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DONALD TRUMP'S VICTORY AS A SYMBOL OF (CENTER)LEFT FAILURE IN THE UNITED STATES¹

Introduction

Donald Trump's victory in the presidential election in the United States of 2016 was a huge surprise for many. The mainstream media on both sides of the Atlantic could not understand how this controversial and extravagant billionaire won the race to the White House. Many progressive environments and mainstream media started to claim that Trump's success testifies to the xenophobic disease of the American society, completely ignoring the socio-economic sources of the victory of the American Right.² In addition, some commentators began to undermine the outcome of the election, noting that Hillary Clinton had almost

¹ This article is a development of the text entitled "Jak sieroty po amerykańskiej lewicy dały zwycięstwo Trumpowi" published in *Pressje* 2016, Vol. 47–48, pp. 66–70. The author also wrote about the anti-globalization phenomenon of Donald Trump in: B. Rydliński, "Trump antyglobalista? Znaczenie przegranych amerykańskiego kapitalizmu w wyborach prezydenckich 2016 roku", [in:] *Autorytarny populizm w XXI wieku. Krytyczna rekonstrukcja*, ed. F. Pierzchalski, B. Rydliński, Warszawa 2017, pp. 201–213.

² Some experts claimed even that Trump's victory is the beginning of authoritarianism in the United States. Cf. R. Kowalski, "Graff o zaprzysiężeniu Trumpa: 'Dziś ostatni dzień świata liberalnej demokracji'", *Krytyka Polityczna*, 19.01.2017, <http://krytykapolityczna.pl/multimedia/sterniczki/agnieszka-graff-usa-trump/> [accessed: 27.12.2017].

3 million more votes than her Republican competitor, ignoring the fact, that the rules of the game were clear to both sides and the U.S. election system played in favor of Donald Trump.³ And it is in the voting results from the post-industrial states that one should seek the answer to the question concerning the extent to which Trump's victory is connected above all with the failure of the American center-left in the fields of economic and social policy. In addition, this analysis should be seen as a part of a wider phenomenon of the traditional Left-wing voters' shift to right-wing populism, which currently appears as a clear and credible anti-globalization force. In my view, the American losers of the neoliberal processes of globalization of economies and opening up new economic and customs borders turned out to be one of the key social groups that decided about the electoral success of the CEO of the Trump Organization. In order to verify the posed hypothesis, the author of this article will use the method of qualitative discourse analysis when examining the political language of Donald Trump, quantitative, historical and comparative methods while demonstrating electoral changes in the north-eastern states commonly referred to as the Rust Belt. The article combines the approach of the theory of aggregative democracy and rational choice theory implemented in the field of electoral behavior analysis.

An unfinished crisis

In the beginning of this article, I shall focus on the significance of the 2008 crisis for American politics. This is important because many glorifiers of neoliberalism and the pre-crisis *status quo* of the global "casino capitalism" tried to convince the public that the crisis was over, that the U.S. and world economy was coming out of the depression, and that next time Wall Street gamblers would be more prudent in their plots and speculations. Of course, such calls were unlikely to impress those who, as taxpayers, rescued American banks, beguiled with the lack of alternatives for bailouts and the fear of losing the lion's share of their "invested" pensions on the market. These people have given signs of their anger again and again. First, by choosing Barack Obama, who in the year of the crisis had emerged, promised that his administration will make significant changes in the U.S. economic system ("Change"), and that they can certainly afford it ("Yes we can"). Then the rescuers of the American financial empires began to articulate their indignation against the injustice that surrounded them. The catchphrase "We are 99%" and the call for the U.S. government to save indebted American students, not the banking sector, roared

³ Cf. N. Wing, "Final Popular Vote Total Shows Hillary Clinton Won Almost 3 Million More Ballots Than Donald Trump", Huffpost, 20.12.2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/hillary-clinton-popular-vote_us_58599647e4b0eb58648446c6 [accessed: 27.12.2017].

near the New York stock exchange in the Zuccotti Park in 2011.⁴ The Occupy Wall Street movement, unlike the mainstream part of the American Left, drew attention to the fundamental problem of the USA: glaring socio-economic disproportions, harmful effects of the marketization of education and the need for more radical steps by the Obama administration. The last manifestation of the growing political frustration of the American Left was the unexpected political success of Bernie Sanders in the primaries of the Democratic Party. This at the time 75-year-old senator from Vermont hit the front pages of newspapers and online portals. Proudly calling himself a democratic socialist, he became a serious threat to Hillary Clinton in the race for the nomination of the Democratic Party. He vigorously argued that the United States needed a political revolution, he underlined very clearly that “people are tired of establishment policy and want a real change!”⁵ He called his opponent out on her connections with American financiers. Sanders himself did not collect donations from millionaires for his election campaign. It was based on small payments from millions of his supporters.

Sanders was, in a sense, a complete opposite of Hillary Clinton. Like Donald Trump, he was an anti-establishment candidate. For years he remained a political outsider in Congress, he voted against the American aggression against Iraq, supported war veterans, he spoke directly about the corruption-based system of lobbying on the Capitol Hill. As revealed by WikiLeaks, the Democratic National Committee did everything in its power to prevent Sanders from being nominated for the office of the President of the United States.⁶ Thus, the Democratic Party made a strategic mistake, because, as analyses show, the popular Bernie Sanders could not only fight with Donald Trump, but also win the 2016 presidential election.⁷

Policy of language – language of policy. Donald Trump’s anti-globalism

Sanders brought a strongly anti-neoliberal language to the American public debate. He rightly pointed out that contemporary globalization, contrary to what its

⁴ Cf. B. Rydliński, „Specyfika ruchu ‘Occupy’”, *Athenaeum. Polskie Studia Politologiczne* 2012, Vol. 36, pp. 302–313.

⁵ *Real Change. Bernie Sanders*, 1.11.2015, <https://youtu.be/hwww9zHT-8> [accessed: 27.12.2017].

⁶ “Leaked DNC Emails Reveal Details of Anti-Sanders Sentiment”, *The Guardian*, 24.07.2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/23/dnc-emails-wikileaks-hillary-bernie-sanders> [accessed: 27.12.2017].

⁷ Cf. Z. Cartwright, “If Anyone Doubts Bernie Sanders Would’ve Crushed Trump, Show Them This”, *The Cold Truth – Press Review*, 14.11.2016, <https://micheletocci.wordpress.com/2016/11/14/if-anyone-doubts-bernie-sanders-wouldve-crushed-trump-show-them-this/> [accessed: 27.12.2017].

followers claim, does not make everyone prosper better.⁸ In spite of obvious ideological and class differences, Sanders and Trump spoke about similar problems of the United States. They were both candidates of the losers of the processes of trade liberalization, who did not benefit from the opening of customs borders and negative changes in the labor market. Of course, Donald Trump will never be considered a politician of the idea of progress, if only because of his xenophobic, sexist and demagogic views as well as belonging to a group of hypercapitalists. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Trump managed to fill the political void left after Sanders and how his anti-globalization narrative propelled him to a spectacular victory over Hillary Clinton, with a particular emphasis on the Rust Belt.

This is how the upcoming 45th president of the United States, defined his view of the globalization in April 2016 when presenting his key remarks on U.S. foreign policy:

Americans must know that we are putting the American people first again on trade. So true. On trade, on immigration, on foreign policy. The jobs, incomes and security of the American worker will always be my first priority. No country has ever prospered that failed to put its own interests first. Both our friends and our enemies put their countries above ours and we, while being fair to them, must start doing the same. We will no longer surrender this country or its people to the false song of globalism. The nation-state remains the true foundation for happiness and harmony. I am skeptical of international unions that tie us up and bring America down and will never enter. And under my administration, we will never enter America into any agreement that reduces our ability to control our own affairs. NAFTA, as an example, has been a total disaster for the United States and has emptied our states – literally emptied our states of our manufacturing and our jobs. And I’ve just gotten to see it. I’ve toured Pennsylvania. I’ve toured New York. I’ve toured so many of the states. They have been cleaned out. Their manufacturing is gone. Never again, only the reverse – and I have to say this strongly – never again; only the reverse will happen. We will keep our jobs and bring in new ones. There will be consequences for the companies that leave the United States only to exploit it later. They fire the people. They take advantage of the United States. There will be consequences for those companies. Never again. Under a Trump administration, no American citizen will ever again feel that their needs come second to the citizens of a foreign country. I will view as president the world through the clear lens of American interests. I will be America’s greatest defender and most loyal champion. We will not apologize for becoming successful again, but will instead embrace the unique heritage that makes us who we are.⁹

We see in the above statement a clearly put diagnosis regarding the pernicious impact of the opening of markets and borders for the American society. The ending of jobs as a result of the NAFTA agreement from the United States to much poorer Mexico was already described in 1999 by the icon of the

⁸ Cf. B. Rydliński, “‘Amerykański (socjalistyczny) sen’ Berniego Sandersa”, *Studia Krytyczne/Critical Studies* 2016, Vol. 2, p. 181.

⁹ “Transcript: Donald Trump’s Foreign Policy Speech”, *The New York Times*, 27.04.2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/us/politics/transcript-trump-foreign-policy.html> [accessed: 27.12.2017].

Anglo-Saxon New Left, Naomi Klein, in her legendary book *No Logo*.¹⁰ One of the leading figures behind the implementation of this agreement was Bill Clinton, the 42nd President of the United States and husband of Trump's opposing candidate, who could not clearly specify her views on the issue of this trade agreement. Trump certainly appeared as a defender of the losers of neoliberal globalization, who not only wants to conservatively defend the rest of jobs in American industry, but also announces a return to a policy based on defense of the economic national interest and turning away from the dogmatic faith in the positive effects of the "globalization" of the U.S. economy.

We witnessed a similar procedure of Donald Trump during his first presidential election debate with Hillary Clinton, which took place on September 26, 2016 at the Hofstra University in New York. The Republican candidate ruthlessly accused his competitor in the race to the White House that, like her husband, she completely misunderstood the negative consequences of neoliberal globalization:

Your husband signed NAFTA, which was one of the worst things that ever happened to the manufacturing industry. You go to New England, you go to Ohio, Pennsylvania, you go anywhere you want, Secretary Clinton, and you will see devastation where manufacture is down 30, 40, sometimes 50 percent. NAFTA is the worst trade deal maybe ever signed anywhere, but certainly ever signed in this country. And now you want to approve Trans-Pacific Partnership. You were totally in favor of it. Then you heard what I was saying, how bad it is, and you said, I can't win that debate. But you know that if you did win, you would approve that, and that will be almost as bad as NAFTA. Nothing will ever top NAFTA.¹¹

Trump in an efficient way not only pointed to Clinton's uncertainty about key globalist trade agreements, but also politically empowered the inhabitants of the Rust Belt, whose political choices became the symbol of a significant political change that we observed on November 8, 2016, a key to understand the problem highlighted in the title of this article.

What's the Matter with the Rust Belt?

To this question, we are immediately reminded of the 2004 book by Thomas Frank about the departure of traditional Left-wing voters in the state of Kansas in favor of Right-wing populists.¹² In a sense, we observed a similar process during the last presidential election, in which the vast majority of white working-class voters from the working class from the Midwest and Great Lakes

¹⁰ Cf. N. Klein, *No Logo*, 10th Anniversary Edition, New York 2009, s. 223–226, 231–257.

¹¹ "The First Trump-Clinton Presidential Debate Transcript, Annotated", *The Washington Post*, 26.09.2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/09/26/the-first-trump-clinton-presidential-debate-transcript-annotated/?utm_term=.a51ec2b6603c [accessed: 27.12.2017].

¹² Cf. Th. Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, New York 2004.

massively voted for Donald Trump¹³, who for various reasons could not be considered their natural representative. The current president of the USA is the richest person in this office in the entire history of the United States¹⁴, unlike the inhabitants of the Rust Belt, he did not struggle with the problem of structural unemployment, the fall of the American dream, or observe the progressing degeneration of his workplace, neighborhood, city and state.¹⁵ It is worth asking ourselves, what has happened, in recent years, that the “solid voters” of the Democrats decided to punish the center-left. In order to complete the picture of the described changes and the scale of the phenomenon, it is worth quoting a few facts from the electoral geography of the Rust Belt. Less than a decade ago almost all states from that region – except for West Virginia – voted for Barack Obama by giving him in the 2008 election 138 electoral votes for 270 needed to take the presidency.¹⁶ Four years later, Indiana joined the group of Republican states in the Rust Belt, transferring their support from Barack Obama to Mitt Romney.¹⁷ In 2016, however, in the election between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, we witnessed a real political revolution. Only the states of Illinois and New York supported the Democratic candidate and the majority of voters from Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Iowa and Wisconsin voted for the flamboyant candidate of the Republican Party.

In order to show the fundamental changes in the election behavior in the Rust Belt we should compare two particular states – Iowa and Ohio, which both have changed their election preferences during the last 8 years. In so far as 2008 54% of voters in Iowa supported Barack Obama (the Republican John McCain got 44.7% of the votes¹⁸), in November 2016 Donald Trump got 51.8% and Hillary Clinton 42.2%.¹⁹ Thus, we can observe a mirroring reversal of the proportions of support. A more symbolic difference can be observed in the analysis of votes in the particular counties. 2008 in 52 out of 99 counties voted for the candidate from

¹³ Cf. N. Cohn, “Why Trump Won: Working-Class Whites”, *The New York Times*, 9.11.2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/upshot/why-trump-won-working-class-whites.html> [accessed: 3.01.2018].

¹⁴ Cf. E. Martin, “Donald Trump Is Officially the Richest US President In History”, *Business Insider*, 23.01.2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-richest-us-president-in-history-2017-1?IR=T> [accessed: 27.12.2017].

¹⁵ One of the most symbolic reportage on city degeneration is entitled *The Ruins of Detroit*, <http://www.marchandmeffre.com/detroit> [accessed: 27.12.2017].

¹⁶ Election Results 2008. President Map, *The New York Times*, 9.12.2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2008/results/president/map.html> [accessed: 27.12.2017].

¹⁷ Election 2012. President Map, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2012/results/president.html> [accessed: 27.12.2017].

¹⁸ Election Results 2008. President Map, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ 2016 Presidential Election Results, Politico, 13.12.2016, <https://www.politico.com/map-data-2016/2016-election/results/map/president/> [accessed: 27.12.2017].

the Democrats²⁰, whereas 8 years later Hillary Clinton won in only 6 counties.²¹ Especially symbolic is the defeat of Hillary Clinton in the East, post-industrial part of this state, which is part of the Rust Belt, which 2008 almost entirely voted for the first black president of the United States and in the last elections showed the red card to the Democratic Party by supporting Donald Trump.

The situation in Ohio was very similar – ten years ago the majority of votes went to Barack Obama and gave him victory with 51.2% of votes in comparison to 47.2% for the candidate of the right²², whereas it changed its preferences in 2016 to 52.1% for Donald Trump and 43.5% for Hilary Clinton.²³ Looking at the counties we also can observe shifts: 2008 the candidate of the Democrats won in 22 out of 88 counties, whereas in 2016 the candidate from the same party got only 7 counties.²⁴

The Rust Belt in election of 2016 gave Trump 86 electoral votes and only 49 for Clinton.²⁵ We see, therefore, that during three cycles of presidential elections, post-working-class states from the Democratic stronghold became a reservoir of support for the American Right. Why has this happened and what does this mean for the American Left? These questions can be answered in many ways taking into account both the American and transatlantic specificity of progressive groups.

Self-imposed defeat?

Since the 1968 revolution the American Left continues to have a problem with answering the question of what is the most important aspect of its political strategy. Are those the cultural issues or the struggle for the economic interest of those social classes which constituted the natural electoral base of the Democratic Party? The collapse of the bipolar world in 1989–1991 and the triumph of a neoliberal idea fettered with liberal democracy further influenced the American and European Left. Clinton's political approach above Left and Right, Blair and Giddens's the "New Third Way" and Gerhard Schröder's *Neue Mitte* proved to be a worse cure than for the disease that consumed the progressive

²⁰ Election Results 2008. Iowa: Presidential County Results, *The New York Times*, 9.12.2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2008/results/states/president/iowa.html> [accessed: 27.12.2017].

²¹ 2016 Iowa Presidential Election Results, Politico, 13.12.2016, <https://www.politico.com/2016-election/results/map/president/iowa/> [accessed: 3.01.2018].

²² Election Results 2008. President Map, *op. cit.*

²³ 2016 Presidential Election Results, *op. cit.*

²⁴ 2016 Ohio Presidential Election Results, Politico, 13.12.2016, <https://www.politico.com/2016-election/results/map/president/ohio/> [accessed: 3.01.2018].

²⁵ 2016 Presidential Election Results, *op. cit.*

political parties on both sides of the Atlantic.²⁶ Admittedly, temporarily adopting the free market narrative allowed the American Democrats and European Social Democrats to achieve spectacular election results at the turn of the century, in the second decade of the 21st century, the same phenomenon turned out to be one of the most serious crises in the history of the Western Left. The unemployed of the former U.S. industrial districts, former workers' settlements in the United Kingdom, victims of transitional deindustrialization from Central and Eastern Europe are today the core of Right-wing populism, not Left-wing groups. This is currently one of the most discussed political phenomena in recent years.

One way of interpreting this fact is the wrong choice of political strategy on the part of the American (but also the European) Left. It involves a focus on cultural rather than socio-economic cleavages. Instead of the protection of economically worse-paid classes and losers of globalization, we have been witnessing the “rainbovization” of the Left in the recent years. Cultural issues and the struggle for the rights of all minorities have overshadowed the working class and their demands. As a result of the processes of globalization and the liberalization of markets, this class began to shrink at an unexpectedly fast pace. On the other hand, the newly-formed precariat class had no crystallized political awareness – as is the case in Central Europe – or as it is in the U.S. those people see in the center-left cynicism, lack of ideology and servility towards Wall Street, and thus avoid siding with the “old” Left. In addition, voters who have lost their stable jobs in the industry by moving from the working class to unemployment do not see in the parties a progressive force that is able to solve their problems, but one that is part of the political establishment, which is responsible for this fatal state of affairs. At this point, it is worth pointing out the fundamentally misguided political strategy of Hillary Clinton and the entire American centrist Left based on the concept of Identity Liberalism. As Mark Lilla points out in the *New York Times*, the belief that the mere fact of being an African American, gay, lesbian, Latin American, and a woman constitutes an important political and election motivation proved extremely wrong, because the class and economic conflict of interest still remain the key electoral motivation.²⁷

²⁶ It is good to underline, that from the very beginning of “New Third Way”/*Neue Mitte* we witnessed serious voice of criticism on those doctrines. For example, the Polish economist Tadeusz Kowalik was on one of the first Central European scholars, who published very detailed anti-Third Way scientific statement. Cf. T. Kowalik, „Postowie: spory wokół Trzeciej Drogi”, [in:] *Spory wokół Nowej Trzeciej Drogi*, ed. *idem*, Warszawa 2001, pp. 121–147.

²⁷ Cf. M. Lilla, “The End of Identity Liberalism”, *The New York Times*, 18.11.2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html?_r=0 [accessed: 27.12.2017].

There is no alternative! Democratic socialism!

By its very nature, Identity Politics is a concept that is not only extremely individualistic, but also favors particular social groups to which it is addressed. The previously mentioned Mark Lilla puts it in the following way, pointing at the negative political consequences for the American Left resulting from the fetishizing of the concept:

In recent years American liberalism has slipped into a kind of moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity that has distorted liberalism's message and prevented it from becoming a unifying force capable of governing [...] If you are going to mention groups in America, you had better mention all of them. If you don't, those left out will notice and feel excluded. Which, as the data show, was exactly what happened with the white working class and those with strong religious convictions. Fully two-thirds of white voters without college degrees voted for Donald Trump, as did over 80 percent of white evangelicals.²⁸

At this point, it is worth pointing out the lack of an alternative for the Left, if it wants to both survive and relate to political and electoral successes in the future it can use only one cure. This cure is democratic socialism.

This idea was inseparably connected with the desire to combine the concept of democracy understood as the power of the people combined with the supremacy of the idea of civil liberties and socialism defined as a system of universal social benefits and social control over economic processes. This concept, especially in the last months is gaining popularity in Anglo-Saxon countries thanks to Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, who appear not only as symbols of Left-wing credibility, but also unrelenting ideologists in the time of the fall of all political values.²⁹ The reliability of their activities, devotion to the affairs of the losers and the conviction about the moral superiority of the socialist idea over bloodthirsty capitalism in the neoliberal version constitute their political strength. The lesson from the United States is, therefore, extremely universal for the entire transatlantic Left. It turns out that the losers of globalization processes, disappointed with the center-left policy of representing the Wall Street and not the Main Street, decide to protest by choosing eccentric Right-wing populists as their representatives. If the Left wants to regain their trust in the future, it must once again put a red banner, abandon centrism and trust their experts, who have been indicating for years that emotions, values and conflicts of interest are permanently inscribed in the political system, in which we currently operate. As Chantal Mouffe rightly notes "Such a democracy will therefore always be a democracy 'to come', as conflict and antagonism are at the same time its condition

²⁸ *Ibidem.*

²⁹ Cf. *Corbyn, Sanders – przebudzenie socjalizmu? 30.03.2016. Część 1*, 2.04.2016, <https://youtu.be/GgeSTJeWcEM>; *Corbyn, Sanders – przebudzenie socjalizmu? 30.03.2016. Część 2*, 2.04.2016, <https://youtu.be/swzhpK3N0IA> [accessed: 27.12.2017].

of possibility and the condition of impossibility of its full realization”.³⁰ The Left, remaining on the current conceptual positions, will continue to contribute to the end of the political reality as we know it and could bring even worse crises in the near future.

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³⁰ Ch. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, New York–London 1993, p. 8.

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Zwycięstwo Donalda Trumpa jako symbol porażki (centro)lewicy w Stanach Zjednoczonych

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza zwycięstwa Donalda Trumpa w wyborach prezydenckich w Stanach Zjednoczonych w 2016 roku w kontekście porażki projektu centro-lewicowego w tym kraju. Szczególna uwaga zostanie poświęcona geografii wyborczej tzw. Pasa Rdzy, który stanowi jeden z najbardziej symbolicznych regionów Ameryki, w którym możemy zaobserwować negatywne konsekwencje neoliberalnej globalizacji. Autor artykułu skupi się także na języku politycznym Donalda Trumpa, silnym przekazie antyglobalistycznym użytym przez republikańskiego kandydata zarówno w czasie prawyborów, jaki i podczas debat prezydenckich z Hillary Clinton. Studium zaprezentuje także na ile „polityka tożsamości” oraz inne indywidualistyczne koncepty wpłynęły na porażkę wyborczą amerykańskiej lewicy oraz dlaczego bardziej kolektywne i antagonistyczne podejście może w przyszłości mieć pozytywny wpływ na cały transatlantycki ruch postępowy.

Słowa kluczowe: Trump, Lewica, antyglobalizm, Pas Rdzy, demokratyczny socjalizm

Donald Trump's Victory as a Symbol of (Center)left Failure in the United States

The aim of this article is the analysis of Donald Trump's electoral victory in U.S. presidential elections of 2016 in the context of failure of the center-left in this country. Special attention will be paid to political geography of the Rust Belt, one of the most symbolic regions in America, where one can observe the negative consequences of neoliberal globalization. The author of the article will focus on the political language of Donald Trump and the strong anti-globalist statement used by the Republican candidate during primaries as well during presidential debates with Hillary Clinton. This study will also show, how Identity Politics and other idealistic concepts influenced the electoral defeat of the American Left and why a more collective and antagonistic approach could have a positive impact on the whole transatlantic progressive movement.

Key words: Trump, Left, Anti-globalism, Rust Belt, Democratic Socialism