Other People’s Race Problem
Trumpism and the Collapse of the Liberal Racial
Consensus in the United States

Common wisdom tells us that the rise of Trumpism in the United States is a backlash against liberal centrists’ globalist cosmopolitan dreams. These centrists were, as the story goes, part of a meritocratic global order of elite citizens, a small rich homogeneous caste, disconnected from their own nationals and nonnationals alike because of their elite educational and social backgrounds, their superficial investment in multicultural openness (for elites only), and their disdain for the small-minded provincialism of those who were “left behind” by neoliberal globalization. And it is this excess of technocratic elitism and closed-minded cosmopolitanism that has spurred the wave of ethnonationalist populism in the United States and across the globe. Different versions of this story abound. Christine Lagarde, managing director of the International Monetary Fund, advocated a retooled globalism that is more effective at “sharing” its benefits (Lagarde 2016). Tony Blair and Hilary Clinton have admitted begrudgingly some of the limitations of centrist Third Way politics in their attempts to outflank and discredit the social democratic factions in the Labor and Democratic Parties (Glasser 2017). And Dalibor Rohac, a conservative writer from the American Enterprise Institute, calls for more cosmopolitanism, not nationalism, as an antidote to elitist globalization (Rohac 2016).

As with much common wisdom, there is just enough truth in this story to make it very misleading. It is easy to agree with the part about globalism’s technocratic elitism; this is, after all, a point made by the global justice and alt globalization movements, by Occupy Wall Street and by Bernie Sanders. But Donald Trump did not ride the global wave of popular protest to power; nor is his political popularity explainable exclusively in terms of his admittedly deft manipulation of widely held anti-establishment political sentiments felt in the aftermath of the late 2000s global economic meltdown. Many politicians have tried to ride that wave of political disaffection, but they failed to
capture popular or electoral support. The issue that is ignored or glossed over in many popular accounts of the globalist versus nationalist debate is race. For Trump’s brutal political effectiveness can only be explained, I think, in terms of his white nationalist appeal, and in terms of the failure of liberal cosmopolites and economic nationalists to offer a compelling racial project of their own as an alternative.

In this essay, I want to argue for the centrality of racialized subjects in the making of Trump-era politics, and for the specific understanding of Trumpism as a form of white nationalist politics that has shattered the liberal racial consensus of the post–civil rights era. To insist on the centrality of race may seem unnecessary and even gratuitous as we contend with the increasingly explicit xenophobic and racist language that Trump and his supporters use. But my point here is not merely that Trump is a racist (he is, and this was well established long before his presidential run). In the following pages, I hope to show that an important reason for the effectiveness of Trump’s political project is the way that it prioritizes white community resentments and grievances as the political foundation for elaborating popular disaffection, nationalism, gender politics, and class politics. This articulation, to use Stuart Hall’s term (Hall et al., 2013 [1978]; Hall 1986, 1987, 1989; see also Clarke 2014), does a great deal of political work. By displacing neoconservative color blindness and neoliberal multiculturalism, the dominant racial projects of the liberal centrist political establishment, the politics of white resentment and grievance have energized disgruntled fractions of the white middle and working classes, accelerated the authoritarian turn in US politics and governance, and unsettled long-standing liberal centrist political orthodoxies around race, class, and gender.23

This essay proceeds in three parts. First, I explain briefly the history of the rise of Trumpism, which, I emphasize, must be understood as a form of white nationalism that is resonant with, but ultimately different from, white nationalism in past eras of US history. I then locate Trumpism as a political problematic in the current conjuncture. I end with a brief discussion of a key political impasse that has emerged alongside white nationalism: the propensity by cosmopolites and economic nationalists to see racism as someone else’s problem and to therefore ignore the importance of antiracist projects to the development of an effective popular politics in the United States. Taken together, these parts form the basis for a conjunctural analysis of the rise of Trumpism in the United States in the twenty-first century. Conjunctural analysis (Clarke 2014) helps make connections between different kinds of racial politics and
the multiplicity of political forces, projects, and desires that circulate in US politics and culture in the present.\textsuperscript{24}

**Trumpism as the New White Nationalism**

Trump’s political rise must be attributed first and foremost to the resurfacing of white nationalism in the post–civil rights era. Prevailing popular wisdom tends to treat white nationalism’s recent rise as an outgrowth of a generalized white male youth crisis rooted in the absence of fathers in white working-class households (Farrell and Gray 2018; Kimmel 2018; Picciolini 2018; for a review of the literature, see Hochschild 2018). Or it is viewed as an expression of mounting class resentments by increasingly precarious fractions of the deindustrialized working and middle classes (Fraser 2019). The first explanation resonates very strongly with more than a century of scholarship on the crisis of the black family, though the political implications of these resonances could not be more different (Frazier 1939). The second resonates with Kalb and Halmi’s (2011) “return of the repressed” argument by charting the rise of a “reactionary politics of recognition” (Fraser 2019) in the context of the collapse of the political center, in both its progressive (neoliberal) and reactionary (neoconservative) forms. This latter argument takes us far in understanding the US case, about which I will say more below. Yet it is essential as well to make clear the extent to which race politics shaped this political outcome. The majority of white college-educated men, white non-college-educated men, and white non-college-educated women voted for Trump; in the category of white voters, it was only white college-educated women who did not vote mostly for Trump (Schaffner et al. 2018). These data contradict the simplistic—and ultimately inaccurate—story, promoted popularly and politically in the immediate aftermath of the election, that Trump was voted in by the disgruntled, downwardly mobile fractions of the white working classes. This is only true so far as the election was “determined” by votes by a small part of the electorate, mostly in the Midwest, who had voted in the past election for Obama but who voted, in 2016, for Trump. But voting data more broadly affirms the political effectiveness of Trump’s strategy to run his campaign within the broad currents of white nationalism. Acknowledging the role that race played in the 2016 election, and in US politics more generally, also has the additional advantage of taking race at least as seriously as Trump and white nationalists do themselves.
How should we characterize the new white nationalism that has resurfaced in the Trump era, and to what extent does it unsettle post–civil rights era race politics? Today, white nationalism is not a unified movement. It is a diverse set of political, social, and cultural projects, programs, organizations, and activities. The Southern Poverty Law Center estimates that there are approximately 100 white nationalist groups operating in the United States today (the number of groups has fluctuated between 95 and 146 since 2003) (SPLC 2017). Under the banner of white nationalism are what the Southern Poverty Law Center would call “extremist” groups that elaborate explicit racist ideologies rooted in long-standing ideas about white biological or cultural superiority and that seek to transform the United States into a white ethnostate through violent means. Some representatives from groups such as these were at the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017. Groups that make explicit claims about white superiority remain on the fringe politically, however. But other groups have moved to the mainstream. The media-savvy alt-right, for example, is careful to emphasize white racial grievances and resentments and the need for white community restoration over overt arguments for racial superiority. With this tactic, its leaders have found new audiences for their xenophobic and racist political projects, and its growth accounts in large measure for white nationalism’s popular appeal in the twenty-first-century United States (Bjork-James and Maskovsky 2017).

White nationalism’s resurgence has unsettled both neoconservatism and neoliberalism, the two competing forms of liberal centrist cosmopolitanism, which elaborate different and antagonistic racial projects even as they share a commitment to many classic liberal values and to globalist dreams of one sort or another. The racial projects of neoconservative and neoliberal variety—color blindness and multiculturalism respectively—eschew white supremacist ideologies, at least explicitly. Suffice it to say that neoconservatives have made a political art form out of the selective appropriation of civil rights era political discourses about enfranchisement and equality to justify the rollback of civil rights legislation and policies and advance color-blind policy and postracial ideology (Mullings 2005). For their part, neoliberals have countered neoconservatism’s postracialism with multiculturalism. This framework recognizes and celebrates racial differences, though the extent to which this recognition is linked substantively to a robust vision of equal proprietorship of public institutions or to redress and eradicate racial inequalities is hotly debated. If there was one similarity between these two positions and one line
that was not crossed in the culture wars from the 1980s to the 2000s, however, it was that whiteness was off the table as a project of national unification.

Yet race continued to haunt US politics despite this consensus, and white nationalists were eventually able to mount a grassroots rebuke of neoconservatism and neoliberalism from their location inside the Republican Party base. The story of how precisely this happened requires some fleshing out. In the 1970s, in the wake of the civil rights movement, Republicans put concerted effort into appealing to white southerners’ racial resentments to gain their support. This was helped along in the 1970s and 1980s by the political valorization of the white ethnic community across the political spectrum (di Leonardo 1998; Steinberg 1981). Once vilified as ignorant, dangerous, and criminal in comparison to mainstream WASP culture, white ethnicity became politically legitimate and even fashionable as a white ethnic identity politics formed in direct reaction to Black Power and other militant protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s, the culture wars were effective in further linking the politics of white ethnic pride to white racial resentments. The neoconservative condemnation of “illiberal” causes such as affirmative action, multiculturalism, political correctness, and liberal immigration policy also helped to shift white ethnic politics to the right.

The neoliberal and neoconservative ascendancies from the 1980s to the 2000s further politicized race and gender in connection with questions of government dependency and the critique of “big government.” During the Reagan era, the racialized and gendered attack on the welfare queen was crucial to new right anti-big government policy advances, the rise of supply side economics, the breaking of the Fordist social compact, the rollback on the social wage, the attack on affirmative action, and the rise of nonunionized postindustrialism. For their part, centrist Democrats under Bill Clinton’s leadership responded to Reaganism with a technocratic politics rooted in the pragmatics of prosperity, freighting multiculturalism to individualism, productivity, efficiency, personal responsibility, market enfranchisement, and reinvented government (smaller but still of vital necessity).

The ideological assault against welfare dependency, multiculturalism, affirmative action, and big government widened considerably in the Bush era, especially after 9/11. In this period, the basis for popular compassion and political support for the poor, immigrants, and people of color all but vanished, except among a small group of antipoverty activists and their supporters, while new fractions of the middle classes (especially lower- and middle-class white
suburbanites) came under fire and financial duress as the libertarian attack against government—any government, not just big government—gained traction. “Welfare queens,” already vanquished in the 1990s by welfare “reform,” were largely left alone in the 2012 presidential campaign cycle. But in 2012 teachers and pensioned government employees became the targets: “government-dependent” profligates living life too large off the government dime. Ultimately the attack on “government dependency” spread so wide as to encompass “the 47 percent of the US population” whom Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney condemned for not paying federal income tax but taking government services anyway.

During the Obama era, the attack on dependency from the right intensified and was once again elaborated in explicitly racist terms. The Obama administrative was effective in enforcing civil rights laws, reforming immigration, expanding access to health care (though on terms set by the right in the 1980s), and reviving the economy after the 2007–8 financial crisis. But the right was outraged by Obama’s soaring rhetoric about the audacity of hope and his ascent to the presidency itself was viewed by many as an affirmation of neoliberal triumph. Some on the left, however, were dismayed by Obama’s political abandonment of “main street” in the housing market bail out. Importantly, #BLM and the Movement for Black Lives, with their critique of racialized state violence, also surfaced during the Obama era, posing an overt challenge to some of the institutions where white nationalism has festered, such as the criminal justice system (Mullings in press). Throughout all of this, neoliberal and neoconservative governance struggled to manage “race relations” or to substantively address racial inequalities or white grievances, and racial conflagrations continued to surface, as, for example, in the Henry Louis Gates arrest controversy, into which former president Obama avoided any serious engagement.

This brings me to Trumpism. Trump’s excoriation of political correctness is the centerpiece to his political worldview and a cornerstone of his populist appeal. With it, he stokes white nationalist sentiments, mobilizing supporters to be outraged by PC-induced free speech violations and in defense of white cultural worlds that, in this formulation, are perceived to be under constant attack by liberal accusations of racial insensitivity. Freighted to his anti-PC stance is a politics of nostalgia for a fictitious industrial heyday when Americans were purportedly better off. Indeed, the solution for the precarious status of many Americans today is, for Trump, a return not to the 1970s and 1980s,
when white ethnicity was celebrated across the political spectrum, or to the 1990s, when the culture wars were at their peak, but to the mid-twentieth century, and to the industrial economy and welfare statism of that era. And this is an explicit desire to return to that era, as it actually existed, with its racist and sexist hierarchies wholly intact. Although Trump is often viewed as ideologically inconsistent to the point of incoherency, his call for a new “industrial revolution”—his denunciation of free trade, his emphasis on Rust Belt manufacturing jobs, his grandstanding as the savior of jobs at the Carrier’s Indianapolis factory, and his imposition of tariffs—combines with his support for current levels of Social Security and Medicare spending in his first proposed budget (while slashing the rest of the federally funded safety net) to define white male workers as the virtuous majority whom Trump claims to represent. Accordingly, it is the welfare statism part of Trumpism that so offends neoconservative intellectuals, who are fully invested in its dismantling, while it is the racist and sexist parts of the equation that offend the liberal establishment, which was nonetheless unable to mount a successful electoral political campaign to defeat him. This is, of course, a politics that few non-white Americans can embrace and that offends many women. Indeed, it is a nostalgia for a time of legal segregation that existed prior to the women’s movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The immediate postwar period was also a time when whiteness and masculinity worked as unmarked categories of privilege, when the maintenance of the social order was presumed to be one in which white men had political and economic power. And it is that era that Trump compares favorably to the present period of overt race talk, liberal multiculturalism, and liberal social policy.

Yet Trump is invested in a different kind of race talk. Take, for example, his talk about black America, which reflects a similar investment in white male resurrection. For black Americans, Trump expresses mostly pity for the harrowing, violent conditions of life in the inner city. He blames Democrats for decades of policy experimentation that locked black Americans in the inner city (again there is just enough truth in this claim to make it grossly misleading). Trump’s prescription for change, ironically (given his current hostility to Democrats) is to suggest that the Bill Clinton—era welfare-to-work regime should be extended to all other safety net programs, so black inner-city residents will be forced to work, for instance, to get food stamps or subsidized housing or government health insurance. Of course, Trump’s description of the plight of inner-city residents has very little to do with reality for most
African Americans. Most African Americans are not poor, and they do not live in the urban core. And by treating the black inner city as a metonym for black America, Trump alienated many African American voters. But this kind of race talk signals something else entirely to his white middle-class supporters, who see black Americans both as government dependents for whom they hold disdain and as preferred recipients of government largesse.

As repulsive as his xenophobic race-baiting is, Trump’s embrace of many white nationalist ideological precepts undoubtedly enhances his popularity for a polity for which white racial grievances have been stoked, sub rosa, by Republican operatives for decades. Eventually, much of the Tea Party became Trump’s political base. Controversial figures such as Steve Bannon and his allies on the alt-right also helped to popularize the politics of white racial resentment, as did Fox News. But white nationalism is a more broadly held worldview, crisscrossing red state/blue state divisions, and class and gender differences among whites. Furthermore, Trump was certainly not the only political figure to attempt to craft a populist political message in 2016. Rand Paul tried as a Libertarian, Ted Cruz tried as a religious Conservative, and Bernie Sanders tried as a socialist. All three challenged the liberal centrist globalists—but not with respect to racial politics. Indeed, Cruz’s and Paul’s records suggest strong adherence to new right postracial orthodoxy, though Paul did support some criminal justice reforms that were ideologically heterodox. For his part, Sanders sought to downplay issues of racial difference and inequality in order to build his left-liberal coalition, which was defeated by Hilary Clinton in the Democratic Party primaries. Trump was thus the most brazen in elaborating an antiglobalist, anti-immigrant, white nationalist stance. He also had an oftentimes-overlooked advantage over the other candidates in the Republican primary race. His foray into birtherism against former president Obama, which at the time was considered a fringe position, gave him early credibility in some white Republican quarters and firmly freighted his subsequent anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim positions to antiblack politics. This, alas, turned out to be a very compelling articulation.

The Politics of Resentment and the Crisis in Political Authority

The context for this fairly conventional narrative about racisms in popular culture and politics is an ongoing crisis at the level of political economy that is made visible by the unraveling of several unstable settlements that I wish to
highlight here. First, and foremost, is the ongoing crisis in neoliberal capitalism in the United States and across the globe and its attendant crisis in political legitimacy. At the economic level, neoliberal capitalism has been prone to crisis since its inception in the 1970s, and it has failed to guarantee freedom or equality for most people. After the 2007–8 financial crisis, finance-led neoliberal capitalism has remained in place, but it has taken on an even more disposessive and hyperexploitative form while at the same time its political arm has weakened. It has become clear that, from the global financial elite’s perspective, the solution to the volatility and long-term crisis in political economy is the severe constraint of popular sovereignty, separating it from capitalist decision-making and giving almost dictatorial authority to the central banks. But a full-fledged political crisis emerged after 2007–8, when neoliberals and neoconservatives alike were exposed as corrupt, ineffectual, and beholden exclusively to economic elites. Political elites thus lost legitimacy long before Trump was elected president—and his election is best understood as an effect of this crisis, not its cause (Fraser 2019).

A second related context is the rise of popular sentiment in politics. In a situation where the reigning capitalist ideologies are unpopular, in which neoliberal technocracy and neoconservative moralizing can no longer persuade people, the politics of sentiment is filling people’s hearts (Grossberg 2006). This combines with the fragmentation of the public sphere (di Leonardo 1998) such that facts, authority, and rationality are frequently associated with flawed, ineffectual, elitist, and punishing forms of liberal governance such as neoliberalism. Importantly, this has occurred across the political spectrum. The denunciation of the “fake news” of the mainstream media by Trump, his white nationalist supporters, and pundits on Fox News is but one example of popular suspicion of elite forms of expertise and knowledge. Other examples abound, from Black Lives Matter’s condemnation of CompStat and other crime statistics as racist to the revolt against vaccinations in some quarters. Overall, passion has not replaced rationality in politics today, but in the current conjuncture, the politics of resentment, the rise of angry publics, and the crisis over authority and knowledge culminate in a situation in which rage and resentment has been taken to new levels of intensity in liberal democratic politics. Furthermore, political rhetoric is meant more to invoke sentiments than to pinpoint concrete policy proposals or coherent political ideologies. Trump’s chronic lying and overall lack of presidential comportment does little in this context to undermine his popular support, since his followers are far
too enraged at the political establishment and their media accomplices to trust their accounts or opinions.

Donald Trump’s political ascent is rooted in these developments. The gradual fraying of long-standing political arrangements that freight rights and recognition with access to public resources, accompanied by a mad-dash scramble to formulate workable political programs in defense of an ever-ambiguous category of “the middle class” were strained to the breaking point by the early 2010s. Trump’s signature move was to innovate an articulation of revanchist middle-class politics framed in largely racial—and racist—terms. This formulation undermined the liberal racial consensus of the post–civil rights era with a politics of white community resentment and grievance that diverged significantly from the neoconservative attempt to impose postracial color-blind politics and that treated liberal multiculturalism with contempt and ridicule in the name of a retrograde politics of nostalgia for a white supremacist and patriarchal past.

The Political Impasse of the Present Moment

In the current conjuncture, the politics of sentiment, the rise of affective publics, the crisis over authority and knowledge, and the turn to authoritarianism are all intertwined in ways that have helped to suture together Trumpism as a white nationalist political project for the post–civil rights era. What is to be done about this? Certainly, liberal tolerance, the progressive politics of recognition and redistribution, and the celebration of difference as an intrinsic social good are preferred alternatives to Trump’s xenophobic nativism and racist attacks on black and brown America. But, as the analysis I provide above suggests, liberal race projects are also vulnerable to the critique, from both the left and the right, that they are elitist and indifferent to class dynamics and structural racism. White nationalism today may eschew overt calls for white supremacy and replace them with a purportedly kinder, gentler politics of racial resentment that seeks to assert white pride and the celebration of white heritage as antidotes to the purported tyrannies of political correctness and multiculturalism. Yet this kinder and gentler position is still a form of white supremacy. Ultimately, the white nationalist march in Charlottesville, Virginia, as political spectacle and event, is not separable from Trump’s and the Republican Party’s racist politics in the lead up to the 2018 midterm elections and beyond. But the widespread condemnation in response to Trump’s
racism actually reinforces the sense of grievance felt by many who hold white nationalist sensibilities and sentiments, because those who harbor these resentments frequently feel unfairly characterized as racists by the anti-Trump backlash, especially if it is launched from the liberal quarters of the political establishment and media. These are the same people who see confederate monuments as symbols of their cultural heritage, which, they are convinced, is under attack from liberal cosmopolitan elites.

Located alongside these two conflicting racial projects are also neoconservatives, who are quietly laying the groundwork for the reassertion of color blindness via their legal attacks on affirmative action. They appear to be waiting for the return of globalism too as a dominant political ideal once their own rank and file is burned by Trump, or so they hope. Yet this position too is vulnerable to accusations of elitism from the nationalist populist right, for color blindness cannot, by definition, restore white culture and community to a prominent public place in American political life even if it can advantage whites across institutions from politics to education to work. It is because of the limitations of political ideas such as color blindness that the rank and file of the alt-right remains deeply suspicious of the centrist Republican establishment, who are frequently referred to on alt-right blogs as “cuckservatives” because of their emasculated fealty to the liberal establishment, so their argument goes.

Finally, there is the social democratic left that seeks to counter the ethnonationalism of Trumpism with an economic or progressive populism and civic nationalism of the left. These positions have gained ground recently in electoral struggles inside the Democratic Party, and Bernie Sanders popularized them in the 2017 Democratic primaries. Notably, many proponents of this position have long eschewed liberal race talk and identity politics, which has tended, across successive waves of left mobilization from the 1990s to the 2010s, to be seen as an impediment to a new alignment of the ranks of disposable people in a new movement from below (Brecher et al., 2000; Frank 2004; Fraser 2019). In the immediate aftermath of Trump’s presidential election, criticism of “identity politics” once again gained traction, as a new push for a platform of economic populism was linked, once again, to disdain for cultural radicalism, which is viewed at best as a troublesome diversion from a new working-class politics and at worse as a factor contributing to the rise of economic inequality and to the Democratic Party’s inability to win over white working-class voters (see, e.g., the widely influential New York Times op-ed by Mark Lilla [2016]; see also Michaels et al. 2016).
The strong advantage that white nationalism has over its alternatives is its willingness to take on racial politics more or less explicitly and to blame black and brown people for the woes and challenges affecting white people. This has been a national pastime since the founding of the United States, and it remains, in 2019, an amazingly effective, if horrendous, form of political affiliation and rule. For the other projects, racism’s entrenched capacities to shape political and economic life in the United States are frequently disregarded and, more important, displaced onto political opponents, whose ways of managing “race relations” are criticized as ineffective, inadequate, or racist (Steinberg 2007). In this regard it is only groups on the left that are poised to respond to white nationalism with a critical race politics of their own that can hope to diminish white nationalism’s popular and political influence, as the abolitionist and civil rights movements demonstrated against similar foes in past eras. Groups such as Black Lives Matter, which has a progressive economic program for all linked to its critique of antiblackness (Williams 2015; Mullings forthcoming), and similar movements such as Standing Rock and the immigrant rights movement, are seeking to make race and settler colonialism matter politically in the United States, though on entirely different terms than those that are elaborated, obviously, by white nationalist groups. It is hard to imagine how these movements will flourish, let alone survive, given Trump’s law-and-order posturing and the illiberal policing tradition of our major metropolitan areas (which are ironically now touted as liberal cosmopolitan refuges from Trumpland). If they do not, we will in all likelihood be stuck in an impasse in which white nationalist populism continues to hold sway. In favor or out of favor, it will rule or haunt politics for decades to come. It is, of course, difficult to know where US politics will be in the near future, let alone in the long-term. We may end up with a progressive populism of the left, with Trumpian fascism, or if restored, a liberal centrist globalism. A better idea would be putting our energies into the work of building, aligning with, supporting, and acting in solidarity with political projects that make race something other than someone else’s problem.

Notes

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1. This essay builds on a long tradition of critical anthropological research on the United States; for an overview of this tradition, see Maskovsky (2013); see also Brodkin (2000); Cattelino (2010); di Leonardo (199); Lamphere et al. (1993); and Susser (1996).

2. A useful account of Trump’s rise can be found in Fountain (2018); for an important account of gender in right-wing politics, see Spruill (2017); for a brilliant analysis linking Trump’s political effectiveness to late capitalist spectacle, see Hall et al. (2016); for a brief account that locates Trump’s rise vis-à-vis white nationalism, see Maskovsky (2017).

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