readiness to lead such an effort at political reform are discouraging.”⁴⁵ The left in America is still weak and Sanders does not have the institutional clout needed to bring about a strong working class populist alternative, despite being the most popular politician in the country.

This is not to say that America is sliding into fascism. To claim definitively as such would be alarmist and ignore the complexity of American electoral systems and diversity of interpellations in American civic life. One could tentatively call Trump a proto-fascist by his shredding of American political norms and sheer vitriol aimed at people of colour and immigrants. Rather, he is a culmination—a synthesis—of the crisis of the dominant ideology and clearly an indication of a new direction in American politics. ■

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⁴³ Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, 245.

⁴⁴ Laclau, “Fascism and Ideology,” 115.

⁴⁵ Inderjeet Parmar, “The legitimacy crisis of the U.S. elite and the rise of Donald Trump,” 12.

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