Donald Trump, American populism and affective media

Olivier Jutel

Introduction

This chapter will consider the way the transformation of media values and political economy has driven the resurgence of right-wing populism in America. Broadcast media have been central to American right-wing populism and movement conservatism in the last thirty years. *Fox News* and conservative personalities from Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck and Alex Jones do not simply represent a new political and media voice but embody the convergence of politics and media in which affect and enjoyment are the central values of media production. The consumption of *Fox News* is not a dispassionate exercise drawing on critical faculties, but an affective investment in movement politics and branded conservatism. This audience spans traditional and new media forms as an individuated public primed to the populist politics of affect and alienation. This has been a fecund space for media entrepreneurs and right-wing populists who use access to politicized, conservative audiences to make an end-run around the traditional disciplines of politics and journalism. Donald Trump is the synthesis of a media politics in which affective intensity and enjoyment are the principle political-economic values. He is not simply a media-savvy showman; he offers himself as a subject of enjoyment and elicits affective identification.

In order to properly identify the manner in which affective media engender populism, it is necessary to theorize populist political ontology. Affect is central to psychoanalytic and discourse theories of populism (Žižek, 2008; Laclau, 2005). The populist division of the social space between an organic people and its enemy is a defining feature of theoretical accounts of populism (Canovan, 1999). What psychoanalytic theory offers is an understanding of the irrational affective investments of populism and the centrality of enjoyment to populist political logic. The populist division between a “real America” and its rapacious enemies is not simply a matter of rhetorical style but a necessary precondition for the political “subject of enjoyment” to emerge (Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008: 257). What Donald Trump reveals is that the various iterations of right-wing American populism have less to do with a programmatic social conservatism or libertarian economics than with enjoyment. Whether the Moral Majority, the Tea Party or Trump, populist leaders offer the promise of reclaiming enjoyment and social wholeness from the hands of an overdetermined enemy. Lacan calls this stolen
enjoyment “jouissance” (Johnston, 2002) and it licenses obscene transgressions and a conspiratorial obsession with the enemy. It is in this way that we can understand Trump and other media figures like Alex Jones and Glenn Beck as permissive agents of jouissance offering the obscene enjoyment of degrading their enemies through an unbridled conspiracy that speaks to the irrational drives of the libidinal.

The centrality of media to right-wing American populism owes to a confluence of media deregulation, the diminution public political institutions and a well-funded conservative political network. The resources of conservative think tanks and foundations have been used to create a media infrastructure to popularize a revanchist conservatism, subsidise the cost of conservative media production and establish career pathways for activists, research fellows and media figures. Fox News emerged as the key public interface for this broader conservative network and the grassroots, articulating a populist politics of perpetual outrage. The success of Fox brings with it irreducible tensions between the political ambitions of a policy elite and a populist base driven by the immutable forces of antagonism and enjoyment. The success of far-right media figures like Glenn Beck and Alex Jones who style themselves as movement leaders, is staked on a populist authenticity and loyalty to jouissance. Through his simultaneous transcendence of the conservative media sphere, and his connection to its wild outskirts, Donald Trump is able to sequester this affective element of populism from Fox for his own ends. In doing the unimaginable, attacking Fox News and establishment “Never Trump” Republicans, he wields a libidinal power that earns him a loyal following of disparate conservative strains, from Paleocons, Evangelicals to the alt-right, that constitute themselves as a populist people around him.

The emergence of this powerful conservative media sphere also coincides with broader shifts in the polity and the process of “mediatization” (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011). Mediatization captures the way in which media values have become embedded across social and political fields. With the decline of traditional political identities publics are constituted in media space with political participation shaped by individual affective investments. In this space affect functions as a media capital that may be used for indeterminate ends by media figures like Sarah Palin or Donald Trump in order to bypass the meritocratic strictures of party politics and journalistic scrutiny. In conforming precisely to the media values of spectacle and reality-TV drama Trump is afforded wall-to-wall coverage and access to the field in his own terms, whether appearing on Meet the Press in his private jet or turning a press conference into an infomercial for Trump Steaks. However, Trump is not simply a media celebrity; he embodies the injunction of mediatization to throw oneself into circulation through social media in crafting a personal brand and becoming an object of desire and enjoyment. In this way he offers himself as an ego-ideal to an individuated public of enjoyment that coalesce around his media brand as part of their own performance of identity.

Concurrent with the process of mediatization and the proliferation of media values across social fields has been the transformation of media political economy in a manner conducive to the populist logics of enjoyment and antagonism. One of the innovations of Fox News was its early identification of affective investment and labour as the key to media production and consumption in a fragmenting media environment. The Fox News brand is not built upon the authoritative cultural values of journalism but the active participation in and affective experience of politics. This satisfies both the imperatives of movement conservatism and the economic logic of affective media production. In the case of Tea Party viewers their labour produces the spectacle of authentic protest for Fox which they then consume as part of the populist movement. For a media entrepreneur like Glenn Beck this allows him to sell his own books as canon and use pseudo-political events and rallies to sell populist lifestyle commodities. For Trump this mediatized constituency of affective labour enabled him to overcome the lack
of a traditional political “ground game”, party support and a massive shortfall in campaign spending. The people of Trump’s populism are invested in his enjoyment as their own offering up their affective labour at rallies or sharing memes and personal testimony to fill the empty signifier “Make America Great Again” with meaning. Trump successfully channelled the online spaces of the so-called alt-right in constructing a pure politics of jouissance. Where new media cultures are commonly treated in academic and journalistic discourses as democratizing Trump channels the pathological enjoyment and libidinal frustrations of fascism arising from this space.

**Populism, antagonism and enjoyment**

In order to identify the way in which new forms of affective media have accelerated right-wing American populism it is necessary to, following Ernesto Laclau, recognize populism as a particular political logic (2005). This logic is discursive in constructing a people through hegemonic chains of difference and equivalence in order to enjoy and affectively invest in political identity. This is in contrast to understanding populism as a set of ideological and political forms or a rhetorical style (Moffitt, 2016) and appeal to “the people” whether by insurgent and professional politicians alike. Populism’s lack of fixity in content or form owes to its close proximity to the unruly forces of the libidinal in political ontology. The explosion of passions that accompanies populism is not the pathological outside of democratic politics but its repressed symptoms, what Ardití borrowing from Freud calls “internal foreign territory” (2005: 89). Mouné (2005) writes that “the people” of democracy are defined by an antagonistic division of the social space as in Republicans against monarchists or citizens and aliens. Naming a “people” is an act of negation which enables identity and its associated affective investments. The global surge of populism is a return of antagonism and the libidinal in response to stubbornly persistent neo-liberal post-politics (Mouné, 2005). In opposing the formal politics of consensus, rationalism and technocracy, populism expresses the ontological necessity of antagonism and enjoyment in political identity.

The populist subject is the psychoanalytic “subject of enjoyment” (Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008: 257) shaped by trauma, irrational drives and desires. Populist ontology is analogous to Lacanian symbolic castration in which the loss of the primordial mother, “allows the subject to enter the symbolic order” (Žižek, 1997: 17). The populist emerges through this fundamental antagonism and sense of lost enjoyment. Populist political identity and discourse are the perpetually incomplete process of recapturing this primordial wholeness of mother and child. The Tea Party’s rally cry to “Take our country back” or Trump’s quest to “Make America Great Again” should not be seen as political projects built on policy, but an affective and libidinal appeal to the lost enjoyment of a wholly reconciled America. This experience of a shared affective investment in being part of a people surpasses the importance of any essential ideological content. In Trumpian discourse America stands in as an empty signifier able to embody a sub-urban community ideal, military strength or the melding of Christianity and capitalism, depending upon the affective investments of followers. The endeavour to recapture this American identity or the partial object of desire, what Lacan calls objet petit a, is never attainable. However, this very failure produces an incessant drive and “desire structured around the unending quest for the lost, impossible jouissance” (Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008: 261). It is in this way that we can understand populism as a sustained antagonistic drive pursued and enjoyed for its own sake.

The key distinction within Lacanian psychoanalytic theories of populism is whether it constitutes the political as such (Laclau, 2005) or obfuscates the political (Žižek, 2008). For Laclau there is no difference between left formulations of the people vs the 1% or the nationalism of right-wing populism, the act of defining a people as universal against an enemy.
for Laclau represents “political logic tout court” (2005: 229). In populist ontology “the people” is a potent signifier for an organic virtue as the redeemer of politics. In Kazin’s seminal work on American populism he identifies the discourse of “Americanism” (1995: 12) in this vein. This term denotes an idealistic conservatism and stasis with the virtuous productive middle beset by enemies. Thomas Jefferson’s frontier ideal of the yeoman small-holder is exemplary here as they are counterposed to the “canker” and “mobs” of the city (1975: 216). Even within the labour movement of the New Deal this discourse emerged in the AFL–CIO to imagine the working class as “between the rapacity of the robber barons of industry of America and the lustful rage of the communists” (John Lewis in Kazin: 142). The pliability of this discourse accounts for its incarnation in various American populisms including the Tea Party and Donald Trump. It is the appeal to a besieged people and the obfuscation of the economy through producerism that allows Trump to appropriate a working-class politics in the service of oligarchy. The fetish of an organic people in populism leads Dean to claim in a recent polemic that “there is no such thing as a left populism” (Dean, 2017: 43) so long as the struggle with capital remains the measure of emancipatory left politics.

What Trump reveals about the logic of populism is a trajectory to fascism in the politics of jouissance. Where populism exceeds the affective pleasures of solidarity universal to the political is in jouissance as “pure enjoyment, [and] absolute pleasure undiluted” (Johnston, 2002) by ego, rationality and societal constraints. For Žižek the libidinal dependence upon an enemy “whose annihilation would restore balance and justice” (Žižek, 2008: 278), is a fascist logic which leads to a politics of jouissance. Following Lacan’s thesis that enjoyment always belongs to the other, populist identity requires a rapacious other “who is stealing social jouissance from us” (Žižek, 1997: 43). At its zenith populism’s enemy is analogous to the construct of the Jew in anti-Semitism as a contradictory, overdetermined evil that is defined by excessive enjoyment. In Trump’s formulation American greatness is threatened by the jouissance of inner-city gangs and immigrants. The people of right-wing populism are squeezed between the excessive enjoyment of the Davos, Bohemian groove and “limousine-liberal” elite, or the welfare recipients, from bankers, immigrants and the poor, who “enjoy” the people’s hard-earned tax dollars.

Trump was able to unify the populist energies of the Republican base, from Tea Party libertarians, evangelicals and paleo-conservatives in offering the transgressive enjoyment of ruthlessly attacking those that would thwart American greatness. His speeches were suffused with the blood of innocents and “American carnage” (Trump, 2017) but also of the promise of love and redemption (Parenti, 2016). The large crowds his events drew captured this dichotomy of jouissance between a cumulative effusive solidarity and the spectre of political violence (Berenstein, Corasaniti & Parker, 2016). Trump’s refusal to adhere to political decorum, whether rejecting the official vote tally, his call to arrest Hillary Clinton or jokes about her assassination, marked him as a populist agent of jouissance. There was a vicarious enjoyment in his lashing out against minorities, fellow Republicans and even boasts of sexual assault (Stuart, 2016); all of this signalled that he was unrestrained by super-ego prohibitions. The politics of jouissance means that it is pursued as its own end and is analogous to political power as such. Trump is able to claim a populist anti-elitism not in spite of his gaudy billionaire lifestyle but because of it. As Mudde explains populism is not a left politics of reflexivity and transformation aimed at “changing the people themselves, but rather their status within the political system (2004: 547)” . Trump offers the promise of seizing power and the oligarchy in the name of jouissance. Whether bragging about having political rivals in his back pocket as a donor (Fang, 2016) or appointing his children to positions within the White House, there is a vulgar acting out of the political status quo that shatters decorum and allows the people to feel in charge at an affective level.
Conservative networks and media populism

In the rise of right-wing America populism, media have been central to a conservative movement strategy to roll back the gains of the New Deal and mid-century civic reformers. In this task there has been an irreducible tension between an institutional conservative elite and a populist grassroots activated through a media which renders the battle for capitalism and the Republic in antagonistic terms of freedom versus tyranny. Donald Trump’s ascendance to the presidency as a thoroughly mediatized politician represents the libidinal excess which defines this conservative network of media, think tanks and lobbyists. Trump has understood the manner in which affect and spectacle function as a form of media and political currency that allow him to bypass the disciplines of party. He has been able to benefit from a heavily funded conservative media infrastructure that has sought to channel popular energy for explicitly ideological purposes, however he has sequestered the affective element for his own ends. While a uniquely incompetent figure with little ideological bearings or political machinery, Trump realized and expanded the unruly populist logics of enjoyment and antagonism embedded in conservative media publics.

A defining feature of American right-wing populism has been the key role played by media figures such as Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Andrew Breitbart and Alex Jones. While Father Caughlin comparisons beckon this is not the story of particular demagogues but the function of media within a conservative political nexus of think tanks, foundations, non-profits, lobby groups, professional associations and academic research centres (Meagher, 2012). The seminal blueprint for this conservative political network was laid out in the “Powell Memo” to the US Chamber of Commerce by corporate lawyer and future supreme court justice Lewis Powell (1971). In it he urged business to organize politically through media campaigns, campus activism and lobbying in order to roll back the regulatory gains of reformers and new left activists who represented an “attack on the American free enterprise system” (ibid.). What subsequently emerged in American politics was the increased political activism of conservative magnates and scion’s, such as the Koch Brothers, through the formation of foundations funding think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute. These think tanks and foundations would provide the intellectual grist to the class project of a libertarian and revanchist conservatism and offer student activists training, funding and a career path in publishing, politics and media. Media like the Weekly Standard, Washington Times and National Empowerment Television, the fore-runner to Fox News, were heavily subsidised by the conservative foundations (Meagher, 2012: 473). This media nexus catapulted the careers of pseudo-intellectuals like Dinesh D’Souza, authors such as Ann Coulter and popularized the dubious scholarship of researchers like Arthur Laffer and Charles Murray.

Fox News emerged as the key mechanism of articulation between these networks, the Republican party and a politicized conservative public. Fox paired the notoriously conservative media magnate Rupert Murdoch with Roger Ailes a long-time Republican media operative and strategist. In the project of creating a coherent countersphere of conservative news Fox was able to rely on both a subsidised pool of conservative pundits, scholars and think tank residents, and the free labour of activists and the conservative grassroots. Fox also benefitted from media deregulation with the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine and the Telecommunications Act of 1996 helping bolster the conservative media sphere. Right-wing talk served as a training ground for eventual Fox talent like Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck, and honed the populist style of broadcasting that would come to define Fox. Key to its political and commercial success has been channelling the populist libidinal logic of drive
endlessly recycling and engineering outrage and indignation with the liberal media and the left. From the “War on Christmas”, the spectre of Marxism on campus, George Soros-sponsored voter fraud, fear of terrorism and Hollywood culture wars Fox’s programming is a self-fecund circuit of overdetermined outrage.

The populist fervour that Fox elicits has brought with it irreducible tensions between the professional coterie of establishment Republicans that attempt to instrumentalize the populist base and media figures like Glenn Beck who see themselves as movement leaders. The Tea Party movement that Fox News effectively coordinated, along with advocacy groups like Freedom Works, brought these competing wings into conflict (Jutel, 2013). This Populist anger elected a wave of insurgent candidates who would go on to engineer a government shutdown in defiance of the US Chamber of Commerce (Josten, 2011). Beck himself would be let go by Fox as his continued apocalypticism after the Republicans 2010 midterm success made his highly rated program unsellable to advertisers (Carusone, 2011). Donald Trump’s candidacy represented a high-point of this inter-conservative tension as he made Fox News hosts, fellow Republican candidates and “Never Trump” conservatives targets of populist derision. Trump’s grotesque attacks on Fox’s Megan Kelly were jouissance as power personified. Responding to journalistic scrutiny from Kelly for his record of sexism he railed against “political correctness” and decorum before launching a shockingly misogynistic attack on Kelly the next day (Rucker, 2015). For a large part of the campaign Trump threatened to boycott Fox causing Roger Ailes, one of the most important power brokers in conservative politics, into panicked negotiations with the campaign. Trump refused to apologize, as with most of his indiscretions, demonstrating that the power he wielded though his base was predicated on a fidelity to jouissance. Trump’s unique position as a media entrepreneur within and outside this space allowed him to channel the jouissance of populism in defiance of the disciplines of Fox and his party.

Mediatization and individuated publics of enjoyment

The ability of Fox to dominate conservative politics and create a populist public is not simply a result of intense politicization but also the concurrent diminution of public political life in neoliberalism. The development of neoliberalism in America included both the rebirth of conservative activism and the emergence of Third Way Democrats facilitating “the growth of individualism undermin[ing] trade unions and ... the types of politics they used to foster” (Mouffe, 2005: 49). Third Way neoliberals have ceded the antagonistic political terrain to the populists replacing the values of solidarity and publicness with a consumer driven politics “limited to the private sphere” (Hind, 2010: 147). With the decline of strong political and ideological identities7 political participation is increasingly affective and based “personal and emotional evaluations” (Craig, 2013: 486). The public of post-politics is constituted in media spaces and is at once “more connected than ever before ... yet at the same time on their own” (Deuze, 2011: 145). It is this combination of individuation and volatility in the electorate that allows Trump to coalesce individual affective investments into a populist public around himself as an ego-ideal of enjoyment.

Within these contours of media, politics and public life the American polity can be said to have been thoroughly “mediatized” (Schulz, 2004). Mediatization denotes the process by which media genres of representation and performance come to define “other social subsystems” such as politics, government, business and academia, that are now “dependent on the media and their logic” (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011: 33). In politics this has seen the growth of consultants,8 media managers and the orientation of political action reflexively towards media attention.
Access to the media field whether through “earned media” or a devoted social media following allows mediatized figures to accrue media capital and bypass the strictures of other fields and “make an end run around the normal political process” (Benson, 1999: 474). In conservative politics access to Fox has been leveraged by figures such as Sarah Palin to indeterminate ends from political aspirations to affective forms of consumption (Ouellette, 2012). For Trump this media capital allowed him to use and circumvent conservative political gatekeepers like Fox while leveraging his celebrity for various ventures from Trump Steaks, real estate, to his contract negotiations with NBC.

With the confluence of politics and entertainment, mediatization has meant a shift of journalistic values from a normative liberal rationalism to what Bourdieu describes as a “populist spontaneism and demagogic capitulation to popular tastes” (Bourdieu, 1998: 48). Broadcast journalism has increasingly been subsumed by entertainment media conglomerates which privilege “the spectacularization of political communication” (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999: 251). This media logic emphasizes “personalization ... a political star system ... [and] sports based dramatization” (Platter & Ulram, 2003: 27). Donald Trump’s celebrity status and reality-TV rhetoric of “winning” and “losing” corresponds perfectly to these values. Nothing is more emblematic of this fundamental shift in the field of journalism than the symbiosis of Jeffrey Zucker, president of CNN and creator of The Apprentice, and Donald Trump (Mahler, 2017). For both the metric of ratings and the values of cable news spectacle are the measure of validation, whether journalistic or political (Parker & Costa, 2017). The Trump campaign was an endless source of controversy driving the news cycle by providing the volatility and spectacle of reality television and extraordinary ratings for cheap-to-produce content. CNN and others were central to boosting Trump’s candidacy providing free and extended media coverage of Trump speeches that dwarfed all other presidential candidates (Confessore & Yourish, 2016). Trump’s populist gripes about the liberal media as the people’s enemy during his presidency has not altered this dynamic as it serves both a populist sense of victimization and reinscribes an Edward R. Murrow-esque liberal media identity. Trump is a definitive product of mediatized politics providing the spectacle that drives ratings and affective media consumption, either as part of his populist movement or as the liberal resistance.

What distinguishes Trump from other media-savvy politicians is the manner in which he wields media power in the name of the people’s enjoyment. Freud described the modern authoritarian leader’s relationship to the crowd as a singular Oedipal relation in which a crowd see themselves as a people through the leader as an ego-ideal. However against this original formulation Trump is not a primordial father ruling a group “that wishes to be governed by unrestricted force” (Freud, 1948: 99) but rather he represents the neo-liberal super-ego “enjoining us to go right to the end” (Žižek, 2006: 310) in our enjoyment. Whether flaunting his licentious billionaire lifestyle or serving as the volatile arbiter of success on The Apprentice he entreats his audience to enjoy through him. When he utters his catchphrase “You’re Fired!”, typically humiliating an elite social climber with impeccable credentials, there is a populist enjoyment in wielding this power. His ability to serve as an ego-ideal of enjoyment is in his own submission to the injunction of mediatization, or what Dean calls “communicative capitalism” (2009), to publicly enjoy and throw oneself into circulation as a desired object. In his ceaseless tweeting Trump exemplifies mediatized life as “a non-stop entrepreneurial adventure involving the pursuit of multiple revenue streams predicated on the savvy deployment of virtuosic communicative and image skills” (Hearn, 2016: 657). In embodying mediatized political life Trump creates an individuated public of enjoyment in which the affective investment and labour of followers coalesce around him as an ego-ideal.
Affective media labour and jouissance

Right-wing populism has become an ascendant political force in the US as a result of a conservative media and political infrastructure, and the mediatization of politics and public life. Where conservative media specifically channels the populist libidinal logics of antagonism and enjoyment is with the rise of affective media production. Affective media does not simply denote social media but the manner in which media old and new are driven by the production, circulation, performance and quantification of affect. From the labour of promoting brands, celebrities and politicians on social media to the consumption of traditional content on personalized devices, consumption and production rely upon an emotional investment, sense of user agency, critical knowingness and social connectivity. In an age of superficial media it is affective identification with media brands that elicits the sharing and posting of content and user data as a form of “free labour” (Terranova, 2004) for media brands. In this sense there is a convergence of libidinal and economic logics as affective media interpellates the “prosumer” as the subject of enjoyment. From the second person headline writing of Huffington Post to the outraged patriot addressed by Fox News, consumption is based on an affective appeal that draws one into the ceaseless activity of posting, consuming and performing identity through media.

Affect is central to the brand strategy of Fox which imagined its journalism not in terms of servicing the rational citizen in the public sphere but in “craft[ing] intensive relationships with their viewers” (Jones, 2012: 180) in order to sustain audience share across platforms. The ideal Fox News viewer is not simply an audience member but an active prosumer that watches Fox as part of a broader movement logic associated with other acts of consumption that bolster the conservative media sphere. The rise of the Tea Party was critical in reinforcing Fox as a conservative lifestyle brand during the Obama presidency. While the Tea Party certainly contained organic libidinal rage and jouissance this was anchored by a campaign and political infrastructure orchestrated by Fox and Freedom Works. In staging and coordinating Tea Party events Fox secures the free labour of protesters who produce the spectacle of Fox’s programming and an affective relationship with this same audience who consume Fox as the people’s tribune. The ability of the signifier “Tea Party” to engender a populist people is manifested through an affective investment, social media labour and the performance of protest all serving to fill this signer with meaning. Despite the retrograde populist politics Fox is thoroughly modern in creating an audience that consumes out of identity and enjoyment.

There is an irreducible tension in Fox’s drawing upon the libidinal as its institutional and political-economic objectives come to rely upon some of the more far-flung regions of conservative political discourse. Glenn Beck was a key figure in this Tea Party period and presages the populist epistemology and the logic of jouissance and conspiracy that has come to dominate the social media spaces of the alt-right. In the best traditions of conservative hucksterism (Perlstein, 2012), Beck’s dark visions of George Soros, the Caliphate and Marxists in government tie in to his line of survivalist commodities. Both Beck and Alex Jones share with Trump an entrepreneurialism which links their truth-telling to eclectic ventures, from vitamins to freeze dried food, all premised upon an authentic solidarity with their audience (Jutel, 2017). There is also an affective performance of authenticity, from Beck’s sobbing monologues to Jones’ shirt tearing and screams, which binds their audiences in a conspiratorial drive in pursuit of jouissance. In Beck’s wild chalkboard expositions and Jones’ fulminations against globalist tyranny there is the attempt to understand the enemy of populism in all of their depraved jouissance. In classic paranoid style (Hofstadter, 1965) this enemy often assumes an occultist quality as with the “Pizzagate” conspiracy, believed by over half of Trump voters (Frankovic, 2016), in which the Democratic Party is said to
be an elaborate child-sex ring. The ability of this fraction within conservative media to define the broader movement lies in its appeal to jouissance, the obscene transgressive enjoyment of denigrating the enemy in the basest terms of racism, misogyny, anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

Trump’s success was due in equal measure to his ability to access the heights of the media field and operating in the spaces of pure affective intensity and jouissance. He was able to monopolize the populist forces unleashed by Fox in offering himself as a permissive agent of jouissance. From his birtherist crusade against Obama, his appearance on the Alex Jones program, the granting of White House press credentials to Mike Cernovich and Info Wars, to his entertainment of a range of conspiracies (Haberman, 2016), Trump entreats his followers to go the end in their transgressive enjoyment. Trump’s adherence to the logic of affective media and jouissance was crucial in soliciting the free labour of a mediatized populist public. The Trump campaign had a keen sense of the centrality of affect in producing the spectacle of a mass movement, often employing “rent-a-crowd” tactics, to using his staff as a cheer squad during public events. Trump’s followers perform the free labour of spectacle and a volatile movement authenticity that secured the campaign earned media in overcoming a 4-to-1 advertising deficit to the Clinton campaign (Murray, 2016). This popular mobilization constitutes labour in that it filled the truly hollow edifice of his chaotic, personality driven campaign with meaning. Trump’s fanning of conspiracy allowed these forces of jouissance to coalesce around him through the affective labour of social media users that share fake news, memes and personal testimony all to fill the empty signifier “Make America Great Again” with affective potency and enjoyment.

Trump’s success in channelling transgressive online cultures defies popular and academic discourses about the political promise of new media spaces. Academic accounts of online activism invoke Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring while the hacker and nerd cultures of reddit and 4-Chan have been characterized as “a force for good in the world” (Coleman, 2014: 50). The Trump campaign, particularly in its unbridled Steve Bannon iteration, understood social media as a space to tap antagonism and enjoyment. Bannon is often described as a troll and Breitbart News through Yiannopoulos was at the forefront of “Gamergate” which brought troll-culture and its attendant misogyny into the public eye. Trump’s politics of jouissance corresponds perfectly to the alt-right logic of trolling in which enjoyment combines both vicious dehumanization and an obsession with the enemy. The enjoyment alt-righters experience in “triggering” their political enemies in the most vile forms of racism, anti-Semitism and misogyny is also coupled to their obsession over the minutia of campus political correctness, the posts of online feminists and the betrayal of “cuckservatives” (Nagle, 2017). As with fascism, the alt-right is in the realm of pathological enjoyment and rendered explicitly in terms of violent libidinal frustration, from the crisis of patriarchal authority that is Pizzagate to obsession with sexual hierarchies in the “manosphere”. The significance of the alt-right is not that white supremacist twitter accounts fundamentally shaped the outcome of the election, but that the political apogee of new affective forms of media produce is a fascist culture of jouissance.

**Conclusion**

The centrality of media to right-wing American populism and the rise of Trump represents a confluence of conservative media activism and a mediatization of the polity which accelerates the populist logics of antagonism and enjoyment. Donald Trump is an exemplary figure of these concurrent shifts in the media and political terrain, able to merge disparate strains of conservatism through his appeal to populist jouissance. The promise of “Making America...
Great Again” lies in the pleasure of being of the people and licensed to lash out against a multifarious enemy. Trump elicits the populist subject of enjoyment through his own scandals and lack of decorum which mark him as an agent of jouissance unrestrained from super-ego prohibitions. He represents the potential fascist lurch in populism as jouissance pursued for its own sake culminates in a vicious libidinal deadlock with the enemy always returning to steal the people’s social jouissance. The popular saliency of conspiracies such as Pizzagate speak to a self-fecund conspiratorial drive in which the failures of the people are transposed onto an enemy of unparalleled evil.

In the task of constructing a people Trump has relied on the audiences of conservative media who have been primed for decades by paens to lost American greatness. The conservative networks of foundations and think tanks have provided substantial financial resources to activists and pundits who subsidise the cost of conservative media production. Fox News and others have been key to fuelling an obsessive populist outrage which both drives ratings and popularizes a Manichaean political struggle for freedom. The role of Fox as a medium between an affective popular mobilization and a broader class project driven by institutional interests, brings inevitable tension between these imperatives. For Trump and figures like Glenn Beck and Alex Jones their brand authenticity is staked on a loyalty to a transgressive, conspiratorial jouissance against those that would instrumentalize it. To this end it was necessary for Trump to attack Fox, fellow Republicans and defy any expectations of political normalization in monopolizing conservative populist enjoyment for his own ends.

The unthinkable ascendance of Trump to the presidency, a uniquely ill-tempered narcissist with an inability to govern, speaks to changes within the polity and the attendant mediatization of politics. With the decline of traditional political identities and party loyalties publics are increasingly experiencing politics through an individuated affective lens. Within these contours media populism predominates particularly as the conservative media sphere best capture the logics of antagonism and enjoyment. Figures like Sarah Palin and Trump have leveraged a media capital, built an affective connection to an audience and following, to indeterminate ends allowing them to defy the disciplines of party, ideology and normative journalistic values. As reality-TV celebrity Trump embodies the logic of spectacle and conflict that drives contemporary media production earning him unprecedented media access that reinforces his media brand. Additionally his public volatility, ceaseless tweeting and transparent preening were not liabilities but what connected him to individuated publics of enjoyment. Trump precisely personifying the logic of mediatization offering himself as an ego-ideal and mirroring our own hyper-active media labour of self-branding.

The media infrastructure that enabled the rise of Trump’s populism was not simply a product of well-financed conservative media and the logic of spectacle but new forms of affective media that fuse libidinal and political economies. The solicitation of free labour and the consumption of media as part of identity is central to contemporary media production. While a great deal has been written about the democratic and creative potential of social media prosumption it is the populist logics of antagonism and enjoyment that best secures the affective labour of audiences. Fox viewers simultaneously consume and perform the news as Tea Party protesters, bolstering the authenticity of Fox’s brand and sustaining audiences into new media platforms. In acting as a conduit for the wildest fringes of conservative politics and conspiracy, Trump elicited the affective labour of social media users whose posts, memes and personal testimony filled the empty signifier of “Make America Great Again” with meaning. This following of affective intensity, from online to public mobilizations, was essential in overcoming a significant advertising shortfall and propelling the spectacle. This rise of the alt-right as a key constituency in Trump’s populism is the culmination of a media politics of
jouissance. Here the obsession with the enemy licenses an enjoyment that ranges from the counter-culture of trolling to a denigration of women, immigrants, religious and ethnic minorities in pure fascist terms of violent libidinal frustration.

Notes

1 Donald Trump is exemplary here in his appeal to American conservatives despite his abandonment of the tropes of smaller government and family values. The historically high levels with which evangelicals supported the libertine Trump (Bailey, 2016) appeared ideologically incongruous. However, the logic of Trump’s politics, in which a virtuous people are threatened and enjoy lashing out at their enemy, is the libidinal truth of populism.

2 The Paleocons have been the most marginal fraction of the conservative movement since the Reagan Revolution, but now have a champion in Trump. They can be defined by a producerist economic nationalism, anti-interventionist foreign policy and an ethno-nationalism that has been a source of embarrassment for mainstream Republicans. The intellectual leaders of Paleoconservatism, Samuel Francis and James Burnham, describe a class struggle between a technocratic, social-engineering elite and hard-working traditional American families (Shenk, 2016). This politics corresponds with Trump’s discourse of Americanism, promises to “fire” Washington elites and his past association with Ross Perot’s Reform Party.

3 In his speech at the Republican National Convention he began by reiterating a consistent theme from the convention, from murdered police officers to Benghazi. Trump tells the story of a mid-Western college graduate killed by an immigrant as “one more child to sacrifice on the altar of open borders” (Politico Staff, 2016). Trump’s description of the twenty one year old Sarah Root as a “young girl” and “child” is telling of the crisis of patriarchal authority that colours the fascist imaginary (ibid.).

4 During the third presidential debate Trump stated pre-emptively that he would not accept a loss at the polls. Trump continues to reject the official tally which saw him win the electoral college but lose the popular vote by nearly three million.

5 Limbaugh has been the forerunner of far-right media. His combative conservatism has served as a template for Fox broadcasters and Republican stalwarts like Sean Hannity and Bill O’Reilly. In the aftermath of the unpopular Bush presidency Beck was useful in giving Fox a movement authenticity among the Bircher, libertarian and religious survivalist fringes of the right. While Beck was between these worlds the increasingly influential Alex Jones, who is unrestrained on his independent radio and video platform, is able to espouse pure apocalyptic conspiracy. Remarkably Trump appeared as a guest on Jones’ programme in December 2015 at the suggestion of Roger Stone, the veteran Republican dirty-tricks operative and Trump ally. The significance of the Breitbart website was conservative media’s adaptation of an irreverent online sensibility in a manner similar to the Huffington Post, which Andrew Breitbart was in instrumental in founding alongside Arianna Huffington. Breitbart has been in a perfect position to channel the energies of online reaction towards both Trump and the Breitbart brand. While by no means an exhaustive list of media figures, there is an unmistakable progression from the confines of establishment conservative networks to more chaotic alternative conservative media which has benefited Trump.

6 Clear Channel, now I Heart Radio, was a key player in developing right-wing talk and creating national audiences for Rush Limbaugh and others. As a result of the Telecommunications Act Clear Channel was able to grow from a maximum 40 stations owned to over 1200 (Corcoran, 2016).

7 Party identification has steadily declined in the US since the 1980s (Jones, 2014) and is near all-time highs with 44% of Americans identifying as Independents to 28% as Democrats and 25% Republicans (Gallup, 2017).

8 Steve Bannon was a key figure in realizing Trump’s full political potential given his access to both a mediatized conservative grassroots and the heights of the media field. Bannon embodied a similar convergence of political and entertainment media having worked as a Hollywood producer while also writing and directing a series of documentaries for conservative audiences. As head of Breitbart he oversaw an anti-establishment conservative media player which rose to prominence through an unrestrained chauvinist conservatism and jouissance which verged on the counter-cultural in a figure such as Milo Yiannopoulos. While Bannon’s appointment was initially seen as a sign of a campaign
in free-fall, he understood that Trump’s defiance of political norms was key to activating a following of pure affective intensity from the conservative grassroots to the online alt-right.

9 CBS Chairman Les Moonves neatly evinced this logic of Trump and entertainment to a meeting with investors; “It [Trump’s candidacy] may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS” (Collins, 2016).

10 One of the editor’s of The Apprentice explained that Trump’s selection of the show’s winners and losers “had nothing to do with people’s merit . . . he’d make decisions on who he liked or disliked personally . . . or he’d keep someone that ‘would make good TV’” (Catoline, 2016). This is the fantasy of populist oligarchic power that Trump offers his followers as President.

11 The default insult of the alt-right “cuckservatives” clearly demonstrates the role of (stolen) libidinal potency at the centre of enjoyment. Cucks are those establishment or “Never Trump” conservatives who fail to embrace the logic of jouissance or hold to establishment positions on issues like immigration. In a self-conscious reference to the genre of inter-racial “cuckold” pornography (Heer, 2016), cucks would let America, and its women, be enjoyed by immigrants and a racial other. The very thing that gives the alt-right a currency of derision and enjoyment reinforces the racial other’s virility as a direct threat to their own potency.

References


