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'I WILL DESTROY THE NOBLES, SEIZE THEIR ASSETS'

Government by the worst

Donald Trump made his presidential office serve his personal financial interests. He wasn't the first.

BY IBRAHIM WARDE



Presidential son-in-law Jared Kushner, April 2020
Winn McNamee · Getty

HE great historian of international relations Stanley Hoffmann considered that the best explanation of the advent of the second world war was Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*. For him, the play, in which everybody turns into a rhinoceros but for one person resistant to the herd,

‘capture[d] the essence of the period — all the absurdities and tragedies of that long descent into degradation — better than any work of history or social science’ (1).

Dario Fo, the playwright, comedian and director, won the 1997 Nobel literature prize for ‘emulat[ing] the jesters of the Middle Ages in scourging authority and upholding the dignity of the downtrodden’. His best-known play, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, is set in a police station. As authorities debate whether the death was murder, suicide or accident, a madman who has escaped from a psychiatric hospital impersonates a judge and takes control of the investigation.

Ever since Aristophanes, comedy has provided cover for social commentary and criticism of the powerful, and comedians and satirists have been tempted to enter real politics; the French comedian Coluche briefly took part in the 1981 presidential contest. And after the 2008 financial crash and its political aftermath, the discrediting of global elites created an opening for alternative elites, including those who mocked the establishment. In Italy, the actor Giuseppe ‘Beppe’ Grillo’s creation of the Five Star movement in 2009 upended the political scene. In Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, an actor who had played a history teacher in the television series *Servant of the People*, won the 2019 presidential election on a platform of ending corruption.

Macbeth’s pataphysical cousin

In his play *Ubu roi* (King Ubu), Alfred Jarry, a precursor of the Surrealist movement, created an archetype of the greedy and bloodthirsty tyrant. Ubu, conceived as a ‘pataphysical cousin’ of Shakespeare’s Macbeth, assassinates King Wenceslas of Poland and takes his place. Once in power, he kills so many people that his supporters abandon him and, with the help of the Russian tsar, chase him away.

Jarry understood the logic of unfettered power. Unconstrained by norms and decorum, Ubu is a grotesque and shameless character, megalomaniac and authoritarian, an *enfant terrible* who ‘says stupid things with loutish authority’. Indifferent to the rules he sets and violates, if not contemptuous of them, he is sometimes transparent in trumpeting his designs and methods. He says, ‘I have the honour to announce to you that, in order to enrich the kingdom, I will destroy all the nobles and seize their assets,’ and, ‘I want to get rich; I won’t give up a penny.’ The blurring of lines between public treasury and private purse is central to this form of leadership.

*We make laws tailor-made for the king,
ministers are chosen from his court, and
they protect his sole interests. And the
public applauds*

Dario Fo

The 20th century had no shortage of putschist generals, bloodthirsty buffoons and other Ubu-like figures who caused havoc in the countries they ruled. Some, such as Idi Amin who ruled Uganda from 1971 to 1979, remain engrained in public memory (2). In communist Romania, Nicolae Ceaușescu embodied the madness of absolute power: his cult of personality included building pharaonic monuments to his own glory and conferring upon himself titles such as ‘Genius of the Carpathians’ and ‘Danube of Thought’.

A new variety of Ubu-type ruler has appeared this century, at the intersection of neoliberal ideology and money in politics. In 2002 Dario Fo wrote of the Italian prime minister, billionaire Silvio Berlusconi, ‘We are here before the most foolish paradox, worthy of King Ubu, the farce of the impossible: we make laws tailor-made for the king, cabinet ministers are chosen from his court, and they protect his sole interests. And the public applauds. At best, someone will emit a small burp of disapproval. The Cavaliere and his employees understood full well that they controlled all levers of power, and that they benefited from total impunity’ (3).

That impunity only worsened with the 2016 election of Donald Trump. The architect of his victory, Steve Bannon (later ousted), always had the ambitious political project of ‘deconstructing the administrative state’: dismantling the state apparatus put in place by the New Deal in the 1930s and expanded in the 1960s with the reforms of the Great Society. Michael Lewis, in his book *The Fifth Risk: Undoing Democracy* (4), about the unforeseeable dangers only experienced civil servants can manage, details the deconstruction: not filling certain positions or reducing them to ‘acting’ positions; dismantling existing administrative units, emptying them of substance, cutting off funding; discrediting experts and accusing them of the darkest designs. This is how the structure to fight pandemics, designed during the Obama administration, was abolished two years ago. The president-elect flew into a rage when he learned that a fundraiser was being organised to pay staff for his accession into office and screamed at the head of the transition team, ‘You’re stealing my fucking money.’

‘Off with their heads!’

Trump reached the highest office without any experience of public service and continues to behave like the head of a family business, constantly demanding proof of unconditional loyalty from his appointees. Like the Red Queen in *Through the Looking Glass*, he has reacted to any perceived transgression with a peremptory ‘Off with their heads!’ His administration has been marked by constant purges, with claims that those purged had been appointed by the Obama administration or belonged to the ‘deep state’. Anyone who stood in his way has been barraged with tweets, and subject to other retribution. The former CIA chief John Brennan criticised

Trump, who then took away his security clearance; Brennan responded by reviving a forgotten concept when he tweeted, ‘Your kakistocracy is collapsing’ (5).

The best public servant is the worst one. A thoroughly first-rate man in public service is corrosive. He eats holes in our liberties. The better he is and the longer he stays the greater the danger

Homer Ferguson

This term, from the Greek *kakistos* (worst) and *kratos* (power), means government by the worst; it was invented in 17th-century England to describe the political rise of the least qualified or scrupulous, and reappeared with the elections of Trump and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Alexander Nazaryan investigated the backgrounds and experiences of Trump appointees and found a gallery of whacky characters, notable for conflicts of interest and lack of qualifications for the positions they held: he called it an ‘an orgy for first-class kleptocrats’ (6). For some important positions, such as head of the Department of Energy or the Environmental Protection Agency, Trump selected people who had called for the elimination of those agencies.

Kakistocracy in action is personified by the outsized role of presidential son-in-law Jared Kushner, son of New Jersey real estate developer Charles Kushner and an expert in failing upwards whose experience was limited to the family business. When still in his 20s, he took charge of Kushner Properties because his father was in prison for illegal campaign contributions, tax evasion and witness tampering. The New York business community laughed at Jared when he vastly overpaid for the 666 Fifth Avenue building, at \$1.8bn the highest ever price for a single building.

When Trump came to power, he appointed his son-in-law as a senior advisor with an ever-expanding portfolio of jobs and special missions. He has been entrusted with reforming the criminal justice system, establishing direct channels to Israel and Saudi Arabia, pursuing diplomacy with China and Mexico, creating an Office of American Innovation to revamp how the government works, and building a border wall with Mexico. He managed to offload his Manhattan building on investors who want to court Trump (7). His crowning achievement was supposed to be the January 2020 ‘deal of the century’ to bring peace to the Middle East. It was greeted by total indifference, and he was soon put in charge of the fight against the coronavirus, in which he remains active, especially by disbursing stimulus funding to cronies.

Beyond ‘misgovernment for profit’, kakistocracy serves a political agenda. Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform, said the aim of free-market zealots is to reduce the size

of the state ‘in order to be able to drown it in a bathtub’, implying it needs incompetence to discredit the idea of public service.

On the eve of the Great Depression, the virtues of kakistocracy were often openly celebrated. The former president of the American Chamber of Commerce Homer Ferguson said in 1928, ‘The best public servant is the worst one. A thoroughly first-rate man in public service is corrosive. He eats holes in our liberties. The better he is and the longer he stays the greater the danger’ (8).

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- (1) Stanley Hoffmann, ‘The arrival of World War II: an anticlimax [<https://www.nytimes.com/1989/09/01/opinion/the-arrival-of-world-war-ii-an-anticlimax.html>]’, *The New York Times*, 1 September 1989.
 - (2) Subject of movies such as *General Idi Amin Dada: a Self-Portrait*, directed by Barbet Schroeder (1974), and *The Last King of Scotland*, directed by Kevin Macdonald (2007).
 - (3) Dario Fo, ‘Le nouveau fascisme est arrivé [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2002/01/11/italie-le-nouveau-fascisme-est-arrive-par-dario-fo_258063_1819218.html]’ (The new fascism has arrived), *Le Monde*, 11 January 2002.
 - (4) Michael Lewis, *The Fifth Risk: Undoing Democracy*, WW Norton, New York, 2018.
 - (5) Avi Selk, ‘Kakistocracy, a 374-year-old word that means “government by the worst,” just broke the dictionary [https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?next_url=https%3a%2f%2fwww.washingtonpost.com%2fnews%2fthe-intersect%2fwp%2f2018%2f04%2f13%2fkakistocracy-a-374-year-old-word-that-means-government-by-the-worst-just-broke-the-dictionary%2f]’, *The Washington Post*, 13 April 2018.
 - (6) Alexander Nazaryan, *The Best People: Trump’s Cabinet and the Siege on Washington*, Hachette, New York 2019.
 - (7) In August 2018 he sold the property to a group named Brookfield, which includes Middle Eastern investors. See Mark Vandevelde, ‘Brookfield: inside the \$500bn secretive investment firm [<https://www.ft.com/content/595a77d0-3867-11ea-a6d3-9a26f8c3cba4>]’, *Financial Times*, London, 5 February 2020.
 - (8) Thomas Frank, *The Wrecking Crew: How Conservatives Rule*, Metropolitan Books, New York, 2008.

TRANSLATIONS

FRANÇAIS Kakistocratie

ESPAÑOL Caquistocracia

ESPERANTO Kakistokratio