



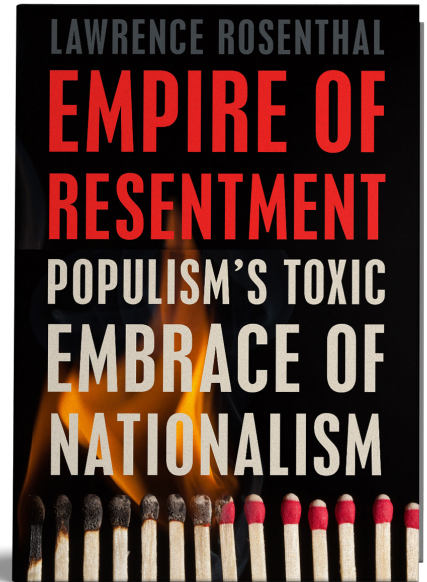
Empire of Resentment by Lawrence Rosenthal
Publication Date: September 8, 2020
Hardcover, 9781620975107
\$27.99, 320 pages
<https://thenewpress.com/>

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“Cogent political analysis. . .A welcome exposé of the politics of wounded resentment and the manipulators behind it.”—**Kirkus Reviews**

Empire of Resentment Populism’s Toxic Embrace of Nationalism

By **Lawrence Rosenthal**



Donald Trump was elected US president in 2016 by rejecting GOP orthodoxy on free trade, immigration, and foreign relations. What does Trumpism mean for the future of US politics, regardless of the outcome of the November election? And how was Trump’s victory part of a global movement towards nationalism?

In the trenchant new book *Empire of Resentment: Populism’s Toxic Embrace of Nationalism*, Lawrence Rosenthal turns his attention to President Donald Trump and the rise of right-wing populism around the world. Tracing modern populism’s roots to the first decades of the twentieth century, Rosenthal demonstrates the central role of emotion—particularly the resentment of perceived elites—in populist nationalism. Written for a general audience, Rosenthal’s account is one of the most persuasive accounts of Trump’s rise yet published, and essential reading for anyone wanting to understand our current populist moment.

In 2009, Lawrence Rosenthal founded UC Berkeley’s Center for Right-Wing Studies, which has grown into America’s top academic program focused on the political right. He continues to lead the Center. He has taught at the University of California, Berkeley, in the sociology and Italian studies departments and was a Fulbright Professor at the University of Naples in Italy.

**VIRTUAL
LAUNCH
EVENTS**

**SAN FRANCISCO
COMMONWEALTH CLUB**
Tuesday, September 8,
12.30pm PT
(with Arlie Hochschild)

**BERKELEY
BERKELEY CENTER FOR RIGHT-WING STUDIES**
Thursday, November 19, 3pm PT
(With panelists: **Corey Fields, Cynthia Miller-Idriss & Vibeke Schou Tjalve**. Moderated by: **Stephen Small**)



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■ Early praise for *Empire Of Resentment*

"Frightening and informative, this lucid exposé makes a strong case that American democracy is under threat."

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

"In this clear-eyed, non-alarmist account, Rosenthal asks what history tells us about the rise of fascism and how close we've come to it. Whatever the outcome of the next presidential election, this book provides a brilliantly clear guideline for what to watch out for—and avoid."

—ARLIE HOCHSCHILD

Author of *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*

"The rise of right-wing populism has surprised many political observers, but not Lawrence Rosenthal. His book is essential for understanding the racism, resentments, and reactionary fantasies of the right-wing populism that fueled the political rise and reign of Donald Trump, and that will endure long after he is gone. Rosenthal's deep knowledge and lucid prose illuminate the dark, dangerous, authoritarian politics in the U.S. and around the world still growing in the third decade of the twenty-first century."

—HARRY LEVINE

City University of New York

"Rosenthal offers a cogent account of one of the most consequential developments in U.S. politics, connecting the threads of populist anti-elitism with nationalist resurgence and the eventual emergence of the 'alt right.' Should be required reading for anyone trying to make sense of where we are, how we got here and what the future holds for liberal democracy."

—CYNTHIA MILLER-IDRISS

Author of *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right*



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■ Q&A with Lawrence Rosenthal

The Tea Party was based in large part on what you call “free market fundamentalism,” yet many if not most of its members ended up supporting Trump. How do you explain this?

Free market fundamentalism is an ideology, one long held by extreme anti-tax, anti-regulation, anti-union, roll-back-the-whole-of-the-welfare-state conservatives, like the Kochs or the Freedom Caucus currently in the House. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and Obama's election, and with the zero-sum conviction that things like Obamacare were going to take away from them such benefits as Medicare and Social Security, right-wing populists adopted free-market fundamentalism as an ideology. In previous years, these populists were motivated primarily by social issues, but with the shocks of 2008 they joined forces with the long-time free-market fundamentalists and created the fierce political juggernaut called the Tea Party. This ideology was held only, as I call it, epidermically, or skin-deep, as is typical with how right populists have historically adopted ideologies in a situational manner. I cover in detail their movement, especially in the second Obama term, toward fixation on the immigrant question and their profound alienation from the Republican establishment. This was what Trump based his presidential campaign on, and the right-wing populists migrated ideologically to his anti-immigrant, America-first ideology.

What was the Tea Party's historical significance, given that its concerns about deficits and Constitutional literalism have apparently been abandoned by both parties?

The Tea Party raised what for decades had been relatively marginalized conspiracy thinking and convictions about the treasonous qualities of liberal policies like those of the Democratic party into the political

mainstream. The number of voters adopting such views was unprecedented after Barack Obama took office. This gave the Tea party leverage over the Republican establishment, as the populist Tea Partiers became the dominant constituency in the Republican party's base. Albeit with a different slant, the populists' sway in the party continued after the Tea Party gave way to the Trump Republican party. To take an example, the Tea Party was dedicated to a certain reading of the US Constitution that has been called populist originalism. This is a blend between the originalist legal philosophy of figures like Robert Bork and Antonin Scalia and the conviction that constitutional principles were not the exclusive province of legal elites, but that ordinary citizens had as much standing as lawyers and judges

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to interpret the Constitution. This paralleled right populist politics in the crisis over the coronavirus in 2020. Again, populists dismissed the elite experts, this time in public health, eventually taking to the streets to demand their liberty to ignore the experts' lockdown recommendations. And again, Republican office holders, including and especially the US president, were in support of their demonstrations. Populist constitutionalism had given way to populist epidemiology.



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How was Donald Trump able to exploit the split between the Republican establishment and the conservative grassroots that emerged after the 2012 presidential election?

In the same way that as president Trump meticulously --obsessively--follows right-wing media, this was how he prepared for his presidential run. There he saw that the Tea Party populists had moved from primary concern over things like Obamacare and the debt to fierce resistance to any form of immigration reform, which they called "amnesty;" This accompanied the populists' conviction of betrayal by the Republican Party. Seventeen candidates presented themselves for the Republican presidential nomination in 2016. All of them were for immigration reform except for Donald Trump. Trump conflated the Republican establishment with the Democrats ("globalists" all) and established himself as the candidate standing against the whole of the American elite.

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You define populism as group resentment toward a perceived elite, yet studies have found that Trump voters are disproportionately middle-class and live in whiter, less diverse parts of the country. So what explains their resentment?

Unlike left-wing populists whose anger is directed at financial elites, right-wing populist resentment has

historically been directed at cultural elites, the "people who think they know better than us and want to tell us how to run our lives." Those despised elites are essentially coterminous with the liberal world, with blue America, and the resentment encompasses both politics and lifestyle questions. On the political level, the Democratic party elites have long been seen as cultivating a client base, largely a minority base, offering welfare goodies to win their votes. With the post-2014 rise of immigration as the populist right's central issue, the liberal client base is now seen urgently to include immigrants and refugees; immigration reform--"amnesty" in the right populist view--is a plot to produce a permanent Democratic electoral majority in the US. Right populists see this as the loss of their country--the loss of an America largely defined by race, religion and culture. Make America Great Again offers them the promise of reversing this loss.

You talk a lot about the difference between a sense of deprivation and a sense of dispossession. Why is that significant in the development of the new right-wing populism?

Dispossession is the conviction and feeling at the heart of Trumpian nationalism as well as the allied nationalist movements across Europe. In its most articulated statement, dispossession goes by the name "replacement theory," or The Great Replacement. This is the idea, with origins in 1970s France, that international forces--today they get called globalists--are conspiring to replace existing populations with foreign-born Others. In France and much of Europe the Others are Moslem immigrants. In the USA the equivalent Other is from Latin America, and will displace the "real Americans." Hence the marchers at Charlottesville chanted, "You will not replace us." Right-wing populism feels itself being "dispossessed" of their perceived birthright as the dominant US ethnicity as the country moves toward becoming majority minority. In short, right-wing populist identity politics is about losing their seat at the American table. Minority identity politics in contrast--the movements of gays, blacks,



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Latinos, women--is about deprivation, or never having had a seat at the table and demanding one. The anger that accompanies dispossession is fiercer, more raw, than that of deprivation.

The idea of a nationalist international is fascinating yet paradoxical. How do you account for the near-simultaneous rise of so many similar populist movements around the world?

The othering nationalism shared by the nationalist international is not new. It existed in relatively marginal political groups and parties for decades. What is new is that these political forces have become major players in their countries' mainstreams, including having come to power in countries like the USA, Italy, Poland, Hungary and more. Three major events account for the movement into the mainstream. The first was the end of the Cold War, which had suppressed nationalism in the name of the bipolar international struggle between East and West. Then came the global financial crisis of 2008, which profoundly punctured the uncontested neoliberalism which had dominated world political economy since the end of the Cold War. Finally, came the refugee crises of 2015 and 2016, when vast numbers from war-torn parts of the globe began arriving in huge numbers on Western shores.

Since the 2016 election, pundits and scholars have argued about the relative significance of cultural and economic grievances in explaining Trump's appeal. Where do you come down on this question?

Many studies I refer to in the book have shown that cultural issues had greater weight in Trump's rise. One I take particular note of in *Empire of Resentment* is the Rothwell and Diego-Rosell study that established that the best predictor for a likely Trump voter was living in a zip code removed from the presence of or

proximity to immigrants. What this means is that immigrants were something like a blank slate, that Trump and other nationalists were able to fill in with fears, above all about crime. I refer to this in the text as the Imagined Other. Several chapters in the book use sociocultural indicators to track in detail how Trump's message successfully migrated Tea Party populists to his America-first, anti-immigrant ideology.

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What does the surge of populist candidates like Trump and Bernie Sanders say about the current moment, and how much do they have in common?

Steve Bannon had a vision: Social conservatives, who made up the bulk of the Tea Party populists, would merge as a political force with the white working class and, using the Tea Party's tactics of primarying Republican candidates and legislative obstructionism, would take over the Tea Party's kingmaker role in the Republican Party. In this he was envisioning a hybrid of left and right populism--from the right resentment of cultural elites; from the left resentment of financial elites. This coalition would form around the Trump campaign and would carry on beyond Trump and would be part of an international movement. On the surface, the



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appeal to the white working class bore similarity to Sanders' appeal: against international trade agreement and the loss of American jobs to overseas manufacturing. But in practice it was the scapegoating of immigrants --calling them criminals and often subhuman--that attracted working-class support to Trumpism. There was some transit of Sanders supporters to Trump, but the scapegoating did not resonate successfully with the Sanders constituency.

**What happens when the virus,
inevitably, hits red America?
Will death in their midst, death of
their loved ones, turn the base?
One is tempted to say:
If this can't, nothing will.**

What lessons can America take from the experience of countries like Hungary and Russia that have experimented with "illiberal democracy"?

Illiberal democracy proceeds by leaving voting in place--thereby retaining its legitimacy as a democratic state--but undermining democracy's foundations. Undermining democracy entails vesting unitary power in the nation's executive and depriving a scapegoated minority of its individual rights. The undermining proceeds using salami tactics. These include control of mass media and education, stacking the courts, manipulating electoral laws so the chance of the executive being voted out is minimized, ethnic attacks on "enemies of the people," and sometimes, as in Hungary, rewriting the

national constitution. American democratic institutions are older and generally more robust than elsewhere, especially in the countries that emerged from the Soviet bloc. Illiberalism has a much steeper wall to climb in the US than elsewhere. but the lesson from the triumphs of illiberalism is the vulnerability of democratic institutions, the realization that what citizens of free societies have largely taken for granted is not eternal.

The coronavirus pandemic appears to have exposed the limits of populism, especially the distrust of experts and scientific knowledge. Do you see the failure of populist-led countries like the U.S. Brazil, and Russia as potentially discrediting the movement?

Starting perhaps from Trump's pussy-grabbing Access Hollywood tape, blue America has grasped at one after another outrage--through to impeachment--that they felt must surely loosen the bond between Trump and his base and undermine his control of Republican politicians. All to no avail. But the coronavirus has introduced a variable operative in none of Trump's other potential reverses: mortality. People are dying. In the initial period Trump denied the seriousness of the disease, called it another in the line of hoaxes out to get him, found scapegoats to blame like the World Health Organization and China, and insisted his administration was doing a great job in the face of the country suffering beyond any other. Through this, the base seemed to stay solid. But the most severely hit states were in blue America. What happens when the virus, inevitably, hits red America? Will death in their midst, death of their loved ones, turn the base? One is tempted to say: If this can't, nothing will.

■ **Watch Lawrence Rosenthal discuss Empire Of Resentment on CSPAN BookTV:**

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?473124-1/empire-resentment>