The Revolution of Values and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy

Abstract

One domain of global political economy (GPE) that warrants more serious scholarly attention is the plane of what Jessop (2010) calls 'cultural political economy' (CPE). This paper connects GPE and CPE, through an exploration of the production and exchange of meaning (semiosis) in the global politics of 'values'. The point of departure for this exploration is a series of overlapping crises in GPE. From the Great Recession to the global coronavirus pandemic, these crises are often associated with the rise of dangerous new reactionary forces. Conspiracist far-right and increasingly authoritarian centre-right movements continue their ascendancy. Meanwhile, a (neo)liberal self-proclaimed 'centre' decries this 'rise of populisms', lamenting a perceived backlash against liberal democracy itself.

This paper offers a novel reading of the present conjunctural crisis, through the cultural theory of bell hooks. Specifically, hooks' (1994) identification of 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' as the real Western social model, her analyses of the political-economic crises of the 1990s, and her development of Martin Luther King's notion of a 'revolution of values' are all crucial to explaining the present crisis, and exploring the potential of progressivism today. Reframing 'liberal democracy' as white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, it is argued, enables a number of further insights. In particular, this analysis allows us to understand our present moment as a confrontation between truly progressive *values* – including anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and feminist values – and what turn out to be the *shared* regressive and reactionary values of (neo)liberalism and the far right. The aim of the paper is to show, in the terms of Stuart Hall's Gramscian analysis, 'how different forces come together, conjuncturally, to create the new terrain, on which a different politics must form up' (Hall, 1987: 16).

> 'The violence with which the supremacy of white values is affirmed and the aggressiveness which has permeated the victory of these values over the ways of life and of thought of the native mean that, in revenge, the native laughs in mockery when Western values are mentioned in front of him'
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> **Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963: 43)**

> 'The public figures who speak the most to us about a return to old-fashioned values embody the evils [Martin Luther] King describes. They are most committed to maintaining systems of domination – racism, sexism, class exploitation and imperialism. […] What amazes me is that so many people claim not to embrace these values and yet our collective rejection of them cannot be complete since they prevail in our daily lives'
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> **bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture* (1994a: 27)**

Introduction

It is now commonplace in the social sciences to assert that we are living through a long and overlapping series of transnational or global crises (e.g. Mulholland, 2020; Moore et al., 2021; Sultana, 2021; Held, 2022). Most obviously: the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and ensuing *economic* crises (including those induced by 'austerity' programmes); the global *ecological* crisis represented by climate change, resource extractivism, and pollution; and the global *public health* crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic (and its own attendant social and economic crises). A fourth, *political* crisis is identified by many as intersecting or overlapping with the first three. The growth and successes of white nationalist European and American political movements since 2016, the election of Donald Trump as 45th President of the United States, and the politics of 'Brexit' in the UK, are together read as components of a deep political crisis in the contemporary 'West' (Mahmud, 2016; Jacques, 2016; Nussbaum, 2018; MacLeavy, 2019). But this crisis, like the others, has both roots and effects well beyond the 'West', and can be characterised as effectively global. From Narendra Modi's India to Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil, reactionary, regressive, and far-right politics have experienced a global resurgence, while distinctly non-liberal 'great powers' like China and Russia have been increasingly assertive and confrontational in their foreign policies. Many scholars and commentators have characterised this as a 'crisis of liberal democracy' (Reiter, 2017; Öniş, 2017; Toplišek, 2019; DuRand, 2020), and of the supposed 'liberal international order' constructed and sustained by liberal democratic states (Ikenberry, 2018; Götz, 2021).

This paper argues for an alternative understanding of the present political crisis that is transforming global political economy. The original contribution of the paper is to propose a new reading of the political crisis based on an alternative conceptualisation of liberal democracy. This reading is rooted in the cultural-political thought of the American feminist

cultural and social theorist bell hooks, in two key ways. First, hooks' conceptualisation of the American state-society model as 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' is engaged and extended to reframe the perceived object of this crisis. It is argued that to properly understand the crisis of liberal democracy, we must understand that it is really a crisis of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy – a radical departure from other influential readings of the crisis. Second, hooks' re-articulation of Martin Luther King's concept of a 'revolution of values' provides the starting point for a critical explanation of the basis and trajectory of the crisis. The crisis is read, through this concept, as emerging from a backlash against an ongoing revolution of values that has normalised progressive political discourses and practices that white supremacist capitalist patriarchy seeks to repress. In this sense the article places the field of global political economy in conversation with the fields of *cultural* political economy, and of 'value politics'.

The central argument of the paper is that rather than a straightforward crisis *for* progressive politics, the new prominence of regressive right-wing political movements represents a crisis of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy itself. On this reading, the rise of the new, global far right is a cultural-political 'morbid symptom', in the Gramscian sense (Worth, 2019). It is a reactionary political movement seeking to protect longstanding but newly and truly endangered social and economic structures of inequality, exclusion, and violence. The crisis of liberal democracy is not, then, a crisis of progressivism (though liberal self-proclaimed 'progressives' would of course frame it as such), and may actually demonstrate the recent success and future potential of progressive political movements.

Following this introduction, the paper proceeds in three main parts. First, hooks' cultural and social theory informs a critique of the concept of liberal democracy, showing some of the ways in which this term acts as an ideological mystification for what might be better termed white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Second, it is argued, through analysis of political movements and events since the onset of the GFC, that the rise of reactionary anti-liberal politics from the Right is best understood as a counter-revolutionary backlash against what hooks called (following King) a 'revolution of values', wherein progressive cultural politics had been increasingly mainstreamed. The third main section explores the implications of this argument for progressive politics in an age of global-political-economic crisis, contending that the re-reading of liberal democracy as white supremacist capitalist patriarchy in turn provides a more optimistic reading of the achievements and potential of progressive political movements than is allowed for by much analysis of the present crisis. Finally, some concluding remarks are offered on the possibility of a 'permanent' revolution of values as a progressive strategy.

Whose liberal democracy? Understanding white supremacist capitalist patriarchy

What do we talk about when we talk about liberal democracy?

In the short story *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* Raymond Carver (1981) explores themes of violent, abusive relationships in which the abuser's behaviour is interpreted by the survivors they seek to victimise as coming from a place of 'love'. The belief

that violent and abusive social structures, practices and behaviours, particularly within the family, can be 'loving' is discussed at length in bell hooks' *All About Love* (2000). She argues that despite the narratives survivors construct to process their trauma or protect themselves from intimate partner or parental abuse, in truth: 'Abuse and neglect negate love. Care and affirmation, the opposite of abuse and humiliation, are the foundation of love. No one can rightfully claim to be loving when behaving abusively' (hooks, 2000: 22). Let us begin the re-reading of the crisis of liberal democracy from a structurally analogous political problem, by asking: what do we talk about when we talk about liberal democracy? Is this a benevolent, 'loving' political-economic arrangement, or something else altogether?

Tensions and contradictions of liberal democracy

The state-society model commonly referred to as 'liberal democracy' ostensibly rests on a few key socio-economic structures, practices, and conventions. These often include: a constitutional order, based on a universalist and individualist conception of rights; a system of inclusive representative democracy that usually takes the form of a multi-party electoral system, determining legislative and executive political office-holders; and a capitalist market economy premised on fundamental rights to private property and free enterprise (Holden, 1988; Ware, 1992). Liberal democracy is thus supposed to designate an inclusive, enabling political-economic arrangement and social order. Liberal discourse represents the liberal-democratic state as a space of political and economic freedom, and even as *the* necessary condition of possibility for human flourishing and self-actualisation (for example: Fukyama, 1989; 1992).

This narrative has been subject to extensive critique. The Marxist state theory debates, for instance, reframed 'liberal' democracy as 'capitalist' democracy; an intrinsically unequal, unjust, and violent political-economic arrangement, prioritising profit over people, and reproducing class power. But much of the critique of liberal democracy does not adequately capture the intersecting structures of domination, exploitation, exclusion and inequality that form its basis. Even critical accounts of liberal democracy, in other words, tend to take its terminology somewhat at face value, accepting that it is a limited (by the social and economic tenets of liberalism, including capitalism) form of popular rule (democracy). Ware's appraisal of the state of the literature on liberal democracy in the early 1990s usefully illustrates this:

> 'For Macpherson they are instances of *liberal democracy*, for Miliband they are exemplars of *capitalist democracy*, for Epstein they are the *western democracies*, for Dahl they are *polyarchies*, while for Lijphart they are simply *democracies*. Despite the disagreement about what they should be called, there is little disagreement that today they include among their number Britain, France, Germany, the US and more than 40 other regimes' (Ware, 1992: 130).

Ware's broad yet specific list of (west European and North American, majority-white) states is common practice in the attempt to define the world's liberal democracies. Influential international relations scholars Michael W. Doyle (1983) and Francis Fukuyama (1992) each offer a table to show when the world's various liberal democracies attained their liberal-

democratic status. They claim that the USA was a liberal democracy by 1776 (Doyle, 1983: 209) or 1790 (Fukuyama,1992: 49). These claims point to some of the tensions and contradictions of liberal-democratic discourse. The first US census, in 1790, counted 697,624 enslaved people, while the 1860 census showed this figure had risen to almost four million. Women, meanwhile, were without voting and other civil rights throughout this period and well into the twentieth century. Doyle and Fukuyama each list Great Britain as a liberal democracy at the height of its imperialist activity in the nineteenth century, and call Belgium a liberal democracy when that country routinely mutilated Congolese children in order to extort more forced labour from their enslaved parents, as recently as the early twentieth century.

What was 'liberal' or 'democratic' about societies in which half the population were denied the vote on the basis of their gender, and in which hundreds of thousands, or even millions, faced the indignity and dehumanisation of enslavement on the basis of how they were racialised? In which a total majority were subjugated by one means or another? In this sense, as the anthropologist Lilith Mahmud put it, on the eve of Trump's election in 2016: in the West 'we have never been liberal' (Mahmud, 2016). Liberal democracy is what Mahmud calls an 'Occidentalist myth'. It only entered our popular vocabulary in the 1930s and 1940s, accelerating in use at the height of the Second World War. As a concept, it provided a means by which the Allied countries could define themselves as something fundamentally other than the fascism of their Axis enemies. The term gained even greater popularity at the end of the Cold War (see Figure 1).

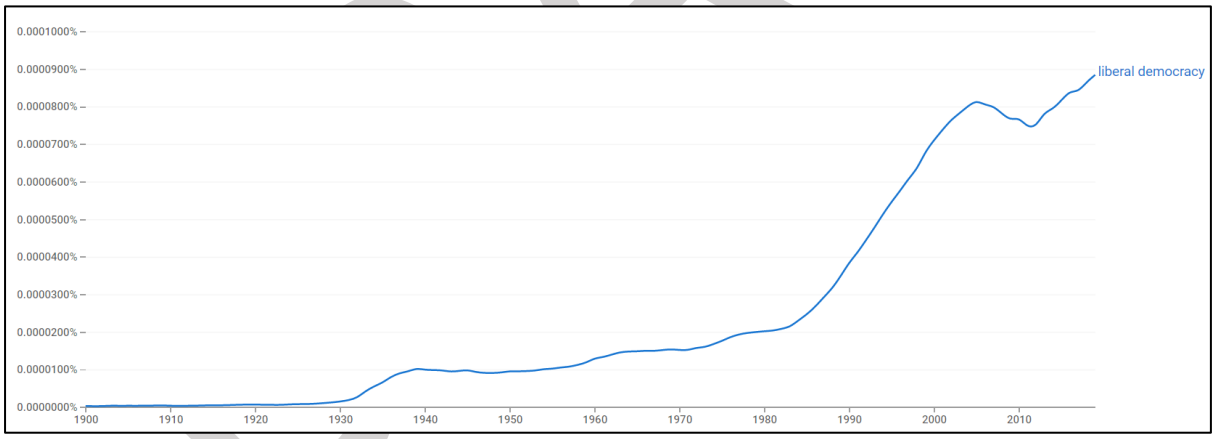

Figure 1: An 'Ngram' chart showing the prevalence of the term 'liberal democracy' in Google's (British and American) English-language publication corpus, 1900-2019.

But fascism, a form of far-right, authoritarian politics inflected by eugenicist racism, is not as alien to these Western societies as is traditionally supposed. In their imperialist international relations, which were only beginning to wane at the onset of WWII, self-proclaimed Western liberal democracies freely practiced many of the things that came to be associated with German fascism in the 1930s and '40s, within the societies they colonised overseas, and against marginalised or minoritised groups at home. They exercised authoritarian political control, used arbitrary detention and torture, and pioneered concentration camps and genocidal

violence. As Aimé Césaire wrote of Western liberal democracies and Nazism in his *Discourse on Colonialism*:

> 'before they were its victims, they were its accomplices; […] they tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on them, […] they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples; […] they have cultivated that Nazism, […] they are responsible for it' (Césaire, 1972: 36).

This historical perspective can be extended to form the starting point for understanding liberal democracy as white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. White supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal values were coded into liberal democracies from the outset. This much is apparent from critical readings of the intellectual 'founding fathers' of the liberal-democratic project in national and international theory, from John Locke (see e.g. Jahn, 2007) to Immanuel Kant (e.g. Kant, [1764] 2011), and John Stuart Mill (e.g. Mill, cited in Mazlish, 1975: 407). Allegedly universal rights and freedoms that are supposed to be typical of liberal democracies and central to their 'values' are, in practice, extended to only narrow sections of those societies – particularly to white, middle- and upper-class, property-owning, cishet men. This is why, as Fanon (1963: 43) writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the colonised 'laugh' when they are instructed in 'Western values'. It is also why postcolonial citizens of the UK today, confronted with racist counter-terrorism and immigration policies centred on 'British values' might ask 'what the fuck are British values?' (Yates, 2015). So what really *are* the values of so-called liberal democracies?

White supremacist capitalist patriarchy

Given the apparent tensions and contradictions surrounding the concept of liberal democracy, what alternative label might suit the grouping of societies this term has traditionally been used to describe? One answer to this question emerges in the work of bell hooks. In her first book, *Ain't I a Woman?* (1981), hooks offered a pathbreaking critique of what is now widely known as 'white feminism'. In other words, like Soujourner Truth before her (whose words inspired the book's title) and the intersectional feminists who followed, hooks noted the exclusion of Black women from popular feminist political narratives and movements of the time. hooks built upon the work of second-wave radical and socialist feminists to argue that not only class but also race had too often been absent from feminist critique and movement. Where Zillah Eisenstein had popularised the concept of 'capitalist patriarchy' to highlight the intrinsic connections between class domination and exploitation on the one hand and gender domination and exploitation on the other, hooks extended this analysis to incorporate racist domination and exploitation through the concept of, at first (hooks, [1981] 1982: 145), 'white capitalist patriarchy', and later (hooks, [1984] 2000b: 19) 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy'. The latter term was used throughout hooks' later work, though sometimes prefixed with 'imperialist' (Whitham, 2017).

While hooks' terminology and analytical framework has had a major impact on sociological, pedagogical, and of course feminist social and cultural theory, little attention has been paid to her work in IR or global political economy. This paper proposes to take hooks'

concepts seriously in these fields, by reframing liberal democracies – often taken to be a basic unit of analysis in both IR and GPE – as white supremacist capitalist patriarchies. The contention here is that this label offers a relatively fulsome and accurate conceptualisation through which to capture the key systemic dynamics of the societies usually called 'liberal democracies', whereas the latter term serves to obfuscate more than it illuminates. So-called 'liberal democracies' may be liberal (providing of individual economic and political rights) and democratic (enabling of popular political participation and rule) for *some* of their constituent peoples. But for many others they are experienced as white supremacist capitalist patriarchies – as societies in which race, class, gender, and other markers of difference, actually form the basis for a wide range of structural and direct systemic violence. Nor is the point here to suggest that white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is a side-effect, by-product or other epiphenomenon of liberal democracy – merely some 'residual discrimination' to be eventually eliminated, as Milton Friedman (1962: 21) sees it – but rather that it is *constitutive of* and *necessitated by* the social formation usually called liberal democracy.

The terminological shift from liberal democracy to white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is necessitated by what Patricia Hill Collins calls Black feminist epistemology. 'Liberal democracy' was never a neutral, descriptive label for an observed phenomenon. It is, rather, a discourse – a means of explaining and representing a set of social structures and practices. And, as Collins puts it: 'All social thought, including white masculinist and Black feminist, reflects the interests and standpoint of its creators' (1989: 751). It is unsurprising, then, that the overwhelmingly white, middle- and upper-class, cishet men who dominated politics and the nascent disciplines of political science and IR in these societies in the early twentieth century should settle upon a positive discourse about the socio-economic arrangements that structurally privilege *them*. But from the perspective of the disenfranchised, the working class, the racially minoritised, and those subject to patriarchal violence in relation to their gender identity or sexuality, 'liberal democracy' captures very little of what is happening. White supremacist capitalist patriarchy captures a lot more. Any *progressive* politics must aim at abolishing the white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal structures of such societies, but that abolition cannot be achieved until these structures cannot be identified for what they are.

Whose crisis? The revolution of values and right-wing reaction

Analysing the cultural political economy of crisis

This paper's analysis of the crisis of liberal democracy *qua* white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is shaped in part by the cultural political economy (CPE) research agenda. CPE demands attention to 'semiosis or meaning-making' in 'the analysis of the articulation between the economic and the political and their embedding in broader sets of social relations' (Jessop, 2010: 336), and it was specifically designed to aid our understanding of crises. Unlike some traditional materialism, CPE enables analysis of the crucial role played by semiotic forms including discourses – in the sense of structured ways of representing and interacting-in the world – in the constitution and transformation of economic and political power structures. One

of the key issues CPE seeks to address is thus that of 'the regularization of practices in normal conditions and […] possible sources of radical transformation, especially in periods of crisis' (Jessop, 2010: 341).

However, Jessop's (2010: 346) 'cultural political economy of crisis' approach has potential limitations. Specifically, the conceptualisation of 'economy' in CPE is rather narrow. CPE seeks to bring semiotic analysis – the analysis of signification, symbolising, meaning and *culture* – to the study of the political and its relation to the economic, where the latter is understood as a set of material structures and practices of production, exchange, and consumption of goods and services. In this paper, global political economy (GPE) is understood to *include* the production, exchange, and consumption of meaning itself. This broader framing also connects the present crisis and its analysis to past crises and the frameworks through which they were most effectively analysed. From Stuart Hall's postcolonial Gramscian, 'conjunctural' analysis of the crisis of the 1970s (Hall et al., 1978), to bell hooks' analysis of the crisis of the early 1990s (hooks, 1994), important work was being done on what might now be called the 'cultural political economy' of crisis, long before that term was coined.

A particular aspect of cultural politics paid insufficient attention in CPE is the circulation of *values*. As David Graeber (2011) has demonstrated, the study of 'value politics' should constitute an important part of the study of political-economy. Values are a ubiquitous feature of societies but often fall beyond the purview of political economy: 'whenever we are not working or buying or selling, when we are motivated by pretty much anything other than the desire to get money, we suddenly find ourselves in the domain of 'values'' (Graeber, 2011: 194). Indeed the project of liberal democracy is itself often articulated in terms of values. The construction of 'fundamental British values' in the UK's 'War on Terror' is a case in point (HM Government, 2014). Critical semiotic analysis of the crisis of liberal democracy, locating it in global political economy, should therefore incorporate analysis of the values that are supposed to be at the core of such societies. Such analysis should, it is contended here, be central to our understanding of 'how different forces come together, conjuncturally, to create the new terrain, on which a different politics must form up' (Hall, 1987: 16).

A crisis of what?

In a short collection of essays entitled *The Neoliberal Crisis,* published in 2015, the editors of the *Soundings* journal – including Stuart Hall and Doreen Massey – offered their interpretations of the economic crisis or 'conjuncture' that had begun with the 2007 US sub-prime mortgage crisis and consequent financial sector crash (Davison and Harris, 2015). Massey noted that despite the deep economic crisis that followed, and its associated politics of austerity, there had essentially been no concomitant ideological crisis (Massey, 2015: 102). Aside from the various state 'bail outs' of banks considered 'too big to fail', there had been no serious challenge to neoliberal rule in the post-crash era.

Yet within a few months of the publication of *The Neoliberal Crisis*, Donald Trump announced his presidential bid. In 2016 he was elected 45th President of the United States,

having run on a racist, Islamophobic, anti-feminist, and explicitly *anti-liberal* platform. Trump swept to power on a wave of support that stretched from a vanguard of neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups, conspiracy theorists and others styling themselves the 'alt right', to lifelong Republicans and even disaffected Democrat voters. A few months earlier, in the summer of 2016, the UK had held a referendum on continuing its membership of the European Union. The resulting 'leave' vote defied a broad political consensus including the Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, the newly elected democratic socialist leader of the Labour opposition Jeremy Corbyn, and a swath of economists, think tanks, businesses and NGOs, all of whom supported or campaigned for a 'remain' vote. Meanwhile, the rise of far-right parties not only in the UK and US, but also for example *Alternativ fur Deutschland* in Germany, and *Generazione Identitaria* in Italy, was fast.

It is tempting to suggest that all of these dramatic breaks with the neoliberal status quo amount to a crisis. But, as the authors of *The Neoliberal Crisis* point out, when we speak of 'crisis', the crucial question is: *a crisis of what?* (Clarke, 2015: 49). Dramatic political or economic upheavals will be perceived in different ways according to our relative subject-positions and political-economic or moral commitments. To call the political shifts currently underway a 'crisis' is to suggest that they threaten the functioning of an existing system. But which system(s), precisely, does this crisis threaten?

The revolution of values and the crisis of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy

In the context of the Cold War's apparent choice between communism and capitalism, political progressives and radicals in capitalist countries frequently faced the (largely rhetorical) question of whether they would prefer life in the 'really existing' revolutionary communism being exercised in the USSR, or in capitalist liberal democracies. Addressing the question of revolutionary politics in a 1967 speech, Martin Luther King argued that what was a different kind of revolution than that offered by Soviet-style communism:

> '[W]e as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values […] A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies' (King, 1967).

The true values that King saw as underpinning American society in the 1960s – in the midst of the Cold War, as the USA sought to identify itself as the 'leader of the free world' – were those that had produced what he called the 'three evils' of racism, war, and poverty. The revolution of values would involve radical introspection, re-appraising American history, and recognising the social and economic injustice that was routinely ignored or erased. In 1994, in the first of her 'teaching trilogy', *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks took-up and developed King's concept of a revolution of values. She noted that in the preceding decades she had encountered 'many folks who say they are committed to freedom and justice for all even though the way they live, the values and habits of being they institutionalize daily, in public and private rituals, help maintain the culture of domination, help create an unfree world' (hooks, 1994a: 27).

Writing in the context of political-economic crisis, following the recession of the early 1990s, hooks noted that:

> 'These days, I feel compelled to consider what forces keep us from moving forward, from having that revolution of values that would enable us to live differently. […] [W]hat we are witnessing today in our everyday life is not an eagerness on the part of neighbors and strangers to develop a world perspective but a return to narrow nationalism, isolationisms, and xenophobia. These shifts are usually explained in New Right and neoconservative terms as attempts to bring order to the chaos, to return to an (idealized) past' (hooks, 1994a: 28).

There are striking parallels between hooks' vision of reactionary 'New Right' politics in the 1990s and what is sometimes called the 'new "New Right"' (King, 2017) that has been ascendant since the mid-2010s. Trump's inauguration cry of 'America First! America First!', which translated into a set of policies during his time in office, certainly represented the 'narrow nationalism, isolationisms, and xenophobia' hooks identified with the New Right more than two decades earlier. And at a time when the new reactionary Right is making its central fights about the reinforcement of a 'traditional' gender binary, the limiting of migration and racial and religious mixing, and the reclamation of the ethno-nation as the source power and authority, there is still truth in hooks' insight that the 'public figures who speak the most to us about a return to old-fashioned values embody the evils King describes. They are most committed to maintaining systems of domination – racism, sexism, class exploitation and imperialism' (hooks, 1994a: 27). But the 'idealised past' to which today's New Right seeks to 'return' is that of only a few years before, when white supremacist capitalist patriarchal values were rarely seen or challenged in politics, media, or popular culture; the era before terms like 'social justice' and 'intersectionality' went mainstream. In this sense, the new reactionary Right is looking simply to restore 'liberal democracy' and its core values.

The reactionary politics of the so-called 'alt-right', including its Trump and Brexit manifestations, are the eruption into plain sight of values that have been central to, but partially concealed by, the mainstream cultural politics of liberal democracies. This is the sudden visibility to a wider range of people of the Lacanian 'Real' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007), of the 'white background' (Hurston, 1928; Johnson, 2020) of largely ignored structural violence that undergirds the liberal democratic fantasy and brutalises the everyday lives of marginalised and systematically disenfranchised people in the West. The contemporary politics of crisis thus represents *values under threat*. Entire continuums of Western political culture and 'civilization' that connect, for example, trans-exclusionary and white feminisms to masculinist misogyny, or liberal multiculturalism to conservative racism, have been endangered. Their advocates' response – the intensification of their politics of denial and exclusion – has only served to highlight the ways in which they are imbricated.

The present crisis thus constitutes rupture, but also continuity. It can be read as a set of interlinked counter-revolutionary movements that together constitute a backlash against the emerging revolution in values. As Kamunge et al. (2018, p. 2) put it: 'The rise of Trump and

the Brexit referendum are symbolic of our entry into an epoch that is both a continuation of, and characteristically different from, that which came before'. Michaela Benson and Chantelle Lewis (2019) similarly note that Brexit and the racist and anti-immigrant discourses associated with it can be seen as 'unexceptional' when viewed through the lens of lived experiences of people of colour in European Union countries. As political projects, both Trump and Brexit aimed at a symbolic 'return', a 'making great again'. These projects, as with other reactionary Right political projects around the world, were articulated in terms of lost or undermined values. They were also articulated, explicitly, as reaction to the perceived gains of progressive values through social movements – especially those that had been enabled by the rise of social media over the preceding decade.

The first wave of Black Lives Matter (BLM) activism of the twenty-first century, triggered by the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2013, and enabled by hashtag-based social media campaigning, which facilitated large-scale social organising, revealed and challenged the operation of white supremacy in liberal democracies. 'Anti-cuts' and anti-austerity movements across Europe revealed and challenged the operation of capitalism in liberal democracies following the 2007-8 crash. The MeToo movement that began as early as 2006 with Tarana Burke's MySpace post, and exploded in the 2010s, becoming a viral hashtag by 2017, revealed and challenged the operation of patriarchy in liberal democracies. These progressive movements manifested and sometimes organised transnationally. They were also often organised around intersectional understandings of racialized, classed, and gendered oppression – highlighting, for example, the damage done by 'white' and trans-exclusionary forms of feminism, and campaigning around the way austerity effects were targeted to harm working-class women of colour and people with disabilities most of all. And these movements had real cut-through. Mainstream media, including liberal and centre-right outlets, politicians, businesses and other organisations, began to seriously discuss issues that feminist and anti-racist scholars like hooks had spent decades exploring.

From questions of representation and cultural appropriation, to sexual harassment, economic precarity, and the coloniality of university curricula, the early 2010s were characterised by a mainstreaming of progressive political concerns. Explicit discussions of intersectionality in mainstream news media (for example: Lees, 2014) were particularly noteworthy, since, as hooks had previously noted:

> 'Feminist theorists acknowledged the overwhelming significance of the interlocking systems of race, gender, and class […] Yet mainstream culture, particularly mass media, was not willing to tune into a radical political discourse that was not privileging one issue over the other' (hooks, 2000a: 8).

Much of the coverage of these issues in the early 2010s was certainly negative, and much of the debate reactionary. And the revolution of values did not always result in immediate transformations of material socio-economic relations. But there was remarkable progress in terms of opening up public discussion of the ways in which allegedly liberal democratic societies might not be all that liberal, or democratic, for many of their citizens and residents.

Issues of structural violence that had been the concern of 'critical' scholars for most of the twentieth century were taken seriously, and as the operation of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy became more visible, so its edifice threatened to crumble. It was in precisely this context that the reactionary Right – ranging from conservatives dabbling in 'culture wars' to fully-fledged neo-nazis – came riding to the rescue. But it did so with the material and symbolic help of liberals.

In 2010 hooks and Ron Scapp hailed 'the cultural revolution that has made it possible for an African American to become President of this struggling democracy' (hooks, 2010: 41). That this President, Barack Obama, had to sit in the Oval Office just a few years later and shake the hand of president-elect Donald Trump – a Republican candidate endorsed by leaders of the Ku Klux Klan and American Nazi Party, whose racist and misogynist attitudes are a matter of public record – could be taken as evidence that hooks and Scapp 'spoke too soon'. But the violence in Charlottesville in 2017 is emblematic of the reactionary, rear-guard nature of Trumpist neo-fascism. The demonstrations and counter-demonstrations were sparked by the fact that the statue of pro-slavery General Lee was successfully removed. The raging whiteness and frustrated masculinity of the far-right marchers in Charlottesville, whose image – young white men in chinos and polo shirts, carrying flaming torches – brought the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy of Trumpism directly into the public gaze, may be more a scream of inadequacy more than a victory cry.

Sara Ahmed notes the extraordinary momentum of feminist movement in 2017:

> 'We might say a movement is strong when we can witness a momentum: more people gathering on the streets, more people signing their names to protest against something, more people using a name to identify themselves. I think we have in recent years witnessed the buildup of a momentum around feminism, in global protests against violence against women; in the increasing number of popular books on feminism; in the high visibility of feminist activism on social media; in how the word *feminism* can set the stage on fire for women artists and celebrities such as Beyoncé. And as a teacher, I have witnessed this buildup firsthand: increasing numbers of students who want to identify themselves as feminists, who are demanding that we teach more courses on feminism; and the almost breathtaking popularity of events we organize on feminism, especially queer feminism and trans feminism. Feminism is bringing people into the room' (p. 3).

It was against the momentum of this movement – the revolution of values – that Trumpism, Brexit politics, transphobia, and a whole host of reactionary Right strategies and campaigns were arrayed. The hope of feminists in the face of Trumpism is demonstrative of the momentum of the revolution of values itself. Selma James, a central figure in the 1970s feminist movement, said in 2017 that 'we are on the verge of some real truths' (James, 2017) while the director Ava DuVernay, the first black woman nominee for the Golden Globe Award for Best Director and the first black woman nominee for the Oscar for Best Picture, put it this way:

> 'What we're going through right now is a really painful awakening […] And it's happening not just in the entertainment industry. It might have started with us, with a very high profile case, but now you see it careening through our society in every space. […] Everyone is coming to terms with this and reckoning. There's a reckoning that's happening. I think that

> that's the first layer of it. The next layer is to make sure that it is not just a trend… Or a hashtag. So it's about the systemic. You know, really investigating and exploring: what is the system, what are the foundations that have allowed this to flourish' (DuVernay, 2018).

To invoke hooks, the 'system' or 'foundations' DuVernay sees an unfolding reckoning with, is white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. The 'real truths' James finds us on the verge of are these intersecting, structured inequalities, violences, and social constraints that are coded into the very values of supposedly 'free' liberal democracies. And it was ever more public and explicit questioning of these values that fed – and continues to feed – the new politics of right-wing reaction. Those who have benefited the most from white supremacist capitalist patriarchy have been the most vociferous in recent years in attacking what they deride as 'wokeness' and 'social justice warriors'. The 'whitelash' described by CNN anchor Van Jones in the wake of Trump's presidential victory in 2016 represented the true 'grievance' politics. While the contemporary reactionary right in Western liberal democracies may be 'diverse', it is dominated by those who stand to lose the most through any undermining of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Paulo Freire, a key influence on hooks, anticipated in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* ([1968] 2017) the attitude of white male fragility that has been typical of the recent 'culture wars'. The furious response of entitled white men to perceived impingements on their 'freedom of speech' has been especially notable in recent years (Whitham, 2020), and this can be better understood by reflecting on Freire's conceptualisation of 'the oppressors'. For Freire, the exploited and oppressed must find their own freedom, and can only do so through revolt against the oppressors, whom the oppressed themselves can, in so doing, also liberate (from being oppressors). But social progress arrives, and the oppressed free themselves from their oppression, Freire suggests:

> '[T]he former oppressors do not feel liberated. On the contrary, they genuinely consider themselves to be oppressed. Conditioned by the experience of oppressing others, any situation other than their former seems to them like oppression' (Freire, [1968] 2017: 31).

Under relations of oppression, the oppressors could experience a high quality of life 'while millions did not'. 'Any restriction on this way of life, in the name of the rights of the community, appears to the former oppressors as a profound violation of their individual rights' (Freire, [1968] 2017: 31). That the 'free speechism' of white male fragility today is rooted in this sense of a 'violation of their individual rights' is abundantly clear, and Freire neatly sums up, half a century in advance of the present crisis, the logic of this outrage, expressed by some ostensibly 'progressive' liberals as well as the political Right: 'For the oppressors there exists only one right: their right to live in peace, over and against the right, not always even recognized, but simply conceded, of the oppressed to survival' ([1968] 2017: 31-32). This is why, for example, when politically progressive or radical women of colour public figures are critical of the attempts by white male public figures to perpetuate colonial nostalgia and racist narratives, they are subject to furious and vicious attacks casting them as 'incivil' and 'offensive' by the same oppressors (the men themselves and the right-wing reactionary press that supports them). These men see their freedom of speech encroached upon and their 'right to live in peace' as oppressors, to use Freire's framing, endangered. What the resistance

movements discussed in this article as driving forward a revolution of values share is a refusal to let the oppressors in liberal democracies 'live in peace'.

Progressive politics in an age of crisis

The crisis of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy

As the analysis above has shown, it is possible to read the political crisis so often framed as a 'crisis of liberal democracy' instead as a *crisis of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy*. Such a reading can provide for a more hopeful view of progressive politics than is currently prevalent. The reactionary Right's recent insurgencies and victories can be understood as a backlash against the revolution of values. But the revolution has demonstrated its resilience in this context. In the wake of the 2020 police murder of George Floyd for example, a fresh wave of BLM protests spread across the USA and then around the world. The protests were of such a scale and intensity – despite Covid-19 'lockdowns' in force in many countries outlawing public gatherings – and constituted of such wide-ranging cross-sections of society, that even some right-wing reactionary political actors, and many corporations and public institutions, felt the need to make symbolic gestures of support. From statements of solidarity, to commitments to reflect on working practices, to concrete policies for change, there was a dramatic shift in explicit value commitments.

This is the cultural political economy of values in action. When the revolution of values appears ready to overwhelm the institutions of the liberal democratic state *qua* white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, those institutions mount a desperate effort at adaptation for survival. And yet that adaptation, that effort at shoring-up white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, and protecting the core of the status quo by incorporating some of the terminology of progressive values, tokenistically making small concessions and accommodations in the name of social justice, is surely bound to fail. When we talk about values, Graeber argues, we are really 'striving to put ourselves in a position where we can dedicate ourselves to something larger than ourselves' (Graeber, 2011: 195). Values represent collective endeavours and commitments. The difference between the values of 'liberal democracy' or 'liberal values' and truly *progressive* political values is that the former are fixed and exclusive – they are actually the values of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy – while the latter are necessarily open and inclusive.

The limits of liberalism

As noted above, the rise of the new transnational far right did not spring from nowhere. Liberalism as the framing ideology of liberal democracy is steeped in white supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal values. The colonial and neo-colonial records of liberal democracies are only the most egregious testimony to this fact, but the domestic politics and economics of inequality, exclusion and violence are also at the heart of the liberal-democratic project. So it should come as no surprise that it was a collection of chauvinists, ethno-nationalists, ultra-conservatives, and neo-fascists that would ride to the rescue of liberal democracy when progressive movements threatened to unpick it.

Perhaps the starkest sign that liberal democracy, and liberalism more broadly, enables rather than constrains the rise of the reactionary Right is the political spectacle of liberals defending fascists (whether from being punched or being de-platformed) in the name of protecting individual rights, and of fascists defending liberal democracy (from the revolution of values and social justice campaigns). One important insight gleaned from applying hooks to read the crisis is that liberalism cannot protect populations from the reactionary Right because the relationship between these two ideological movements is one of co-dependency and mutual constitution. Liberalism may have offered progressive values by contrast to Divine Right, but in the present political-economic constellation it represents a deeply regressive politics.

Conclusion: Towards a permanent revolution of values

The crisis of liberal democracy can, as this paper has shown, be productively read as a crisis of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. The rise of reactionary, regressive right-wing political movements around the world should not be read as a threat to a benign or beneficent, progressive liberal rights culture, because: a) no such culture obtains in so-called liberal democracies, which are in fact constituted by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy; and b) the 'rise' of the Right is really a desperate backlash against the gains of progressive values and their revealing and challenging of the operation of structural and direct forms of violence, inequality and exclusion.

Claims by new far-right figures, often styling themselves as 'alt-right', to be defending 'Western civilisation', 'classical liberalism', 'free speech', and so on, reinforce this analysis. Recognising that the symbolically repressed racialized, classed, and gendered violence of liberal democracies is being made increasingly explicit – not least by social movements seeking to name and fight it – the neo-fascists have leapt to the defence of a project that actually protects them. Consider, for example, the response of many liberals to the rise of white nationalism and neo-fascism. Self-proclaimed 'liberal' media outlets like the *Economist* have defended their platforming of white nationalists in the name of 'free speech' (Whitham, 2020), while so-called 'gender critical' trans-exclusionary 'feminists' have found themselves making identical reactionary arguments to the new far right.

But if we accept that liberals have found a convenient (if mostly unconscious) alliance with the far right in the protection of liberal democracy *qua* white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the question remains: whither the progressive revolution of values, given the regressive Right's insurgency? One possible conclusion is that while there will be victories and defeats in the development of any revolutionary politics, a revolution of *values* has the particular advantage of being structurally leaderless and thus potentially highly resilient. As Audre Lorde put it in her 1982 speech on 'learning from the 60s': 'Revolution is not a one-time event. It is becoming always vigilant for the smallest opportunity to make a genuine change in established, outgrown responses; for instance, it is learning to address each other's difference with respect'. Lorde went on to add that:

> 'The 60s were characterized by a heady belief in instantaneous solutions […] But any future vision which can encompass all of us, by definition, must be complex and expanding, not

> easy to achieve. The answer to cold is heat, the answer to hunger is food. But there is no simple monolithic solution to racism, to sexism, to homophobia. There is only the conscious focusing within each of my days to move against them, wherever I come up against these particular manifestations of the same disease' (Lorde, 1982).

Like all social things, freedom and equality are emergent and processual in character, not fixed 'states' that we can reach; we have to make and re-make them in our everyday lives, *ad infinitum*. As scholars of the Essex School tradition have stressed, a 'good society' will not realistically be 'a society pacified and harmonious where […] consensus has been established about a single interpretation of common values' (Mouffe, 2004: 42). Struggle over values and how we should live together will never be 'settled'. But nor does this mean that, for example, white supremacist views need be 'tolerated' in the public sphere in the name of a pure abstraction like the liberal conceit of 'free speech' (Whitham, 2020).

It is, as Trotsky noted, often the enemies of a revolution who seek to declare it settled. An example is the stalling of feminist movement from the 1990s (and the rise of 'post-feminism') by those mostly white, liberal feminists who sought to suggest key equalities had been largely achieved. A 'significant step' for feminist movement is, Sara Ahmed notes, 'to recognize what has not ended' (2017: 5). This will always be the case for struggles against oppression, domination, and exploitation, and for recognition, dignity, and equality. But it is precisely in these struggles, in this process of challenging and changing norms, in the critical moments, friendships, disputes, and alliances this process throws-up – in other words, in this *permanent revolution* of values – that we can locate that thing that hooks focused on in her pedagogical theory: 'the *practice* of freedom' [emphasis added].

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