The wound of whiteness: Conceptualizing economic convergence as Trauma in the 2016 United States Presidential Election

Maureen Sioh

Department of Geography, DePaul University, 990 W. Fullerton Ave, Suite 4300, Chicago, IL 60614, USA

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Political commentators on the right of the political spectrum and the mainstream left assert that Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 United States presidential election was due to poor white male voters left behind by globalization because his opponent abandoned them by prioritizing identity, meaning race and gender, politics. I argue instead that White masculinist identity politics constructed legal gains domestically by minorities and women and economic gains internationally by emerging economies, particularly in East Asia, as trauma. The economic position that generated the rage that carried Donald Trump to the White House was not economic divergence from the wealthiest one percenters but economic convergence between Whites and other racialized groups. Building on Freudian trauma theory, Judith Herman's seminal clinical research on repeat trauma and James Gilligan's research on masculinity, I construct a framework for understanding political trauma in the election. Referencing statistical data from exit polls, recent reassessments and textual analysis, I argue that White men and women vis-à-vis racial minorities, construct the erosion of the normative social compact and consequent loss of racial privilege as trauma because it entails submission to humiliation and loss of status, experienced as a position of gendered subjectivity.

"Why did US voters back Trump? Economic powerlessness.

(Robert Shiller)

The median household income of a Trump voter so far in the primaries is about $72,000 … [I]t's well above the national median household income of about $56,000. It's also higher than the median income for Hillary Clinton … which is around $61,000.

(Nate Silver)

Grab them by the pussy.

(Donald Trump, quoted in Jacobs et al., 2016)

53% of White women voted for Trump.

(Huang et al., 2016)

1. Introduction

In the dry prose of economist Kaletsky (2016), "[T]here are several reasons to question the link between populist politics and economic distress" with regards to the electoral trend now sweeping the Western world. Liberal economist Krugman (2016) has also voiced his doubts about the explanation of economic distress for the turn to populism in politics. This paper argues that Donald Trump won the 2016 American presidential election because of the rage generated by economic convergence, not divergence as is conceived in the dominant political narrative adopted by both the right and mainstream left. In my argument, a fear of globalization is defined by White economic anxiety that is a function of the anxiety of a perceived loss of racial entitlement, both domestically and internationally. The dominant narrative asserts that Trump owed his victory to poor White male voters left behind by globalization who rallied to him because his opponent, and the left in general, had long abandoned them by prioritizing identity politics. Yet, even when new statistical data (Center for American Progress, henceforth referred to as CAP, 2018) would argue for a challenge to or at least a reinterpretation of earlier analyses, commentators are doubling down on their earlier conclusions.

This paper challenges the current popular American political discourse by offering an alternative narrative. Referencing statistical data from exit polls and textual analysis, I argue that economics and identity politics were indeed central to the election outcome – to both voters and policy-makers. The dominant factor for Trump supporters across categories of age, education, income and gender was race (Huang et al., 2016). Racism in America is not surprising nor is it politically unanticipated. The interesting question is when and why racism becomes the decisive electoral factor. In the aftermath of the election, policy proposals to win back Trump supporters have pandered to racism by the deafening silence on its role in Trump's victory. This paper makes

E-mail address: msioh@depaul.edu.

three linked arguments to expand the common narrative that support for Trump reflects a traumatic experience that is linked to the economy. **First**, I argue that the significance of the economy lies in how it affects identity and culture but that both are relational and dynamic rather than essentialized and fixed. **Second**, I argue that identity and culture are self-perceived not just by how poorly individuals fare by their own indicators of success, but by how well they perceive others to be doing. In this latter sense, the 2016 American election can be understood as a 'state of the nation' assessment by the voters of the place of the United States in the age of globalization. These anxieties resulted from the changes that began with the move to a post-industrial economy in the 1970s in the West as part of what Harvey (1989) calls the "spatial fix" of globalization to ensure continuing profits for Western capital. Harvey (1982) uses the term "spatial fix" to describe the tendency of Western capital, when confronted with declining profits in the West, to seek a solution through expanding their operations geographically to exploit new resources and investment opportunities. **Third**, I argue that the economic position that generated the rage that carried Donald Trump to the White House was not *economic divergence* from the wealthiest one percenters but, rather, *economic convergence* with other racialized groups. I argue that 'White masculinist identity' politics constructed legal gains domestically by minorities and women and economic gains internationally by emerging economies, crucially, in East Asia, as trauma. Middle and working class Whites, fearful of their historical racial privilege being eroded, acted upon their fears to elect Donald Trump. As a corollary to my argument, Trump supporters prioritize addressing racial economic convergence rather than economic divergence with the one percenters as the price of their appeasement.

Yet, mainstream analysis in the US elides the force of race in political decisions to minimize its effect on economic rationality. And using the term 'masculinist' to refer to customs and ideas associated with male power rather than simply biological males, I suggest, also explains why White women could support Trump since they can partake of the privileges of White male power through association. This is not to say that economic inequality should not be a major policy focus; it should. If we accept that Trump won the election because he was supported by multiple demographic categories, it bears investigating the slippage between why political commentators and policy analysts, in focusing on inequality, have highlighted it as a problem only of the 'forgotten' White middle and working class, ignoring that Clinton won on income and lost due to relatively lower Black support (CAP, 2018). The analytical sleight of hand results in an overt problem statement of income inequality, and the implied focus is that it is only when economic inequality affects White voters that it matters. Highlighting the contradiction between the mainstream policy focus and the extensive empirical evidence that race played a bigger factor in Trump support shows that even liberal policy-makers are refusing to address one of the most powerful currents that carried Donald Trump to victory.

2. Framing the election

In the wake of Donald Trump's victory, political commentators struggled to identify the key factor in explaining the result. Two lines of reasoning coalesced into one narrative despite being contradicted by the data, including reassessments of voter patterns (CAP, 2018). While the right's argument can be summarized by Trump's campaign, the centrist to left liberal explanations for Trump's victory range from academic and self-described liberal Lilla's (2016) jeremiad against identity politics to politicians Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren championing the return to a class politics that is inherently racialized. Among the media commentators who take the line of Sanders and Warren are McGreal (2015) and Arnade (2016a, 2016b, 2016c). Hochschild's (2016) sympathetic treatment of resentful White southern voters who support the Tea Party and Trump, through its focus, also inadvertently reinforces the notion that it is only their concerns that are worthwhile. And authoritative voices of globalization such as the World Economic Forum (2017) at Davos and the Managing Director of the IMF, Christine Lagarde (Black and Follain, 2017), and the British House of Commons Library (Savage, 2018) have highlighted economic inequality as the source of political discontent in the West overall, not just in specific countries. This narrative rests on two assumptions: that inequality is defined as economic divergence between the wealthiest members and the rest of society; and the universal norm for class identity is White and male. Yet exit polls from the US election contradict this simplistic treatment. Trump won among voters in every income category above $50,000 (14% in the category below $50,000 voted for Trump) and the median income of his voters was $16,000 above the national median income (Huang et al., 2016; Silver, 2016). Astonishingly, when the CAP (2018) released statistics estimating that Clinton's share of the vote even among non-college educated Whites (the demographic shorthand for White working class voters who are also presumably low income) was actually six percent higher than predicted from exit polls (Griffin et al., 2017), commentators interviewed in the *New York Times* (Edsall, 2018) claimed that the new findings only strengthened their assessment based on the earlier lower figure that Clinton should have abandoned identity issues. Ignored were the statistics in the same CAP report that argued that Clinton would have won the 2016 election had Black voter turnout not dropped and had Clinton not reduced her share of the Black vote. It is also worth noting that between 1952 and 2012, White women have voted in the majority for Democratic presidential candidates only twice (Junn, 2016). Obama, like Clinton, lost the White women vote; he took 42% against McCain and 46% against Romney compared to the 43% of the vote that Clinton took against Trump.

So why do policy and opinion makers accept this victim narrative of Whites left behind so unproblematically? The common investment in this reading is that it focuses on a group that is perceived to be susceptible to being mobilized through White resentment politics and shifting political power; hence, placating this group becomes a priority. When the Trump 'supporter' is invoked, the assumption is that we are dealing with a group that has common interests that can be mobilized, but more significantly, the Trump supporters of interest to both the left and right constituted a block of interests that was not captured by pollsters before the 2016 election, was not anticipated for in election strategies and, therefore, the group that 'delivered' the election. The mainstream media analysis of the election has focused on trauma, humiliation, respect and economy without constructing a coherent conceptual framework that links those terms together. I argue that the experience of trauma that can be traced back to the anxieties around fantasies of identity makes psychoanalysis a suitable explanatory framework. In this sense, the focus of the paper is less on pinpointing the exact income demarcation of Trump supporters who came from various demographics than in examining what is common in how trauma is interpreted by his supporters. It is not necessarily only those who directly experience loss of status but anyone who can perceive themselves in that position who is displaying symptoms of trauma. Thus, the current progressive policy focus on income and tandem dismissal of identity will not suffice to address the rage of Trump supporters. Building on theories of shame and trauma, beginning with Freud's conceptualization of trauma as a phenomenon that only acquires meaning retrospectively, I offer a framework of a trialectics of trauma to understand the current political moment from the perspective of Trump supporters. White men and indeed White women vis-à-vis racial minorities construct the destruction of the normative social compact of a racial hierarchy and consequent loss of racial privilege as trauma. First, while the civil rights movement in the US caused White anxiety in the past, the symbolic significance of the Obama presidency – the capture of the ultimate cultural symbol of American power – is of a different magnitude as a trigger for White anxiety. Second, unlike the economic rise of Japan, which was a junior ally to the US, the rise of China, not just as an economic power but also as a perceived geopolitical rival, makes the current political moment different from previous