Chapter 2: Populism and Transgression

Anyone but a social scientist could be forgiven for claiming Donald Trump is a *populist.* This moniker has become one of the most common appellations to describe Trump's brand of politics, hearkening back to segregationist Democrat George Wallace of Alabama, who personally blocked Black students arriving at the University of Alabama after it was forced to integrate (Jamison 2022). The term populist is quite possibly the most effective euphemism of our time, laundering racists and fascists into ostensibly people-centric politicians giving voice to the unheard working class. This narrative is nonsense of course, Trump is about as 'elite' as it gets, even if many leading columnists in the papers became convinced by the 'populist' description after the 2016 election. This narrative is not just nonsense. It is foolish. It prevents us from seeing what Trump, and the others that pundits label 'populists,' clearly are. But it is also the term that dominates public discussion about the resurgent anti-democratic, anti-equality, and anti-pluralist politics that compromise fundamental rights and human dignity. So, if we want to talk about Trump and the erosion of democracy, we cannot avoid discussing populism.

Trump's election in 2016 shattered the expectations of pundits, pollsters, journalists, and scholars alike. His success catapulted the term 'populism'—the focus of debate in what was a relatively marginal subfield of (primarily) European political science—to the forefront of political consciousness across the world. Before we knew it, Trump was not only a populist, he was its *archetype.* Researchers leapt on this term, which lurched from relative obscurity in political science to becoming what is among the fastest-growing keywords in the social sciences. Columnists from periodicals, primarily on the left and center, found it to be the most descriptive term for the rise of Trump and for Brexit. Populism, invoked across Western Europe, became the dragnet expression for rebranded fascists. Considering use of the word 'populism' in the English broadsheet *The Guardian* in expressions such as "populist hype," Brown and Mondon (2021) argue that the newspaper frequently collapses the *far right* into 'populism.' Like Brown and Mondon, we believe that this has serious impacts. They argue that (1) the populist hype protects elites (e.g., leaders of movements, like Trump) from blame for far-right, racist, and extreme discourse, instead blaming it on the (white) 'working class'; that (2) it euphemizes and trivializes racism, such as Islamophobia, as a feature of 'populism' rather than a fundamental feature of far-right politics; and that (3), by focusing on populism, thanks to the 'hype,' ultimately *The Guardian* and other papers inadvertently amplify the far right.

The populist surge, which ostensibly began in 2016, also affects Western Europe (to mention one region among many). Just a few months before Donald

Trump surprised the world by winning the presidential election, a slim margin of British voters delivered Brexit, an idea tabled by the upstart party, UKIP (UK Independence Party). In a now iconic image, Brexiteer-in-Chief, Nigel Farage of UKIP (MEP for South East England at the time), stood in front of a "Vote Leave" poster, featuring the faces of hundreds of ostensible migrants and emblazoned with the words "Breaking Point," claiming the "EU has failed us all." The poster is nonsensical. The migrants pictured mostly appear to be non-European. It was displayed in the context of major inflows of migrants that nationalist parties across Europe used to propel their agenda. Brexit could only stop the migration of Europeans into the UK, and yet today (after disgraced Prime Minister Boris Johnson finalized Brexit), the UK has a record number of immigrants. It is important to remember that Nigel Farage went to a fee-paying school (Rawnsley 2022) while his ancestors ostensibly fled religious prosecution in France. Before Brexit, he had been an MEP for sixteen years. Certainly a career politician, and hardly "working class." Yet after the campaign, Farage was the British face of this 'populist' surge. In France, Marine Le Pen (daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who founded the far-right party Front national, directed a presidential campaign for a Nazi collaborator in 1965, and is a convicted Holocaust denier) revived her father's party in 2011 and has been a strong contender for the French presidency. Today, the party—which has demonstrable roots in French fascism (Ivaldi and Lanzone 2016)—has been renamed Rassemblement National (National Rally). Marine Le Pen, who is no doubt a far-right politican and runs a party founded by fascists, is frequently referred to by pundits and columnists as a populist.

As a final example, take Giorgia Meloni, who in 2022 became the first woman to be elected Prime Minister of Italy. She was active in the youth wing of the fascist political party the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) and praised Mussolini in her teens, before becoming an MP in the conservative Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance) party that grew out of the defunct MSI. In 2012, she founded the far-right party Fratelli d'Italia and became a prominent politician on the right in Italy, before finding her way to the top job after electoral success and coalition-building in 2022. After her election, Sky News's Europe correspondent Adam Parsons *claimed* that "no, she's not a fascist, a word that gets thrown around far too carelessly" (Parsons 2022). For someone that spent their entire career in Italy's post-fascist parties and maintains well-documented extreme positions across the board, it is hardly careless to call her a fascist. But she's just a social conservative, according to Parsons.

Journalists, pundits, and many others use the term populist to describe the far right, and to a degree, we are stuck with populism if we want to talk about the far right. Political scientists, however, make some compelling points for why we *should* use the term populism to describe politicians like Trump. Political scientists are

agnostic about where on the left-right spectrum a populist sits. Populism is discursive and rhetorical, and describes a politician that claims to speak for the 'people' who are (supposedly) ignored by elites. According to the dominant view among political scientists, populism is a 'thin ideology' that is associated with thicker ideologies, such as socialism, environmentalism, nationalism, or fascism. Others argue that it is purely stylistic; that while populists can sit anywhere on the ideological spectrum, it is how they present themselves—by flaunting the 'low' culture versus the 'high' culture of elites—that makes them populist. For the most part, political scientists do not just study 'populism,' but tend to study populism in conjunction with other movements. The parties of Farage, Le Pen, and Meloni are broadly characterized by political scientists as radical right parties. In some cases, political scientists add populism as a qualifier to refer to the *populist radical right.* This qualifier is primarily based on how these actors *enact* politics. Political scientists, for example, see populism in how these actors claim to speak for a 'pure' people, defined as the 'native' population. (This claim is of course absurd in settler colonial contexts like Australia, Canada, and the US, where it is primarily about the maintenance of racial dominance for those constructed as 'white.') Others see populism in Donald Trump's style, for example, in his angry tone and crass manners. This makes him look more 'real', 'authentic', and closer to 'the people' than the well-heeled suits we imagine in Washington DC. This style makes Trump populist, but that matters less than his ideology.

Despite its problems, there is something useful in the term populism. But it is not a term to replace *far right*, which identifies a global family of political parties —well beyond North America and Western Europe—and accurately describes the political movement that is eroding democracy today. It is important to remember that while we focus on Trump, he is not an anomaly. Across the world we find far-right politicians both in power and trying to obtain it. Narendra Modi, Jair Bolsonaro, Viktor Orban, and Benjamin Netanyahu are far-right contemporaries of Trump—like the Western Europeans mentioned above—with rather varying commitments to "populism". Few would refer to Modi and Netanyahu as populists, but they are certainly far-right and appeal to a sense of a pure, ethnically and religiously bound, people. Bolsonaro, on the other hand, enacts a populist style along with extremist politics. As a term, "populism", either as a descriptor of a politician or as an object of study, should have relatively narrow applications. When it is used in the press to describe the far right without a qualifier, it normalizes racism, anti-democratic politics, and fascism.

All the same, there is something curiously populist about Trump and other radical right cultures. This populism is not about style as such, but rather about the collective violation of—quite literally for the insurrectionist that smeared shit on the Capitol—the rules, values, symbols, and institutions of democracy. Fun-

damentally, what is populist here is its *transgressive* aspect: both its articulation of taboos, ostensibly put in place by an elite, and the encouragment of their violation. When Trump, as we argue in this book, creates the carnival, he creates a space that not only gives license to but encourages violation. But what matters is *what* Trump violates, which also reveals what kind of a populist he is. The Trump carnival is fundamentally anti-democratic; as its carnival fool, Trump's transgressions—taking pride in grabbing pussies and mocking political correctness—are an invitation for others to do the same. The Trump carnival is about the collective violation of democracy itself. It is about taking joy in the violation of claims to equality and representation, by a group of people who mythologize themselves as victims because they no longer have dominance over others. We argue that this transgression and violation of democracy is central to the far right today. By studying the Trump carnival, we make clear how this movement uses play, transgression, laughter, and misogyny to erode democracy while celebrating its downfall.

2.1 Populism

As we discussed previously in relation to Bakhtin's theory of carnival, the focus on popular culture, its folkloric response to 'official' and 'serious' church-sanctioned culture, and its use of laughter and vulgarity are all aspects that make carnival *populist.* In this book, we frame populism differently than most political scientists or journalists. As discussed above, journalistic discussions of populism tend towards its uncritical use as a moniker for the far right. Instead, we focus on carnival to make sense of how Trump makes use of populism. In this section, we briefly introduce theories of populism in political science and in communication studies (which has also picked up the term). In doing so we develop a critique of the term in scientific work to better explain why it is only in the carnival that it makes sense to speak of Trump as a populist. We introduce this idea here, and the following chapters flesh out how the Trump carnival works.

As mentioned above, there are some excellent reasons why populism is a useful term to describe Donald Trump. Political scientists provide two main ones, referred to in debates as the 'ideational' approach to populism and the 'socio-cultural' approach to populism. Others also discuss populism as organizational, but that is beyond the scope of this book. The 'ideational' approach is dominant in the field, and the vast majority of political scientists would place themselves in this camp. However, we find the 'socio-cultural' approach to populism more convincing, which is what we discuss here. Both of these approaches have significant flaws that have not sufficiently been addressed by the field. We do not intend to provide an in-depth or complete review of these ideas here. Rather, we only outline two

major positions and explain how our theorization of carnival as an analytical framework for the Trump phenomenon relates to these broader debates.

Populism is useful for scientific purposes: it provides scholars and researchers with a set of formal features that describe political movements that challenge elite power in a multitude of ways across the world, and that do indeed share some features. Researchers—for the most part—tend to conceive of populism as a 'thin' (at best) ideology that is attached to 'thicker' ideologies. In this sense, populism has little ideological content on its own, so it is at best a fuzzy concept. The 'ideational' definition of populism, developed by Cas Mudde, is without doubt the dominant approach to populism in political science. It is best summarized by the following, which is, at this point, an obligatory citation in the field:

> [Populism is] an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. (2004, p. 543)

To Mudde, this implies that there are four elements that we must understand to discuss populism: ideology, the people, the elite, and the general will. Ideology is not-predetermined; while populism, as Mudde argues, includes some ideological content of its own (it constructs the people and the elite and articulates the people's will, whatever that may be), it does not prescribe a grander, thicker theory of a social order, legal principles, or a vision of power as Western ideologies such as liberalism, socialism, and fascism do. In this sense, the ideational approach is agnostic to ideological content. The people are, of course, the center of populism. The 'people' are constructed as a *morally pure* and *righteous* 'idealization' of a community. For Mudde, the moral evaluation of populism is central: if the people are 'pure,' then the 'elite' are fundamentally corrupt. In this sense, populism's construction of the people is not (in theory, here) racial, but instead based on the sense of 'doing the right thing,' which is the opposite of the actions taken by the corrupt elite who are fundamentally out of step with the moral purity of the people. Indeed, it is the elites that *betray* the people. Finally, the idea of the 'general will' contends that the morally pure people speak with only one voice, are fundamentally homogeneous, and that politics should follow only their 'will,' alone and that the populist is their ultimate representative.

Mudde is an expert on the populist radical right, and we should stress that he is very clear in that he is fundamentally concerned about *the far right* and not populism as such (see Mudde 2020). We share this assessment while noting that the features of populism Mudde describes are readily applicable to Trump. Trump indeed claims to speak for an imagined, 'pure' people through what political scien-

tists usually refer to as 'nativist' appeals (at least in comparative research) in which one group of people is constructed as 'native' in that their territory (e. g., the US, France, etc.) is their *birthright.*[1] Ultimately, nativism is fundamentally about constructing *race* in the US and Western Europe: it is about constructing the idea of Western culture facing a civilizational threat (Brubaker 2017). This threat, primarily, comes from the 'liberal elites' whose support of immigrants, refugees, and Muslims (in particular) compromises 'real' Americans and is the root cause of an apparent cultural degeneracy in American cities and culture.

Today, the 'war on woke' is an extension of this idea that cultural elites—such as those working in equality, inclusion and diversity in the corporate sector or intellectuals who discuss the US's violent and racist foundations—seek to compromise everything that 'real' Americans believe. Who are these 'real' Americans? It doesn't take a genius to figure out that 'real' here really means 'white,' and Trump has made almost no effort to distance himself from white supremacist groups. Most of the time, he launders their reputations (reminding us there's "very fine people on both sides" even when one side is chanting, "Jews will not replace us"; see Gray 2017) or encourages them (the Proud Boys ought to "stand back and stand by," until January 6, 2021 at least; see Ronayne and Kunzelman 2020). Fundamentally, Trump articulated an imagined, righteous 'white' community that is being betrayed by a cosmopolitan, liberal establishment. In this manner, Mudde's definition of populism, at least in the abstract, works quite well: we have a 'pure people,' articulated as a *race*, downtrodden by an 'elite' and a leader that claims to speak for them.

As many researchers have found, in the US, the radical right is primarily concerned with the diminished superiority of the withering entitlements and privileges that accrue to 'white' Americans (McVeigh and Estep 2020). Where many argue that populists are representative of the losers of globalization, the reality is that the resentment that many anthropologists and sociologists study is a backlash against the advancement of the equality of racial, religious, and sexual minorities. Here, Toni Morrison's insights are (as ever) piercing; writing in *The New Yorker* in the aftermath of Trump's election, she states:

> The comfort of being 'naturally better than,' of not having to struggle or demand civil treatment, is hard to give up. The confidence that you will not be watched in a department store,

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1 Application of the term "nativism" to describe Trump is nonsensical; the white identity that he speaks to is of course not native to North America. The appellation is also questionable in Europe, given its long history of migration within and across the continent. Nativism thus involves the *construction* of a community or group of people as native, and has no necessary relation to truth. It is purely a rhetorical device, which is not always clear in political science research.

that you are the preferred customer in high-end restaurants—these social inflections, belonging to whiteness, are greedily relished [...] so scary are the consequences of a collapse of white privilege that many Americans have flocked to a political platform that supports and translates violence against the defenseless as strength. (Morrison 2016)

Anthropologists indeed come to some similar findings. In one of the books that has received the most attention in recent years, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, Arlie Hochschild (2018) paints a rich picture of this sense of lost privilege. In Europe, Norris and Inglehart make a similar observation about what they refer to as "authoritarian populism" as a backlash by conservatives against the increasing diversity and visibility of racial and sexual minorities in Europe, which they enact not for economic reasons but due to cultural anxieties about 'whiteness' in Europe (see 2019, p. 205).

Populism, in Mudde's definition, fits well here, because of the centrality of white identity for the populist radical right in Europe and North America. In references to 'real' Americans and 'the people', the populist radical right primarily refers to white Europeans and Americans. The construction of the 'morally pure' people is not, as may be the case with other forms of populism, about class but about race. The community, the idea of common sense, and the 'general will' all begin from this presupposition. Thus, the attitudes of Norris and Inglehart's "authoritarian populist" become *commonsensical*, such as the idea that European culture is under threat of Islamization (one of Meloni's favored claims on Twitter before she became PM; see Ganesh and Froio 2020) or that 'real' American culture faces degenerate influences such as feminism, Marxism, and multiculturalism. In all cases, it is the 'elites'—Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, George Soros, and the coastal 'latte-sipping' liberals—that collude with immigrants, feminists, multiculturalists, and progressives to destroy the 'real' American culture. In this narrative, the 'pure people' are those who identify with white America and see their 'way of life' as under threat. Thus, we have the curious but absurd construction of white Americans as the primary victims in contemporary American society.

Our assertions are backed up by a large volume of quantitative research on the US electorate. This is why we opened the chapter with the claim that anyone *but* a social scientist could be forgiven for calling Trump a populist. Social scientists have come to the consensus that not only did Trump's election depend on white voters' anxiety regarding their racial entitlements and privileges—those "social inflections" that Toni Morrison argues are "greedily relished"—but that Trump normalized extreme, white supremacist narratives and rhetoric (Fording and Schram 2020). In an extensive analysis of both official polling data from the 2016 election and historical data, Fording and Schram (2020) argue that not only does "outgroup hostility" include racial animus towards Black Americans, but

also that, "in an age of growing concern about globalization, immigration, and multiculturalism, outgroup hostility came to include other racialized groups, especially Latinx immigrants and Muslims" (p. 24). They find that "the effect of outgroup hostility was substantively larger than the effects of any of the other independent variables and actually comparable to the effect of party identification" (p. 163). Repeated exposure to Trump's demonization of refugees, immigrants, and Muslims, according to this research, far outweighed factors such as education in predicting votes for him. And while they find that white identity did not have a direct relation to increasing the vote share for Trump, white identification played an important role in activating this outgroup hostility, as did economic anxieties (pp. 169–170). Fording and Schram also find that outgroup hostility also explains anger towards Democrats and enthusiasm for Republicans in the period 2004–2016, with such hostility increasing sharply after the election of Obama (pp. 180–181). The correlation that Fording and Schram (2020) observe between anger towards Democrats and outgroup hostility is, in their view, evidence that Trump's victory "was a monument to the mainstreaming of racism" (p. 182). Others argue that Christian nationalism and white identity had a significant impact in predicting Trump vote intention, more so than education or income (Whitehead and Perry 2020). Overall, there is precious little data to suggest that economic or class-based explanations were important in the election.

What Fording and Schram (2020) do point out is that emotion, particularly as it is activated by white identity, plays a key role in activating outgroup hostility. While the authors focus on racial resentment as Trump expresses it in his speeches, our theorization of the Trump carnival can build on these findings. As we discuss in the chapter on displaced abjection, expressing hostility towards outgroups is a fundamental aspect of carnival. Here, we are mostly concerned with dispelling the idea that Trump is a simple populist. He is a white supremacist whose electoral success greatly depended on racial conservatives and extremists whose animus towards minorities, immigrants, and Muslims was at the center of their politics. Populism, then, attaches to this much *thicker* ideology (white supremacy) that is central to far-right parties across Europe and North America. Trump's populism works, if we follow the dominant reading of populism in political science, because it translates white identity into an imagined 'pure people,' and as outgroup hostility grows, it is anger towards the Democrats—the imagined 'elites'—that grows. Populism as a thin ideology, then, can be helpful in drawing out the discursive, ideational, and rhetorical strategies that Trump uses. It is not, however, a description of his ideology, which is unambiguously far-right and white supremacist.

2.2 Populism and Transgression

There is a problem with the ideational approach to populism. Populism provides a schema that organizes society into two camps, the people and the elite, and sees them as opposed. This is present well across the political spectrum. Bernie Sanders could certainly be considered a left-wing populist, not least for seeing society as the 99 % against the 1%. That is why the ideational approach has to qualify populism as a thin ideology, because all it really posits is the antagonism between two social strata. When populism is attached to an ideology, it gives meaning to 'the people,' 'the elite,' and the 'general will.' It is a thicker ideology that makes sense of what is morally good and what is not. That is why political scientists can compare Bernie Sanders as a populist social democrat candidate on the left and Donald Trump as a populist radical right candidate. We cannot really isolate thin populism from the thicker ideology with which it is entangled when we think of populism as a set of ideas, which is more or less also how we think about ideology. If populism is abstract until its conjunction with a thicker ideology, then it is the latter that matters. Trump's populism is not, in itself, a threat to democracy. He is a threat to democracy because he represents and advances far-right ideology. The problem with the term populism, then, is that it becomes very easy to equate populism with the far right (as Brown and Mondon 2021 find) and focus on the former as a threat to democracy.

Populism tells us something about how Trump's far-right politics *work*. The sociocultural approach to populism can help us to better disentangle populism and ideology. Where the ideational approach conceives of populism as a thin ideology, the main exponents of the sociocultural approach argue that populism should be understood as a social and cultural style. This approach also espouses the idea that populism only works in conjunction with specific kinds of ideologies (to which it is essentially agnostic). Pierre Ostiguy (2017), among others, is one of the key thinkers developing this approach (see also Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt 2021). He adds the cultural high and low as an orthogonal axis to the classic left-right political spectrum. This cultural axis refers to "ways of *being* and *acting* in politics" (Ostiguy 2009, p. 5 in Aiolfi 2022, p. 4). Populism, then, is the "flaunting of the low," referring to performances that express proximity to 'the people' as well as the kind of coarseness and vulgarity that characterizes Trump's transgressive style (Bucy et al. 2020; Ostiguy 2017; Aiolfi 2022, p. 5). In this sense, we can conceive of populism as a performance in politics that *violates* what is considered 'proper' and 'acceptable' in normal politics. On the populist right, the well-coiffed, cautious, and mannered comportment of elites—the epitome of 'political correctness'—is challenged by political entrepreneurs that call themselves "mavericks" or "outsiders" who "tell it like it is" without all the useless pomp and circumstance of the political es-

tablishment. The binary that Ostiguy creates also presents its own risks. By describing a duality between high and low, not unlike the false binaries drawn between 'vulgar' popular culture and 'proper' high culture by elitist cultural theorists in the 20th century (Macdonald 2006), the socio-cultural approach situates populism as something that appeals to those 'deplorables.'

What is particularly valuable about Ostiguy's argument is that it associates populism with transgression. This is an argument made by Aiolfi (2022) that is particularly notable because it identifies how the false binary between 'high' and 'low' culture represents subjective cultural dimensions. Instead, Aiolfi (2022) argues that populism is actually about transgression, or the violation of specific norms, and is a culturally neutral and observable feature of political performances. According to Aiolfi, there are three kinds of norms that populists violate: (1) norms about how "a politician ought to behave toward their peers," such as maintaining mutual respect between candidates on a debate stage; (2) rhetorical norms, such as political correctness and the appropriate manner of speaking and presenting oneself within the context of a given country; and (3) theatrical norms, or the 'tacit agreement' between candidates not to reveal the 'artificial' and staged nature of the political stage. Trump violates the latter, for example, "where Trump sarcastically praised Clinton's avoidance of a difficult question on open borders by saying 'that was a great pivot'" (Aiolfi 2022, p. 8; Blake 2016). By "breaking the fourth wall of political performances" (Aiolfi 2022, p. 8), Trump makes a joke out of his opponent and casts the political process itself as a farce.

This argument is primarily concerned with how politicians enact populism as they seek to win votes. However, this conceptualization of populism as transgression—of the violation of the 'rules of the game'—provides a compelling way for us to elucidate how Trump, the carnival fool, puts populism to work. It also helps us comprehend the different ways that the ideational and sociocultural approaches to populism can help us better understand the far right today. Trump's carnival is a celebration of the transgression of all the rules and norms of democracy. However, these transgressions and violations go well beyond Trump on the debate stage or his Twitter or Truth Social account. His transgressions encourage others to do the same. In this sense, carnival is a participatory culture of transgression that represents, at least in the case of Trump, a key aspect of how far-right politics *work*. Transgression is not, on its own, an ideology or inherently right-wing, or associated with 'bad manners' or 'low' culture. Here, transgression is done in the name of a 'pure people' against the rules of the 'elite' that renders them victims. *This* populism better explains Trump, the great 'outsider,' erstwhile reality TV star and real estate mogul, transformed into the champion of the far right violating all the liberals' foolish rules. This carnivalesque populism, of displaced abjection, misogyny, and liberation from 'political correctness,' is fundamental to understanding how

Trump's populism erodes democracy. We are not interested in defining populism as such, but rather in trying to define Trump's version of populism. His populism is chiefly concerned with transgression against the norms of democracy—defended by a set of 'elites'—on behalf of an imagined community that feels under threat and expresses outgroup hostility. As a candidate and as the president, Trump espoused a form of populism that serves as a vehicle for the far right. His carnivalesque populism, as we discuss in the next section, brings together participatory culture, anti-elitism, anti-intellectualism, and white identity to negate democratic values of equality and liberty.

2.3 Carnivalesque Populism

Carnival is quintessentially populist because of how it violates the norms and values of the elite. This elite, as with populism, is of course contingent on the society that engages in carnival. For Bakhtin, the specific characteristics of carnival culture stem from the anti-hierarchical push of popular culture against the official. Thus, it is intrinsically anti-elitist, a key feature of populism (Taggart 2002; Mudde 2004; Canovan 1999). As we mention above, while definitions of populism abound, most scholars agree that populist movements juxtapose the 'pure people' against the 'corrupt elite' (Mudde 2004; Kaltwasser and Taggart 2016), which makes the carnival framework analysis especially poignant in light of the perceived advent of the 'populist Zeitgeist.' Even though if it is intended to be short lived, carnival represents a power transfer to 'the people' from the established ruler (Bakhtin 2015). It is designed to assuage a discontented populace by creating an *illusion* of power of the masses. This makes carnival very suitable for analysis of the Trump campaign given that his persona is that of a quintessential simulacrum of a 'popular' candidate.

Given its anti-elitist nature, carnival allows for 'low culture' to come to the high world (of politics), wherein everyone is allowed to curse and swear without societal sanction. Swearing is common among carnival fools that have previously entered politics and were considered populist. It is worth mentioning that Italian comedian, actor, blogger and politician Beppe Grillo founded a Vaffanaculo-Day ["fuck off day"], abbreviated as V-Day, which despite its obscene name, served a genuine political purpose in mobilizing support for popular legal initiatives. Another 'carnival fool,' Vladimir Zhirinovksy, a late Russian far-right politician and the leader of "Liberal Democratic Party of Russia" is famous for calling his female parliamentary colleagues "bitches," reflecting a tendency for coarse and vulgar language—*ploshchadnyi* in Bakhtin's native Russian or "billingsgate" in Iswolsky's translation (Bakhtin 1968). Carnival gives license to a type of interaction unthink-

able in real life, with no class or income distinction. Carnival culture can thus be seen as a counterpoint to the notion of 'civilizing' in post-medieval Europe that seemingly internalized 'self-restraint' and decreased the threshold for shame (Elias and Hammer 1979).

Carnival is fundamentally about transgression, which Bakhtin idealizes. He glorifies popular culture and the anti-authoritarian drive of the people in the carnival square. Hence, his argument that those in power never "speak the language of laughter," because laughter helps transgress taboos and fear (Bakhtin 2015):

> Seriousness in class culture is official, authoritarian, combined with violence, prohibitions, and restrictions. In such seriousness, there is always an element of fear and intimidation. In medieval seriousness, this element dominated sharply. Laughter, on the other hand, meant overcoming fear. There are no prohibitions and restrictions created by laughter. Power, violence, authority never speak the language of laughter. (p. 45)

The grotesque is also a key notion in the carnivalesque. Bakhtin uses this term quite frequently to refer to the over-the-top practices of carnival, exaggerations in costumes, acts, speech, and gestures. The grotesque emphasizes a culture of the people, not created by the elite—the inversion of the 'sanitized' world. In the "aesthetics of the monstrous," the elite's hold on the culture seems no longer visible. The grotesque offers a new perspective on the world that helps realize the relative nature of all that exists (Bakhtin 2015). However, while carnival promises joyous renewal, it may well deliver something less desirable (Danow 1995)—practices of displaced abjection, for instance (more on that below).

Transgression depends upon the existence of a norm or a prohibition. Without the rule, there is nothing to violate. Trump's frequent transgression of the norms of political culture, from showcasing his misogyny or speaking "the truth" about "radical Islam," are all targeted at violating democratic norms. This is a central aspect of Aristotle Kallis's work describing how fascist and far-right discourse *licenses* hate as a form of self-defense (Kallis 2013):

> The taboo nature of the far right's language on immigrants and immigration as a whole [...] is relativized through the imageries of threat and of the ensuing right to self-defense vis-à-vis an ostensible existential threat. Through these mutually reinforcing imageries, an array of more fundamental, previously suppressed and delegitimized prejudices appear to gain a putatively (more) legitimate lease on life and come once again to the fore [...] the prescribed transgressive behavior (discrimination, violence, expulsion, and so on) is presented as a conditional, legitimate, and targeted derogation of mainstream norms. (p. 233)

As we discuss, carnival laughter is a transgression against specific prohibitions and restrictions. Laughter in the Trump carnival is deployed to use to demonize and derogate others to re-establish the very structures and hierarchies that marginal-

ize groups in the US. Trump is the carnival fool that puts transgression to work for the far right by violating the norms of democracy. One of the main ideas of carnival is the idea of renewal, and Trump (or, most likely, his advisor Steve Bannon) promised a rebirth of the American political system through his candidacy. It is no wonder that Trump and his surrogates consistently pushed the narrative of "outsider" (Trump) versus "insider" (Clinton) or campaigned against the "coastal elite" and "Washington DC swamp"—all of these tropes fit well within the carnivalesque disparagement of authority. Unlike the fleeting, temporal nature of 'traditional' carnival, where anti-establishment curses are quickly forgotten, the multiplatform nature of modern political communication allows the statements to be screenshot, recorded, replayed, re-sent, and re-contextualized, thus prolonging the carnival and making it a way of doing politics. But before we dive further into Trump's carnival, let us take a look at Bakhtin's.