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# Was Donald Trump Elected Because He Is Laughable?

## Reflections on Trump and Sovereignty

Dimitris Vardoulakis — December 21, 2016

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Flying over the Pacific to return to Sydney after six weeks in the US, conversations with my friends in New York in the aftermath of the November 8 election run through my head. There was a strong sense of bafflement, even incomprehension, at Donald Trump's victory. It was mystifying that people seemed to have failed to see the lies that his campaign spread, and accepted his blatant sexism and racism. These responses were often accompanied by outrage and anger at the bigotry of the President-elect and his advisers.

There have been, of course, plenty of explanations put forward for the result. But they tend to either be monocausal — such as blaming the result on white middle- to lower-class men — or lacking specificity: sure, sexism played a significant part, but Trump's vulgarity is not the reason for his success. Or, explanations employed spurious analogical reasoning: the most sophisticated was Yanis Varoufakis' comparison of the current economic situation to the Great Depression. All these offer elements of truth but they fail to explain how a genuinely laughable figure was elected president.

In addition, shifting the blame for the result to “ignorant,” “misled,” or “uninformed” voters who failed to calculate their advantage is a suspiciously undemocratic disposition. There may be a “Jeffersonian” image of democracy — as I have heard colleagues in the US assert — that requires citizens to make informed decisions. But it is striking that, according to the same narrative, it is ultimately only the cultured upper-middle-class who claim for themselves the ability to make the correct political inferences.

I’m suggesting, instead, that a committed democratic analysis needs to recognize that people voted employing an instrumental logic to calculate their advantage. Regardless of how problematic the concept of the “people” is, no commitment to democracy can start from the assumption that the “people” are stupid. A glance at history reminds us that the “fickle multitude” has been a war cry against democracy for centuries.

To understand the instrumental logic that led people to vote for Trump, it is necessary to ask how a laughable figure was elected president. I am not using the word “laughable” here as a put-down, but as something that genuinely allowed people to calculate that their advantage was served by voting for Trump. How can we explain that the people thought it would be good for them to vote for someone who is laughable?

If we are to understand and resist Trump, we need to demystify the figure of the laughable sovereign. This is only possible when we recognize that the laughable sovereign is not a radically new phenomenon but rather that it conforms to a certain logic of biopolitical sovereignty that is linked to a broader conception of sovereignty. The laughable sovereign is a paradoxical figure that both allowed Trump to stake a claim to the presidency, but also has the potential to undermine the construction of a new post-election narrative.

To demonstrate the paradoxes within the figure of the laughable sovereign, I will rely on my book *Sovereignty and Its Other*, where I argue that sovereign power justifies itself by employing an instrumental logic. This logic articulates violence in means-and-ends relations. I argue that there are three ways that such a justification can unfold, working together to produce an image of sovereignty.

Let me describe this typology of sovereign justification as it applies to Trump, leading us to the figure of the laughable sovereign. What were the means-and-ends calculations that justified his claim to the presidency?

## Make America Great Again

The most prevalent explanation put forward for Trump’s electoral victory is that people wanted change. According to this explanation, this was particularly true for those white populations affected by the shut-down of industries and by the financial crisis post 2008.

Trump sought to speak to those voters. But he did not address them using financial arguments. He left that to Hillary Clinton. Instead, he employed a rhetoric of change that was encapsulated in his campaign slogan “Make America Great Again.” This functioned as an end that justified a whole slew of promises that had to do with pulling out of trade agreements, and with a protectionist economic agenda including increasing import tariffs.

It is important to note that the goal of American “greatness” remained itself undefined. It was an end by virtue of its mystique and opacity. There is no way of ever knowing that this end has been achieved — which is another way of saying that it is unachievable.

Such an end functions in an analogous way to the “City of God” in Augustine’s discourse. In Augustine too, the end is unachievable. The City of God is something that everyone ought to strive for, and any obstacle on the way can be subjected to justified violence.

In other words, the positing of a noble, even mystically-sanctioned end that cannot be achieved justifies various forms of violence as the means to achieving that end. Augustine advocated such violence against all the “pagans” who put obstacles in the way of the attainment of the City of God, just as Trump advocated violence against all foreign economic powers or internal economic arrangements that were obstacles to making America “great again.”

This is the ancient justification of sovereign violence. The sovereign relies on a transcendent end that bestows authority upon the sovereign and simultaneously justifies any violent means at the sovereign's disposal.

## The Great Wall

With modern sovereignty, the structure of justification is reversed. The preoccupation of the state here has to do with its own self-preservation. As Machiavelli very well recognizes, the end of the state is nothing else but the continuation of the state. Consequently, it is the continuous operation of the state that provides the justification. Or, the means of the operation of the state justify the end of sovereignty.

The consolidation of the modern justification of sovereignty is exemplified by the Treaties of Westphalia, which legitimated the distinction between the internal and external aspect to sovereignty. Both of these parts relied on well-defined borders. The border distinguishes one sovereign state from another, and it legitimates the sovereign ruler's promulgation and policing of laws within the borders of the state.

An effect of this logic — as Balibar, for instance, has shown — is the use of racism by modern nation-states. We can also explain the rise of sexism on this model. The image of the “man of reason,” as Genevieve Lloyd puts it, when transposed to the political arena, is the image of a strong male sovereign, who can — *nay, should* — be vicious, like the biblical monster the leviathan.

All these elements were aptly deployed in Trump's narrative. One of the most prominent promises that Trump made was about building a wall along the Mexican border to put an end to illegal immigration. Equally (in)famous were his statements about stopping Muslim immigration or establishing tests for those wishing to enter the US. Securing the border, and racism, play on the logic of modern sovereignty's justification of violence.

We should not think that Trump's image conformed to the figure of the vicious sovereign. One of the most widely critiqued aspects of Trump's performance during the presidential debates was his hawkish demeanor. He either interrupted Clinton, or attacked her because of her husband, or hovered menacingly behind her while she was speaking. But these antics reinforced his image as a strong sovereign, a contemporary impersonation of the monster — always alpha-male, of course — who can protect the nation.

From this perspective, we can also understand why the revelations of his misogynistic comments ultimately functioned in his favor: they consolidated this image of the monster-sovereign. I am not trying to suggest a conspiracy theory for the release of the *Access Hollywood* recording, nor am I imputing an evil mastermind orchestrating the entire thing. Rather, I am suggesting that Trump was faced with a potentially damaging situation that serendipitously fit the subliminal message about his masculinity as contributing to the protection of the US.

The element of sexism, and the figure of the strong, male sovereign whose exercise of violence is justified on the basis of the protection of the state were further promoted around the issue of Clinton's email server. Even though an exhaustive investigation concluded that there was no evidence warranting prosecution, Trump continued to suggest that she had acted illegally. The subliminal message was that she could never attain the status of the male protector legitimately. Her power was not based on strength. It was based on feminine deceit.

In sum, all the sexism and racism that characterized Trump's campaign drew on an instrumental logic whereby the means — sheer strength, masculinity — justified the end of the protection of the state. The image of Trump as a strong potential president was built on this logic of the means justifying the end.

## You're fired

Perhaps what was most perplexing for the liberal left in the US was how someone they regarded as a buffoon and hence incompetent to be president could beat the “**most qualified**” presidential candidate in history. For anyone having read Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, that should not be entirely surprising — Marx explains how a

laughable character can rise to sovereignty. But the fact that incompetent figures who are the subject of ridicule end up winning elections does not say much about the specific election of 2016.

I hold that Trump's ridiculous character actually contributed to his success. The most significant issue Clinton faced was her association with neoliberalism. This was an issue that the left was aware of, even though she herself sought to ignore it. But it is hard to ignore when someone is paid a quarter of a millions dollars to make a speech to companies epitomizing neoliberal economics. The emails released by WikiLeaks did not reveal her connection to neoliberalism — they simply put on the front page something that was already known.

Trump is just as, if not more, complicit in neoliberal economics. The fact that "smart" people, as he puts it, avoid paying federal tax demonstrates the profoundly neoliberal mentality of Trump — which is to say, a mentality that understands freedom as the exercise of economic enterprise for the benefit of the individual. Thus, Trump was reassuring to the neoliberal status quo.

At the same time, the figure of sovereignty in neoliberalism is a weakened one. We all know how globalization has eroded sovereign power. What does a sovereign look like in a world where large corporations hold state governments for ransom? It is an enfeebled sovereign, an enervated or emasculated one. It is a sovereign who has been castrated.

It is at this juncture that the paradox of Clinton's strong economic credentials really hurt her. Given her indisputable "competence," she appeared anything but emasculated. In fact, she appeared too strong — that is, she appeared to represent the corporate side. Her strength made her look unstately in the sense of not representing the interests of the working class. The fact that Trump was "incompetent" in this context allowed him to appear as if he could represent working class interests over corporate greed.

But there is an additional element that played right in Trump's hands. Sovereignty in a neoliberal or biopolitical context does not appear to defend any particular end. Biopolitics is, as Foucault put it, all about normalization and regulation. It is about control of the population. It is as if the means of the exercise of power lacks any end and simply justifies the further exercise of means.

A good example of this structure of biopolitical justification is the moralizing aspect of power — something that Hardt and Negri understand very well in *Empire*. When it appears as if there is no political end to be defended in a globalized world, then moral principles rush in to occupy the vacuum. The various campaigns of "political correctness" are symptoms of this.

Trump triumphed against Clinton as a resistance against this moralizing logic of biopolitics. His buffoonery was directed against anything that might have been perceived as "political correctness." The phrase that symbolized Trump and made him a household name — "you're fired" — was the password to the other side of biopolitical moralizing. From then on, anything inappropriate uttered by Trump was a further demonstration of his anti-moralizing campaign. The fact that this was only a symbolic refutation of biopolitical moralizing that, by its very opposition, reaffirmed the biopolitical logic, did not dent the perception that Clinton was deeply and unambiguously mired in biopower.

There have been too many comparisons between Trump and dictators — quick comparisons between Trump and the archetypal authoritarian personality. The comparisons are not entirely false but they miss the essential. A dictator cannot be ridiculed in public. No one could laugh at Hitler in public in Germany.

Trump's strength was the fact that he was laughable. His utter weakness was his greatest asset, as this created the perfect image of the neoliberal sovereign within a biopolitical world. His incompetence made him appear to stand above corporate greed, and his thoughtless, laughable pronouncements presented him as if he was resisting the "system." His incompetence was his strongest claim to the office of the President.

The fact that he was subject to ridicule was epitomized by Clinton's inability to hide her disbelief at his pronouncements during the presidential debates and to suppress smiles at them. That showed two things. First,

that Trump did not completely conform to the image of a dictator, as one cannot laugh in the face of a dictator. Second, that he embodied the image of the emasculated biopolitical sovereign. This image follows a paradoxical pattern: his laughable pronouncements make him appear to oppose the system, even though in fact, and reassuringly for the system, they reaffirm it by embodying the enfeebled sovereign of neoliberalism.

This allowed Trump to appear as someone resisting neoliberalism and biopolitics, while also simultaneously representing its ultimate endpoint — the laughable sovereign. Thus Trump presented himself as a champion of change *because* he was the most neoliberal and biopolitical personification of sovereignty.

## Give Trump a chance?

In her concession speech, Clinton suggested that we should give Trump a chance to be president. But which Trump? The proponent of an unreachable ideal that violently brushes away every obstacle to this unattainable endgame? Or the impersonator of an über-male leader who secures the nation? Or the laughable sovereign?

I would like to suggest that these three images of Trump are tightly interconnected. This is not due to a ploy on Trump's part. Rather, it is because the various justifications of sovereign violence operate simultaneously.

It may seem contradictory that Trump impersonates both the strong male of modern sovereignty and the enfeebled sovereign of biopolitics. But that is not a problem so long as each field of justification is self-subsistent *and* so long as it remains possible to move from one to the other.

Let me provide an example. The consensus is that Trump won the working class vote by presenting himself as an opponent to neoliberalism. The fact that this is simply not true does not matter — as Machiavelli taught us, in politics truth as such does not exist, there is only effectual truth. And this effectual truth operates through the easy transition to the other two clusters of justification, the modern and the ancient.

Imagine a Trump voter confronted with the fact that Trump is implicated in neoliberalism. The voter can swiftly, effortlessly shift to the justification that Trump will make America great again — which is also opposed to Clinton's position that America is already great, meaning that she was going to continue Obama's policies. If, at the next step, someone pointed out that such greatness was a meaningless, empty signifier, that imaginary voter would have fiercely rejected the "political correctness" of such elitist talk, simultaneously responding that Trump will build a wall to stop aliens from taking "our" jobs.

None of the three modalities of justification is enough on its own. What matters instead is the ability to transition smoothly from one to the next and back again. It is due to this effectual transition, I argue in my work, that we have the figure of absolute sovereignty. Notably, Clinton failed to build a narrative showing these transitions. Trump succeeded, which explains why he could personify the figure of the sovereign. Trump built a narrative that provided people with the means to move between the three justifications of sovereignty, and this explains why people calculated that their interest is served by electing him president.

So, shall we give Trump a chance? To give him a chance would be tantamount to accepting his narrative of justification. Conversely, to resist him, we first need to demystify him, which is to say, we need to be able to identify the ways in which he justifies his impersonation of a sovereign. There are reasons that people voted for him, and these reasons are directly linked to the ways in which Trump constructed his image as a sovereign by justifying the way he would exercise violence.

Such demystification needs to account for all three modalities of sovereignty *and* for their interconnections. Every justification needs to be "dejustified" — not only his sexism and racism, not only his use of the presidency to further his personal business interests, but also the phantasm of the "great" America he seeks to appropriate for himself. But for the formation of a long-term strategy, this raises the following question: Which one of these modalities of justification is most liable to crumble?

The answer to this last question is difficult, since Trump will have to rapidly develop a presidential appearance. This means that he will have to amend his positions. We do not know exactly what he will stand for as an occupant of the Oval Office.

And yet, perhaps we know enough. We know, for instance, that it is very difficult for someone just elected to completely change his or her narrative. Not only because that confuses the electorate, but also because it confuses the conveyor of the message himself — it is difficult to completely change one's story, especially when it has been repeated in the exhaustive and exhausting American process of primaries and elections.

From this perspective, Trump will naturally reinforce the narratives of justification of ancient and modern sovereignty, simply because they are easy to reinforce and do not run counter to GOP positions. Who does not want to have a “great America,” especially if we do not know what this means? And how easy would it be for Trump to assert his power on some arbitrarily chosen powerless victims after an electoral mandate?

The story is not as simple with neoliberal and biopolitical sovereignty. Here, finding a narrative will be much harder. For instance, if he implements the economic policies that he announced — such as the economic war with China — it is likely that those who will be hurt the most will be his electoral base. Working class people are not Trump's natural allies and, if they indeed voted for him, it was because they calculated their advantage according to the “lesser of two evils” principle. As far as his opposition to political correctness is concerned, the narrative will also be hard to construct, as it is not clear how one can occupy an anti-moralizing position when one is in a position of power that allows one to regulate and normalize.

Ultimately, the most significant challenge Trump faces is that eventually, the fact that he wants to address a strong end (according to the ancient logic of sovereignty) and assert his sovereign/male/monster power (according to modern sovereignty), and the fact that he is laughable (exemplifying the emasculated biopolitical sovereign), will start to clash. Put differently, it will no longer be a laughing matter when he is president. The neoliberal and biopolitical narrative of justification that served him so well in combating Clinton will no longer serve him when he is in the White House, and it will not operate easily alongside the other two narratives.

My guess is that Trump will be unable to construct a narrative to address the neoliberal and biopolitical ways in which he justified his exercise of violence. If Trump needs to shake off the image of the laughable sovereign to govern, then the entire field of the biopolitical and neoliberal justification will open up, allowing for the most extreme and effective contestation. It is in this area that Trump will leave most of the decisions to others. Whether they succeed in building a new image for him, or whether they fail to create a new narrative that overcomes the figure of the buffoon, will be the litmus test of his effective grip on power as a president.

And how much this new narrative of a neoliberal and biopolitical president is derailed will also be the measure of the success of the resistance against Trump's presidency. Will the liberals simply articulate an economic agenda of a more “humane” or “fair” neoliberalism? This would consist in both exposing Trump's tawdry neoliberalism and putting forward a reassuring economic agenda for the corporate world. Or will the left refuse the neoliberal agenda, giving voice to the kind of narrative that Bernie Sanders employed in the primaries? This would turn the tables on Trump. But I am not sure whether the Democratic Party has the capacity and the commitment to pursue such a strategy.

The paradox of the laughable sovereign that Trump personifies — that is, the sovereign who is both opposed to neoliberalism as well as epitomizing its highest culmination — leads to a paradoxical strategy of resistance against his neoliberal justification of power. Trump can be resisted both as an inadequate, wayward neoliberal, and as too neoliberal. He can be presented both as the exception and as the rule of neoliberalism. The future of liberal politics in the US depends on how it will handle this paradox.

There is one final point that needs to be noted: It is now in the hands of the left to interpret the paradox of the laughable sovereign. Trump is faced with the problem of rebuilding his image as the biopolitical sovereign, from that of a buffoon to that of a president. The left has the chance to take the initiative in this area. This is the opportunity that the left has to grasp. Trump will not self-destruct as easily as [Zizek's accelerationist logic](#)

suggests. This is something that resistance to Trump needs to — and can — effect by identifying and using against him the paradox of the laughable sovereign.

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