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Overcoming Being Overwhelmed in the Trump Era

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DER SPIEGEL DEPICTING TRUMP AS AN ASTEROID HEADING FOR EARTH

Over the past several months, I have noticed a growing sense among undergraduate students of being overwhelmed by mainstream electoral politics. From the long, vitriolic primary campaigns, to the scandal-plagued lead-up to the vote, the disbelief after November 8th, the confusion during the transition period, and the ongoing turbulence since the inauguration, it seems their sensibilities and expectations have been under repeated assault. What started out for many as a joke and then an embarrassment turned into a circus and then a threat, and then, finally, a disturbing reality.

At the same time, students have been inundated with various commentaries that seek to give coherence to all that has happened during the election cycle and its aftermath. Dozens of articles appear almost every day dissecting one or another aspect of Trump's victory and what it means for different groups of people, the country as a whole and the wider world. The attempt to ban Muslims from several countries, the push to end subsidized private healthcare and the renewed targeting of undocumented migrants are only the most recent measures compounding their sense of uncertainty and anxiety.

One way to overcome this feeling of being overwhelmed is by teaching the current conjuncture in a broader historical context yet with a sharper analytical focus. At William Paterson University, a mid-sized public institution located in northern New Jersey, my students come from mostly working-class families with a remarkable degree of ethnic and religious diversity. In my introductory Modern Global History course, I have adopted a three-pronged strategy to encourage them to think through the Trump presidency without succumbing to the pitfalls of exaggeration, conflation and exceptionality.

At the outset, I emphasize the need to attend to the specificity of Trump. It is critical to avoid generalization and hyperbole, no matter how cathartic. Students ought to understand Trump not as a crazed tycoon or a ridiculous imbecile, or even an ominous fascist-in-the-making. Instead, I ask them to choose appropriate adjectives: he is erratic and opportunistic, no doubt, but plainly right-wing, with regressive positions on a host of fiscal, social and environmental issues. Just as we would not accept students characterizing, say, Southern slave-owners, Napoleon or East India Company officers as "crazy," "stupid" or "evil," we should prevent Trump from being merely ridiculed in our classrooms. Only when we lack faith in the acuity of our analysis do we resort to caricature.

Beyond the careful use of language, I ask students to divide the Trump presidency into two categories. On the one hand, we identify as rhetoric the content of all of the statements he and his spokespersons have made over the past year. This entails overt expressions of racism, xenophobia, sexism and war-mongering, as well as convoluted claims about American greatness amid an ever-growing assortment of falsehoods. On the other hand, we list as policy all of his actionable positions, the concrete decisions he has already implemented or seeks to do so. This

includes building a wall along the Mexican border, reducing taxes on the wealthy, restricting immigration and refugee resettlement, and eliminating a range of government programs, subsidies and regulations. Perhaps less conventionally, it also encompasses plans to increase infrastructure spending, cancelling "free" trade agreements and withdrawing from the NATO military alliance.

In reality, of course, there is no simple separation between rhetoric and policy. The two are inextricable, and serve to inform and justify each other. Calling Mexicans "rapists" underpins the building of the wall, just as defunding Planned Parenthood exemplifies a routine degradation of women. The reason for the artificial divide, however, is to encourage students to focus on the material effects of policy rather than be distracted by the bombast of rhetoric. Too often the aspects of Trump's presidency that garner the most attention -- and thereby generate the most impassioned responses -- are his ignorant and offensive utterances. Yet outrage over his call to kill the families of suspected militants can quickly descend into outrage over his angry tweets about "Saturday Night Live" or the supposed size of the crowd at his inauguration. While issues of tone and temperament are important, they cannot overshadow confronting the tangible consequences of exercising presidential power.

In order to comparatively analyze Trump's policy positions, I next ask students to map out the current political spectrum in the United States. We start by drawing a horizontal line, with the left-end identified by students as Liberal and the right-end as Conservative. Leaving party affiliations aside, I ask how one would determine if a person was a liberal or a conservative? Usually, they answer with issues such as abortion access, gun control, same-sex marriage, the death penalty and military spending. Less frequently, students mention taxation rates, environmental protections and raising the minimum wage. I then ask them to locate certain politicians along the spectrum. We plot the position of George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush and Jimmy Carter, before moving on to Hilary Clinton, Ted Cruz, Barack Obama, Chris Christie and Bernie Sanders.

And then I ask them to place Trump along this spectrum. The mention of his name usually elicits hoots, with calls for placing him at the extreme right-end, or even off the line altogether. I remind them that they constructed this spectrum on their own, without any limitations, and therefore no one can be outside of its bounds. But why, I probe, do we think Trump is the furthest, most extreme type of conservative? We then go through each of the issues in the criterion, identifying his position and contrasting it to Clinton, Cruz and Sanders. Quite strikingly, students realize the need to adjust the location of these figures along the spectrum. It turns out Trump is not an arch-conservative, that Obama is far from the most leftward, and that Clinton ends up in the middle on many issues. From corporate bailouts to trade deals and criminal justice reform, the initial distance between these politicians shrinks considerably. By

focusing on Trump's actual policies instead of his rhetoric, students are better able to evaluate the meaning of his presidency.

At this point, I shift gears to discuss a different kind of political spectrum, that of nineteenth century Europe. We construct the same horizontal line, but now locate various groups of Reactionaries, Liberals and Radicals from right to left. I again ask how one would identify the political orientation of a person in this era? Based on previous discussions of assigned readings, students know the key issue at that time was what was to be done about the growing inequalities generated by industrial capitalism. For reactionaries, inequality was either natural or divine, while liberals believed it to be unfortunate but unavoidable. Only radicals sought to abolish it, even as different factions disagreed on how best to accomplish this task and what society would look like in the future. More importantly, the radical desire to transcend capitalism is what brought reactionaries and liberals closer together, united in a common fear of revolution to broadly defend the status quo.

Juxtaposing the political spectrum of twenty-first century America with nineteenth century Europe brings to the fore a few key observations. First, students realize the bulk of seemingly polarized Liberal-Conservative politics in the United States today largely falls within a rather narrow realm of Liberal politics from two centuries earlier in Europe. What appears at opposite ends of the current political spectrum was, in another context, merely what different groups of liberals disagreed on among themselves. Students also recognize that the issues that animate politics today are mostly social and cultural -- from abortion to gun control and same-sex marriage -- with far less attention paid to worker rights, universal healthcare and public ownership of industries. In an earlier period, however, the problem of economic inequality was paramount. This is what generated the sharpest divide between various political orientations, and from which the majority of other divisions followed. Finally, this exercise reveals to students a much larger, more open world of politics than what they presently imagine. The narrowness of the current spectrum, and the limited scope of disagreement within it, points to the need to extend the boundaries of contestation, to more fundamentally question the parameters of political life in the United States.

A final point to the comparison is to collapse the space of historical difference. I tell my students that in most of the world today, the political spectrum is akin to nineteenth century Europe rather than contemporary America. That is, most countries have a much more diverse terrain of politics, with a far larger number of parties contesting a vastly broader range of issues. Throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as Europe, there are an assortment of right-wing nationalists and fiscal and religious conservatives along with left-wing social-democrats and militant communists and anarchists among different strands of liberals, all using parliamentary and extra-parliamentary means to further

their respective agendas. While each of these groups has a specific position on various social and cultural issues, they usually do not confine themselves to debating within that sphere alone. Instead, they struggle more capaciously to define the kind of society they want to live in and the way it should be achieved.

At the end of this exercise, students begin to see Trump and the country he leads in a different light. No longer is he simply a fool or villain, but a representative of a kind of politics that requires patient, detailed analysis to understand. At the same time, the current political binary ceases to appear natural and inevitable as compared to earlier and elsewhere in the world. Perhaps most importantly, students are able to overcome the sense of being overwhelmed by opening up possibilities to imagine and engage in a new kind of politics for today, and tomorrow.



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