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Regime Change Abroad, Fascism at Home: How US Interventions Paved the Way for Trump

By Rebecca Gould
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“People pay for what they do, and still more, for what they have allowed themselves to become. And they pay for it simply: by the lives they lead.” These words, from James Baldwin’s *No Name in the Street* (1972), his book-length essay about race in America, were quoted as the epigraph to Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), a now classic novel about the demographic often referred to colloquially as “white trash”: the poor, disenfranchised white working class. With his theory that justice is made manifest in and through the lives we lead, Baldwin was referencing the entanglement of race politics within the American dream, and facing forthrightly all the contradictions this legacy has generated. Allison was thinking about the poverty of the white working class, their systematic disempowerment, and the exclusions they face, that far outlast the moment of their occurrence. Although they tell their stories in different ways, Baldwin and Allison are making the same point: crimes have consequences. When we cause others to suffer, we end by suffering ourselves.

At no moment in history has the boomerang effect of everyday ethics been expressed more thoroughly or remorselessly than in the outcome of the elections for the forty-fifth President of the United States. America has made countless other peoples around the world suffer. It has turned democracies into dictatorships with a systematicity that far outpaces any other country. The only legitimation for its actions has been the agenda of “regime change” in the interests of “global democracy” that neither the Republican nor the Democratic party ever questioned publicly. On 8 November 2016, that agenda was suddenly exposed for what it was: rank

hypocrisy that has contributed the impoverishment of the majority of Americans, while enriching the ruling class.

In Libya, Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Haiti, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Cuba, and Chile, the US has replaced popularly elected leaders with obedient puppets who are incentivised to reject the will of their people they govern. I learned more about these obscure chapters of my own country's history in an Iranian hotel room, watching a state television announcer flip through slides of more than sixty countries where the US had, covertly or forcibly, instituted regime change, than in any US high school or university classroom.

During most of the regime changes it has coercively organised around the world, the US has largely succeeded in suppressing freedom abroad while upholding freedom at home. Citizens from the affected countries have long ago learned to suspect US claims to serve the interest of world peace, as the Iranian TV show demonstrated. Outside the US, few believe the country's claims to moral superiority. Yet before 2016 most of its citizens saw the US as a force for good in the world.

In the aftermath of 8 November 2016, the façade of democracy promotion around the world no longer holds in the center that espouses this ideology. Citizens of the USA are getting a taste of their own medicine. The authoritarianism they have exported since the beginning of the Cold War has suddenly, and unprecedentedly, been transported home. It is now exploding in our face, through racist attacks on school children, the proliferation of swastikas around the country, name-calling, death threats, and a general atmosphere of hate. It can no longer be denied that what we do abroad shapes what we experience at home.

When I first realized the catastrophe that had befallen the world on 8 November 2016, I apologised to everyone I knew. To all my friends in Iran, who may suffer yet further sanctions as a result of a business tycoon's mendacity. To all my British colleagues, who will have to endure many more years of stupid sound bytes and the gradual cheapening of the free press. I apologised to the world, for my country, for its electorate, and for my complicity with a corrupt system that arguably coincides with the birth of the American Republic. Despicable US foreign policy is as old as the idea of manifest destiny that drove US expansion in the American West. The Mexican American War (1846-1848) was yet another land grab. The purpose of the Spanish-American War (1898) was to annex the Philippines, land that never rightfully belonged to the USA. This violent annexation led to the Philippine-American War, which lasted from 1899-1902. During this same period, in 1898, Hawaii was incorporated into the American Empire, without the consent of its people. The US has always behaved like a colonial power, while within its borders, treating its white citizens differently.

When US history is taught in public schools, its contradictions are often packaged into a narrative that reflects the country's variegated makeup and multicultural history. Because of my lopsided education, it took some time before I was able to recognise that the real horror of 8 November 2016 was not what it meant for America on the world stage, but what it meant at home. For the first time in modern US history, the greatest impact of American foreign policy would be experienced within the US, in the domestic sphere that for so many generations has been sheltered and isolated from the suffering it inflicts on the world. For once, the most direct

and immediate victims of American stupidity and prejudice are the American people themselves. Minorities and people of colour have long been targets of discriminatory policies within the USA. Following the vote of 8 November, these forms of discrimination have been legitimated for use against everyone, from women to Latinos to the disabled and gay.

This state of affairs marks a turning point in world history. For many generations, US voters have elected politicians of a wide range of political persuasions while closing their eyes to the overturning of democracies, forcibly installed dictatorships, the punitive taxes, sanctions, and other penalties that have been extracted unilaterally as the world looked on in obedient silence, or turned the other way. Although these disasters nagged at the conscience of the more internationally minded among the US electorate, voters did not have to face the consequences of our actions abroad. Voters could afford to be blind to the suffering of Iranians, Iraqis, Afghans, Libyans, and the citizens of Honduras, because it does not occur on US territory.

The very same political system that brought the first African-American President to power elected a racist and misogynist bigot to the same office eight years later. In fact, in many of the swing states that determine the election's outcome, the very same *people* who voted for Obama voted for Trump. It was as though there is no real difference, from the point of view of a disenfranchised American electorate, between a racist bigot and an African-American promising change, so long as they both promise to overhaul the status quo.

To say that these voters are right not to discern any difference would mean defending racism. But to fail to learn from their decision to put every ethical consideration aside when faced with economic suffocation would mean hiding from reality. "One good thing that may come from this election," an Egyptian colleague, Mona Baker, said to me. A Professor at the University of Manchester, Baker has made her reputation as a scholar of Translation Studies, most recently by studying activists' contribution to the Arab spring. Baker sees no difference between Clinton and Trump, and regards both as likely architects of global atrocity. "The system is broken," she concluded our discussion, "It cannot be fixed by an election. The status quo needs to end."

Will a Trump presidency help to bring an end to the status quo? Whatever happens, it is a certainty that Americans will soon have a great deal more in common with Iranians, Russians, and other peoples living live in authoritarian regimes than they used to. For once, the common ground between the US and the rest of the world will not be founded solely on what we have done to others, or on our on-going complicity in sustaining their oppressive governments; it will be based on what we have done to ourselves. We can now start learning lessons in democracy from the many countries where the US government has orchestrated coups, rather than exporting US ideologies abroad in the form of guns and arms. This is not the lesson I would have liked to take home from Election Day, but it is a lesson nonetheless. Precisely because it is humiliating and humbling, 8 November 2016 will prove to be a salutary education in the limits of American democracy.