

The Death of Neoliberal Realism?

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Introduction

Despite near-constant warnings about the unprecedented threat Donald Trump poses to stability in the US and the world—especially his assault on the bellwethers and norms of liberal democracy¹—much of what he has done as president merely extends policies already in place under Barack Obama and his predecessors. His most substantive legislative accomplishment, *The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017*, may have been a departure from the last administration’s efforts to slowly reverse Bush era tax cuts, but it was nonetheless in-line with the Republican Party’s most conventional policy goals. Many have determined, then, that Donald Trump’s presidency represents an extension of the neoliberal status-quo, rather than a transformational force or an existential threat to the interests that have constricted public policy. As Robert Chernomas, Ian Hudson, and Mark Hudson assert, Trump’s governance is, more than anything else, a “... continuation of almost four decades of neoliberal policies that have favored business at the expense of the US population” (Chernomas, Hudson, Hudson, 2019, p. 200).

Their analysis justifiably foregrounds the continuities between Trump’s supposedly irregular rhetorical tendencies and the decades-old consensus around key policy areas. Relying on this legislative, technical understanding of neoliberalism, however, risks obfuscating how his political success is premised on meaningfully undermining central planks of that consensus’ deeper authority. Rather than argue whether Trump’s policies deviate from existing precedents in that sense, this paper considers how his appeal reveals weaknesses in the distinct forms of depoliticizing rationality that insulate neoliberalism’s ideological presuppositions from public scrutiny. For while Trump may not be challenging the Republican Party’s commitment to tax cuts and austerity; to some extent, his entire project rests on restoring a notion of contestability (and the legitimacy of such appeals) in political discourse. Although his rhetorical style and affect are dismissed by many as a form of insincere or empty populism, whatever its ideological content, Trump’s appeal transgresses the status-quo’s discursive limits. These boundaries, on how voters can be engaged, through what terms and on what conditions, are not superficial components of the existing political order, but are vital to how neoliberalism is replicated and naturalized over time by both parties.

Therefore, Trumpism may not destabilize the ideological fixtures of neoliberal policy, but it nevertheless has a more complicated relationship to the sense of **realism** that pervades popular

political thought and behavior more generally. To explore this connection, my analysis will isolate the features of these neoliberal tendencies and how Trump has (intentionally or otherwise) challenged their legitimacy. In this sense, Trump's effect on neoliberalism needs to be considered beyond the outright policy prescriptions of his administration. Rather, it must be read in context with how Trump's success drew upon and shaped the public's political imagination—that is, what voters imagined about the potentialities of political action—and how his surprising resonance challenges assumptions about its limits under neoliberalism. As such, Trumpism must be grounded in a more comprehensive understanding of neoliberalism, as a bi-partisan consensus that justifies certain forms of political speech, thought, and behavior while restricting others. Through this lens, my analysis examines Trump's (perhaps inadvertent) threat to neoliberalism by foregrounding how developments outside of his direct orbit (particularly on the left) have been shaped by his relatively aberrational rhetoric and its effect on dominant forms of political rationality in both parties. While some have drawn similar conclusions, describing Trump and the surge in support for left-populist candidates as variations of the same phenomenon, these interventions have usually been more concerned with attacking the credibility of either set of 'populist' tendencies than in exploring their political significance. This paper, then, is an attempt to bridge the divide between these divergent, but common responses—one that downplays Trump's effects on the status-quo by emphasizing the details of legislation and policy, and another that views Trumpism (exhibited by Trump himself or his supposed left-wing analogs) as a threatening source of change, but fails to acknowledge its political character, reducing it to a trans-ideological 'anti-establishment' reaction that rejects norms for the sake of it. This analysis offers an alternative to either characterization by reframing neoliberalism beyond its technical qualities and complicating the term 'populism' as its commonly used to describe Trump and those who are equated with him. Instead, it considers how the anomalous political appeals that have emerged out of the Trumpian moment are connected, not by ideology, but by their relationship to the breakdown in neoliberalism's symbolic authority.

Neoliberalism and “Capitalist Realism”

Beyond actual policies (from privatization to deregulation) and their outcomes, neoliberalism is about imposing fixed limits on politics in ways that situate existing rationalities as unconditional. To some extent, this learned sense of inevitability has a greater effect than any individual policy, because its disciplinary force acts as the precondition for the establishment and maintenance of the policies themselves. Put otherwise, neoliberalism is not only a legislative project, but an ideological and sociocultural one, that relies upon the dissolution of certain forms of consciousness, and the disciplining of discourse to a preselected range of framings and rationalities. As Margaret Thatcher infamously explained, “economics is the method, but the object is to change the soul.” If neoliberalism can be understood as a response to the post-war Keynesian order, then one must account for how it deconstructs not only the regulatory and welfare state, but also the ideological infrastructure that helped create and sustain those institutions politically, socially, and culturally. Projects like the New Deal (and other post-war settlements) relied upon instigating a new popular consciousness and sociocultural conceptions of civic duty, the state, and the citizen. Like other paradigmatic shifts, it was as much a symbolic transformation as it was a legislative one. To roll it back, neoliberalism relies on a similar strategy, propagating new imaginaries—of meritocracy,

innovation, and self-invention— while obfuscating and foreclosing upon others.

This vision of neoliberalism, as a disciplinary, depoliticizing apparatus, rather than a set of economic policies, is best illustrated through Mark Fisher's diagnoses in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Fisher asserts that neoliberalism's greatest achievement has been entrenching itself so deeply into our culture that we have effectively lost a conceptual language for imagining a world outside of its precepts and disciplinary limits. He asserts that neoliberal capitalism relies upon a "reflexive impudence" imposed on politics and culture by the necessity of "realism". Fisher's concept of capitalist realism isolates neoliberalism in ways that challenge a primarily legislative or legalistic understanding of its ideological goals. It functions socioculturally as a means of precluding alternatives to existing socioeconomic structures and conditions, naturalizing certain forms of life, while also guarding against political dispositions and expressions outside those amenable to this status quo. It is not only about changing the world but unmaking the means through which further change might be accomplished, and it does this through the regulation of political and cultural (as much as economic) sensibilities. Neoliberalism frames "ironic distance" as a prerequisite to "immunize us against the seduction of fanaticism." In Fisher's words, "lowering our expectations, we are told, is a small price to pay for being protected from terror and authoritarianism" (2009, p.4). Within this framework, capitalist realism is a "deflationary perspective" by which "any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion" (Fisher, 2009, p.5).

The ideological and political sparring between the Bernie Sanders' and Hillary Clinton' primary campaigns made this realist tendency self-evident, for they revealed not only how central disciplinary rationality is to American politics but also how both parties rely on realism to strategically demobilize elements of their base. During the primary, policy differences on key issues were repeatedly framed by the Clinton campaign as a matter of "pragmatism" versus idealism. The basic premise, invented by the Clinton camp and replicated by the commentariat, was that Clinton's policies reflected the same spirit of Sanders' social-democratic vision but tempered by a sensible desire to "get things done." Sanders was framed not only as out of touch with reality but dangerously so. Although his positions on issues like single-payer healthcare and tuition-free public college were repeatedly framed as economically and politically unfeasible, these objections often characterized the changes to economic-political policy required as metrics of their own impossibility. If "the numbers" were not there, it was not because the tax revenue literally could not be raised, but that to do so would represent a bridge too far. Media commentators like think-tank president (and former Bain Capital portfolio manager) Avik Roy, for instance, stepped in to defend Clinton's limited reforms. Writing for *Forbes*, as their leading policy editor for healthcare, he rattled off numbers and percentages about increased spending, but rarely put these metrics into context, other than to suggest that the scale of the figures made the policy proposal a political "fantasy."²

Similar Critiques of the single-payer plan seemed to echo each other throughout the Democratic primary; they seemed to ask, "what, are we just going to **eliminate** private insurance"? Comparable questions have been raised throughout the 2020 primary debates, as critics of single-payer healthcare (and a number of other progressive reform items) present the scale of the change, rather than its substance, as the ultimate obstacle to its feasibility. The reform is foreclosed upon as a principle of its deviation from the very institutions that are altered. If one assumes the predominant features of the system in place are an inherent, immovable reality, as many of these critiques seem to, then any alternative becomes **unrealistic**. Not because there are serious

material obstacles to their success, but because they stray too far from the presuppositions of an entrenched ethico-political order. It is a regime of truth built to maintain what Frederick Jameson described as the “constitution of post-modernity” under late capitalism, “where everything now submits to the perpetual change of fashion and media image, that nothing can change any longer” (Jameson qtd in Fisher, 2009, p. 59).

Regardless of his policies once in office, Trump ran on an explicitly post-neoliberal platform that challenged key components of the status-quo’s economic order. Furthermore, just as Sanders was challenged by Clinton, Trump was repeatedly decried as a dangerous populist, whose rhetoric failed to acknowledge the **self-evident** necessity of existing policies. In this sense, Trump’s unpredicted political resonance may be meaningfully dissolving neoliberalism’s dominance, or suggest that it has already partially dissolved—not because his administration is transitioning from the status quo, but because his improbable victories demonstrate that the ideological and discursive defenses Fisher describes (and Clinton successfully deployed against Sanders in 2016) may be more at risk than ever before. Since the 2008 fiscal crisis, the opposition has been slowly boiling across the right and left, in response to the conditions imposed by this disciplinary apparatus. While Sanders is the most celebrated critic of the neoliberal policies most implicated by 2008, Trump may have done more to undermine their authority. Clinton was able to secure the nomination from Sanders, effectively deploying capitalist realism throughout the debates and primaries, but her general election campaign against Trump (and its eventual result) revealed its possible limits politically. Despite her well-structured, technocratically superior policy proposals, and her attempts to weaponize the status-quo, Trump’s (often incoherent) call for a multi-billion-dollar wall was more attractive to a sizable portion of voters. Calls for “great healthcare” seem to have resonated with some people more than detailed policy papers. His political success was, in part, driven by opposition to the sort of impudent pragmatism Clinton represented. Similarly, although he lost the primary, Sanders’ campaign has grown into an insurgency throughout the Democratic base, and after 2018, into the ranks of elected officials. Calls for single-payer, tuition-free college, and a “green new deal”—all of which would have been (or were) derided as politically untenable throughout the 2016 campaign— are gaining traction.

These shifts in American politics sit well outside the realm of what was considered plausible as late as 2015, but it is possible that they are evidence, not of a sudden disruption in the norm, but rather, a delayed recognition of the **norm’s** fragility. In his lectures on Manet and the “symbolic revolution,” Pierre Bourdieu uses the impressionist’s work to demonstrate how our sense of reality is framed by hidden assumptions. The aesthetic conventions of gallery-style painting were so internalized within Western sensibilities that Manet’s work represented an almost epistemological break—a sudden realization of all the hitherto invisible presuppositions defining the earlier works, and an acute awareness of their instability. This break is what Bourdieu calls a “symbolic revolution.” These revolutions, Bourdieu claims, hide themselves. As he explains, “there is nothing more difficult to understand than what appears to go without saying, in so far as a symbolic revolution produces the very structures through which we perceive it” (1999, *College du France*). A successful symbolic revolution is only perceivable as it is happening; in other words, if it is successful, the new presuppositions it introduces will—like the old—be adopted as given. If Bourdieu is right, then once the assumptions of a given hegemonic rationality are **identifiable**, then its order has already begun to collapse, and the next symbolic revolution is upon us. The success Trump, Sanders, and others have had in penetrating the shell of neoliberal realism suggests something similar may be taking place. If Bourdieu’s claim is taken seriously, then the very fact

that the Democratic Party establishment and their media surrogates are engaging platforms like Sanders' demonstrates the magnitude of the shift underway.

Populism or Politics?

In a 2018 Munk Debate, Steve Bannon and David Frum sparred over the motion that “the future of western politics is populist, not liberal.” This debate came on the heels of more than two years of discourse surrounding ‘populism’, as a political tendency that supposedly contains within it Occupy Wall Street, Brexit, Trump, Sanders, the AFD, Corbyn, and the authoritarian government of Jair Bolsonaro. Bannon, in his defense of populism, argues that: “it is not a question of whether populism is on the rise, or if populism is going to be the political future. The only question before us—is it going to be populist nationalism or populist socialism.” At first, this proposition seems to align with much of what I have argued throughout this paper, that western politics is on the edge between two alternatives, represented broadly by left and right-wing responses to the failures of a ‘neoliberal’ consensus. The issue, though, is how the discussion is framed. Despite his attempt to subvert the status quo, by accepting the terms of the debate, and adopting ‘populism’ as a platform, Bannon provides an essential service to maintaining neoliberal realism. The very idea of populism, as it has been invoked in response to the events of the last decade, is a flat, negativistic one; it is anti-elitist, anti-status quo, and anti-establishment, but these descriptions negate its political substance.

Any alternative in opposition to the rationale of existing conditions is subsumed by the populist label. The term fundamentally depoliticizes the issues and figures it captures, by reducing attempts to mobilize opposing political futures as an inherently reactionary, contrarian, or plebian project. If Sanders invokes the “millionaires and billionaires” as political opponents of the working and middle class, his statement can be essentialized as ‘anti-elitist,’ rather than a legitimate politicization of the conflicting interests of different economic blocs. The status quo is naturalized, as all opposition is reducible to its form, rather than its content. To be in opposition is to be populist, whether one argues for limiting immigration or creating new taxes on wealth. The unifying feature seems to be direct appeals to voters’ anger or their own sense of self-interest. What is described as populist may actually represent the reassertion of political contestation into presupposed, structural ‘realities.’

As Wolfgang Streeck observes, populism describes any tendency or organization that rejects the “responsible politics” of neoliberalism. In other words, anything that asserts alternatives against a political rationality that presents itself as immovable. This polemical framing, as Streeck argues, allows the establishment to “avoid distinctions, so that Trump and Sanders, Farage and Corbyn, and in Germany, Petry and Wagenknecht can all be lumped together under the same heading” (2017, p.11). This results in a dynamic that obfuscates the alternatives and re-legitimizes the logic of neoliberalism—that there is actually “no alternative” and the options on offer are dangerous illusions. Anything that falls outside of the endless expansion of capitalism, the ever-widening maw between the rich and the poor, and the subsumption of national or popular sovereignty to markets must be dismissed. The implication is that opponents to these processes are “cynics who promise ‘the people’ the ‘simple solutions’ they crave, even though they know that there are no alternatives to the complex solutions of the technocrats.” (Streeck, 2017, p. 12) Trump and Sanders have both confronted and found some success in resisting this framework. Still, Streeck is right to point out the strategy of conflation, obfuscates the real distinctions between

these platforms, in a way that ultimately serves to reify established doctrines. The question is not whether the future of western politics is populist, as the Munk Debate's framing proposes, but whether the future will be **political** at all.

This dynamic was self-evident during the 2016 primary between Sanders and Clinton. Clinton repeatedly argued Sanders' policies were not "fiscally responsible," and that he should be "held accountable for whether or not the numbers add up." Clinton foreclosed upon single-payer healthcare, for instance, by citing a non-partisan analysis, arguing that Sanders' plan would add too much to the national debt. This one moment is representative of the deeper struggle identified by the scholars I have cited, between not just Clinton and Sanders, but "TINA"³ realism and politics itself. Clinton insisted that "even after massive tax increases" Sanders' plan would add "as much as \$15 trillion to the national debt". First, this statement presupposes that the national debt is necessarily a qualifying factor in healthcare policy—even though its relevance to economic stability and growth is contested among economists. This is more of an invocation of debt as an ethical-moral order, rather than a material or political impediment to changing policy. The possibility of sovereignty over the national debt is precluded from discussion by the premises of Clinton's neoliberal rationality. Second, even if one accepts Clinton's use of the national debt, she still presupposes what constitutes a "massive" tax increase, and that anything beyond that metric is an impossibility. The proposal is foreclosed upon by an unspoken refusal to consider either a rejection of debt's role in structuring policy or the changes necessary to accommodate the spending. In both cases, Clinton's response depoliticizes the issues; the question between a privatized health care system and a nationalized federal system is subservient to predetermined structural *priori*. Politics cannot be allowed to interfere with policy. By attempting to do so, Sanders is acting **irresponsibly**, or worse, is using **populist** appeals that promise the impossible.

These debates were not only a sign of new ideological divides in the Democratic party but also strong indicators of how Clinton and the Democratic establishment believed they could (or should) combat Donald Trump's populist appeals. The comparisons between Clinton and Trump's 2016 campaigns, then, provide some of the clearest demonstrations of capitalist realism's new inadequacy.

Clinton & Trump

Through this lens, Clinton's defeat in the 2016 election can be understood as a failure to be sufficiently political, that is, her seeming inability to mobilize support on the bases of contestable choices or their possibilities. Her platform was, fundamentally, rooted in the maintenance of the prevailing order, rather than any radical change. Her campaign repeatedly employed the disciplinary logic of neoliberal realism, warning against the unavoidable extremism and instability that Trump would unleash (Fisher). In order to characterize Trump as dangerous and maintain her adherence to political pragmatism, Clinton was forced to position herself as the safe and sane choice. This tethered her to an apolitical mode that could only appeal to voters through supposedly self-evident realism—a tempering of expectations to protect us from the perils of figures, like Trump, who promise too much (Streeck). At a time of extreme dissatisfaction, Clinton presented herself as the medicine the electorate had to take for its own good. She was not a representative of the voters, but of expertise, competency, and earned meritocratic status. One should vote for her; her surrogates seemed to say, because she has gotten better grades than everyone else in the class, and she deserves to be in charge. In a **Daily Show** segment, Michelle Wolf unwittingly described

the problem. As she argued in an appeal to Hillary, “you’re not running to be everyone’s friend, you’re running to be the boss.” If we don’t vote for the “smart lady,” Wolf argues, we will be “eating squirrel out of a hole in the ground.” Although part of a comedy show, Wolf’s sentiments accurately reflect how Clinton presented herself and was positioned rhetorically against Trump. This ideological appeal to professionalism and meritocracy framed Clinton as an unpopular, but necessary choice. She made herself into the practical embodiment of what Fisher’s **Capitalist Realism** describes — a technocrat who disciplines the electorate into supporting her, through the structural logic, moral reason, and immovable reality of the established order. Her campaign was a sort of anti-politics, that tried to transform the election into a rationalized process divorced from the experiences, dispositions, or material conditions of the voters. As Wolf said, “shut the fuck up” and vote for the “smart lady”⁴ (2016).

This ideological and rhetorical position restricted her ability to run as a **change candidate**, providing Trump almost no opposition to mobilizing the dissatisfaction of voters. At nearly every point in the race, her campaign emphasized continuity; “America’s already great” she proclaimed. Unable to run on any appeal for change, she presented her candidacy, and her policy platform, as the inevitable conclusion of rational consideration; any alternative was characterized as unthinkable. During the debates with Trump, she did not frame her candidacy around an affirmative appeal to voters and did not rouse any sort of agonism. Her rhetoric seemed to confirm an outright refusal to frame any issue as a conflict between political positions, with attached interests for specific groups. This denied all agency to her supporters. Their votes were not vehicles for a political vision that would address their conditions. They were obligations, served up as recognition of her qualifications. The overwhelming message was: You cannot vote for Trump, and I am not Trump. It was a campaign rooted in TINA logic, attempting to confirm its own legitimacy through the foreclosure of political possibility, rather than presenting its own.

Meanwhile, Trump proclaimed, “I am your voice!” The message was clear to many; whereas Clinton represented an imposed rationalism—expertise removed from political contestation—Trump would say and do what everyone wanted. He would oppose the right people, violate orthodoxy, and, most importantly, demonstrate a willingness to propose alternatives to established policy. He transgressed neoliberal consensus from the left and the right, forcefully criticizing the Bush administration and the Iraq war, proposing new taxes on hedge fund managers, legal penalties for offshoring businesses, and injecting over a trillion dollars in federal infrastructure spending. He did this all while demonstrating an irreverence for the didacticism and moralizing of disconnected figures and institutions—the op-ed writers, the late-night comedy hosts, and the “experts” who had spent decades carefully explaining why everyone would have to accept less, for their own good. His signature issue, immigration, can be understood in these terms. Although these elements of his platform have been characterized by many as racist dog whistles, these appeals function according to a similar logic, in that they frame immigration as an economically disadvantageous phenomenon imposed on the country through an immovable rationality by those who are seen as insulated from its consequences. In an era of secular stagnation and downward mobility, Trump can frame immigration as a rejection of these foregone conclusions. Clinton’s attachment to established socioeconomic positions makes her especially vulnerable to this move. She offers a poorer, less stable (culturally and economically), and less sovereign future as the necessary condition of a determined process. Trump interjects, he can show how “open borders” and the ethics of political correctness bludgeon the population into an economic and cultural future they did not choose.

Voting for him then, above all, is a reassertion of popular sovereignty; it is a refusal to allow imposed moral or economic doctrines to dictate the direction of the country. Trump can position himself as the only recourse besides subservience to disciplined expectations and slow economic decay, which in many post-industrial states, set in decades ago. This is not to suggest that Trump's vision convinced all those dissatisfied with the political-economic and ethical-moral discipline of neoliberalism, but it did not have to. Trump's success is, more accurately, Clinton's failure. What Trump demonstrates is that, in the wake of aporia (or in the midst of an interregnum), strict adherence to old presuppositions may not defeat more empowering political counter-appeals that engage voters and provide an affirmative, reflective vision of the present and future—regardless of their deviation from supposedly solid orthodoxies. Both candidates were almost universally unpopular, but whereas Clinton was incapable of undermining the political-economic order she was embedded within, or offer voters a sense of political agency in shaping what would be done or how, Trump was able to seize the moment, and rouse defiance. Ultimately, the turnout in 2016 was some of the lowest in the post-war era, and non-voters (most from “blue” states) outnumbered Trump voters in key swing contests (Enten, 2017⁵). Despite endless op-eds about rust-belt whites, more white democratic voters stayed home than switched to Trump. His victory was ensured, not because of the ascendant appeal of his racism or misogyny to “white working class” voters, but because he faced an opponent unwilling or unable to reconcile her attachment to neoliberalism with the necessary political action. Clinton's defeat demonstrates neoliberal realism's failing grasp over America's political consciousness. Furthermore, it reveals that any successful opposition to the far-right insurgency of Donald Trump (or several similar figures across the globe), will need to reembrace politics in ways that neoliberalism precludes.

The Professional-managerial Democrats and Neoliberalism in 2020

Continued debates on the Democratic side are one of the key demarcates of Trump's effect on neoliberalism's increasing visibility as an object of critique and contestation. Ultimately, the extent of Trump's challenges to neoliberalism may be best understood through the broader changes his success invites into politics more generally, not unlike how the Reaganite era helped catalyze the saliency of the ‘Atari Democrats’ and third-way politics. The establishment response to growing factionalism in the Democratic Party in the wake of Trump, then, may illustrate how neoliberalism's realist tendencies are being reformulated to counter their own supposedly “Trumpian” elements. Perhaps more importantly, the Democrat's efficacy in resisting these populist currents in their own party, compared to the Republican's failure to contain Trump during their primary or Clinton's performance in 2016 – suggests that elements of neoliberal rationality may have a deeper authority with the Democrats than is popularly understood. This has significant implications for how neoliberalism is ideologically classified moving forward; to some extent, ostensibly left-leaning parties like the Democrats may be less willing (or less able) to challenge neoliberalism's symbolic authority than right-populists such as Trump. In this sense, post-2016 conflicts in the Democratic Party are vital to clarifying Trumpism's relationship to capitalist realism, for they clarify the connections between neoliberalism's political necessities and specific, institutionalized class interests hitherto obscured by the supposed ideological commitments of the two parties.

In some ways, the 2020 Democratic race has been a mirror image of the Clinton-Sanders

contest. But most notably, unlike 2016, the principal struggle at times has been between supposed critics of neoliberalism—rather than a single critic and an establishment that hardly acknowledges the institution's existence. This, in and of itself, represents a transformative shift that may indicate that Trump's presidency has weakened the realism that was once so effective in denying Sanders' fervent attacks on neoliberal policy. There is now an implicit awareness of neoliberalism and a vague notion of what it means to oppose it. Pete Buttigieg was even confronted with the term directly, asked what he thought "neoliberalism" was and whether he supported it. He identified it as the consensus economic policy of the last several decades, and something the country must "replace with something better⁶." While the term has been common in academic discourse for decades, its use in popular political discourse, even in limited instances, suggests that Trump's time in office may be catalyzing the dissolution of its symbolic position. For as Bourdieu argues, its very presence as an object of discussion displaces its hegemonic certitude. However, Buttigieg's willingness to openly reject the term only suggests there is now some political advantage to opposing neoliberalism but complicates how one ideologically classifies the implicit substance of these signals. In a sense, neoliberals may slip away like **The Thing** (1982), simply taking on the form of concerned critics, making gestures to "something better" as they linger in the camp patiently.

It is still unclear whether opposition to neoliberalism rhetorically, or even through policy proposals, represents a comprehensive break with major components of the underlying ideology and its accompanying political rationalities. This seeming paradox is perhaps clearest when inspecting the discursive appeal and framing forwarded by Elizabeth Warren. The candidate presented a legislative agenda that seemed to push the Democratic Party further left than at any time since the 1960s, but as I have tried to show through my analysis, neoliberalism is defined as much by its presuppositions **about** politics as it is by the content of its policy proposals. In many ways, the former is a consequence of how neoliberalism has institutionalized certain assumptions about the role of the public relative to the careful management of educated, meritocratic experts. As left critics of modern liberalism have argued, this technocratic approach tends to decenter conflict, and in the process, embrace "solutions" that foreclose on the masses' ability to politically mobilize around their interests. It envisions politics not as a struggle for power, but as an exercise in problem-solving in which knowledge and deftness can resolve contradictions.

This tendency has, over time, created an embedded constituency of educated professionals scattered throughout think tanks, party offices, and top academic departments, most concentrated in the coastal cities that make up the country's political and economic core. Not only is Elizabeth Warren herself an ideal exemplar of this political class, but her most enthusiastic support rises from the ranks of white, college-educated professionals. Her campaign reflects this support in ways that replicate key components of Clinton's strategy in 2016, and the ideological presuppositions of neoliberalism more generally. Her candidacy, then, demonstrated that even a politics explicitly opposed to components of neoliberal economics can be firmly entrenched in elements of its disciplinary sensibilities, technical rationalities, and ideological presuppositions.

Perhaps any political order meaningfully outside of neoliberalism would have to (in some way) confront and displace the political centrality and dominance of this professional-managerial class (PMC). It should be unsurprising then that the major apparatuses controlled by the PMC invoked pragmatism to elevate Warren's campaign over Sander's, once again collapsing the relevant distinction between him and a more establishment candidate while insisting she had "more detailed plans" and will "get things done." In addition to a familiar appeal to expertise

and deserved meritocratic anointment, there were also attempts to revive the disciplinary language of Clinton's 2016 campaign, castigating Sanders as sexist or as somehow inauthentically committed to social justice. In an MSNBC live-panel, for instance, Mimi Rocha explained that, when compared to Elizabeth Warren, Sanders was clearly a "not-pro-woman" candidate, also stating that she "can't identify what exactly it is" that informs these conclusions.⁷ These discursive strategies are complementary since the moralist claims are as much implicit appeals to the affect and disposition of highly educated professionals as they are ideological critiques. We are told he is a disheveled, angry man who yells and irresponsibly appeals to groups whose sensibilities and prejudices are too dangerous to be treated seriously. By contrast, like Clinton, Warren and the other candidates appeal to what the professional-managerial class believes elevates them from those outside of their economic and sociocultural spaces—the uneducated, white working class, or the "deplorables."

Be it Warren's Harvard education and practiced social disposition, or Buttigieg's affinity for James Joyce, the differences drawn between Sanders and the rest of the primary field reflect the distinctions that the Democratic party's liberal professionals use to define themselves, usually in opposition to an image of the broader electorate. These attitudes are self-evident from the discourse that reverberated between prominent Warren supporters and members of the Democratic establishment. Figures like Tom Watson, a Democratic strategist and consultant, for instance, claims Bernie's movement employs "toxicity"⁸ as a strategy because he supposedly enables attacks in online spaces by empowering groups and individuals outside of traditional currents of civil political discourse (Watson, 2019). This projection of disdain imagines the subject position of more marginal groups who are supposedly being defended vicariously, despite Sanders' disproportionate popularity with African American and Hispanic voters relative to Warren and the rest of the field, especially among younger voters and those without a college degree (Morning Consult, 2019).

While Sanders is popular with working-class white men, he is also popular with nearly every group with incomes lower than \$100,000 a year; what this reveals is that the objections to Sander's political appeals from commentators like Watson, especially comparative allusions to Trump, are informed less by the racial or gender breakdown of his support than by its clear roots outside of the PMC. To these sensibilities, Trump and Sanders are offensive in similar ways because they speak to impulses and groups who are not meant to participate politically as active agents. The thought of a politically self-possessed working-class majority could seem threatening to a group whose cultural identity and social position—not to mention (in many cases) their income—are premised on the privileged authority granted by their professional and educational status to set the terms of political discussion. These discursive currents not only risk undermining the Democrats' position in 2020, but they replicate key components of neoliberalism's political culture and disciplinary impulses, especially a commitment to moral and economic individuation, meritocracy, and the subsequent dismissal of a myriad of undeserving classes. This places fixed limits on politics in ways that help preserve a status quo built around the rejection of common social goods and majoritarian democracy.

In this sense, Trump has helped meaningfully distinguish the contradictory interests implicit to the Democratic Party's status as both a working-class party that presented alternatives to the Republican's free-market platform and as a professional-class party, representing the interests and sensibilities of the smart, successful, and creative elite. Furthermore, it should be clear from Trump's victory how these unresolved divisions weaken the Democrats' chances in 2020, or even

beyond. The energy the Democratic establishment has mobilized to resist Bernie Sanders, and its relatively weak response to Trump, suggest his removal could even be a secondary priority. Consequently, the Democrats, despite being the only major, institutional opposition to Trump's right-wing populism, may be either incapable or unwilling to seize the possibilities opened up by neoliberalism's increasing disarray. Rather than preparing for the seeming breakdown of capitalist realism, they appear to have opted to mount a vigorous (and likely futile) defense. If they fail, as they did in 2016, Trump may further monopolize popular antagonisms to the status quo, contributing to a warranted sense that he is a legitimate threat to establishment interests, rather than a false-prophet. Perhaps the gravest possibility for opponents of this right-wing project is that Trump may have the greatest role in shaping the alternative that rises from neoliberalism's decline, and thus, in establishing a new symbolic reality that may last another political generation. It is often repeated that Trump's governance and what he has introduced into national politics is "not normal", but it may be soon, and who knows for how long.

Endnotes

1. Frum, David. 2018. Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic. New York: HarperCollins.
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