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Adrian Liviu SCUTARIU[1]*

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[1] "Ştefan cel Mare" University of Suceava, Faculty of Economics and Public Administration, Suceava, Romania, livius@seap.usv.ro.

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Deconstructing Roth's *The Plot against America*: The Making of the President Donald Trump

Majid SHIRVANI[1]*

Abstract

This article deals with deconstructing both Philip Roth and Donald Trump's rhetoric in an attempt to self-performance by reproducing the fundamental history and knowledge within the multicultural Plot Against America. It also seeks to examine Roth's too-true vision on Trump's rise as a product of the American heritage of racism, sexism, and to uncover the alternate history as a way to self-manifestation, while concurrently subverting its validity by showing how such an approach is inadequate in reaching the self-making. By historicizing the anti-Semitic discourse, Roth doubts and influences the "traps of history", mainly when dealing with the Jewish minority, as well as Trump does by his anti-immigrant and racist positions (xenophobia), in order to generate a transgressive space for his fictional Lindbergh. Moreover, "economic anxiety" has become a notorious term for articulating Trump's discourse; even when his campaigns clear call to racism are acknowledged; it was accepted that this racism is caused by economics rather than by a revival of white nationalism. In spite of the explicit racism and nationalism that has always been the milestone of Trump's campaign, within Roth's novel, it isn't just the media that distorts the essence of Lindbergh's appeal to the public; most of the Jews disavows that virulent anti-Semitism has taken hold of the United States.

Keywords: Alternate history, ethnicity, subjectivity, eliminationist rhetoric, nationalism.

1. Introduction

In *The Plot Against America*, Roth introduces an ethnic history in order to demonstrate how minority groups lack autonomy as a result of the

[1] Lorestan University, Khorramabad, Iran, m.shirvani@aol.com.

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Corresponding Author: Majid SHIRVANI
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hegemony's manipulation of history. This approaches to historiography and the tone with which history is treated in this novel not only help illuminate how the narrating self re-tells history through its own stories, but also how it locates its own placement within those narrative frameworks. Employing this approach, Roth "asks what it means to be an American and suggests that subjectivity is not just a narrative construct but also, inextricably, a historical product" [1]. To highlight Jewish anxieties in the period before Pearl Harbour, Roth stated that "Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear." [2] Roth's 2004 fascinating novel is actually a deconstruction of Donald Trump's nomination, a Republican candidate who managed to motivate a stepped down and isolated Party, a beguiling outsider having no political experience and whose racist and bragging rhetoric could not even stop his presidential impetus.

Roth's novel action takes place in 1940 with the Republican convention nomination of the notorious transcontinental pilot. His anti-Semitic manifestations and Nazi behaviors are part of the collective consciousness, but on his campaign, he only states: "Vote for Lindbergh or vote for war." While Roosevelt rejects to seriously acknowledge the candidate, the historical Lindbergh starts flying to every state in his popular airplane. As a result, the media attention becomes high. He finally wins the presidency by a resounding victory just as Trump won the elections at the end of 2016.

Just as Lindbergh, Donald Trump won his position as a recognized business personality (i.e. as a prodigious real-estate magnate) rather than as a politician. Naturally, while Roth's 1940-era Lindbergh is a standard, rough, silent Midwestern man, Trump's licentiousness is part of his recourse. While on his campaign trail, Lindbergh adverts to anti-Semitism; on his political advertising and marketing for the 2016 presidential race, Trump does not tamp down his rhetoric [2] about Islamists[3] or immigrants[4]. On the contrary,

[2] However, the most manifestly eliminationist rhetoric articulated in the presidential campaign was intended for outside threats, especially for the Muslim world. During his aggressive discourse, Trump raised the prospect of killing protesters and reporters, just to instantly reject it. Either Trump or any other major political figure has not focused their campaign on the eradication of an inside opponent, as an almost existential evil. Trump's assembly sometimes used a menacing tone, especially when The Donald challenged the badgers. Therefore, Trump replied to protesters by delivering a speech of how Vladimir Putin executed opponent reporters: "I'm totally against that," he said. "By the way, I hate some of these people (the protesters) but I'd never kill them. I hate them, I'll be honest. I'd never kill them.' He then went over: "I'd never kill them. I just hate them. But some people are such lying, disgusting people – it's true, it's true – but I'd never kill them." [3]

[3] Islamism is linked in Berman's book entitled *Terror and Liberalism (2004)*, with the latest embodiment of racist impulses, and advocated general resistance to support the War on

he makes somehow a more sharp synthesis of Roth's Charles Lindbergh. Yet it could be too easily to declare Trump as a fascist, though he certainly fitted into the modern right-wing or the oppressive[5] leadership worldwide. Therefore, the improbable just happened. Renowned and unavoidable candidates were challenged or removed. In fact, right the word "unavoidable" shows that nowadays nothing feels unavoidable. It is a time of an alternative history, of alienation, of uncomfortable uncertainly, of an endless "What if," what might be called a science fiction or alternate impetus, where rules of cause and effect are corrupted, or reworded in a language we cannot understand.

To sustain all these, *The Plot Against America* was inspired by the historian Arthur Schlesinger's distinct line regarding the fear of Lindbergh's political campaign. Now, our hypotheses are: What if the president enforced agreeable assimilationist programs intended to disintegrate the Jewish community? What if he subscribed a nonaggression pact with Germany? What if a gossip determined to widespread anti-Jewish Holocaust? The novel is woven around fear, and this could be interpreted as a declaration that Jews are never really safe in any country, but Roth is more interested in the attitudes of Newark's Jews than in native anti-Semitism where Jews

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Terror mirrored the identical fear that determined previous generation to accept Nazism. It was him who publicized a description of American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq as anti-fascist campaigns. [4]

[4] In his online article entitled "Donald Trump and the Politics of Disgust" (2015) published in *New Republic Daily Magazine*, Alexander Hurst outlines an exciting analogy between Trump's intimate germ phobia (he appreciated – in an interview with *Dateline NBC* in 1999 – shaking hands ("Well, I'm not a big fan of shaking hands") as a 'barbaric' act: "They have medical reports all the time. Shaking hands, you catch colds, you catch the flu, you catch it, you catch all sorts of things. Who knows what you don't catch?", while washing his hands 'as much as possible': "One of the curses of American society is the simple act of shaking hands," he wrote in *The Art of the Deal*. "I happen to be a clean hands freak. I feel much better after I thoroughly wash my hands, which I do as much as possible" [5] and his rhetoric about both immigrants and his internal enemies, always supported by revolt and aversion. 'When Trump invokes "rapists, drug dealers, killers,'" Hurst motivates, 'or talks about Marco Rubio's sweating, or says that Hillary Clinton got "schlonged," it presents his supporters, caught in the intersection of disgust and fear, with people against whom they can recoil. Feminism, Islam, a majority-minority society, pressing 1 for English and 2 for Spanish, Barack Obama himself – there is something bad, something impure that has infiltrated America, and it must be expelled.' [6]

[5] The most notable factor in anticipating Trump's advocacy was that "authoritarian inclination", followed by the "fear of terrorism". This is the key to Trumpism: "From pledging to "make America great again" by building a wall on the border to promising to close mosques and ban Muslims from visiting the United States, Trump is playing directly to authoritarian inclinations." [7]

know other Jews, while non-Jews are seen as strange creatures or objects of fear and delight. These non-Jews are the ones who elected Lindbergh.

2. Theoretical Background

Nowadays U.S. immigration policy is a predicament. The Obama Administration may have made this situation worse, though the underlying problem – suspicious border enforcement alongside with a liberal prerogative state acting as n international focus – dates back to Obama presidential term. Nevertheless, we think this recent "plot against America" – to use the title of Roth's alternative history of Lindbergh Administration during World War II – does not deal with this dilemma, but Donald Trump's adequate program, announced on "Meet the Press," to deal with it.

Engaging in supporting the country's borders, enforcing its laws, and secure its working-class community, Trump introduced in his rhetoric some plausible immigration enforcement policy measures including "e-verify" and severe measures to restrict or discourage undesirable or illegal people or behavior on "sanctuary cities." Instead he merged this with a guarantee to dismiss 11 to 20 million unlawful citizens, and to deprive their American-born children of their birthright citizenship. However, Trump's Wall[6] would incorporate a doorway while dismissal would be accompanied by an extra-territorial investigation process under which "worthy" illegals and their children would be reaccepted with discharge. There will be no place in Trump's America for illegals – past, present or future – and no room for those who embrace Trumpism[7] for self-respecting Jews.

3. Argument of the paper

There is no doubt that nowadays the Americans live in their own version of Roth's Jewish Newark, while tweeting or posting, with regard to Trump's presidency. Our research question is: Do they expect some magic intervention to set things right? Maybe the American people should step out of their neighborhoods and find a solution to stop him. In the end, any

[6] "People are pouring across the southern border," Trump says. He adds: "I will build a wall. It will be a great wall. People will not come in unless they come in legally. Drugs will not pour through that wall."
(https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/02/us/politics/transcript-trump-immigration-speech.html, accessed on March 16, 2017)

[7] However, Trumpism does not stand on anti-Semitism; it employs Islamophobia. Trump is an anti-fascist epic hero with clearly fascist propensities (i.e. the travel restrictions *imposed* on *seven Muslim*-majority *countries* in January 2017)

consequence is unavoidable.

Ten candidates were substantially supported by the American electorate during the 1940 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, with only Thomas Dewey gathering more than a third of the overall total. The possible nominee, Wendell Willkie, got only 10 percent on the first roll call; by the fourth ballot he had arisen as one of three front-runners, deadlocked with Dewey and Robert Taft. As Philip Roth re-considers this instance in his allo-history *The Plot Against America*, the balloting proceeds without resolution until 4 a.m., when Charles Lindbergh gets over the convention floor and announces his candidature as the nominee. The Republican candidate is promptly elected, and a campaign against the minorities begins while disruptive elements are debilitating the parts of American society. Some citizens flee to Canada, but most of all remain, where they watch the alienation of the despised minority group, first by re-education programs, persecution, pressure, and imposed relocation. Moreover, Lindbergh's fatal rule over the country is the backdrop for the more personal drama as the young "Philip Roth" tries to make sense of his changing world and witnesses his mother and father struggle to accept the nationally endorsed anti-Semitism that has made them unexpected foes of the state.

The main argument of the paper is Trump's evident unstoppable steamroll to the Republican nomination becomes the most relevant in this context. During the 2015 autumn, when Trump first began to be acknowledged as a plausible candidate, several journalists made the connection between the Roth's plot and the 'stranger than fiction' events on the American political stage. Some of them compared Trump not just to the anti-Semitic segregationist, but to Hitler himself, a comparison that turned Trump's supporters progressively rampant. Trump's highly-rehearsed political rhetorical skills become a triumph of contradictions.

As Roth Pierpont highlighted in her biography, *Roth Unbound: A Writer and His Books*, "in conversation Roth is careful to distinguish between ontological fascism[8] and Bush's merely right wing government." [9]

[8] In his relevant article on *The Plot Against America: Neoliberalism and Antiracism*, Walter Benn Michaels portrays its employment on a tripartite logical agreement: "'Part of the book's power,' he says, 'derives from its realism', the fact that it feels like the truth – one reviewer called it Roth's "most believable book in years" – while another part derives from the fact that, of course, it's not true – when the police come to remove the Jews from the hotel, it's scary but, like a horror movie, pleasurably scary because its history is counterfactual – it didn't happen here. And both these facts – the fact that it could have happened here and the fact that it didn't – are given additional power by a third fact, the fact that, of course, it did happen here, only not to the Jews." [8] He keeps on claiming that in order to introduce

4. Arguments to support the thesis

The purpose of this study is to focus on the eliminationist, fastidious and dividing rhetoric of Trump's discourse during his presidential campaign. In doing this, we must turn from fiction to several nowadays parallels. In November 2016 Donald Trump finally won the presidential elections with 279 electoral votes by a frank rhetoric against Muslims, Hispanics, African-Americans, and liberals; by nominating his opponent a criminal and pledging to prosecute her; by arousing crowds to violent acts. It is very easy to spot incipient forms of his eliminationist rhetoric, mainly in relation to Muslims. For example, when during his interview taken by Bill O'Reilly in Arizona, Trump replied: 'I would do pretty severe stuff', the crowd roared its approval.

Donald Trump's amazing triumph during the 2016 presidential race must be must be regarded through the lens of *The Plot Against America* in spite of Roth's protests. Just like Lindbergh, Trump manipulated by his fame and richness[9] – as well as by his private plane! – to prevail over a pessimistically fractured Republican Party. Joining a irrepressible field that increased to 17, Trump stepped into the race when no candidate constantly polled over 15%. Politically, both Trump and Lindbergh share a segregationist character that flows into ethno-nationalism. The fictional Lindbergh mirrors his historical peer whose anti-Semitism and veneration for Hitler was sold to the American electorate as a judicial opposition to engagement in World War II. Mostly adapted from the historical record of his discourses Lindbergh's dialogue is in fact a silent adaptation of Trump's winding baffling rhetoric, in which "Mexican immigrants" and "China" were replaced for "Jews" and "Great Britain." Trump's slogan is to make America great again, while Lindbergh's desire is to keep America far from the Jewish war; both consider themselves as crafty dealmakers that perform their goals through their charismatic personality. As expected, Trump's electioneering is claimed on his expertise to make better deals – on trade and on subsidizing the building of imaginary separating walls.

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fascism Roth employs a post-Holocaust perspective where anti-Semitism became its (nearly exclusive) distinctive mark.

[9] According to CNN Transcripts, Trump started his presidential campaign by insisting on his assets: "I'm really rich. I'm not doing that to brag, because you know what? I don't have to brag." http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1506/16/cnr.08.html, accessed on March 15, 2017. Equally "when he's not hurling invective at others, Trump can be heard preening on his own greatness, exulting over his intelligence, his wealth, and his way with women" [10]

In this respect, we will employ the research method of drawing a parallel between Trump and the politicians illustrated by Roth's hidden predictions, their shared xenophobia and explicitly racist rhetoric. The speech of Father Coughlin sermons can be found online in his quality as the radio priest who supports Lindbergh in *The Plot Against America*. When overcoming the dissonance of historical distance, Coughlin's message becomes amazingly contemporary. While listening to Coughlin, everyone can just realize how much of his rhetoric would be fully unimpeachable in Trump's rise within the present context of presidential politics –as if it was addressed to Muslims rather than Jews. For instance, the stereotypical nature of Trump's rhetoric – he recurrently employs words like "loser" and "hater" in his speech – has a narrative purpose to reinforce messages in his polemical combat.

5. Arguments to argue the thesis

In *The Plot Against America*, Philip Roth speculated that the super-famous pro-German rabid segregationist, Charles Lindbergh, was nominated the Republican candidate for presidency in 1940 and then triumphed over Franklin D. Roosevelt. After winning the elections, Lindbergh signs peace treaties with Nazi Germany and Japan and invests Henry Ford as secretary of the interior. Immediately after that, Anti-Semitic groups start an offensive against Jews while the Ku Klux Klan is in rage for blacks. As a consequence, white nationalism starts ruling the country. Roth was allegorically and implicitly writing about something hidden in America. Later on, Trump came along to further speculate that passive spirit driven by a charismatic leadership that he has accomplished what Lindy, the spokesman for the America First movement, hardly conceived.

Trump's rhetoric betrays his eagerness to make peace with Vladimir Putin, who more than any other politician (statesman) showed himself against the Western values regarding the individual liberties and political freedom. He even hacked the senior Democratic officials' emails – which Trump had the massive cynicism to welcome. Furthermore, Trump's speech targets the present Hispanic or Muslim Americans immigrants. Nowadays, American institutions are far more dynamic than those in the new democracies of Eastern Europe, and we do not doubt while not be concerned that Trump will deal with running off the charge upon judiciary independence, or the free press. Throughout his life as a businessman, Trump has never allowed opposition, or tolerated its lawfulness. Why should he shift his perspective now that he won the public adhesion?

Who can predict how President Trump will act in, and to, the world? He has leading reflexes, but he does not have policies. We admit that he respects Putin[10], the more as he considers Syria already a lost cause. He would probably disclaim supporting the Syrian opposition and instead engage with Putin and Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad in order to fighting terrorism.

We are also familiar with the fact that the President-elect Donald Trump thinks the nuclear pact that former President Barack Obama fastidiously signed with Iran to be the worst deal[11] ever made (or it is probably linked with worst with every other agreement Obama had ever reached). If together with the support of the Republican Congress he revokes Iran deal[12] (as his "no.1 priority"), this will allow Iran to deliriously develop its nuclear enrichment (i.e. illegal ballistic missiles), and successively challenging Israel (supported by American help) to launch an offensive and thus to isolate the US. In reply, Iran will make use of its proxies, including Hezbollah, to fund assaults against Israel and the United States everywhere it can.

Another issue is that Trump believes global warming a farce. Just a couple of things are more doubtless than that Donald Trump administration will disavow the Paris agreement to restrict carbon emissions and Washington will renounce to its efforts to reduce climate change. Trump is that disengaging voice. Called by Roth as "humanly impoverished"[13] [12], he is willing to build walls: against trade, immigration, or all the evil forces worldwide, believing that this is why he won a mandate to do so.

While Roth's young narrator is shaken by Lindbergh's success over Roosevelt, the mass media instantly embrace an omniscient position. The

[10] To quote Judith Thurman's editorial "Phillip Roth's Emails on Trump": "The historical Lindbergh was an isolationist who espoused a catchphrase that Donald Trump borrowed for his Presidential campaign, and for his Inaugural Address: "America First." The fictional Lindbergh, like the actual Trump, expressed admiration for a murderous European dictator, and his election emboldened xenophobes. In Roth's novel, a foreign power – Nazi Germany – meddles in an American election, leading to a theory that the President is being blackmailed. In real life, U.S. intelligence agencies are investigating Trump's ties to Vladimir Putin and the possibility that a dossier of secret information – *kompromat* – gives Russia leverage with his regime." [11]

[11] During his last Republican speech, he literally labeled the Iran nuclear deal as "horrible, disgusting, and absolutely incompetent."

[12] For further reading, follow https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2016-12-12/trump-can-crack-down-on-iran-without-shredding-the-nuclear-deal, accessed on March 14, 2017.

[13] For further reading on Roth's viewpoint, follow https://www.bustle.com/p/philip-roth-calls-donald-trump-humanly-impoverished-in-blistering-email-32398, accessed on March 15, 2017.

domination of American anti-Semitism is certainly removed. Further on in the novel, the increasingly fast-paced plot developed by several news which unveil the terrible gullibility and inactivity of the fourth estate. All these mirror the bitter rejection on the part of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and other considerable newspapers and political news headlines to highlight Trump's disgust and insults during the Republican election primary. The editorial "Donald Trump's Heated Words Were Destined to Stir Violence, Opponents Say"[14] of *The New York Times* 2016 edition offers a classical example of the sympathy of "Opponents Say" [13] providing what should be a great news event – the unconfirmed nominee menaces with an aggressive uprising at the party convention – into another discussion where "both sides" bring into justified arguments.[15]

6. Dismantling the arguments against

During his political rise, Trump's interminable deluge of fearful policy statements, lies, insults, plaudits for foreign dictators, and misspelled tweets were like a heavily flood in a burned desert – incapable of absorbing it all, the political media acted merely as a pipe-line for an endless torrent of absurdity. Nevertheless, just as significant as the media reaction to Trump is the American public's reluctance to acknowledge that a major political party has nominated a racist, xenophobic and demagogic fanatic. In spite of the conspicuous racism and nationalism that always proved to be the nature of Trump's presidential campaign, several political analysts became eager to support his economic affairs[16] or an unexpected public interest in multilateral trade agreements. In Roth's novel, not only the mass media distort the essence of Lindbergh's message to the public; most of the Jews in Weequahic abstain to think that dangerous anti-Semitism took over the United States. Like the inhabitants of Weequahic, the present-day Americans within the entire the political spectrum embrace a version of history according to which the United States constantly moved towards acknowledgement and egalitarianism and a post-racial future.

Similarly, when *The Plot Against America* was released, parallels between Lindbergh and George W. Bush were jotted down, even the novel's

[14] For further reading, follow: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/us/politics/donald-trumps-heated-words-were-destined-to-stir-violence-opponents-say.html?_r=0, accessed on March 15, 2017.

[15] For further reading, follow: http://buzzmachine.com/2017/02/19/trump-press-murder-suicide-pact/, accessed on March 15, 2017.

[16] "Economic anxiety" is a notorious phrase to voice Trump's interests even when his racist campaigns are clearly acknowledged.

most crucial events could not have manifested during the 21st century. While, in an effort to unveil the Jewish immigrants' descendants to "real" American families, the ambiguous euphemistic language chiefly used by Lindbergh's Office of American Absorption in political propaganda recalled the newly official fascist-embracing Department of Homeland Security.

It is more than evident that *The Plot Against America* focuses on a Carlylean "Great Man" theory of alternate history that may disappoint the readers who expected a subtler turn on political stage. The plot centers on the suspicious rise of an individual fictional villain who mysteriously disappears after his flight from Louisville to Washington. Nowadays, presidents do not benefit from complete authority or control over the economy, foreign affairs, terrorism, or health care. Therefore, Roth's portrayal of an all-powerful mischievous man might be received as diverting but gullible to the last decade spectators of both American and world history. Contrasting the Third Reich, Lindbergh does not perform an American version of the Nuremberg Laws or riot violence (the anti-Semitic rebellions in the novel rise after he mysteriously disappears). Rather, he obviously conveys to other anti-Semitic groups that they no longer need to dissimulate their biases.

7. Conclusions

This assignment of state agency to a single leading figure might be interpreted as gullible to present-day readers, but the novel's plot implies that the author takes the idea seriously. Lindbergh's election authorized and operated a strong but hidden pressure of anti-Semitism that generated an ever more unfriendly world for the Roths and other Jews.

Also, Trump's gestures to his supporters are significantly evident: exert violence if necessary to banish opponents from assemblies; condemn Muslims and Mexicans for all of the United States's shortages; honor state and authority over agreement and deliberation. Most of the American voters accepted his regretful mixture of ethno-nationalism, authoritarianism, and evident self-interest.

In this respect, *The Plot Against America* ends happily. Lindbergh enigmatically vanishes and Roosevelt is reinvested as president. It is obvious that Roth placed the United States on its moral path toward democracy, growing equality, and richness. From our perspective, Roth returned to a glorious history: a period of wealth without military recruitment or state-sponsored intolerance. As well, the American postwar history proved to be a very satisfied story for Fred Trump, who employed his building corporation

to collect fabulous profits from the Federal Housing Administration, capitalizing massive personal assets to help later on his son Donald to create his own building empire. But while the novel ends happily for our narrator's family, for other sections of the population, it shows that US history which led to the imprisonment of Japanese Americans, Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Oklahoma City bombing, John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassinations, the My Lai Massacre, state-sanctioned abuses at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, the exposure of New Orleans during Katrina Hurricane, and other several crimes justified by American xenophobia, racism, and anti-government paranoia.

Regardless of the results of November 2016 presidential elections, the Americans need to narrate themselves another story now, that in which the spreading of powerful racism and the potential recourse of fascist authority are not linked to alternate history but to the reliable elements of collective life. The immediate duty is to reconsider and restore the political and economic liberalism in order to reproduce a non-demagogic, non-cynical, non-vulgar reaction to the severe anxieties about the future that this last presidential election has exposed. Roth's young narrator understands this well: the fear of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a holocaust into an epic.

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