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Normcore plutocrats in gold elevators: reading the Trump Tower photographs

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Abstract

This article analyses two notorious photos of Donald Trump and Nigel Farage - one on their own, and one alongside Arron Banks, Gerry Gunster, Andy Wigmore and Raheem Kassam - standing in a gold-plated elevator after Trump had won the US election. The article provides a cultural and political analysis of the plutocrats who are playing at being ordinary 'winners', or what it calls normcore plutocrats. Analysing the symbolic and material contexts of these two images, it considers the physical context of the lift within Trump Tower; the tangled web of relationships uniting the men in the lift; and the photograph's later life as a social media meme. Asking how a depiction of glittering luxury can be presented as populist revolt, it discusses how elites draw on discourses of meritocracy, of 'travelling up the social ladder' to validate their actions. That Trump and friends are not on a ladder but in an express lift symbolises the attempted velocity of this phase of corporate meritocracy. In the process the analysis provides a multi-layered contribution towards understanding how these normcore plutocrats in gold elevators have achieved and extended their power.

Keywords

corpocracy * meritocracy * neoliberalism * Trump * Brexit

Introduction

In November 12, 2016 Donald Trump – whose estimated wealth was at that time around \$3.7 billion dollars – was photographed standing in his own glittering gold-plated elevator after winning the US election, on behalf of he claimed, the forgotten and the left behind. Alongside Trump stood Nigel Farage, former leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), and an instrumental figure in mobilising the vote for Britain to leave the European Union (or 'Brexit'). In the photograph these two portly, besuited white men appear profoundly pleased, with Trump's hand in a thumbs-up pose, Farage grinning open mouthed, his palm gesturing towards Trump as if to say 'this guy!'. It was taken by Farage's 'Brexit buddy' Andy Wigmore, the director of the Leave.EU campaign, who featured in another photograph taken moments afterwards alongside more male Brexiteers (Arron Banks, Gerry Gunster and Raheem Kassam). Both images rapidly achieved notoriety. The image of Trump and Farage quickly travelled from Farage's Twitter feed to the international press, and on to a variety of adapted image-afterlives on social media, where it was extensively parodied and achieved widespread notoriety. Novelist Matt Haig, for instance, wrote "Look at these two young earnest revolutionaries plotting the downfall of the global elite from their humble golden elevator." (@matthaig1, Twitter November 13 2016).

The key contradiction that the majority of these comic memes and tweets highlighted was that of, on the one hand, being obviously, flamboyantly, immensely rich, and energetically continuing to increase your personal fortune, whilst on the other hand purporting to speak for the oppressed masses. Both the image and criticisms of it provoke a crucial question: how has it come to be possible that such incredibly wealthy people are able to pass as representative, as 'sticking up for ordinary people', when they're very clearly in a completely different income bracket -- in the case of most of them, obscenely wealthy – and are, in fact, actively siphoning off wealth from the rest of the population?

The title of this article indicates that I read these men as ‘normcore plutocrats’, which is a term I developed to describe how sections of the ultra-wealthy attempt to maintain and increase their power and wealth by *performing ordinariness* (Littler 2018).¹ This article analyses the cultural politics of these specific normcore plutocrats in relation to these images that frame them. It does so by discussing the material entanglements of these men and their political investments; the multifaceted, gold-plated, context of the Trump tower lift; the use of narratives of meritocracy; and the work of these political images in the era of social media reproduction.

In the process it aims to expand the current interest in elites (e.g. Savage 2008; Davis 2018) by returning to an earlier historical technique in cultural studies and theory of reading the cultural politics of an image in wide circulation. These include, for example, how Roland Barthes read the racialised politics of French nationalism through a *Paris Match* cover; how Stuart Hall read the liberal humanist ‘social eye’ of the magazine *Picture Post*; and how Richard Dyer picked apart the meaning of a photograph of Jane Fonda in relation to the politics of sexuality and peace (Hall 1972; Barthes 1957; Dyer 1979). As Gillian Rose put it, ‘images are embedded in the social world and are only comprehensible when that embedding is taken into account’ (Rose 2003: xvii). This article is influenced by this tradition, returning to its core structural method of picking apart the cultural politics of a media image; whilst at the same time parlaying more recent work on digital image flows, and relating both to the contemporary neoliberal politics of ‘the corpocracy’, in which the interests of corporate power attempts to colonise and dominate the social.

The lift in the tower

The ‘backdrop’ in the Trump Tower photographs is less of a backdrop than a foreground. Its gold hues, from ceiling to floor, drip ostentatious wealth, besides which the men joyously position themselves. It radiates not only luxury, a continually ‘animating force of modern capitalism’ (Armitage and Roberts 2016: 13) but excessive wealth. As Naomi Klein so memorably puts it, ‘the Trump brand stands for wealth itself – or, to put it more crassly, money. That’s why its aesthetics are Dynasty-meets-Louis XIV.’ (Klein 2017: 32)

Analysing the material context of the lift itself tells us more about the cultural politics of this moment. It is situated in Trump Tower, which was constructed by Donald Trump on the site of a former department store, Bonwit Teller, after he bought it in 1979. Trump had wanted to own and build on the site for years. Bonwit Teller had a spectacular art deco entrance outside the building with a ‘stupendously luxurious mix of limestone, bronze, platinum and hammered aluminium’ (Gray 2014). Its 15 foot tall limestone relief panels depicted nude women in art deco style, alongside stained glass and large metal grillwork. The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) wanted to have them both as significant works of art in its collection; and Trump promised them they could have them. But the MOMA representative arrived in 1980 at the Bonwit Teller building to find the limestone relief panels had been jackhammered into bits. The large metal grille had been lost, claimed spokesperson ‘John Barron’, a recurring figure who was later revealed (by Trump) to be Trump himself, posing as his own assistant. ‘Barron’ argued that his ‘independent valuation’ had revealed the artistic

¹ Of course, the super-rich presenting themselves as ‘normal’ also has a longer history, as I discuss elsewhere (Littler 2018).

pieces to have no merit; and that besides, it would have held up production and cost Trump \$500,000 (Gray 2014). MOMA, the designer of the grillwork and numerous cultural commentators condemned the destruction of these artefacts, which made front page news in 1980 (McFadden 1980a, 1980b). If destroying these artefacts not only indicated Trump's violent disregard for existing cultural institutions and social history, and brazen ability to fake truth, it also demonstrated his fundamental aggression towards anything standing in the way of his plans to construct 'his own' luxury aesthetic and expand his own capital.

Most skyscrapers at that time were built with steel. Trump, unusually, chose to use ready mix concrete; an industry which, contrary to its earlier history had by this time built up a strong union membership (Forty 2012: 227). Large sections of the industry were also under mafia control, which had been subject to a concerted government investigation. Several investigative reporters have repeatedly alleged that Trump, at this time, had close connections with the mafia, and that he met with mob leaders. When workers in the concrete industry went on strike in 1982 over their pay and conditions (as ready-mix set so quickly, unions had a lever for power) the concrete construction at Trump Tower kept flowing. The building, in other words, was built whilst helping bust union activity and boost mob power. Two people also died in separate incidents during its construction, and 200 undocumented Polish labourers -- some of whom actually lived on site -- were paid extremely low wages. A subsequent and extremely long-running lawsuit (during which 'John Barron' threatened labour lawyers on the phone) ended in the contractor repaying the workers and, as was later revealed in 2017, Trump being forced to pay out \$1.375million (Bagli 2017).

In his business autobiography *The Art of the Deal*, Trump devotes page after page to Trump Tower. He writes, for instance, about how, in the construction of Trump Tower, he wanted to attract not 'the sort of person who inherited money 175 years ago' but 'the wealthy Italian with the beautiful wife and the red Ferrari' (Trump 1986: 55-6). It is a particular kind of 1980s dream, of chauvinistic masculinity, new money and overtly phallic symbolism. In *The Art of the Deal* Trump expresses disdain for co-operative housing and rent controls in New York, and writes of how he rejected his father's tips on saving money in construction, instead taking after his mother's sense of showmanship, her 'flair for the dramatic and grand' (Trump 1986: 55-6; 182; 79-80). His continual framing of the tower as 'awesome' and as a 'great success' for him is childlike and narcissistic in its bragging individualism. All that matters is 'winning': showing what a great success your personal brand is, how it is the richest and biggest and best, how an individual has achieved ownership: ownership of money, of power over other people, and particularly over women.

The Trump Tower building is missing several floors. Trump omitted 10 floor numbers, fudging the figures with the rationale that some of the ceilings are high (Green 2016). Such a profoundly loose connection with the truth resonates with Trump's subsequent penchant for 'alternative facts'. The building was constructed at the beginnings of the political experiments with neoliberalism in practice in New York. The city had been known for pursuing social democracy through its services and housing, but in the mid-1970s dramatic and austere cutbacks in federal and state funding, combined with a recession, meant that New York nearly became bankrupt (Harvey 2007: 45-7). As Naomi Klein puts it, this crisis was used to push through a 'shock doctrine' expanding corporate power: 'under cover of crisis came a wave of brutal austerity, sweetheart deals to the rich, and privatizations' (Klein 2017: 142). Dramatic underfunding and deregulation was used to push through tax breaks for corporations and increase corporate power at the expense of citizens. Trump worked with his close friends in powerful positions to extract outlandishly favourable terms for the purchase

of Trump Tower. With a \$9.5million downpayment, he would sell it for a dollar to the Urban Development corporation, who would in turn lease it back to him for 4 decades at an extremely low rate. It is estimated that this tax break windfall was worth \$360 million by 2017 (Klein 2017: 142).

The phenomenally favourable terms of the deal (to Trump) was in part permitted because a section of Trump Tower provides privately owned ‘public space’ (POPUS): it includes shops and flats as well as Trump’s own offices and apartments. In this sense it is connected to a wider trend in the expansion of privatised ‘public’ space: space that is ostensibly public but which is owned and controlled by private interests, which geographers including Saskia Sassen, David Harvey and Doreen Massey have warned about for decades (e.g. Sassen 2015; Harvey 2013; Massey 2007). To make this understandable; people can enter as consumers to shop, but any noisy protest against Trump is not acceptable, and protestors have been blocked by security and police (Gabbat 2017).²

Since Trump’s election, a C-Span TV channel has been devoted to screening what is happening in the lobby: who is entering and leaving, who is getting in the lift, who has access to the ‘White House North’, so-called in part due to Donald and Melania Trump’s apparent reluctance to leave it, post-inauguration, to go and live in Washington DC. After the election the foyer became a privatised, wealth-flaunting media space in which the emergent celebrity presidency was to be staged. The most notorious example was when pop star Kanye West, widely known to be suffering from mental health problems, and who had struggled with opioid addiction, turned up to visit Trump. As Ta-Nehisi Coates diagnoses in his astute essay linking Kanye, the destructive individualism of celebrity, and internalised racism, ‘it was a drugged-out West who appeared in that lobby, dead-eyed and blond-haired’ (Coates 2018), desperately seeking the ‘free’ white power that Trump appeared to represent.

The men in the photograph

Both the image of Trump and Farage, and the photograph of Trump, Farage, Banks, Gunster, Kassam and Wigmore taken shortly after it, indicate the tangled web of relationships between corporate and media capital, between the alt-right social media site Breitbart, pollsters Goddard Gunster and the data mining marketeers Cambridge Analytica, and between Trump’s celebrity and the businessmen who wanted Britain out of the EU so it could be used as a deregulated site for corporate exploitation and as a corporate tax haven.

The second photo depicts a variety of men instrumental in the Leave.EU campaign. Standing on the other side of Donald Trump is Arron Banks, the UKIP donor who largely bankrolled the Leave.EU campaign. To the left of him is Gerry Gunster, the American pollster who helped win it. Andy Wigmore, the communications director of Leave.EU, has one arm around Nigel Farage, and another around Raheem Kassam, the editor-in-chief of *Breitbart News London* as well as a former UKIP leadership candidate and adviser to Farage. Together they have used chaos and strategy, and strategic chaos, to extend and deepen right-wing political power (Grossberg 2018).

² One man, Jeff Bergman, does however protest weekly inside Trump Tower in modest and acceptable fashion by reading aloud literature, speeches and editorials. (Helmore 2017)

There are many stories it is possible to tell about the men in this image. One is that they embody the rise of financialisation. Arron Banks amassed his fortune working in the financial sector, including Lloyds of London and insurance companies such as the online company GoSkippy.com, and has set up 37 different companies using different variations of his name. In 2017 his wealth was estimated at £250 million (*Economist*, 2017). Nigel Farage worked as a commodities trader in the City of London. Raheem Kassam also briefly worked for the financial services and investment bank Lehman Brothers before it went bankrupt. Both Farage and Banks came from affluent, private school backgrounds; wealthy, though nowhere near as wealthy as Trump, who was given millions by his father, the real estate mogul Fred Trump. Financialisation has involved an increase in gambling and speculation on financial trading, and is an industry which has lobbied for looser regulations on commercial companies and less public sector spending and security. It has risen into ascendancy over the past few decades alongside and in fusion with an aggressive corporate culture that promotes a *rentier* economy (in which income like rent, interest or capital gains is garnered from pre-existing assets) and asset stripping – landing in institutions, selling off assets and moving onto the next company (Sayer 2016; Lapavistas 2013, Piketty 2013, Meek 2014). It is perhaps not completely unrelated that Arron Banks was once expelled for stripping out and selling the lead from the roof of his boarding school (Fletcher 2016).

Of course, as any critical theorist knows, what is left out of the picture is just as important as what is in it. A key figure not in the picture but uniting all of them is Robert Mercer, a former computer scientist who gained his wealth through hedge funds, who was a major donor to both Trump and Farage. Mercer gave Farage the services of Cambridge Analytica, which harvested data from over 50 million people without them realising it on Facebook, campaigned for *Breitbart's* Steve Bannon to take a prominent role in the White House, and whose Managing Director and Chief Executive were later exposed and filmed in an undercover Channel 4 news operation boasting of manipulating voters, buying candidates and creating fake information on websites in democracies throughout the world (Channel 4 News 2018). The traffic between the UK and the US mainstream/renegade political right wing and the forms of expertise they lend and trade each other radiates out of both images; not least in the lapel pin Farage wears, where a Union Jack and Stars and Stripes flags are intertwined. The firm Gerry Gunster runs, Goddard Gunster, was paid by Arron Banks to run the Leave.EU campaign. Goddard Gunster specialises in referendums (claiming ‘a 90% success rate’), having defeated proposals for a tax on large sugary drinks in New York and plastic deposit bottles; in other words, specifically campaigning against measures to tackle environmental degradation and obesity. The firm also worked for Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s for his political and economic reforms (Reuters 2015), which instigated mass privatisation and enabled Russian oligarchs to vastly expand their wealth (Klein 2012: 218-262). By May 2018 Leave.EU had been fined by the UK Electoral Commission, and its chief executive reported to the police, for breaking multiple counts of electoral law during the EU referendum (Weaver and Waterson 2018). The picture of these men together is testament to this intertwined nexus of capital, political, digital and media power and corruption.

An important component of this nexus interconnecting the men in the lift is their relationship to imperialism and racism. Donald Trump’s political pronouncements and behaviour, whilst erratic, have notoriously supported the racist views of the ‘alt-right’. He has called Mexicans ‘rapists’ and promised that he will build a wall between the US and Mexico. Such racism is built out of white North American imperial superiority over the rest of the Americas. Its overt imperialism was echoed, in a different register, by many of the leading proponents of Brexit. In the Leave.EU campaign, a similarly reactionary imperialist nostalgia -- what Paul Gilroy

accurately termed, over a decade ago, ‘postcolonial melancholia’ (Gilroy 2004) -- was energised and vitalised through pronouncements that Brexit would make Britain great again. Notably, many of the Brexit boys had expat childhoods: Arron Banks’ father made his money through the residues of imperialism, working on a variety of sugar estates across several African countries including Kenya and Somalia; Banks himself has invested in South African diamond mines (Fletcher 2016). The political framing of their Leave.EU campaign for Brexit was wrapped in overt nationalism, perpetuating and reactivating a muscular love for ‘imperial greatness’. As Gary Younge put it, Brexit was produced by Britain’s delusions of its colonial role: ‘Our colonial past, and the inability to come to terms with its demise, gave many the impression that we are far bigger, stronger and more influential than we really are’ (Younge 2018).

The presence of Raheem Kassam in this context, alongside men well known for endorsing racist groups and sentiments, stands out, for his is the only non-white face. Kassam, a Londoner and an atheist, was a member of the Conservative party who flirted with the far-right anti-Islam group Pegida before arriving in UKIP. Kassam takes part in a pattern whereby a handful of non-white UKIP members are foregrounded to try to show ‘anti-racist’ nationalistic credentials. He currently appears on his Twitter feed wearing a suit made of Union Jack fabric. In interviews he talks – using the same trope that people from the centre to the right of the political spectrum have deployed for a long time – about being ‘beyond ideology’ (Hayward 2016; Littler 2017). The right wing politics, the nationalism, are fused with a sense of breaking beyond the norm, of shattering the normal rules of the political game; it participates in a fantasy that they are beyond ideology, and, like trolling, that it is just a game of poking the powerful, where ethics and feelings don’t matter (Phillips 2016; Littler 2018). Kassam’s career took off when he started supporting extreme immigration controls and making spectacular statements against Islam and Palestine (Walker 2016). This projection of ‘difference’ and anti-politics (Glaser 2018) has been key to the ‘offer’ of Brexit and Trump. The people in the lift, to borrow the title of Aeron Davis’s book, are ‘reckless opportunists’ (Davis 2018); they reject ‘the establishment’ and pander to people’s feelings of rejection in the interests of their own massive material gain and self-promotion.

What also unites these men, besides their love of far right politics and corporate power, is their gender -- it is, after all, only men in the lift -- and the specific mode of their masculinity. Andy Wigmore, the communications director of Leave.EU, took the Trump & Farage photo and who appears himself in the second photo. Wigmore likes to describe this gang on social media as ‘the bad boys of Brexit’ and ‘The Brex Pistols’.³ Such self-styling attempts to capture something of the symbolism of punk and of renegade outlaws for wealthy white middle-aged men. It carries with it more than a whiff of ‘the new lad’: of ostensibly joking around when styling themselves as renegade and hedonistic, compacting themselves together in a tightly knit brotherhood of masculinity and repeated misogyny, seeking to restore a lost masculine power through aggressive talk towards women. The idea that we are ‘postracism’ or ‘postfeminism’, so endemic in the 1990s and 2000s, was shattered as increased votes for Trump and UKIP activated and reactivated racism, xenophobia and sexism, with all the destructive and vicious power that entailed (Hochschild 2016). Raheem Kassam posted a tweet in June 2016 suggesting the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, should have ‘her mouth taped up. And her legs, so she can’t reproduce’. (Oppenheim 2016).

³ Wigmore has a more elusive background than the others, although it is widely reported that he has won medals for shooting and has represented Belize in sporting competitions.

An elevator is an enclosed space. Donald Trump has notoriously been accused of sexual harassment by more than a dozen women (Gray 2017). One such woman was Stacia Robataille, who a year after this photo was taken, tweeted

I was once on an elevator alone with @realDonaldTrump (and a man w/him) at Madison Square Gardens. He was aggressive & told me I was coming home with him. I laughed, stating I was married to a Ranger. He guaranteed me my husband didn't make as much money as him. #ThisIsOurPresident (@staciaRR 11 December 2017).

The aggressive assumptions of firstly, ownership of women, and secondly, the assumption that a woman he wanted would simply become sexually aroused by the mere mention of him earning more money than her husband (a wealthy hockey star) stands out in this account. It foregrounds a patently misogynistic and mercenary value system. It recalls the notorious leaked recording from 2005 in which Trump was heard bragging to Billy Bush of grabbing women 'by the pussy'. Proposing that women 'love it', he was not at all ashamed of, but rather actively endorsing such behaviour; even if the celebration itself was under the radar and the recording was secret, it was laddishly explained away by his publicists as 'locker-room banter'. Like so much of these actions, it is not generally acceptable, but his behaviour works to attempt to *make* it so, to shift the codes of normality and the norms of acceptability to the right.

The lift not the ladder: hypermeritocracy

We use cultural stories to narrate our lives: of what is ordinary, of how people do and should live. One of these is the story that says *people need to be given the chance to work hard in order to activate their talent to rise up and climb the ladder of success*. This is the narrative of meritocracy, which has been used as a key cultural means of legitimation for contemporary capitalism --- a neoliberal narrative which promises opportunity whilst creating new forms of social division (Littler 2018).

Such narratives of neoliberal meritocracy are implicitly at work here, in the affective registers; they look surprised and ecstatic to be here, not statesmanlike. Their deportment says, these guys made it! The ordinary blokes made it not just up the ladder, but into the gold plated lift! The garnering of such extreme plutocratic wealth is what Thomas Piketty calls *hypermeritocracy* (Piketty 2013: 265). The vast majority of these men were extremely wealthy to begin with, and all of them gained their money through forms of exploitation. But the lift photo presents them as lads who have made it and who are enjoying a good time.

We might read their expressions as saying, we weren't supposed to be here! - in these positions of political power. They are 'not supposed to be there' in more ways than one. They aren't supposed to be there because they are not actually dealing with the issues they purport to be (such as helping the NHS) despite ventriloquising them: in fact the contrary, as their actual policies (e.g. privatization) breaks the pledges they stand for.⁴ They also aren't supposed to be there because decades of technocratic neoliberalism, in which political

⁴ Leave.EU deployed a large red promotional 'Brexit bus', for example stating that £350 million of extra money would go to the NHS if Britain left the EU. The figure that the UK pays to the EU after rebates is around half of this; the cost of Brexit is vast (their political rivals suggest £2, 000 million per week) although it is its very unknowability allow such claims to be made; and crucially those involved in Leave.EU are of the political tendency that urges privatisation of the NHS

machines become more divorced from the grassroots, via ‘partyless democracy’ and ‘post-democracy’, has seen candidates parachute into roles by a managerial centre of political machinery (Mair 2000, Crouch 2004). It is the slippage between these reasons why they ‘weren’t supposed to be there’ that *enable* them to be there. Farage and Trump have notoriously framed themselves as breaking with the elitism of an existing liberal settlement, with the status quo. To do this they have used racism, xenophobia and sexism to ‘say the unsayable’; to appear that they are breaking the smooth surface of party politics, appearing to offer a radical change and actual power. Voting for them parlayed desires from people left behind through years of neoliberal economic precarity; areas that voted for Brexit, for instance, are also projected to be the areas with most to lose from it; voters often talked of wanting ‘something different to happen’, which UKIP seemed to offer (Barnett 2017). There were pronounced commonalities as well as differences between the reasons for Brexit and the result of the 2016 US election; the most enthusiastic Trump supporters came from wealthy white people, and the largest proportion of pro-Brexit voters were white, affluent voters from the South of England (Ashcroft 2016). Even though the white working class vote was higher for Trump than Clinton, the overall number of working-class voters fell (Grossberg 2018). This is indicative of the extent to which Hilary Clinton was synonymous with a neoliberal status quo since the 1980s, in which US production has been decimated and living standards for the working and lower middle classes have markedly fallen (Younge 2018). Similarly the working-class Leave vote in the UK was high, although not as high as amongst the affluent (Ashcroft 2016; Barnett 2017; Dorling et al 2016).

The cultural pull of contemporary meritocratic discourse is one explanation of why we are in political grip of these brutal billionaires. As I have explored elsewhere, (Littler 2018) these incredibly wealthy men present themselves as everyday, as ‘normcore’, and as deserved achievers or meritocrats, in a number of affective ways. Despite being members of an extremely rich elite they continually frame themselves as hardworking and savvy, projecting images of being ‘deserving grafters’, in the process extrapolating a whiff of working-class culture and sticking this onto their overprivileged selves. Farage and Trump have placed himself and his party in the rhetorical position of the exploited, stoking hatred toward ‘elites’ and immigrants in the process. (Frank 2012: 44). Trump literally broke the established art deco design cultural capital of the Bonwit Teller grillwork, replacing it with shiny glass and gold that connoted ‘new’ money.

Simultaneously, Trump’s projection of himself as a brand becomes positioned as a skill to admire in an era when, as Alison Hearn points out, ‘most people must now assiduously self-promote and hustle in order to find or protect their jobs’; it becomes ‘all the qualification he needs to become president (Hearn 2016: 656). This means that, as Naomi Klein argues, scandals aren’t sticking to Trump because

he didn’t just enter politics as a so-called outsider’ but , somebody who doesn’t play by the rules. He entered politics playing by a completely different set of rules -- the rules of branding. According to these rules, you don’t need to be objectively good or decent. (Klein 2017: 33)

The entrepreneurial self-branding combines with what Wendy Brown calls the ‘libertarian authoritarianism’ of Trump: the wild and aggressive Frankenstein monster spawned by neoliberalism (2018) promoting aggressive nationalism and corporate marketisation. This sedimented logic is what is ‘made’ when Trump, and Farage, present the image of having ‘made it’.

The image and its afterlives

The images are not selfies or ‘groupies’; there is no besuited arm bending out to the camera from the group. But neither is it an institutional or professionally produced shot. It is personal photography: it is of a genre which connotes close relationships and emotional moments. Trump has his thumbs-up in both photos; he does not wear a tie. These are friends in the lift, sharing their glee, presenting their togetherness, their winning moment against a symbolic backdrop of glittering gold. The ‘private-public’ nature of the image is accentuated by being initially shared on social media, as part of Farage’s Twitter feed. In an era of ‘ubiquitous photography’, we are surrounded by what Martin Hand calls ‘the visual publicization of ordinary life in a ubiquitous photoscape’ (Hand 2012: 1). Both of these images work by generating the sense that they are part of such ‘ordinary’ ubiquity, just as celebrities generate a sense of ordinary intimacy through their Twitter and Instagram feeds. When anyone can be what Terri Senft calls a ‘microcelebrity’ (Senft 2008) the larger celebrity using social media imaging is simultaneously rendered ‘ordinary’ and intimate through it. Trump and Farage use these technologies with bombastic effectiveness.

These images are then ‘networked within a range of globally connected flows of communication (Hand 2012: 1), but they also have a privileged status within these networks. By virtue of the political and celebrity status of who is depicted in and who is posting the images they obviously become of considerable public interest. The photograph marks the other men’s closeness to the new centre of power that is President Donald Trump, proves their political proximity, and attempts to mediate what Trump will ‘be like’ as President to the world. Farage wrote below the image ‘It was a great honour to spend time with @realDonaldTrump. He was relaxed and full of good ideas. I’m confident he will be a good President’. Their manipulation of the image and its materiality and meaning extends to purporting their own compassion: Andy Wigmore pronounced in interview that he had donated his half of the profits from the Trump & Farage photo sales to the Royal Commonwealth Society (Cooper 2016), again reinforcing the attempt to elide ‘greatness’ with imperialism.

These images of normcore plutocrats are therefore used to attempt to accrue more cultural power in what is now a ‘fragmented, deregulated, interactive and increasingly factionalized mediascape’ (Ouellette and Banet-Weiser 2018: 4). The use of the ‘ordinary’ and ‘direct’ social media channels, a personalised message from Farage and its trappings of a family snap frames these plutocrats as everyday beings who are surprised to inhabit such splendour. The affective awkwardness works by inviting its viewer, who is quite likely not to inhabit such wealth, into seeing that it might be possible for sites of power and privilege to be occupied by people who don’t seem ‘used to it’; their awkwardness and informal glee displacing the actual fact of the subjects’ vast financial privileges. This is a populist invitation. As Paolo Gerbaudo notes, there is an ‘elective affinity between populism and social media’, an affinity mobilised by both right and left, to reactionary and progressive ends (Gerbaudo 2018). The dominance of corporate media monopolies and the failure to regulate them are a key reason for the rise and expansion of the power of right-wing populism (Fuchs 2018: 9).

Yet the image was also widely parodied and mocked. It was ridiculed through captions. ‘Trump and Farage in a gold elevator. Laughing. At You’ wrote @isolatedBrit (10 January 2017). ‘Men of the people Nigel Farage and Donald Trump pose in golden elevator. Take that, global elites!’ lambasted an article in the digital media /marketing industry website

Mashable (Wagstaff 2016), a sentiment repeated with slight modifications in a wide range of similar tweets. And its visual and material excess was scorned by identifying what it shared with the fascist aesthetic of the Hitler and the Third Reich. The author Robert Harris tweeted an image of Hitler's golden elevator the subsequent day, a tweet which was shared 3.9K times, with the caption 'This was Hitler's elevator at the Berghof to the Eagle's Nest. Just saying' (@Robert_Harris 13 November 2016). The work of rejecting, belittling, explaining and lambasting the image is simultaneously but one, and one significant, part of an oppositional and alternative politics.

The photographs in the elevator at Trump Tower propose flamboyant material wealth of corporate plutocrats as the ultimate triumph and show how social and cultural codes of 'ordinariness' have been used and abused to achieve it. Borrowing from social media's tropes of everyday microcelebrity, and blending them into a spectacle of startling success, the image frames this story as one which is not so much about climbing the social ladder to the top as taking a privatised gilt-encrusted express lift. In the process the inequalities that narratives of meritocracy obscure, through their cultural codes of 'everyone having the opportunity to make it, if only they try hard enough', are spectacularly elided to a far greater extent than in living memory. The material history of the lift itself -- built through the exploited labour of workmen, built on a site in which two people died in construction, built through the corporate leverage of money from public funds, coded as 'public' space policed by the private realm -- reveals so very much about the value system of the men contained in it. The image signifies and materialises a power grab: of visual time, of material resources, of people's labour and lives and futures; and the men in the lift are laughing at the audacity of having pulled this feat off, so far.

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