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Michael Goodhart, Jeanne Morefield

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Michael Goodhart and Jeanne Morefield

Well before the US presidential election in November, liberal commentators on both foreign and domestic policy took every opportunity to point out just how disastrous a Trump presidency would be for American values and for the stability of the global economy and the international order. This was the explicit message of the Clinton campaign and of those who hailed her as the lesser of two evils;¹ it was also the cry of those Republicans who openly denounced not only Trump's behavior but also some of his policy proposals.² At the same time, many in the foreign policy establishment intoned gravely that Trump was "beyond repair" and that his election would signal "a de facto withdrawal from the liberal world order."³ In Robert Kagan's words, if elected, Trump's "ultimately self-destructive tendencies would play out on the biggest stage in the world, with consequences at home and abroad that one can barely begin to imagine."⁴ In short, for liberals on both sides of the partisan divide, the choice was clear: "Clinton or barbarism."⁵

As this brief introduction indicates, we define the term "liberal" capaciously to comprise adherents of a worldview that emphasizes liberty, individualism, formal equality, and the rule of law. Politically, this philosophy entails a commitment to sovereign autonomy and constitutional government, typically representative democracy. Economically, it includes a commitment to capitalism (which today means to neoliberal economic orthodoxies), individual responsibility, and unrestricted property rights. On the foreign policy front, liberals believe in a version of informal imperialism that understands America as the "indispensable nation" whose military hegemony is necessary for the maintenance of international peace, the protection of human rights, the stability of financial markets, and the smooth functioning of the world's vastly integrated system of trade relationships.⁶ Despite internal variation, liberalism in this sense is a doctrine shared by establishment Democrats and Republicans alike, by mainstream parties throughout Europe, North America, and the Antipodes, and by much of the professional commentariat.

This article focuses primarily on American liberalism and on its characteristic practices of denial and deflection, practices which we maintain have fertilized the soil in which Trumpism has taken root.

We are well aware that some readers will criticize us for lumping Democrats and Republicans together in our analysis, thereby ignoring real and important differences between them – differences that have been animated (and called into question) during Trump’s first weeks in office. Yet we believe that the urgency of the current situation makes it vital to engage in an honest and uncompromising critique of liberalism and its complicity in creating that situation. No adequate critique of the present moment, and no effective political response to it, can ignore the proclivity of a self-satisfied and unreflective liberalism to coopt and undermine resistance by ignoring its own failures and re-asserting itself as the only reasonable and viable alternative to Trumpism. Our point is that critique of liberalism and opposition to Trump go hand in glove.

In a similar vein, Edward Said once insisted that engaging in historical and discursive reflection on ideological and cultural phenomena like Orientalism is not meant to vitiate the imperative to confront the profound material violence and injustice of imperialism’s legacy. The idea, he argued, was “not to separate one struggle from another,” but rather “to connect” these debates over history and social meaning to the reality of political struggle. This article is written in a such a spirit of connection. We maintain that constructing the kind of ongoing, heterogeneous solidarity necessary to counter the unrepentant white nationalism and proto-fascism – evident in the President’s ugly “wall politics,” his “Muslim Ban,” and his pointed attacks on the media and on the separation of powers – *requires* a vigorous critique of liberal deflection in the past and in the present, and *requires* that we marry this critique to effective resistance. This, we argue, is the essence of a politics of reflection.



Following Trump’s Electoral College triumph, liberal hand-wringing intensified, with much of the punditry struggling to make sense of an outcome it had long regarded as unthinkable. We are deeply worried by the political implications of one emerging liberal narrative that explains the election results by interpolating Trumpism into a broader analysis of anti-establishment sentiment at home and abroad. There are three crucial moves in this interpolation. In the first move, commentators lump Trumpism together with Brexit, the National Front, *Alternative für Deutschland*, and other right movements, on the one hand, and with Podemos, Syriza, the Sanders movement and similar left mobilizations on the other.⁷ They then refer to this concoction as an undifferentiated “populism” that is condemned *en masse* and by association as fascistic.⁸ In a variation on this theme, some pundits

acknowledge the differences between left and right movements but regard both as extremist, achieving the same lumping effect.⁹ This ploy had already been used in the primary season, when supporters of Trump and Sanders were wrongly conflated and dismissed as a bunch of angry white men who were portrayed as either ignorant, working class thugs or elitist mansplainers – or sometimes both at once.¹⁰

In the second move, pundits equate “liberalism” with peace, stability, toleration, human rights, free trade, prosperity, and the rule of law – a bundle of “Western values” that now, ironically, finds its last, best hope in Angela Merkel and a new *Pax Germania*.¹¹ Always and at the same time, liberalism-as-Western-values in this context serves as a convenient shorthand for a deeper set of political assumptions and policy prescriptions that are, in their essence, contradictory, but whose truth and coherence are rarely questioned. Specifically, we have in mind the contemporary liberal consensus on domestic policy (austerity + liberal multiculturalism), foreign policy (*Pax Americana* + neocolonialism / informal imperialism), economics (neoliberal globalization), and mythology (deregulation=freedom, war/drone strikes=peace, inequality=liberty and opportunity, etc.). The move to elide these contradictions was on full display during the election when many on the American “left” hailed Clinton as an avatar of progressivism, which required ignoring or just lying about her ardent activism on behalf of neoliberalism and American militarism (not to mention her actual record on race and women’s issues) over the past three decades. In this sense, Clinton was the complete embodiment and expression of the contradictory logic of the system itself.

In the final move, liberal pundits position the undifferentiated “populist extremism” concocted in the first move as a kind of poison to the body politic, an existential threat to the “all-good-things” liberalism concocted in the second move, thereby dividing the world into us and them, the reasonable and the unhinged, the civilized and the barbarians.¹² This analysis allows the American liberal establishment to have its cake and eat it *twice* by depicting both Trump *and* Sanders and Jill Stein supporters as equally ignorant of, or indifferent to, both “political realities” and to the specter of fascism. Both groups somehow become equivalently complicit in Trump’s victory and responsible for its consequences.¹³

Together, this sequence of moves leads to the seemingly logical conclusion that the primary political and critical task in an era of ascendant populism is to expose and resist the extremism of Donald Trump in the name of a liberalism conveniently sheared of all connections to austerity and militarism. In this view, we should understand the success of Trump and Brexit as symptomatic of the “eclipse of liberal values across the West” and reject hard-hitting critiques of the liberal establishment as foolish recrimination.¹⁴ This line of argument proves

congenial to liberals both because it allows them to tap into the genuine and appropriate fears that many people share about the new Administration but also because it provides a distraction from liberalism itself. By pointing to the peril of Trump/populism/fascism, liberals hope to deflect attention away from liberalism itself and from the concrete ways in which the failures and contradictions of the liberal world order (American empire, and neoliberal economic globalization) are implicated in the rise of the very populist movements they condemn.

The starkness of this deflection is perfectly captured in the Democratic Party's decision after the election to devote significant energy and resources not to determining why so many traditionally Democratic voters stayed home or defected in this last election but, rather, to investigating Russia's alleged cyberattacks on the US elections.¹⁵ Linking Trump with Russia and Putin—even in a manner that suggests he might be compromised by the lurid intelligence of the secret “dossier”—further reinforces the “us versus them” narrative and feeds the notion that the spectacular failure of establishment candidates of both parties was some kind of conspiracy rather than an indictment of liberalism itself. In a moment of vivid contrast, just as the Democratic Party was kitting out its “war room” dedicated to the Russian menace, Bernie Sanders stood alone on the floor of the Senate, waving posters of Donald Trump's tweets and calling on him to honor his pre-election promises not to cut Social Security.¹⁶

However disappointing, it is hardly surprising that contemporary liberal pundits, intellectuals, and activists—in the mainstream political parties, the Davos set, and the global policy establishment—would work so hard to tar leftist and progressive movements with the same brush as Trumpism and then double-down on a deflection, chicken-little strategy that blames Sanders, Jill Stein, or Russia for Trump's victory while simultaneously insisting that our political options are limited to liberalism or barbarism. Deflection is the bread and butter, the favored stratagem, of liberals who insist that “there is no alternative” (TINA) to the contemporary neoliberal economic orthodoxy. TINA is a familiar trope among neoliberal propagandists, think-tankers, and others who have labored over the past forty years to naturalize unfettered markets and free-flowing capital, portraying neoliberal economic globalization as an ineluctable force to which resistance would be futile as well as irrational.¹⁷ Confidently asserting that “there is no alternative” from the outset deflects attention away from even the possibility that there could be.

Of course, there *are* always alternatives, but the success of TINA depends upon depicting them as so unappealing, so dangerous, so irrational that they really don't represent viable or even plausible options. One familiar deflection device on which liberals rely to dismiss all alternatives as unthinkable is the invocation of crisis. For neoliberal-

als, each successive economic crisis becomes the pretext for the imposition of (further) neoliberal reform; structural adjustment and austerity are the bitter medicines administered to every patient, regardless of the symptoms and of the patient's general health and own wishes. The peerless neoliberal apologist Thomas Friedman, for instance, (in) famously contrasted the "Lexus and the olive tree" in insisting that the only alternative to embracing neoliberal economic orthodoxy – symbolized by a luxury item few can afford – is a kind of atavistic reversion to a barren, pre-modern form of existence symbolized by subsistence agriculture in the Middle East.¹⁸

This is not to deny differences in the way that mainstream parties position themselves with respect to neoliberalism. Third Way advocates in erstwhile leftist parties in Europe and within the Democratic party in the US (think Blair, Schroeder, Clinton) frame the lack of options differently than do either *laissez-faire* or libertarian conservatives. While the latter may celebrate the rational or Galtian virtues of neoliberalism and embrace the "discipline" meted out by the market, the former often frame their policies as elixirs to soothe the pain of what must, however regrettably, be done.¹⁹ Fraser astutely calls this "progressive neoliberalism," a destructive economic agenda sugar-coated with cosmopolitanism and diversity.²⁰ Liberals and libertarian conservatives converge, however, in dismissing any genuine alternatives as either pie-in-the-sky utopianism (the Clinton critique of Sanders) or as so grotesquely violative of liberty and reason that they would inevitably set us off on the road to serfdom (think of the sneering dismissals of Medicare for all and the putative "oppression" attributed to the Affordable Care Act).

While TINA and the specter of crisis have helped neoliberals to tighten their stranglehold on mainstream economic discourse, neither is a neoliberal invention. There is a long and ignoble tradition of deflection in the realm of British and American foreign policy in which liberal supporters of empire deny or denigrate any and all alternatives to the military, political, and economic hegemony of their states. They do so to rationalize and maintain their empire and deflect attention from the fundamental disconnect between the fact that they rule in the name of equality, democracy, and sovereign autonomy by denying equality, democracy, and sovereign autonomy to much of the world. For instance, over the years, American liberals have had to work extraordinarily hard to deflect attention away from the fact that the post-war *Pax Americana* they celebrate has been grounded on the systematic denial of democratic freedom to millions of people throughout the world, from Syria (the site of the first CIA backed coup in 1949), to the Congo, Iran, Vietnam, Honduras, Greece, Chile, Guatemala, Haiti, and beyond. Throughout the long twentieth-century, positioning the "indispensable" imperial nation – first Britain, then America – as both

necessary for international order and always perched on the brink of a disaster that occludes all other options, has provided them with one particularly effective language for doing this.²¹

That the Democratic party would blame Russian hacking for its failure at the polls is hardly surprising in this regard. Doing so deflects attention away from the concrete policy failures created by a rigid adherence to neoliberal economic policies and the related burdens of imperial maintenance. It also feeds the narrative that there are no viable alternatives by restoring Russia to its historic role as bogeyman of American liberalism. Thus, the failure of liberalism in the person and policies of Clinton becomes a crisis of the liberal system and Western values more broadly. Democrats restage this drama every four years: “if you allow Republicans to win, imagine the crisis we’ll face.” In 2016, we were treated to a minor plot twist, as the argument against Trump shifted from the familiar “lesser of two evils” monologue to one urging voters to embrace “the devil you know.”²² After a poor box office showing at the election, the party is already reworking its well-worn script, with Tom Perez newly cast in the lead role at the DNC.

The specter of crisis—of global financial meltdown caused by a refusal to take the tough medicine of austerity, or by the rise of a new imperial rival (whether it be China, Russia, or the undifferentiated threats issuing from “global terrorist networks”)—works rhetorically for liberals as a proactive form of deflection. It lets them push back against alternatives to liberal empire and neoliberal economics well in advance of any actual international problems.²³ In a fascinating example of this phenomenon, many commentators have begun to openly invoke anticipated Russian hacking in upcoming European elections in order to proactively explain increasingly probable electoral losses by mainstream parties such as Merkel’s Christian Democrats.²⁴

This deflective discourse of crisis has become deeply familiar and thoroughly instantiated within liberalism, narrowing the aperture of our political vision so much that it becomes nearly impossible to see anything on the political horizon apart from liberal militarism and neoliberal austerity. Through this tunnel vision, all challenges to the liberal order appear alike, obscuring the vital distinction between the real and terrifying dangers posed by the genuinely fascistic or proto-fascistic forces of right populism represented by Trump, Putin, and Le Pen, on the one hand, and supposed “threats” posed by critics of military interventionism, unprecedented state surveillance, structural racism and police brutality, mass incarceration and deportation, environmental degradation and depredation, and the metastasizing inequalities of wealth, income, and life chances, on the other.

At the same time, this lumping of all populisms into an amorphous and terrifying blob prevents us from seeing genuine commonalities among them, commonalities stemming from the contradictions

of liberalism itself. Thus, the liberal plea to focus all of our critical and political energies on the crisis of Trump and the dangers of populism-as-fascism (wrapped in a Russian blanket) conveniently erases or occludes the myriad ways in which liberalism actually engenders the very popular refusals to its own logic that animate populism on the left and on the right through its oppressions, exploitations, and exclusions. To take just one example, liberals in America, on both sides of the establishment partisan “divide,” are doubling down on their efforts to tar the “white working class” with racism, misogyny, and xenophobia, to paint Trump voters as alienated by the “political correctness” and by the party politics of a liberal cultural elite out of touch with mainstream values. Trump’s victory, in this story, represents the revenge of the “deplorables.”

Without questioning for a moment that many Trump voters were surely motivated by nativism, racial animus, or cultural atavism, we worry that this narrative—applied broadly as an explanation for Trump (or for Brexit, or ...)—is being used to deflect attention away from the critical numbers of Democratic voters who stayed home rather than vote for Trump or Clinton, numbers that far exceed those who supported Stein’s third-party candidacy.²⁵ Likewise, such a narrative annihilates the possibility of imagining that some Trump voters were made especially susceptible to the appeals of xenophobia not merely because they are inherently reactionary human beings but because of the real economic concerns of continued un- or under-employment,²⁶ stagnant or declining wages, and increased precariousness in an economy where the rich devour an even greater share of the pie.²⁷ Again, in making this argument, we are *not* legitimating the various expressions of white nationalist hate we see on the right as a valid or even rational response to the failures of liberalism. Our point is different and more ominous: that in the absence of sensible explanations of, and rational solutions to, the real economic difficulties they face, many people will opt for whatever explanations and solutions are on offer. As a late 19th or early 20th century German Social Democrat is said to have remarked, “anti-Semitism is the socialism of fools.”²⁸ Trumpism may be the new “socialism of fools,” but it can function as such only because liberal deflection makes the genuine article impossible, literally unthinkable: there is no alternative.

In addition to stoking the fears of chaos and crisis, liberal apologists also rely on outright lies to deflect attention away from the realities of neoliberal economic policy and liberal empire. In our view, this makes liberals partly responsible for what many have identified as our worrying entry into a “post-factual” era characterized by rampant distrust of the mainstream media and the rise of fake news—developments they typically blame on the alt-Right, social media platforms, Russian internet trolls, and others. By contrast, we suggest that per-

haps 40 years of liberal promises that “a rising tide will lift all boats” and that American workers will benefit from trade, tax cuts, deregulation, and austerity have been increasingly belied by stagnant wages, growing inequality, and a steady flow of manufacturing jobs overseas. Indeed, liberals themselves know that many of their economic arguments are bogus,²⁹ and their persistence in asking us to believe them amounts to asking us to believe in fiction.

Consider Greece, whose lenders have preached that austerity is the sure and only path back from economic ruin, even as the policies on which they have insisted have resulted in the highest levels of unemployment in the EU, a nearly 7-fold increase in the share of the population living in extreme poverty, and widespread social alienation, with effectively no economic growth and mounting rather than decreasing indebtedness.³⁰ That Greece’s far right nationalist party, Golden Dawn, would be seeing a surge in popularity — explicitly aided and abetted by the inspiration they draw from Trump’s Muslim Ban — is hardly surprising under such circumstances.³¹ Likewise, the trillions of dollars spent — and still being spent — on ceaseless wars and drone strikes (in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen) have been justified as crucial to winning the war on terror. The Iraq war itself was ginned up with fake news about weapons of mass destruction endorsed by both parties, and — as is evident to anyone paying attention — this endless war on terror has done nothing to curb terrorist attacks in liberal states or to decrease terrorist violence in the sacrifice zones it has created. Even the Director of National Intelligence conceded that the war on terror had *increased* the terrorist threat.³²

So, liberal deflection primes the public to distrust the media by asking us to believe in what amounts to fake news. Given the choice between a sanctimonious avatar of the establishment (who dutifully repeats the same lines about neoliberal prosperity and imperial security) and an unctuous grifter who says that it’s all lies, that the game is rigged, that he’s going to drain the swamp, how surprising is it that many people (though far from a majority) might vote for that grifter, either out of desperation or to send a signal that they aren’t buying the lies any longer? If there’s no horse in the race willing to take you where you want to go, how irrational is it to choose an ass instead of a unicorn?

For all of these reasons, any successful resistance to Trumpism and to right-wing populism more generally must, in our view, include not only a principled opposition to the racist, xenophobic, misogynistic, authoritarian politics already on display in these first few weeks, but also a vigorous critique of the practices of liberal deflection that prevent us from understanding the powerful discontent engendered by liberalism itself. We believe it is essential for any alternative political movement or ideology to identify the commonalities that animate both

right and left opposition to liberalism without conflating the two; that is, to reflect on their profound political and ideological differences while engaging the common origins of key elements of that opposition in frustration and disgust with the failures of liberalism itself.

This is especially important because liberal deflection makes it difficult to see that while Trump's presidency poses a real and serious threat to the well-being of many vulnerable people, it does not actually pose much of a danger either to neoliberal capitalism or to American empire (though it does promise changes in the way both are narrated and conducted). Hype about trade notwithstanding, the parade of inexperienced billionaires that Trump has marched forward to fill key positions in his cabinet and administration makes clear his desire to advance the neoliberal economic and political agenda that facilitates upward redistribution of wealth, cuts regulation, promotes mass incarceration, enables the exploitation of migrant and low-wage labor, strengthens capital politically and financially, suppresses unions, divides the working class by race to fend off a potential "poor people's movement," and delegitimizes what George Monbiot aptly called "the self-hating state."³³ One indication that Trump's policies would largely represent business as usual is that the Wall Street wags who once voiced fears of economic instability under a Trump Administration quickly began talking out of the other sides of their mouths when stocks surged after the election, while finance capitalists salivated over what is clearly Trump's own signature brand of deregulation on steroids.³⁴

Similarly, Trump has no fundamental interest in wrecking American empire or relinquishing American predominance in the liberal global order. He has explicitly expressed his desire to boost the military spending of a state that already has 800 bases in over 80 countries—more, according to David Vine, than "any other people, nation, or empire in history"³⁵—and that spends more on its war-making capabilities than the next eight highest spenders *combined*.³⁶ As with Wall Street's change of heart, a sizable number of realist, neoconservative, and liberal foreign policy pundits blithely switched gears after the election to confidently assure us, with former Never-Trumper Max Boot, that Gen. James Mattis was a "terrific choice" for Secretary of Defense and that, in the words of Philip Gordon, Trump's foreign policy "might prove less radical than you think."³⁷ Even as Trump made a show of "firing" much of the top State Department leadership, he was moving to embrace many Obama Administration policies, including chastising (but not punishing) Israel for its illegal plans to build new settlements, demanding that Russia withdraw from Crimea, and threatening Iran with sanctions for ballistic missile tests.³⁸

Our plea for reflection is a plea for scholars, commentators, and citizens to recognize and reject liberalism's insistence that, in this moment

of crisis, we drop everything to focus on the threat of Trump=populism=fascism. Yes, we must absolutely do everything possible to support and stand with those who face immediate danger under the new administration, a danger embodied in the Muslim Ban, the deportation orders, and the ominous rise in hate crimes since the election.³⁹ We have already seen that people are finding powerful new ways to resist and amplify their voices—critically and in the streets—in opposition to the racism and xenophobia legitimized by Trump’s presidency. At the same time, we absolutely must not allow liberal party leaders and pundits to once again weaponize this crisis, to use it as an excuse not to question their policies, rethink their priorities, or revise their assumptions by falling back on the familiar trope-of-last-resort: that the alternative is so much worse. As the 2016 election taught us, that trope is exhausted.

To do this work effectively requires that we—opponents of unreflective liberalism and of Trump—develop a deeper, more nuanced, more energetic, and politically practical critique of liberalism and liberal deflection as *an indispensable part* of the resistance to Trump.⁴⁰ Such a critique is already emerging in the streets, as citizens mobilize in opposition to Trump’s agenda *and* simultaneously to oppose a timid Democratic liberal centrism by demanding that their elected representatives commit themselves to total resistance—rather than conciliation.⁴¹

An incisive critique of liberalism and liberal deflection can also help to free us from the gravitational pull of liberal solipsism. When Michael Ignatieff patiently explains to a Hungarian journalist that “we liberals” need to “wake up” and “pay attention to the people in ways we have not done for a long time,” or when Jeffrey Isaac urges “defenders of liberal and pluralist democracy” to strengthen liberal institutions “so that they can meaningfully address issues of political alienation and social injustice that plague existing liberal democracies,”⁴² they implicitly assume that there are no viable alternatives to liberalism. This liberalism-all-the-way-down approach imagines liberals as always the only grown-ups in the room, the only ones capable of making decisions about what issues to “meaningfully address” and which citizens merit their “attention.” And yet, foundational liberalism cannot provide an adequate basis for a robust critique of its own deficiencies when it has reflexively and adamantly denied *having* any deficiencies—other than the failure to live up to its own values. Notice that for Ignatieff and for Isaac, the problem is to rouse liberalism to be truly itself, to expand rather than to critique its basic presumptions. Liberals’ refusal to acknowledge or even discuss the sordid history of liberal imperialism and the lengthening track-record of neoliberal social devastation means that liberalism cannot possibly come to grips with economic populism, international terrorism, structural racism, or other problems generated by its own core contradictions.

A critique of these core contradictions is emergent in the mass protests against Trump's Presidency. Much of the political energy in these protests—and in the resistance networks and neighborhood action councils that they have catalyzed—has been directed at simultaneously challenging the misogyny, racism, and xenophobia at the core of Trumpism *and* critiquing the feckless liberalism that has enabled it. The Women's March, for instance, was initially conceived as a tightly choreographed advertisement for liberal feminism but evolved into a broadly intersectional movement mainly through the efforts of women of color and their allies who rightly insisted that a liberal denunciation of Trumpism was wholly inadequate both as critique and as politics.⁴³ The difficult but productive negotiations that transformed the March demonstrate how a critique of liberalism strengthens the critique of Trumpism rather than undercutting it while simultaneously contributing to the creation of deeper, broader forms of solidarity.⁴⁴

We are heartened by these developments. At the same time, we want to encourage deeper engagement with, and learning from, *existing* modalities of political praxis that are *already* connecting the dots between liberalism, neoliberalism, and empire in the ways that we are advocating *because they have had to* do so, given their location within what Patricia Hill Collins called the "matrix of domination."⁴⁵ We have in mind political movements that typically emerge at the margins of mainstream politics, whose social positions are constructed by overlapping forms of liberal oppression and whose resistance must therefore speak to liberalism's core contradictions. These movements often draw on what Boaventura de Sousa Santos has referred to as "alternative knowledges" generated by activists committed to exploring possible world visions rendered invisible by liberalism's insistence that it is always the only game in town.⁴⁶ Many of them enact what James Tully refers to as "glocal" practices of democratic citizenship in which members of specific communities articulate their concerns not in terms of "universal institutions and historical processes" but as local calls for justice with simultaneous global implications.⁴⁷

Perhaps no political movement in contemporary America better captures the mix of critique and solidarity that we are calling for than the ongoing protests at Standing Rock. In the overlapping forms of organization and discourse generated by First Nation water protectors and their allies, we see a convergence of the critical, reflective, anti-capitalist, and anti-colonial politics that models the kind of political response to Trump that we envision here. The story has been spun by the media almost purely in terms of environmental activism. But for members of the Lakota Sioux Nation, the representatives of over 300 of the 567 federally recognized tribes and their allies who have gathered at Standing Rock over the last nine months, the struggle to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline is also a struggle against a history of

dispossession of Indian land that precedes the founding of the Republic – dispossession frequently driven then, as now, by the political and economic imperatives of capitalist resource extraction.⁴⁸

The fight to stop the pipeline from transgressing on territory sacred to the Sioux (territory that once belonged to them by treaty right) is at one and the same time a fight to protect the water, to resist further theft, and to rectify historical wrongs. It is thus simultaneously a movement in which struggles over the past, present, and future are inextricably linked. By reflecting upon, rather than deflecting, the history of American continental imperialism, the Standing Rock movement is able to connect that past directly to the contemporary struggles for First Nation rights, for a livable planet, and for alternatives to the rapacious logic of capitalism that again threatens life as we know it. In addition, this modality of reflective politics offers a compelling alternative to liberal universalism, one in which the situatedness of the resistance in the particularity of a distinctive local context vivifies and amplifies the global resonance of that resistance by clarifying points of convergence and divergence with similar struggles elsewhere. (This, we take it, is what Tully and others have in mind in invoking the “glocal.”) Moreover, by reflecting upon the ways in which both past wrongs and present threats reflect centuries of liberal accommodation to empire and capitalism, the Standing Rock movement refuses to be taken in by the claim that what’s needed is merely a liberalism truer to its own values. In doing so it makes solidarity an epistemological resource as well as a political asset: by joining with allies of many stripes and drawing on their experiences of domination, oppression, and exploitation, it reveals the contradictory logic of liberalism in stark terms, making it impossible to deflect dispossession, resource extraction, and corporate collusion with hand-waving about exceptions or deviations. Thus, solidarity both augments the political strength of the allies it unites and foregrounds the productive, forward-looking potential of a politics of acknowledgment and repair.

Consider this contrast: on the one hand, in 2009, the US Congress approved the Native American Apology Resolution, which acknowledged the “violence, maltreatment, and neglect” committed by the federal government against First Nation peoples in the past but offered no concrete political or economic responses to this maltreatment. On the other hand, in December 2016, Standing Rock was the site of a “forgiveness ceremony” aimed at bringing Lakota elders together with Pipeline demonstrators, including a contingent of former members of the US military,⁴⁹ to acknowledge and repair past injustices and to find a new path forward. Whereas the 2009 Resolution served a deflective purpose – checking a box in hopes of moving on without looking back or deeper – the “forgiveness ceremony” consciously looked back and deeper, as a way of promoting reflection about the path forward.

During the ceremony, veterans apologized for the US Army's role in dispossession, violence, and genocide and acknowledged their ongoing connection to an institution that continues to enable those same injustices (often in the name of the same resource extractive capitalism) around the world today. The response of Lakota Elder Chief Leonard Crow Dog to this public expression of regret was to offer forgiveness and then to move immediately and seamlessly to the broader issues at stake, first calling for "world peace," then acknowledging Lakota sovereignty, and finally ending with the observation that "we do not own the land, the land owns us."⁵⁰ Crow Dog's double pivot—from the particular to the global and then back to the local—shows how it is possible to reshape the possibilities of the present by reconfiguring the past. This move transforms the encounter from one between supplicants and confessors to one characterized by parity and reciprocity and made possible by the courage and humility of all parties. Crucially, it does so not by deflecting attention from the past but by engaging it reflectively. The bonds and knowledge created through shared acknowledgment and forgiveness transform the past and the present in ways that foster "alternative knowledges" while reminding us that another world is possible.



We conclude by reiterating our opposition to an emerging liberal narrative that lumps all resistance to liberal common sense into a single undifferentiated populism as a way of deflecting attention from the ways phenomena like Brexit and Trumpism are, in a very real and direct sense, *creations of liberalism*. Deflection impairs our critical capacities in three related ways. It encourages us to treat as singular and acutely dangerous that which is largely continuous with liberalism and to overlook those continuities.⁵¹ It emboldens forces that are hell bent on the most nakedly aggressive, neoliberal forms of austerity to extend their agenda under the cover provided by the distraction created by this populist (and Russian) threat.⁵² Finally, deflection induces a narrowing of our political imagination precisely at a time when alternatives to liberalism are urgently needed.

Instead, we call on everyone sincerely dedicated to opposing Trump in the months and years to come to embrace the potential of the kinds of solidarity politics so evident in the Standing Rock action. In this sense, Standing Rock demonstrates how reflective politics—with its emphasis on historical and contemporary critique as a means of facilitating the acknowledgement, forgiveness, and repair of injustice—can reconfigure knowledge and relations among people in ways that both enrich and strengthen our critical acumen and transform our po-

litical horizons. Standing Rock invites us to reject the politics of TINA, to resist the simplistic logic of “us or the abyss,” and instead to embrace a politics of solidarity modeled on the honesty, reflective humility, and relentless bravery of the most vulnerable among us.

Notes

Notes

1. Robert Davis, “Is Clinton the Lesser of Two Evils?,” *The Hill*, August, 9, 2016. <http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/defense/290865-is-clinton-the-lesser-of-two-evils>.

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