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## Donald Trump the Vulgar Democrat



**T**he most striking aspect of the rise and reign of Donald Trump was his unabashed display of vulgarity and the ease with which he got away with it until, finally, he came a cropper in the election of 2020. “Vulgar,” a term of condescension, is not often heard in democracies, where it most applies. It certainly applies to The Donald (as he is sometimes known). The brazen insults of women and honorable opponents strewn along his path were more than enough to deserve the plain name of vulgar. His success despite them, taking him all the way to the presidency, suggests something even more upsetting than he is: that his vulgarity was not a drag on his common appeal but an advantage.

The whole Trump phenomenon, both the man himself and the people he appeals to, reminds us of the vulgarity in democracy. Or more, of human vulgarity – since disrespect for the high and mighty can have universal appeal.

In the classical political science of the Greeks democracy had much less esteem than with us today. We now treat it as unquestionably the best, sometimes as the only, form of government. For Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, and Plutarch, the work of democracy was typified in the figure of the demagogue, the democratic leader. This man was hasty, angry, impulsive, brash, and punitive; he sought the favor of those like himself, the demos, the hoi polloi (the many), as we Greek-speakers like to say. He opposed men of quality, nobles, aristocrats, or gentlemen, accusing them of being enemies of the people, the majority that he spoke for. Unlike our view, the “people” was considered in the classical conception to be just a

part of the whole, the majority part to be sure, but not so as to include everyone: the demos was quantity against quality, the many versus the few, in practice the poor versus the rich.

Our American founders, building on the philosophy of liberalism, expanded the people so that “popular government” could include everyone. James Madison made a famous distinction (one that used to be taught in high school civics) between “democracy,” meaning pure democracy dominated by the demos and subject to “majority faction,” and “republic,” based on representation and structured with separation of powers and federalism so that the demos would be required to govern through electing the few and be kept diverse and scattered in order to stay moderate. Thus the American founders saw to it that their popular republic would provide for government by people like themselves, no longer aristocrats or nobles because their work would be ratified by the people, but still the few. The American people would have those founders for heroes, rather than vicious characters like Robespierre or naïve agitators like Tom Paine, who spoke and acted for the demos.

To complete the argument, one must see that the demagogue was a vulgar man who appealed to vulgar people on the level of a vulgar manliness with the traits of the demagogue. Vulgar is not always bad, though today we avoid using the term out of concern for the self-esteem of the vulgar. (“Plebeian” can occasionally be heard, but never politically.) Hillary Clinton could speak of “deplorables,” but to condemn them as “vulgar” might have excused them from the easy remedy for being deplorable, which was to vote for the Democrats. Vulgar people can be honest and good-hearted, but they are susceptible to passion and impatience. Madison wanted a government that would “refine and enlarge” opinions of the people, that is, the vulgar (The Federalist 10). The vulgar are aggressive and less educated males, not modest or moderate as normal women used to be before feminism. The moderate republic – now called by the name of what it replaced, democracy – would with the consent of the vulgar take power from the hands of the vulgar.

The result in America was a Constitution that makes use of the talents and virtues of the few, especially their ambition. With its complex structure it supplies many avenues of ambition in politics, and outside politics it suffuses the spirit of ambition everywhere in our society. Ambition is the desire to excel, to be outstanding above the normal satisfactions of ordinary people. In our democracy the popular desire to “get ahead” is normal and imparts a modicum of ambition to all. All of us have learned to live with enlightened innovation rather than custom, and we do not yearn for the

settled comfort of aristocracy. But still some want to get ahead by rising to the top or at least by having an “impact,” as students at elite universities like to say. This sort of ambition is hostile to the conservative aristocratic responsibility of those born to be nobles, but however democratic in origin, it belongs to the natural legion of the few.

Donald Trump is one of these few, ambitious if nothing else. In fact, there is little else to him. Though the son of a rich man, he has the outrageous coarseness of a vulgar man. He appealed to such men and to women who like manly men. These are his audience, and they are not put off by his departures from decorum. Far from it: they appreciate his lack of good taste, of good manners, of gentlemanliness, of protocol, and of tact. His boldness in going beyond the boundaries of decency they interpret as “telling it like it is” – as if honesty were found mainly in company with indecency and plain talk were the same as blurting lies.

Though rich (but just how rich?) Trump is not a philanthropist who wishes to elevate American democracy with magnificent gifts, like Andrew Carnegie’s libraries scattered throughout the nation. He does not support the fine arts or education, apart from founding Trump University, a failed monument to the profit motive. He dresses in a dark suit, wearing an aggressive tie, and does not try to hide his uncommon wealth with presumptuous informality like the techie billionaires. He does this and gets away with it, because he knows that he retains close contact with his supporters: he uses his wealth in vulgar display just as they would. He made his name in Reality TV and lost some of his wealth in the operation of casinos. And speaking of his name, he has branded all his enterprises with the name of Trump, apparently believing that his every activity deserves the highest honor he can bestow.

Along with the tremendous value of Trump’s name, however, goes his insistence that everyone recognize it. His thin skin, his amazing touchiness, show in his ready reactions to slights, let alone criticism. His egoism makes his psychology an easy read – his bluster opposed and counteracted by his sensitivity so that he is both tough and tender. Unlike the manly male, who hardly notices and cares little for how he is received by others, Trump demands universal love as the reward for his just denunciations and wise observations. In this he is closer to the sensitive male than to the manly male, and differs from the former only by his optimism that women will like him for his candor.

His outrageous comments during the 2016 election on the moderator Megyn Kelly’s menstrual condition and his rival Carly Fiorina’s supposedly plain looks set a new record for rash behavior by a public figure in need of

votes, perhaps causing for all he knew or cared a permanent breach in the bounds of decorum. But it did not appear that he suffered much for it in the women's vote. With such rashness one would expect an appropriate insensitivity, a devil-may-care approach to public esteem – but not at all, he wants it just the same. His vulgar manliness wants to mask his obvious yearning for indiscriminate love, and of course doesn't succeed. The fawning demagogue in him prevails over the impression he wants to convey of brash independence.

Yet he won that first election, as he keeps reminding us. Before he was a loser in 2020 he was a winner in 2016, and the vulgar love a winner. This fact invites us to infer that he might have a planned policy of swagger as opposed to an uncontrollable impulse. Ordinary people, decent though they may be, are impressed by extraordinary daring; they stand amazed at sensational violations of decency. So, under the hypothesis of his Machiavellian shrewdness one can suppose that Trump deliberately chose a strategy of speaking beyond normal bounds, one designed to impress ordinary folk and at the same time to dismay the elite who kept expecting that he would pay, as they would, for having gone too far. The classical demagogue rouses the demos against the nobles or gentlemen, and Trump used the same method against the leaders of both parties, first the Republicans in the state primaries, then the Democrats in the national election. As do all trendy folk, Trump has called these leaders the “Establishment,” taking them as a collectivity and using the name given them by the New Left in the Late Sixties.

Edmund Burke in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century spoke of “establishments” in the plural of the British constitution, such as the Church, the lawyers, the universities, the nobility – all unelected authorities supplying stability and guidance to a free society. By contrast, the single Establishment of the New Left, picked up by Trump, represents an accusation of malignant stagnation in a free society. The term “elite” has a mixed history, good and bad, of describing the democratic replacement for the aristocratic few. In America now the “elite” and the “Establishment” refer principally to elected officials, present or past, as well as to institutions, like the media, that have power because they have popular favor. It is strange to denounce them to the people who have chosen them, and particularly as if they were a single conspiracy when American parties seem to be so deeply at odds and said to be “polarized.”

As Trump had it during his first campaign, American parties are together against the people, yet so divided against each other as to be unable to act. He was quite uninterested in the liberal/conservative debate, or indeed in

any debate. But he found one point to attack that no other recent politician had seen: political correctness. Here was a well-known mind-set with practices and policies carried out and defended by Democrats, often criticized but not by politicians. No Republican had had the cleverness to see and the boldness to exploit the weakness in political correctness. To sum it up, this was a name for the general political strategy of Democrats to designate vulnerable groups, “minorities and women,” for special favor in jobs, honors, and benefits. To adopt this strategy of inclusiveness would win elections by the simple addition of vulnerable groups taught to vote by their identity, following the example of black voters.

Trump noticed that the policy of inclusiveness, such as Affirmative Action, was actually including some by excluding others not officially identified as vulnerable – particularly white voters. Without saying so – for in this Trump was cautious and prudent – he began to mobilize a white community to match the long-existing “black community,” thus turning the strategy of identity against itself. It was now Trump voters who were encouraged to think themselves marginalized. One could call this racism only if the “inclusive” policy of the Democrats were also termed racism. Surely, however, Trump was not calling on the finer feelings of the electorate. In a democratic age without nobles to serve as targets, the demagogue has to operate against some of the people in order to claim to act on behalf of those forgotten. Arlie Hochschild, a Berkeley sociologist, has made a study of forgotten whites in Bayou Louisiana (titled *Strangers in Their Own Land*, published in 2016) that nicely describes Trump voters before they voted for him. They were resentful, like departing airline passengers, of having to stand in line and watch other preferred groups waved ahead of them.

The Establishment, according to Trump, had made us losers; he would make America great again. Democrats had forgotten America in their preoccupation with its separate identities, and their desire to come to the aid of the vulnerable at home induced them to prefer the vulnerable abroad. America was too successful, too much a winner, the Establishment (or at least its Democratic branch) believed. America’s greatness was due to its exploitation of weaker countries, not to its virtue; its greatness was lacking in goodness. Best to apologize, and so lead the world after all in apologizing for human exploitation of nature. Nature needs our protection from us (humans), and we must seek means of “sustainability” to enable it to return to functioning on its own for our good.

All this – the politics and philosophy of Barack Obama and his liberals – was fresh meat for Donald Trump. But the hectoring manner in which they were conveyed – the schoolmarm political correctness that admonishes rather than argues – was still more inviting. Whereas the liberal policy of

Affirmative Action was designed to help blacks, the liberal affectation of political correctness came from feminism.

Political correctness now applies to black Americans as well, particularly to the way whites are required to address blacks. Blacks take pleasure in exempting themselves from the strictures of the P. C. language police, and they are also allowed the privileges of vulgar manliness that are denied to the rest of the population. They have the freedom to swagger, which is the manly basis of the human dignity that the Establishment prefers to preach. They are secure from feminist strictures against manliness; they enjoy the only safe space that cannot be violated by intrusive feminist propaganda. If only blacks would preach manly virtue, refined or not, to the rest of the population! But they are content with their own freedom and, with manly contempt of others, do not seek to justify it more generally.

Thus it was left to Donald Trump to attack political correctness and come to the defense of vulgar manliness. He did this not with argument but with outrageous behavior meant to be offensive. As demagogue he sought direct contact with the people. He wanted to bypass the media, the parties, and the Constitution which try to control and limit his contact and claim the right, whether formal or informal, to stand between him and the people. As methods of direct contact Trump used old-fashioned rallies in his campaign rather than informal meetings; he sent Twitter tweets to all indiscriminately rather than addressing people through the media; and he featured shocking talk and behavior rather than conventional politeness and respect. His desire was to transgress normal boundaries, especially those of political correctness, and thus to capture attention. His boastfulness seems stupid, and it is, but it makes people think that because he is bold, he is more honest and more truthful than those who hesitate and formulate. His offhand lies are not meant to be accurate but rather to display the lack of restraint that seems to be more truthful than the uptight rectitude of the fact-checker. His vulgar insults betray the absence of wit and the rejection of humor and irony in his flat soul; he is always serious and yet always exaggerates.

In sum, Donald Trump reflected and connected to the vulgar manliness in the American (or any) people. He is demotic rather than democratic, intuitive himself in finding what is instinctive in us. The American Founders made a Constitution for a popular republic that would resist the ills of all previous republics, which had exposed government to the vagaries and impulses of the vulgar. Instead, our republic would “refine and enlarge” the popular will through representative institutions that contain and employ the ambition of the few and that supply the whole with the “cool and

deliberate sense of the community” (*The Federalist* 63). This is the standard that Trump never understood and instinctively opposed.

Donald Trump left the scene as he entered it, playing the demagogue. The charge he incited against the Capitol building, holding most of the elected part of the government, is a pure instance of the demagogic action that the classic critics of democracy decried. Though mob rule is as old as the hills, this event is unprecedented in America because its founders took care in the Constitution they framed to prevent it above all other dangers.

The Constitution offers popular election instead of mob rule. The purpose of an election is to bring the government close to the people just once, and then having voted, for them to give their elected representatives a generous term in which to govern. They govern *in the name* of the people, but *instead* of the people, and at some distance from them – a “constitutional distance,” one might call it. When Trump was elected president, he profited from attaining the office that was intended to substitute for the demagogue, keeping him within bounds. Elected as a Republican, he had the Republican party to supply him with principles and policies that limited the freedom of action a demagogue seeks. True, he made the Republican party conform to him to varying degrees, so that the party could be accused of enabling him and of having been corrupted by him. But it’s also true that he conformed to it, particularly in tax policy, foreign policy and judicial appointments. And though Congress bent to him, he had to listen to it. The executive branch, as well, was not putty in his hands, but often reluctant and at times disobedient.

Trump with his art of dealing (he “wrote” a book on *The Art of the Deal*) was not able to deal with the Democrats and play them off against the Republicans in the typical maneuvering of the classic demagogue, because the Democrats undertook a “resistance” that forced him to stay with the party he had hijacked originally. His tweeting kept him at the center of attention and at the same time kept his supporters with him there. He made them feel big, and at no cost to himself. His enemies either paid the bill for opposing him, or like the Democratic media, profited from their subscribers by attacking him (The New York Times doubled its circulation during his presidency).

It was when he lost the election that he and his demotic supporters showed their fangs. Who was worse, one can ask: Was it Trump himself or his supporters who actually charged the Capitol while he took to the safety of the White House? The ancient critics of democracy believed that it was the supporters, the demos, who are responsible; Trump was doing their bidding. We moderns are invested in democracy and want to blame the

demagogue almost entirely. Trump is surely less honest than his troops, but that is perhaps a greater indictment of the quality of their honesty for such eager willingness they showed to violate the law. His followers at the Capitol seemed to be as joyful as they were angry.

American government is meant to be “wholly popular” in origin (says *The Federalist*), but entirely representative in operation. To keep its representatives in check, but also to give them scope to govern, the American Constitution separates them into different branches and has them elected from different states. Trump and his MAGA (Make America Great Again) followers are what democracy looks like without an establishment, which is the same as without a Constitution. One can hope that Republicans will judge Trump by his own standard as a loser. Unfortunately, a good part of them have followed his lead in actually denying that he lost the election. Those who deny he lost will in time have to admit that by his own standard that winners are always better than losers, he is a loser. They may be tempted to consider him by a higher standard, to which he is not entitled, as a noble loser. The noble loser in the Trump administration is its vice-president, Mike Pence. It is Trump’s refusal to accept losing that makes him a loser. The last weeks of his term after his election loss, more than the record he made before, spoiled his presidency. Had he not been so vain in his distractions during the 2020 campaign, he could have won re-election. For in truth his presidency had its accomplishments. But instead, he disgraced himself because he did not know how to lose. Rather than admit defeat and concede to his opponent he told an obvious lie.

The Trump phenomenon is a sad commentary on the lowest feature of a democratic people that has hitherto conducted itself as a constitutional democracy, even during its Civil War. It is a reminder of the value of propriety, which is a kind of general respect for one another and for the institutions of self-government. That sturdy virtue has been out of favor in intellectual circles as well as in popular behavior. Americans need to recover their sense of what is proper.