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Comprendre le phénomène Trump, au-delà du chaos

The Trump Phenomenon and the Racialization of American Politics

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The Trump Phenomenon and the Racialization of American Politics

Le phénomène Trump et la racialisation de la politique américaine

Serge Ricard

- 1 If very few observers across the Atlantic predicted that a reality-TV star would succeed Barack Obama, there is today among commentators of the political scene a scramble for analysis of the Trump phenomenon. Political scientists and sociologists are having a field day exploring demographics and economic factors, historians in scrutinizing precedents in demagoguery. The rise of Donald J. Trump can no doubt be attributed to a conjunction of causes, but one in particular deserves special attention: the racial factor. Not that it is being neglected in the outpour of articles about the unexpected accession of the real estate mogul to the White House, but it seems comparatively to be played down rather than trumpeted as it should. The continuing racial incidents throughout Obama's Presidency, like the Ferguson riots or the Charleston church shooting, tend to prove that it takes more than a change of Chief Executive to improve the situation. The United States is historically a racist nation with a veneer – cracking today – of tolerance since the spread of “political correctness” in the 1990s. Obama's election was hailed as the advent of post-racial America when in fact prejudice was only dormant and awakened in the process, and Trump's victory was regarded as the elevation to the highest office of a political misfit when it was actually a return to normalcy, as attested by the increase in racially-motivated incivility and crime since November 8, 2016. The election of the first African American president Barack Hussein Obama was atypical, not Trump's. The following essay attempts to throw light on the permanence of the race factor in American society, its impact on the 2016 election, either by means of its unabashed activation or through a coded rhetoric, its centrality in the Trumpian discourse, and the heyday of white nationalism under a President prone to stoking the flames of division and prejudice.

The Melting Pot Fallacy

- 2 Despite the Melting Pot oratory of the early 20th century and its later mosaic and salad-bowl avatars, racism and anti-immigrant prejudice run as constants throughout U.S. history. Besides, this unique nation of immigrants also bears the stigma of its original sin, slavery – the importation of black servile labor from Africa, the involuntary immigrants, historically welcomed as chattel before the Civil War but later unwanted as citizens. A century and a half after their accession to citizenship, black Americans still struggle to achieve full acceptance in every walk of life. The cult of racial homogeneity, if not racial purity, has often justified exclusionary policies towards Native Americans, Blacks, and Mexicans. Massive immigration, especially non-white or viewed as such, has always been socially and economically disruptive; the nativistic reactions of the 1850s against the Irish, of the 1890s and 1910s against eastern and southern Europeans, or the Chinese Exclusion Act, anti-Japanese agitation, the literacy test campaigns, the Immigration Act of 1924, are among the numerous examples of this. The immigration issue in Donald Trump’s United States today harks back to these troubled times when illegal aliens appeared as some sort of Trojan horse that imperiled the whole Republic.¹ It was stridently resurrected during the 2016 campaign as the Republican candidate decried the browning of America, the new scapegoats being the Latinos who have outnumbered Blacks since the turn of the 21st century. Concomitantly, in the world context of Islamic terrorism, he targeted Muslims (1.1% of the U.S. population) as convenient bogeymen, despite the unlikelihood of the threat this minority allegedly represented, and vowed to bar from entry into the U.S. Muslims from countries harboring terrorists.²
- 3 Barack Obama’s election in 2008 with strong support from major ethnic groups (Asian Americans, Hispanics and African Americans) was hailed as the advent of a post-racial era when in fact the forest could not be seen for the trees. Eight years later a real estate tycoon with a “redneck” mindset, to the brazen applause of white supremacists and the “alt-right,”³ succeeded the outgoing black President. His triumph smacked of WASP working- and middle-class revanchism⁴: as much as the economic desperation of non-college educated Whites facing status loss, it bespoke their subterranean resentment at the upending of the racial hierarchy as well as their silent exasperation with almost three decades of political correctness (equated with censorship) and affirmative action (seen as reverse discrimination) that allegedly benefited minorities at their expense.⁵ Trump’s popularity is the outcome of the Republican Party’s longtime “Southern Strategy” that goes back to Nixon if not earlier, a coded appeal to white race prejudice and bigotry. The new White House incumbent is decidedly the GOP’s creature and the latest symptom of its crisis, a demagogue whose outspokenness made him the hero and mouthpiece of white nationalism and helped it morph into open militancy.⁶ There is grim irony in the fact that America’s first black President was “followed by the untitled leader of the Birther movement, a candidate slow to disavow support from the Ku Klux Klan⁷ and happy to receive the backing of white nationalists [...]”; in that sense “Donald Trump can easily be portrayed as a personal repudiation and also proof of racial regression”.⁸

Obama's Election: The Post-Racial America Myth

- 4 Despite his unimaginable elevation to the highest office the 44th President never deluded himself about the alleged retreat of racism. As he observed in his farewell speech in Chicago on January 10, 2017:

There's a second threat to our democracy—one as old as our nation itself. After my election, there was talk of a post-racial America. Such a vision, however well-intended, was never realistic. For race remains a potent and often divisive force in our society. I've lived long enough to know that race relations are better than they were ten, or twenty, or thirty years ago—you can see it not just in statistics, but in the attitudes of young Americans across the political spectrum.

But we're not where we need to be. [...]

Going forward, we must uphold laws against discrimination—in hiring, in housing, in education and the criminal justice system. That's what our Constitution and highest ideals require. But laws alone won't be enough. Hearts must change. [...]⁹

- 5 During his two terms in office, he would repeatedly refute the myth of a post-racial society. The United States in 2008 had not turned colorblind. The nation was not atoning for the original sin of slavery and the taint of segregation. The condition of African Americans was unlikely to change overnight. Barack Hussein Obama did not win because he was a black man, but because a country shaken by two wars and an economic crisis was yearning for change, and also because he was a brilliant young and novel candidate who eclipsed the popular old maverick John S. McCain. Race relations did not improve miraculously during his tenure; on the contrary, they got worse. By the end of his Presidency, according to a CNN/ORC poll,¹⁰ a majority of Americans (54%) felt that relations between Blacks and Whites had worsened since his election (57% of Whites and 40% of Blacks said so) and about four-in-ten Blacks were doubtful that the U.S. would ever achieve racial equality.¹¹ The new President's approach to the race question was extremely cautious, too subdued for his black critics and too divisive for his white opponents; he was always careful not to politicize the issue whenever it erupted on the national scene so as to avoid the accusation of partiality for this was the most daunting of his challenges: he was the President of all Americans, not of just one segment of the population as some would inevitably uphold, and in his response to racial incidents he could not afford to appear influenced by his origins. Such occurrences actually abounded while he was at the helm, racial strife giving rise to the "Black Lives Matter" movement, which paradoxically emerged when the White House welcomed its first black President, forcing him to speak out more passionately and more intimately.¹²
- 6 On July 16, 2009, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a black Professor at Harvard University, was arrested by a white police officer while trying to open a jammed door at his home; a suspected burglary had been reported. A few days later, Obama commented that he was not sure what part race had played in the incident, but "that there [was] a long history in this country of African Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately." The remark sparked a controversy that Obama tried to quell by inviting Gates and the officer to the White House for what became known as the "Beer Summit." On his first Martin Luther King Jr. holiday as President, on January 17, 2010, he reflected on the distractions caused by remarks about his race. Referring to the so-called "post-racial" era that some had predicted would result from his election, he said, "That didn't work out so well." It was well nigh impossible for him to remain silent or neutral in

most race-related circumstances. On July 19, 2013, a Florida neighborhood watch volunteer, George Zimmerman, was acquitted in the shooting death of a black teenager, Trayvon Martin. At the time of the youth's death in 2012, Obama had mused, "[he] could have been my son." After the trial, against charges of divisiveness in conservative quarters, he ventured again to explain black America's reaction to the case:

Trayvon Martin could have been me thirty-five years ago. And when you think about why, in the African-American community at least, there's a lot of pain around what happened here, I think it's important to recognize that the African-American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a history that doesn't go away.¹³

- 7 Police shootings of unarmed black men continued as in the past. On August 9, 2014, unarmed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown, was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, triggering protests and riots that brought to national attention the incipient "Black Lives Matter" movement. Impunity seemed to be the rule in such cases of police homicide. In December of that year, a grand jury declined to indict an NYPD officer in the chokehold death of Eric Garner, a black man suspected of selling cigarettes illegally.

- 8 More dramatic still, on June 17, 2015, a white supremacist brandishing the Confederate flag fatally shot eight black worshippers and their pastor at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The next week, Obama delivered the eulogy for the slain Reverend Clementa Pinckney and led the audience in singing the hymn "Amazing Grace," stirring raucous emotion in one of the most powerful moments of his Presidency. And there was more to come. "On July 7, 2016, a sniper ambushed and cut down five Dallas police officers at a peaceful protest against the police killings earlier that week of Alton Sterling in Louisiana and Philando Castile in Minnesota. Amid rising racial tensions, the President spoke at the officers' memorial service and in a delicate balancing act praised law enforcement officials for their courage while also expressing the need to understand the grievances of African Americans who protested racial bias".¹⁴

- 9 America's first black President also had to confront racist personal attacks. On April 27, 2011, the White House released copies of his long-form birth certificate to prove that he was born in Hawaii in an attempt to silence the "birther" movement that Donald Trump had reignited two and a half months before and to discard the barefaced falsehood that Obama was born in Kenya. The "birther" conspiracy theory developed as a concerted right-wing effort to delegitimize the White House incumbent. Racial slurs were also frequently used in reference to his features; his campaign for reelection in 2012 unleashed a slew of racist insults, like the bumper sticker showing a picture of a chimpanzee next to "Obama 2012." In most Western countries such blatant racism would not have been tolerated. In France, for example, several lawsuits were filed following attacks on French Guiana-born Minister of Justice Christiane Taubira in which she was compared to or pictured as a banana-eating monkey. The problem is that no such constraints exist in the United States; no law punishes racist abuse and hate speech, for the First Amendment's protection of freedom of expression is almost absolute; and in that, the U.S. distinguishes itself from other liberal democracies.¹⁵

Trump's Campaign: Revenge of the WASPs

- 10 Given his personal history of animus towards Blacks, from his racial discrimination suits to his 1989 active hatred of the exonerated “Central Park Five,”¹⁶ it could be argued that Donald Trump’s decision to run for the Presidency had to do with the accession of a black man to the White House; given his well-documented arrogance and narcissism, it could further be argued that it dates back to the public humiliation he suffered at the hands of Barack Obama on April 30, 2011, at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner, as suggested by longtime Trump ally Roger Stone, a Republican political consultant. Three days before that night, the White House had released the President’s long-form birth certificate as a response to the “birther” claim that Trump had launched earlier that year. Obama took over the podium in the star-filled ballroom of the Washington Hilton, and for several minutes roasted and excoriated “The Donald”¹⁷ who was sitting in the audience as a guest of the *Washington Post*, making fun of citizenship conspiracy theories – “birtherism” – and mocking one of Trump’s greatest sources of pride, his TV show “The Apprentice”.¹⁸ Trump would actually cling to the theory for another five years, even claiming at some point that Hillary Clinton had started the “birther” movement, and he would eventually renounce it late in the campaign, declaring reluctantly on September 16, 2016, under media pressure: “President Barack Obama was born in the United States. Period”.¹⁹
- 11 On June 16, 2015, the day before the Charleston church shooting, Donald J. Trump came down an escalator at Trump Tower, New York City, and announced his improbable bid for the White House, his campaign to “Make America Great Again”²⁰; the forces of conservatism were about to rally behind a new figurehead, a populist demagogue who sensed that nativism, xenophobia, and norm-breaking would be central to his electoral appeal.²¹
- 12 His main target was Obama whom he blamed for letting the country collapse to the level of “a third world country.” He began by ranting on the subject of immigration, which would become his signature crusade, accusing Mexico of “bringing their worst people”: “They’re sending people that have lots of problems and they’re bringing their problems [...]. They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime, they’re rapists, and some I assume are good people but I speak to border guards and they tell us what we are getting.” He promised that one of his first actions would be to build a “great, great wall on our southern border, and I will make Mexico pay for that wall.” He claimed that Obama and previous administrations had allowed Mexico, China and other countries to take away American jobs and prosperity: “Our enemies are getting stronger and stronger by the day, and the US as a country is getting weaker and weaker. How stupid are our leaders, how stupid are our politicians to let this happen? Our President doesn’t have a clue.” He went on to say with a wink to football fans that the Chinese leadership was much smarter than Obama and his team: “It’s like the New England Patriots and Tom Brady [playing] a high school team.”²² He added that politicians were “all talk and no action”: “They will not bring us, believe me, to the Promised Land.”²³
- 13 Most of his *idées fixes* and leitmotifs were floated in this speech, which among other things exuded his trademark smugness and pretentiousness – that “Obamacare,” the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, was “a disaster” and “a big lie,” that he would replace it with a “much better and much less expensive” system; that education was too costly and that drastic cuts were in order for “people [were] tired of spending more

money on education per capita than any other country”; that “nobody [would] be tougher on ISIS [the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] than Donald Trump,” and that he would be “the greatest jobs President that God ever made.”

- 14 The speech also signaled the blooming of a “post-truth” era in that it exposed Trump as a compulsive liar, whether or not he believes his fabrications, as some observers now wonder. He questioned government statistics showing that unemployment had fallen to 5.4% (which was true): “Our real unemployment is 18-20%, don’t believe their 5.6%. China has our jobs, Mexico has our jobs. I’ll bring back our jobs and bring back our money.” He told the crowd that somebody had to stand up for the good of the country, to stop it from “dying”: “We’re dying, we’re dying. We need money, and we need the right people.” He vaunted his fortune and claimed that he did not need “anyone else’s money,” hinting that he was perfectly disinterested in seeking the highest office. He had bragged in a recent interview with the Associated Press that the television networks would put him on the upcoming nationally televised Republican debate in August (for the ten top-ranking candidates in national polls) “because I get great ratings”.²⁴
- 15 Trump campaigned on white middle class angst – fear of undocumented immigrants and Muslim refugees, of “radical Islamic terrorism, of the violent civil rights protesters demonstrating against police killings of unarmed Blacks.” “The Donald” eventually outsmarted all his competitors. He revealed to America and the world his true nature – his racism, his misogyny, his mendacity – and peddled successfully his obsessive isolationist credo: his conviction that such trade agreements as NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) and the TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership) were detrimental to the U.S., that in actual fact the United States was being taken advantage of by friends and foes alike – by its NATO allies whose share of defense expenditures was insufficient, by the UN and UNESCO whose budgets were heavily financed by America with criticism from its member states in return instead of gratefulness, by China, Japan, and South Korea, guilty of unfair trade practices. He inveighed against the wasteful and indecisive foreign wars George W. Bush had launched and Obama continued, as well as the latter’s failure to vanquish ISIS (the Islamic State) which he, Trump, of course would crush in no time. Throughout his tumultuous norm-breaking campaign, he claimed that he would fix the ills of America and the world as no one else could, a ridiculous and puerile “Mr. Fixit” posture that he would never tire of touting, as he would do later as President in defense of his unpredictable foreign policy:

That’s what I do. I fix things. We’re going to straighten it out. Believe me. When you hear about the tough phone calls I’m having – don’t worry about it. Just don’t worry about it. They’re tough. We have to be tough, it’s time we’re going to be a little bit tough, folks. We’re taken advantage by every nation in the world, virtually. It’s not going to happen any more.²⁵

Trump in the White House: The New Normal

- 16 It is tempting to remark that “there is method” in President Donald J. Trump’s “madness,” for most of his decisions and measures since he entered the White House have followed a consistent pattern: eradicating Barack Obama’s record. The list of adverse counter-measures and policy reversals that have been implemented since January 20, 2017, reveals by inference in a sense the 44th President’s innumerable accomplishments in most fields – health, education, employment, social justice, finance, the environment, defense, diplomacy, etc. – and may ironically read as a tribute to them. Trump’s

performance since he became Chief Executive has essentially defined itself by its opposition to his predecessor's. His agenda, however, includes other priorities, maintaining the racial divide, scaring and reassuring in turn his white base, bullying minorities, especially Blacks and Latinos, and stopping the immigrant invasion by building a wall on the U.S. southern border.

- 17 Trump who vowed to stop “this American carnage” on inauguration day has, in fact, exacerbated it and added chaos on top. His message throughout was one of racial reaction as when he vowed to “restore safety” in American streets upon accepting the Republican nomination on July 21, 2016:

Our convention occurs at a moment of crisis for our nation. The attacks on our police, and the terrorism in our cities, threaten our very way of life. Any politician who does not grasp this danger is not fit to lead our country.

Americans watching this address tonight have seen the recent images of violence in our streets and the chaos in our communities. Many have witnessed this violence personally. Some have even been its victims.

I have a message for all of you: The crime and violence that today afflicts our nation will soon – and I mean very soon come to an end. Beginning on January 20th 2017, safety will be restored.²⁶

- 18 A similar message appeared on the White House website after his inauguration:

President Trump understands that safe communities and low crime levels don't happen by accident. To ensure public safety, the Administration has taken significant steps in its first year to restore the rule of law, forge new partnerships with state and local law enforcement agencies, encourage respect for officers nationwide, and adopt aggressive strategies for tackling gang- and drug-related violence. Continued work to support law enforcement will help reduce violent crime to historic lows.²⁷

- 19 The purpose behind such statements is to perpetuate a “fantasy,” to conflate criminal violence and civil rights outbreaks so as “to demonize groups and protest movements organized around police reform.” As Jamelle Bouie underlines, it is “central to the President's larger political vision, white identity politics that looks with skepticism and hostility toward claims of racial injustice”.²⁸ Reality belies Trump's rhetoric: violent crime and property crime in the U.S. have fallen sharply in the past twenty-five years according to official sources like the FBI data and the Bureau of Justice Statistics; interestingly, most crimes are not reported to the police and most reported crimes are not solved; besides, there are significant variations in crime rates depending on population density and economic conditions. It should also be noted that public perceptions of crime in the U.S. are not borne out by facts: despite the downward trend since 1993 regular Gallup surveys have shown time and again that at least six-in-ten Americans believed that there was more crime at the *national* level compared with the year before, though half of them or fewer said such was not the case *in their area*.²⁹

- 20 The heart of the matter is that racial and ethnic groups are not treated equally, although an overwhelming majority of Whites believe they are, and that one group bears the brunt of violent crime—African Americans, a cohort most likely to be critical of law enforcement and supportive of police reform, notably stricter accountability for officers using excessive force or evincing racial bias. Trump's approach, as Bouie puts it, is “part and parcel of the white racial nationalism that fueled his campaign, informed his administration, and now shapes his rhetoric as President,” an indication that “he will govern with the same eye toward division and racial antagonism he had as a candidate.” And most Whites seem to subscribe to this highly racialized vision of American society.³⁰

- 21 Since his inauguration the 45th President has indeed shown himself adept at creating an alternative reality in which Blacks are essentially potential criminals and immigrants are all members of the infamous MS-13 gang.³¹ He has successfully equated a symbolic racial protest with anti-patriotism with his attacks on the National Football League players kneeling during the National Anthem and thereby got the NFL to change its rules in violation of the players' First Amendment rights.³² He has even tried to instill fear in refugees at the southern border with the cruel separation of children from their parents. The White House was for once so unsettled by the backlash and almost universal condemnation which followed the implementation of its zero-tolerance immigration policy that Trump uncharacteristically rescinded his executive order.³³
- 22 He who sows the wind shall reap the whirlwind. There is cause for concern in a divided nation. Not only has Trump's short tenure witnessed three of the worst mass shootings in modern U.S. history, carried out by mentally troubled white Americans and not by jihadists or immigrant gang members, but the number of hate crimes has soared dramatically since he was elected. On August 14, 2017, *Slate* reported the following:
- The Southern Poverty Law Center, which has aggregated media reports and gathered submissions from its website, catalogued 1064 such incidents, 13 of which were later debunked as false reports, in the first month after Trump won the Presidency. (Twenty-six of those incidents were perpetrated against Trump supporters.) The SPLC has presented that data in aggregate, creating an invaluable record of the scope of post-election hate crimes.³⁴
- 23 This phenomenon resulted from his sowing the seeds of division and fanning the flames of racism; the President of the United States himself emboldened hate groups whose support he never denounced. His relentlessly hammered disparaging comments about Muslims completed the racist message. Now paranoid white citizens have even taken to calling 911 to target peaceful black Americans going about their business;³⁵ and not surprisingly police shootings of Blacks have gone on, routinely punctuated by protests from Black Lives Matter,³⁶ with no reaction from the "Tweeter in Chief," unlike his predecessors.³⁷ Almost a year into Trump's Presidency, 60% of Americans felt that his election had led to worse race relations, 8% said the opposite, and 30% believed that there had been no change.³⁸ No wonder that his support among black voters is at a low ebb – not withstanding the endorsement Trump rather childishly and comically claimed he had received from bipolar rapper Kanye West, a very talented but troubled artist to whom his numerous black fans gave a pass on account of his frequent eccentricities and provocation.³⁹ The darker picture lies in the openly militant posture of white nationalists and white supremacists, to say nothing of the perennial Ku Klux Klan.
- 24 Since Trump's election, white supremacists have held quite a few rallies across the United States. Regardless of their location, all of them have been staged in similar fashion: each time a small number of white supremacists from various hate groups (e.g., the KKK, Identity Evropa) have united with members from less explicitly white nationalist groups, who often assemble under the banner of the "alt-right." They have invariably been met by police and counter-protesters (like Antifa, a violent anti-fascist group), and total chaos has frequently ensued, with beatings and even shootings and loss of life. These pro-Trump rallies feature racially charged messages and Confederate flags in the South. Incidents occurred notably in Portland, Ore., Rexboro, N.C., Washington, D.C., Seattle, Wash., Berkeley, Calif., Pikeville, Ky., New Orleans, La., Portland, Ore., Boston, Mass., Gainesville, Fla., Murfreesboro and Shelbyville, Tenn. The worst one – and the most horrific – took place in Charlottesville, Virginia, where hundreds of "alt-righters," white

nationalists, neo-Nazis, and other white supremacist groups gathered on August 12, 2017. The event, which ended in deadly violence, was in a way a turning point on account of its national and international impact. Trump at first condemned “both sides” for the violence, including what he called the “alt-left,” and claimed both sides had “some very fine people,” finally clumsily distancing himself from the far right (“I’ve condemned neo-Nazis”). On August 23, 2017, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in a rare warning urged the United States government to “unequivocally and unconditionally” condemn racist speech and crimes, stopping short of criticizing the U.S. President by name.⁴⁰ Under Donald Trump “bias, hate and racism [have moved] from the margins to the mainstream”⁴¹ and the far right groups have considerably improved their rhetoric, astutely draping their views in the guise of “free speech,” open debate, and “right-wing unity” in order to make them more palatable, thereby fooling some liberals. But the Charlottesville drama has led to near-universal censure.⁴²

Pandora’s Box and the Hydra of Racism

- 25 Democracy could very well be at risk in today’s United States. By ignoring and defying norms and traditions, the 45th President has exposed the flaws of the American Constitution.⁴³ Globally, the Republican Party has moved further to the right since the beginning of the 21st century; it has obviously radicalized in recent years and absorbed its Tea Party fringe. The demise of bipartisanship is now a given in congressional politicking. Conservatives have developed a panoply of insults and coded terms to derogatorily depict Democrats as left-wingers.⁴⁴ Electorally, “a house divided” has fallen prey to the tyranny of the minority. The Republicans are positioned to dominate the three nationwide democratic arenas (House, Senate, Presidency) even without a majority of voters for any one of them⁴⁵—and Trump’s judicial picks are likely to make the Judiciary more conservative in the years to come. Reaction rather than progress seems to be the new mantra, and it slants towards the extreme right.
- 26 Since the rise of Donald Trump, the ultra right has given free vent to its noxious views. The poison of racism is spreading further. More hideous voices resonate in the national conversation about immigration and race. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, for the first time in eight years, hate groups (almost a thousand of them) were found in all fifty states, not only white supremacists but also black nationalist hate groups. Within the former category, neo-Nazis saw the highest growth.⁴⁶ More explicitly, on February 1, 2018, *The Huffington Post* published a piece on the AtomwaffenDivision, a well-armed neo-Nazi group that admire Charles Manson and Adolf Hitler and ambition to wage a race war and overthrow the U.S. government, and whose members have allegedly committed five (apparently uncoordinated) murders in eight months (Mathias, “Neo-Nazi Groups”).⁴⁷ Some white supremacists have also tried to organize counter-marches with the slogan “White Lives Matter”.⁴⁸
- 27 An ideological war is being waged, too, which a few examples can easily illustrate. In late December 2017, some 3,000 students from campuses nationwide convened in Florida for four days near Trump’s Mar-a-Lago estate for a “summit” held by Turning Point USA, a conservative non-profit organization dedicated to educating students in free market values; the meeting was devoted to free speech, “culture wars,” and the leftist peril.⁴⁹ More troubling is the white supremacist propaganda aimed at college campuses which

has increased 258 percent between the falls of 2016 and 2017, according to an Anti-Defamation League's February 2018 report. The assumption of the "alt-right," which is responsible for most of it, is that political change since the Sixties has always originated on campuses.⁵⁰ A more devious approach, more worrying for the future, consists in going mainstream, as attempted by Richard Spencer,⁵¹ and dissembling racism under the worn-out cloak of "pseudo-social-scientific" theory to make it more respectable and therefore more palatable:

Thus, by focusing their opprobrium on the Nazi next door, white liberals are missing the very real threat posed by a growing white nationalism. These new white supremacists are coming not with tiki torches but with reasoned arguments, buttressed by facts and figures, to make palatable racist ideas that many people, deep down, have always felt were true.⁵²

- 28 The white nationalists who lump together Browns, Blacks, Jews, and Muslims as undesirables have undeniably been encouraged in their militancy by Donald Trump's rhetoric, which they have applauded on several occasions, for it sounded like a normalization of their hate speech. They have found a hero whose divisive agenda is similarly tailored to suit them: barring immigrants of color and Muslims from entry into the U.S., expelling illegals, postponing the day predicted by the Census Bureau when Whites in the United States would become a minority, subverting long-held American ideals and values, in a word polarizing and racializing the national debate. Who knows what this opening of the floodgates of hatred and bigotry may portend if not a looming race war? Judging from the first half of Donald J. Trump's tenure, the United States is heading for a confrontational Presidency and a kind of undeclared civil war in which race and rage will feature prominently. This "uncivil war" has already begun with the public shaming and shunning of Trump officials;⁵³ a "Resistance to Trump" movement is under way, a motley coalition of "anti-Trumpists" who diverge on tactics but seem to agree that the ballot is the last resort.⁵⁴ Given the current tensions in American society there is little hope that political and racial antagonisms will be appeased anytime soon.

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ABSTRACTS

If very few observers across the Atlantic predicted that a reality-TV star would succeed the United States’ first African American President, there is today among commentators of the political scene a scramble for analysis of the rise of Donald J. Trump. His victory can no doubt be attributed to a conjunction of causes but one in particular deserves special attention: the racial factor. The Trump phenomenon was regarded as the elevation to the highest office of a political misfit when it was actually a return to normalcy in a historically racist society. Barack Obama’s election was atypical, not Trump’s. The following essay attempts to throw light on the permanence of the race factor in American society, its impact on the 2016 election, either by means of its unabashed activation or through a coded rhetoric, its centrality in the Trumpian discourse, the heyday of white nationalism under a President prone to stoking the flames of division and prejudice, together with the disquieting signs of a “new civil war” in a disunited nation.

Si peu d’observateurs outre-Atlantique prédirent qu’une vedette de la télé-réalité succéderait au premier président afro-américain des États-Unis, il y a aujourd’hui parmi les commentateurs de

la scène politique pléthore d'analyses de l'ascension de Donald J. Trump. Sa victoire peut sans doute être attribuée à une conjonction de causes, mais l'une d'elles en particulier mérite tout spécialement l'attention : le facteur racial. Le phénomène Trump fut regardé comme l'élévation à la magistrature suprême d'un égaré en politique alors qu'en réalité, il s'agissait d'un retour à la normale dans une société historiquement raciste. L'élection d'Obama fut atypique ; pas celle de Trump. L'essai qui suit tente de mettre en évidence la permanence du facteur racial dans la société américaine, son impact sur l'élection de 2016, soit par le biais de son activation éhontée, soit à travers une rhétorique codée, sa centralité dans le discours trumpien, les beaux jours promis au nationalisme blanc sous un président qui attise les flammes de la division et des préjugés, ainsi que les signes inquiétants d'une « nouvelle guerre civile » dans une nation désunie.

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