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The Trump Phenomenon, as Seen From Europe

By Jean Bricmont
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Brussels, Belgium.

The first thing to say about the U.S. presidential elections is that they are extremely anti-democratic. And here I'm not even talking about the manipulations that may have enabled Clinton to beat Sanders or about the fact that mainstream media spend their time deriding one candidate and covering up for the other. The most fundamentally anti-democratic aspect of the American elections is that a small fragment of humanity gets to elect someone who has an enormous influence over the rest of the world, someone who takes decisions that can drag us all into a generalized war, or at very least can aggravate tensions with Russia, Iran, and China, not to mention Syria, which are contrary to European interests.

From that point of view, Trump has an advantage over Clinton. That is, he says he wants to be President of the United States and not of the whole world, whereas she insists that the United States must exert world leadership.

Trump is berated as the latest incarnation of Evil (after Saddam, Gaddafi, Assad, the Brexiters): racist, sexist, Islamophobe, a friend of dictators, etc., in short the embodiment of all that arouses the righteous indignation of the human rights defenders.

I would like to suggest a different way of seeing Trump. He is above all a capitalist, almost a caricature of the sort of man capitalism produces, encourages and celebrates. He makes money and is proud of it. For him, the bottom line is cost-benefit. Everything comes down to that ratio. Defend the Baltic States? What does it cost, what do we gain? Defend Japan? What does it cost, what do we gain?

In his way, he is also patriotic. Of course, not enough to pay taxes, or to pay his subcontractors if he can get out of it. But he is no doubt seriously worried about the de-industrialization of the United States (a rational worry for a capitalist). He fancies he can solve the problem, in a capitalist way – making deals with the Chinese or with companies that take their jobs abroad.

As a capitalist, Trump succeeded. Of course, he didn't start from nothing, but he considerably enlarged the fortune he inherited. He did so by all sort of morally and legally doubtful methods. So what? Are there many capitalists who get that rich otherwise?

It is almost laughable to see the horrified reaction of the respectable left (human rights defenders, feminists, anti-racists) to the sight of this phenomenon. After all, the respectable left is itself totally pro-capitalist, but it uses its own vocabulary to designate the system: free market, open society, liberalism. But it accepts capitalism as essentially the end of history. It directs its criticism solely against “exclusion”, whether due to supposed prejudice or rejection of immigrants, or against unfair competition. But perfect competition would be a capitalist dream come true.

When the respectable left is faced with such a pure product of the system it defends (in its own way), that is, someone who is very calculating, vulgar, who says what comes to mind without concern for what is politically correct, all of which is fairly typical of a successful capitalist pleased with himself, we hear cries of dismay.

For that well-mannered left, the pro-capitalist discourse must be wrapped in sweet words, such as freedom, human rights, equality of opportunity, whereas the system as it is produces something quite different. Trump, for example.

The point at which the conflict between Trump and the pro-Clinton left, including the lesser-evils, becomes interesting is the issue of war and peace.

Here too, Trump calculates: almost six *trillion* dollars spent on wars in the Middle East. And what do we have to show for it? Practically nothing! Chinese companies among others exploit Iraqi oil without having spent a penny on those wars. The chaos in Libya or Syria is not profitable to anyone, notably not to oil companies (which profit from stability), while all reasonable capitalists are itching to do business with Iran and Russia.

Incidentally, even the anti-war left tends to get things wrong by attributing those wars to rational economic calculation. In reality, those wars are motivated by a mixture of human rights ideology, determination to destroy Israel's enemies and American ambition to exert world hegemony.

However, that ambition is not rational in economic terms. It is expensive. If you neglect the costs, it can seem rational. But Trump, as a genuine capitalist, doesn't neglect them, and figures the whole enterprise is not worth it. And there, he is absolutely right. By the same token, he doesn't see any good reason to launch a jihad against Russia, which is what is being done by the same ideologues who support the Middle East wars. Russia is a capitalist country and someone like Trump can perfectly well make deals with the Russians.

What is fascinating about the Trump phenomenon is that those who denounce him as vulgar, dishonest, racist, and so on, have nevertheless to admit that his support comes from ordinary folks, inasmuch as all the media are against him, along with Wall Street, the Pentagon, and the left from Sanders to Chomsky. But the more violent that denunciation is, the more obvious becomes the total failure of the "third way", or the "second left" (the Clintons, Blair, Zapatero, Schroeder, Jospin, Hollande, Renzi) which has totally lost popular support, and can now only rely on the support of the elites.

That "second left" has lost out because it is unable to solve economic problems due to its blind obedience to economic liberalism and because its international policy of endless interventions has only resulted in gigantic chaos, both in the Middle East and increasingly in Europe, by causing the refugee crisis. Intensifying tension with Russia or insisting on overthrowing the Syrian government, no matter what the price, can only make matters worse.

Finally, that "third way" finds nothing better to do than to insult the people as being a mass of "deplorables", as Hillary Clinton put it, thus digging itself deeper into a hole.

However "deplorable" he may be, the Trump phenomenon is a current form of "the revolt of the masses" faced with the failure of Western elites, supported by the "third way" left.

As for those of us in Europe, the issue is not to support either Trump or Clinton, since there is absolutely nothing we can do about it. We need to wake up to our submission to the United States and try to free ourselves, which requires a long term effort at cultural, psychological and political liberation. From that angle, an eventual election of Trump could have a positive effect, at least in the short run, by the shock it would provoke among our America-idolizing media and political elites. But it's up to ourselves to recapture our own independence. That never comes from outside.