

Dying from ideology: the spatial paradox of Trump's "populism" in the time of Covid-19

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1. *Introduction*

The emergence and management of a pandemic like the one we are currently experiencing would tax even the most efficient and honest of administrations. Pandemics have always been a challenge to polities, from the Black Death down to the present day (Snowden, 2019). They are typically global-local occurrences in the sense that once worldwide connections are in play the spread of the disease is between individuals locally. In other words, pandemics are not national events. But the resources and organization needed to manage them are typically associated with national agencies and national leadership. Without a rapid and active national role, diseases spread opportunistically taking advantage of local-to-local and cross-regional vulnerabilities arising from different mitigation and suppression efforts pursued without coordination across the national territory (Haffajee and Mello, 2020). By mid-April 2020 the lack of any sort of federal plan for managing a way out of the pandemic led some states and private experts to develop their own approach to using testing for the disease and antibodies to it so that rather than the half-baked aspirational dates offered by US President Trump (Easter Sunday? End of April?) there could be a practical way of organizing a way out (Sun *et al.*, 2020). Why has the US federal government's response to the pandemic been so anemic and ham-fisted, to say the least?

2. *It's Trump's Fault, Isn't It?*

With respect to the current Coronavirus/Covid-19 pandemic, the case of South Korea suggests the most positive sort of outcome, as does a similar effort in Germany (e.g. Park, 2020; Hall and Buck, 2020). Both managed to stall the spread of the virus by massive early investment in testing. China and the United States can both be faulted in different ways for their failures in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic: the Government of China for initially hiding what was happening and then providing information and statistics of questionable

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quality and the federal government in the US for long dismissing the pandemic as a hoax or overstated for several months and displaying incredible incompetence in responding to the spread of the disease with respect to its managerial role in, for example, testing for the disease (e.g. Garrett, 2020; Simonetta, 2020; Haberman, 2020; Sachs, 2020; Goodman and Schulkin, 2020). In particular, the Trump administration had undermined pandemic preparations long before the advent of this pandemic by abolishing the specialist warning group, then set states against one another in the allocation of healthcare resources such as hospital clothing and ventilators, neglected to issue standard nationwide instructions on mitigating the spread of the virus (with stay-at-home orders, for example), and totally failed to provide any sort of inspiring national leadership but focused on criticizing the media and insulting state governors and others looking for a national policy (e.g. Baumgaertner and Rainey, 2020; Biesecker, 2020; Pearce, 2020; Ali, 2020; Slevin, 2020; Baumgaertner, 2020). It is a massive national political failure unsurpassed in US history since the civil war. And it is entirely Trump's fault (Frum, 2020).

In the US much of the criticism of the national approach to the pandemic has been focused on the president and his familial/loyalist model of governance and hostility to the government professionals he often refers to disdainfully as the "deep state" (e.g. Baker, 2020a; Cancryn and Diamond, 2020). This reflects the way in which he was elected to the presidency by campaigning as a pluto-populist, a putative "outsider" even though a self-claimed wealthy man, who appealed largely to an older white constituency anxious about their future as the defining "people" of the United States. The federal government was thus seen as an enemy because of its history of favoring affirmative action and other policies that were seen, if often falsely, as being favorable to despised minorities and to positions on cultural questions such as abortion and the roles of women that were corrosive of traditionally dominant social values (Agnew and Shin 2019).

Many of Trump's critics, and even some of his supporters, examine him largely in terms of his narcissistic personality and his career as a minor celebrity who played a businessman on television. Many of his fans love him because he hates the same people they do: experts, multiculturalists, immigrants, the Hollywood "elite", and African Americans, in no particular order. The critics accurately portray his partiality to lying and exaggeration as well as infinite capacity to rewrite the history of what he has said and done from his phone call to the Ukrainian President that led to his impeachment to his claim to have stopped all direct flights from China early in the coronavirus pandemic when he actually had not (e.g. Baker, 2020a; Eder *et al.*, 2020). Some psychiatrists diagnose his sociopathy and inability to show empathy as evidence for more than just a narcissistic personality disorder such as vascular dementia or senility (e.g. Gersen, 2017).

But Trump has been something of a political star in managing to conquer a political party that initially seemed partly allergic to his appeal, on economic issues such as trade barriers, and in consistently receiving support in opinion polls from around 40 percent or so of those polled. Even in the face of a dreadful record of mismanaging the early warnings of the coronavi-

rus pandemic, Trump still retained significant popular support (Gabriel and Lerer, 2020). His reservoir of support among Republican Party voters is based on a "fealty, a visceral and emotional attachment" that is still triggered by his open displays of nativism and attachment to a nostalgic vision of an America that had been "lost" (quoted in Waldmeir, 2020). Indeed, in parts of rural/small town America, his supporters are already prepared to blame their globalist co-nationals who travel for the virus coming into their America (Kilgore, 2020). That he rhetorically has continued by and large to demonize his political opponents and rewrite his own history in relation to the pandemic shows how much he has not changed operationally even as the challenges he faces are no longer those of his own invention, like the Ukraine imbroglio that led to his impeachment, but something that would test even the best of leaders (e.g. Baker, 2020b; Bump, 2020; Parker and Rucker, 2020). Even in the face of the most significant challenge facing a US president in a generation he has remained focused on his re-election in November 2020 rather than dealing with the crisis at hand. Trump's abject performance in a prime-time speech about the pandemic on 11 March 2020 as he struck a "starkly militaristic and nationalistic tone" while the country was being radically upended by what he termed a "foreign virus," as if it were not already abroad in the land, was widely panned by critics (Glasser, 2020). But it probably resonated positively with those he wishes to mobilize for November. They know that foreigners are always to blame. As a toxic TV personality rather than a national leader, Trump often behaves more like a Mafia boss than a president and his crew of incompetent managers in a government he has gutted of much expertise, not least in dealing with the pandemic, is simply not up to the job (e.g. Abutaleb *et al.*, 2020; Harris, 2020; O'Toole, 2020).

What is missing from much of this analysis, notwithstanding its overall accuracy in relation to daily events, is attention to the broader context of the Trump Administration and the features of contemporary US politics that Trump both represents and exploits. Among these one might include the polarization between the two dominant political parties and their failure to perform the traditional functions that they once served in making the federal government work (e.g. Popkin, 2020), the limits of the populism that Trump campaigned on in 2016 when it comes to designing and enacting policies as opposed to engaging in attacks on adversaries and enflaming fears of one sort or another (Agnew and Shin, 2019), and the ambiguities of a federal governmental system that gives only a coordinating role to federal agencies in managing emergencies such as that represented by the current pandemic with many of the real powers in the hands of state and local governments (Agnew, 2011; Gostin and Wetter, 2020; Kreitner, 2020).

In my view, these all are playing a role in the problems that the US is facing in dealing with the pandemic. But a more synthetic structural or institutional perspective is possible. This would emphasize the contradictions central to the type of governance that Trump has tried to put in place since his election in 2016 and that also involve a trend in US politics since the 1980s. The contradictions reflect the very terms on which he was elected. These are of a distinctly spatial character: on the one hand, there is the "people" or nation posed in

opposition to the “global” or, more specifically “the globalists,” because this is about vague “forces” and the “cabals” that animate them in a conventional far-right conspiracy *modus operandi*, and, on the other hand, there is a deep disdain for government in general and the federal government in particular which derives from the confluence of two strands of American ideology, that of the neoliberal “magic of the marketplace” against the sclerotic “state” as such, and the longstanding historical antipathy of many US southern whites and evangelical Protestants, major Trump constituencies, towards the federal government as an agent of racial equality/civil rights and secular /scientific values, respectively (e.g. Maxwell and Shields, 2019; Stewart, 2020). At the same time as aspiring to wall off the US from the rest of the world (“America First” is Trump’s slogan borrowed from the isolationist Lindbergh campaign for the US presidency in 1940), the Trump administration is also beholden to libertarian and reactionary constituencies (equally anti-federalist, as we shall see) distributed differentially across the country, concentrated heavily in the rural/small town southern and western states, whose interests and identities are more domestically oriented than are those in the more globally-oriented Northeast and on the West Coast (Agnew and Shin, 2019).

3. *The Global Meets the National/Popular*

Trump campaigned in 2016, unlike previous Republican candidates for the presidency, on an openly populist platform. His central claim, emblazoned on the baseball hats of his supporters, was “To Make America Great Again.” Following on a two-term first-time African-American President, whom Trump had personally insulted and run down from before the 2008 election including being the primary source of the charge that Obama was an illegitimate president because he had not been born in the US, this slogan was not hard to decode. Indeed, since his election much of what Trump has done has been to undo what Obama had done with respect of social, healthcare and environmental regulation. Apart from that, Trump has followed recent Republican orthodoxy on slashing the federal income tax on high-payers and appointing ultra-conservative judges to the federal courts. In the election campaign, however, more than these initiatives, Trump emphasized “toughness” in “bringing back” jobs in manufacturing that had somehow been stolen by “China” (not a word about the role of US multinational businesses in this) and building a wall with Mexico (that Mexico would pay for) to keep out the “illegals” that he spent much energy on the campaign trail decrying for their criminality and threat to the racial composition of the country. The entire thrust of Trump’s public persona has been to present himself as a national savior with a very clear sense that those he desires to see exalted after the Obama years is the largely elderly white demographic that he appealed to support him in 2016. Since arriving in office he has made no attempt to portray himself as a president of the entire country *only* of those who display loyalty to him.

Key to the entire framing that brought Trump to the White House has been the discursive opposition between globalism (and globalists) on the one hand and nationalists favoring the people and its national state on the other.

The fusion of an idealized people with the national state is by no means alien to American political development (Peel, 2017). This framing was the one suggested by Trump's advisor Steve Bannon in which rather than pitching himself as the agent of Wall Street and as a business-as-usual Republican, the only way Trump could win in 2016 was in bringing into national electoral politics people alienated from both of the dominant parties by the lackluster performance of the US domestic manufacturing sector and slumping median household incomes since the 1990s. In turn, the only way to do this was to criticize the liberal global order and talk about re-establishing a territorial sovereignty over borders and the economy that had been lost with the latest round of globalization since the 1980s. Imposing tariffs and opposing international trade agreements were the main strategies used to pursue these goals, even as the tax cuts widened the federal government fiscal deficit that could only be financed by foreign sales of US treasury bonds. The Republican obsession with the federal deficit simply disappeared overnight.

At the same time, of course, Trump was very clearly himself a globalizer with his foreign investments in hotels and golf courses. His cover on this was to paint himself as an American everyman down to how he spoke and what he ate. This is a typical move on the part of right-wing populists. His business "successes" therefore (notwithstanding a long history of bankruptcies and questionable loans) could be viewed as evidence of his managerial intelligence even as he had to overcome the disability of being just another everyman. As a neo-patrimonial figure dispensing favors to his subjects/people, Trump would reward his supporters through punishing foreign interests and by channeling federal resources and tax-favored capitalist investment to their benighted communities (Riley, 2017). This self-presentation met with enormous success among a significant portion of the electorate concentrated largely in southern and western states but with enough strength in what turned out to be the crucial states (given the indirect nature of US presidential elections through the Electoral College) of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin to give him a victory even as he failed to achieve a majority of the national vote. As a caveat, we should note that both he and his opponent, Hillary Clinton, had the largest negative approval ratings of any presidential candidates since polls had asked the question (Agnew and Shin, 2019).

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown how much Trump's political calculus is still invested in the populist approach to governance. Even as the pandemic crisis was blazingly obvious to most observers and Trump himself finally recognized this in mid-March 2020, he was still engaged in pushing back Obama-era environmental regulations, deporting asylum seekers along the US-Mexico border, and appointing ultra-conservative judges (Olorunnipa, 2020). He has also consistently attempted to compensate for his own lack of focus and preparedness by labeling the disease in classic xenophobic fashion as "Chinese." Blaming the pandemic on a foreign source, even associating it with his own efforts at building a "beautiful wall" with Mexico, substituted for swift administrative action to counter the pandemic's effects once it was spreading inside the United States. Given that the metaphor of infectious disease as a foreign invasion is par for the course among populist demagogues

this is not surprising. Simultaneously, Trump has also exhibited a complete disinterest in collaborating with other countries, including longtime allies, in addressing the pandemic. This would be to resurrect the dreadful global international order that he has consistently decried. He attacked the WHO as if it were to blame for his own months long passivity. Repeatedly, Trump also has returned to the idea that the pandemic was the product of travelers, particularly foreign ones, rather than that once present it is tracing and isolating people (as in “community spread”) who test positive that should take center stage rather than restricting international travel. Finally, in his daily press conferences Trump has found a substitute for the frequent rallies that characterized both his 2016 campaign and his period in office where he rambles on incoherently, contradicts the public health experts, peddles his own doubtful cures like a snake-oil salesman, and instead of showing any grasp of the managerial issues facing his government, verbally assaults the media representatives present and dispenses advice that is the opposite of that he has given the day before (e.g. Wright and Campbell, 2020; Hernandez and Miroff, 2020; Shear, 2020; Rucker and Costa, 2020; Mergerian, 2020; Tyler, 2020; Lipton *et al.*, 2020).

4. *The Degrading of the Federal Government*

While representing “his” people, presumably a national constituency at least in theory, Trump has also been heir to a set of ideological positions that were to a considerable extent contradictory to his national-populist commitment. These were apparent in his 2016 campaign but have become glaringly obvious in the years in office. Certainly, hostility to professional expertise and science are often fundamental components of right-wing populism (e.g. Gerson, 2020). But in the contemporary United States they are frequently connected popularly to government. President Ronald Reagan famously announced in his inaugural address as President of the United States that “Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem.” Reagan did not so much have professional expertise in mind. But he certainly wished to trim and limit the role of the federal government. He opened the door to doubts about the very idea of the “public interest” and disinterested pursuit of objective knowledge. The very term Federalist was redefined to mean the exact opposite of what it meant to the writers of the US Constitution (e.g. Agnew, 2005, pp. 102-18; Ides 2019; Gilbertson, 2018; Lynch, 1999; Edling, 2003). Thus the right-wing Federalist Society is in fact largely anti-federalist in orientation, belittling the roles of the federal government that Madison and Hamilton had championed (see, e.g., Ketcham, 1986). Even left-wing critics of the current federal system often confuse federalist with anti-federalist positions (e.g. Kreitner, 2020). Trump has picked up on the truly anti-federalist viewpoint in his attacks on the purpose and expertise of the federal government tout court and in relation to the experts in government agencies such as the EPA, the Department of the Interior, the State Department, the FBI and the Department of Justice, and the Department of Defense. Shrinking the role of the federal government thus fulfilled the view that markets were always better

than government and that there is no such thing as the public interest (e.g. Frank, 2008; Brown, 2019).

The Reagan years marked the beginning of what has been called the neoliberal assault on the role of the federal government in managing the US economy and providing for the expansion and protection of fundamental civil rights. From the neoliberal perspective, the best government is that which does least except insofar as it favors privatized solutions and capitalist interests over public institutions. It was an organized reaction against the so-called liberal-Keynesian view that governments should use fiscal policy, government spending and tax increases, to stimulate demand during economic downturns. In its place neo-liberalism variously encouraged monetary as opposed to fiscal policy and tax cuts, particularly on the wealthy and business, as supply-side stimulus. It also preferred private to public provision even of goods, such as healthcare, that most people might reasonably regard as better made available on a public basis. Trump has certainly governed in this neoliberal vein. Even in the face of a disastrous response both private and federal to the Covid-19 pandemic the old magical thinking dies hard to the extent that its ideologues see the pandemic perversely as vindicating increased pollution as signaling economic growth and healthcare as definitively not a public good (e.g. Kessler, 2020). Reflecting the hegemonic calculus behind this tortuous logic, Trump's neo-patrimonial promises referred to previously as important to his 2016 campaign for President have been largely forgotten. The promised investments in national infrastructure and in replanting manufacturing industry have come to nothing. His main achievements in office have been a giant income tax cut for the wealthy and business in 2017 and the appointment of numerous ultra-conservative judges to the federal courts. Period.

At the same time, Trump has inherited and cultivated the anti-federalist vote that came out of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s and led to the Republican strategy since Richard Nixon of hunting for white voters in the US South (Maxwell and Shields, 2019). From this viewpoint, the federal government represents both the hated "Union" that won the civil war and the imposition on the South of norms and regulations that do not fit their "heritage." This heritage, as Maxwell and Shields (2019) brilliantly deconstruct, consists of an amalgam of white racism, patriarchy, and religious zealotry used to justify the other two. In this construction, the "Deep State" to which Trump frequently refers, typically associated with right-wing conspiracy theories, is not the bugaboo that libertarians might associate with limiting access to certain calibers of guns or imposing vaccinations, although these can be present too, but more the sense of a national-level government that imposes rules such as affirmative action, restricts local law enforcement, and insists on the basic equality of all citizens in the eyes of the law. With more than a nod to a confederate imaginary of the United States, Reagan in his day often used the locution "these" United States to emphasize the sovereignty of the states against that of the federal government. Trump's recourse to the rhetoric of culture war over abortion, gay rights, immigrant undermining of American "culture" and so on all are designed to appeal to a constituency that sees the federal government (particularly the judiciary) as useful only in the negative

sense of restricting its enforcement powers in the jurisdictions where they live rather in terms of an affirmative role in providing goods and services on an equal basis nationwide.

Since arriving in office even as he has continued with his populist-nationalist rhetoric, Trump has systematically degraded the functioning of the US federal government. Almost every other government department has either no or acting leadership. Many of the political appointees running their agencies are utterly incompetent for the charges they have received. Regulations and rules have been rolled back across the board from education to transportation and healthcare. Crucially in the present context, the pandemic warning system was dismantled as a leftover from Obama, the CDC, the main federal government agency charged with preparing for and managing disease outbreaks, had its budget gutted, and Trump has left the states and their governors to fend for themselves without much of any real federal policy or plan to speak of (Haffajee and Mello, 2020; Cortez *et al.*, 2020). Trump's media cheerleaders at *Fox News* and on the editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal* have focused on either dismissing the seriousness of the pandemic until Trump's own turn-about in mid-March or speculate on how many deaths could be sanctioned in order to get the stock market moving upwards again as the economy kicks back into gear (e.g. Freeman, 2020a; Freeman, 2020b). At the same time, they ran down the publically organized healthcare systems of other countries as inferior to that of the United States on totally ideological rather than empirical grounds (e.g. WSJ, 2020). Trump is only a symptom, then, of a profoundly anti-federalist system that he has simply re-empowered.

5. *The Trump Paradox*

It could have been different. As the conservative writer Andrew Sullivan (2020) has said, Trump could have gone full national-populist from the get-go in January 2020 and “adopted a wartime presidential posture and announced an emergency response to the threat from China.” If the “people” and the “national state” are mutually reinforcing as Trump's populism and its obsession with walls bordering off the entire country would suggest, then that is what one might expect. But he did not. Sullivan puts it down to his “clinical narcissism.” Trump's improvising approach does reflect his life experience as an opportunistic real-estate huckster and reality-TV celebrity with minimal empathy for other people. But Trump's personal role in the Covid-19 crisis has been grossly overstated. He has made matters worse, for sure. But he also and more fundamentally represents an ideology of governing and a set of political practices about the very role of the federal government in the United States that go with it that make it more or less impossible for there to be a rational *national-level* response from any President elected on the grounds he was and in the face of demonstrable national fragmentation over the proper role of the federal government even in the face of a healthcare-economic crisis of the proportion we are now facing. Trump engaged in what could be called a “Darwinian” approach to federalism in which the states compete with one another for resources and direct their own policies and the federal government avoids much

of a managerial role except as a weak backstop, and from Trump's perspective the most significant, avoid blame or responsibility (Cook and Diamond, 2020). Even after Trump had changed tack and recognized that a crisis had already broken, many of his most avid political supporters and the governors of states most closely attached to his populism, key in his mind to his re-election in November 2020, were still dismissive and had no plans for managing the pandemic (Zeleny, 2020). This was true as he announced that only he could "open up" the country as the pandemic passed, not the governors, more especially the effective ones in New York, California, Washington, Maryland, and Ohio, who had done something instead of just stalling and hand waving as he had (LA Times, 2020). He could claim rhetorically that he was in charge even as nothing he had *done* had made an ounce worth's of difference to managing the pandemic. Meanwhile his governor allies in states where the virus arrived somewhat later followed the populist logic that the globalist metropolises were the places most vulnerable to the pandemic because of their openness to the world. This turned out to be bad bet, to say the least. Once on the loose, the virus was particularly deadly and hospital resources are particularly short for the well above-national average elderly and health-challenged populations of their states (Keating and Karklis, 2020; Florida, 2020; Brittain *et al.*, 2020).

As Donald Kettl (2020, 204) says in his brilliant book on the sorry state of contemporary US governance: "From immigration to health care, state and local governments are where policy problems and proposals meet reality. However, state and local governments are increasingly where federal policy-makers dump big issues that they cannot or choose not to resolve. The decline of federalism is thus tightly bound to the rise of reality-TV politics: it's attractive for federal officials to solve problems by wrapping them in slogans, and to duck the details by passing them along to the states." Given the hugely varying capacities of the states to address different problems should they choose to do so we are left with the impasse over whether governmentally the United States is actually one country at all. The massive federal-level mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic in the US suggests that this is much more than academic hand waving.

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Morire di ideologia: il paradosso spaziale del "populismo" di Trump ai tempi del Covid-19

Il governo federale americano ha a lungo respinto la pandemia come una bufala o come sopravvalutata per diversi mesi all'inizio del 2020 e quindi ha mostrato un'incredibile incompetenza nel rispondere alla diffusione della malattia. Ciò è stato principalmente attribuito agli errori del presidente Trump. In realtà, anche se nazionalista confesso, il presidente disponeva di un governo federale degradato che non era in grado di mobilitare perché il suo populismo si basa su principi fondamentalmente anti-federalisti.

Mourir d'idéologie: le paradoxe spatial du «populisme» de Trump à l'époque de Covid-19

Le gouvernement fédéral américain a longtemps rejeté la pandémie comme un canular ou comme exagérée pendant plusieurs mois au début de 2020, puis a fait preuve d'une incroyable incompetence à répondre à la propagation de la maladie. Cela a été principalement imputé aux erreurs du président Trump. En fait, même s'il est un nationaliste avoué, il disposait d'un gouvernement fédéral dégradé qu'il était incapable de mobiliser parce que son populisme repose sur des principes fondamentalement anti-fédéralistes.

