

The Issue is Not Trump. It is Us.

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On the day President Trump is inaugurated, thousands of writers in the United States will express their indignation. "In order for us to heal and move forward ...," say Writers Resist, "we wish to bypass direct political discourse, in favour of an inspired focus on the future, and how we, as writers, can be a unifying force for the protection of democracy."

And: "We urge local organizers and speakers to avoid using the names of politicians or adopting 'anti' language as the focus for their Writers Resist event. It's important to ensure that nonprofit organizations, which are prohibited from political campaigning, will feel confident participating in and sponsoring these events."

Thus, real protest is to be avoided, for it is not tax exempt.

Compare such drivel with the declarations of the Congress of American Writers, held at Carnegie Hall, New York, in 1935, and again two years later. They were electric events, with writers discussing how they could confront ominous events in Abyssinia, China and Spain. Telegrams from Thomas Mann, C Day Lewis, Upton Sinclair and Albert Einstein were read out, reflecting the fear that great power was now rampant and that it had become impossible to discuss art and literature without politics or, indeed, direct political action.

"A writer," the journalist Martha Gellhorn told the second congress,

"must be a man of action now . . . A man who has given a year of his life to steel strikes, or to the unemployed, or to the problems of racial prejudice, has not lost or wasted time. He is a man who has known where he belonged. If you should survive such action, what you have to say about it afterwards is the truth, is necessary and real, and it will last."

Her words echo across the unction and violence of the Obama era and the silence of those who colluded with his deceptions.

That the menace of rapacious power — rampant long before the rise of Trump — has been accepted by writers, many of them privileged and celebrated, and by those who guard the gates of literary criticism, and culture, including popular culture, is uncontroversial. Not for them the impossibility of writing and promoting literature bereft of politics. Not for them the responsibility to speak out, regardless of who occupies the White House.

Today, false symbolism is all. "Identity" is all. In 2016, Hillary Clinton stigmatised millions of voters as "a basket of deplorables, racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamaphobic — you name it". Her abuse was handed out at an LGBT rally as part of her cynical campaign to win over minorities by abusing a white mostly working-class majority. Divide and rule, this is

called; or identity politics in which race and gender conceal class, and allow the waging of class war. Trump understood this.

“When the truth is replaced by silence,” said the Soviet dissident poet Yevtushenko, “the silence is a lie.”

This is not an American phenomenon. A few years ago, Terry Eagleton, then professor of English literature at Manchester University, reckoned that “for the first time in two centuries, there is no eminent British poet, playwright or novelist prepared to question the foundations of the western way of life”.

No Shelley speaks for the poor, no Blake for utopian dreams, no Byron damns the corruption of the ruling class, no Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin reveal the moral disaster of capitalism. William Morris, Oscar Wilde, HG Wells, George Bernard Shaw have no equivalents today. Harold Pinter was the last to raise his voice. Among today’s insistent voices of consumer-feminism, none echoes Virginia Woolf, who described “the arts of dominating other people... of ruling, of killing, of acquiring land and capital”.

There is something both venal and profoundly stupid about famous writers as they venture outside their cosseted world and embrace an “issue”. Across the Review section of the *Guardian* on 10 December was a dreamy picture of Barack Obama looking up to the heavens and the words, “Amazing Grace” and “Farewell the Chief”.

The sycophancy ran like a polluted babbling brook through page after page.

“He was a vulnerable figure in many ways But the grace. The all-encompassing grace: in manner and form, in argument and intellect, with humour and cool[He] is a blazing tribute to what has been, and what can be again ... He seems ready to keep fighting, and remains a formidable champion to have on our side ... The grace ... the almost surreal levels of grace ...”

I have conflated these quotes. There are others even more hagiographic and bereft of mitigation. The *Guardian*’s chief apologist for Obama, Gary Younge, has always been careful to mitigate, to say that his hero “could have done more”: oh, but there were the “calm, measured and consensual solutions ...”

None of them, however, could surpass the American writer, Ta-Nehisi Coates, the recipient of a “genius” grant worth \$625,000 from a liberal foundation. In an interminable essay for *The Atlantic* entitled, “My President Was Black”, Coates brought new meaning to prostration. The final “chapter”, entitled “When You Left, You Took All of Me With You”, a line from a Marvin Gaye song, describes seeing the Obamas “rising out of the limo, rising up from fear, smiling, waving, defying despair, defying history, defying gravity”. The Ascension, no less.

One of the persistent strands in American political life is a cultish extremism that approaches fascism. This was given expression and reinforced during the two terms of Barack Obama. “I believe in American exceptionalism with every fibre of my being,” said Obama, who expanded America’s favourite military pastime, bombing, and death squads (“special operations”) as no other president has done since the Cold War.

According to a Council on Foreign Relations survey, in 2016 alone Obama dropped 26,171 bombs. That is 72 bombs every day. He bombed the poorest people on earth, in Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan.

Every Tuesday — reported the *New York Times* — he personally selected those who would be murdered by mostly hellfire missiles fired from drones. Weddings, funerals, shepherds were attacked, along with those attempting to collect the body parts festooning the “terrorist target”. A leading Republican senator, Lindsey Graham, estimated, approvingly, that Obama’s drones killed 4,700 people. “Sometimes you hit innocent people and I hate that,” he said, but we’ve taken out some very senior members of Al Qaeda.”

Like the fascism of the 1930s, big lies are delivered with the precision of a metronome: thanks to an omnipresent media whose description now fits that of the Nuremberg prosecutor:

“Before each major aggression, with some few exceptions based on expediency, they initiated a press campaign calculated to weaken their victims and to prepare the German people psychologically ... In the propaganda system ... it was the daily press and the radio that were the most important weapons.

Take the catastrophe in Libya. In 2011, Obama said Libyan president Muammar Gaddafi was planning “genocide” against his own people.

“We knew... that if we waited one more day, Benghazi, a city the size of Charlotte, could suffer a massacre that would have reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world.”

This was the known lie of Islamist militias facing defeat by Libyan government forces. It became the media story; and Nato – led by Obama and Hillary Clinton – launched 9,700 “strike sorties” against Libya, of which more than a third were aimed at civilian targets. Uranium warheads were used; the cities of Misurata and Sirte were carpet-bombed. The Red Cross identified mass graves, and Unicef reported that “most [of the children killed] were under the age of ten”.

Under Obama, the US has extended secret “special forces” operations to 138 countries, or 70 per cent of the world’s population. The first African-American president launched what amounted to a full-scale invasion of Africa. Reminiscent of the Scramble for Africa in the late 19th century, the US African Command (Africom) has built a network of supplicants among collaborative African regimes eager for American bribes and armaments. Africom’s “soldier to soldier” doctrine embeds US officers at every level of command from general to warrant officer. Only pith helmets are missing.

It is as if Africa’s proud history of liberation, from Patrice Lumumba to Nelson Mandela, is consigned to oblivion by a new master’s black colonial elite whose “historic mission”, warned Frantz Fanon half a century ago, is the promotion of “a capitalism rampant though camouflaged”.

It was Obama who, in 2011, announced what became known as the “pivot to Asia”, in which almost two-thirds of US naval forces would be transferred to the Asia-Pacific to “confront

China", in the words of his Defence Secretary. There was no threat from China; the entire enterprise was unnecessary. It was an extreme provocation to keep the Pentagon and its demented brass happy.

In 2014, the Obama's administration oversaw and paid for a fascist-led coup in Ukraine against the democratically-elected government, threatening Russia in the western borderland through Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, with a loss of 27 million lives. It was Obama who placed missiles in Eastern Europe aimed at Russia, and it was the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize who increased spending on nuclear warheads to a level higher than that of any administration since the cold war — having promised, in an emotional speech in Prague, to "help rid the world of nuclear weapons".

Obama, the constitutional lawyer, prosecuted more whistleblowers than any other president in history, even though the US constitution protects them. He declared Chelsea Manning guilty before the end of a trial that was a travesty. He has refused to pardon Manning who has suffered years of inhumane treatment which the UN says amounts to torture. He has pursued an entirely bogus case against Julian Assange. He promised to close the Guantanamo concentration camp and didn't.

Following the public relations disaster of George W. Bush, Obama, the smooth operator from Chicago via Harvard, was enlisted to restore what he calls "leadership" throughout the world. The Nobel Prize committee's decision was part of this: the kind of cloying reverse racism that beatified the man for no reason other than he was attractive to liberal sensibilities and, of course, American power, if not to the children he kills in impoverished, mostly Muslim countries.

This is the Call of Obama. It is not unlike a dog whistle: inaudible to most, irresistible to the besotted and boneheaded, especially "liberal brains pickled in the formaldehyde of identity politics," as Luciana Bohne put it. "When Obama walks into a room," gushed George Clooney, "you want to follow him somewhere, anywhere."

William I. Robinson, professor at the University of California, and one of an uncontaminated group of American strategic thinkers who have retained their independence during the years of intellectual dog-whistling since 9/11, wrote this last week:

"President Barack Obama ... may have done more than anyone to assure [Donald] Trump's victory. While Trump's election has triggered a rapid expansion of fascist currents in US civil society, a fascist outcome for the political system is far from inevitable But that fight back requires clarity as to how we got to such a dangerous precipice. The seeds of 21st century fascism were planted, fertilized and watered by the Obama administration and the politically bankrupt liberal elite."

Robinson points out that

"whether in its 20th or its emerging 21st century variants, fascism is, above all, a response to deep structural crises of capitalism, such as that of the 1930s and the one that began with the financial meltdown in 2008 There is a near-straight line here from Obama to Trump ... The liberal elite's refusal to challenge the rapaciousness of transnational capital and its brand of identity politics served to eclipse the language of the working and popular classes ... pushing white workers into an 'identity' of white nationalism and helping the

neo-fascists to organise them”.

The seedbed is Obama’s Weimar Republic, a landscape of endemic poverty, militarised police and barbaric prisons: the consequence of a “market” extremism which, under his presidency, prompted the transfer of \$14 trillion in public money to criminal enterprises in Wall Street.

Perhaps his greatest “legacy” is the co-option and disorientation of any real opposition. Bernie Sanders’ specious “revolution” does not apply. Propaganda is his triumph.

The lies about Russia — in whose elections the US has openly intervened — have made the world’s most self-important journalists laughing stocks. In the country with constitutionally the freest press in the world, free journalism now exists only in its honourable exceptions.

The obsession with Trump is a cover for many of those calling themselves “left/liberal”, as if to claim political decency. They are not “left”, neither are they especially “liberal”. Much of America’s aggression towards the rest of humanity has come from so-called liberal Democratic administrations — such as Obama’s. America’s political spectrum extends from the mythical centre to the lunar right. The “left” are homeless renegades Martha Gellhorn described as “a rare and wholly admirable fraternity”. She excluded those who confuse politics with a fixation on their navels.

While they “heal” and “move forward”, will the Writers Resist campaigners and other anti-Trumpists reflect upon this? More to the point: when will a genuine movement of opposition arise? Angry, eloquent, all-for-one-and-one-for all. Until real politics return to people’s lives, the enemy is not Trump, it is ourselves.

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