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Realist Perspectives on Trump's Illiberal Counterrevolution

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PETAR POPOVIĆ, MAR 25 2021

The combination of Donald Trump's ideological nationalism and style of governing is colloquially called 'Trumpism', and it represents the American variant of the broader international phenomenon of nationalistic 'populism'. Contemporary far right nationalism has been on the fringes of intellectual and political life in the West at least since the 1960s, only to gain momentum in the 2010s and challenge the conventional International Relations (IR) perspectives and assumptions (Williams and Drolet, 2018). Yet, it seems that for rationalist IR theories there is no dilemma. Contemporary realism (or, more precisely, its American brand of neo-realism), has a unique criteria for defining certain foreign policy. Namely, its capability to assess the effects of material structures on the behaviour of states. Thus, for realists like Randall Schweller (2018), Trumpism is a version of retrenchment in response to the US hegemonic decline, caused by the changing distribution of power. The American 'unipolar moment' ended with the global recession of 2008, and the rise of illiberal revisionist powers such as China and Russia. Trump did not create this highly competitive multipolarity, he simply recognized it and acted accordingly. Hence, his trade wars, repudiation of multilateralism, and pressures on NATO allies to bear the fair share of costs. It follows that Trumpism is Realism.

While others sought to determine which specific type of Realism applied to Trumpism – e.g. 'offensive realist' or 'conservative realist' – most realists, however, saw Trump's attempts to dismantle the institutions of international cooperation as anything but Realism (Brands and Feaver, 2017; Larison, 2018). Since 1945, the US was pragmatically building the Liberal international order from its Western core to secure democracy and capitalism from the Soviet alternative. Its *raison d'être* has always been and still is the security and economic well-being of the United States. Trumpism, thus, merely represents an embarrassing disruption in a more than half century long and settled foreign policy strategy. This also explains analytical confusion in making sense of Trump's erratic improvisationalism and unpredictable style, which is reflected in proliferation of labels, from 'Jacksonian nationalism' and 'illiberal exceptionalism' to 'isolationism' or simply no label at all; suggesting that Trumpism is a complete antithesis to any of the established patterns of thought or traditions in IR. But then, there was also a telling interview given by the arch-realist Henry Kissinger. He said that Trump is 'one of those figures in history who appears from time to time to mark the end of an era and to force it to give up its old pretenses. It doesn't necessarily mean that he knows this, or that he is considering any great alternative. It could just be an accident' (Luce, 2018).

Kissinger's statement reveals a classical Realist attitude, established in the tragic sense of historical reflection. Indeed, present multipolarity is a fact. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic only accelerated and, thus, fully disclosed the process of the decline of Anglo-American model of globalization and the further rise of authoritarian tendencies internationally. Yet, claims that any foreign policy doctrine that recognizes multipolarity is *a priori* realist is misleading. Trumpism is not simply the response to the mechanic redistribution of power in the system. Actually, realists share this ahistorical attitude with their Liberal counterparts, who sincerely believe that president Joe Biden will return 'life back to normal' and revitalize the liberal order. By revisiting classical IR literature, this essay argues that Trumpism does not represent just the rational response to structural crisis of American liberal hegemony. Nor that it should be seen as a temporary aberration in the liberal epoch. Rather, Trumpism is constitutive to liberalism and its excesses. It emerges as its internal negation at the certain point in history, which marks deep and irreversible socio-political changes.

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The purpose and character of Trumpism

With Brexit, Recep Erdogan's counter coup against the military (Turkey's last bastion of secularism) and Trump's presidential victory, the year 2016 was a shock to the Trans-Atlantic community. The single underlying attitude behind this rising tide of illiberalism is nostalgia. As recent studies have shown, nostalgia is becoming the dominant force in shaping contemporary politics in reaction to ruling doctrines, norms and political culture (Lilla, 2016). At the heart of the Trumpist movement is a nostalgic vision of 1950s America. It reflects the rhetoric and discourse dominated by the word 'again' – as in 'Make America Great Again'; 'we will win again', 'make our military strong again' etc, (Brownstein, 2016). This is what Hans Morgenthau (1970: ch. 13) described as 'political romanticism'. It cherishes the image of 'the glorious past' or 'the lost paradise' of a traditional system of morality and its customary practices, which were destroyed by the forces of progress. The nostalgic attitude of romanticism is a common disposition in the politics of conservatism. Yet, what chiefly separates romantics from conservatives (i.e. foreign policy realists) is the purpose of political action. Conservatism, always conscious of the moral limits history imposes on the individual and society, intends to preserve, or in the case of crisis, reform the given order. Romanticism, on the other hand, is reactionary; it intends to restore the past in the present.

Trump's restoration of American 'greatness' was articulated in the key promise to 'bring jobs back to the US'. The economic agenda focused on boosting primarily those iconic industrial sectors of the lost golden age of American productivity, like steel production, coal mining and manufacturing. To secure these industries, protectionist policies were employed but with two major implications. First is the seeming irrationality of the policy itself. Saving declining manufacturing sectors was pursued at the expense of the growing industries that secured US's leading position in the world; e.g. natural gas or renewable energies (Plumer and Tankersley, 2018). For example, a romanticized image of the American farmer motivated the renegotiation of the NAFTA agreement with Canada and Mexico. At the same time, the new deal jeopardized the automotive, textiles and apparel sectors of the American agricultural-industrial complex (Burfisher et al., 2019). Second, these protectionist policies were in opposition to rules and norms of international free trade. Hence Trump's disregard for multilateralism, i.e. withdrawal from Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), paralyzing the World Trade Organization WTO, and trade wars with China, EU and Japan. Indeed, the trend of protectionism has been globally on the rise since the outbreak of financial crisis in 2008. Even prior to the global economic meltdown, the US was commonly protectionist over its steel and aluminum industry; India and the EU over their agriculture; and China over its domestic markets. But such measures were always perceived as an exception rather than a rule. Trumpism is unique in that it attempts to turn the exception into the rule.

Jan-Werner Müller (2016: ch. 2) attributes such behavior as a defining feature of all populist movements. Disregarding the norms is their 'technique of governing', which rests on the monopolization of the word 'nation' (or 'people'). With the 'nation', nationalist populists denote only the fraction of the population to which they appeal, while rendering everyone who does not fit into the narrative as members of 'liberal elite' or 'enemies of the people'. This gives nationalists like Trump a moral high ground to, on the one hand, explicitly establish a political system based on clientelism, nepotism and corruption (e.g. conflicts of interests with running the Trump Organization, or employing his daughter and son-in-law in the White House). On the other hand, it establishes the 'discriminatory legalism', or legal favoritism of a certain regime-friendly groups (Trump's ignoring safety regulation laws in favor of Dow Chemicals in 2017). Yet, as Müller notes, such behavior is nothing new in politics (the same goes for protectionism in international politics). What makes it significant in the case of nationalist populism is its brazen explicitness; an open disregard for national and international norms, approved by massive popular support. In IR terminology, the political behavior that openly expresses dissatisfaction with the existing status quo is the politics of revisionism.

Foreign policy revisionism is commonly associated with the term 'revolutionism'. Revolution in all its ideological variants is a phenomenon inherent to the history of Western modernity (Martin Wight (1990) of English school constitutes it as a grand utopian 'revolutionary' tradition in international theory, alongside belligerent 'realist' and pragmatic 'rationalist' traditions). Regardless of the doctrinal position, the revolutionary ethic is universally characterized by its anti-elitism, anti-pluralism and strong loyalty to the doctrine of a certain group, not the state. Such an ethic is antithetical to everything for which the entire Realist tradition stands. Classical realism with its conservative pretenses always puts the interest of the social order above the interest of a political group. Deeply conscious of the pluralist nature of society, i.e. its inherent complexity of conflicting interests, classical realists saw

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the relative stability best attained in the domestic system of checks-and-balances, and internationally in the principle of the balance of power (Morgenthau, 2006: 179–184). Neo-realism also by focusing on polarity as a critical variable denotes some kind of political pluralism. Does not neo-realism's amoral conceptualization of anarchy presume socialization of states into accepting certain predictable patterns of behavior, thus creating a certain kind of rationalistic order?

The revolutionary ethic of loyalty is a hallmark of Trump's style of governing. Trump's presidency was bookended by the firing of FBI director James Comey for refusing personal loyalty to him and ended with the storming of Congress by his loyal followers after losing the elections. Trumpism refers to a belief in what Morgenthau (1945) calls the 'Machiavellian utopia', a belief that peace and security are guaranteed by the accumulation of overwhelming power. This rationale is revealed in Trump's National Security Strategy, ironically called 'principled realism': 'we will preserve peace through strength by rebuilding our military so that it remains preeminent, deters our adversaries, and if necessary, is able to fight and win' (Trump, 2017). The way power is exercised is determined by the way power is understood. As Wight points out, the revolutionary perceives and exercises power always as a force, with the purpose 'to overthrow and destroy existing political organizations' in the name of the certain revolutionary doctrine (Wight, 1990: 107).

However, as was already mentioned, Trumpism is essentially moved by romanticist nostalgia. The ambiguity of romanticism stems from the fact that while its principles of action are indeed revolutionary, it is ideally established in conservatism. Furthermore, if Trumpism is in a traditional sense a 'revolutionary doctrine', it would assume that the order is status quo. But the liberal international order is, as contemporary realists insist, the embodiment of US liberal hegemony (Schweller, 2015; Mearsheimer, 2018; Walt, 2018; Lind and Wohlforth, 2019). Since the end of the Cold War, the West aggressively promoted liberal values and forcefully exported democracy and free markets worldwide. Fighting wars in 'periphery countries' and creating a global trade system that favors the West is what made the order inherently revisionist. If there is no legitimate status quo established on some kind of balance, then there is no proper 'order' but a disarray of conflicting interests. Established rules and norms serve merely as an ideological tool of oppression by the dominant group or state. In such conditions, as Kissinger argues, the conservative movement historically comes to be dominated by the 'reactionary' or 'counterrevolutionary' group (Kissinger, 1957: ch. 11).

The concept of counterrevolution has no universal definition. It comes in a variety of forms and historical contexts because it is essentially only a response to any given revisionist upheaval. For Fred Halliday, counterrevolution is always a natural 'accompaniment' to every revolution in history and its character is international because the effects of revolutions are international (Halliday, 1999: ch. 8). Counterrevolution being constitutive to revolution is what Wight calls a 'dialectical hostility' within the 'revolutionary' tradition (Wight, 1991: 9). According to Wight, historical experience shows that since the dawn of modernity every great revolutionary transformation of Western society carried its own internal negative response. The Reformation of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was opposed by the Catholic counter-reformation; the French Revolution of the late eighteenth century by international legitimism; and communism by fascism in the twentieth century. It seems that in 2019, Trump openly announced an illiberal counterrevolution, when he said in his speech to the UN that 'the future does not belong to globalists, it belongs to patriots'. However, to understand the implications of Trumpian counterrevolution for international order, it is necessary to understand what Trumpism is reacting against.

Trumpian counterrevolution and its implications

The 1990s paradigm of the 'end of history' presumed that the epochal contradictions of modernity were forever resolved. With free market capitalism performing miracles, it was believed that a benevolent boredom of satisfied consumer society could finally reign in a more or less harmonized world. However, the political power of West's liberal establishment did not stem from the unprecedented accumulation of wealth in a globalized free market economy, from its superior military capabilities, or demonstrations of force against 'rogue regimes' in undeveloped countries. It stemmed from the control of language. John Mearsheimer claims that once the Cold War ended and bipolar constraints disappeared, foreign policy culture was reshaped by the systematic expansion of the discourse of 'high politics' onto traditionally non-political issues. The purpose was to degrade the meaning of notions of the sovereign nation state, its power and interests, and to focus on 'either humanity as a whole, or the individual'

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(Mearsheimer, 2005: 146).

Under the backdrop of this hegemonic discourse was the strategy of liberal depoliticization; to impose legalism by defusing political power. If the state abandons its subjective (political) interests in favor of objective (legal) ones, it naturally attains a powerful moral position. To uphold it, as Chantal Mouffe argues, liberalism had to continuously repudiate that which is essential to politics, *antagonism*. But by suppressing any antagonism within the consensual uniformity of the liberal order, liberals were effectively undermining pluralism and any possibility of articulating legitimate political expression. Consequently, the only way political interests could channel their expression in this sterile functionalist system was through political extremism. The first explosive reaction to the liberal international order occurred in 2001, in the form of international terrorism by Islamic fundamentalists (Mouffe, 2005: ch. 5).

The liberal depoliticization of foreign policy inevitably had to lead into the international politicization of everything. The inherent struggle for power spilled over from the concrete and limited interests of 'high politics' to every facet of international relations. The West became embroiled in a confusing web of potential and actual threats, all interconnected in one way or another, from poverty and climate change, to health and gender inequality. Eventually, the revisionism of Liberal hegemony had less to do with the ideological zealotism of liberal elites, then it did with structural necessity. Spreading democracy abroad resulted in what Herfried Münkler (2005) describes as Globalization's production of failed states. Privatization in ethnically diverse undeveloped countries made wars in those 'peripheral' areas endemic, pushing the West into a vicious circle of interventionism and draining processes of nation-building. Hence, endless wars.

The consequence of this is clear in Mearsheimer's main argument – spreading liberalism abroad inevitably leads to illiberalism at home. Because fighting endless wars requires a strong state national security apparatus, the militarization of Western states and their institutions prompts secretive and deceptive behavior in the ruling elites. In such an environment, the violation of individual rights and erosion of civil liberties naturally increases (Mearsheimer, 2018: ch. 6). If the Liberal hegemony is in a perpetual war and yet liberalizes the borders, the zone of its interventionism becomes limitless, i.e. total control of privacy via cyber spying programs and the militarization of the police (especially in the US). The financial crisis of 2008 would further radicalize the domestic economic dimension. The US government's bail out of Wall Street banks, the rise of unelected technocracy in Europe, and the implementation of harsh austerity measures for the general population determined even wider exclusions of the 'losers of globalization'. But these post-2008 policies emerged only on top of what was already a deeply internalized 'colonial' attitude of the establishment within the West. Along with the wealth inequalities, eroding living standards, and the democratic deficit, there is a cultural oppression by liberal policing of the public discourse via social norms such as political correctness (Hamilton, 2015). Imposing an image of nationalism as a combination of irrationality, ignorance and fascism, had to provoke domestic reaction. Enter Trumpism.

The extremism of Trumpism repudiates every norm, rule and convention of liberal rationality. Internationally, it reflects Trump's praising of the foreign authoritarian leaders, while straining relations in the Trans-Atlantic alliance. Domestically, it attacked mainstream media as 'the enemies of the people' and proclaimed every information outside Trumpian alternate reality as 'fake news'. The result of decades long liberal depoliticization is Trumpism's overpoliticization, which goes beyond repudiations of legalism. For example, in the Covid-19 pandemic, Trump managed to turn something as common sense as wearing masks into a contested political issue. But this political need to oppose and react to everything so far assumed to be 'normal' should not come as a surprise.

This is a pattern that has its roots in another counterrevolution over two centuries ago – non-political, but with major political implications – that of the intellectual and spiritual counter-Enlightenment. It was essentially an emotional reaction to cold rationality and uniformity of dehumanizing industrial civilization. Originating in France with Jean Jacques Rousseau, but culminating with German romanticism, it was characterized by a reactionary nostalgia for the pre-modern 'natural' order. The movement emphasized everything that the Enlightenment culture of materialism and rationalism rejected: spirituality, imagination, sentiment. The counter-Enlightenment set the pattern for sentimental forces to react against the ever repeating and dehumanizing excesses of modernity. Two world wars, totalitarianism and genocide in the first half of the twentieth century attest to that fact, all of which was the crux of Morgenthau's attack on Western rationalism in his famous book *Scientific Man vs Power Politics*. At the heart of Morgenthau's

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argument is the tension between the static truth of the dominant philosophical doctrine, established in the belief in progress and redeeming power of science; and the complex contradictory experiences of the individual. The tension reflected the age of confusion, despair and finally violent backlash, in the form of society's embrace of fascism, 'a philosophy which promised to reinterpret their experience, to guide their actions, and create a new society' (Morgenthau, 1947: 15).

In the 2010s, nationalist populism displayed the same pattern of emotional irrationality, from politicized nostalgia to extreme rhetoric. But what does the Trumpist reaction mean for international politics? Here we encounter seemingly perplexing paradox. If one ignores Trump's extreme rhetoric and style, his foreign policy record is more or less one of continuity. The issue over burden sharing in NATO was already raised by the Obama administration; the attitude towards international organizations and regimes, like WTO or Paris Climate accords is basically no different from the attitude of any administration since Ronald Reagan; sanctions on Russia were not removed; instead of ending the war in Afghanistan, Trump sent more troops; the policy towards the Middle East confirmed the years long established position of the US; Trump intervened in Syria; supported Saudi Arabia in the Yemen Civil War; and assassinated Iranian top military figure Soleimani. Even withdrawing from the Iranian nuclear deal was, as Steven Walt (2018) pointed out, a return to the traditional US position.

There are various explanations as to why there was no radical break with the established US foreign policy. On the left, the main argument is that Trump is the product of the same exploitative hegemonic system, while his style is merely a distraction for the public. On the right, the argument is that he was constrained by the massive bureaucratic apparatus (the 'deep state'), or forced by liberal elites not to change course. Actually, the key to resolving the 'continuity dilemma' lies in that which is most evident – Trumpism is extreme, but not radical. Beyond the emotions expressed through erratic behavior and extreme rhetoric, political reaction faced with the challenges and demands of political reality is always intellectually, creatively and morally empty. It still rests on a discourse of nostalgic visions of the past, but as Halliday says, it can never succeed in an attempted restoration because 'the passage of time, the very impact of revolution, prevents replication' (Halliday, 1999: 208). Thus, the continuity of Trump's foreign policy reflects the void in the face of political present. The only thing left is the nihilism of force. Without any principle or meaningful justifications, Trumpism in foreign policy becomes what Barry Posen (2018) calls 'illiberal hegemony' – essentially continuation of hegemony, but based on pure negation.

This brings us back to Kissinger's statement. Indeed, Trumpism is neither viable or practical alternative, nor conscious that it is bringing an era of Liberal hegemony to its close. The means with which Trumpism is accomplishing this, is what Müller described as populist 'technique of governing'. Explicit clientelism and corruption in domestic affairs, reflects the same nature and character of Trump's 'transactional diplomacy' that blurs the line between state and personal interests. But as was already mentioned, corruption and egotism is common in politics. The problem is when it becomes the norm. When Trump decides to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, he is only confirming the fact that the US has never been in favor of a two-state solution on Israel's behalf. The difference here, however, is that while every administration in the past decades was in principle dedicated to mediation and some kind of peaceful solution, Trump saw no need to hide the direct personal relations between his son-in-law and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. When Trump said that his policy towards Iraq is simply to 'take the oil', he expressed the same policy motive that was shrouded in the noble language of freedom, security and democratization ever since the inauguration of the Carter Doctrine in 1979. The strategy 'principled realism' is in a strange, almost cynical way, truly realistic in that it pursues the actual interest in the most explicit, non-hypocritical way.

Hypocrisy is the hallmark of transitions. It is most pronounced when old values have broken down but are still honored publicly because the new values that guide behavior have not yet been articulated or legitimized (Lebow, 2003: 17).

In this moral limbo between two ages and two systems of values, a counterrevolution emerges as a catalyst. What Trump achieved in his four years as president was to fully expose the hypocrisy of Liberal hegemony. Thus, Kissinger cannot see Trump as anything but the unconscious agent of history, surfacing at the end of a cycle. The same pattern can be traced throughout history, to the Peloponnesian War. It was not Pericles – or more precisely his premature death – that marked the tragic end of Athens. Rather, it was the fall of Athenian hypocrisy, reflected in the explicit

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selfishness of warmongering demagogues from upper aristocratic classes such as Cleon. If Trump is for liberal hegemony what Cleon was for Athenian hegemony, then his presidency indeed marks the inauguration of a new era of ideas and practices that have yet to be internalized. Until then, and in order to survive, liberalism has to reconsider and reassess itself. Otherwise, pursuing strategies of the old 'normal' in the post-Trump era are going to be met with further internal and external disastrous consequences.

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About the author:

Dr.sc. Petar Popović is an associate professor at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb (FPZG). He specializes in International Relations theory and international modern history. Recent publications include 'Hans Morgenthau and the Lasting Implications of World War I', *Journal of Military Ethics* 19 (2), July-August 2020.