

The Trump carnival: Popular appeal in the age of misinformation

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Abstract

This article argues that a Russian analytical paradigm of carnival culture can help explain the successful presidential campaign of President Donald J. Trump. Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin developed the notion of carnival culture while analyzing Francois Rabelais' work and its connection to the popular culture of Renaissance. Carnival ethos stood in opposition to the 'official' and 'serious' church sanctioned and feudal culture, by bringing out folklore and different forms of folk laughter that Bakhtin denoted as carnival. Carnival culture with its opposition to the official buttoned-up discourse is supposed to be polar opposite, distinguished by anti-ideology and anti-authority, in other words, anti-establishment – the foundation of Trump's appeal to his voters. This article examines the core characteristics of carnival culture that defined Trump's presidential campaign from the start.

Keywords

Bakhtin, gender, misinformation, presidential campaign, social networks, Trump

Introduction

In the aftermath of Donald Trump's presidential election victory, considerable blame was passed around by pundits and politicians alike,¹ wondering how the Republican nominee managed to secure the presidency. Facebook, the Democratic National Committee, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), gerrymandering, and angry white men appeared among the suspects, while numerous voices blamed Russian hackers and Putin personally for interfering with the elections in Trump's favor.² This article argues that it is a Russian analytical paradigm that can help explain the 'blue-collar billionaire's' success.

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Even though his work has been applied to International Relations theory,³ Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of carnival culture is another fruitful avenue to analyze the success of the 'populist Zeitgeist'.⁴ Unlike most approaches that single out one specific factor, such as economic inequality or the role of mass media, or rationalize Donald Trump's presidency post factum as a Black Swan event,⁵ carnival provides a holistic theoretical framework that includes a range of structural factors.

Bakhtin developed the concept of carnival while analyzing François Rabelais's work and its connection to the popular laughing culture of the Renaissance.⁶ Carnival culture's idea of 'transgression of cultural norms and values by subaltern groups, [is] the ideal critical tool for approaching all kinds of social and material interactions'.⁷ Even though Donald Trump, as a white, straight, rich male could hardly be seen as a subaltern voice, he nevertheless managed to galvanize a substantial amount of support among the American population, in marketing himself as an anti-establishment figure, that is, a subaltern voice, by using elements of the carnival culture.

The carnival ethos stood in opposition to the 'official' and 'serious' church sanctioned and feudal culture, by bringing out folklore and different forms of folk laughter that Bakhtin calls carnival. This type of culture challenges the official buttoned-up discourse and is characterized by coarseness and vulgarity and is distinguished by its anti-ideology and anti-authority themes, in other words, anti-establishment. This article is not the first attempt to apply Bakhtin's framework to the study of politics and Donald Trump is not the first 'carnival fool' to succeed in politics:⁸ one of the most prominent examples is Beppe Grillo, an Italian comedian and blogger who managed to launch a very successful political career. Edelman⁹ noted that carnivalesque elements can penetrate political discourse via outsider candidates or, at least, via the candidates who style themselves as such. James Janack¹⁰ studied Russia's own Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (a Russian version of Trump, according to late night comedienne Samantha Bee), as well as Jesse Ventura's successful campaign for the governorship in Minnesota, in large part due to his 'carnival fool's role of protesting against the prevailing political system'.¹¹ While Fetissenko¹² offered a critique to this theoretical framework, as the 'spectacle of democratic elections as a whole and the ritualized courtship of campaign events in particular [are] examples of carnival', this article argues that the Trump campaign went far beyond just 'familiar contact' with voters and encompassed many more carnivalesque elements.

As Çelikkol¹³ notes, carnival elements are ubiquitous in movements of dissent. As Trump's campaign took up the anti-establishment battle-cry, it came to epitomize dissent as a means of rallying voters against his opponent, who was portrayed as mainstream and experienced – part of the 'Washington DC swamp'.¹⁴ At the same time, Hoy¹⁵ mentioned that carnival's potential for political rebellion is limited – but that could also be inferred from Bakhtin as well, as carnival by its nature is a temporary phenomenon, of which its participants are well aware.¹⁶ In Trump's case, this temporality was particularly well taken up by his electorate: his supporters consistently stated that Trump's most outlandish statements and actions were not for real, and that he would be a different, 'more presidential' person when in office.¹⁷

The age of misinformation presented Trump with a unique opportunity to leverage the power of social networks to his advantage.¹⁸ Even though the role of mass media in populist ascent to power was underlined a great deal ahead of Facebook or Twitter,¹⁹

multidirectional discourse, a hallmark of carnival culture that does not necessarily distinguish between fact, opinion or even feelings, created an atmosphere where carnival replaced normal politics. This article traces the carnivalization of US politics using the example of the Trump presidential campaign. First, the article will outline the main features of carnival culture, stressing its relevance to modern politics. Second, it will show how these features were reflected in the Trump presidential bid and whether they were adopted by his electorate. Finally, the article will conclude with the potential implications for employing carnival 'tricks' in political campaigning.

What is carnival?

As mentioned above, the carnival culture emerged as an antithesis to the serious culture that was appropriate for a world imbued with religious and social doctrine. Renaissance folk, just like modern people, needed an outlet for their non-serious feelings and discourse and the Church allocated a time for folly for about 3 months each year.²⁰ Carnival in its essence is a total reversal of the 'real life': it allows for a short period of time to experience the freedom an individual is usually deprived of and build a second identity in a second world. In a sense, the notion of carnival is very close to the postmodern understanding of the world with its subversion and re-interpretation.²¹ It is also close to the notion of simulacra:²² a person within the carnival culture is defined by what they seem to be, not by what they are. Moreover, carnival culture can also be conceived of as a culture of resistance or counter-culture.²³

As several scholars have noted, carnival can also be perceived as a perfect vehicle for a post-colonial understanding of the subaltern's voice,²⁴ 'with its attention focused on the micro-politics of sanctioned and undermining cultural norms, licit and illicit language, spoken and unspoken (but performed) utterance'.²⁵ Perceptions of subalternity can vary among different populations,²⁶ thus even white voters can perceive themselves as disenfranchised and having insufficient access to modes of representation.²⁷ Even though carnival culture reverses conventional hierarchy and puts everything on its head, it still works to maintain the status quo because of its inherent temporality. Here, however, lies its danger: a temporary rule suspension originally was supposed to reinforce the existing normative order, but a long-lasting carnival can have disastrous consequences for a political community.

The specific characteristics of carnival culture stem from the anti-hierarchical push of popular culture against the official. It is also intrinsically anti-elitist, which also makes it a populist phenomenon.²⁸ While there are numerous definitions of populism, what most scholars agree on is that populist movements juxtapose the 'pure people' against the 'corrupt elite',²⁹ which makes the carnival framework analysis especially poignant in the light of the current 'populist Zeitgeist'. Even if it is supposed to be short lived, carnival is a power transfer to 'the people' from the established ruler.³⁰ It is supposed to assuage the discontent in the population by creating an *illusion* of power of the masses and that it also makes carnival very suitable for analysis of the Trump campaign given that his persona is a quintessential simulacrum of a 'popular' candidate.

Moreover, given its anti-elite nature carnival allows for 'low culture' to come to the high world (of politics), wherein all people are also allowed to curse and swear without

societal sanction. The swearing part is common among carnival fools that have entered politics before: it is worth mentioning that Beppe Grillo founded a Vaffanculo-Day (fuck off day) abbreviated as V-Day, which despite its obscene name served a genuine political purpose in mobilizing support for popular legal initiatives. Another ‘carnival fool’ Zhirinovskiy is famous for calling his female Parliament colleagues ‘bitches’, which also reflects a tendency for coarse and vulgar language (*ploshchadnyi* in Bakhtin’s native Russian). Carnival embodies a type of interaction unthinkable and impossible in real life, with no class or income distinction. Carnival culture can thus be seen as a critique of the concept of *habitus*³¹ or at least as a counterpoint to the notion of ‘civilizing’ (*Zivilisierung*) in post-medieval Europe that seemingly internalized ‘self-restraint’ and increased the threshold for shame.³²

The laughing culture of carnival is also ambivalent. It is not an individual reaction, it could be interpreted as a mass emotional contagion that is not reflexive and spreads quickly through crowds.³³ “‘Official’ authority is subverted most of all by laughter, a current of slippery ambivalence”.³⁴ Jesters or tricksters who are allowed to speak their mind regardless of subordination are a good example of the way carnival works. Full names are replaced by nicknames, there is a high degree of familiarity: you can slap each other on the shoulder, or even on the stomach.³⁵ This also appealed to the inherent intimacy of carnival interactions: carnival participants are on a friendly footing with each other regardless of their social standing.³⁶ Moreover, the town square and streets bring the population together in one location, which also shrinks the spatial continuum.

Given that carnival is an antithesis of normal, highly religious Renaissance life, the former is also fascinated with the material part of existence. Hence, people obsess with body parts, bodily functions, sex, and material objects, which define participants during carnival. Jesse Ventura’s wrestling nickname ‘the body’ is all too literal of an example, and in an interview with Playboy he also mentioned that he would like to reincarnate as a 38 double-D bra. While Foucault discussed the ‘body of sovereign’ and the medieval and late medieval practices of public execution that was supposed to harm the criminal’s body as much as he harmed the state – the ‘body of the sovereign’³⁷ – carnival equalizes the bodies of all participants and brings the shamed and forbidden practices and body parts to the fore.

Another inextricable part of the material carnivalesque existence is food.³⁸ Bakhtin noted, ‘this material and bodily substrate of the grotesque image (food, wine, productive power, organs of the body) is profoundly positive’. Thus, the material and bodily substance prevails, because in the end the excess is more important. Food as well as other elements is supposed to be present in the excessive, grotesque way: it is the food that is supposed to be gorged on, consumed without regard to the future. It is important to note that food has significant religious connotations (e.g. sacraments), but is also associated with ‘guilty pleasures’ and the perception of gluttony as a sin.³⁹ That is why it was also bound to become a significant part of the carnival culture: as a sacrament, it had to be reversed into the material culture of gluttony and pleasure normally condemned outside of the carnival culture. Politicians consuming certain types of food is an important part of the political spectacle⁴⁰ that can sometimes conversely even damage a political career as Ed Miliband’s bacon sandwich eating photos proved.

An enemy in carnival culture is an enemy of the carnival square freedom,⁴¹ but enmification also includes an element of demonization, whereby 'a marginalized group is degraded so as to restore specifically the core values that mainstreamers hold'.⁴² Moreover, an enemy, in carnival culture often symbolized by a pig, is a focus of 'displaced abjection', that is, when socially 'low' groups focus their anger not against someone in authority, but someone who is hierarchically even lower.⁴³ Thus, the pig also served as the symbolic analogy of scapegoated groups and demonized 'Others' and, in Medieval tradition, primarily Jews.⁴⁴ The carnival tradition of burning or hanging an effigy (in earlier carnivalesque traditions even killing the mock-king) is the conclusive act of achieving social inversion.⁴⁵ It is notable, however, that the real subaltern in the context of carnival remains subaltern. The folk that reverses the hierarchy with the elite still preserves certain social groups on the very bottom of the social ladder who remain there through carnival practices of abuse. In other words, even in a carnival reversal, certain groups do not get to the top of the hierarchy ladder and that had clear implications for the Trump campaign. While it looked like it was 'the people' who take control of the government, in the end the power remained in the hands of the same Wall Street or Washington elite.

The game element is also inherently present in the carnival culture where everyone is supposed to participate in the rituals, including the elections of the mock-king,⁴⁶ which also serves to emphasize carnival's anti-ideology and anti-hierarchy (democratic) constellation. Carnival's game element is also significant when one takes into consideration the growing literature on the importance of gamification in life⁴⁷ and politics.⁴⁸ Another feature of carnival is its ritualistic nature that relies on certain tropes and practices that are repeated on a regular basis. Carnival participants are perfectly aware of what they are in for, because despite its perceived lawlessness, carnival period follows a very clear pattern, including its very strictly delineated and anticipated end. Thus, carnival participants are also grounded both discursively and practically in the existing carnivalesque features. In that regard, when Trump tried to 'channel' Nixon (the forgotten majority) and Reagan (Make America Great Again), it can be interpreted as him trying to fit within the existing political rhetoric that would have both conservative and far-right appeal. Thus, despite him being a carnivalesque candidate, he still followed a certain set of (discursive) rules that exist even in such a setting as carnival.

Moreover, in the so-called post-truth world,⁴⁹ the multidirectional discourse takes center stage. As Elliot noted:

The function of 'official culture' reappears in the image of the 'authoritative discourse' or 'Monologic discourse': a one-sided world that claims absolute truth. 'Dialogic discourse' like the image of carnival activity responds and moves ... 'Multidirectional discourse', meanwhile, resembles the ambivalent and subversive language of the marketplace, simultaneously debasing and renewing, revealing and hiding, selling and entertaining.⁵⁰

Social networks embody that multidirectional discourse. This fast-paced and transient environment not only offers instant gratification, which is a very powerful psychological driver,⁵¹ but it is also supposed to confirm the temporality of carnival. Fake news, memes, product placement, gifs, cat videos, and quality journalism co-exist on a seemingly equal

footing where it is almost impossible to sort the wheat from the chaff. Moreover, the phenomenon of Internet trolls – commentators who are intentionally trying to provoke other users – are also a perfect embodiment of simulacra and the performance-oriented culture of carnival, with their roots having also been traced to folklore and trickster culture.⁵² As Quattrocio et al.⁵³ note, the so-called ‘echo-chambers’ on social media reinforce selective exposure and group polarization, further radicalizing the political debate that is already polarized in the United States.⁵⁴ With 62 percent of American adults getting their news from social networks⁵⁵ there is a general turn to social media for news coverage,⁵⁶ while patterns of misinformation and echo chambers are becoming an everyday phenomenon.

Trump’s carnival

This section of the article will address the way carnival culture expressed itself during Donald Trump’s successful presidential campaign. First, and most importantly, Trump styled himself as an anti-establishment candidate, a Washington ‘outsider’, a ‘blue-collar billionaire’, someone, who would ‘drain the swamp’ of corruption in Washington DC.⁵⁷ It is also not surprising that another successful American anti-establishment candidate Jesse Ventura whose success was analyzed by Janack⁵⁸ is in fact Trump’s longtime friend. Trump himself used the hashtag #DrainTheSwamp repeatedly, referring to the eradication of Washington DC’s establishment.⁵⁹ Trump’s children, who also acted as surrogates, tried to perpetuate this narrative through a political ad that argued that elections were ‘about an insider vs an outsider’.⁶⁰

This framing speaks to the anti-ideology and anti-authority features of carnival: by switching his affiliations between Democratic, Republican, and Independence parties, Trump fashioned a candidate who is supposed to break down the traditional system, which is what carnival is supposed to do. Emancipatory power feeds the subversion of hierarchy and was also visible when Trump boasted that politicians used to come to him for donations, which was useful for him as a businessman.⁶¹ By presenting himself as not part of the elite, Trump also tapped into the essence of populism⁶² and appealed to the sense of disenfranchisement among certain groups of voters in the United States,⁶³ which could be conceived as giving voice to the part of the population that perceived itself as subaltern in the American context.

Most political analysts agreed that Trump subverted the traditions of the presidential race and came up with a grotesque version of it – grotesque being one of the crucial terms in Bakhtin’s analysis. As American comedians noticed every time Trump came up with a shtick, it was an all-time low for American political discourse. It was the presidential campaign of ‘firsts’ that included fraud lawsuits, sexual assault allegations, mocking a disabled reporter, race-baiting, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, insulting numerous public figures and countries (the list goes on, but Lee and Quealy⁶⁴ compiled at least the Twitter-based part of it). If Stallybrass and White call a carnival ‘the rock bottom of symbolic form’,⁶⁵ Donald Trump’s epitomized the rock bottom of presidential campaigns.

The laughing culture of carnival was an important factor. Even though traditional mass media were not taking Donald Trump seriously, they were still reporting about him.⁶⁶ This was especially true for late night shows that have become a staple part of the

American political landscape.⁶⁷ The general levity with which Trump's campaign was reported and his antics, presented as a carnival fool's performance, sustained the atmosphere of carnival and failed to warn the public of Trump's non-existent qualifications, serial lying, and rampant xenophobia. Serious journalism and Hillary Clinton herself who prepared for the debates instead of winging them were seen as the main enemies of carnival freedom – one of the worst positions in carnival culture,⁶⁸ which could also be connected to the tendency for anti-intellectualism in the United States already observed by Richard Hofstadter.⁶⁹

Another factor that worked in Trump's advantage is social networks. As numerous studies have noted, the Trump campaign benefited from the social networks' propensity to spread misinformation.⁷⁰ Given that social networks are conducive to the spread of conspiracy theories, fake photos, rumors about cough-preventing machines⁷¹ and the like, misinformation blossomed on the Internet, which hurt the chances of Hillary Clinton – already seen as an untrustworthy person. Moreover, social networks, with its ability to bring closer people around the world, for example, to tweet directly at politicians and journalists, created the illusion of the carnival town square and its closeness, leveling the playfield with familiarity. At the same time, Trump's name calling of his opponents, that is, 'little Marco', 'lyin' Ted', or 'crooked Hillary',⁷² was particularly emblematic of carnival: it is the time when 'Ivan Ivanovich turns into Vanya or Van'ka'.⁷³ Donald Trump's insistence to constantly call Secretary Clinton by her first name also displayed the carnivalesque intimacy.

Social networks also played into the 'multidirectional discourse' environment that is supposed to 'debase, renew, reveal, hide, sell and entertain'. Numerous neo-Nazi voices on Twitter, which have euphemistically been termed 'alt-right', attacks on journalists critical of Trump, and (Russian) trolls, created a multi-directionality hardly ever seen before in the presidential campaign. One just needs to remember that one of Trump's major announcements about his birther convictions was turned into a presentation of his new Washington DC hotel that mass media dutifully reported on for hours.⁷⁴ Moreover, most newscasters and reporters agreed that Trump received an exorbitant amount of air time because his campaign was 'entertaining'.⁷⁵ As a Wired article puts it, 'this election blurred the already blurry line between politics and entertainment, in large part because this year a reality star was running for president'.⁷⁶ The 'reality show' aspect was also poignant as carnival itself is a game and without the public participation in it, it does not work, everyone has to be engaged. And everyone was.

As the US population is increasingly turning to social networks for news, the public is susceptible to misinformation spreading on social media. Carnival's core principle of reversal was also momentous in the way news stories were consumed by the public. The main antithesis to quality journalism is conspiracy theories that normally remain on the fringes of public discourse.⁷⁷ However, with Trump's presidential campaign and his own affinity to retweeting or talking about things that are 'on the Internet',⁷⁸ including race-baiting conspiracies,⁷⁹ John F. Kennedy murder conspiracy,⁸⁰ climate change hoax conspiracy,⁸¹ Mexican rapist conspiracy, not to mention the birther conspiracy that Trump fueled for years⁸² conspiracy theories became a substantial part of his presidential bid. Thus, the Trump campaign signified a carnival reversal from the mainstream journalism narrative to a conspiratorial discourse that bubbled to the surface and was actively championed by the republican presidential candidate.

Another crucial point in the Trump campaign was his self-styling as person free from political correctness.⁸³ Freedom is the core value of carnival and ‘telling it like it is’⁸⁴ without a semblance of politesse and etiquette created an illusion of a supposedly real-world town square clashing with the world dominated and mapped out by elites. Coarse and raw (*ploshchadnyi*) language is supposed to define the carnival square.⁸⁵ Stripping the daily interaction of political correctness can be seen as an act against ideology and hierarchy – that is exactly what carnival is supposed to do.

Moreover, Trump’s ‘nasty woman’ comment toward Hillary Clinton could also be interpreted through and traced back to European Medieval popular culture, not to mention tapping into the more recent 1990s discourse of ‘castrating first ladies’.⁸⁶ The ‘mauvaise femme’ (wicked woman) trope⁸⁷ came out of the theatrical performances of ‘silly stories’ (*fabula ineptissima*) that featured a blood libel tale with an obligatory female Christian maid who worked for the Jews and was seen as a co-conspirator in ritual murder.⁸⁸ The wicked woman (never a man) was supposed to be equally guilty in the ritual murder allegation, not only because she worked for Jews but also because she failed to report suspicious activity. The Trump campaign frequently engaged in anti-Semitic discourse, whereby he or his surrogates implied that Hillary Clinton had some mysterious ties with ‘Jewish capital’, such as the poster ‘History made’ with money and a star of David, and his last campaign ad, which was universally condemned as anti-Semitic.⁸⁹ This sustained the age-old anti-feminist trope with its anti-Semitic tinge. Ultimately, however, the ‘wicked woman’ trope goes back to the carnival culture of these theatrical performances that were on the edge of the official discourse, where the physical and moral abuse of Jews was a staple part of carnival entertainment.⁹⁰ No wonder that Trump’s candidacy was endorsed by the KKK, the American Nazi Party and other fringe nationalist groups.⁹¹

The ‘wicked woman’ narrative also fed into the conservative understanding of a woman’s role in society,⁹² where a politically active woman has been seen as a threat to the fabric of society ever since the suffragette movement in the United States and Great Britain.⁹³ This categorization is very similar to the gender stereotypes discussed by Gentry and Sjoberg:⁹⁴ a positive image of a woman is supposed to be passive and mostly defined through motherhood. An active position threatens the heteronormal society and is therefore wrong.

Popular Trump rally slogans ‘trump that bitch’, ‘lock her up’, ‘hang the bitch’⁹⁵ could be seen both in the anti-feminist context of the ‘mauvaise femme’ trope, but also in the carnival attitude toward the enemy. As mentioned earlier, Saturnalia festivities, precursor to carnival rituals, ended with the murder of the mock-king.⁹⁶ Carnival ritual burnings of effigies symbolized renewal, and in Trump’s case, came to be associated with the renewal of the political system that Hillary Clinton was opposed to as a representative of the ‘establishment’.

The fact that Trump’s win also led to a serious uptick in racially motivated harassment and crime⁹⁷ is another evidence that groups that serve as focus for ‘displaced abjection’ during carnival season – in this case, Muslims, Mexicans, and Jews – suffer consequences after the carnival is over as well.⁹⁸ Trump’s not even coded xenophobic language, while often regarded as the core factor of his appeal,⁹⁹ has been a staple part of the GOP rhetoric for years¹⁰⁰ and did not change the further marginalization and

degrading tendency inherent to carnival.¹⁰¹ In other words, while carnival prides itself in reversing the existing hierarchy, it still has a certain hierarchy within that is not reversed¹⁰² that is usually exemplified with the anti-Semitic rituals, such as the above-mentioned pig ritual. In that regard, carnival does give voice to the ‘silent majority’, but that majority, both in the Middle Ages and in a 2016 America, is a white one.

Another carnivalesque obsession – food – was not particularly visible within the Trump campaign. At the same time, Trump’s previous failed business ventures included steaks and vodka, both hardly dietary items, while one of his sons owns a wine business.¹⁰³ There were, however, several publicized instances when Trump was consuming fast food. That, admittedly, also brought him closer to ‘regular Joe’ as his voters were able to see that he was no stranger to the food of the masses. Trump’s tweeted photographs of himself consuming fast food, such as KFC or taco bowls¹⁰⁴ was also an expression of carnival’s infatuation with junk food in particular as it is the time to gorge and indulge.

Finally, carnival’s emphasis on material and not spiritual life was particularly prominent in the Trump campaign. It was especially true for the focus on body that had massive repercussions on the types of resistance to the Trump candidacy (and, subsequently, his presidency) and general level of political discourse in the United States, which is traditionally famous for its Puritan and sterile qualities.¹⁰⁵ While previously it was supposedly inappropriate to raise your voice or French-kiss your wife in public,¹⁰⁶ the 2016 race consistently featured various discussions of body parts and bodily functions.

It was probably the first time in an American election that the size of a presidential candidate’s penis actually came up during the debate.¹⁰⁷ One can argue that physical features of presidential candidates have become increasingly important with the advent of TV and the visualization of politics,¹⁰⁸ but none of the previous presidential campaigns were so extensively covered by news media and especially social media. Hardly any comedic segment on CBS, NBC, HBO or Comedy Central failed to mention the size of Trump’s allegedly small hands,¹⁰⁹ his hair, or the color of his skin (e.g. ‘orange Hitler’), which is ridiculous in a political debate, but yet normal in a carnival setting. Trump himself seems to be obsessed with body parts and close physical contact, as, for instance, his association with the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) and even active participation in matches shows. At the same time, wrestling itself has been identified as having carnival roots,¹¹⁰ so the extent to which Donald Trump is a representative of carnival culture is itself grotesque.

What also played into carnival culture was Trump’s bragging about sexually assaulting women, by ‘grabbing them by the pussy’ and his philandering.¹¹¹ Even though the Hollywood Access admission happened before the campaign, the incident was quickly dismissed by Trump himself and his surrogates as ‘boys’ or ‘locker room’ talk, that is, something all (real) men do anyway. This factor was particularly galling for the traditional importance of moral character for the president of the United States and showed that the 2016 election campaign genuinely signified a complete reversal from politics as usual. The (perhaps not so) surprising high voter support among evangelical and born-again Christian voters for Trump¹¹² can also be primarily explained by carnival culture. Given that carnival is a temporary phenomenon and it represents another life that one can live until repenting the sins, many Trump voters stressed that they did not take Trump

literally and admitted that his campaign was a way of winning the office and did not reflect his true attitudes.¹¹³

Apart from the carnivalesque obsession with sex and body parts, carnival culture is also permissive to promiscuity and adultery, given the anonymity, familiarity, and close physical contact.¹¹⁴ Even modern carnivals are infamous for numerous incidents of sexual assault.¹¹⁵ That is why Trump's surrogates' dismissal of his sexual assault admission as 'locker room talk' actually worked. An invitation to check out an alleged 'sex tape' of former Miss Universe¹¹⁶ was yet another sign of the carnivalesque obsession with coitus. Especially prominent of carnival culture was Trump's comment about FOX News moderator Megyn Kelly that 'blood was coming out of her wherever'.¹¹⁷ Later, Trump qualified in a Tweet that he meant Kelly's nose [sic],¹¹⁸ but it still showed an incredible fixation with body and bodily functions that also echoed the usual anti-feminist trope about 'hormonal' women being irrational,¹¹⁹ which, incidentally, some of Trump's supporters repeated as well.¹²⁰ Thus, carnival's obsession with bodily functions, which are usually taboo in everyday official communication and especially political discourse,¹²¹ came to the surface.

Another sign of body obsession was visible through numerous references to physical attributes of Donald Trump's wife Melania, whose nude pictures were posted and reprinted by several newspapers.¹²² It is also notable that one of the erotic photoshoots that Melania did was published in British GQ magazine during Trump's Reform Party presidential bid. Granted, Ted Cruz campaign's focus on Melania's photoshoot was also related to slut-shaming practices¹²³ but at the same time it displayed Donald Trump's fixation on the female body and body in general. It was especially visible when he tweeted a meme with Heidi Cruz comparing her looks with Melania's.¹²⁴

The public followed suit: another issue in the presidential campaign was the obsession with both presidential candidates' health and statements from their doctors.¹²⁵ In Hillary Clinton's case, it went so far as to suggest that she had a body double and fueled conspiracy theories about her having Parkinson's disease or other conditions that would make her unfit to be President.¹²⁶ At the same time, Donald Trump masterfully avoided his own health conspiracy by appearing in a TV talk show with a pseudoscience promoting doctor.¹²⁷ It is also notable that Donald Trump's naked statues with small genitals that popped up across American cities showed the carnivalesque elements were picked up by his opponents as well where they tried to represent him as a less masculine entity.¹²⁸ This type of resistance, again, focused on his body and not political issues, which reflected even the opposition's inclusion in the carnival setting.

A big data analysis of Trump's tweets from 2016¹²⁹ also confirms the main carnival narratives (Figure 1).

Apart from thanking his supporters for supporting him during the elections, his most frequently used words include Hillary (415) – fixation on enemy – that is used almost as often as the word 'great' (440). To be fair, judging from the same amount of Hillary Clinton's tweets she discussed Trump even more (756), but she did not use derogatory nicknames like Trump did, such as 'crooked', which again shows Trump's unconscious adherence to carnival culture. His most commonly used adjectives apart from 'great' (440) included big (118) and bad (104) and the corpus of his tweets generally shows rather restricted vocabulary. This restricted vocabulary is also an echo of carnival culture

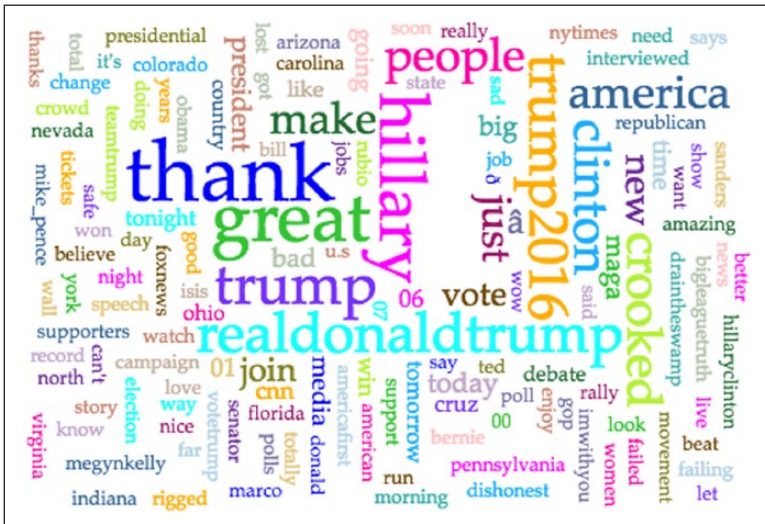


Figure 1. Word Cloud of most frequently used words in Donald Trump's tweets between February and November 2016.

language that was defined by uneducated classes and was expressed primarily through performance.¹³⁰ At the same time, Hillary Clinton's tweets had more unique words, were generally polysyllabic, and featured more specifics on the presidency. One of Trump's most frequent hashtags apart from #makeamericagreatagain and its #MAGA abbreviation is in fact #DrainTheSwamp (77) and #AmericaFirst (76), both of which have fascist connotations that are normally well beyond mainstream discourse – another sign of the political landscape reversal that had not been seen before. Even though politicians often need to appeal to different population groups – in Trump's case they included fiscal conservatives, evangelicals, blue-collar workers, and far-right groups – for the first time in American history the openly far-right and fascist rhetoric took center stage in a presidential campaign.

A more general and sinister consequence of a long-lasting carnival is related to governance. As noted above, carnival is supposed to temporarily suspend the normative order, but a permanent carnival leads to norm decay and in this particular case to erosion of liberal-republican institutions both within the United States as well as outside, that will have long-lasting consequences for the American republic.¹³¹ While many pundits had hoped that Trump would become more presidential, his year in office has shown that a long-term carnivalesque reversal is detrimental to the foundational principles of democracy, just as Nexon predicted in November 2016.¹³²

Conclusion

This article argued that Trump's success could be explained by several factors that contributed to the inversion of the political landscape in the United States. The main idea of

carnival is antithesis, anti-ideology, and anti-authority that Trump consistently propagated despite him being a member of the top 1 percent. This way he created a perception among those who self-identified as disenfranchised voters of giving voice to the subaltern, that is, part of the population that is seemingly not represented by the current political elite. The voice of the subaltern, as one emanating from the carnival square, and characterized by vulgar or coarse language, was particularly visible through Trump's rhetoric in general, his campaign's constant juxtapositions of the outsider versus the insider, and his #DrainTheSwamp narrative.

One of the most significant features of carnival is its perceived intimacy and multi-directionality of the discourse where people are supposed to 'debase, renew, reveal, hide, sell and entertain'. Trump being a professional entertainer mastered this type of discourse that ultimately delivered him victory in the presidential election. Moreover, even Trump's hobbies, such as WWE, show an astonishing genealogical connection to carnival culture. The essence of his popular appeal is grounded in the game element that is so attractive to human psychology. Trump was familiar with the way one makes a spectacle and managed to steer mass media's attention his way.¹³³ Pervasive use of social networks further exacerbated the Donald phenomenon partly due to their propensity for spreading misinformation and honing echo chambers that lent more credibility to the fringe conspiracy and racist discourses.

Bakhtin emphasized that carnival showed a 'two-world-ness' of medieval life that was indispensable for the understanding of Renaissance culture. Even though Bakhtin argued that carnival culture is a hallmark of pre-class societies, by the looks of it, the modern world is not that far off from Rabelais's world. The temporality of carnival played a significant role: many Trump voters did not believe that his outlandish statements were for real. The essential doublespeak of the Trump campaign catered to racists, misogynists, and xenophobes of all colors. Apart from the massive institutional harm that constitutes the most important implication for governance, one of the other damaging consequences so far of his campaign is the acceptability and normalization of hate speech in mainstream discourse. At the same time, carnival approach cannot account for all factors that played a role in the success of the Trump campaign. For instance, his personal characteristics were not necessarily taken into consideration by this framework. However, carnival provides a more comprehensive and holistic account of both Trump's appeal and the crucial mechanisms at play in his presidential campaign.

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