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THE YEAR IN SHOCK

THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

WENDY BROWN

THE STUNNING RISE OF NATIONALISM, populism, and fundamentalism has roiled the world. It is tempting to imagine that we are witnessing just another rotation of political modernity's cycle of progress and backlash. But we can situate the undoing of the demos in democracy's *longue durée* while rejecting the false comfort of the idea that what's happening is not new, that we've seen it all before. How did we get here? How did we create the conditions for Trump, for Brexit, for Mosul, for a daily sequence of devastating events, whether shootings or strikes? Is shock, that quintessentially modernist avant-garde strategy of instigating mass perceptual—and therefore political—change, somehow more prevalent than ever, albeit in radically transformed ways? Does shock, in fact, go hand in hand with apathy and desensitization?

Art must confront these shifts in experience and form. And so *Artforum* asked curator HELEN MOLESWORTH, activist TARIQ ALI, and political theorist WENDY BROWN to reflect on the year in shock: on the sudden reaction, the surprise turn, the violent wake.



Donald Trump. Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

“**WE KNOW THIS** might carry us over a cliff, but fuck it. Compared with my life? Let’s blow it all up and see what’s left.” That seems to be the impulse motivating some Trump and some Brexit supporters alike. It’s apocalyptic populism: “We know it might lead to economic collapse, political peril, even nuclear war, but that’s better than the humiliation and impotence we face now.”

One has to be shocked by the events of the past year—especially by Brexit, the growing strength of neofascist parties in Europe, the destruction of Turkish democracy, and the rise of Trump—and at the same time, one has to figure out the frame through which they make sense. Trump in particular must be fathomed in terms of a white working- and lower-middle-class population that has been radically displaced, economically and culturally, over the past quarter century, and whose increasing frustration has been mobilized in xenophobic and racist ways. But it’s crucial to attend to the extent to which *impotence*—displaced, rerouted, improperly named—is at stake here. I mean to invoke both felt political powerlessness and felt socioeconomic castration. The political powerlessness has to do with the gutting of democracies, and the castration has to do with expectations and powers long associated with whiteness, with maleness, *and* with class.

Gender politics in the US is cracked open right now. There’s extraordinary ferment around sexual violence, misogyny, and women’s enduring inequality—economically, politically, and socially. This explosion is not attributable to either Clinton or Trump, but their respective candidacies have certainly been explosive sites for some of these issues and have produced some spectacular effects, like the robust corporate feminism of Megyn Kelly. This fifth wave of feminism is happening side by side with queer and trans movements dealing with gender along quite different axes, and with Black Lives Matter and immigrants’ rights movements that feature still other dimensions of women’s struggles for life, belonging, equality, mattering. All of this is tremendously exciting, opening up new domains of meaning and possibilities for being human and for addressing the nonhuman world. But all of this, and not only Clinton’s presidential run, is surely compounding the rage of that castrated stratum of white men. We could cite similar dynamics in the United Kingdom, around Brexit, for example, and in Europe more generally.

It's important, however, not to focus solely on the racism and xenophobia of neofascist white-nationalist parties like France's Front National and Greece's Golden Dawn. That dimension is there, and terrifying. But we need to fathom why we're seeing these particularly neofascist forms of racism and xenophobia, as opposed to more quotidian forms, right now. These new Right movements are not just racist, they also generally reject classic democratic political principles, whether liberal or radical, and seek a strong authoritarian state in its place. We're not seeing calls for inclusion, equality, freedom through popular sovereignty. We're seeing mass thuggery, contempt for the rule of law, equality, civil liberties, and universal inclusion. We are seeing a deep, wholesale rejection of the most basic principles of democracy. This is what neoliberalism has wrought over four decades—this wide, deep rejection of democracy, not only social democracy but political democracy.

There are other aspects of neoliberalism at stake in the US elections. Yes, it's incredible that a figure like Trump, with his unbridled narcissism and sociopathic tendencies and ludicrous chest-thumping, could become the Republican nominee. What isn't incredible in 2016, however, is a wealthy real estate developer proposing his business acumen and business success as qualifications for the presidency. This is the quintessence of the transformation of political life *and political meanings* by markets and by economic meanings. Personality-disorder issues aside, Trump is offering himself as a businessman who would bring to the executive office his capacity to make deals and dominate the competition. He's not offering knowledge of the Constitution; he's not promising to represent the people, execute the law, or work with Congress. That his credentials in business and entertainment could become credentials for the presidency is totally in line with the neoliberal assault on democracy.

But there are other unprecedented dimensions of the past year or two: the rise of Justin Trudeau in Canada, Bernie Sanders in the US, and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, along with SYRIZA, Podemos, the Indignados, and so forth. Half a decade ago, few imagined that there was a future in Left parties. We were focused on movements like Occupy, and we'd more or less given up on party politics—certainly on Democratic Party politics in the US and Labour Party politics in the UK. Now we have reason to reconsider. And these parties are often very clear-minded about neoliberalism as a social, political, and economic regime that has failed, that is cruel and unsustainable. I find this hopeful. Of course, once these parties are in power, they have to cope with rule by international finance. And Left governing in those circumstances, especially when the powers of finance want the government to fail, is not easy. Ask SYRIZA.



Demonstrators outside Trump Tower, New York, October 26, 2016. Photo: Drew Angerer/Getty Images.

AS FOR THE UNITED STATES: Whether Trump or Clinton wins, the Left and the mainstream of the Democratic party must rethink how to address the tens of millions of Americans who have been won over to Trump. The Left

has largely given up on organizing the working class, which means it has been abandoned to Fox News and its own pain. That's the stuff of reactionary or fascist popular formations. If Clinton is in the White House, our task is also to push hard for reinvesting in public education, deprivatizing prisons, lowering the black incarceration rate, and, above all, leashing the banks and corporations. Put another way, our task is both to figure out how to reach the deeply alienated and often angry working class and how to open up new ways of thinking about justice, democracy, and political action. Our task is to expose and replace the neoliberal rationality that has governed all policy for the past thirty-five years. It's time to put everything we've got into the effort, while also understanding the gravity of our situation, which is unprecedented in many ways. Here, we can't lose sight of the *neo* in neoliberalism. We need to distinguish, for example, between the colonization of everyday life by the commodity, a feature of liberal capitalism, and the saturation of every part of existence and the construction of the human subject itself by contemporary economic metrics of value, and especially the gutting of democracy and justice with market values. We are in a different kind of struggle today over what constitutes a livable world than was imagined by older Left critiques of capital.

There are some other features of the landscape that strike me as radically new and that I think we need to bear in mind in order to work effectively in what Stuart Hall would have called our current conjuncture. First, we are obviously in a kind of interregnum between the era of nation-states and whatever comes after them. We're not done with nation-states, but they are waning in power and significance. Globalization means they have less and less power over their economies and even their political life. They're also, obviously, less and less homogeneous. Thus, they do not secure cultural and political identity at the site, for example, of Frenchness, Americanness, etc. Some of the emerging neofascist movements are responding to that. So now we have a serious predicament. On the one hand, you can't think or easily practice global belonging—the globe is too big, diverse, and unknown to most of us. On the other hand, national belonging is almost inevitably nationalist in a reactionary sense, even as it may be a platform for radical democratic demands, as in the case of Greece. So that is one predicament that contours our present and near future.

The second feature is related and pertains to the tremendous transnational movement of contemporary populations. Whether they are displaced or voluntarily mobile, people are migrating in unprecedented numbers, bringing different cultures and religions and gender norms and so forth into close proximity. This heterogeneity means that those who care about democracy have to think about how we can live together without settled norms, and how to govern ourselves together, but not as a nation in either the ethnic or the sovereign sense. The problem here is not just to figure out how we live together as peoples with different histories and attachments, but to determine how we imagine ruling ourselves together—being democrats together—without settling the norms that come out of these histories and attachments.

And finally, there's the phenomenon I've touched on above—finance capital, which increasingly rules the world. Unless we figure out a way to get that genie back into the bottle, everything we say or do about socialist or democratic or communist or anarchist futures is probably beside the point. And the task of getting that genie back in is not trivial. It's on the order of unsplitting the atom, figuring out, in a world that knows how to make nuclear weapons, how we can eliminate them. In a world that now knows how to generate unfathomable amounts of wealth through the financialization of assets, through credit and debt, how do we eliminate that and turn instead to building economies that are sustainable for the earth and the creatures on it? It's not impossible, but damn close. To pull it off, we have to be very imaginative and undogmatic—not simply drawing on current trends, on past Left thinking or hoped-for solutions from markets and technology. We have to be absolutely inventive, creative, open, pluralistic, and humble. And we have to be totally committed to nonstupidity.

—As told to Elizabeth Schambelan, October 27, 2016
