

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Fuck the blue!”

“Our house!”

“Let the people in!”

“Hang ‘em!”

“Bring Nancy Pelosi out here now. We want to hang that fucking bitch. Bring her out!”

These are just some of the exclamations heard during the storming of the Capitol Building in Washington DC in the US on January 6, 2021. Disgruntled Trump supporters, egged on during the Stop the Steal rally by Trump himself and his associates, stormed and breached the Capitol Building, forcing the Congressional proceedings of election certification to be suspended and members of Congress to flee the building. The mob of violent insurrectionists, shrieking incoherencies, made their way to the congressional offices and chambers. Vice President Mike Pence was supposed to be presiding over the certification and, having declined President Trump’s illicit request to thwart the certification, declared Joe Biden the President-elect. He too was evacuated from the building and rightly so: the crowd was heard chanting “hang Mike Pence” and even erected a gallows outside. The insurrectionists left behind a trail of destruction, violence, and excrement, with five people losing their lives during the attack.

For most Americans, some of whom might trace a previous Capitol Building storming back to the war with the British in 1812, it was probably very traumatic to watch the footage of the insurrection. For those who did the storming or supported it, the same event was the climax of their idea to take back control from those they considered to be the corrupt elite who stole ‘their’ election; the same elite that conspiracy myth-mongers portrayed as a bloodthirsty cabal of pedophiles (with space lasers) bent on destroying an idealized vision of the United States. While the January 6 committee as well as numerous media outlets have highlighted this transgression of the tradition of American politics, the insurrection was indicative of the change in the way politics works in the United States. While right-wing personalities tried to defend the insurrectionists by highlighting their adherence to the norms (“they were walking along the velvet ropes!”), the events on January 6 have shown that those norms had been broken long before that day. In fact, the whole idea of transgressing democratic norms has been the rallying cry of Trump supporters from day one.

“The sensitive ear will always catch even the most distant echoes of a carnival sense of the world,” wrote literary philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin in his book on Dostoyevsky. In the case of the January 6 insurrection, the echoes were not distant at all: the ritual abuse, the profanities, even the feces smeared inside Congress are

very much emblematic of the carnival culture that describes the transgression of cultural norms and values by ‘the people.’ Even though Donald Trump, as a rich, white, straight male can hardly be seen as a marginalized voice, he nevertheless managed to galvanize a substantial amount of support among the American population by marketing himself as an anti-establishment figure, i.e., a voice of the ‘regular’ people, by using elements of carnival culture. Charles Lock complained that many scholars selectively read Bakhtin and make him into a linguist, a semiotician, a deviant Formalist, a revisionist Marxist, a theorist of fiction, a categorist of genres (Lock 1991). Well, we are making Mikhail Mikhailovich into a political scientist.

What is carnival and why should you care about it in the context of American politics? Let us begin with the second question. For starters, many politicians, pundits, political scientists, and regular people have clutched at their pearls, thrown their hands in the air, or torn their hair out at the spectacle that has been the Trump campaign, the Trump presidency, his second campaign in 2020, and the aftermath of his loss. “Carnival barking clown,” “carnival fool,” “carnival act,” and similar epithets have been thrown around rather consistently and emphatically. In this book, we show that these comparisons were not far from the truth, so let us explain what carnival in this context means. We are not discussing the carnival fairs of today, with rides, tents, and junk food; together with Mikhail Mikhailovich, we are going back to the Renaissance. Back then, a carnival was a period of sanctioned levity, where people in medieval European cities were allowed by the powers that be to engage in activities that the Church frowned upon: for instance you could eat lots of meat (hence “carne” in the name—meat). Carnival liberates carnal desire and encourages transgression, where you can swear as much as you want, disguise yourself, and harass women and minorities. The carnival square is where lots of people talk, touch each other, eat, copulate, and laugh. The carnival ethos stood in opposition to the ‘official’ and ‘serious’ Church-sanctioned and feudal culture, by bringing out folklore and different forms of folk laughter that Bakhtin calls carnival. This type of culture challenges the official buttoned-up discourse and is characterized by coarseness and vulgarity, distinguished by its anti-ideology and anti-authority themes. In other words, carnival is anti-establishment, something that the ‘blue-collar billionaire’ emphasized in almost every rally and speech. This book is not the first attempt to apply Bakhtin’s framework to the study of politics, and Donald Trump is not the first ‘carnival fool’ to succeed in politics (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013; Bartlett et al. 2013). However, we take the carnivalesque framework further and show how it explains the normalization of racism, anti-democratic politics, and fascism.

Carnival is not only about fools and laughter, when ‘the people’ feel like they have the power, things can turn ugly. The storming of the Capitol is often seen as a

violent culmination of Trump's populist politics, but Trump was in fact firmly within the right-wing American populist tradition. There is always a degree of populism in a representative democracy (Dulio and Klemanski 2018) and the claim to represent 'common people' or everyday Americans has driven American politics in multiple election cycles in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. Who counted as the common people in the span of American history is, of course, a matter of debate. From Jacksonian voting rights expansion in the 1830s and Huey Long's crusade against the wealthy elite to Sarah Palin's soccer mom-turned-politician agenda, not to mention the populism of the second half of the 20th century (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016), Trump was not necessarily an aberration in the existing political landscape. While scores of articles, academic and journalistic, are written about the populist zeitgeist and the rise of populist politics connected to the election of Donald Trump, former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro or the success of the Brexit vote, we would like to emphasize a different aspect of what most scholars call populist politics. Namely, while most academics focus on the juxtaposition of the pure people and the corrupt elite, we focus on the politics of transgression and carnivalesque features.

Where can the appetite for transgression be found? Candidates have often tried to exploit the changes in internal party dynamics to their advantage (Rackaway and Rice 2018). One of the main drivers of this phenomenon was the partisan change in so-called unhyphenated Americans (Arbour 2018), where white Americans who do not identify with their European countries of origin constituted one of the main forces in Trump's support. At the same time, his success in 'Trump country' was just another marginally improved Republican victory among this electorate that was often motivated by the rhetoric of nostalgia (Brownstein 2016) that sought to capitalize on a myth of what America supposedly once was coupled with the crude rhetoric of winning (Mason 2018). As Barone notes, both the Democratic party and the Republican party each maintained a relatively constant character; at least in the second half of the twentieth century, with the former representing a coalition of "out-groups" and the latter appealing to "typical Americans" as understood at a given time (Barone 2019). This distinction is crucial not only for populists, but also for the politics of carnival.

This book should be published in early 2024, during yet another United States presidential campaign in which Donald Trump is running. As we write this book, Trump has been charged in criminal cases in three states: New York, Florida, and Georgia, as well as Washington DC (Politico Staff 2023). At the time of writing, he commands the lead in the 2024 Republican primary with a massive margin over his competitors. When Trump boasted two weeks before the Iowa caucus in 2016 that he could shoot someone and still not lose any voters (Dwyer 2016), almost eight years and 91 felony charges later, the majority of Republican Iowa caucus del-

egates still support him. His 2016 quip, tragically, seems all too true. As we show, carnival has become an entrenched part of American politics, having broken a number of taboos and making transgression a value. We hope that by reminding readers of the previous two campaigns and the Trump presidency, we can help make sense of the damage done to American democracy since 2015.

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This book's aims are threefold. First, we offer a Bakhtinian analysis of American electoral politics since 2015 that led to the election of Donald Trump. Each chapter is devoted to specific aspects of the carnivalesque culture, emphasizing multidirectional discourse, displaced abjection, laughing culture, misogyny, and sex. Each chapter begins with a more general American Studies perspective on the carnivalesque item in question and then reflects on the way Bakhtin's framework rethinks and reconceptualizes the existing literature. Second, we analyze the way carnivalesque elements have been visible in Trump rallies, the mass media covering them, and the mainstream late-night comedy shows that followed, as well as various social media platforms. Third, we argue that the disruptive nature of carnival signified by Trump's campaign and later politics is one of the causes of the erosion of democratic institutions in the US. And as we are talking about carnival in all its carnal, transgressive glory, this book will feature obscene vocabulary and obscene subjects. Be forewarned.