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Toward the anthropology of white nationalist postracialism

Comments inspired by Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram's "The hands of Donald Trump"

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This article explains Donald Trump's brutal political effectiveness in terms of his white nationalist appeal. It locates the intellectual, popular, and policy imperatives of Trumpism in a new form of racial politics that I am calling white nationalist postracialism. This is a paradoxical politics of twenty-first-century white racial resentment whose proponents seek to do two contradictory things: to reclaim the nation for white Americans while also denying an ideological investment in white supremacy. The article shows how Trump's excoriation of political correctness, his nostalgia for the post-WWII industrial economy, his use of hand gestures, and his public speaking about race work together to telegraph a white nationalist message to his followers without making them feel that he is, or they are, racist. I end the article by explaining why I think that Donald Trump's embrace of many white nationalist ideological precepts—if not quite yet of white nationalism as a fully realized political project—makes good political sense in the twenty-first-century United States.

Keywords: race, racism, populism, whiteness, nationalism, politics, United States

Kira Hall, Donna Goldstein, and Matthew Ingram (2016) have written a brave and insightful piece on Donald Trump's politically unprecedented use of comedic gestural enactments during the 2016 Republic primary season. Pundits have asserted repeatedly that no candidate showed more mastery of the art of the political put-down or exploited more effectively the public's appetite for grotesquerie, scandal, and politics-as-entertainment than did Donald Trump. Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram give substance to this assertion with a detailed account of the ways that



Trump used hand gestures to mock his political opponents, reinforce his outsider political status, elevate himself, and thrill supporters. Their piece is a novel and important contribution to the study of political communication in the media- and entertainment-saturated twenty-first-century United States. The piece stands out as an early effort to take Trump seriously. It helps to explain his brutal political effectiveness in a moment when much of the liberal intellectual establishment is still wallowing in helpless apoplexy at Trump's political rise.

An important part of Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram's argument is its treatment of Trump's presidential political campaign as a paradigmatic expression of late-capitalist spectacle. I could not agree more with this analysis. The authors are brilliant in tracing the unique and disturbing ways that Trump brings together entertainment, entrepreneurial triumphalism, and mockery of the political establishment to mask his own business class agenda and its implications for the production and reproduction of class division and economic inequality. Yet racial politics are, I think, just as important as are late-capitalist class politics to Trump's populist appeal. In this commentary, I want to tease out the ways that the intellectual, popular, and policy imperatives of Trumpism are rooted in a new form of racial politics that I am calling *white nationalist postracialism*. This is a paradoxical politics of twenty-first-century white racial resentment. Its proponents seek to do two contradictory things: to reclaim the nation for white Americans while also denying an ideological investment in white supremacy. And they attempt to accomplish this feat by a highly selective reading of post-Civil Rights era US history. There is, of course, nothing new about white nationalism; the freighting of national identity to white ethnic identity has a long inglorious history in the United States (Saxton [1990] 2003). Further, white nationalist populisms frequently surface at times of great economic inequality, though they are by no means the only kinds of populism to emerge in these times (Kazin 2016). But the reappearance of white nationalism in the post-Civil Rights era is new, if not wholly unprecedented, and in urgent need of study. For this is an era during which the New Right (and some neoliberals) have made a political art form of the selective appropriation of Civil Rights era political discourses about enfranchisement and equality to justify the rollback of Civil Rights legislation and policies, dismantle the social democratic tradition, attack Keynesian welfare statism, and advance color-blind policy and postracial ideology (see Mullings 2005 for an extensive discussion of anthropological scholarship on unmarked or postracial racism). The New Right's attack on Affirmative Action is a case in point. The New Right argument against efforts to create educational and job opportunities for groups that have not been treated fairly in the past is not predicated on the idea that whites should receive preferential treatment because they are biologically or culturally superior. Rather, the argument is based on the idea that racial discrimination is no longer a factor that affects educational attainment or hiring: people should be judged on the basis of "merit" alone, not race. According to this reasoning, Affirmative Action policies perpetuate racial inequalities by offering "preferred treatment" to individuals who do not deserve it and thus block talented individuals from attaining success. This case exemplifies the New Right's proclivity to use the themes and language of the civil rights movement to defeat its goals (Ansell 1997). And this is the specific context in which today's white nationalism is embedded.

Trump's excoriation of political correctness is the centerpiece to his political worldview and a cornerstone of his populist appeal. With it, he stokes white nationalist sentiments, mobilizing supporters to be outraged by PC-induced free speech violations and in defense of white cultural worlds that, in this formulation, are perceived to be under constant attack by liberal accusations of racial insensitivity. Freightened to his anti-PC stance is a politics of nostalgia for a fictitious industrial heyday when Americans were purportedly better off. Indeed, the solution for the precarious status of many Americans today is, for Trump, a return not to the 1970s and 80s, when white ethnicity was celebrated across the political spectrum, or to the 1990s, when the culture wars were at their peak, but to the mid-twentieth century, and to the industrial economy and welfare statism of that era. And this is an explicit desire to return to that era, *as it actually existed*, with its racist and sexist hierarchies wholly intact. Although Trump is often viewed as ideologically inconsistent to the point of incoherency, his call for a new "industrial revolution"—his denunciation of free trade, his emphasis on Rust Belt manufacturing jobs, his grandstanding as the savior of jobs at the Carrier's Indianapolis factory—combines with his support for current levels of Social Security and Medicare spending in his first proposed budget (while slashing the rest of the federally funded safety net) to define white male workers as the virtuous majority whom Trump claims to represent. Accordingly, it is the welfare statism part of Trumpism that so offends neoconservative intellectuals, who are fully invested in its dismantling, while it is the racist and sexist parts of the equation that offend the liberal establishment, which was nonetheless unable to mount a successful electoral political campaign to defeat him. This is, of course, a politics that few nonwhite Americans can embrace and that offends many women. Indeed, it is a nostalgia for a time of legal segregation that existed prior to the women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The immediate postwar period was also a time when whiteness and masculinity worked as unmarked categories of privilege, when the maintenance of the social order was presumed to be one in which white men had political and economic power. And it is that era that Trump compares favorably to the present period of overt race talk, liberal multiculturalism, and liberal social policy.

Yet Trump is invested in a different kind of race talk. Take, for example, his talk about Black America, which reflects a similar investment in white male resurrection. For black Americans, Trump expresses mostly pity for the harrowing, violent conditions of life in the inner city. He blames Democrats for decades of policy experimentation that locked black Americans in the inner city (again there is just enough truth in this claim to make it grossly misleading). Trump's prescription for change, ironically (given his current hostility to Democrats) is to suggest that the Bill Clinton-era welfare-to-work regime should be extended to all other safety net programs, so black inner city residents will be forced to work, for instance, to get food stamps or subsidized housing or government health insurance. Of course, Trump's description of the plight of inner city residents has very little to do with reality for most African Americans. Most African Americans are not poor, and they do not live in the urban core. And by treating the black inner city as a metonym for Black America, Trump alienated many African American voters. But this kind of race talk signals something else entirely to his white middle class supporters, who see black Americans both as government dependents for whom they hold disdain, and as preferred recipients of government largesse.

My observations of Trump's public speaking suggest that Trump chose race as a topic about which he would get serious, to demonstrate his presidential bona fides, and further that his spectacular performances and dramatic hand gestures are not limited exclusively to contexts that are just mocking. For example, in his October 19th presidential debate with Hillary Clinton, Trump uses hand gestures like those described by Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram—even if slightly less flamboyantly—to reinforce his point about the plight of the black and Latinx inner city, including hand waving, the pistol hand gesture, and a bull's-eye gesture (not discussed in “The Hands of Donald Trump”), which looks like the hand sign for “OK.” Often discussed in scholarship on political style as the “precision-grip gesture” (Lempert 2011), Trump's gesture helps here to emphasize the word *shot*: “Our inner cities are a disaster. You get *shot* walking to the store. They have no education, they have no jobs” (see Figure 1). Trump makes this statement emphatically but somberly, with no hint of irony or mockery. And even if the words he says may insult African Americans and Latinxs by misrepresenting their communities, they allow white viewers to read him as caring deeply about people of color and therefore as not racist.



Figure 1: Trump's bull's-eye gesture emphasizing the word “shot”
Third Presidential Debate, October 19, 2016; *Politico*.

Trump's mocking tone and accompanying hand gestures return in his next statement when he criticizes Hillary Clinton: “I will do more for African Americans and Latinos than she can ever do in ten lifetimes. All she's done is talk to the African Americans and to the Latinos, but they get the vote, and then they come back—they say ‘we'll see you in four years’” (Strauss 2016). Much has been made of Trump's racist use of the definite article *the* in statements such as these (Murphy 2016; Strauss 2016). But the full statement is also a brilliant display of white nationalist political performance. It reinforces the trope of the deprived racialized inner city resident, the effaced status of whom economically insecure and downwardly mobile white middle class men and women are scrambling to avoid for themselves. And it further signals precisely what many white Americans want to

hear about race: that Trump is not a racist, he cares for people of color, but he is not going to abide by PC rules when he talks about race. Further, in this statement he blames Democrats—not white privilege or institutional racism—for the plight of immigrants and people of color, making it possible for white viewers to embrace his white nationalist position without seeing it as one rooted overtly in white supremacy. Statements such as these helped to provide gravitas to Trump's debate performance at a crucial moment in his presidential campaign. With respect to his hand gestures, I noticed in the video clip of his performance that they were remarkably similar as he moved from mockery to seriousness and back to mockery again. This contiguous use of hand gestures in the context of a presidential debate helped to telegraph to the audience that jesting and somber statements alike are both part of the Trump political brand.

Why were performances like these effective? Much new research needs to be done to understand not just what he says or does and how it might be appealing to different political constituencies; we also need to understand better why Donald Trump's embrace of many white nationalist ideological precepts—if not quite yet of white nationalism as a fully realized political project—makes good political sense in the twenty-first-century United States. To a certain extent, white nationalism in the United States is the deviant spawn of liberal forms of white ethnic identity politics that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, in the aftermath of the Black power and other protest movement of the 1960s and 1970s (di Leonardo 1998; Steinberg 1981). It has festered on the fringe of the Republican Party since the 1970s, encouraged (and frustrated) by the kind of cynical crypto race-baiting that has been a hallmark of Republican politics since the 1960s, when, in the context of the Civil Rights movement, Republicans put concerted effort into appealing to white Southerners' racial resentments to gain their support. Its ideological precepts were honed in the 1980s and 1990s during the culture wars, as part of the New Right condemnation of “illiberal” causes such as affirmative action, multiculturalism, political correctness, and liberal immigration policy. And it gained traction in the context of the austerity politics that the populist (not neoconservative) right asserted as a counterweight to the Obama administration's attempts at economic stimulus in the aftermath of the global economic collapse of 2008.

The rise of the antitax, antigovernment Tea Party played a crucial role in this ascendance. Funded into existence by the oil industry tycoons, the Koch brothers, and by other libertarian and conservative donors, it was extremely effective in naming and then popularizing opposition to debt-driven government spending. Yet the Tea Party turned out to be an unwieldy and unpredictable political formation. If it started out as a movement of libertarian, antitax, deficit scolds, its rank and file turned out to be more concerned about race and immigration than it was about debt and fiscal constraint (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin 2011). Eventually, much of the Tea Party became Trump's political base. Controversial figures such as Steve Bannon and his allies on the alt-right also helped to popularize the politics of white racial resentment, as did Fox News. But I think that white nationalism is a more broadly held worldview, crisscrossing Red State / Blue State divisions, and class and gender differences among whites.

In this context, Trump was certainly not the only political figure to attempt to craft a populist political message in the 2016 Republican primary race. Rand Paul

tried as a Libertarian and Ted Cruz tried as a religious Conservative. They both challenged the neoconservatism of the Republican establishment—but not with respect to racial politics. Indeed, their records suggest strong adherence to New Right postracial orthodoxy, though Paul did support some criminal justice reforms that were ideologically heterodox. But Trump garnered more support from disgruntled Republican voters precisely because he was the most brazen in elaborating an antiglobalist, anti-immigrant, white nationalist–friendly stance. His politics are thus noteworthy for their overt articulation of white racial resentments that have long been exploited, *sub rosa*, by the Republican Party but that Trump has, for his convenience, made explicit. Further, Trump had an oftentimes-overlooked advantage over the other candidates. His foray into birtherism against President Obama, which at the time was considered a fringe position, gave him early credibility in some white Republican quarters and firmly freighted his subsequent anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim positions to antiblack politics. This, alas, turned out to be a very compelling articulation.

Across the last thirty years, we have seen the gradual fraying of longstanding political arrangements that freight rights and recognition with access to public resources, accompanied by a mad-dash scramble to formulate workable political programs in defense of an ever-ambiguous category of “the middle class.” Trumpism is one such attempt that articulates that middle class in largely racial—and racist—terms. The job of antiracist and left intellectuals in the Trump era is to raise alarms about the threat to democracy that Trump poses, to document and publicize the consequences of his policies for the populations he targets as disposable or politically threatening, and to align ourselves with, and participate in, political groups that oppose him. But we must also do the hard work of trying to understand his populist appeal, and to use what we learn to help to reimagine politics in ways that unsettle political formations such as white nationalist postracialism. We must also sustain the constructive critique of centrist Democratic Party neoliberalism and Republican neoconservatism, whose respective failures contributed to the rise of Trumpism in the first place, and to the authoritarian turn more generally in US politics.

Building on the piece by Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram, we can see not just how reactionary populist forces may benefit politically from using grotesque mockery and critical gestures. These strategies and tactics may, as the authors tell us, help also to animate opposition to Trump, building on the spectacular protest strategies of groups such as the Black Panthers and ACT UP. Indeed, the mobilizations that have already occurred since Trump’s inauguration have been boosted by spectacularly mocking protest signs and slogans like “We Shall Overcomb,” “Tweet Women With Respect,” and “Without Immigrants, Trump Would Have No Wives.” Let us hope that the new politics that repudiates Trump takes race and racism seriously. As Trump’s ascendancy demonstrates, the right has already mastered that trick.

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Vers une anthropologie du post-racialisme blanc nationaliste: commentaires inspirés de l'article de Hall, Goldstein et Ingram "The Hands of Donald Trump"

Résumé : Cet article explique l'efficacité politique redoutable de Donald Trump par l'attrait du nationalisme blanc. Il situe les objectifs politiques et les enjeux intellectuels du Trumpisme dans une nouvelle forme de politique raciale que j'appelle le post-racialisme blanc nationaliste. Il consiste en une politique paradoxale, propre au 21^e siècle, de ressentiment racial blanc dont les partisans cherchent à accomplir deux buts contradictoires: revendiquer la nation pour les Américains blancs tout en niant les enjeux idéologique de la suprématie blanche. L'article montre que la critique du politiquement correct de Donald Trump, sa nostalgie pour l'économie industrielle d'après-guerre, sa gestuelle, et ses discours sur le problème racial agissent ensemble pour suggérer à ses soutiens un message nationaliste blanc, tout

en les laissant penser que ni Trump ni eux ne sont racistes. Je termine cet article en expliquant pourquoi je pense que l'adhésion de Trump aux préceptes idéologiques du nationalisme blanc - sinon à un projet politique entièrement réalisé de nationalisme blanc - fait sens politiquement dans l'Amérique du 21e siècle.

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