

2016: A POPULIST ODYSSEY NEOLIBERALISM AND POPULISM IN *HELL* OR *HIGH WATER*¹

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ABSTRACT

The year 2016 will be long associated to the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. Although the film studies literature on “Trump’s America” is yet to be written, there are instances of American films addressing the conditions leading to the seismic shifts of 2016. This article examines the film *Hell or High Water* in light of the epochal political changes of the year 2016. Drawing on the concept of populism and analyzing the central aspects of neoliberalism, I argue that *Hell or High Water* represents the state of the political camps circa 2016, as well as the political and economic demands prefiguring a potential populist reaction.

RESUMEN

El año 2016 estará largamente asociado a la elección de Donald Trump como presidente de los Estados Unidos. Aunque la literatura desde el campo de los estudios de cine sobre la “América de Trump” está por escribirse, podemos encontrar ejemplos de películas americanas

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centradas en describir las condiciones que han llevado a los profundos cambios de 2016. Este artículo analiza la película *Comanchería* a la luz de los dramáticos cambios políticos del año 2016. Usando el concepto de populismo y analizando los aspectos vertebradores del neoliberalismo, sostengo que *Comanchería* representa el estado de los campos políticos en el año 2016, así como las demandas políticas y económicas que prefiguran una potencial reacción populista.

Trump is the symptom. He is not the disease.
Chris Hedges (min.8)

*So, ultimately, whoever complains about populism should also complain about neoliberalism. One thing leads to the other.*²
Jose Luis Villacañas (116)

In a recent interview former Chief Strategist for Donald Trump Steve Bannon repeatedly used the phrase “the Party of Davos,” making reference to the “the scientific, managerial, engineering, financial elites in the city of London [or in] Wall Street; these corporatists that don’t care about the little guy, they look at the little guy as just another unit of production, right? A unit of consumption” (“Europe” min.14). During the 2016 primary season, Senator Bernie Sanders spoke about the financial sector along these lines: “In 2008, the greed, recklessness and illegal behavior on Wall Street nearly destroyed the American and global economy. Millions of Americans lost their jobs [...] their homes and [...] their life savings” (Sanders “Remarks”). How so that, despite irreconcilable differences between both individuals, the two statements are virtually interchangeable in their projection of a destructive elite vs. a battered majority?

The conceptual linkage between both messages is populism—the will to address, unify, and defend “a people” as opposed to a privileged, predatory minority. As theorist of populism Ernesto Laclau spelt out “by ‘populism’ we do not understand a *type* of movement—identifiable with either a base or a particular ideological orientation—but a *political logic*” (117). A corollary question ensues: what conditions have operated so that the former head of the far-right Breitbart News and a self-avowed democratic socialist have formulated identical diagnoses of American politics? Critical theorist Nancy Fraser has claimed that, notwithstanding differences in

² My translation. Original quotation: “Así, en último extremo, quien se queje de populismo, debería quejarse también del neoliberalismo. Una cosa lleva a la otra.”

ideology and goals, the movements spearheaded by Sanders and Trump share a common target: “[they] are rejections of corporate globalization, neoliberalism, and the political establishments that have promoted them” (“The End”).

Scholars of American Studies will surely brood over these issues in seeking to map out and unpack the strands leading to the year 2016. It will not be long before American filmmakers produce a body of work addressing the earthquake brought about by the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States. A mere year and a half into his stewardship, American film has not had time to grapple with “Trump’s America” in an explicitly textual manner.³ The literature on American film and Trump’s America is yet to be written.

However, my proposition is that some American films have been released as of late showcasing, not so much the narrow tropes and discourses of “Trumpism” or “Trump’s America” but, rather, the fault-lines of American politics paving the way for a moment of historical acceleration as 2016 certainly was.⁴ The most politically eloquent and thematically acute example of this is the 2016 post-western⁵ bank-heist thriller film *Hell or High Water* directed by David Mackenzie and penned by Taylor Sheridan. I argue this is the one American film illuminating what 2016 ultimately signified: a populist moment of repudiation of the elites amidst the fraying of American neoliberalism. Mackenzie’s film is less a forecast of the 2016 presidential election than a low-key portrait of a set of unaddressed claims and untapped resentments—the basic precondition for a populist upset to take place regardless of its ideological color. In relation to this, I will try to prove how the film presents an array of unfulfilled frustrations and miseries as wrought by neoliberalism, yet the film as a whole can hardly be pinned to one clear-cut ideological undercurrent. In other words, *Hell or High Water* represents the populist moment of 2016 and its various constituents but the

³ Some 2017 releases such as *Get Out*, *The Post*, or *The Shape of Water* may arguably be read as containing some allegorical elements vis-à-vis the political state of affairs circa 2016. See Freedland, Patterson, and Richardson.

⁴ See *Deepwater Horizon*—where hints of blue collar and working class anxiety surface—and *99 Homes*—centered on the foreclosure crisis.

⁵ I am here borrowing Neil Campbell’s notion of the post-western (2013)—western films which reassess classical narratives of the genre by voicing and foregrounding themes and motifs that, albeit traceable in classical westerns, do not comply with the hegemonic politics, cultural discourse, and iconography of the genre.

narration does not prescribe the overall ideological channeling that populist moment may be tied up to. Thus, the film displays the “raw materials” that were at hand for a populist surge to occur around the tail-end of the Obama Era.

1. A FRAMEWORK FOR 2016: POPULISM AND NEOLIBERALISM

Both a radicalization and a theoretical fine-tuning of Gramscian hegemony, the concept of populism tries to undo some of the essentialisms sustaining the more orthodox forms of Marxism (Critchley and Marchart 3). Drawing substantially on post-structuralism, authors like Laclau and political philosopher Chantal Mouffe reject “the conviction that the social is sutured at some point, from which it is possible to fix the meaning of any event independently of any articulatory practice” (177). Theorists of populism radicalize Gramscian hegemony insofar as they underscore the nature of political universalities as articulated. Consent is necessarily a constructed, assembled thing which, in turn, is legitimized and naturalized. With a finite set of raw materials produced by the contingencies of political and historical struggles, a hegemonic identity persuades a range of political bodies to coalesce into one bloc. Hence, the production of hegemony entails thinking of political signification not as entirely malleable but as unstable and, indeed, as subject to negotiation and contestation:

The general field of the emergence of hegemony is that of articulatory practices, that is, a field where the ‘elements’ have not crystallized into ‘moments’. In a closed system of relational identities, in which the meaning of each moment is absolutely fixed, there is no place whatsoever for a hegemonic practice. [...] It is because hegemony supposes the incomplete and open character of the social, that it can take place only in a field dominated by articulatory practices. (Laclau and Mouffe 134)

Herein lies the main proposition of populism: the possibility of fashioning a partial universality—i.e. a hegemony—called “the people.”

“[P]opulism,” elaborates Laclau, “requires the dichotomic division of society into two camps—one presenting itself as a part

which claims to be the whole; [...] this dichotomy involves the antagonistic division of the social field; and [...] the popular camp presupposes, as condition of its constitution, the construction of a global identity out of the equivalence of a plurality of social demands” (83). Provided that the institutional framework be somewhat broken (Laclau 177; Villacañas 59), populism is essentially the rhetorical construction of the people by means of merging a variety of unfulfilled, untapped demands the system has dismissed or discarded. The logic of populism dichotomizes society, revealing the people as being against an antagonistic entity fundamentally opposed to the former’s interests and wellbeing. What or who that antagonistic entity is—racial minorities or oligarchies; welfare recipients or bankers—will depend on the ideological compass a given populism pivots on.

Therefore, my analysis will seek to identify the populist logics in *Hell or High Water*, that is, instances of political dichotomization prior to specific ideological articulations—although the film may occasionally show the latter. Thus, I am less interested in which characters, institutions, and discourses are cast as being constitutive of the people than which are portrayed as destructive and harmful to the people. That way we can characterize the political camp leading to 2016 at large—across partisan and ideology lines—and the way it lent itself to the dichotomizations typical of populism. By doing so, I will likewise point out the demands the system has failed to address—these demands being largely byproducts of neoliberal hegemony. In conclusion, I will show the way the film points out the staples of the populist moment of 2016. Characterizing those staples poses quite a difficulty though.

The historical-political matrix of the film is constituted by a handful of structural transformations harking back to, at least, the Reagan era—namely globalization, outsourcing, deindustrialization, an increasingly financialized capitalism, ill-adjustment to cultural and demographic changes in the nation, and record-breaking levels of income inequality.⁶ Historian Wyatt Wells encapsulates the dynamics undergirding these processes: “From the 1930s through the 1960s economic policy had sought to smooth out the rough edges of capitalism by limiting destructive competition, protecting workers, and stabilizing demand. Starting in the late 1970s,

⁶ For studies of these phenomena see Aronowitz; Formisano, *Plutocracy*; Harvey *Neoliberalism*; Kemp; Peck; Wartzman; Wells.

government policy increasingly sought to hone the cutting edge of the capitalist system, encouraging innovation, investment, and risk-taking” (195). The political and economic background of *Hell or High Water* embodies the most uncomfortable byproducts of the transition described by Wells—that which moved the US from postwar Keynesian-Fordist capitalism to neoliberalism (Harvey, *Postmodernity* 124; Jessop 262; Wacquant 267).

In their appraisal of neoliberalism and its global projection, Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell comment on how “[l]ocalities [...] have [...] become ‘hostile brothers’, flinging themselves into the competitive process of attracting jobs and investment by bargaining away living standards and regulatory controls. Needless to say, not all localities can be victorious in this competition, the losers ending up with more than their share of global unemployment” (280-281). Driven by the goal of global competitiveness (Dardot and Laval 153), these shifts in the political and economic makeup of American society have particularly impacted a historically privileged demographic:

[W]ell-paid, union-protected jobs through which a man could support a stay-at-home wife are gone for all but a small elite. Given automation and corporate offshoring real wages of high school-educated American men have fallen 40 percent since 1970. For the whole bottom 90 percent of workers, average wages have flattened since 1980. Many older white men are in despair. Indeed, such men suffer a higher than average death rate due to alcohol, drugs, and even suicide. Although life expectancy for nearly every other group is rising, between 1990 and 2008 the life expectancy of older white men without high school diplomas has been shortened by three years. (Hochschild 125-126)

White working class men with no college degree—the demographic dominating *Hell or High Water*—have ranked among the most negatively affected by neoliberalism’s emphasis on global competitiveness. “American workers displaced by imports,” writes Wells, “were often among the least educated and worst paid. They might lack the skills to fill better-paying jobs, even if such were available” (Wells 185). A paradigmatic example, if ever there was one, of the transition from Keynesian-Fordist capitalism to neoliberalism lies in the contrast between the two largest employers in both periods: General Motors and Wal-Mart. In his history of corporate America, Rick Wartzman explores such contrast as well as the material realities implicit in it:

In terms of scale, Wal-Mart was the obvious successor to GM. In 2002, the retailer became the biggest corporation in America, topping the Fortune 500 list for the first time. By 2005, its revenues exceeded \$285 billion, and profits surpassed \$10 billion. [...] But there was a massive difference between GM and Wal-Mart. While the former had put most of its workers on a secure route to the middle class, the latter was placing many on a path to impoverishment. [...] In 2005, most Wal-Mart workers took home less than ten dollars an hour, compared with more than thirty dollars for a nonskilled assembly line workers at General Motors. This added up to a yearly income at Wal-Mart of about \$18,000—below the poverty line for a family of four. [...] The health benefits that Wal-Mart offered were also lacking. As a result, many of its employees had to turn to public relief: food stamps, Medicaid, and subsidized housing. (330-332)⁷

These socio-economic and political conditions represent both the breeding ground for the populist groundswell of 2016 and the backdrop against which the story of *Hell or High Water* is laid out.

2. “NO BAILOUT FOR PEOPLE LIKE US”: HATRED FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT AS POPULIST UNIFIER

Set up in a modern-day West Texas economically savaged, *Hell or High Water* follows unemployed oil worker Toby Howard (Chris Pine) and his ex-con brother Tanner (Ben Foster), who team up to rob branches of the Texas Midlands Bank, sticking to a carefully devised plan to avoid eviction. Toby intends to raise just enough money to pay off the mortgage and leave the family ranch to his sons, where oil has been recently found. The Texas Midlands Bank has used every trick to foreclose on the mortgage and claim the property. So the irony lies on the fact that the brothers will pay the Texas Midlands Bank with money stolen from that very bank. The Howard brothers are chased by Texas Ranger—and soon-to-be retiree—Marcus Hamilton (Jeff Bridges) and his partner Alberto Parker (Gil Birmingham).



Figure 1

The film opens with a powerful sequence centered on the first robbery. A meticulously crafted crane-shot long take in full silence introduces us to the microcosm of the film, deploying a potent visual grammar that is both narratively fluid and politically illuminating. The camera movement visually links a graffiti reading “three tours in Iraq but no bailout for people like us” and the façade of a Texas Midlands Bank branch (Fig.1). Similar images inhabit the whole narration, reminding the audience that, despite macroeconomic stabilization, for most Americans the Great Recession never really ended (Blinder 14)—long shots of open land featuring ads of debt relief and fast-cash services and foreclosed homes (Fig.2). The long shots showing vast extensions of land typical of the western film, and their ethos of exuberance and opportunity, are here transformed, as in most post-westerns, into a



Figure 2

national identity. (Campbell 15)

spectral landscape [...] a complex space much changed from the preferred simplicity of a nineteenth-century version constantly revisited by Hollywood with its fundamentally clear lines of demarcation around issues of race, gender, land use, and

The opening long take is worth dwelling on though. Through the visual linkage between the graffiti and the Texas Midlands Bank, the film makes an explicit connection between a hurting populace and a well-secluded and powerful institution; the misery of the former leading to the welfare of the latter. In its simplicity and bluntness the graffiti message dismantles party and ideology lines—Democrats vs. Republicans; progressivism vs. conservatism. That is not the linchpin of the message. It is, rather, a denunciation on the basis of

a “people vs. elites” logic. The banking sector, as well as the actors propping it up, are placed “outside” the margins of what constitutes the people.

This critique shortens or, at least, relativizes the distance between Democrats and Republicans in terms of economic policy solutions in tackling the Great Recession:

Banks were bailed out, no reliefs extended to under-water mortgages, criminal executives left unpunished, and the workforce participation ratio sank still further, while the top 1 per cent of the population became proportionately even richer. Since there was no change at the Fed, and this course was already set in the last phase of the Bush Administration, not a great deal in this crisis-management was distinctive under Obama. (Anderson 44)

The populist message of the film seems to comply with such diagnosis. Implicitly, the opening sequence codifies a damning critique of the Obama Administration and its arguable failure in substantially redressing the wrongdoing of Wall Street elites. The perception that, during the Obama era, the structural dynamics leading to the Great Recession were not corrected and that no Rooseveltian, New Deal-style political project was articulated (Frank 144-145; Rauchway 30-31) underpins the early political disclosures of the film.

This type of anti-establishment discourse seen in *Hell or High Water* can be mobilized by different actors. Occupy Wall Street’s slogan “We are the 99%” comes to mind; so does Bernie Sanders’ systematic focus on Wall Street malpractice as source for much of the country’s problems. However, similar anti-establishment animus has been embraced by considerably different political forces, such as the Tea Party, a movement that, in many aspects, has nudged the ideological axis of the Republican Party further to the right (Logfren 225). Oftentimes ardently opposed to establishment Republicans (Hochschild 47), “[t]he Tea Party grassroots,” writes Richard Formisano, “shares some of the classical hallmarks of the third-party/independent tradition: suspicion of professional politicians [and] frustration with the two-party system and politics as usual. [...] The Tea Parties’ grassroots resemble past progressive populism in being pervaded by anti-elite sentiment” (*Tea* 17-20). There is a similar logic of repudiation of elites binding together all these actors—not ideology, let alone a policy agenda.

In a more structural sense, the robbing of banks also underpins the film narratively and plot-wise. Occasional commentaries are made as to whether the Howards' actions are legitimate. After the second robbery takes place, Ranger Marcus questions some of the witnesses:

Marcus: "Boys. Y'all been here for a while?"

Bystander: "Well, long enough to watch a bank getting robbed that's been robbing me for 30 years." (min. 29)

Later on, the brothers consult a lawyer in order to launder the stolen cash. Visibly sympathetic to their cause, the lawyer advises the Howards as follows:

You know, they [The Texas Midlands Bank] loaned the least they could. Just enough to keep your mama poor on a guaranteed return. Thought they could swipe her land for \$25,000. That's just so arrogant, it makes my teeth hurt. To see you boys pay those bastards back with their own money? Well, if that ain't Texan, I don't know what is. (mins. 47-48)

Even once Toby has succeeded in paying off the mortgage and retaining the ranch, we witness a western standoff-like scene where he refuses to shake hands with the Texas Midlands Bank director, with Toby looking ostensibly disgruntled by the director's affected friendliness to him after the bank had used financial engineering trying to foreclose on his property (Fig. 3).



The film unambiguously indicates there is no social frowning upon as regards the banks being robbed. Quite on the contrary, a well-entrenched narrative operates showing banks as an elite class whose existence is predicated upon extracting resources from regular citizens. These portraits of folk anger cannot be fitted in classical ideological slots such as left-right or progressive-conservative. These axes do very little to explain the internal logic of these last three sequences, nor do they shed light on the real political significance of the long take at the beginning of the film. In this sense, the film is governed by a populist critique, one not primarily guided by ideology but by disdain and distrust towards the unaccountable power of an elite.⁸ Precisely, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders tapped into that anxiety and its resulting sense of lack of agency and defenselessness.

In the film, the placeholder for these anti-establishment sentiments is the Texas Midlands Banks—an entity presented as living off regular citizens. This is connected to the eminently and similarly anti-establishment discourses deployed by both outsiders during the 2016 presidential campaign. Investigative journalist Jeremy Scahill aptly described this question in the aftermath of the election:

I do think that Bernie Sanders tapped into the same kind of emotion that Trump did in a kind of parallel universe [...] You have people that voted twice for Barack Obama and then voted for Donald Trump, [...] what is the common factor there? The common factor was this perception that you were voting for an outsider. You're rejecting establishment politics in the United States. And I think a lot of the people who voted for Donald Trump that also voted for Barack Obama were people that were looking for a circuit-breaker, someone that was going to stop business as usual. So it didn't necessarily matter the ideas Trump was promoting as much as he wasn't a Hillary Clinton or a Jeb Bush. (mins. 1-2)

The economically battered and politically disempowered citizens of *Hell or High Water* voice a malaise that—whatever its potential

⁸ This type of political struggles over the meaning of the people is as old as the political fabric of the US. See Michael Kazin's seminal *The Populist Reason: An American History*.

ideological channeling might be—is essentially populist in its rejection of the establishment, just as backing Sanders or Trump—for whom “the people” encompass completely different political subjects—meant standing up against political and economic elites.⁹

3. THE FADING MEMORY OF KEYNES AND FORD: NEOLIBERALISM AS PASSAGE TO POPULISM

Hell or High Water emanates an undeniable tone of hopelessness and pessimism. Personal indebtedness, poverty, and lack of job opportunities loom large both visually and thematically. The robberies represent an against-the-clock attempt to prevent the bank from stripping the Howards of their sole resource—the ranch—to get out of poverty. The gloomy nature of the story does not just pervade the aesthetics and the plot, but also the inner world of the characters. Ranger Marcus, on the trail of the Howards, is a widowed and childless man fearing the utter loneliness of his upcoming years as a retiree; his longtime partner Alberto is shot down by Tanner towards the end of the film, only to heighten the already tragic texture of the narration. Toby and Tanner reveal a family background marked by poverty and an abusive father—whom Tanner killed. Toby remains unemployed and seeking to reconnect with a family he barely gets to see; Tanner is portrayed as an unbalanced and tragic man, prone to both violence and loyalty to his brother.

That tonal despair and forlornness stem from a set of material shortages wrought by neoliberalism, leading to the corrosion of fundamental American values such as optimism, classlessness or the very notion of the pursuit of happiness—all of which can be generically placed under the cultural and political umbrella of the American Dream. The proverbial American Dream is, as sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild has written,

a dream of progress—the idea that you’re better off than your forebears just as they superseded their parents before you—and extends beyond money and stuff. You’ve suffered long hours, layoffs, and exposure to dangerous chemicals at work, and received reduced pensions. You have shown moral character through trial by fire, and

⁹ Not only did Sanders and Trump revolt against the establishment at large. They actively decried the elites of their own parties—especially during the primary debates. Also, see Bannon, “Hannity” min.2; Sanders, “Hardtalk” min. 17; Sanders, “Podcast” mins. 7-10; Taibbi 7.

the American Dream of prosperity and security is a reward for all of this, showing who you have been and are—a badge of honor. (136)

This narrative, adds Hochschild, requires a disposition to feeling “hopeful, energetic, focused, mobilized. Progress—its core idea—didn’t go with feeling confused or mournful” (140-141). Neither the characters nor the social environment in *Hell or High Water* adhere to the myth of progress and optimism as prescribed in the American Dream. In fact, the film’s zeroing in on economic stagnation and joblessness, as well as its refusal to view the future as a by-default promise for better living standards, indicates the impossibility to fulfill the American Dream through the socially-sanctioned practices of hard work, effort, and decency.

As highlighted earlier, the material landscape of the film is inhabited by foreclosure signs, debt relief ads, credit extension billboards and the like. The spaces of the west become colonized by economics—its products and language integrating in the physicality of the place. Theorist Wendy Brown has seen this type of economicization of life as a key trait of neoliberalism:

Neoliberalism [...] is best understood not simply as economic policy, but as a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and construes the human itself as *homo oeconomicus*. Neoliberalism thus does not merely privatize [...] what was formerly publicly supported and valued. Rather, it formulates everything, everywhere, in terms of capital investment and appreciation. (176)

Critics of neoliberalism argue that one of its consequences is the stripping away of citizens’ basic economic rights, ultimately favoring “strong limits on democratic governance, relying instead upon undemocratic and unaccountable institutions (such as the Federal Reserve or the IMF) to make key decisions” (Harvey, *Neoliberalism* 69). The characters in *Hell or High Water* experience this type of political phenomenon—a lack of agency that makes their livelihoods be tied to a land whose resources have been siphoned off by an extractive elite, in this case, the banking sector.

As part of this political critique fashioned in the film, the viewer is informed that life in West Texas has not always been so utterly grey and precarious. Two of the most poignant examples of it come fairly early on. As Toby makes small talk with a waitress, he bitterly comments that “there ain’t nothing high-dollar about drilling.

No one seems to be drilling for gas now, anyway” (min. 20). Some sequences later, one cowboy-looking witness to the second bank robbery melancholically says: “[it] seems foolish [...] the days of robbing banks and trying to live to spend the money, they’re long gone. Long gone for sure” (min. 31). At least two corollaries can be extracted. On the one hand, an intelligible and productive economic world, where goods and services can be easily bought and sold, does not exist anymore—where to spend the stolen money, muses the bystander, in such a barren, indebted land? On the other, the industrial fabric—along with its well-paying jobs—has been either dismantled or reduced to a bare minimum. Both messages indicate a yearning that can be related to some of the characteristics of Keynesian-Fordist capitalism. The white blue-collar men with no college degree¹⁰ who voice these concerns seem to long for much of the political economy of the postwar boom: overall economic predictability and stability, distinct and delineable markets, high levels of consumption, and strong manufacturing industries and the living wages that came with them (Jessop 253). The world the Howard brothers live in is no longer shaped by those structures nor is it governed by the so-called “industrial paternalism” or “welfare capitalism” under which a sizable—and mostly white—middle-class was built (Wartzman 24). They have become “disposable workers,” a prototypical figure in the inherently changing and flexible labor world of neoliberalism (Harvey, *Neoliberalism* 169; Jessop 259). Since the 1980s and 1990s—and fueled by structural dynamics of neoliberalism like automation, offshoring, and globalization—the white non-college-educated working class has endured a stripping away of living standards and economic wellbeing:

When GM and other manufacturers employed a quarter or more of the American workforce through the early 1980s, even those without much education could land a factory job and do quite well. But what were the two-thirds of Americans without a four-year college degree supposed to do now? Manufacturing, with its high wages and good benefits, employed just 10 percent of Americans by 2010. And even many of these industrial jobs and other blue-collar positions now

¹⁰ It is fair to say that, for instance, Donald Trump’s electoral victory was basically “a revolt by white America based on economic resentment” along with racial prejudices and cultural resistance, as Ralph Nader described it on the very day after the election (mins. 23-24)

demanded technical instruction beyond high school—something that far too few people had. (Wartzman 343)

In relation to this, the bystanders of the robberies and the Howard brothers seem to have no formal occupation. We see, though, plenty of service sector jobs—waitresses, bartenders, secretaries, clerks—as well as the occasional professional—the sympathetic lawyer and the Texas Midlands bank executive. This also reflects the labor disparities nurtured under neoliberalism, configuring a job market where high employment is typical for “high-education professional, technical, and managerial occupations, as well as in low-end service work: food preparers, health-care aides, security guards, and so on” whereas “both blue-collar and white-collar jobs in between—the work of factory hands, sales assistants, clerks, and low-ranking administrators who could build a middle-class life, even with little formal education—” tend to disappear (Wartzman 321-322).

This set of systemic dynamics represented in the film is imbricated, yet again, into a populist logic separating the people vs. the elite—one that was of paramount importance in 2016. Unlike the more concretized image of the bank as the enemy entity, here the populist logic divides the social camp between “change” and “continuity.” To put it differently, the film palpably shows a malfunctioning political and economic system. On that reality, two factions were configured in the run-up to the 2016 election.

A populist bloc claimed that under the current institutional conditions the prospect of decent living standards in the future is untenable. This thesis is quite visible in the film—e.g. poverty, joblessness, a consistent tone of pessimism, a pervasive sense that the American dream has gone awry. Such perspective was embraced by Sanders and Trump, whose structuring claims were essentially formulated from outside and against the political establishment. A cursory look at Sanders’ and Trump’s political views through their rhetoric may reveal their populism in this change vs. continuity axis. This is Sanders’ take on the sociological profile of the Trump voter:

What the media doesn’t understand, what the establishment doesn’t understand, is there are tens of millions of people who are not racists, who are not sexists, they’re hurting [...] If you are 50 percent of older American workers, you know how much money you have in the bank for retirement? [...] Zero [...] you’re scared to death. And you’re getting sick, you go to the doctor, you’ve got an illness, how

do you pay for that? If you are middle-aged right now, you've got a couple of kids and you have health insurance, but you have very high deductibles and co-payments and you can't afford prescription drugs, you are scared to death. That is a reality that the establishment [...] [has] ignored. But that is what millions of people are experiencing every day. They are hurting. (mins. 6-8 "Charlie Rose")

When announcing his campaign, then-candidate Trump offered a portrait, rich in nativism and economic Keynesianism,¹¹ of a nation gripped by an almost irreversible crisis:

But they [China, Japan, and Mexico] are killing us economically. The U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems. [...]
They're [politicians] controlled fully—they're controlled fully by the lobbyists, by the donors, and by the special interests, fully. Yes, they control them. [...]
We need a leader that can bring back our jobs, can bring back our manufacturing, can bring back our military.

He then concluded his speech as follows: "Sadly, the American dream is dead. But if I get elected president I will bring it back bigger and better and stronger than ever before, and we will make America great again" (Trump). Despite markedly different agendas and ideological colorings, the uprisings marshalled by Sanders and Trump similarly adhere to one assumption: the economic and political structures of the country have ceased to function effectively for a majority of Americans (i.e. for "the people").

Within this populist framework of much needed change vs. stagnant continuity, the latter came to be unsurprisingly associated to Hillary Clinton's campaign. The Democratic candidacy, tellingly enough, pivoted on continuing the Obama legacy (Tau), promoting messages such as "America is already great" (Clinton; Frank, "RAI" mins. 17-18; Sainato), and hailing Clinton as the most qualified candidate credentials-wise (Nelson). In this line of professionalism

¹¹ Racism and xenophobia are obvious core components of Trump's appeal (Taibbi xx). Hochschild has called Trump "the identity politics candidate for white men" (229-230). Although *Hell or High Water* is primarily focused—and so has been my analysis—on narrating the economic distress behind potential Trump supporters, the film hints at race issues. One elderly man witness to one of the robberies is surprised to learn the Howards are not Mexicans. (min.6)

and technocracy, current politics may be tweaked or fine-tuned, but not structurally reformed.

In conclusion, the political and cultural background portrayed in *Hell High or Water* is one where, according to Fraser, options had been narrowed down to either multicultural—Democrats—or ethno-nationalist—Republicans—neoliberalism, both equally leading to “financialization and deindustrialization [...] [T]here was no force to oppose the decimation of working-class and middle-class standards of living [...] That left,” continues Fraser, “a sizeable segment of the U.S. electorate, victims of financialization and corporate globalization, without a natural political home. Given that neither of the two major blocs spoke for them, there was a *gap* in the American political universe: an empty, unoccupied zone, where anti-neoliberal, pro-working-family politics might have taken root.” Ultimately, the populist portrait in *Hell or High Water* dramatizes that gap Fraser refers to—the plot and the characters incarnating that unoccupied political terrain where no claims and demands can be brought to fruition, remaining unaddressed, untapped.

4. IDEOLOGICAL DIVERSIONS: THE TEA PARTY AND THE POLITICAL REVOLUTION OF BERNIE SANDERS

Hell or High Water shows populism to be the main explanatory force for the political context of 2016. However, the political and cultural world of the film is not exclusively circumscribed by populism, just as 2016 was a populist moment yet other types of discourses also played an important role in shaping the direction and outcomes of that moment. Thus, the film features other political realities built on logics not strictly attributable to the populist line heretofore described—which I have defined as the dichotomization of the political space prior to ideological mobilization, in compliance with Laclau.

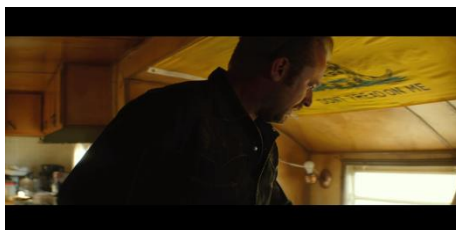


Figure 4

A major strand represented in the film is the political culture of the Tea Party, visible in, at least, three interlocked constituents: gun culture, the oil industry, and the unrepentantly individualistic nature of the leading characters—modern-day cowboys and outlaws. In fact, at one point we see an actual Tea Party image—the libertarian “Don’t Tread on Me” flag (Fig.4).



Figure 5

The plot is rich in 2nd Amendment Rights tropes—an element elevated as the ultimate symbol of freedom by the Tea Party. In two sequences, Tanner and Toby storm out of the banks they have just robbed under a hail of bullets. In the latter sequence, Tanner kills two men who shoot him and Toby while ransacking the bank. Once Tanner and Toby leave the bank, the clients respond in a militia-like manner, car-chasing and shooting at the brothers (mins. 68-69). The images of the oil industry also loom large. The entire narration is dominated by oil. The ultimate goal of Toby’s scheme is to retain the oil-drenched land where the family ranch is on. The mise-en-scène and visual grammar of the film repeatedly underscore the prominence of oil in the story (Fig.5). Even in the tense final dialogue between Toby and Marcus, a carefully framed shot shows oil pumps physically separating both characters (Fig.6). Tanner and Toby, deprived of any means to secure a decent livelihood, resort to breaking the law in order to safeguard the family ranch—the only resource left to avoid homelessness.



Figure 6

All these elements can be related to one basic political byproduct of the Great Recession: estrangement from politics and polity-building. “During the depression of the 1930s, Americans turned to the federal government for aid in their economic recovery. But in response to the Great Recession of 2008, a majority of Americans turned away from it” (Hochschild 8). It is within that political logic, fruitfully hegemonized by conservatism, where freedom is tantamount to absence of the federal government, that the right to bear guns becomes the means for people’s own security, oil a window into a sound economy, and, overall, individual initiative the only province of personal agency. As Hochschild claims in her account of Tea Party culture “I heard a great deal about freedom in the sense of freedom *to*—to talk on your cellphone as you drove a car, to pick up a drive-in daiquiri with a straw on the side, to walk about with a loaded gun. But there was almost no talk about *freedom from* such things as gun violence, car accidents, or toxic pollution” (71-72). In this mindset “[t]he more oil, the more jobs. The more jobs, the more prosperity, and the less need for government aid” (73). We can see here how the demand for protection and stability can be ideologically colored by radicalizing classical forms of American individualism. Thus, “[a]ll state intervention, except in connection with matters that cannot be regulated through the market, is considered as an attack on individual liberty” (Laclau and Mouffe 173). It is fair to say that measures such as gun control or environmental protection would not sit well with many of the gun-toting, job-seeking characters in *Hell or High Water*, for whom bearing arms and the oil industry are synonym for individual liberty and economic safety.

Less noticeably, the film also represents discontent factoring in progressivism and class consciousness. The anti-establishment vein of the film, largely articulated via the anti-banks discourse, is occasionally expressed with different inflections. This is Alberto speaking, the half-Native American half-Mexican partner of Marcus:

A long time ago, your ancestors [talking to Marcus] was the Indians till someone came along and killed them, broke ‘em down, made you into one of them. 150 years ago, all this was my ancestors’ land [Mexicans]. Everything you can see. Everything you saw yesterday. Till the grandparents of these folks [current Caucasian West Texans] took it. And now, it’s been taken from them. Except it ain’t no army

doing it. It's those sons of bitches right there [pointing at the Texas Midlands Bank]. (mins. 57-58)

Here, the narration conveys political critique on the grounds of race and class, the American experience being the succession of land expropriations and racial cleansings—a message akin to post-consensus social histories. There is a comment at the end worth delving into, when Alberto says that the historical privilege of white Americans—meaning the land—has been “taken from them” by an elite class that has economically emancipated from the majority of Americans. In Alberto’s narrative, class status has equalized almost all social bodies. Acknowledging the historical phenomenon of racial violence and land dispossession, Alberto, nonetheless, sees the post-Great Recession context as one where most citizens have been equally subject to exploitation and economic inequality—whites included. In addition, in one of the last sequences of the film, Toby voices his status as a long-time member of the white poor: “I’ve been poor my whole life. So were my parents, their parents before them. It’s like a disease passing from generation to generation, becomes a sickness. That’s what it is. Infects every person you know” (mins. 93-94). In this new light, Toby’s plan is meant to break free from the so-called “white trash” status—a reminder of white downward mobility as an integral constituent of American history (Isenberg 320). Alberto’s and Toby’s words highlight similar concerns by foregrounding, just as the Bernie Sanders’ campaign did, the parameters of class and economic injustice as the crucial vectors to actually understand the nation’s real state of affairs. “The Sanders movement [...],” writes Mike Davis, “has shown that heartland discontent can be brought under the canopy of a ‘democratic socialism’ that reignites New Deal hopes for fundamental economic rights and the Civil Rights Movement’s goals of equality and social justice.” The Sanders campaign—retrieving a political discourse the Democratic Party had long dropped¹²—has placed the fight against income inequality and economic plutocracy as the main organizing principle for a transformative politics. Albeit secondarily, the film likewise addresses class factors as shaping the political discourse of the 2016 moment by having characters like Toby and Alberto

¹² See the realignments in the Democratic Party since the 1970s in Berman 164-187; Frank, *Listen* 62-105; Waddan 1-43; and Wilentz 323-381.

articulate some of their discontents on the basis of class-warfare tropes.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Hell or High Water is likely to be featured as a prescient film in the upcoming scholarly literature on American film and the Trump administration.¹³ In addition, this is a film that lends itself to be examined from manifold theoretical standpoints. The reading I have performed is but one possible approach. This film certainly warrants a gender perspective—the sense of masculinity-in-crisis as caused by deindustrialization (Kimmel 216) is pervasive throughout the narration. It would also merit a deeper analysis genre-wise—not only does the film tap into certain motifs connected to the subgenre of elegiac westerns¹⁴; it also heavily draws on the ethos, as noted before, of the so-called post-western as authored by Campbell (2013) given the film’s multiple images related to the “death of the west.”

As for the film’s strictly political subtexts, I would favor analyses focused less on pigeonholing ideologically the film—e.g. pro-Trump, pro-Sanders—than on identifying instances of economic angst and material wants that go unaddressed. Taylor Sheridan—the screenwriter of *Hell or High Water*—commented that the West Texas portrayed in the film is a

community where there are no social services [...] Planned Parenthood is three states away, so they don’t understand why funding is going there. And money meant for highways doesn’t make sense because their highways never get fixed. All these things, when you study them, start to explain the political leanings that have nothing to do with ideology. It has to do with [the question:] ‘how can I control this bubble right around me that’s imploding?’

Building on Sheridan’s insights, the film shows, precisely, characters populating a socio-economic and political context that severely hollows out their living standards and the promises of prosperity and reward for hard work codified in the American dream—hence, an

¹³ A few film critics have seen *Hell or High Water* as being linked to the Trump demographic—see Ayuso, D’Alessandro, and Doherty.

¹⁴ The elegiac western zeroes in on the myth of the west as being either long-gone or dismantled—with the resulting sense of despair, disorientation, and crisis. See Lusted 205-230.

array of political and economic discontents and resentments, which are ultimately attributed to malfunctioning institutions and actors. My emphasis on the dichotomizations that run through the film—change vs. continuity; people vs. elites—has been meant to explain how the seismic shifts of 2016 can be fundamentally explained less through ideological divides than through the distinctive logic of populism—not that the epochal shifts of 2016 occurred in an ideology-free vacuum, as I have indicated in section four. The logic of populism is facilitated and exacerbated by the dynamics of neoliberalism. In *Hell or High Water* the landscapes and the leading characters become avatars for the consequences of financialization, offshoring, and deindustrialization. In the light of the film, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders can be viewed as different channelings of similar urges and malaises, evincing how populism “is not a fixed constellation but a series of discursive resources which can be put to very different uses” (Laclau 176).

Hell or High Water narrativizes and aestheticizes the erosion of neoliberalism and the existence of potential populist lines dividing the social body, ready to be tapped into, ripe for ideological contents to shape them. Antonio Gramsci said that political decay tends to produce an impasse he termed interregnum—“[w]here the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (556). What *Hell or High Water* delves into is, plain and simple, just that: the underpinnings of an economic and political hegemony crumbling and the raw materials for the next one emerging.

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