

TRUMP, AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM, and COVID-19 from a US PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract This article engages the contemporary crises of health, the economy, and democracy in the United States during the era of Trump and the COVID-19 pandemic. The author begins with a discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic and Trump's chaotic and inept responses. The author follows with a discussion of Trump and authoritarian populism, arguing that Trump's floundering fortunes in the context of a hotly contested 2020 presidential campaign triggered his chaotic and contradictory responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, producing a crisis of democracy.

Keywords COVID-19, Donald Trump, authoritarian populism, economic crisis, 2020 US presidential election, crisis of democracy

With the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the rise of right-wing authoritarian governments in many countries, authoritarian populism threatens democracies and public safety throughout the world. With authoritarian populism accompanied by the COVID-19 pandemic, people suffering under autocratic and incompetent governments are struggling with dual viruses threatening the health of democracy and the polity, as well as human life.

In addition, the United States has been plagued since its inception by the original sin of racism, and the murder of African American George Floyd by four Minneapolis police officers on May 26, 2020, triggered unparalleled resistance movements against police brutality and racism in the United States.

The Floyd police murder was videotaped, and its repeated broadcast on television and internet dissemination generated a viral media spectacle globally, as a policeman was shown nonchalantly holding Floyd down with a knee on his neck as Floyd repeatedly said “I can’t breathe,” replicating the death of African American Eric Garner and many other people of color who were killed in similar fashion at the hands of the police (Prashad 2020).

The powerful demonstrations against police brutality and racism exploded into a sustained movement that mobilized millions in protest in summer 2020. This movement arose during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has taken over 2.1 million lives globally and from 420,000 lives in the United States as I write in early 2021, with the United States now being the epicenter and most dangerous site of the pandemic that continues to careen out of control (McNeil 2020).¹

In this article, I will focus on the contemporary crises of health and democracy in the era of Trump and the COVID-19 pandemic. I begin with a discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States and Trump’s chaotic responses. I follow with a discussion of Trump and authoritarian populism and argue that Trump’s floundering fortunes in the context of a hotly contested 2020 presidential campaign triggered his chaotic, contradictory, and incompetent responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Trump’s election fortunes required that he placate his base and try to assure them that the COVID-19 pandemic was going to soon disappear and that he had it under total control—both false, as medical authorities and informed media commentators reported daily.

COVID-19, Eco-Crisis, and Global Viralization

As deaths and panic from the virus expanded in the United States by March 2020, Trump renamed the COVID-19 virus “the China virus” and used the crisis to deflect blame on China, the World Health Organization, and other global entities, as he tried to deny the intensity of the crisis. Indeed, the virus was global in scope, illustrating the dark side of globalization: it could transmit deadly viruses as well as goods, democracy, and interpersonal communication (see Kellner 2002). Scientific experts believed that the COVID-19 virus arose in Wuhan animal (“wet”) markets, which trafficked in illegal animals, like bats, that have previously conveyed deadly viruses to humans (HSI 2020).² This called attention to the dangers of mass animal harvesting in animal breeding/feeding operations in factory farms in China, which contributes to global environmental crisis, as well as the transmittal of viruses from animals to humans.

The COVID-19 crisis thus illustrates what the Frankfurt School called “the revenge of nature” for the destruction of animals, plant life, and the earth itself through the project of the domination of nature in which human beings colonize, exploit, and ravage it for human use and profit.³ Since the mass production of animals takes place throughout the globe, it intensifies species extinction, global eco-crisis, and the spread of diseases from one country throughout the world in an era of global commerce, trade, and population movement. The COVID-19 virus quickly spread throughout Asia, Europe, and the United States. After the outbreak in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, the World Health Organization declared it a “public health emergency of international

concern” on January 30, 2020, and a pandemic on March 11, as the virus spread to Italy, Iran, South Korea, Japan, and other countries from Asia to Europe.

The first cases in the United States were reported in January 2020 and continued to spread, but Trump refused to acknowledge any dangers and assured Americans that he had the pandemic under control and that it would soon disappear—a line he continued to take up to the end of his presidency. By mid-March 2020, the Trump administration was forced to acknowledge the enormity of the COVID-19 crisis, after which it created a pandemic response team and started conducting daily press briefings at the White House. Critical media voices pointed out that Trump had shut down the pandemic response group that Barack Obama had established and ignored a pandemic presidential response plan that the Obama administration had produced in 2015, and thus the US government had no coherent crisis response to the pandemic, as COVID-19 cases continue to multiply and death rates rise (Tracy 2020).

Moreover, Trump has repeatedly uttered falsehoods regarding the pandemic, contributing to the more than thirty thousand false or misleading claims he made as president, according to the final account of the *Washington Post* “Fact Checker” team, claims documented by other sources.⁴ One theme of Trump’s falsehoods is exaggeration of the constructive measures allegedly taken by his administration to control the virus and the great achievements of the private sector to produce a vaccine, under his leadership. Trump has also understated the projected time to produce a vaccine and promoted unapproved treatments such as hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine, even to the point of claiming that he has been taking

hydroxychloroquine to protect himself against COVID-19, despite claims by Fauci and other experts that it doesn’t provide protection (Cathey 2020; Olorunnipa, Cha, and McGinley 2020).

Trump’s false medical advice feeds into an “infodemic” that describes an overload of information from public officials, media, the internet, and social media. False information about the virus leads people to attempt dangerous medical solutions, often with fatal results (Bellware 2020; United Nations 2020). Facebook, Twitter, and responsible social media sites and medical authorities are forced to fight and respond to the dangerous misinformation, but in an infodemic it is difficult to get false information under control (Frenkel, Alba, and Zhong 2020; Izadi 2020).⁵

Trump has repeatedly refused to admit mistakes as reporters confronted him with false statements or erroneous claims about the COVID-19 virus and crisis, instead blaming many others. The *Washington Post* estimated that around 15 percent of Trump’s April 6–24 speeches were spent attacking others, with the most frequent targets being Joe Biden and Democrats, followed by the media, state governors, and China (Bump and Parker 2020). Trump went from praising China in January 2020 regarding their “transparency” in response to the Chinese COVID-19 outbreak, to criticizing China in March for a lack of transparency, to criticizing the World Health Organization in April for praising China’s transparency. Further, Trump has often reversed his stances in his communications, giving mixed or contradictory messaging and sometimes denying his own recent public statements and those by administration officials and public health authorities.

Accompanying the anxiety and deaths in the COVID-19 crisis has been a global

economic crisis with massive unemployment, sectors of the economy brought to a halt, and economic futures impaired (Evans and Mendez Acosta 2020). In the United States, the economy was largely shut down for many months in large parts of the country, but because of the lack of a national plan, different states and even cities had wildly different shut down and reopening processes, resulting in uneven economic impact. Even though Congress and the Trump administration produced a relief package for families in the lowest economic categories, and loans to some small businesses through July 2020, many families and regions suffered economically. Further, throughout the pandemic Congress and the Trump administration could not agree on a second relief plan to move forward, and the US economy appeared stalled while many families face bankruptcy, the loss of their homes, and worse—a desperate situation the new Biden administration is attempting to address at the beginning of his term.

Moreover, with the start of the school year in August 2020, state officials and parents, respectively, had to make difficult decisions on whether to open schools and send their kids. Trump continued to urge in daily tirades to “open up the schools,” just as he has for months urged opening up businesses and the economy, with dire effect. As schools began to open, there have been predictable reports of outbreak of COVID-19 in the schools, followed by quarantines and widespread panic and anxiety as individuals and regions were forced to decide how to protect their children as the president ranted until the end about opening the schools, leading to the slaughter of innocents and leaving the Biden administration to deal with the continuously raging pandemic, a task he took as one of his most important challenges

(Foster and Mundell 2020; Raymond 2020); White House 2021.

Despite the death, destruction, and chaos of the COVID-19 crisis, Trump continually claimed the pandemic was almost over, or simply ignored it, while his messaging often contradicted that of his administration’s public health officials and medical science experts. From January to mid-March, Trump downplayed the threat posed by the coronavirus, as well as the severity of the outbreak. He presented himself as a “cheerleader for the country,” repeatedly claimed that he had the virus under control, and from February until the end of his presidency, Trump would assert that the coronavirus would “go away” and simply disappear (McDonald 2020).

Authoritarian Populism, COVID-19, and Crises of Democracy

Recent studies have shown that authoritarian populism involves the masses submitting to a leader’s authority, suggesting a continuity between the fascism and mass movements of the 1930s with today’s global profusion of authoritarian leaders and movements (Kellner 2016, 2017). Just as the 1930s authoritarian movements led to economic and political chaos, war, and massive human tragedy, today’s authoritarians are bringing widespread economic crisis and uncertainty, political chaos, oppression and division, and human suffering that is cascading throughout the globe and intensifying in the COVID-19 crisis.

In this context, the Frankfurt School’s theories of the authoritarian personality, mass society and political movements, and the culture industry help illuminate the rise of autocrats and authoritarian movements, and the ways that demagogic autocrats in conjunction with mass movements and the mass media help produce a massification of public opinion and authoritarian political

leaders who present themselves as saviors of the people.⁶ “I am the one,” the authoritarian leaders proclaim, and the masses follow in obedience. The autocratic leader seeks a monopoly on political truth and action and attacks the media, the judiciary, political organs and representatives, and any person or institution that does not follow his way, that opposes him, or that he cannot control. The autocrat’s propaganda requires and elicits obedience and loyalty, while expressing disdain for voices and institutions that oppose the leader and his followers.

Authoritarian populism has shown the dangers of authoritarian leaders being confronted with a pandemic or other health emergencies, as authoritarians are generally more concerned with their own interests, political power, and movements, rather than the health and welfare of the people. In the first half of this article, I showed how Trump’s attempts at deflection and failure to address the COVID-19 pandemic at the expense of his own efforts at self-promotion and his presidential campaign paralyzed the US government response to the crisis and produced the world’s largest, most deadly and out-of-control COVID-19 pandemic.

The United States is followed by Brazil, which has 8.8 million cases and 160,000 deaths as of January 24, 2021 (Andreoni 2020).⁷ Like Trump, its authoritarian president, Jair Bolsonaro, has dismissed the danger posed by the virus, sabotaged quarantine measures adopted at the state level, and urged Brazilians to continue working and keep the economy open, while testing positive for the virus. The UK under Tory leader Boris Johnson suffered a devastating initial outbreak of the pandemic as Johnson, like Trump, failed to listen to expert medical advice and initially ignored the severity of the

pandemic and failed to take measures. Johnson contracted the virus, was hospitalized, and too late took the virus seriously, leading to many deaths and eventual economic crisis. Critics argued that his Tory party underfunded the British National Health Service, just as Trump cut Obama-era pandemic funding early in his administration, which undermined the effort to stem the outbreak and save lives (Merrick 2020).⁸

Furthermore, in the United States and elsewhere, the pandemic crises and deaths have disproportionately harmed Black and Latino populations (Oppel et al. 2020), highlighting that Trump’s failure to respond is marked by his racism as well as his lack of empathy and narcissist personality.⁹ Hence in this context I would argue that the authoritarian leader is necessarily an enemy of the health and well-being of its citizens, as well as being hostile to democracy and democratic institutions. The autocrat mobilizes the masses to follow autocratic rule and dictates, as he attacks democratic forces that oppose him. The demagogic autocrat lies to the people and attacks the very norms of truth and reason, rational political discourse, and science. While truth depends on curiosity, debate, and consensus, authoritarians insist on conformity to their dictates and complete loyalty to their person. They claim to represent the people and the nation while mobilizing mass movements and supportive mass media to trumpet their every word and dictate.

Segments of the people identify with the leader who expresses their grievances, resentments, hatreds, and prejudices. The authoritarian leader attacks privilege and institutions that represent privilege, even though he may be part of the elite himself. The autocrat uses his office to promote his own interests, often at odds with the

public interest, violating political norms and often engaging in outright criminality.¹⁰

Authoritarian populism often leads to and produces violence, as an enraged leader or group stigmatizes and takes out their grievances on minority groups, whom they blame for their own, or social, problems. This leads to demagoguery, outrage, and hate, which produces societal division and violence. The autocrat chooses an “other,” whom his followers see as an enemy, dividing the society and polis into “us” and “them.” Hence Trump has blamed the COVID-19 pandemic on China, the Obama administration, the media, the World Health Administration, the Democrats, and whoever else criticizes him or arouses his ire at a given moment.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic shows that authoritarian populist leaders like Trump threaten not only democracy but also the health and well-being of the population. Yet authoritarian leaders may generate resistance—especially if the leader threatens the people with destructive wars or massive out-of-control pandemics. As people find themselves sick or dying, or losing family or friends, anger grows, and people look to find who was responsible for pandemics like COVID-19 spreading without any significant government response or protections.¹¹ Further, institutions, groups, and individuals that the autocrat attacks, and that his followers are led to demonize and hate, may fight back, mobilizing individuals against the autocrat and his antidemocratic forces via newspapers, books, mass media, public demonstrations, and oppositional movements. We see this happening in certain pandemic-ridden regions like the United States, where significant resistance movements have arisen in response to the multiple crises attacking people’s health,

democracy, and the sustainability of human life on the planet.

Moreover, crises as intense as the COVID-19 pandemic create opportunities for transformational and progressive change. The health systems of the United States, UK, Brazil, and other major countries hit hard by the crisis have shown themselves to be inadequate, requiring a focus on public health and more robust health systems. To the question of how to pay for better government-funded health care, the answer is provided by Bernie Sanders (2020a, 2020b), who along with Senate colleagues offered a bill that would tax billionaires’ wealth to fund health care.

The failures of authoritarian leaders, such as those I described above, show the necessity of electing leaders and governments that will protect the public, uphold their rights, and provide adequate health and welfare. Authoritarian leaders breed resistance, leading to the possibilities of governments that serve the needs and interests of the people rather than the authoritarian leader and his clique of insiders and political base.

We cannot see where our current plagues of COVID-19 and authoritarian populism will take us, where the rising resistance and ever-expanding movements will go, or what impact global pandemics, ecological crises, and economic catastrophes will play in our crisis-infected futures. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the global markets, capitalist expansion, and commerce into uncertainty and chaos, providing for the first time since at least World War II the possibility of actually transforming the world from an unsustainable economic (dis)order and polity into a more sustainable planetary community to deal with multiple crises of the future.

It is clear, however, that authoritarian

populism has created crises and political oppression throughout the globe that threatens democracy, civility, and human life. It is also clear that global opposition movements are rising to challenge authoritarian populism, and the key question we face—as many times before—remains: which side are you on?

Notes

1. The statistics cited above are from the Google COVID-19 page at www.google.com/search?q=covid-19 (accessed January 23, 2021). World Health Organization daily statistics are found at WHO 2020.
2. For background on viruses and human animal markets, see Quammen 2013.
3. See the book from my University of Texas student C. Fred Alford (1985).
4. According to the *Washington Post* “Fact Checker” team, “in four years, President Trump made 30,573 false or misleading claims” (Kessler et al. 2021). The *Wikipedia* entry “Veracity of Statements by Donald Trump” cites other databases collecting his lies and offer well-documented examples of Trump’s stunning amount of lying throughout his career (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veracity_of_statements_by_Donald_Trump, accessed on January 22, 2021).
5. Twitter and Facebook both removed Trump from their social media sites near the end of his presidency, giving rise to furious debate over high-tech companies’ right to censorship vs. freedom of speech. See Conger, Isaac, and Frenkel 2021.
6. On the Frankfurt School and authoritarian populism, see the studies in Kellner 2016 and Morelock 2020.
7. These statistics are from the Google COVID-19 page at www.google.com/search?q=brazil+covid+19+cases (accessed January 23, 2021).
8. On the economic impact of the pandemic in the UK, see *BBC News* 2020 and Partington 2020.
9. Trump’s niece Mary Trump (2020), a clinical psychologist, has published a book that describes how Trump’s authoritarian personality, lack of empathy, and extreme narcissism derive from his harsh family discipline at the hands

- of his authoritarian father Fred Trump, and a highly competitive family and business career that helped make him ruthless, uncaring, and authoritarian.
10. Jeffrey Toobin (2020) presents a full inventory of Donald Trump’s crimes, and the *New York Times* published a blockbuster investigation showing that Trump’s father Fred engaged in income tax fraud and other criminality his whole life, based on analysis of his income tax returns and financial records that Mary Trump helped provide to the *Times* and drew on in her own book (Trump 2020); see Barstow, Craig, and Buettner 2018.
11. Many believe that Trump lost the 2020 US presidential election to Joe Biden because of his failed response to the COVID-19 virus. See Cillizza 2020.

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