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AMERICAN REALITIES
A European perspective on Trump’s America

Liam Kennedy

Introduction
Let’s begin with a European question: “Are Americans really stupid?” This is a question posed, or better reported by the Polish writer Czeslaw Milosz in his book *The Captive Mind*, published in 1953. Milosz had experienced the horrors of both WWI and WWII directly, and in *The Captive Mind* he sought to explore and explain the psychology and appeal of authoritarianism and more particularly of totalitarianism. He also addresses what he sees as an American ignorance of the realities of totalitarianism:

“Are Americans really stupid?” I was asked in Warsaw. In the voice of the man who posed the question, there was despair, as well as the hope that I would contradict him. This question reveals the attitude of the average person in the people’s democracies toward the West: it is despair mixed with a residue of hope.

During the last few years, the West has given these people a number of reasons to despair politically. [...] Before the countries of Central and Eastern Europe entered the sphere of the Imperium, they lived through the Second World War. That war was much more devastating there than in the countries of Western Europe. It destroyed not only their economies, but also a great many values which had seemed till then unshakeable.

(Milosz 2001[1953], 25)

Milosz goes on to describe how conditions of totalitarian oppression shake human faith in the “naturalness” of their surroundings and remarks on how this distinguishes peoples of the East and the West.

The man of the East cannot take Americans seriously because they have never undergone the experiences that teach men how relative their judgments and thinking habits are. Their resultant lack of imagination is appalling. Because they were born and raised in a given social order and in a given system of values, they believe that any other order must be “unnatural,” and that it cannot last because it is
incompatible with human nature. But even they may one day know fire, hunger, and the sword.

(Milosz 2001[1953], 29)

This question—“Are Americans really stupid?”—is worth repeating today, not as a cheeky response to the wisdom of electing Trump but to reconsider Milosz’s concern with whether Americans lack the experience and imagination to grasp the realities of totalitarianism. Are they, as Milosz implied in 1953, cut off from history, inured in their relative comfort and ignorance? To what extent is this “naturalisation” of American reality now in crisis?

A correlative question: Why is the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States proving challenging to comprehend and interpret well after its initial, shocking impact? Even as the dust clears and the shockwaves recede and we begin to formulate frames and narratives to explain what happened, there is something excessive and confounding about this presidency that not only beggars belief but impedes critical interpretation—a sense that the very grounds of analysis and argument have shifted, that a paradigm shift is underway that many barely grasp at this time.

In this chapter, I offer some reflections on aspects of this paradigm shift and challenges it poses for Americanists, with a particular interest in what it means for those of us who are transnational in perspective, whether by inclination or geography or both. One of the challenges for those of us “outside” the US is to recognise the ways in which our study is always already bound up with the present conditions of its (geo)political imperatives and actions; our positionality is both privileged and compromised. And so, more particularly, I will consider several European perspectives on the significance of Trump’s presidency.

Something happened

In the wake of Trump’s election there was a rush by commentators—journalists, pollsters, academics—to question what it meant and why they had failed to see it coming. Many expressed a frustrating sense of failure, that something had blindsided them, they seemed confounded by events and processes they were supposed to know something about. For all these commentators, there was a sense, somewhat nebulous, that the grounds of analysis and debate had shifted—something happened—and that something exceeded existing means of explanation and representation.

For the journalists, the challenge has been to understand and respond to the dynamics and consequences of what has come to be called “post-truth” politics, where conviction trumps facts and the norms of political communication have been radically disrupted. For the academics (and especially the academic left: academic apologists for Trump are thin on the ground), the issue has been seismic in a different way, with apprehension of a paradigm shift, or at least some intense pressure being put on paradigms commonly used to study the US. What combines these concerns is a far-reaching delegitimisation of knowledge and expertise that is now widely assumed to evidence a crisis in and of liberal democracy.

To argue that the Trump election and early presidency exceeds existing means of explanation and representation is not to say it is unknowable or beyond interpretation but is rather to underline that it challenges the grounds and frames of interpretation to the degree these have functioned based on assumptions about truth and democracy. We need to consider fresh ways of looking at “America” as an object of knowledge. Of course, this has long been a focal issue for American Studies scholars, many of whom have a troubled relationship to their object of knowledge and the status of the nation as a site of meaningful community and identity. To be sure, the challenge to think afresh is certainly not the preserve of
Americanists alone but there is a particular onus on us to critically attend to it. We should not be complacent about our paradigms or tools of knowledge; even those of us who have critiqued the values and assumptions of liberal democracy are challenged to think anew as these are shifting before our eyes. We are at a complex, pivotal point of paradigm change, where the bedrock of American liberal democracy has been mined and the conventions of critical inquiry not to mention active dissent are being compromised if not rendered obsolete.

For a great many Americans, America changed on November 9th, 2016. Recall the references to unreality and dislocation expressed by so many; some commentators spoke of a form of collective trauma. It is easy to belittle such reactions, especially as the sky did not fall in. Or did it? After all, the measurement most media reports used to assure Americans that the sky had not fallen in, were reports that markets had not only stayed stable but risen. This was a good result and all was well with America. That the reason the markets jumped was because corporations foresaw greater profits under Trump barely seemed to register in this collective delusion of what represented the national interest. If anything, this turn to the markets to measure the public good represents the way in which neoliberalism has recast democratic ideals in corporate terms.

It is precisely such normative articulation of normality that is called into question by the Trump election. Again and again, commentators have looked for some kind of return to normality: the idea that as president-elect Trump would suddenly learn or at least mimic civility; the idea that the Office of the Presidency would curb and reshape his wayward temperament; that the role would subsume the man as we are often told it does. Mark Danner, observing the early weeks of the Trump presidency remarked that there has been “an ongoing seminar on where norms end and laws begin, of how much of what we relied on when it came to the president’s conduct rested largely on a heretofore unquestioned foundation of centuries-old custom” (Danner 2017). This desire for normality reflects a concern that the election of Trump is something more, something different from the normal run of Republican and Democrat presidencies.

What if Trump’s presidency represents an irreparable tear in the fabric of American liberal reality? Might it be that underlying the apprehension that with Trump’s election nothing will “be as it used to be” resides a deeper fear that “nothing had ever been the way it used to be” (Hemon 2017). There is a distinctively parochial American myopia about what constitutes normative political and social reality, a myopia that registers a profound naturalisation of American reality, fed by delusions of continuity, such that liberal democracy functions as an ontological bubble. American liberals apprehend this bubble as a fixed horizon; they find it hard to think outside its doxa, they fail to consider that alternative realities are possible and that the edifice of reality is precarious. We might say, to borrow from Frederic Jameson, that Americans can more readily imagine the end of the world than imagine the end of liberal capitalism (Jameson 2003, 77).

There has however been a shift in American reality, which though recently perceived as sudden has in fact been a slow-motion decline in the symbolic efficiency of liberal democracy (Dean 2009). It is marked by an ever-closer relationship between economic and political sectors and actors, the regression of the public sphere, and the hollowing out of civil society by the logic of the market. Such shifts in American reality are always at work but sometimes they are seismic, sometimes something happens.

A celebrity enters the White House

Let us visit an earlier moment of seismic shift in American reality. Reflecting on the 1960 televised debates between presidential candidates Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy, the novelist Philip Roth, in 1961, lamented:
The American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make credible much of the American reality [...] The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist [...] on the TV screen, as a real public image, a political fact, my mind balked at taking [Nixon] in. Whatever else the television debates produced in me, I should like to point out, as a literary curiosity, that they also produced a type of professional envy.

(Roth 1961)

This sense that reality was outrunning the capacities of writers to represent it was not new, but tellingly articulated by Roth as a challenge occasioned by the growth of televisial media and the transformation of American politics into spectacle. His comments presciently indicated something profound and shattering: an epochal shift in the “American reality.”

It is not coincidental that Roth was writing at the start of a period of intense social and political unrest in the US. As he pillori ed many contemporary American writers for failing to respond to this epochal change, he noted one exception: “There is Norman Mailer. And he is an interesting example, I think, of one in whom our era has provoked such a magnificent disgust that dealing with it in fiction has almost come to seem, for him, beside the point” (Roth 1961). Sure enough, Mailer helped fashion a “new journalism” that could cope with the emerging society of the spectacle in the 1960s. In his 1960 essay on Kennedy’s election campaign, “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” Mailer described the president-to-be as an “existential hero” who could tap into the drives that roil the national unconscious (Mailer 1960). This reflected Mailer’s very particular vision of American history:

Our history has moved on two rivers, one visible, the other underground; there has been the history of politics, which is concrete, factual, practical [...] and there is a subterranean river of untapped, feroeious, lonely and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation.

(Mailer 1960)

In Kennedy, Mailer saw someone who could fuse these historical currents and potentially renew the nation: “Only a hero can capture the secret imagination of a people, and so be good for the vitality of his nation” (Mailer 1960). To be sure, he recognised the dangers in celebrating a “superman” as leader, but reckoned Kennedy struck the right balance between rational substance and romantic style. Mailer’s perspective may have been perversely romantic, but this was also its power as a dissenting vision, attuned to “the dream life of the nation.”

American reality now seems to be undergoing another seismic shift, again in sync with a cycle of civil unrest. And once again, reality appears to be outrunning American writers as they struggle to explain it, to make it credible. Step forward another Übermensch. Is Trump an existential hero in the mode Mailer described? And if he really is someone “who reveals the character of the country to itself” what does he reveal about the character of the US today? (Mailer 1960) There is no doubt that Trump has channelled the discontents of the nation, and tapped into angers and resentments that are more than politics as usual. He dares to say what should not be said, shocking the political and cultural elites, speaking to and for the “real Americans” in their language, giving voice to their inarticulate anger and thwarted dreams. He eschews the discourse of decency and decorum.
Trump’s call to “Make America Great Again” is in some part an articulation and legitimization of what has been disavowed in the making of a liberal democracy. He promises national renewal, but not the progressive, forward-looking renewal promised by Kennedy. Instead, he offers a regressive, backward-looking nationalism. For Mailer, Kennedy’s heroism was inherent in his ability to balance glamorous style with political substance. Trump demonstrates no such ability; quite the opposite: he displays an excess of style and a deficit of substance. His brand of heroism, such as it is, marks a new stage in the aestheticization of politics in which American entertainment and political life have converged as never before. Trump’s celebrity is the lifeblood of his appeal, and he astutely understands his currency as a performer: “I will be so presidential” he promised while campaigning; “I play to people’s fantasies,” he remarks in his book The Art of the Deal; and “I call it truthful hyperbole,” he asserts without irony (Lozada 2015). Trump is the superman unleashed as celebrity phantasm, a figure of libidinal jouissance who leeringly embodies the obscene underside of liberal democracy. And as was his campaign, so his presidency has been shadowed by neo-fascist subtexts and authoritarian tendencies.

As in the 1960s, today’s cultural and political turmoil is playing out in struggles over identity, representation and recognition—but in a more profound sense, the American reality itself has changed. This is not identity politics as we knew it; this is the politics of “wounded attachments,” of resentment and grievance, the politics of all-or-nothing (Brown 1993). Trump’s gift for seizing attention and peddling fantasy plugs him into the zeitgeist and bemuses those who believe lies should have consequences. For many liberal, educated Americans, Trump’s political ascension is a confusing assault on their sense of reality.

**Reality inertia**

Trump’s victory should remind Americans just how fragile the social and political order so many take for granted is—and how quickly an advanced democracy can be dragged into or at least towards barbarism. Is it not a little shocking that Americans should need to be reminded of this? Perhaps not, perhaps the amnesia is a component of the American worldview. The American writer Tom Wolfe echoed this amnesia in mocking fashion when he remarked that the “dark night of fascism is always descending in the United States and yet lands only in Europe” (Wolfe 1976, 117). Might it be that the import of Trump’s election is better or at least more readily understood in other countries where there is a living memory of the pains of populist authoritarianism, where people are more familiar with how reality can be dismantled.

The Slovenian-American writer Aleksandar Hemon suggests as much when, in the wake of Trump’s election, he commented: “In America, a comfortable entitlement blunts and deactivates imagination—it is hard to imagine that this American life is not the only life possible, that there could be any reason to undo it” (Hemon 2017). Hemon filters his perspective through his experiences and insights from living in Sarajevo during the Bosnian war, “through a time when what cannot possibly happen begins to happen, rapidly and everywhere” (Hemon 2017). He writes:

People asked me if I had known the war was coming—I did, I’d say, I just didn’t know I did, because my mind refused to accept the possibility that the only life and reality I had known could be so easily annihilated. I perceived and received information but could not process it and convert it into knowledge, because the mind
could not accept the unimaginable, because I had no access to an alternative ontology.

(Hemon 2017)

Chastising Americans for their “scramble for the ontological blanket of reality inertia” following Trump’s election, Hemon wryly notes that “‘Reality’ has finally earned its quotation marks” (Hemon 2017).

Europeans have their own sharp memories, of course. We might note, following Trump’s election, the increase in the sales of books by a number of European writers who have discussed on totalitarianism, perhaps most notably George Orwell and Hannah Arendt. Might the fresh interest in Arendt be because she constantly reminded her reader of how capitalist exploitation can create the conditions for far-right totalitarianism? Leading European intellectuals have been vocal in interpreting Trump’s election in relation to a continental history of fascist politics and leadership. The Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman labels Trump a “decisionist” leader, using Carl Schmitt’s definition of sovereign power that explained the first stages of Nazism, “a rule that has its sole […] foundation and legitimation in the will of the ruler” (Bauman 2016). The ascension of Trump confirms Bauman’s belief that “we are currently witnessing […] a thorough re-hashing of allegedly untouchable principles of ‘democracy’” and the prospect of these being replaced by “condensation of power within an authoritarian or even dictatorial model” (Bauman 2016). The French philosopher Alain Badiou views Trump as an example of an emergent “democratic fascism,” the “apparition of a new figure of political determination which is a figure which is very often inside the democratic constitution but which is in some sense also outside” (Badiou 2016). In part, this is a repetition of the European lesson that fascism is birthed by democracy but it is also a warning that politics is being erased by contemporary conditions. Badiou posits Trump as the symbol of the “disparition” of politics, “because, what is the politics of Trump? Nobody knows. It’s something like a figure and not a politics” (Badiou 2016). He has argued the need to “think beyond the affect” caused by Trump’s presidency; he warns that if we do not “we are only in the fascination, the stupidity of fascination, by the depressive success of Trump” (Badiou 2016).

A significant theme in European journalism throughout the first year of the Trump presidency has been the dangers of authoritarian populism and leadership. The Spanish journalist Andres Miguel Rondon, in a piece published by Politico in April 2017, took issue with American naivety about “alternative realities,” observing pithily that “the developed world seems to be discovering this concept [the postfactual universe] for the first time” (Rondon 2017). In the article he describes his own experiences of growing up in Venezuela “surrounded by a fictional universe of [Hugo] Chavez’s making” (Rondon 2017). Rondon distills the populist appeal of an alternative reality:

Populism is not a system of facts or solutions, operating in the complex world of policy and legislation, but rather an interactive fiction, borne of posturing and symbolism, where whole countries can become not what they are, but what they believe themselves to be.

(Rondon 2017)

Trump’s populist appeal in the United States posits just such an interactive fiction, a dramaturgy of Trump’s making and orchestration, of continual disruption and outrage. His deceptions are widely endorsed as an alternative reality—the frightening story is not that
Trump lies but that he is mandated to do so, his very performance of lies and fabrications is what designates his reality for supporters.

Conclusions

Of course, there is a good deal of *schadenfreude* in European commentaries on American travails, yet these Europeans comment with a sensitivity about authoritarian populism that is rarely articulated so sharply in American culture. It is a sensitivity that is shared among large European publics, which have responded to the spectre of fascism with both alarm and action. In France, a liberal front formed to prevent Marie LePen from winning the presidency; many held their noses in doing so but the memory of fascism remains powerful, and values are not taken for granted. For all the talk of a transatlantic wave of populism, linking ethnonationalist energies in Europe and the US, there have been major setbacks for the political right in elections across Europe in 2017. In some part this is a backlash against Trump, who is deeply unpopular in Europe. At the same time, Europeans are taking a fresh look at their geopolitical positions and relations. A poll taken in February 2017 showed that only 22% of Germans thought the US a trustworthy partner, only one percentage point above Russia (Mortimer 2017). European leaders are now openly opining that Europe must not rely on the US any longer. Angela Merkel, speaking in late May 2017, shortly after the G7 group met in Sicily, stated: “The times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over… I’ve experienced that in the last few days. We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands” (Henley 2017).

While this does not mean a collapse of transatlantic relations, it does indicate quite a radical reconfiguration of those relations. The present turmoil in these relations is a reminder that “America” has long figured as a screen for European discontents and desires. For much of the twentieth century and now into the twenty-first, the US has functioned as “a tertium comparationis” in cultural and political struggles in Europe, centering on the control of the discourses of national and transnational European identities (Kroes 1999, 465). Debates on Americanization and discourses of anti-Americanism have frequently activated this dialectic. Most recently, it has been present in the debates about borders, security, and immigration that are running at a heightened, tabloid-sensationalized pitch in Europe. In such a volatile political context, European efforts to critique or interpret American power or leadership take on an especially potent dialectical charge, reflecting back on the uncertainties in European futures. The spectres of European empires and their fallout—of (de)colonizations, sectarian divisions, wars and genocides—haunt the warnings by European intellectuals about the dangers of authoritarian populism, just as they haunt efforts to formulate an effective political expression for the historical and moral identity of Europe and generate an alternative to US global power.3

The current reconfiguring of America in the European imagination is indicative of the epistemological and interpretive challenges presented to Americanists by the ascent of Trump and his presidency’s disruption and distortions of the grounds and object of our analysis. With the Trump presidency, the US has gone through the looking glass into a new symbolic order of mediated political and cultural reality, one that we are barely beginning to understand. As the new American reality takes shape we need to be alert to our own illusions and delusions, and to the ways “America” has functioned as a screen for our ideological and theoretical disquisitions and assumptions. For Americanists whose critique has focused on hegemonic illusions of reality enforced by capitalist relations of power, the paradigm shift in American
reality brings our object of study into question and out of focus in new ways. We may, as Slavoj Zizek quips, begin to long for the old days of American hypocrisy.

Notes
1 A portion of this essay was previously published (Kennedy 2017).
2 During his inaugural address, Trump stated his convictions that “at the bedrock of our politics will be a total allegiance to the United States of America” and that “we all bleed the same red blood of patriots” (Trump 2017).
3 Again and again, these projects are linked together in the dialectics of Atlantic debate. In other words, the challenge of and to American hegemony energizes discourses of and on European identity and the efforts to distinguish this identity signify the borders and spectres that traverse its symbolic presence in the discourses (Kennedy 2006, 135).

Bibliography