



Political Disconnects: Donald Trump, the Cultural Left, and the Crisis of Neoliberalism

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Introduction

This essay will primarily focus on the 2016 US election, including its ideological, socio-economic and political circumstances. Evidently, this context relates to numerous ‘political disconnects,’ phenomena which are all too obvious in contemporary American culture and society. In this respect, the narrow victory of a TV celebrity, businessman, and right-wing nationalist, who now serves as the 45th President of the United States, can be seen as an apt expression of the ideological divisions by which American culture and politics have been marked for quite some time.¹ Perhaps, then, liberal commentators and intellectuals should not have been all that surprised about the election’s outcome. For although former President Barack Obama was successful in getting reelected in 2012, his eight years in office also saw the rise of the Tea Party movement and a Republican Party which has increasingly drifted to the right. While this essay is certainly concerned with such political divisions – divisions, that is, which separate ‘blue states’ from ‘red states,’ Democrats from Republicans, liberals from conservatives, and the so-called left from the new right – I prefer to concentrate on a different (but perhaps equally challenging) type of disconnect. What I mean is the disconnect between today’s left (or, more precisely, what I have termed the ‘cultural left’) and large segments of the American working and lower middle class. Here, regarding the 2016 election, I will analyze the Clinton campaign’s curious inability to effectively articulate issues like class injustice and socioeconomic inequality. While this may seem to be mostly an ‘American’ issue, I am convinced that the class problem and the question of inequality go well beyond the US context and are in many ways related to the general upsurge of the new right, a phenomenon which can be observed in numerous European countries as well.

Overall, the essay consists of two parts. In the first part, I attempt to situate the Trump victory and the recent upsurge of right-wing populism against the backdrop of

¹ While these divisions are nowadays oftentimes related to an ideological struggle between nationalism and so-called ‘globalism,’ another point of reference would be the ongoing ‘Culture Wars,’ a term that has been in use since the early 1990s (cf. Hunter 1991).



neoliberalism and its current crisis. In the second part, I will then investigate the ways in which the left has played a part in this development. As mentioned above, I use the term ‘cultural left’ here, hoping that this will underline the affinities between many positions currently held by the mainstream left, especially in the US, and the legacy of Cultural Studies. To put it in a nutshell, my claim is that today’s left, which is generally more focused on identity issues than on class matters and economic policy, seems curiously ill-equipped to counter the recent rise of right-wing populism.² In a sense, then, this second part of the essay may appear like a type of self-criticism – something which was relatively common right after the election, when all kinds of intellectuals and activists asked themselves how the left may have contributed to the election’s outcome.³ While I am certain that some readers may by now be tired of such routinized forms of self-critique or ‘soul-searching,’ I see a greater danger in that – due to the expectedly disastrous start of the Trump presidency as well as the debate about Russian meddling in the election – the necessary discussion on the failure of the left may come to an end before it really started. This discussion, however, is highly important. For if phenomena such as the Brexit in the UK, the election of Trump in the US, and the overall rise of right-wing populism in Europe (and basically across the globe) would not be considered a wake-up-call for the left – then what else would have to happen to have this effect?

Neoliberalism and the 2016 US Election

In what follows, I seek to situate the Trump victory and the recent success of the new right in the context of neoliberalism, and more specifically, in what I refer to as the ‘crisis of neoliberalism.’ This reference is certainly not supposed to suggest that neoliberalism as a set of economic policies is dead, or that it has been superseded by a new accumulation regime or a new mode of regulation.⁴ Nevertheless, as William Davies has recently put it: “The question inevitably arises, is this thing called ‘neoliberalism’ now over? And if not, when might it be and how would we know?” (2017: xviii). Indeed, there are a number of theorists who claim that the financial-economic crisis of 2008 and its unresolved causes will eventually prove to be so severe and all-encompassing that what results will either be “the breakdown of the capitalist system” (Wallerstein/Collins/Mann

² On the general turn from class analysis to identity politics, cf. Michaels 2006. Regarding the upsurge of right-wing populism, cf. Klein 2017: 127: “The crucial lesson of Brexit and of Trump’s victory is that leaders who are seen as representing the failed neoliberal status quo are no match for the demagogues and neo-fascists. Only a bold and genuinely redistributive progressive agenda can offer real answers to inequality and the crises in democracy.”

³ Cf., for instance, the reactions from American intellectuals such as Judith Butler and Stephen Greenblatt which appeared in the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* immediately after the election (Baker/Boyle/Butler et al. 2016).

⁴ These terms are central concepts in the Regulation School’s approach to capitalism (cf. Aglietta 1979).



et al. 2013: 2) or a significant structural change and readjustment.⁵ While it seems premature to make any such predictions, I will argue that there exists a notable *ideological* crisis of neoliberalism, as the neoliberal doctrine is currently challenged by voices from both the left and the right.

So in which way can this crisis of neoliberalism be said to have impacted the election? A simple answer is that the disaffections caused by neoliberalism, globalization, and economic policies that led to a continuous increase in the unequal distribution of wealth added to the popularity of two of the candidates in particular, who, in their very different ways, both seemed to represent an alternative. These candidates are Bernie Sanders for the Democrats (whose loss to Hillary Clinton in the primaries was much tighter than almost anyone had expected) and Donald Trump for the Republicans (whose election as President was even more surprising). While Sanders embodied a 'left-wing' solution to the crisis of capitalism, one that is based on social democracy and the idea of a strong welfare state, Trump represented a 'right-wing' solution, one that embraces a nationalist doctrine of isolationist protectionism, for which he campaigned under the slogan 'America first.'⁶

Now, it certainly seems rather odd to see in Trump a critic of neoliberalism, or, for that matter, a champion of the working class. After all, Trump is a billionaire, who has consistently avoided paying taxes, and who has a record of exploiting the people that work for him. He campaigned under the neoliberal motto that he would run America 'like a business,' while frequently referring to Ronald Reagan, who embodies the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, as one of his role models. Moreover, with his tax policy, his planned healthcare reform, as well as by appointing representatives of Goldman Sachs, Exxon Mobile, and other multinational companies to his cabinet, it is likely that many aspects of his economic policies will represent a mere continuation, if not an intensification, of his predecessors' neoliberal programs.⁷

⁵ Cf., for instance, Duménil/Lévy 2011, Wallerstein/Collins/Mann et al. 2013, Mason 2015, and Streeck 2016. Other authors, however, have underlined the persistence of neoliberalism, which has managed to survive the financial crisis and its aftermath (cf. Crouch 2011 and Mirowski 2013).

⁶ As a response to "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it," Mark Fisher has introduced the concept of 'Capitalist Realism' (2009: 2). While it would be an exaggeration to suggest that Sanders and Trump represent a break with this doctrine (as their models of politics remain firmly anchored in the capitalist logic), what they articulated in their campaigns was an alternative to the currently dominant type of capitalism as based on neoliberal principles and an affirmation of the global market.

⁷ It has oftentimes been claimed that there is a tension in the general direction of the Trump Administration's economic policy, which is influenced by both the economic nationalism of former White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon and the more transnational orientation of Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner. However, as Naomi Klein has argued, "when it comes to deconstructing the state, and outsourcing as much as possible to for-profit corporations, Bannon and Kushner are not in conflict but in perfect alignment" (2017: 3f).



Nevertheless, there are aspects of his ideology – and more importantly, of his rhetoric – that significantly contradict the capitalist free market ideology, something which enabled him to connect with voters from the working class during the campaign. Most notably, Trump called for higher tariffs on imports and spoke out against NAFTA as well as other free trade agreements, arguing that they result in a massive outsourcing of American jobs to foreign countries.⁸ Along these lines, the principal metaphor of his campaign became the giant wall he intends to build between the USA and Mexico, a plan which is supposedly designed to keep out illegal immigrants from entering the American job market. While it is unclear whether this plan will ever be fully implemented, the wall evidently also has a symbolic function in that it emblematically represents a decided opposition to the politics of open borders and global free trade.

These elements of a populist economic nationalism, along with his straightforward language, his opposition to political correctness, and his anti-elitist and anti-corruption rhetoric – his alleged effort, that is, to ‘drain the swamp’⁹ – is part of the reason why Trump became popular among members of the working and lower middle class, and in particular the white working class in the so-called ‘rust belt’ area. Hillary Clinton, to the contrary, was perceived by many as the epitome of the liberal elite, the Wall Street candidate who is thoroughly out of touch with the problems and hardships of ‘common Americans.’ Although it is likely that Trump will eventually do even less to improve the economic situation of the working class than Clinton would have, it is nevertheless striking that she had such obvious problems connecting with working-class voters, many of whom had voted for the Democrats in previous elections. To be sure, there are also non-economic factors that have contributed to Clinton’s defeat, and sexism has certainly played a role here. It would be too easy, however, to simply dismiss the class aspect of the election’s outcome and blame Trump’s victory exclusively on racism, misogyny, and prejudice. While all these factors obviously played a role, what I will argue is 1) that racism should not be viewed independently from questions of political economy, as if it was an entirely autonomous phenomenon. And 2) that the class dimension that came to the

⁸ Having initially planned to completely withdraw from NAFTA, Trump later announced that the agreement will be renegotiated (cf. Davis 2017).

⁹ It seems hardly worth mentioning that Trump has not only fallen short of this particular campaign promise, but that the make-up of his cabinet – apparently the wealthiest one in modern American history – renders all such announcements utterly ridiculous. Cf., for instance, Klein 2017: 21: “Trump and his cabinet of former executives are remaking government at a startling pace to serve the interests of their own businesses, their former businesses, and their tax bracket as a whole. Within hours of taking office, Trump called for a massive tax cut, which would see corporations pay just 15 percent (down from 35 percent), and pledged to slash regulations by 75 percent. His tax plan includes a range of other breaks and loopholes for very wealthy people like the ones inhabiting his cabinet (not to mention himself). He appointed his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, to head up a ‘swat team’ stacked with corporate executives who have been tasked with finding new regulations to eliminate, new programs to privatize, and new ways to make the US government ‘run like a great American company’. (According to an analysis by Public Citizen, Trump met with at least 190 corporate executives in less than three months in office – before announcing that visitor logs would no longer be made public).”



fore in the election goes well beyond this isolated example, but points to the fact that, in the last few decades, the left has become increasingly unable to effectively address issues like class injustice and economic inequality.

In order to connect these issues to the outcome of the election, it is worthwhile to first look at the election’s demographic data. Here, it is important to note that Clinton won the popular vote by almost three million votes (cf. CNN Politics 2017), a fact that significantly relativizes the sense that there has been a Republican landslide victory, a major swing to the right, or, as some people have called it, a ‘whitelash’ (cf. Blake 2016). Indeed, according to the exit polls, whites are ironically the only ethnic group from which the Republicans received a smaller percentage of votes than in 2012 – namely 58 instead of 59 percent – while Trump gained among black, Latino, and Asian voters when compared to Romney’s performance four years earlier (cf. Fig. 1 and 2). Regarding low-income groups – that is, people who earn less than 50,000 or 30,000 dollars annually – Clinton still has a lead over Trump, but it is among these constituencies that Republicans were most successful in gaining new voters since 2012, while Democrats faced the biggest losses (cf. Fig. 3 and 4). Obviously, this trend should not only be of concern to the Democratic Party, but to the left in general.

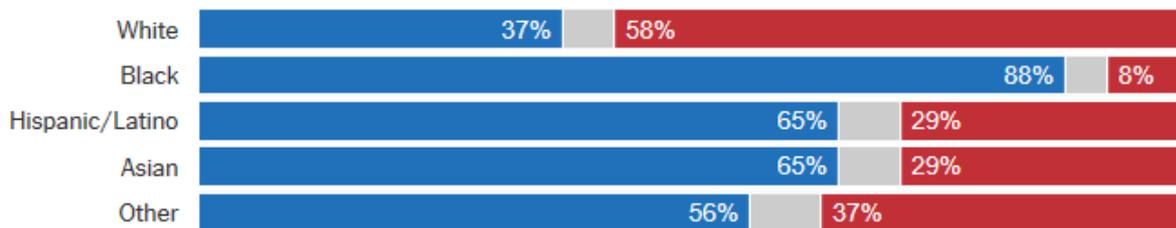


Fig. 1: Exit polls of the 2016 Presidential election (race). On the left are the percentage points for the Democratic candidate (Hillary Clinton), on the right for the Republican candidate (Donald Trump).

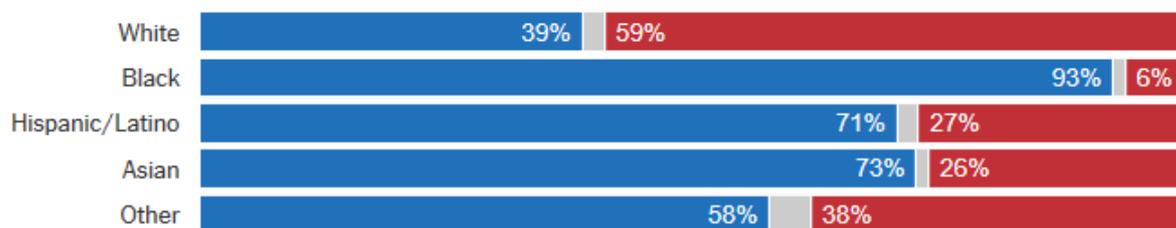


Fig. 2: Exit polls of the 2012 Presidential election (race). On the left are the percentage points for the Democratic candidate (Barack Obama), on the right for the Republican candidate (Mitt Romney).

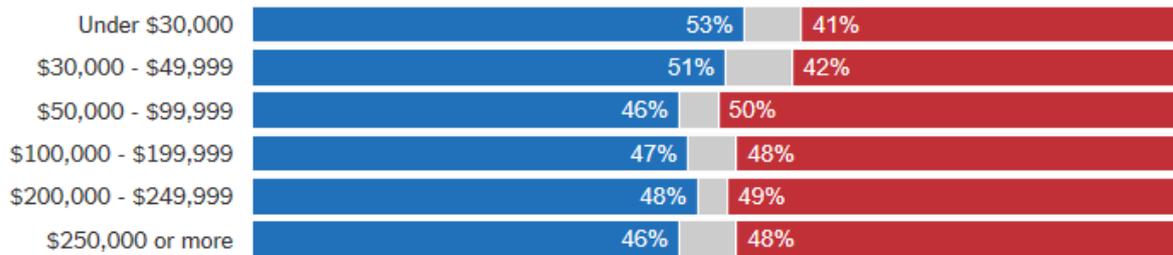


Fig. 3: Exit polls of the 2016 Presidential election (income). On the left are the percentage points for the Democratic candidate (Hillary Clinton), on the right for the Republican candidate (Donald Trump).

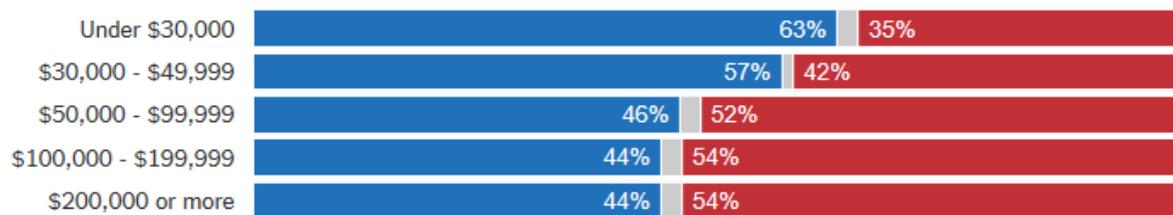


Fig. 4: Exit polls of the 2012 Presidential election (income). On the left are the percentage points for the Democratic candidate (Barack Obama), on the right for the Republican candidate (Mitt Romney).

Although this does *not* mean that class analysis alone could explain the rise of right-wing populism, one can safely assume that class-related issues have played a decisive role in the 2016 election. It is therefore no coincidence that the states which the Democrats lost in comparison to 2012 are states with a large white working-class population – people, that is, in Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Pennsylvania, who oftentimes had formerly voted for the Democrats, but who felt that Clinton offered no alternative (cf. Fig. 5).¹⁰ Considering that many of these people voted for Obama in the previous elections, it would be too simple to refer to Trump’s racism as their chief motivation.¹¹ Instead, as Michael Moore has put it, voters from the rust belt area, who felt “forgotten,” “beaten down,” and “dispossessed,” saw in Trump “the human Molotov Cocktail that they’ve been waiting for. The human hand grenade that they can legally throw into the system that stole their lives from them” (cf. *Michael Moore in TrumpLand*).¹²

¹⁰ Besides those rust belt states, the Democrats also lost Florida, which is traditionally a swing state.

¹¹ In favor of the argument that race played a pivotal role in the election’s outcome, a number of authors have rightly pointed out that whites of both sexes – and almost all ages, education levels, and income groups – predominantly voted for Trump (cf. Henley 2016). While this surely underlines the ongoing racial divisions in the US, the inclination to vote Republican among white voters is not a new phenomenon. As outlined above, the most characteristic fluctuation from the 2012 to the 2016 election concerns the drift of low-income voters from the Democrats to the Republicans.

¹² A very similar point can be made with regard to the Brexit referendum, in which members of the lower middle and working classes predominantly voted to leave the EU, while the upper classes tended to be in favor of remaining (cf. Harris 2016).



though there are certainly significant differences between fascism and the discourse of the new right, it may nevertheless be worthwhile to reread Polanyi in view of the current situation.¹⁴

From Class to Identity: Cultural Studies and the Contemporary Left

What I seek to demonstrate now is that the left's current problem in attracting voters and supporters from the working class has a history that resonates with the history of Cultural Studies, particularly in the US. Approximately since the 1980s, there occurred a major shift which largely transformed left-wing politics from a class-based movement critical of exploitation, economic inequality, and the general commodification of social life into a movement promoting a multiculturalist 'politics of recognition' (cf. Taylor 1992) mainly based on identity issues and geared, for instance, to anti-racism, anti-sexism, and anti-homophobia. Interestingly, these issues nowadays constitute the mainstream of left-liberal discourse, so that even a centrist Democrat with neoliberal inclinations, like Hillary Clinton, can easily promote a politics based on the mutual recognition of otherness and a celebration of diversity. It is probably due to its marginalization of class and its easy compatibility with neoliberalism – to whose transnational orientation it oftentimes serves as the fitting ideology – that identity politics and the 'politics of recognition' have come under critical scrutiny by parts of the left in recent years.¹⁵ Even an author like Didier Eribon, who is largely associated with identity-based gay rights activism, has claimed that today's left has widely neglected 'class oppression,' a fact that he sees directly connected to the rise of right-wing movements such as the *Front National*.¹⁶

Regarding the 2016 US election, however, it is of course noteworthy that Bernie Sanders, representing a rather marginal current in his party, did surely *not* neglect class

¹⁴ For an attempt to use Polanyi's understanding of 'the great transformation' as a basis for analyzing 'the great financialization' of our time, cf. Levitt 2013.

¹⁵ Cf., for instance, Michaels 2006 and Fraser/Honneth 2003.

¹⁶ Cf. Eribon 2013: 241: "During the period of the 1960s and 1970s, when I was student and when Marxism dominated French intellectual life [...], all other forms of 'struggle' seemed 'secondary' – or they might even be denounced as 'petite bourgeois distractions' from the place where attention should be focused, the only 'true' struggle, [...] that of the working class. Movements that came to be labeled as 'cultural' were focusing their attention on various dimensions that Marxism had set aside: gendered, sexual, and racial forms of subjectivation, among others. Because Marxism's attention was so exclusively concentrated on class oppression, these other movements were required to find other avenues for problematizing lived experience, and they often ended up to a great extent neglecting class oppression." As Eribon further argues, when the left lost interest in the problem of class exploitation in the 1980s, working-class voters increasingly drifted to the extreme right: "I am convinced that voting for the National Front must be interpreted, at least in part, as the final recourse of people of the working classes attempting to defend their collective identity, or to defend, in any case, a dignity that was being trampled on – now even by those who had once been their representatives and defenders" (2013: 132).



issues. Not too surprising, though, Sanders was frequently criticized by the liberal establishment and various parts of the left. As Slavoj Žižek writes, this was partly due to “his close contact with small farmers and other working people [...], the typical electoral supporters of Republican conservatives. Sanders is ready to listen to their worries and cares, rather than dismissing them as white racist trash” (2016: 63). In *Kill All Normies*, her book on the “online culture wars,” Angela Nagle makes a similar point:

While the alt-right regard [liberal websites like BuzzFeed] and the Guardian, BBC and CNN as the media of ‘the left’, espousing ‘Cultural Marxism’, it became obvious when the possibility of any kind of economically ‘left’ political force emerged that liberal media sources were often the most vicious and oppositional. Liberal feminist journalist Joan Walsh called Bernie Sanders’s supporters ‘Berniebot keyboard warriors’, while Salon was one of the main propagators of the Berniebro meme with headlines like, ‘Bernie Bros out of control: Explosion of misogynist rage...’ and, ‘Just like a Bernie Bro, Sanders bullies Clinton...’ (2017: 43)

As Nagle argues, however, allegations of the Sanders campaign’s ‘sexism’ were hardly based on facts, but rather served as a pretext to attack the campaign’s focus on class matters rather than identity issues:

Despite overwhelming evidence of Bernie’s popularity among young women, the myth was relentlessly peddled until it passed into the realm of Internet truth. The old liberal establishment then weighed in; for example, when feminist Gloria Steinem claimed that these numerous female Bernie fans were merely trying to impress their male peers. (2017: 44)

But what, now, has all this to do with Cultural Studies? Significantly in this respect, in the early phase of Cultural Studies the areas of culture and the economy were still thought of as essentially interrelated and depending on each other. Cultural Studies were certainly concerned with dismantling the base/superstructure dualism of classical Marxism, so as to render culture not simply the reflection of a society’s economic structure (cf. Williams 1977: 11-20, 75-82). Nevertheless, Raymond Williams and the Birmingham School, among others, were still in many ways preoccupied with analyzing the interdependencies between culture and the economy, or, more specifically, “the indissoluble connections between material production, political and cultural institutions and activity, and consciousness” (1977: 80). Along these lines, early Cultural Studies oftentimes referred to Gramsci, who, on the one hand, sought to move the realm of culture out of the shadow of Marxist economism, while, on the other hand, making clear that culture and the economy are fundamentally interconnected. In his texts on Fordism, for example, Gramsci argued that the prohibition and the mobilization of a ‘puritanical’ cultural tradition in 1920s America was predominantly meant to aid the enforcement of the rationalist system of Fordist production.¹⁷ For Gramsci, then, cultural forms and manifestations (such

¹⁷ Cf. Gramsci 1971: 303: “‘Puritanical’ initiatives simply have the purpose of preserving, outside of work, a certain psycho-physical equilibrium which prevents the physiological collapse of the worker, exhausted



as abstinence or monogamy) are not independent from the respective relations of production, an insight which led early proponents of Cultural Studies to regard the realm of culture as partly constitutive for the implementation of a particular economic order. This kind of linkage, however, has more and more disappeared from view in the field's later development, especially since the late 1980s and early 1990s. A fitting example to illustrate this development is the fact that the earlier term *Race, Class, and Gender Studies* (which at least suggested some kind of entanglement between cultural and economic factors) has become largely replaced by the narrower, more identity-oriented expression *Race and Gender Studies*.¹⁸ It seems, then, that a later generation of scholars effectively uncoupled the conjunction between cultural identity and economic production.

This circumstance can be observed, for example, in Judith Butler's extremely influential *Gender Trouble* from 1990 – the year which marks the collapse of the Soviet Union and therefore the final triumph of global capitalism.¹⁹ In this context, what is significant about the book is how it entirely detaches the problem of a normative gender identity from all questions regarding modes of production or the division of labor. Instead, Butler connects the compulsory order of gender and sexuality to the so-called “heterosexual matrix,” a term by which she designates the discursive “grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized” (2007: 208). It can be argued, then, that while early Cultural Studies were still grappling with the base/superstructure dualism, the whole idea of an immanent relation between cultural manifestations and economic realities was in later years almost completely abandoned, resulting in a conception in which the things that matter most are seemingly non-material entities like culture, identity, narrative, and discourse. Consequently, this trend has not only played a significant role in the marginalization of class (which was typically either overlooked or reconfigured as a form of identity²⁰), but also signals a major epistemological

by the new method of production [...]. American industrialists are concerned to maintain the continuity of the physical and muscular-nervous efficiency of the worker. It is in their interests to have a stable, skilled labour force, a permanently well-adjusted complex, because the human complex (the collective worker) of an enterprise is also a machine which cannot, without considerable loss, be taken to pieces too often and renewed with single new parts.”

¹⁸ As Walter Benn Michaels argues, “class has always seemed a little like the odd man out in the race/gender/class trinity” (2006: 200). Rather than representing a simple continuity, however, the relative neglect of class issues in the humanities is related to a trend that became especially noticeable in the late 1980s and 1990s. For the field of American Studies, cf., for instance, Lemke 2014: 41: “In the early nineties the New American Studies drew our attention to sexist, imperialist, racist and homophobic practices and representations. In the late nineties we embraced transnational, global, postcolonial, and ecological perspectives. Again, if at all, class matters were mostly limited to research on naturalism and the Great Depression.”

¹⁹ Besides the book's high degree of publicity, I am not singling out *Gender Trouble* for any specific reason here. Obviously, the tendency that interests me can be traced in a wide range of publications from that period, in Cultural Studies and beyond.

²⁰ An example of this tendency is the fact that it has become common in Cultural Studies lingo to use terms like *classism* or *povertyism*, thereby treating class as if it was simply another identity category. The problem here is that class fundamentally differs from identity in that to be poor is a problem *in itself*, while there certainly is nothing inherently wrong with being black or a woman. When using a term like ‘poverty-



and ontological shift. In other words, the humanities' relative neglect of class issues and economic inequality is coupled with the theoretical sidelining of 'materiality' as a whole, which, during the heyday of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and Cultural Theory, was largely excluded from critical analysis.²¹ And this tendency – in conjunction with the valorization of culture and discourse as the ultimate forms of social reality – is surely among the factors that have contributed to the reification of concepts like racism or sexism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to quickly relate the above presented analysis to the 2016 election. While it is certainly important to differentiate between academic discourse and political discourse, it is nevertheless evident that there exists a contact zone in which arguments, ideas, and slogans are picked up, transmitted, and appropriated, traveling from one field to the other. In the case of the Democrats, it seems obvious that the move from class to identity (which I have outlined in relation to the history of Cultural Studies) has clearly left its mark on the party's general political orientation, which – despite the popularity of Bernie Sanders – is still to a large degree influenced by identity politics and the politics of recognition. This has become especially evident in one of the more memorable moments of Hillary Clinton's election campaign. At a fundraiser in September 2016, Clinton claimed that about half of Trump's supporters belong in what she termed a "basket of deplorables," adding that they are "racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic – you name it." Some of these people, she argued, "are irredeemable, but thankfully they are not America" (cf. Mehta 2016).²² Apparently, what Clinton wanted to achieve with this statement was to forcefully counter Trump's xenophobic

ism,' however – in analogy to terms like racism or sexism – one implicitly makes the claim that what the poor need is not to get rid of poverty, but rather of the disrespect they may experience for being poor (cf. Lister 2017). Yet, different from the case of identity categories such as race and gender, the solution to the problem of poverty is not respect or 'recognition,' but would involve an actual 'redistribution' of wealth (Fraser 1995). For more on this, cf. Michaels 2006: 106: "Classism is what you're a victim of not because you're poor but because people aren't nice to you because you're poor." Such a concept "treats economic difference along the lines of racial and sexual difference, thus identifying the problem not as the difference but as the prejudice (racism, sexism) against the difference."

²¹ In recent years, the widespread *ennui* with this development has inspired the resurgence of various new types of realism and materialism that are firmly opposed to the marginalization of materiality, criticizing the implied 'correlationism' of postmodern theory and social-linguistic constructivism (cf., for instance, Meillassoux 2008, Coole/Frost [eds.] 2010, and Bryant/Srnicsek/Harman [eds.] 2011). Yet, in terms of politics (especially when it comes to contemporary capitalism), the works of this 'new materialism' have thus far been largely disappointing. Although much more needs to be said about this, the essay at hand is not the right place for that discussion. Cf., however, Paul Rekret's (2016) compelling analysis, which focuses on the perspectives of Jane Bennett, Karen Barad, and Rosi Braidotti.

²² An interesting aspect of Clinton's statement is that it exemplifies the frivolous way in which the logic of American exceptionalism (cf. Madsen 1998 and Pease 2009) is nowadays oftentimes coupled with a 'progressive' multiculturalist agenda.



right-wing ideology. Her wording, however, was more than unfortunate, because, on the one hand, she offered Trump's followers a perfect occasion to attack her in return for scapegoating a large part of the American population.²³ On the other hand, her expression clearly resonates with what I have described as the reification of racism. If someone is a racist, the message seems to be, then there is nothing to be done, for such a person is likely to be "irredeemable." In other words, racism does not need to be explained anymore, since it has itself become an explanation, a seemingly transcendent cause and not an effect of something else.

As a last point, then, I would like to assert that for both Cultural Studies and today's left it would indeed be worthwhile to take class matters, political economy, and the question of socioeconomic injustice more seriously again.²⁴ This might at least serve as one possible strategy to confront the rise of right-wing populism (as well as the disconnect between the working class and the left) more effectively. Obviously, this proposition should neither be understood as a return to a simplistic model of 'Marxist economism,' nor as a nostalgic longing for the 'Fordist consensus' (Beck 2008: 76). Yet, when coming up with a political program, the left should ask itself whether its content and language would appeal to people from the lower economic classes as well. If the only message that, say, an unemployed white worker from the American Midwest will pick up from the left is that, due to his whiteness, he is nonetheless still privileged, then, perhaps, one should not be all too surprised about the recent working-class drift to the right.

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²³ In fact, in what can be described as a classic case of 'resignification' (Butler 2007: 45), the expression 'basket of deplorables' was quickly appropriated by Trump supporters, who turned it from an insult into a badge of honor (cf. Zak 2017).

²⁴ Although things are changing at a slow pace, it is safe to say that this process has already started. In American Studies, for instance, there seems to be a renewed interest in theorizing class and linking cultural and economic issues, especially since the financial crisis and the Occupy movement. Cf., among other publications, Butter/Schinko (eds.) 2010 and Boesenberg/Isensee/Klepper (eds.) 2012.



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