

On both sides of the Atlantic - The Globalization of Donald Trump

Wednesday 9 November 2016, by [SEYMOUR Richard](#) (Date first published: 14 October 2016).

On both sides of the Atlantic, a previously fringe current of middle-class radicals has moved to the center of politics.

Contents

- [I](#)
- [II](#)
- [III](#)
- [IV](#)

I.

In the most recent presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, the citrine Republican candidate told his rival that if he won, she would be going to jail.

In a sense, this is what the figure of Trump, a pure creation of U.S. celebrity culture, was made for. Long before he debated politics, “The Apprentice” star libidinated his sociopathic “boss” schtick. The high of the program was always the moment when he pointed his finger at a usually unsympathetic “apprentice” and said, “you’re fired.”

Now he’s saying, “you’re going to jail.” His faithful fans love it, seeing Clinton as a member of an elite that acts with impunity and with no loyalty to what they see as “America.”

Theresa May struck a similarly punitive note in her recent speech to the Conservative Party’s annual conference. Her target was the “privileged few” who have benefited from globalization, the “successful and the powerful” who, unmoored from the nation, lord it over “ordinary working-class families.”

She promised to use the power of government to restore national sovereignty. In this, she borrowed the entire wardrobe and dance act of Nigel Farage, former leader of the hard-right U.K. Independence Party, Britain’s equivalent to Trump.

On both sides of the Atlantic, a previously fringe current of middle-class radicals has moved to the center of politics, and that is going to change the fabled “special relationship.”

II.

London and New York are global cities at the heart of the Anglo-American “special relationship,” linking Wall Street to the City of London. “Global cities,” according to the sociologist Saskia Sassen,

have more in common with one another than with the countries they have formed in. They are linked by the heavy concentration of financial service industries, they host the headquarters of large multinational corporations, they are centers of media, communications and political power.

The Anglo-American axis has always been pivoted on liberalism, both in the economy and in international order. The engine of globalization has always been the U.S. Treasury Department, Federal Reserve and Wall Street. And closely linked to each has been the British Treasury, the Bank of England, and the City of London. The elites of finance and industry dominate politically because of their huge leverage over markets, which ensures that they have privileged institutional access to the state.

Talk about “elites” can lend itself to conspiracy theory by implying that they all agree or have the same interests. If they did, they would have no need for competitive multi-party democracy. But it is because elites disagree – it is because their “interests” always need to be represented ideologically and politically, and because they need consent – that what happens to political parties matters to them. The “Brexit” result in the U.K. and subsequent right-turn of the Conservative Party, and the capture of the Republican Party by Donald Trump, are both hugely unwelcome outcomes from their perspective. They are being, in a sense, driven out of their own political homes by provincial racists, traditionalists, quasi-fascists and suburban nationalists defending the interests of the small man, the small business and the small town.

III.

For beyond these metropolitan centers, there exist large regions – both in the United States and the United Kingdom – where there has been a generation of decline. Industries have rusted, unionized workforces have decomposed, poverty and suicide have increased. They are economically, culturally and politically walled-off from affluent centers.

Those small business owners and sections of the new middle class who inhabit these areas resent being trapped in regional decline with the poor and unemployed. They strive for respectability and they resent feeling culturally condescended to by political and cultural elites. Above all, they resent that the scale of power, of decision-making, and of finance and business, has grown so vast that it seems to have got out of their control. And over the years they’ve been winning allies, from among older skilled workers, independent professionals and retirees, and even some medium-sized employers and cowboy speculators. But they have few allies in the business class.

In Britain, the slogan of the right wing was “Take Back Control.” In the U.S., it is “Build The Wall.” Often, liberal critics take issue with these slogans in a literal way. What “control” will the average person in the street gain from leaving the European Union under these circumstances? What good would a wall on the border do anyone? Ironically, some of the people who most support these measures have the most to lose materially.

This is true, but political speech works and persuades through metaphor. When the experiences of millions of people are represented in racist and nationalist terms, “taking back control” means taking it back from foreigners. “Building the wall” means keeping them out. It adverts to a language of purity, in which the ‘unproductive’ poor, migrants and racial minorities become the symbolic bearers of all the excesses and dysfunctions of the system, a taint to be quarantined and removed.

IV.

But just as these elites have an ally in Hillary Clinton, who saw off the left-wing insurgency of Bernie Sanders, they also have a closeted ally in Theresa May. May comes from the liberal, modernizing wing of Toryism. Her rhetoric does not betoken conversion so much as an acknowledgment of political reality. She cannot rule the Conservative Party without the support of rabid Brexit supporters. She cannot restore an embattled Tory grip on electoral dominance without squeezing out right-wing competitors. She cannot see off Jeremy Corbyn's left-wing, class-based politics without articulating a right-wing, class-based politics.

Above all, May cannot hope to govern an unhappy country, a country whose worst days may be just ahead of it, without articulating resentment and anger. But just as Cameron was not able to satisfy the raging Tory rank-and-file with impossible promises to control immigration, only feeding the beast that killed his career, so May is likely to paint herself into a corner. Having promised a "hard Brexit" that will be hardest on the poorest, she will find herself obliged to rely more and more on using racism to cut into the potential base of any revived left-wing politics. The more you do this sort of thing, the more you are obliged to do it.

This raises an interesting question. Supposing Trump were – however improbable it seems at this stage – to win the U.S. election, what would happen to the "special relationship?" May has said that immigration controls matter more than Britain's economic interests in being part of the single market. This would converge with Trump's anti-free trade, anti-immigrant nationalism. With the far right rising across Europe, there would be the extraordinary possibility that a "special relationship" would de facto emerge not around capitalist liberalism, but on the basis of resurgent nationalism. It could become a polestar of global reaction, with racists and fascists all over the world drawing inspiration from it. And, of course, it would be armed by the greatest military power the world has ever seen. Trump sounds isolationist notes, but also promises to commit war crimes, to massacre the families of America's enemies.

The erosion of the liberal center leaves left-wing minorities, supporting Corbyn, Sanders, Podemos, and others, to try to articulate these class discontents in an internationalist, anti-racist language. But they are returning after years of relative absence, and they do not have the tremendous advantages of resources and media coverage that the reactionaries do. In the short term, if Trump wins, then Trumpism globalizes.

Richard Seymour

P.S.

* <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/opinion/The-Globalization-of-Donald-Trump-20161014-0014.html>

* Richard Seymour is a London-based author and broadcaster, most recently author of *Corbyn: The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics*. He has a PhD from the London School of Economics, and is online editor of *Salvage*