



OUR AMERICA: NOTES ON HISTORICAL COMPARISON IN THE AGE OF TRUMP (AND ERDOĞAN)

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Since the US election, there have been two major debates on the left and in the broader public about the implications of Trump's election and his assumption of the presidency. The first has concerned the relationship between the Trump movement and various potential historically analogous movements, especially fascism. The second has involved trying to understand the reasons for Trump's victory (or Clinton's defeat); this conversation has involved numerous factors, from Russian intervention to voter intimidation, but from the perspective of political strategy the most important dimension of this debate has been the question of what social categories (i.e. race, class, gender, region, etc.) were the most salient in shaping voter preferences.

The following notes—initially drafted between the election and the inauguration and revised in the first weeks after the inauguration—start from the question of what it means to make historical comparisons, and go on to address questions about historical precedent and political mobilization on the left in the new national and global context. Historical comparisons and analogies are worth taking seriously because—for better or worse—they are frequently the foundation for powerful cultural memories that help produce individual and collective identities and because they inevitably play a role in historical understanding and political movement.

My title's allusion to the Turkish situation is meant to suggest the need for all of us to look beyond our own national context and think about what we can learn by taking a broader perspective, even if it means leaving our comfort zone. Ultimately, my call is for cross-border as well as cross-disciplinary collaboration—in the attempt both to understand our world and to change it.

The questions addressed here are urgent and the situation is rapidly changing day by day. While these notes seek to preserve some of that urgency, they are also a first attempt at a slower, longer-term process of reflection that will need to be continuously revised in the light of events.

1. Historical figures and political movements do not repeat themselves exactly. Even if similarities exist, their meanings will change because of the changed context in which they appear and unfold. Trump is not Hitler and his followers are not Nazis—nor are Erdoğan and his followers in Turkey. One could say the same for Putin and his followers, in Russia, Kaczyński and his followers in Poland, Modi and his followers in India, etc.

Nonetheless:

2. Some of Trump's followers see themselves as Nazis, and Trump and some of his followers hold racist and authoritarian positions that bring them into relation with historical fascism. Similarly, Erdoğan mobilizes racism toward minorities in Turkey as part of his strategy for consolidating power and has steadily destroyed the autonomy of civil society and state institutions in a way that resonates with National Socialist *Gleichschaltung* ("coordination"). There are already hints of such "coordination" in the US, too, after Trump's first week in power. In our moment, analogous forms of racist, sexist, and homophobic mobilization in the interest of state power can be found in many other locations as well.

3. In the face of such a politics, historical comparison can be an affectively powerful mobilizing force for critique and opposition. Yet we also have to recognize that all of the populist movements come with their own politics of memory and forgetting: think of Turkey's neo-Ottomanism paired with its ongoing genocide denial or the Trump administration's decision to bar refugees and immigrants from certain Muslim countries on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, all while failing to mention the Nazis' Jewish victims. Whether it comes from the left or the right, mobilization of the past matters and does so regardless of historical

accuracy.

Thus:

4. Comparison is unavoidable and can be enlightening. But it must be handled delicately and must strive to mark significant discontinuities while also drawing lines of continuity.

5. There is a difference between comparison in the name of political mobilization (e.g. anti-fascism) and comparison in the name of historical understanding. Understanding and mobilization possess different temporalities, urgencies, and modes of affective investment, but they also feed into and off of each other. Both forms of comparison are necessary in our moment because we on the left need simultaneously to understand the rapid changes that are taking place around us and mobilize a large coalition to change the direction of longer-term political developments in a large number of geopolitical contexts.

6. It thus also follows that comparison must be made horizontally (synchronically) as well as vertically (diachronically): we cannot *not* attempt to understand our local situation (whatever it is) without reference to global, historical developments in a variety of other national contexts. Many of these contexts are not simply abstractly comparable; they are also materially connected to our own locations. Cross-border connections are ideological as well as material: today's political right is radically nationalist, but also transnationally networked.

7. The ease with which many plausible lateral comparisons come quickly to mind today (US, Turkey, Russia, India, Poland, Hungary, Egypt, Israel, Brazil...) suggests the presence of common structural factors that are shaping developments across the globe. Not every location will experience or respond to these structural factors in identical ways—just as history does not repeat, nor are any two places the same—but patterns become identifiable that attest to common forces and dilemmas. This kind of horizontal comparison may seem or may even be more urgent than the historical analogies that point backwards in search of insight. And yet, a singular focus on the present cannot tell us everything we need to know either; the present is, after all, the outcome of multiple historical sequences. The attempt to understand the novelty of the present should not repeat a discredited progressive vision of history that renders the past as absent and outmoded.

8. Comparison should be able to bring out distinctions of location and suggest forces that are emergent, residual, and dominant. Some places on the globe may already look like the fascist era while others may be in the early stages of an uncertain transition—and interpretations will vary. Turkey, Russia, India, Israel, Egypt, or Hungary might represent the former, while the US and France might be on the route toward the latter; Poland might already be somewhere in between. No doubt there are many other national contexts to be brought in (and divergent, informed evaluations to be made of the contexts I have mentioned for purposes of illustration here).

9. As we think comparatively about the current conjuncture, it is useful to distinguish between the questions of whether to “normalize” today's right-wing movements and whether to declare them “exceptional” or “unprecedented.” The refusal to normalize—that is the refusal to think and act as if the normative rules of democracy are still fully operative—differs from the work of historical comparison that finds precedents, analogies, and family resemblances in historical examples, including recent ones. Today's movements are by no means fully unprecedented—and indeed they often build on policies inaugurated or continued by previous, politically “liberal” regimes—but we treat them as normal at great risk. Refusing to normalize involves both recognizing the echoes of past catastrophes and seeking out the novelty of the current crises.

10. The ultimate point of comparison is not only between Trump (or Erdoğan) and Hitler or between Trump's (or Erdoğan's) followers and the Nazi movement, but also especially between the conjuncture of Trump's (or Erdoğan's) rise to power and the conjuncture that led to Europe's twentieth-century fascist era (in Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, etc.). The crisis of democracy and its links to ongoing crises of capitalism are key links and commonalities between these different eras as are the failures of liberal, social democratic, and leftist opposition and the appearance of such authoritarian leader figures as Trump and Erdoğan. The primary danger is not the repetition of Nazism and the Holocaust—though nor should we completely discount the most extreme possibilities—but the existence of new, heterogeneous forms of right-wing, anti-democratic politics that are on the ascendance and could become hegemonic on a global scale. Despite the obvious differences between them (between, e.g., Turkey, the US, India, and Poland), these political forms are part of a common moment that testifies to common structural conditions: to a crisis of the dominant neoliberal order, which has been supported by political parties across the spectrum, and to the failures of the left across most of the globe to capitalize on that crisis by creating a counter-hegemonic, alternative narrative.

11. Within this common moment, a variety of differently weighted social categories all come into play together. Questions of class intersect with questions of race, gender, and sexuality. In some places, religion plays a prominent role; in others it may be less significant. Colonial and imperial legacies are critical factors in many sites as is ongoing settler colonialism in others. Worth remarking from a historical perspective is that analogous forms of right-wing populism are arising both in the former imperial spheres and in the formerly colonized zones. Despite radical differences of power and wealth, these phenomena also testify to

shared planetary conditions, some of which are best understood through an ecological lens—that is, they involve the relation between the human and the non-human in the age of the Anthropocene. Analysis must be intersectional, but that intersectional analysis must be aware of local differences in how categories intersect and it must keep in view the asymmetry between the different categories (that, e.g. class does not work in the same way as race—and vice versa) as well as the planetary limits of shared but unevenly experienced environmental devastation. Comparison is an essential feature of intersectional thinking, even as intersectionality poses a necessary challenge to traditional forms of comparison that seek to juxtapose “separate,” seemingly self-contained entities.

12. In responding to the current conjuncture and in seeking to create an alternative, qualitatively different future based on an intersectional and cosmopolitan vision, proponents of a radically democratic left have to think historically and globally about the patterns and structures we confront. Ultimately, we will need to be able to weigh the urgency of different struggles in different locations, but we need to start by admitting the urgent co-presence of different struggles and by attempting to find points of articulation between as heterogeneous an array of struggles as we can. The point is not to overcome differences but to create alliances that preserve the urgency of particular struggles while also contributing to large-scale movement—the recent women’s marches are a powerful starting point. There is no ultimate synthesis, but we need to keep building hegemony across sites and issues and we desperately need a new grand narrative.

The three most important conclusions I draw from this thought-experiment on historical comparison are the following:

- 1) Historical and geopolitical comparisons illuminate the importance of structural features and crises—along with the nefarious individuals and political movements enabled by structural crises—as the important analogies and connections to work through. As useful as they are, though, analogies and comparisons should not become screens that block perception of new conditions of governance and struggle.
- 2) Both historical understanding and political strategy have to derive from an intersectional approach to the present that refuses the a priori elevation of one category (class, race, gender, etc.) over the other while simultaneously attending to local urgencies and to asymmetries between categories. Collaboration, exchange, and dialogue will enhance both understanding and action; nobody can do this alone.
- 3) Nation-based left theorists and activists—especially those of us in the US—need to think transnationally about the political conjuncture and ask what events in our own backyard have to do with those unfolding elsewhere. In order to change the world together, we also need to interpret it together.

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