

I

Day Zero

Ross sprints past me, his camera rolling. He taps me on the shoulder and starts to speak but I point to the GoPro taped to my crash helmet and silently mouth the word 'live' – meaning 'don't say anything that could incriminate us'. Last time we filmed a riot together was in Istanbul. This is different.

Seconds later it is Brandon who hi-fives me as he weaves through the chaos, also filming. We've criss-crossed the riot world since 2011: Cairo, Athens, Istanbul. We extend our non-camera hands and grip fingers for a millisecond. Windows are getting shattered. An SUV is on fire. Flash-bangs thump the air and the CS gas is drifting.

About a thousand young people, masked up and dressed in black, are swarming across the city with the riot police in pursuit. And by total coincidence, in this few square metres of urban battlefield, we find each other: me, Ross and Brandon – veterans at filming countries that are going to shit.

The date is 20 January 2017. The place is Washington DC. The social war that's been raging at the edges of the global system has just arrived at its centre. We are two blocks away from the White House. Donald Trump's presidency is one minute old.

As the riot gathers momentum the police are clueless: they are trained for situations where people either obey them or get shot. Today neither shooting nor obedience is possible. So they jog breathlessly behind the protesters, their bodies weighed down by pointless equipment and bloated by a lifestyle of militarized sloth. When a girl pushing a bike trips over, accidentally taking three cops to the floor, some other cops rush up to baton her, and the bike itself, while others try to help her up. The soundtrack is classic riot music: police bullhorns; radios

sizzling with panicked orders; the glass of a Starbucks window smashing; young Americans chanting ‘No fascist USA!’

Eventually the cops attack, the CS gas vomiting out of their half-inch hoses. Instead of fleeing, some youths in black balaclavas form a tight wedge, black umbrellas opened horizontally for protection, and rush the police line. One protester, unmasked, lies face down on the tarmac as a cop pulls a taser on him. About twenty years old, he has blond curly hair: his face betrays not one single flicker of fear. He looks at the cop, and at the camera lenses zooming on him, and states calmly: ‘Fuck Donald Trump. Fuck Donald Trump.’

As the riot breaks into fragments, the cops begin chasing small groups across the city. Everything intensifies: we sprint past the American Development Bank, past Joe’s Stone Crab, past the soul-drained office blocks where Washington’s lobbyists work. And as we run, this act of panicked flight from a slow, unthinking enemy – across the shattered landscape of normality – reminds me of something in the movies. But I can’t place it.

The night before Trump is inaugurated I meet a 72-year-old farmer from Tennessee. ‘What d’ya think’a that?’ he says, jerking his head towards the words ‘Fuck Trump’ chalked onto a path in Franklin Square. He’s wearing a thick, red cowboy shirt and a pained expression. Gazing at the demonstrators, who have gathered around a thrash metal band, he mutters: ‘They don’t want to work. They’re sick.’ Which is weird, because most of the demonstrators are clearly middle-class kids with degrees and jobs.

‘Know what it costs?’ he continues. ‘Fifty dollars for a baseball cap. Hundred-fifty for a pair o’ sneakers.’ Again this remark seems strange, because – being mainly anarchists – almost none of the protesters are wearing branded baseball caps or sports shoes. ‘All they want is mo-ney,’ he pronounces the last word as whine, stroking his outstretched palm like a beggar. His face screws up as though he’s smelled shit.

And only now do I realize: he is not actually seeing the demonstrators but – in his mind’s eye – the people they remind him of: poor black people in Tennessee. ‘You see ’em coming outta the supermarket . . .’ his eyes stiffen and bulge with anger . . . ‘white t-shirt twenty

dollars, sneakers hundred-fifty . . .’ He is an expert on the price of the clothes black people wear.

When I try to object, his brain flips to another topic: climate change, which he believes is fake. ‘Cows fart,’ he exclaims, ‘but now they say I gotta pay a methane tax?’ He tells me that beneath the Antarctic there is a fossilized tropical forest containing the skeletons of camels, and that this proves climate change is temporary: ‘What goes around comes around.’

As Washington fills up for the Inauguration I meet individuals like this on every corner. Trump has empowered them, and the US media has granted them permission to unleash what they want to unleash most: hatred. As one self-pitying racist after another unloads their story on me, it becomes clear what we are dealing with: people who’ve lost their power to compute logic, but for whom all the minor injustices and inconveniences in life are linked to an imagined threat posed by blacks, gays and liberated women.

We are asked by liberal commentators to understand what motivates such individuals: the economics that has impoverished them and the social change that has disoriented them. We are asked to sympathize with the unfulfilled lives they live among the motels and flyovers of the mid-West.

I prefer a harsher form of sympathy called reason, logic and science.

Asked to understand the problems of the ‘white working class’ I say, with the confidence of someone born white, and raised in a tough, English coal-mining town: it does not exist. ‘White working class’ is an identity constructed by rich people to oppress poor people, just as the identities of the ‘coolie’ and the ‘savage’ were constructed by colonial settlers to justify treating their victims as subhuman.

Let’s confront the problem. If you want peace, freedom and social justice, people like the Antarctic Camel Guy are your enemies. They put a man in power – in the most powerful nation on earth – who is a racist and a tax-dodger, and who had bragged about ‘grabbing women by the pussy’. In doing so they knowingly attempted to destroy the multilateral system known as globalization, reverse fifty years of progress on minority and women’s rights, and replace the rule of law with that of a kleptocratic dynasty.

And such people are on the offensive in every continent. There’s the

Patriot Prayer demonstrators in Portland Oregon, calling for the heads of migrants to be ‘smashed against the concrete’; there’s the trolls from the ruling AK Party in Turkey, sending coordinated rape threats to female journalists; there’s the mobs attacking Pride marches in Russia; and the neo-Nazis spouting Islamophobic rhetoric from the podium of the German Bundestag. In India they are among the ‘cow vigilantes’ lynching Muslims while Prime Minister Narendra Modi – the Hindu Trump – refuses to lift a finger. In Brazil they are the footsoldiers of Jair Bolsonaro, the fascist president elected in 2018, who said of a female opponent that she was ‘not worth raping’ and suggested that black *quilombolas*, the descendants of rebel African slaves, were ‘not fit to procreate’.

On a wider level, their mental garbage is polluting the thoughts and social media timelines of rational individuals all over the world.

Opinion pollsters have dubbed their mindset ‘authoritarian populism’.¹ They are united in opposition to human rights, which they see as rights for somebody else; to migration, which they see as polluting ‘their’ culture; and to all forms of multilateralism in global politics and economics, which they see as restraining the hand of a justifiably repressive state. If that was all they believed in, we could tell ourselves this is simply a surge in the kind of reactionary sentiment that always lurks within fast-changing societies.

But there is something deeper going on: a hostility to science, logic and rationality, which have been the guiding values of market-based societies for the past 500 years. As we shall see, whether or not the activists of the alt-right fully understand it, this attack on reason was theorized in advance by a section of the elite in crisis.

The eruption of learned stupidity into global politics is all the more terrifying because it’s happening in the most information-rich era in history. We need to understand this situation, and work out ways of persuading as many conservative-minded people as possible to embrace rationality, restraint and the norms of democratic behaviour.

Where they cannot be persuaded, however, we have to resist them. They have declared war on evidence-based policymaking, prudence and a global system based on rules instead of naked force. Those who want to defend these values need to fight back.

To do this, we have to arm ourselves with more than just facts. We need, as the philosopher Tzvetan Todorov wrote, surveying the struggle against totalitarianism in the twentieth century, both hope and memory. But to remember what and to hope for what?

It wasn't long ago, in the early 1990s, that perfectly rational individuals believed history had 'ended'; that liberal democracy and free-market capitalism were states of perfection, making future upheavals impossible.

Since 2008 that illusion has collapsed. The financial crisis unleashed by the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers has spiralled into a crisis of legitimacy for the free-market system, which has now turned into an attack on democracy and human rights and is placing new strains on the geopolitical system.

Trump rules America. Brexit has triggered the breakup of the European Union. The social media are awash with anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, fantasies of white supremacy and male victimhood. In Turkey, hundreds of journalists are in jail. In the Philippines, the president revels in the work of death squads. The Syrian War, which started with teenagers scrawling graffiti against Bashar al-Assad, has killed 470,000 and displaced 10 million people.² Over the next decade China is gearing up to place its 1.4 billion citizens under absolute digital surveillance and control.³ This is not some dystopian fantasy from a graphic novel. It is reality.

As a journalist I used to envy the certainties of my younger colleagues, who'd been taught in the world's elite universities that the era of systemic crisis was over. I, by contrast, had spent my early twenties in Thatcher's Britain – an era of conflict, recession and social disintegration. They, it seemed, would know only cool, calm, technocratic progress.

Now, I pity them. They are being forced to watch dramatic, unthinkable events cascade across their newsfeeds each morning, for which they have no theory. Trump flies to Moscow to side with Putin against the FBI. Austria's respectable conservative party switches overnight from an alliance with socialists to an alliance with neo-fascists. In China, Xi Jin Ping breaks with thirty years of consensus government and seizes total power. Private intelligence agencies we

never knew existed turn out to be manipulating elections on behalf of the highest bidder.

Because it is happening to us in real time, and seen through devices in our pockets, this new global disorder is creating a bipolar response: hyper-sensitivity to the chaos but a mood of resignation when it comes to the possibility of ending it.

As for liberalism, once the dominant ideology of the Western world, it too has become bipolar. Among educated people it is routine to hear technological euphoria expressed alongside geopolitical despair: dark foreboding about what comes after Trump alongside business plans which assume a hi-tech, automation-driven, green future. Interrogate this attitude and the assumption is, even now, that something called the Fourth Industrial Revolution will put everything right.

The argument of this book is that it will not. To unlock the potential of new technologies to boost human wellbeing, there has to be something human left to defend. But each of the crises we face – economic, geopolitical and technological – is rooted in the erosion of what it means to be human.

Since the 1980s, free-market ideology has attacked our right to possess a self that is more than a collection of economic needs. As globalization falls apart, the very idea of rights that are universal and inalienable has come under attack. Meanwhile, technology has begun to undermine our ability to act autonomously, free of digital control and surveillance: we are increasingly subject to forms of algorithmic control that we are not allowed to see, nor to understand.

None of this is accidental: as I will show in the course of this book, overt theories of anti-humanism are today stronger than at any time in the past 200 years.

I believe, despite the fear and cruelty of the present, we can still achieve what the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky once called ‘the clear, bright future’ of humankind. But as well as demystifying the sources of economic crisis and deepening our understanding of democracy, we need to defend the very concept of humanity and draw new practical conclusions from it.

After we’d escaped the police on Trump’s inauguration day, I remembered what the scene reminded me of: a zombie movie. The first

zombie movie appeared in 1932, but the genre remained niche until the 1960s.⁴ In most of the early zombie flicks the monster is a re-animated black Caribbean man intent on ravaging white women. It's not hard to work out what fears those films were playing on.

Only in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) did we meet the modern zombie: a corpse brought back to life, programmed to kill human beings and eat them. This new kind of monster is just your ordinary white neighbour gone crazy. After that the zombie movie went global. In 2010 alone there were twenty-seven zombie films produced, ranging from *Big Tits Zombie* in Japan, to *Santa Claus vs the Zombies* in the USA. The zombie is now a staple enemy in video games – the predictable, dumb target who multiply the more of them you kill. There are zombie weekend conventions; zombie 'walks', where people cover themselves in gore to raise money for charity. The zombie has become a trope: a narrative framework understood by all, whose rules and conventions allow you to hang any other ideas inside it: so we get movies such as *Kung Fu Zombie*, *Biker Zombies from Detroit*, *La Cage aux Zombies* and *World War Z*.

Why are we collectively investing such a huge amount of concentration, emotion and mental energy into the zombie? What are we trying to say to and about ourselves?

Human cultures have always constructed myths and legends about undead beings or semi-humans, usually as a metaphor for some deep-felt human need – but the zombie is unique. Zombies are not vampires. The relationship between vampire and victim is a metaphor for illicit sexual attraction, plus you can reason with a vampire. Zombies are not ghosts. The metaphor behind the ghost story is grief, and ghosts can't kill you. Zombies are not werewolves: the werewolf is a metaphor for mental illness, or sociopathic violence – and becoming one is temporary, while becoming a zombie is irreversible.

Compared to the traditional monsters of Western folklore, the zombie has a superpower that sets it in a class of its own: it is self-replicating. One werewolf is not going to decimate London; one vampire will not depopulate Transylvania. One zombie, however, can – through an exponential process of killing or infection – take down an entire society.

So what is the real, deep fear that the zombie metaphor plays on?

The most likely answer is: the fear that we are about to lose what makes us human – our rationality, our capacity to discern truth from lies, our ability to see other human beings as fellow species members, with rights equal to our own. Our agency. Our freedom.

Such fears are rational. We are facing the biggest attack on humanism since it was formulated in the days of Shakespeare and Galileo. Humanism was central to Western ideas of civilization, to scientific thought and to concepts of social progress for more than 400 years. But since the late twentieth century, opposition to humanism has been building from several directions at once.

The strategic threat is from technology. It is possible that within this century artificial intelligence will attain a level of sophistication that exceeds the capabilities of all human brains put together. At the same time bio-engineering has advanced to the point where one-off modifications to individuals and – if the taboos on it were lifted – irreversible changes to humanity's gene pool are possible. Belief in these possibilities is fuelling a strong anti-humanism among those thinking about the future: a defeatism about the value of human individuality; a conviction that *Homo sapiens* is a species destined to be eclipsed.

Second, developments in neuroscience and information theory have strengthened the belief that our behaviour is inescapably determined; that our brains are just biological machines, 'programmed' by their DNA and modified only by their physical environment, within a universe which itself now looks more and more like the product of a giant 'computer'. Though both propositions are disputed within science itself, the airport bookstands of the world are groaning with bestsellers that ignore the nuances and convey the straight message: we are already automata incapable of freedom.

Third, there is a simple demographic fact: the majority of the earth's population now lives in countries where the cultural concepts underpinning humanism are weak. When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed in 1949, there were 2.4 billion people on the planet, a quarter of them living in developed, democratic countries with social elites shaped by the traditions of the Enlightenment. Today there are 7.5 billion – and the majority live outside stable democratic systems, in societies where human rights are denied. Worse still, the official ideologies of these states are thoroughly

anti-humanist. This includes the mixture of Confucianism and accountancy that is taught as ‘Marxism’ in China, the Hindu chauvinism of the Modi administration in India and the Great Russian nationalism that animates Putin.

Last but not least, there is the attack on humanism carried out over the past four decades in the name of free-market economics. By coercing us into new routines, forcing us to adopt new attitudes and values simply to survive; by reducing us to two-dimensional economic beings, the economic model known as neoliberalism has broken down our behavioural and intellectual defences against the subsequent forms of anti-humanism that are now coming at us in the early twenty-first century.

The inflection point, crystallizing all these dangers and accelerating them, was Trump’s presidential victory, and the global wave of right-wing populism he helped unleash.

Trump launched himself like a wrecking ball against the multi-lateral institutions on which the globalized free market relied: the UN Human Rights Council, the World Trade Organization, the European Union and NAFTA. By stigmatizing the media as ‘fake news’ and by injecting gesture and unpredictability into diplomacy and domestic politics, Trump was not only trying to dismantle the post-1989 world order. He was actively trying to create disorder.

In his response to the Charlottesville violence in 2017, Trump gave a clear green light to a new form of fascism in the USA. The alt-right attacks the whole idea of universal human rights; it relentlessly questions the validity of scientific thought; it denigrates the institutions dedicated to producing objective truth, like universities or the publicly regulated media.

Meanwhile, the very tools Trump used to wage war on liberal, democratic values in the USA were machines that suck the lifeblood out of human choice and reason: the algorithms that Facebook supplied to Cambridge Analytica, so that Trump and his Russian supporters could manipulate the opinions and voting behaviour of US voters.

If this new alliance of right-wing authoritarians and techno-literate fascists get their way, large numbers of people are going to become like that farmer from Tennessee: dead-eyed, unthinkingly obedient,

lacking any sense of agency, their behaviour controlled by Facebook algorithms and their thoughts merely an echo of last night's Fox News. Political zombies.

At the core of the authoritarian right's agenda is an attack on the possibility of truth. The aim of Trump and his imitators is to produce in the minds of millions the conviction that nothing is true: that all news footage is doctored; all images of war and torture are Photoshopped; all terrorist attacks are 'false flag' operations by some deeper and unguessed intelligence agency; all victims of war and torture are 'crisis actors'.

They want us to believe that the rule of law represents an attack by the 'deep state' against the popular will; that the professional news media are 'enemies of the people'; that political opposition parties are 'saboteurs'. Autocrats like Vladimir Putin and Narendra Modi were already operating from the same playbook, with fewer obligations to democratic principles, but Trump took the approach mainstream. His success, during the first twenty-four months in office, has inspired copycat projects in Brazil, Hungary, Italy and beyond.

We are even now underestimating the seriousness of the catastrophe that's unfolding. This is not some short-term political cycle. It's a global attack on methods of thinking, science and evidence-based policymaking which go back to the early seventeenth century.

And it is also a crisis for the dominant mode of thinking on the left. As you scroll through the obscene claims of the internet trolls – that the latest ISIS terror attack was staged by the CIA, or that some mutilated Syrian child is a 'crisis actor' – always remember that the groundwork for the attack on rationality was laid by a left-wing academic current called postmodernism.

'A theory', wrote the physicist Hermann Weyl, is a set of ideas that allow you to 'jump over your own shadow', using words and numbers to represent what cannot be physically seen.⁵ The postmodernists replied: 'How can you jump over your shadow when you no longer have one?'⁶ Jean Baudrillard, who wrote these words in 1994, believed our willingness to live as capitalism dictates, to the rhythms of money and self-interest, had hollowed out our humanity. We had become mere expressions of economic forces, unable to cast a shadow onto

the world, incapable of thinking beyond the reality presented to us by mass media.

The academic left had theorized human helplessness long before the right turned it into a project. What began in the 1950s as an explanation for working-class passivity has now coalesced into a growing academic and philosophical movement called post-humanism. It is an outright rationale for our slavery to machines and, at its most extreme, our voluntary extinction as a species. One of this book's aims is to put the post-humanism industry out of business.

To defend rationality you have to defend what it is based on: the proposal that experience plus accurate observation can create verifiable truth inside our brains.

When you trust your life to an airliner flying at 40,000 feet, you do so because you believe there is a real world, independent of your senses, whose laws the aircraft engineer has understood. However complex that world is, however full of randomness, to retreat from the belief in the 400-year-old scientific method that guides the aircraft engineer would be a seriously retrograde step.

To debunk the new religions of irrationalism and fatalism we have to return to a way of thinking that has become deeply unfashionable, which places humanity at the centre of its worldview – not machines, not nature, and not subgroups of human beings with differential rights – but all of us as a species.

After the Holocaust and the Second World War, humanism was the liferaft the survivors clung to. In the aftermath of Trump's shock victory, a new generation delved once again into the great humanist writers of the antifascist era: George Orwell, Primo Levi, Hannah Arendt and the rest. But once you get beyond the similarities, and the comforting soundbites, it's clear that theirs was a worldview at odds with the assumptions of modern progressive thought.

Humanism became unfashionable because of its association with white, Eurocentric culture, its justifications for colonial domination and its alignment with male power. In the 1960s the black French psychiatrist Frantz Fanon called for a 'new humanism' devoid of the racism of the colonial past – but it didn't happen. Instead, from Vietnam to Iraq, devastating attacks on human life were carried out by politicians professing to be humanists. The French anthropologist

Claude Lévi-Strauss summed up the growing distaste for humanistic thinking when, in 1979, he claimed not only colonialism but fascism and its extermination camps were the ‘natural continuation’ of humanism as it had been practised for centuries.⁷

Then, towards the end of the twentieth century, neuroscience, genetics and anthropology all made claims that seemed to undermine earlier scientific assertions about what makes humanity unique. Meanwhile, some deep-green environmentalists concluded it would be better for the planet if we did not exist, while some radical supporters of animal liberation added: the sooner the better.⁸

The defence of rationality and science can succeed only if we return to a different form of humanism than the one espoused by Arendt, Primo Levi and their generation. There is, arising out of the same traditions of rationality and Enlightenment, an alternative and more radical form of humanism whose aim is complete liberation – including liberation from the identities imposed on us by poverty, racism and sexism.

Only one thinker in the humanist tradition combined *realism* – the idea that the world exists beyond our senses – with a definition of human nature that can withstand twenty-first-century theories of cognition and artificial intelligence. His name was Karl Marx. Despite all the flaws in his theories and all the crimes committed in his name, Marx was the only great philosopher who, had he been alive, would have gone masked up on that protest in Washington DC. He would have understood what it signified, too: Day Zero in the struggle to rekindle hope.

2

A General Theory of Trump

‘Globalisation is dead. The American superpower will die.’¹ That’s what I wrote in a column filed for the *Guardian* two hours after Trump declared victory. He had won, I suggested, ‘because millions of middle class and educated US citizens reached into their soul and found there, after all its conceits were stripped away, a grinning white supremacist. Plus untapped reserves of misogyny.’

It was perhaps an extreme thing to write at a time when mainstream opinion writers were saying his victory had been an accident, the result of Clinton’s campaign mistakes in four swing states, and would soon be remedied by Trump being smothered within the great federal bureaucracy and hogtied by the rule of law.

But Trump’s victory was part of a pattern. This was the third tsunami to hit the liberal political centre in eighteen months. In June 2015 the people of Greece had voted to defy the EU, despite being held to ransom by the closure of their banking system. In June 2016 a clear majority of British voters opted for Brexit. And now, in November the same year, there was Trump.

I’d been warning since the 2008 financial crisis that, unless we ditched free-market economics, a major country would exit the multilateral system based on rules and common standards, and globalization itself would begin to die. The *Financial Times* called these warnings ‘irritatingly shrill’.² Not shrill enough, as it turned out.

Trump’s victory was not just an event in the political and economic history of the world, big enough though that is. It was a tear in the intellectual fabric of the world that, even now, most people have failed to understand.

Whether Trump is indicted, impeached or simply incapacitated

through an overdose of cheeseburgers, his victory has irreversibly changed the world we live in. He declared war on the rules-based global system, started a trade war with China, pulled America out of the Paris climate change accord, destroyed the 2013 Iran nuclear deal, legitimized far-right violence, incited violence against the media, and brought organized lying into the mainstream of both politics and diplomacy.

His 'America First' strategy was not only about boosting US jobs and growth at the expense of China and Mexico, it was an attempt to shatter the existing global power structure and remake it, with America and Putin's Russia as co-beneficiaries. His tactics have included threatening North Korea with pre-emptive nuclear war, and putting migrant toddlers behind wire fences separating them from their parents. And, to date, he has succeeded.

To achieve the new order, the method Trump adopted was chaos: the outrageous statement followed by denial; the communiqué signed and then cancelled by mid-air Tweet; diplomacy conducted without diplomats, advisers, written records or accountability.

To orient ourselves amid this chaos we need a theory that explains how the new right-wing authoritarianism developed, who benefits from it and what it is aiming to achieve. That is exactly what most liberal-minded people did not have on the night of Trump's victory. They understood that this monstrosity signalled the potential end of liberal politics and of an orderly global system, but they could not comprehend it was the liberal order itself that had created Trump and empowered the activists who put him into the White House.

Even once we understand Trump we will only possess a theory of the wrecking ball. To complete the picture we will need to survey the fragile structures it has begun to wreck. These, it turns out, include not only the economic architecture of the world but the ideologies of liberalism, globalism and universal rights.

These ideas have become so fragile because they grafted themselves onto an economic structure that could not survive. During the thirty-year rise and fall of the economic model known as neoliberalism, much of its thought-architecture was expressed through performances and rituals that did not require inner belief. By the end, just as with the Soviet Union before it collapsed, people were going

through the motions but knew in their hearts the whole thing was bullshit.

To re-establish order and predictability in the world, we need to restore what the neoliberal era stripped out of it: the three-dimensional human being with a belief in restraint, kindness, mutual obligation and democracy; an army of individuals who can think independently and who mean what they say. As you can imagine, this won't be easy.

Trump declared his presidential run on 16 June 2015 from a podium inside Trump Tower. In a rambling and apparently unscripted speech he outlined the key planks of his platform. He attacked Mexican immigrants, saying: 'They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.'³ He promised to 'make America great again' by forcing the US corporate elite to move jobs back onshore and through punitive trade sanctions against China and Mexico. He would reverse US foreign policy in the Middle East, isolating Iran and backing Saudi Arabia. He would repeal Obamacare, which had brought 20 million of America's poor into the healthcare system; he would spend billions on upgrading America's decrepit infrastructure while at the same time (and miraculously) reducing the national debt.

The establishment laughed. Anti-racists went predictably and justifiably nuts. He polled just 6.5 per cent among Republican voters. But within six weeks Trump was scoring 20 per cent: double the ratings of his closest rival, Jeb Bush, and leaving a long tail of whey-faced Christian fundamentalists far behind.⁴ Few understood it then, but Trump – through his racist, misogynist, economic nationalist and anti-elite narrative – had created a populist bandwagon more effective than all the other populists, and unmatched by the establishment candidates.

If we had 20:20 hindsight, the question we should have asked as Trump gained momentum is: what fraction of the rich and powerful will move behind him? But at the time such questions seemed pointless. Because free-market capitalism in the USA had produced a political monoculture in which the very idea that different sections of the elite could use politics to fight each other seemed to belong to the

days of sepia photographs. The norm for thirty years had been a socially liberal business elite oriented to finance, global corporations, carbon extraction and tech monopolies. Their general preference was for a government of the centre right but ultimately the party-political divide didn't matter. Most big corporations donated to both parties.

Sure, there were by 2015 tens of thousands of ruined small business people and laid-off workers in the right-wing Tea Party movement, clamouring for an end to globalization, human rights and immigration. But their agenda was so contrary to the interests of the corporate elite that it could find support only among cranky individuals such as Charles and David Koch, prepared to pour \$400 million down the drain of libertarian lost causes.

This in turn shaped the accepted wisdom among the pollsters. In April 2016 I sat through a briefing by pro-Clinton analyst Stan Greenberg, in which he assured the *Guardian's* political journalists that the coming election was 'edging towards an earthquake' that would destroy the Republicans and put Hillary Clinton into power. The reason was that a 'new American majority' comprising black people, Hispanics, millennials and single women now made up 54 per cent of the electorate and rising. That made it impossible for the Republicans to win on a programme of social conservatism. Republican right-wing activists weren't even trying to win the election, he told us: they just wanted to punish the Republican mainstream for failing to stop Obama.⁵

Trump won the nomination because he created, first, a new kind of conservative populist movement. With it, he opened up a split within the US ruling class over where its material interests lie, both in geopolitics and economics. And with these two forces he created what Hannah Arendt had labelled a 'temporary alliance between the mob and the elite'. Its aim was the destruction of an economic and political order that had been presented as both perfect and permanent.

In 2012 I attended a Tea Party meeting in Phoenix, Arizona. It was a collection of pleasant, analogue-era cranks. Before we went in, I gave my colleagues a team talk about respecting such people's views. At the end people queued up to hand me files, folders and CDs wrapped with handwritten notes. There was a large file on the Obama birth

controversy; a well-researched timeline of the Benghazi fiasco, where four US personnel had just been killed; plus the usual stuff debunking climate change. I took the whole pile of CDs, files and leaflets detailing their nutty obsessions and made my cameraman film me dumping them in a bin. Here's why.

At the start, I'd taken them seriously. In 2008 I reported on the mass mobilization of right-wing voters that derailed the Bush administration's \$780 billion bank bailout in Congress. While others wrote them off as 'astroturf' – fake grass roots – I treated them as a genuine force, motivated by justifiable grievances over the way Wall Street made ordinary people pay for the financial crisis. After that, I'd watched with growing fascination as the Tea Party colonized the Republican apparatus from below. I'd stood in their rallies, enduring their scowls, because I knew the existing order could not last and I wanted to understand what might replace it.

But by 2012 it looked like they'd hit a dead end – an impression shared by many people in that Phoenix meeting. Mitt Romney, a moderate, was the Republican presidential candidate. As a result, most said they would refuse to vote. True, his running mate, Paul Ryan, had tabled an alternative budget calling for tax cuts, cuts to health and welfare programmes and a shrunken state. But the Tea Party was never just about economics. It was also a revolt against modern life by evangelical Christians; a revolt against women's liberation by misogynistic men; a revolt against immigration, gay rights and diversity; and above all a revolt against President Obama by those who could not stand the colour of his skin.

From Romney's defeat in November 2012 to the moment Trump descended his golden escalator in June 2015, the Tea Party would remain trapped inside the political ghetto I'd seen in Phoenix. Because alongside sacred America there is always profane America. In some states, along mile after mile of freeway, you see only adverts for roadside porn cinemas, liquor stores and the Confederate flag. Here the Jesus brigade could never become a popular movement. Their morals would not allow them to mix with the kind of people who sit glue-eyed on the slot machines at Trump's casinos or leering at the waitresses in the Hooters fast-food chain.

The Evangelicals were insistently nice people – even while waving

plastic foetuses in the faces of frightened women outside abortion clinics. They had moral limits. But that was the problem Trump solved for the American right: he brought in the not-nice people, the amorlists and the self-described ‘shitposters’ of the online right.

In every Hollywood movie there is a text and a subtext. The subtext of the movie – which is never spoken – is what sends individuals out of the cinema prepared to join wars, save the planet or get divorced. Trump, like all demagogues, is a natural at manipulating text-vs-subtext.

The ‘text’ of the Trump campaign was Trump’s life itself: a story of rags to riches. The riches were gained through speculative property investments and extensive business contacts with Russian oligarchs and Gulf oil sheikhs in an industry rife with organized crime. David Cay Johnston, a Pulitzer-Prizewinning journalist, writes that ‘Trump’s career has benefited from a decades-long and largely successful effort to limit and deflect law enforcement investigations into his dealings with top mobsters, organized crime associates, labor fixers, corrupt union leaders, con artists and even a one-time drug trafficker.’⁶ By picking Trump to run for president, the Republican Party created a new and shocking subtext: the rich no longer have to even look clean to run America.

Once the campaign started, Trump inserted a second, equally shocking subtext into public life, about the irrelevance of facts. In July 2015 he insulted his opponent, Senator John McCain, saying: ‘He’s not a war hero. He’s a war hero because he was captured. I like people who weren’t captured.’⁷

When the remark provoked outrage, Trump denied he had ever said these words. The insult, its viral repetition across social media and then the flat denial told a story between the lines that would recur many times later: nothing Trump says is meant literally, nor should be taken seriously. Nor should any of Trump’s utterances be held up against normal standards of truth or decency. This demonstration of blatant lying took Trump out of the league of previous US presidents and into the league inhabited by the standout kleptocrats of the twenty-first century: Russia’s Putin, Turkey’s Erdoğan, Hungary’s Orbán and Israel’s Netanyahu.

A third layer of subtext was written at Trump’s rallies. In the Tea Party movement, in front of the cameras at least, they usually tried to

restrain outright bigotry. Trump thrust this nicety aside, saying to the racists, sexists and Islamophobes: go ahead and vocalize all the hate inside you. The rallies brought together a mixture of born-again Christians, amoralists from the alt-right movement and porn-addicted right-wing bigots – and created an atmosphere in which they could all yell the word ‘cunt’ every time he mentioned Hillary Clinton.

Trump is no fascist; nor were most of those at his rallies. Yet Trump played on a dynamic between speaker and crowd that was first theorized by the German sociologist Erich Fromm during the rise of Hitler. ‘Psychologically,’ wrote Fromm in 1941, people’s readiness to submit to fascism ‘seems to be due mainly to a state of inner tiredness and resignation’, which he said was ‘characteristic of the individual in the present era, even in democratic countries’.⁸ Where this ‘inner tiredness and resignation’ comes from, in the richest economy in the world and a society buzzing with cultural creativity, is one of the most fundamental problems those trying to resist the new right have to confront.

Trump understood that tired people don’t want logic or principles; and they don’t want the kind of freedom that the libertarian right offers. In fact they fear freedom. What they want is a leader who rises above logic and truth and tells them all their inner prejudices are right. There is no mystery as to why the people at the rallies bought Trump’s offer. But why did part of the elite buy it, and what do they want to achieve?

For the first months of the 2016 primaries, the money that would put Trump in the White House was invested in the ultra-right conservative Ted Cruz. Hedge fund boss Robert Mercer – who would become Trump’s biggest donor – had given him \$11 million, while four members of the Wilks fracking dynasty had handed Cruz \$15 million between them. Fronting the Cruz SuperPAC was Kellyanne Conway, later Trump’s presidential counsellor.

But the Cruz campaign faltered and Trump’s took off. When Cruz pulled out in May 2016, Mercer’s group effectively engineered a reverse takeover of the Trump campaign. By August, Steve Bannon – into whose far-right news outlet, Breitbart, Mercer had already pumped \$10 million – was installed as campaign chairman and Conway as manager.

Meanwhile, a niche group of more traditional right-wing business

leaders came out for the Trump project. They included casino magnate Sheldon Adelson; Carl Icahn, a property boss and asset stripper; and Wilbur Ross – another asset stripper who together with Icahn had helped save Trump’s casino business in the 1980s. These were property and casino guys – sharks from the same shiver as Trump. Alongside them came a few libertarian tech billionaires, notably PayPal founder Peter Thiel, who had declared in 2009 that ‘I no longer believe democracy and freedom are compatible.’⁹

The Koch brothers, the most prominent elite businessmen associated with the Tea Party, kept their distance from Trump on ideological grounds. But they unleashed millions into Republican Congressional campaigns, mobilized their army of paid canvassers and placed key people into the Trump team, notably Indiana governor Mike Pence. The Kochs had bankrolled Pence as he turned Indiana into a laboratory for free-market cruelty – now they would make him vice president.

However, even as Trump attracted more elite support, the bulk of billionaire money was going to Clinton. Trump had the casino guys, big oil and big tobacco. But Clinton had most of Silicon Valley, most of Hollywood, most of Wall Street and most of the S&P 500. Even the heiress to the union-busting Walmart empire backed Hillary.

Once Trump won, of course, many of these business people fell over their own shoes to congratulate him, join his advisory boards and take part in the bonanza of deregulation he offered. But those given direct power were still drawn from the tiny right-wing circle that had driven the project. Betsy DeVos, the school privatizer, was put in charge of schools. Wilbur Ross, at the age of seventy-nine, was made commerce secretary. Rex Tillerson, whose Exxon Mobil had funded climate science denial, became secretary of state. Robert Mercer’s daughter Rebekah got an executive role, while the Trump business empire itself was represented by Jared Kushner, the president’s son-in-law.

So to describe this as a ‘corporate takeover’ of US politics, in the words of left-wing Canadian writer and thinker Naomi Klein, is too simplistic.¹⁰ It was a takeover by a minority fraction of the business elite, its centre of gravity sitting squarely in the world of private companies untroubled by stock market scrutiny, and with overlapping