

Editorial: the populist wave

Ben Little

One of the focuses of this issue is the rise of populism, and the question of how it might be embraced by the left - if indeed it should. This is clearly an important issue in a political terrain marked by Trump and Brexit.

But the left also has to work out how to respond to opposition to Trump from business interests and other right-wing populists. I focus here on the tech industry in the US, which has been very interesting in its responses to Trump. There is no easy analogue to Silicon Valley in Europe: outposts of the same culture exist in cities like London and Berlin, but there is nothing to match the scale, wealth and power of the Valley anywhere this side of the Atlantic. However, the global reach of digital giants such as Facebook and Google, and the continued centrality of the US in world affairs, means that the ways in which the situation develops in the US will certainly have political implications for the rest of us.

The significance of the industry has not been lost on the new administration. One of the first things that Trump did on winning the presidency was to call a meeting (on 14 December) of senior figures in Big Tech, in a conference room in Trump Tower. In the room were some of the most vocal opponents to his presidency, and to his platform, among the powerbrokers of American capitalism. Trump was deferential and flattering - 'There's no-one like you in the world' - and, in an attempt at echoing the iconoclastic ideology of Silicon Valley, he insisted that there was no hierarchy in his administration. He told them that his door was open: he was 'here to help [them] do well'. Elon Musk, who had previously said he'd move to China if Trump won, now joined the administration's business advisory board, following his fellow PayPal founder (and Trump donor and advisor) Peter Thiel.

The bungled travel ban, however - which could be understood as resulting from Trump's incompetence but also as a quick test of potential levels of resistance to the more illiberal parts of his platform - produced a clear and negative reaction from Silicon Valley. A letter signed by the vast majority of big tech firms, including Microsoft, Apple and Facebook, stated: 'We are a nation made stronger by

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immigrants'. Sergey Brin, President of Google's parent company Alphabet (also a signatory to the letter) was spotted at an airport protest in San Francisco against the ban. Many of the letter's signatories also offered their weight to legal challenges to the ban, in the form of a supporting briefing. After a short delay, even Musk allowed his companies Tesla and SpaceX to be added as signatories to the letter.

At the same time, a group of lesser known Valley investors offered to match public donations from their own pockets in an initiative to raise funds for the American Civil Liberties Union to oppose the ban. This was followed by a flurry of articles within tech media about the grassroots movements resisting Trump, often couched within the logic of start-up culture (a sort-of Darwinian, winner-takes-all logic best summarised by Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook's favourite maxim 'move fast and break things'). Not only are the tech industry providing funds and protecting their business interests, but now, it seems, they are also attempting to provide intellectual leadership in the popular resistance to Trump.

Trump has rightly identified the tech industry as a critical industry for the success of his administration. But it could also make a fearsome opposition. With near unlimited funds, a honed PR machine and a presence in almost everyone's pocket, Big Tech - and Trump's relationship to it - will be a major shaper both of the administration and the resistance to it.

It is important to remember here, however, that although Silicon Valley is frequently presented as an interest group, Big Tech is not a single homogeneous entity: it is both geographically and ideologically more spread than its common metonym normally implies, and it includes far more corporate types than software start-ups (albeit sometimes turned giant) and communications device manufacturers. Business models based on transcending state apparatuses (such as Apple or Amazon) rub up against corporations such as Tesla and Space X that are profoundly dependent on subsidies and good working relationships with state industries. Then there is a whole section of the industry that is involved in military technologies and surveillance, from robotics manufacturers Boston Dynamics (currently being sold-on by Alphabet) to Thiel's Palantir data analytics security company. Indeed, the roots of the Valley lie in high-tech innovation for the military industrial complex.

The struggle between Trump, Tech and 'the Resistance' will affect the future shape of capitalism and democracy. Will the Tech giants line up with the business interests for whom Trump's protectionism and xenophobia make sense, based as

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they are in the state-subsidised industries enmeshed in crony capitalism? Or will they try to shore up a globalised liberal capitalism, with an intensification of the shinier side of branded neoliberalism, ameliorative measures such as Basic Income (an increasingly popular idea among some technologists as new techniques of automation destroy jobs), and new drives towards the marketisation and datafication of everything?

But what should the left do in either outcome? For Paolo Gerbaudo, the future lies in embracing a populism based on restoring sovereignty and control to nation states or groups of states (see his article in this issue). This would appear to make an alliance that includes liberal global capital problematic. On the other hand, Marina Prentoulis (see her contribution to 'Alliances, fronts, parties and populism') argues both that Syriza's government coalition with the right-wing party ANEL was a shrewd strategic move, and that participating in alliances with people from very different political traditions often changes people's politics in a progressive direction. The answer to the question of alliances surely must be based on what kinds of alliances we are discussing. Is opposing Trump so urgent that we need a cross-class alliance broadly similar to the popular fronts of the 1930s? Or should (can) the left focus on building a populist movement that can take on both liberal capitalism and the populist right?

The Bernie Sanders campaign is a good place to look for an understanding of what these alliances may mean. Guessing what would have happened if Sanders had won the nomination is to step into the fictions of alternative history: it is unclear whether he could have swung enough of the Trump voters in Rust Belt states and at the same time maintained the core Democrat liberal vote. Yet in terms of whether an alliance with Silicon Valley was considered worth the cost, this can be easily answered. Tech donors, albeit largely through lots of small donations, gave twice as much to Sanders in the primaries as to Clinton and Trump combined - and more than they had given to Obama by a similar point in 2008. And it is easy to draw a connection between this support and the Sanders campaign's populist critique of capitalist excess, which focused on Wall Street and the institutions of global financial capital rather than Palo Alto's digital imperialism.

A left front in the US now has to consider whether it can maintain an alliance with the bits of Tech that already oppose Trump - with all the problems and advantages that brings - or whether it should adopt policies that might lose Tech's

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support and encourage a shift of patronage to an emollient Trump. A further question is whether, if the Valley really does want to seriously challenge Trump, they will even need or want an alliance with others.

Seven out of ten of the richest people (predictably all white men) in America now come from the tech industry: they represent the greatest sectoral concentration of wealth in history; and they control what are probably the most important channels of communication (as well as designing the devices we use to access them). They have access to raw sources of data over which party campaign strategists would weep with joy. They largely practise a post-(Ayn)Randian messianic ideology where they believe they can shape the world in the image of their utopian imaginations. Given all this, why would they want an alliance that would force them to compromise their vision? Tech companies are not like ordinary corporations. They lack the separation of ownership and control that has been a key characteristic of traditional corporate apparatus. As with medieval kingdoms and their monarchs (and with other similar patriarchal structures), we can ask where Facebook ends and Mark Zuckerberg begins. This gives immense power to such figures - including potential political power.

Trump has changed the logic of American politics. An established public profile, outsider rhetoric and a big heap of money (though he claims to have turned a profit from his campaign) enabled him to make a successful run at the presidency despite the fierce opposition of the Republican establishment. A pathway to the highest office has now been demonstrated as a possibility for anyone with a resonant message, access to the media and the cash to fund a run. Silicon Valley has no shortage of people who can lay claim to that: reports suggest that Mark Zuckerberg has already adjusted the terms of his Facebook holdings to retain control of the company should he want to make a bid for office. On the other hand, the New Patriarchs of Big Tech may decide not to run themselves, but instead to deploy a proxy (Sheryl Sandberg has been mentioned), or to find a telegenic celebrity (George Clooney maybe?) with whom those elements of the industry unable to reconcile to Trump can work in open partnership. In the two-party system of American politics, there is a big question mark over what a populist left could really do in such a situation.

Big business interests have always been a significant, if not dominant, influence on American politics, but the firewall that has traditionally separated business

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from party candidacy is now down (there is no need any more for a period of apprenticeship, as, for instance, in the case of Mitt Romney). We're entering a world where the American presidency could become an extension of whatever corporate interest has the ability to outcompete the others.

It is clear that we must stop Trump, but in doing so will we simply be shutting the door on one vain eccentric white man and his cronies, whose total wealth comes in at around \$14 billion (see Matt Seaton's article in this issue), only to open it for a pack worth a trillion?

About this issue

The first three features of this issue look at the much commented-upon recent rise of populism. Matt Seaton analyses the specifically American nature of Trump's populism; our discussion looking at popular fronts and other kinds of alliances takes a more European look at the subject; while Paolo Gerbaudo makes the case for populism as the dominant political narrative of the contemporary era. There is agreement here that populism can be a left-wing phenomenon as well as right, and that populism is a legitimate political discourse - not an outsider phenomenon to be ejected from mainstream; and there is also a shared concern that so few people make any serious effort to define or understand populism, or to locate it within a specific historical set of circumstances. There is also agreement that right-wing populism needs to be vigorously resisted. But not all contributors have the same take on left-wing populism. Our hope is that the three pieces, taken together, will stimulate serious thinking on how best to organise politically in the difficult contemporary political landscape.

That we need to take time to think seriously about current political trends is not in doubt, and this makes our new series, *Soundings Critical Terms*, extremely timely. The aim of the series is to explore and build on a range of theoretical resources that members of the *Soundings* editorial group have found helpful to their own understandings of politics. The first article, by series editors Deborah Grayson and Ben Little, offers a framing statement for the series as whole, and makes a strong case for the place of conjunctural writing at the heart of the project.

Stuart Hall, one of the three founding editors of *Soundings*, was someone whose political writing, over a period of many years, provided immensely valuable ideas

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and analysis for people who seek to change the world as well as interpret it. As a complement to Deborah and Ben's series introduction, we are therefore including here edited extracts from the introductory material to the newly published edition of Stuart's *Selected Political Writings*, as these set out some of his main contributions to political thinking.

Victoria Lawson and Sarah Elwood's contribution to this issue, which is focused on ways of repoliticising poverty in the face of persistent attempts to naturalise it, and to explain it in terms of individual failing rather than a system that is predicated upon inequality, pays tribute to Doreen Massey's work specifically because of its ability to shape generative ways of understanding political issues.

Doreen's work gave insights and starting points to a very wide range of thinkers, and in this issue we have collected together memories from some of them about the pleasures of thinking and working alongside Doreen.

In the anniversary year of the Russian revolution, Mike Makin-Waite discusses the political legacy of communism. His aim is to reflect on what went wrong (and occasionally right) as a way of informing decisions we make today. His particular focus is on democracy, and this includes both an analysis of how the repressive structures of state communism arose, and a discussion of the ways in which Gramscian communists sought to rethink communist oppositional practices within liberal democracies.

Our final article is the fourth instalment of our *Soundings Futures* series, which seeks to link a detailed critique of a particular aspect of neoliberal society to a set of proposals for an alternative socialist vision. Here Danny MacKinnon looks at the dismal record of regional policy in Britain, which, at least since the 1930s, has not comprehended that small amounts of ameliorative investment and political tinkering can make little headway in the context of a centralised system that is organised in a such a way that, as a matter of course, far more resources are channelled to the South East than to the rest of the country. Instead he proposes a regional policy that actively seeks to rethink the power relationship between different parts of the country, and to introduce forms of decentralisation that would enable industrial and economic policy to be coproduced between different levels: central government, the regions, cities and rural areas.