

# Trump and racist, xenophobic rejection of neoliberal globalization in the West – a hopeful portent? (1)

It is the early hours of Friday, July 22, 2016 and as I have been doing in the last three days, I have been sitting up late into the early hours of the new day watching television broadcast of the Republican Party's National Convention on the CNN channel. Because I am in Berlin, Germany that is six hours ahead of the Eastern Standard Time (EST) of the United States, tonight as in each of the last three nights, I have to persevere till the wee hours of the morning. This is unusual for me as the only thing that I normally watch on television this late is tennis and then only when it is one of the four so-called "Opens" – Australian, French, Wimbledon and American. So what is there in the Republican National Convention that has kept me so bewitchingly glued to the television for hours on end? The answer to this is simple and unambiguous: the coming American presidential election in November 2016 is so portentous, both for the United States and the rest of the world, that I want to see and hear everything that leads to it. More on this point concerning the portents of this year's American presidential election for the rest of the world later.

For now, it is difficult for me to hide my gladness that many things have gone wrong *with* and *in* the Republican Convention, from the deliberate and *en masse* absence of most of the "heavyweight" leaders of the Party; to the widely discussed plagiarism of Michele Obama's speech at the 2008 Democratic Convention by Melania, the wife of Donald Trump, in her speech at the Convention on opening night; and the refusal of Ted Cruz, who was one of Trump's rivals during the primaries, to endorse Trump in his speech last night at this Republican Convention. One of the much touted claims of Trump in his electoral campaign is that nearly everything in America is broken and only he, Donald Trump, can fix things. Well, how come then that so many things in *his* Convention are so broken that it is not only embarrassing for his Party but calls into question his claim of heroic, superhuman and technocratic deal-making efficiency? Can a man who cannot run a Party Convention smoothly and efficiently run an entire country, that country being the richest and most powerful nation in the world?

Above everything else in this Republican Convention and far beyond the sheer noise and spectacle that we get in all Conventions, I have been struck by the extreme level of mob and herd instincts driving the thousands gathered at the Convention. It is nothing less than what you would get at a mass, open-air prayer meeting of one of our evangelical denominations, especially the sort of Dionysian frenzy that you see and hear at a gathering of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles – halleluia! Last night, one of the featured speakers, Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey, drove the crowd at the Convention into an apoplectic frenzy of violent rage against Trump's Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, with shouts of "Jail Her! Jail Her! Jail Her!" that sounded very much like "Kill Her! Kill Her! Kill Her!" I solemnly swear that the last time that I saw



(178)

Talakawa Liberation Herald  
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•Donald Trump "Economic nationalism welded to xenophobia and incipient fascism in the heartland of neoliberal globalization"

an electioneering gathering get driven into such a paroxysm of hate, anger and violent words and expressions was in my childhood in the early 1950s in colonial Nigeria when electoral politics was no more and no less than the continuation of warfare in the domain of politics. This observation leads directly to the theme of this piece, this being the portentousness of this year's American presidential election for the rest of the world, particularly the West.

Many things are by now so well known all over the world about the demagoguery, xenophobia, misogyny and racism of Donald Trump that there is no need to restate them here. What is of relevance here is one particular issue that though it has not been ignored, it has garnered far less attention than it deserves. Permit me to state it very clearly if only because of its novelty: in Donald Trump we see the kind of extreme and uncompromising rejection of free-trade neoliberal globalization that for the most part, we have seen only in the Third World and hardly ever in the Western countries. Let me be very specific and unambiguous

about this point. Xenophobic and anti-immigrant anti-globalization is quite common in the rich countries of the West and it has been so for about a decade now. As a matter of fact, this is the ideological and political fuel that powers the nationalism of many of the extreme, far-right parties of Europe. What is perhaps unique of Trump and the mass movement that he has fostered is a very plain, very explicit rejection of free-trade globalization and its many transnational practices, protocols and treaties, so much so that he has openly and vociferously stated that if elected, he will rescind all the free-trade treaties that Obama and the Republican presidents before him have signed with partners in Europe, North America and Asia. Trump has in particular singled out China in his tirades against currency manipulations that underwrite indebtedness and huge trade deficits of America to that country. And he has stated that as President, he will reinstate open protectionist policies to reinvigorate industrial factory production to create hundreds of thousands of jobs for American work-

ers. Sounds like demands you usually get from the anti-neoliberal Left in Africa and many other parts of the developing world? Unquestionably so, except that this is a candidate of one of the two major ruling class parties of America, the heartland of neoliberal globalization, making these demands.

There is an even more uncanny similarity of Trump's anti-neoliberal globalization to the ideological views of progressive activists in the developing world and this is to be found in Trump's claim that while neoliberal globalization has generated unprecedented quantities of money wealth, the lion's share of that wealth has gone to a few rich thereby immensely widening the gap between the haves and the have-nots. The careful regular reader of this column might have noticed that this was indeed a point that I made again and again in my recent two-week series on global political economy before and after neoliberalism. On this particular point, let me say again that while our peoples in Africa and the developing world have been continuously SAPPED (SAP – Structural Adjustment Pro-

grams of the IMF) for close to three decades now, the middle class, the working people and the poor of the rich countries of the global North have been experiencing SAP only in slightly less than one decade. All the same, SAP is SAP and Trump is the first major aspirant to very high office in a Western country with a chance to win that has articulated a fierce opposition to neoliberal globalization in terms that seem uncannily similar to what we have been saying in the global South for a long time now. Is this a hopeful portent? I don't think so, especially if one considers the fate of Bernie Sanders during the Democratic Party primaries to that of Donald Trump in the Republican primaries.

At the risk of oversimplification, I would argue that Bernie Sanders, whose anti-neoliberalism was at least as passionate as Trump's if not more so, could and would not connect his anti-neoliberalism and economic nationalism to racism and xenophobia as Trump did and this is why Sanders was defeated by Clinton. In this respect, the fate of Sanders is very much like the fate of progressive European opponents of neoliberal globalization who have consistently stopped short of attaining lasting or even sustained electoral victories precisely because demographically, those marginalized or altogether excluded by globalization in Europe are nowhere as numerous as in the Third World. In other words, in one part or region of the world, the wealth generated *by* and *from* free-trade neoliberal globalization has in many places left as large as 70% of the population desperately poor and marginalized, while in another part or region of the same world, the percentage of the truly disadvantaged and poor is (only) 25% overall. Of course, for many countries of the global North 25% of desperately poor people in the total population is a historical high, but so far this has not been sufficiently weighty enough to tilt the balance in the direction of an all-out assault on neoliberal globalization as we have it in Donald Trump. Which is why we have to zero in on the dimensions of xenophobia, racism, fascism, Islamophobia and misogyny as the factors that finally secured the electoral victories for Trump that eluded Bernie Sanders.

As I listened to Trump's acceptance speech faraway from America in Berlin in the early of this morning, his fascism and xenophobia seemed to me the most insistent, the most clamant dimensions of the economic nationalism that is the core of the appeal that he potentially holds for white, blue-collar workers in the so-called "rust belt" region of the country. Fascism also once rose like a titanic force here in Berlin less than a century ago; and also, its hordes of frenzied supporters such as those at the Republican Convention, were drawn mainly from tens of millions of deeply disaffected blue-collar workers and déclassé middle class white-collar professionals. Is this a portent, a frightening portent of what lies ahead of us? No, I don't think so. This will be our starting point in next week's continuation of the series.

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# Trump and racist, xenophobic rejection of neoliberal globalization in the West – a hopeful portent? (2)

**T**HIS was the note on which we ended the column last week: Donald Trump linked his economic nationalism and anti-globalization – America first! – with xenophobia, racism and Islamophobia and this is why his message, his demagoguery has created a mass movement numbered in the tens of millions, especially among the white working class. Is this a portent, a frightening portent for the future? No, I don't think so, I wrote last week and write again this week. Let me now address this issue in this closing piece in the series.

First of all, and as a slight qualification of what might appear as an over-confident assertion that Trump and his movement do not represent deeply troubling auguries for the future of our global community, let me admit that there is great cause for alarm in the successes of Trump, first through the Republican Party's primaries and now in the unfolding see-saw movement of the polls between him and Hillary Clinton. Ordinarily and on any measure of decency, maturity and responsibility, Trump should be in the gutter, in the sinkhole of public and electoral popularity. His vulgarity, his bombastic egomania, his mendacity and his reckless disregard for accountability for his past and present misdeeds are unmatched in American electoral politics in the last hundred years. Indeed, in January this year, Trump went so far as to declare that if he went down the streets of New York City and shot dead the first person he met, the masses would still stick with him! That such an odious person and a politician with the mind and the morality of a teenager with a severe case of arrested emotional and ethical development is riding so high in electoral popularity in the richest and most powerful country in the world should be worrisome for all of us, especially as the fundamental basis of his appeal is a total rejection of neoliberal globalization and its discontents.

Trump and his mass movement are troubling also because they present us all with an all too familiar reminder of how all human beings typically behave when confronted with severe economic hardship, this being the tendency to displace our anger, resentment and bitterness on the strangers, the collective "other" among us. Remember the "Ghana Must Go" debacle to African unity and solidarity in 1983 when an order was given by the government of Shehu Shagari for the expulsion of about two million "aliens" from Nigeria within a period of two weeks? After the economic boom of the 1970s, oil prices had slumped and the economy had sharply contracted. Moreover, elections were approaching and Shagari and the NPN found it expedient to displace the anger and resentment of the masses on "foreigners", especially the Ghanaians who numbered a solid one million among the two million ordered expelled. I remember it distinctly now with a rueful anger that has never gone away: *Shagari's expulsion of the Ghanaians and other West African nationals was very popular in our country, especially in Lagos.* And this is not in any way mitigated by the fact that about two decades before "Ghana Must Go", the government of Ghana had

in 1969 itself expelled hundreds of thousands of "foreigners", most of them Nigerians, from Ghana. And then of course, there is post-apartheid South Africa in which we have seen wave after wave of murderous, xenophobic violence against "foreigners" in the wake of the rising tide of economic and social insecurity attendant on the failure of the government and the ruling party, the ANC, to effect deep and meaningful redistribution of wealth after the end of apartheid. Thus, the millions trooping to the xenophobic trumpet of Trump indeed have justificatory examples and similarities to point to in our continent and other parts of the world.

All these caveats notwithstanding, I still insist that Trump and his mass movement, though deeply troubling in the ways in which they connect with our human tendency to scapegoat "others" in periods of deep insecurity, do not present us with a portent for both the immediate and long-range future ahead of us. Trump may have won the Republican primaries, but he has not captured the American presidency. And I for one will go out on a limb now to declare that he is unlikely to win in November. In making this seemingly unguarded "prediction", I hasten to declare that it is not so much the issue of winning or losing in the

contest for the American presidency that concerns me as what this would mean for the forces of anti-neoliberalism and anti-globalization in our country, our continent and the world. Let me express what I have in mind here very clearly and unambiguously: even if he were to win in November, Trump will not in any sincere and meaningful way carry out the most important of his anti-globalization campaign promises. This is partly because of his fundamental insincerity and inconsistency. But there is also the far more important fact that Trump – and for that matter any American president – would need the legislative approval of the U.S. Congress to push through the sort of deep and wide departure from free-trade capitalist globalization that he is promising his supporters. Congress, as it is presently constituted, will not give legislative support to such a project. In other words, and to bring the particular speculations I am making here to their logical conclusion, in office as president, neither Trump nor Clinton would embark on a serious project of doing away with free-trade, neoliberal capitalism. And on this point, we need to briefly consider Bernie Sanders who, as a matter of fact, has given deep thought to how to take on the U.S. Congress in dealing with neoliberal globalization and its discontents in America in particu-

lar and more generally, in the world. What do I have in mind in making this observation?

It is one of the great regrets of the present cycle of American presidential elections that both the electoral platform and the message of Sanders have been grossly underreported at home in the U.S. itself and around the world. Other than the significant fact that he attracted millions of young people and previously unregistered Independents who had never participated in elections, little has been reported or discussed on his absolute insistence on the limits to electoral politics in America and what to do to circumvent and get beyond those limits. Specifically, Sanders has addressed the issue of the certainty of Congressional opposition to his project of dismantling neoliberalism in favor of an economic nationalism that mostly favors working people and the shrinking middle class. With a courage and a frankness that are rare in American electoral politics – indeed in electoral politics all over the world – Sanders again and again told his supporters that many of the things he was promising would not get Congressional approval, and that the only way they could be overcome resistance and blockage from the present political order was through a permanent political revolution in which a per-

manent siege on Congress in particular and all political appointees would put an end to business as usual. In other words, Sanders has repeatedly told his supporters, "don't expect that after you elect me into office you can go home and leave everything to me and my cabinet; no, you will not go home, you will remain permanently mobilized to make sure that things will not go back to business as usual".

I started this series with the idea of portents in the current American presidential electoral campaigns and return to that topic in my concluding observations and reflections. As we now know, thanks to the hacking of the emails of the Democratic National Committee, Sanders was defeated by Clinton in part because she is the candidate preferred by the Establishment. In fairness though, diehard Sanders partisans must admit that Clinton did win a resounding majority and plurality over Sanders and that, in the words of Chinua Achebe, it is not morning yet on creation day for the sort of left-wing anti-neoliberalism of their hero, Bernie Sanders. If Sanders had defeated Clinton in the primaries, and if he had then gone to trounce Trump in the general elections, that would have been a portent of great significance to all of us across the world for it would have indicated that it is not necessary to link anti-globalization with xenophobia and racism in order to win elections and change the course of global affairs away from a seemingly entrenched and immovable neoliberalism. As things stand now, Clinton has taken on board some of the items on the Sanders electoral platform. This too has a portent specific to it: depending on how sincere she proves to be if she wins the elections in November, we may see and get some reforms to neoliberalism that we have not seen so far in any Western country, least of all in America itself, the heartland, the center of gravity of neoliberal globalization and its enforcement in our world through both arms and diplomacy, aggression and enticement, the stick and the carrot.

Our last words, our concluding thoughts must go Trump and the great threat that his coupling of economic nationalism with xenophobia and racism poses to all of us around the globe. In insisting that the future does not belong to Trump and the mass movement that he has inspired and set in motion, I am, I admit, expressing the wish, the hope that he loses and loses mightily in November. These are very chaotic, very perilous times in our world and the last thing we need now is a demagogue, a charlatan, a conman and a rabid misogynist at the helm of affairs in the most powerful nation in the world. But I am also fairly convinced that Trump will not win, that the Western world is not about to descent into a new dark age into to which it will, undoubtedly, pull all of us in our planetary home. If the best we can hope for and get now is Clinton-Sanders, so be it. Let it not be Trump, alone, his supporters fooled and in their disappointment digging deeper into the morass of the worst fears and anxieties that plague us when turn on the "enemies" among and within us.

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(179)

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• "Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders: how deep, how meaningful will the reform of neoliberal globalization be?"