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European Languages	زبانهای اروپائی

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20.01.2021

Donald Trump, the Pantomime President

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Donald J Trump's tale is a tale of epochs and generations, about dilapidated tenement housing and star-spangled casino palaces, about race hate and glossy Forbes spreads, about bankruptcy on route to the presidential suite. Above all, it is about the dirty trails which money leaves in its wake, the grime which lives behind wealth's golden, glittering façade.

It is a story which begins at the end of the nineteenth century. Trump's grandfather, Fredrick Trump, was made of hard, flinty Protestant stuff, a grey austere man who had made it over on a steamship bound for the US in order to invest his life savings, making a fortune as a restaurateur and businessman at the height of the gold rush. His son, Fred Christ Trump, was fated to live in less salubrious times. Trump Senior came to his own business ventures on the cusp of the Wall Street Crash, but while the times were changing, Trump Senior inherited his father's ruthless determination and his ability to turn a buck.

Fred Trump was able to channel the windfall from his father's network of restaurants, brothels and bars into the grey, piling storeys – the squat rooms, the leaky ceilings – of the

crumbling dilapidated tenement housing whose gloominess seemed to speak of the depression era *par excellence*. Fred Trump, like many an astute businessman before him, was an effective barometer for human desperation, and in the thirties – the epoch of the dust bowl and the hobo, and desperation and drought – it was here when Fred Trump made his bones. A savvy skin-flint, he was notorious for pinching the pennies; rather than shell out for an exterminator to take care of the more lice-filled rooms he rented, he would endeavour to do the job himself. He was known for keeping his books and cash on his person, and even as a millionaire many times over, he would keep just the one small office with a single secretary. He had the immigrant outsider's sense of self-sufficiency, the businessman's need to keep things on the down-low, and the landlord's sense of superiority and borderline revulsion toward those he rents to, those to be squeezed and extorted.

Almost inevitably, such aversion chimed with a racist set of politics. Trump Senior flagrantly discriminated against blacks, trying to up the white count among his tenants, trying to cultivate the image of a more "respectable", "well-to-do" element, no doubts so his properties could attach to themselves higher prices. He was exposed for his racist practises, not only by the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice which would eventually file suit against him, but also by that astute and poetic chronicler of the times, Woodie Guthrie, who had the misfortune of having Trump Senior as a landlord. Guthrie would croon about his odious landlord with both ire and melancholy when he sang "I suppose Old Man Trump knows/Just how much/Racial hate/ he stirred up/in the bloodpot of human hearts".

It seems, however, as if Trump senior's racism was about more than just economics; he experienced his race hate in the purest form and from the heart – so to speak. In 1927, for example, he was arrested during a Klu-Klux-Klan rally in Queens. It would be difficult to add to this melting pot of toe-curling characteristics – a veritable embarrassment of riches for any one individual – and yet, one has to include a cynical aptitude to play the broader political climate. While Trump Senior was clearly an inveterate racist, a dyed-in-the-wool right winger, and a hoarder of cash on a Scrooge-like scale, he was as well a schemer of Machiavellian means, someone adept at greasing the political wheel in order to glean any type of economic advantage. Despite his hard right affiliations, he would court the Democratic Party of the time, watering its bureaucratic machine with his own ill-gotten gains, and this was no doubts helpful in providing him with a steady stream of favourable loans from the Federal Housing Administration, delivering a windfall of millions. Trump Senior would give an overinflated estimation for construction costs for properties, absorb the loan which was to cover them, and then squirrel away the surplus amount on which he would pay no taxes, using it as capital to stimulate other investments, other ventures. In the words of the investigation which exposed such shoddy practise, the tenants who would then move into such abodes, were saddled "with the burden of meeting not only legitimate costs" but also the

costs of the money the developer had removed from the circuit of investment for these particular properties.

While it clear that "Old Man Trump" was blessed with something akin to intelligence, it was the type of intelligence which had been narrowed down into the most base deviousness, and which saw those outside his immediate circle merely as cogs in a broader machine to be manipulated, finessed or pressured into better yielding the cash product. There was no higher end in human endeavour than the extraction of profit – a petty, perpetual, monotonous and grinding process to which "Old Man Trump" was devoted with every fibre of his being. Gnarly, wizened, devious and cynical, he would walk the shadowlands between legality and illegality, the slow trudge-trudge of the slum landlord up a darkened staircase, approaching the door of the destitute and the desperate, indifferent to the fumes of misery he leaves trailing in his wake. Perhaps, therefore, it was almost inevitable that Old Man Trump's money making activity would neatly elide into the echelons of the criminal underworld, and when his racket involving FHA loans was brought into the light of day, Fred Trump began to rely on his Brooklyn connections more heavily including Joe DePaolo – President of Dic Underhill Co, a company with alleged mob connections – and business partner and financier William "Willie" Tomasello who was, according to the Federal Organised Crime Task Force, associated with the Gambino family.

If Old Man Trump was grey, flinty and largely devoid of ostentation, his wife, Mary Anne MacLeod, was an altogether different prospect. Donald J Trump's mother was from lower middle-class stock, she was born in a small township on a Scottish island. Her father ran a post office and small shop in his later years, however with the event of the First World War the economy of their extended village had suffered, and Mary chose to emigrate to the United States in order to cleave out new opportunities. The decision, born of aspiration and bravery, implied both loneliness and a meagre economic existence, for at first she made her way working as a domestic servant in the houses of the well-to-do, but soon she would encounter her salvation, meeting the already prosperous Fred Trump and her marriage to him elevated her forever above the poverty bracket she had so long dreamed of escaping.

Such escapism was an integral facet of her personality, the young maid and nanny, enamoured by the glint and glitz of the diamond chandlers which illuminated the plush, salubrious houses she worked her fingers to the bone cleaning – and even as a lady of considerable means she never relinquished that early, illicit fascination with the workings of an upper-class elite which perhaps she never fully felt a part of. In the words of her son, she was hypnotized by the antics of the royal family back in the United Kingdom, she would watch their various weddings and processions with wide-eyed wonder, for she was "enthralled by the pomp and circumstance, the whole idea of royalty and glamour". With her husband's financial resources she was able to decisively refashion herself in the style of the wealthy American matriarch, dramatized by the Jacquie Kennedy bouffant, the flashing

fingers bejewelled with silver and the sleek flowing mink draped from one shoulder. All this affectation, all the gaudy glamour and crass ostentation was perhaps, on Mary Anne MacLeod's part, something akin to a magical charm, intended to ward of the memory of the poverty she had once known, the humiliation she had bridled against as a Scottish Cinderella reduced to the level of cleaning other people's houses, washing other people's children. When the British television journalist Selina Scott was greeted by the presence of Mrs Trump for an interview which took place in the 90s, Scott was confronted by a perfectly manicured, perfectly attired, perfectly coiffured creation in which "all trace of the humble Scottish lass [had been] airbrushed away".

The family home too represented a kind of stubborn stand by wealth against the encroaching poverty which lurked forever just beyond the borders, of geography, of memory, of existence. The family home was a mansion with twenty three rooms, nine bathrooms, supported by six ivory coloured columns which flowed upward into a gable that overhung a generous front porch and was stamped with a confected crest. The Trump family crest – the mark of the *parvenu* who seeks to paper over humdrum origins with the rococo symbols of a hastily contrived, aristocratic refinery. But while the Trumps were ensconced in this ghastly monument to their own awful taste, the outer world had grown ever more turbulent, just beyond their borders economic upheaval was wracking New York, shaking the city to its foundations. In the two decades following the Second World War, New York had lost almost half its jobs in manufacturing. The post-war migrations of blacks and Hispanics flowing into the city found themselves increasingly locked out of the dwindling construction jobs and the unions – and though they helped provide the basis for a real estate boom with their ever spiralling rents those newly arrived immigrants reaped none of its rewards. For them the American Dream was evaporated and what remained in its wake was the suppurating divide between wealth and poverty.

The borough of Queens itself was increasingly defined by tribalism and ghettoization; whole neighbourhoods sprang up between which invisible but impermeable dividing lines were drawn. More and more whites fled to the outer suburbs, while minorities tended to stick to their own. Fred Trump's wealth was a parasitical symptom of all of this, of segregation, the real estate boom, the shoddy tenement flats – the seismic tremors which were passing across the economic and cultural landscape of the period, and yet the Trump family home in Jamaica Estates also provided a bastion against these things, a last-ditch outcrop of wealth and whiteness which, dripping with aristocratic ersatz, provided a nod to some fantasised past, a pristine totem set against the forces of change. Trump's spiel about Mexican immigrants and the need to build walls is more than just cynically contrived demagoguery; it is part and parcel of the sensibilities he imbibed in the cultural *milieu* of his very earliest beginnings, a Queens which was simmering with the fear and anxiety that came from a sense of being

overwhelmed by the "outsider" and the "undesirable", a far cry from the bawdy, colourful, raffish melting pot which characterises the area today.

The economic ruthlessness of his father, the unadorned desire for accumulation, the sense of superiority sported by the *nouveau riche* and overlaid with racist contempt – jostled for position in the young Donald Trump alongside the tasteless ostentation which came from his mother, her fixation with the gaudy, glittering trinkets which could be conscripted in the grossest displays of wealth. To this heady brew was added a strong sense of religious conformity – and every Sunday the Trump family would drive into Manhattan to worship at the Marble Collegiate church. The institution was overseen by the type of pastor which America seems to do so well. A religious entrepreneur, a holy roller who was at the same time a silver tonged salesman, a breathless extoller of the heavenly prophets as a way to secure the more earthly variant to be measured in dollars and cents. Pastor Norman Vincent Peale – dubbed "God's salesman" – was the author of the bestselling text The Power of Positive Thinking which offered up the type of quackery to combine false evidence, rampant individualism and vulgar pseudo-science, all delivered in a lofty religious tone which fell somewhere between that of preacher of the prairies and wandering snake oil salesman. Gems from this utterly, utterly awful exercise in platitude include: "Anybody can do just about anything with himself that he really wants to and makes up his mind to do. We are capable of greater things than we realize." The influence of the pastor on the young Trump was profound, he was, in Trump's own words, "the greatest guy". He taught Donald to confuse indelibly and forever truth with platitude, leadership with manipulation, charisma with the glib soundbite; above all, the presentation, the slick delivery, the superficial and flashy appearance was allowed to depose any deeper reality; the appearance itself was rendered sacrosanct.

Throughout his business, celebrity and political career Trump would promote the appearance above all else. An image of himself which was at the same time a fantastically contrived piece of PR placement and served to gloss over the more mundane and tawdry realities of a set of business practises which were rooted in privilege, power, illicit connection and rife corruption. Like many of history's greatest fantasists, Trump seems to have the unnerving ability to believe his own fabulations, to believe in the fantastical tales he himself spun and which speak to the heroic and extraordinary feats which underlie his climb to economic and political power. His narcissistic tendency to imbibe his own hype is what perhaps gives him such unusually thin skin; when some of his taller tales are mocked, he reacts with a petulant fury which seems almost insensible. There is, to be sure, a good deal to be mocked; the appearance he has so meticulously cultivated is always in danger being perforated by reality itself. Trump, never backward about coming forward, does not just consider himself a businessman *extraordinaire* who has perfected the "art of the deal", but also a top-flight

intellectual of a quite remarkable calibre: “Let me tell you, I’m a really smart guy. I was a really good student at the best school in the country.”

In 2011 he questioned the academic credentials of the then president Barack Obama, suggesting that he was a “terrible student” and hinting that Obama had managed to get into Colombia University and Harvard Law School by some nefarious means which was indifferent to merit. A true pot and kettle situation then, for Trump himself, it eventually transpired in a book by Gwenda Blair, had gained admission to Wharton School on the back of “an interview with a friendly Wharton admissions officer who was one of Freddy’s old high school classmates.” The “Freddy” in question was Donald’s older brother. And though it seems that Donald Trump’s actual school record was undistinguished, nevertheless for years papers like *The New York Times* reported that Trump had graduated “first in his class in 1968”. In actual fact Trump failed to graduate with honours that year, however the rumours persisted for decades following. Was Trump the one to circulate them? Most likely – in any event he certainly didn’t go out of his way to correct them. In his autobiography Trump outlines in explicit terms the fantasist’s mantra: “I play to people’s fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That’s why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole.”

When we come to Trump’s burgeoning business career, it is then when the “truthful hyperbole” becomes particularly intense. Over the years, Trump has made significant hay recycling an image of himself as one who has a strong affinity with blue-collar America, the rugged working man who clings doggedly to the dream even in the most difficult of circumstances. In 1990, in an interview for *Playboy Magazine*, Trump opined that “the working man likes me because he knows I worked hard and didn’t inherit what I’ve built. Hey, I made it myself; I have a right to do what I want with it.”

Elsewhere Trump makes reference to the humble, meagre origins of his business beginnings when he recalls with gritty nostalgia just how, in 1975, his father had granted him “a very small loan” and from this, plus the sweat of his brow – “I built…a company that’s worth many, many billions of dollars”. One can’t help but note how, by this point, “hyperbole” has long since said goodbye to “truth” and sent the latter for a long vacation, as the “small” loan Trump references happens to have been for the rather portly sum of 14 million dollars. Nevertheless Trump has continued to cultivate a very different kind of image. The image of himself as a goodly grafter; a cheeky underdog, operating on a wing and a prayer – able to fashion financial success from the most meagre basic investment; the miracle of economic fire managed by the striking of flint against flint, enterprise constructed painstakingly from the bottom up. But perhaps the more apt metaphor would be that of the silver spoon; advantage fed in rich, parcelized gobbets of privilege and power to the greedy and ever open mouth of the preening second son, always ready to splash the family fortune

on his next glitzy endeavour. Far from expressing any sense of originality, inspiration or imagination on his part, the basis of Donald Trump's wealth was fully rooted in privilege – the banal, prosaic hand-me-down of vast amounts from father to son in the manner of a feudal lord who wishes to fortify his scion's legacy as a way of securing the family claim.

Trump's unoriginality, however, was not restricted to his cash "birth right", for he also absorbed his father's business practises and ideals almost wholesale without taking the time to formulate his own. In Trump's own words his first major deal was struck over a site located in Cincinnati – a site he had hit upon as a lucrative investment opportunity when at "college, while my friends were reading the comics and the sports pages of newspapers, [and] I was reading the listings of FHA foreclosures…And that's how I found out about Swifton Village." Again the superficial spin belies the more prosaic reality – the Swifton Village property had been acquired by his father some time before, and Trump simply took over its management, but during his time there, the same familial practises of discrimination were in effect. Black residents were denied access, poorer tenants were forced out in a bid to cultivate a "better element" on the road to gentrification. Donald Trump inherited not only his father's fondness for ruthless discrimination but also his tendency to cultivate contacts in the underworld; shady, subterranean figures who could be used to circumvent state bureaucracy, be relied on to exert influence behind the scenes.

According to the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist David Cay Johnston, in the construction of Trump Towers during the early 1980s, Trump was paying overinflated prices for "ready mix" concrete which was not only more expensive but also a "riskier method" than the "steel girder" form of construction which was typically used in skyscrapers of the period. What did Trump have to gain? Well, argues Johnston, the "ready mix" concrete providers were almost down to a man mob outfits – and by securing deals with some of their bosses like Anthony "Fat Tony" Salerno, boss of the Genovese crime family, or Paul "Big Paulie" Castellano, boss of the Gambino crime family – Trump was as well able to procure the kind of muscle which would see the job pushed through with quick, brutal efficiency while also applying the type of pressure which could secure "union peace" and a pliable and cheap workforce. So, for instance, when Trump hired as many as 200 non-unionised workers to work on a demolition job in 1979 (Bonwit Teller department store) in an incident which epitomizes both his attitude toward immigrants and blue-collar workers, the 200 men – the majority of whom were illegal Polish immigrants – were paid $4 to $6 per hour with no benefits. Some of them were using sledge hammers rather than power tools, were working over 12 hours a day – 7 days a week, and were sometimes lacking in elementary safety equipment like hard hats. When Salerno was convicted in 1988 – the indictment against him listed the $8 million contract for concrete to be used on one "Trump Plaza" on the East Side as a part of the mafioso's racketeering enterprise. In the early 80s, Trump was sued by a woman with mob connections who accused the mogul of taking kickbacks from contractors in court papers and

pushed for the Attorney General to mount an investigation. Trump at once settled, paying the woman a cool $500 000.

With only the briefest glance at Trump's incredibly sketchy resume, the mob connections pile up. From Felix Sater, a convicted money launderer for the Russian Mafia, who helped invest in the Trump Soho Hotel, to Joseph "Joey No Socks" Cinque, someone who had been convicted on felony charges pertaining to stolen art, and was a former associate of the crime Kingpin John Gotti. From Salvatore "Salvie" Testa, a "crown prince" of the Philadelphia Mob, who sold Trump the land Trump Plaza was to be situated on – to the crime boss Nicodemos "Nicky" Scarfo whose construction companies would be deployed in the building of it. The force which helped mediate Trump with the mob was the dirty lawyer Roy Cohn, a soiled hand-me-down from the era of McCarthyism, resonating avarice and corruption. Cohn had come to prominence rooting out suspected communists for the sinister, witch-finding Senator, and in order to make the prosecutions more palpable Cohn would claim that some of the defendants were closeted homosexuals and spies. Rampant homophobia thrived in the hothouse of paranoia he so effortlessly helped erect, thereby creating the context for the then president Dwight Eisenhower to sign a federal order barring homosexuals from positions in the federal government. What Cohn had failed to mention in an unsavoury crusade saturated with homophobic hatred – was that he himself was a closeted gay man.

When Donald met Roy, way back when in 1973 at an exclusive New York nightclub, the then 27-year-old Trump was much enamoured by the slick, sharp talking lawyer who was mobbed up and demonstrated the kind of vicious, acquisitive aggression which Trump *fils* had been taught to prize his whole life long: "You made it in my father's business — rent-controlled and rent-stabilized buildings — by being very tough and very relentless." Cohn at once began tutoring the younger man in the arts of power politiquing and aggressive legal manoeuvre. Trump outlined the latest legal dilemma he and his father were facing in the deferential tones of one seeking advice; "tell them to go to hell" the older man cackled back with a mobster's hacking drawl! Indeed Cohn would be conscripted in fighting that particular suit – for racial discrimination – on the Trumps behalf, and at once filled a $100 million dollar countersuit. The countersuit had no merit, was ridiculously inflated, and was dismissed by the judge almost instantaneously, but that was beside the point; what it actually achieved was to make the papers, to give the Trumps a media platform by which they could blast out their outrage about the perfectly true allegations made against them. And in this sense, Donald and Roy, attained a certain spiritual affinity. Like Trump, Cohn was obsessed with cultivating the outward appearance, the presentation. As a true homophobe he felt in his bones that to be gay was indicative of a blemishing, "effeminate" weakness and so he countered his own homosexuality by developing a weasel-like ruthlessness, by transfixing

any enemy with the ominous power of his underworld contacts or the prospect of the high profile politicians into whose ears he whispered.

At the core of Trump's being too, there nestled a fundamental inadequacy – the palliative to which would always be the gaudy posturing of an oversized bully. Trump had learnt the bullying part, stock-in-trade, from his father – but it seemed as though he had never been able to step out of Trump Senior's shadow. The constant spiel about in some way being a self-made man, the running off at the mouth about his affinities with the blue collar worker – all this speaks to the unease which comes from being handed everything; instead of the "effeminacy" of homosexuality, Donald Trump's was the "effeminacy" of privilege. That was something Trump's father never really had – granted Fred Trump too had inherited money, and in no small measure, but his own father had died when he was just a 13-year-old child. Coming of age in the depression era, Fred Trump had had to be self-sufficient in a way in which Donald never needed be, and for this reason – though both men were driven fundamentally by greed – they nevertheless represent two very different archetypes of wealth. Whereas Fred Trump was most comfortable doing business in the shadows, making contacts on the sly, surreptitiously greasing the wheels from behind the scenes – Trump *fils* had come to fruition in the era of Reaganomics and neoliberalism, an epoch of casino capitalism and rampant speculation, the moment in which industrial capital was eclipsed by financial capital, when form eclipsed content, and the realities of deregulation and deindustrialisation were papered over by the flashy façade; the yuppie playboy screeching around the city in his spiv's suit and top-end Lamborghini, roaring with testosterone and ambition. Whereas Trump Senior, in his own miserly, miserable way, had been concerned with providing homes in poor areas, Donald Trump looked to expand the scope of the family business, moving from tenement housing to vast investments in luxury projects like golf courses and casinos.

The casino was, in many ways, a temple to the type of wealth which Junior now held sacred, a wealth which promoted both the glitzy appearance and the reckless financial gamble all wrapped up in the whirl of the roulette table or the flashing, bleeping windows of the slot machine. The mob officials and enforcers were the guardians of this world, its high priests, and through tainted lawyer Roy Cohn, Donald Trump was granted unadulterated access. Whereas Trump Senior had fostered his own mob connections, looking at the men from that world wryly, seeing them as a useful means to certain ends, Trump Junior was enamoured by them – their ostentation, their gaudy displays of wealth, the simmering promise of sudden violence they held. For him these people were objects of aspiration and glamour. Trump got to know the movers and shakers of that world and it was Cohn who helped pave the way. Trump's meetings with figures like Salerno who would build Trump's first casino in Atlantic City were facilitated by Cohn and held in the lawyer's townhouse.

Trump went into the casino and the hotel business with the brassy confidence of a master of the universe, a financial savant whose charisma and flamboyance were to be feted in a

glittering, profligate world of wealth whose dynamism and ruthless individualism offered soaring, stratospheric rewards. Everything was his for the taking. Trump visited the banks, overdosed on credit time and time again, splashing the money about in a golden shower of expenditure which fell on casinos, hotels and yachts, cocking his leg over New York City, marking his moment as the man of the hour, grinning out from the pages of a thousand glossy spreads which all bespoke of his sophistication, glamour and savvy. And such affectation set into such gaudy overdrive – behind it lurked something more elemental and unformed, an oedipal impulse, the need to supplant his father's success so utterly and fully that for the first time the Donald could feel himself to be a man in his own right.

Unfortunately, that's not quite how it all worked out. With all his wild excess, Trump Junior had run up $3 billion dollars in debt. His Trump shuttle airline company arced in mid-air before plummeting to the ground and exploding in flames. When Trump Hotels went public he "over-leveraged [them]… with such expensive debt, that they could never make enough money to repay bondholders…It was a great way for Trump to escape debt burdens, but it created a huge burden for his shareholders." Trump lost the Plaza Hotel – a hotel which itself had lost $74 million during its first year under Trump's stewardship. Trump had to declare bankruptcy several times over. He was forced to sell his prized Yacht – the Trump Princess. And perhaps most significantly of all – the jewel in Trump's crown – the Taj Mahal Casino – went into economic freefall just a year after it had opened in 1990, haemorrhaging money. What is particularly interesting is that, in order to buoy it up, Trump was forced to hand half his equity to creditors, and at the same time, Fred Trump was summoned, to prop up his helplessly flapping man-child – at once swooping in to buy millions in casino chips which could act as a loan to his son in order to help avoid default.

The notion of Trump as a shrewd businessman with the Midas touch, then, was always part and parcel of a massive PR campaign that Trump himself helped generate, and which offset the reality of implosion, bankruptcy and bailout; which obscured the fact that Junior's reckless gambles, flagrant exploitation and illicit working practises were shored up by a safety net of wealth and the figure of his father in the background, keeping one watchful eye on his garish progeny. It was through lawyerly weasel Roy Cohn, that Trump was able to better work the press and cultivate a media image which would help mask his litany of failed ventures, for Cohn, according to one of Donald Trump's long-time political advisors, "was a master at understanding the news cycle…Roy would literally call up and dictate pieces for Page Six because [New York Post owner] Rupert [Murdoch] was a client".

After Cohn's death in 1986, Trump would not forgo such close connection with the media. In the decades to follow, not only was Trump profusely litigious – suing ex-wives who released information in the public domain through books or newspaper articles, taking action against authors like Timothy L. O'Brien or Jacob M. Appel whose depiction of him he had taken offence to – but Trump also maintained Cohn's close connections to various media

outlets so that his celebrity image would be enhanced in and through the drip-drip of various hagiographic articles which gushed about his sexual prestige or his supposed charisma, while less sensational pieces worked as little more than adverts by which he could hawk the Trump name to wealth investors. As Sydney Blumenthal notes, these two streams of propaganda increasingly converged; "the headlines fed to the New York Post consisting of make-believe quotes from his then mistress Marla Maples ("Best Sex I've Ever Had") became a PR platform for the licensing of his celebrated name to murky investors from Russia, China and Saudi Arabia who were looking for an American frontman."

And yet, not all the media followed suit. The image of Trump as a financial *Übermensch* who had triumphed as a result of his own ingenuity and magnetism simply stuck in the craw of some of the more satirical and critical outfits. *Spy Magazine*, for example, recognized – in a spirit of lacerating irony – that Trump's glaring, overblown loudness was the inevitable product of someone whose every need had been coddled by untapped wealth and whose entitlement was apt to crack into the petulant fury of a spoilt toddler the moment his toys were taken away. "Wa-a-a-a-h! – Little Donald, Unhappy At Last – Trump's Final Days," shrieked one satirical leader, depicting "the short-fingered vulgarian" in the manner of an errant child, fists clenched, eyes streaming with hot petulant tears, having just lost control of his latest casino venture. That such spreads were few and far between probably speaks to the manner in which the lawsuit happy Donald had managed to do a number on the press, and yet Spy's lead headline, dripping with contempt, was redolent of a larger sensibility. The town which was closest to Trump's heart, the place where he'd built his beloved Trump Towers – the phallic manifestation of all his aspiration and vulgarity – was the place where Trump was most keen to be seen in the glamorous, splendid glow of success.

And yet, the citizens of Manhattan had always been in possession of a certain kind of humour; urban, stoical, dry – with an acute detection system for the presence of bullshit. In Trump's fanciful presentation, pompousness, and self-aggrandizing – in the slick spiel of the used car salesman, alongside the thin skin and vengeful nature of a spiteful society belle – in all of these things New Yorkers sensed the overwhelming wreak of ordure. While Trump attempted to project a sense of self which was cool, masterful and charismatic – the denizens of New York deflated his fantasy with remorseless barbs of mockery and derision; from the debut issue of Spy in 1986 which featured Trump as one of the "Ten Most Embarrassing New Yorkers" to the late night comedy sketch show Saturday Night Life which caricatures Trump as a presidential windbag with a repertoire of pouty patriotism and nonsensical sloganeering. Both unhinged and ridiculous, the Trump of New York folklore appears as an anomaly of vitriol and privilege, utterly abstracted from the lives of regular people. Perhaps that is what wounds and infuriates Trump most of all, in the city where he should be king, he is at best its most infamous court Jester; and despite all the cash he has poured into PR and

media spin, despite all his connections, nevertheless it seems that money really can't buy love (a terrifying thought indeed for a man like Trump who for years owned the "Miss Universe Organization" and has had a long track record of propositioning its contestants). New Yorkers, however, have remained steadfastly contemptuous of his creepy advances and in 2016 during his presidential campaign he lost 87% of the vote in Manhattan, in Queens he only garnered 22% of the vote, in Brooklyn he won less than 20%, while in the Bronx it was only around 10%.

The more that Trump, in his belligerent and semi-conscious way, sensed the hostility and ridicule of the city which never sleeps, the more he sought to lose himself in the dreams and fantasies of his own grandeur. The apotheosis of this process arrived when he made the move from colourful man-about-town to full on television celebrity in his own right, with the launching of *The Apprentice* franchise. *The Apprentice* was the latest in a strain of reality TV shows which, in their very essence, harnessed the worst of the twenty-first century capitalism. Instead of hiring costly actors, such programmes had hit upon the formula of exploiting real people as a means to extract drama. More often than not, they presented themselves as being socially progressive; so, for example, the ostensible premise was about the search for talent, but what increasingly became clear in shows like *The X Factor* or *Pop Idol* was that people who were often inadequate, desperate and delusional were being allowed through the early rounds so they could make a televised appearance and be humiliated by the judges for the voyeuristic delight of the audience.

There was a performative aspect to such programmes; a thin, spurious moral veneer overlaying a process by which the bewildered and powerless were set against each other in what was often quite brutal and soul-destroying competition, only to have their fates decided by their natural "superiors" – several preening, besuited, wealthy judges. It was the kind of pornographic fantasy which emanated from the millionaire mindset; a vindication of crass competition as the natural condition of relationships and progress, the sense that market values, sales, were the ultimate measure of the human good; an absolute prostration on the part of the powerless before the altar of the dollar. It was the ideology of neoliberalism condensed into a theatre of the absurd. Trump harnessed his own version of this paradigm in *The Apprentice*– here the contestants would compete in groups to do various business tasks – the most successful winning a place in the Trump organisation, the others, brutally derided, before being subject to Trump's notorious catchphrase "You're fired!".

The people who were appearing on this programme were aspirant, glib, and nearly always unlikeable, prone to the unqualified belief of the fantasist in the trajectory of his own rising star. But the ultimate fantasist on the programme was surely Trump himself. His turn to *The Apprentice* in 2004 marked the tail end of another string of failures, the series of schemes which he had engaged in and which had fallen flat like duds – Trump Airlines. Trump Steaks. Trump: The Game. Trump Vodka. Trump Magazine. But the show portrayed the

very opposite of this. Trump was able to present himself according to his own fantasy remit; a gimlet-eyed entrepreneur always able to glimpse the innovative and new, a businessman-cum-intellectual who had transfigured the "deal" into an art form, a serious, frowning figure whose authority was absolute. Donald Trump was always concerned about the appearance above all else. When he had lost control of his property ventures – had declared bankruptcy four times over – his media profile provided him with a much needed solace. When he endeavoured to expand into other fields with a series of crackpot innovations which tanked one after the next, he was able to console himself with the thought of his name, his brand – himself as a personality, a celebrity – which extended beyond any particular product and its failures.

The Apprentice marks the apogee of this process – for now the presentation had been wholly abstracted from the substance; there was no longer any material product – no property, no board game – which Trump was seeking to hawk; rather he was purveying only the celebrity image of himself. The appearance had overwhelmed everything else – the form had almost completely divested itself of any content. And in this, Trump's professional trajectory provides a microcosm of the movement of late capitalism more broadly: what was the financial crisis other than the triumph of the appearance over the reality, the form over content – the movement away from any investment in the building of houses to the investment in the financial packages which accrue to houses – the securities which attach themselves to mortgages – until eventually such mortgage debts were being packaged together and sold off in their own right to investors – with the ever illusory promise of staggering returns.

In the 1984 movie Ghostbusters, the dramatic denouement takes place on the top of an old New York building. The four ghostbusters are faced with a malevolent Sumerian demi-god named Goza the Gozerian. The imp-like deity, eyes crackling with fire, offers our heroes a choice: "Choose and perish! Choose the form of the Destructor!" The ghostbusters keep their minds blank, all accept Ray Stantz because the thought "just popped in there." From the depths of Stantz's psyche, the hundred-foot-tall Stay Puff Marshmallow Man is conjured into being, striding down the New York streets with a goofy grin, crushing the cars and the terrified citizenry underfoot. And in one way, this is not a bad analogy for Trump's presidency. An electorate faced with an existential choice: Trump conjured up from the darkest recesses of the American *conscience collective*; a figure in which the racism and protectionism of the 1930s is materialized, alongside the casino capitalism of the 1980s and the unbridled speculation which was fully unleashed in the early twenty-first century – and finally the culture of reality TV and the garish boardroom boss in which the exercise of power wed to humiliation is glibly repackaged as the intelligence and ingenuity of progress. A hundred foot Trump, grinning, gurning – fully unbound – crashing across the streets of the city, and the country, which has for so long rebuffed him. The fact that Trump has been

raised in this way, summoned like a spectre to the highest office in the land, speaks above all to the erosion of parliamentary democracy in the epoch of finance capital. The Democratic candidate, the so called "liberal" candidate in the mould of Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton has had their platform so thoroughly penetrated by Wall Street and big business more broadly, that the spiel they perpetrate about "change" and "hope" increasingly feels like lifeless words cast into the void. And, as everyone knows, from the void there comes monsters.

JANUARY 19, 2021

This is an extract from the book Angels and Demons: A Radical Anthology of Political Lives (Zero Books).

***Tony McKenna**'s journalism has been featured by Al Jazeera, The Huffington Post, ABC Australia, New Internationalist, The Progressive, New Statesman and New Humanist. His books include Art, Literature and Culture from a Marxist Perspective (Macmillan), The Dictator, the Revolution, the Machine: A Political Account of Joseph Stalin (Sussex Academic Press) a novel, The Dying Light (New Haven Publishing) and Toward Forever: Radical Refletions on History and Art (Zero Books).*