Cultural Hegemony in the Age of Trump:

The Intersection of Right-Wing Populism, Commercial Media, and White Supremacy

Following the election of Donald J. Trump in 2016, there has been a severe resurgence of white nationalism in the US, one that contradictorily denies the prevalence of violence towards and disenfranchisement of marginalized communities of color while simultaneously using them as a backdrop onto which it has overlaid its narratives of extremism and white supremacy. These two ideologies facilitate the political stylings of right-wing populism. White nationalism advocates for the whitetification of a nation, unified as one national polity, through the ostracization and violent subordination of those counter to or disruptive of a cultural hegemony that is white, patriarchal, and heteronormative– for space, this paper will scrutinize white hegemony. Mirroring this explosion was an odious spike in police brutality towards people of color, particularly Black Americans, which alludes to a pernicious correlation.

The age of Trump has witnessed a horrific proliferation of police violence incidents towards colored bodies. The attribution of increased violence to this time frame is partly due to the medium through which this violence enters the public's consciousness, namely video recordings and subsequent video circulation through legacy and social media. Although the seemingly ubiquitous police brutality through these years (2016 to 2020) is, in no way, a phenomenon of contemporary occurrence, the blatant connection between Trump's election to office and the flagrant aftermath– entailing an acquiescence to and validation of violence towards those outside the cultural hegemony– cannot go unrecognized nor be overlooked.

To make sense of Trump's rise to power and his exploitation and subversion of it, relating to police violence, it is necessary to analyze the intersection of right-wing populism, white supremacy, and commercial media. This paper situates right-wing populism as a political style masquerading as ideology, white supremacy as the root cause of a vast majority of all racialized issues, and commercial media as the vehicle that amplifies and disseminates populist ideals– all

of which have flourished under Trump's presidency and coalesced to maintain cultural hegemony. As for Trump's role in this systematic chaos, further scrutiny reveals that Trump is as much a product of this culture as he is a disseminator of it. After President Obama's election in 2008, there was widespread thought that America might have been entering into a "post-racial" or "color-blind" era in our politics. The 2016 election and all the history thereafter attests that this could not be further from the truth.

Right-Wing Populism

As populism is an inherently neutral term, it exists on both sides of the political spectrum and, by nature, advocates for more radical changes and fortifications of associated policies. Populism is the "'thin-centered ideology' or worldview of political and social life as a Manichean moral combat between a unitary and pure people and a dissolute and corrupt elite/system" (Chakravartty and Roy 4007). It is a consequence of framed compromises between political parties that fail to extend viable choices among alternatives– democratic laws submit to the politically centered consensus. Populism provided the channel through which democracy could return to the people, and politics could articulate their identities, interests, and needs. However, since Trump's election, and much to the detriment and destruction of civility within the US, it is strikingly apparent populism has overwhelmingly worked in favor of the Right, proven in their implementation of self-beneficial policies– social, environmental, economic, and otherwise– and validation of state-sanctioned violence and vigilantism against "Others." Trump's election also rocketed into the spotlight a rigid dichotomy between activist foundations on the Left and pugnacious white supremacy on the Right. A blatant disparity was that the Right was unanimously more united through their "identity politics" than the Left, which resulted in a fracturing of leftist efforts to produce a strong leader of social justice and an empowering of white, right-wing solidarity– the success of a radical right over a radical left. This paper will analyze the success of right-wing populism in contrast with the failure of that on the Left.

The political agency imparted by liberal identity politics recoils from radical change; instead, it promotes "the neutralization of [radical] movements against racial oppression" by obfuscating the channels through which leftist movements for radical change funnel into elite-controlled liberal party politics (Haider 12). For example, when discussing the state redress of injury of Black Americans by policing institutions, Haider inculpates the state for merely superimposing racial integration onto already existing power structures– "in which the white cop would be replaced by a black cop"– while allowing police and politicians to continue the neoliberal project of suppressing radical movements for justice (Haider 19). Such reparations fail to catalyze any real systematic change. Nevertheless, most liberals acknowledge them as laudable changes because liberals' "political agency through identity"– that is forced to choose between Democratic-centrist and Republican electoral options– "locks [them] into the state, [and] ensures [their] continued subjection" to the dominant forms of power (Haider 10-11).

Furthermore, there are often fractures on the Left among their ranks. Haider offers a 2014 protest against a university-wide tuition spike at the University of California, Santa Cruz, based on the dogmatic charge of anachronistic racial separatism as an example. The protest's glaring issue was general negligence of considering an underlying connection between tuition increase and state efforts to exclude low-income students as a multiracial class from higher education opportunities. Activists instead viewed the tuition spike as institutionalized aggression towards communities of color, angrily surmising that "rising tuition 'hits students of color the hardest'" (Haider 31). In the macro-context, this separatism conclusively divides movements internally and fails to catalyze genuine solidarity around a concrete anti-capitalist antiracism program. The Democratic Party tries to be a "catch-all" party due to their overwhelmingly diverse base, shown through their extreme pluralism in political debate. However, such aggregate and rational policies often backfire against the "simple solutions" of populism, which explains, in part, the difficulty of implementing the radical changes demanded from the Left (Greven 2).

In contrast, right-wing populism adds a second dimension of antagonism to the permanent "corrupt system versus the people" narrative– in the case of the 2016 election, the "corrupt" Republican elites versus the working class– in the positioning of an "us versus them." Entering into and following the election, the Right had a distinct and intransigent sense of who constituted "us" (culturally hegemonic peoples with an identity and common interests considered as "common-sense") and "them" (anyone counter to this hegemony, such as minorities). Trump effectively brought together this self-perceived aggrieved crowd and amplified their extremist demands through his newly granted platform as right-wing populism's potent leader. Extremist attribution to this party comes from "the more ethnocentric the conception of the people, the more xenophobic the positioning against 'the other,'" and the "clearer the desire" to completely subvert the "democratic systems of governance" that had robbed them of some element of their hegemonic privilege (Greven 2).

Right-wing populists' success also stems from their refusal of political compromise and the concomitant demand for radical solutions regarding their core issues, two belligerent actions for which Trump has become infamous. One of these issues calls upon weaponizing the "us versus them" narrative to target and incriminate the bodies that disrupt the cultural hegemony propounded in right-wing populism, which manifests through Trump's brazenly authoritarian and racist rhetoric and conduct. By utilizing dog-whistle politics against the backdrop of neoliberal capitalism, Trump perpetuates fallacious and damaging mythologies of black criminality that are readily believed by his supporters. He receives consent from his base to strengthen policing measures and augment the grounds for (black) criminality, which have, as they intended to, heightened police profiling, aggression, and violence towards Black Americans and fortified the populist distinction between "us" and "them." The deployment of "law-and-order tactics" serves to "discipline those left behind" by capitalist progressions and "suppress those who resist

widening inequalities," an unmistakable rigging of neoliberal capitalism against communities of color (Paik 13).

If there is any theoretical grounding of Trump and his right-wing populists' desire to see colored bodies controlled, punished, and subjugated, it would be the "Broken Windows" theory. This idea, conceived in 1982 by George Kelling and James Q. Wilson, assumes that Black communities have latent criminal tendencies that will invariably lead to violence. It argues that maintaining order and preventing crime go hand in hand, which provides cause to fortify and fund further policing and prison institutions. Although a Northeastern University research team debunked this theory on the grounds that there is "no consistent evidence that disorder induces higher levels of aggression or makes residents feel more negative toward [their residential areas]," the insight affixed to this theory remains sound to many conservatives who are temperamentally more disturbed by disruptions of order and cultural hegemony than liberals (Martin). The tendency for right-wing populists to react to such disruptions, either through staged and calculated provocations and scandals (i.e., Hilary Clinton's emails) or other means of malapropos distraction, resonates with market demands of the media and the news cycle, affording Trump's band of ethnocentric, right-wing populists an abundance of free media.

Commercial Media

The actions taken through both legacy and social media help to manufacture and communicate identity politics. The extensiveness of conservatism's mediation reinforces the boundaries of conservative identity and disseminates particular discourses and sentiments more broadly and swiftly. Right-wing populism deploys commercial media for the sake of capitalism and advancing political agendas, such as vilifying and dehumanizing colored bodies and, thereby, their communities for the sake of shaping general public opinion to oppose outright policing or prison reform and approve strengthened policing and carceral measures. In the same way that capitalism inextricably links with racism– racialized subjugation and exploitation taint

the former's conception– policing and punishment structures have racism built into them. The police's primary and original function is to protect capital and property, which, as America has especially witnessed in Trump's era, implies the expendability of Black lives, lives that were once property themselves and who now, as depicted in the media, act as antagonists to it.

News media frequently reproduce harmful racial misconceptions about black criminality, whether intentional or not. They act as the gatekeepers of public knowledge, determining what becomes news. There is always a mode of crisis reported by news sites, as its spectacularity is often the most profitable variety of newsmaking. This over-coverage pushes the public to believe that crime is consistently a threat to be wary of, which only serves to reinforce and bolster policing or other law-upholding institutions. Stuart Hall et al. analyzed the media's work of inducing generalized panic over casual crime through the lens of anti-immigrant sentiment in the UK in the 1970s. In the case of "muggings" in the UK, the media turned to police and judiciary figures to report on the events of crises, which invariably shaped the crisis narrative to serve cultural hegemony. The media ambiguously localized "muggings" to concern Black youth, and in the same vein, the media construct much of the crime in the US to concern Black bodies. Though located at different historical junctures and countries, Hall et al.'s arguments speak to our contemporary condition in that the media "reproduce the definitions of the powerful," those who have "privileged access" to institutions that uphold social maps of meaning (Hall et al. 59).

Fox News partakes in the same work but with deliberate vilification of colored bodies, often deploying disinformation as the means for their political communication. Disinformation, which includes "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit," is a rampant problem in right-wing news culture (qt. in Freelon & Wells 145). Fox News manipulates maps of meaning by cruelly defending the officers who murder and abuse Black people, condemning the victims as somehow deserving of their unjust fates, or shifting the narrative entirely. George Floyd's death had ignited

a global fight for Black lives. However, Fox News insidiously constructed a narrative of social justice efforts different from most mainstream media, focalizing the "rioting and looting" and "attack[s on] police officers" to create public trepidation towards these protests and, more importantly, distraction from police brutality (Shapiro). The most recent spouting of disinformation by Fox News pertained to the 2020 election, as they cited false claims of voter fraud to arouse mistrust in and near insurgency towards the election. Fox News' treatment of right-wing pseudo-scandals as major news stories infiltrates and dominates not only general public discourse but also mainstream media through a "hack gap." It should be noted that Fox News delivers the news that is desired by its viewers. It does not force its incendiary rhetoric and indifference to real credibility on its audience, for commercial media is a vehicle for already-established political views and identity politics.

The "hack gap" refers to the phenomenon of right-wing disinformation and, almost always in concert, white supremacist rhetoric to dominate the news cycle, which forces liberals to play continual defense (Yglesias). That is the sensationalizing effect of right-wing populism and, most recently, of Trump. Trump and his base champion an aggressive disregard for "facts, decorum, and basic decency," a crude reflection of conservatism operating through a "hostility to reason… and factual fidelity" (Bennett & Livingston 125; Robin 13:20-13:28). They weaponize and swing the term "fake news" around haphazardly to delegitimize and discredit any unfavorable news coverage, which often focuses on investigative facts and Trump's ethical infractions. Instead, Trump and his supporters opt to believe the illusory reality that Trump, the chosen right-wing populist leader, is the jury, judge, and executioner within that reality. The polarization of the country is rooted in this denialism, even within modern conservatism itself, as "both selective exposure and polarization" are more "at work on the right" with increased insularity of right-wing news audiences and their preference to "more ideologically self-reinforcing" media (Bauer & Nadler 14). These two pillars of right-wing news culture

enable the amalgamation of identity politics and "weaponized victimhood," the latter being an ideology embraced by extremist groups "to maintain power and privilege [bestowed by cultural hegemony] in the guise of powerlessness and justice" (Bauer & Nadler 64).

White Americans often deploy "weaponized victimhood" as a response to movements that challenge the institutions and systems built by and for whites, such as the Black Lives Matter movement. At once, there arises a distinct polarization between the sensitive Right and the aggrieved Left, as the former repudiates any attempt by institutions of democratic governance to touch these systems while the latter stands in stark juxtaposition. The "deep political contentiousness and polarization of… publics" attribute much of their existence to social media (Freelon & Wells 146). The burgeoning attention economy is a substantial element underscoring the sensationalism of disinformation and its ability to 'sell' better than real news. Public opinion falls to the mercy of commercial interests that have created systems of bias towards false information, exponential gossip and hearsay, and anything else that derails public debate off the tracks of rationality. With capitalism built into social media platforms, the latter's structures are intentionally obfuscated by technological capabilities, "the passion and rage of social media exchanges and the unfettered power of algorithms to shape public debate and knowledge" (Davis et al. 53). The digital public sphere goes unmoderated and unpoliced, allowing for the rampant and abundant spread of disinformation on social networking and online sites, most noticeably through alt-right media, which ultimately played a significant role in the election of Trump.

Alt-right media refer to "sites and platforms that produce and distribute disinformation to advance partisan agendas and destabilize opponents and institutions" (Bennett & Livingston 125). They antagonize the professional journalistic standards and values of objectivity and impartiality; they mobilize identity politics; they epitomize the notion of emotional attachment to political affiliations, of constructing political views as social identity. Before the 2016 election, confrontation and analysis of right-wing news culture were relatively minimal as a Trump

presidency seemed like a delusive reality. However, this neglect of alt-right media allowed them to operate under the radar of mainstream media, where they successfully propagated their populist desires and silently won Trump the presidency. Now, mainstream media and the public take alt-right media seriously, but the cost of their dereliction has been steep. As tangible evidence, the spike in production, circulation, and consumption of videos and images of police brutality and anti-Black violence are horrifying proof of the damage of Trump's thinly-veiled– if veiled at all– white supremacist and racist rhetoric and conduct. Although meant to serve as documentation of injustice, these visuals of Black suffering can, and often do, traumatize viewers of color; however, many white onlookers consider these atrocities extensions of what W. E. B Du Bois called their "title to the universe" and everything in it (Myers; Du Bois 16).

White Supremacy

White supremacy has been the instigator, perpetrator, and product of right-wing populism and media efforts. In itself, "white supremacy" is a term that urges one to acknowledge one's collusion with the dominant forces of racism and imperialism– a prosecution of institutional constructs, not personal constructs– but increasingly, particularly in the age of Trump, dominant, cultural hegemony has transformed "white supremacy" into a weapon used in the name of this hegemony and as a cause for solidarity among the alt-right. Trump's presidency is the product of a continuous simmering of white nationalist sentiments and "weaponized victimhood" narratives on the Right, and Trump himself feeds into the perceived aggrievement of whiteness in America by unabashedly enabling, commending, and defending white supremacists, or neo-Nazis, as the Left has aptly branded them, and their incendiary nature. He tapped into these sentiments of white nationalism and cultural hegemony that presupposed and contributed to his rise to power and helped project a culture of whiteness that places brutality at its center.

From calling neo-Nazis in Charlottesville "very fine people" (Donald Trump) to retweeting a video of people chanting "White Power" (@davenewworld_2) to him recently

telling the Proud Boys, a far-right, neo-fascist, and male-only domestic terrorist organization, to "stand back and stand by" at the 2020 Presidential Debate (Trump), there is no shortage of Trump's embrace of cultural hegemony and its inherent racism and violence towards "Others." This failure to condemn white supremacy and, by proxy, the inextricably linked practices of racism and capitalism reinforces the capitalist structures that enable the privatization of prisons and, therefore, the rapid monetization and exploitation of incarcerated Black bodies. It also validates alt-right sentiments that excuse and even defend anti-Black violence– like that of Derek Chauvin, the police officer who murdered Floyd, and Kyle Rittenhouse, the murderer of two protestors in Kenosha, Wisconsin. In sync with the movement of cultural hegemony, capitalism plays a substantial role in the socioeconomic issues of Black suffering because its emergence was not only based on a theory of inequality– the accumulation of wealth in fewer hands– but also on a racial hierarchy. Elites within this capitalist economy rely on racism, a by-product of capitalism, as a way to both divide a multiracial class of workers and, simultaneously, extract value out of those bodies, as is ubiquitous today. It is imperative to analyze this wedge in the working class to understand the intersection of race and class, notably, why white working class Americans would support a regime that benefits whiteness but fails to afford them salient monetary spoils. This scrutiny reveals the trend that the white working class's Republican vote long predates the 2016 election.

As the largest demographic, the working class is a political force that plays a dominant role in determining where the needle falls on the spectrum of American politics. Since the majority composition of the class is non-Hispanic white Americans– around 57.6-percent– hegemonic powers streamline their political efforts to continue pounding a deeply rooted wedge of racial animus further into the splintering cracks of racialized separation within the working class. This wedge's materialization dates back to the Sixties when, prior to this decade and the new demands on the welfare state it ushered in, the white working class was relatively

pro-Democratic. The extreme racial divide sparked into existence following the civil rights movements and their far-reaching political effects. Opposition to these "progressive" movements seeking a more equal and better America came from white "Democrats who objected to Washington dissipating their tax dollars on programs which did them no good" (qt. in Teixeira & Abramowitz 8). The shift in liberal programs "taxing the few for the benefit of the many... to programs taxing the many on behalf of the few" did not resonate well with white laborers.

Race was the chief, though not the only, vehicle that tore apart the New Deal Coalition and ripped the white working class out of the hands of the Democratic party and into the awaiting Republican party that flourished as a counter to the Democratic welfare state. Thus, the white working class's shift in political orientation became clear as 70-percent of their votes went to Richard Nixon, the Republican candidate, in 1972. The drop of 20 points for the Democrat party solidified the loss of their title as "the party of the white working class" (Teixeira & Abramowitz 10). This historical analysis reveals that the white working class's role in the 2016 election was not shocking or unexpected but, in fact, a continuation and aggregation of political perceptions and racial tendencies. However, this is only one perspective to the story of white working class alignment with Republicans, capitalism, and racism; the other side, but still of the same coin, reveals how the Right leverages race, the "wage of whiteness," as Du Bois terms it, to keep the white working class subservient to capitalistic structures.

Conservatives employ a two-pronged approach to maintaining the white working class vote, where conservatives manipulate the white laborers' economic insecurity and distract them from their exploitation within the capitalist economy. First, right-wing politics routinely connect whites' legitimate fears surrounding economic insecurity to illegitimate anti-black sentiments– a connection very nearly intrinsic to racial capitalism and a maneuver exemplary of Trump's redrawing of the "color line" to disguise the suffering generated by capitalism. In his work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois prophetically stated that "[t]he problem of the twentieth century is

the problem of the color line," the color line referring to "the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men," which determines who constitutes the cultural hegemony and, thereby, gets to revel in its privileges and opportunities (Du Bois). This manipulation plays out in elections; in the 2016 election, the white working class vote represented an amalgamation of economic insecurity and racial animus, therefore turning to populist ideology to elect Trump.

Second, to distract the white working class from their exploitation and scarce economic benefits, white laborers receive compensation in the form of "wages of whiteness," which are "public and psychological" rather than monetary (Du Bois 700). Grants of basic decency and public deference, ease and freedom of social mobility, positions within or leniency from law and justice institutions, direct political representation and voting rights, and access to facilitative educational environments and opportunities are some of the myriad forms of this wage paid out to white laborers. White supremacy enables these wages as it bases their value of whiteness, as meaningful compensation, on the devaluation of Black existence and white workers on their classification as "not-black." The payment, in the form of social status, not only unites the lower class whites with white elites and capitalists, but it also serves to bind the white working class to white capital, securing public acquiescence to capitalism and maintaining capitalism's racial hierarchy. The successful racial division of a multiracial class works in favor of regimes such as Trump's brazenly authoritarian and racist one, through which the amplification of and widening between the "us versus them" narrative is more recognizable than ever.

Conclusion

Racism in the US has the bipartite function of anchoring the socioeconomic rift between the 1-percent and everyone else and fueling capitalism's selective democratization, which invariably involves racially exclusive pathways of mobility. The systems of inequality that underpin the foundations of the US continue to maintain privilege and power for those located within the cultural hegemony, specifically those that are white. Backed by capitalist structures,

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these modes of domination continually work to debilitate the economic situations of "Others" counter to or located outside of the hegemony. Without access to the same "public and psychological" wages that white laborers receive, these "Others," often Black people, are pushed into "crimes" of poverty just to live within modern civilization. Media coverage of these crimes erupts across news channels and online sites, stoking fear of and heightened wariness towards Black bodies, which buttresses sentiments vehemently lauding the police force's efforts and rejecting any genuine programs of defunding the police or prison reform.

This process authenticates the underlying messages of Trump's dog-whistle politics, which ultimately serve to reinforce the cultural hegemony that is, in totality, white, patriarchal, and heteronormative. Any disruption of or perceived loss to white hegemony, such as Obama's presidency or the impending majority-minority US, mobilizes responses of "weaponized victimhood" and general "whitelash"– independent of white economic insecurity but in concert with racial animus. The aftermath of the 2016 election did more than open America's eyes to the interlinked forms of racism and capitalism that enabled Trump's rise to power and subverted expectations of moral and basic decency. The election thrust much of America into a visceral nightmare, one all too familiar for people of color, but, at the cost of innumerable lives and an incredibly divided nation, America is finally starting to wake up. Seriously and collaboratively confronting not only right-wing populism but the entirety of cultural hegemony itself is daunting and, as we have seen, deadly, but the work of scholars, activists, and morally competent journalists alike in exposing, undermining, countering, and challenging these systems and institutions, made for and by whiteness, has never been more crucial and necessary.

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