From Emerson to Trump: Capitalism, Meritocracy, and the Virtue of Money

Olga Thierbach-McLean

ABSTRACT

Donald Trump’s political victory has taken many by surprise on both sides of the Atlantic. Months after his election, the world is still trying to find explanations for his mass endorsement by U.S. voters. In all of this, one aspect has received little attention so far: namely, the culturally ingrained U.S. American assumption that free markets are ruled by a metaphysical mechanism that rewards moral behavior. More than merely venues for economic competition and exchange, they tend to be perceived as a societal filter that helps single out the most talented and worthy individuals. This tenet has entered the United States’ collective bloodstream as a latent aspect of the individualist intellectual tradition whose main architect is Ralph Waldo Emerson. Against this background, Trump’s public appeal may be interpreted not as an isolated lapse in political judgement or a sudden outburst of blatant racism, but rather as a logical consequence of a firmly established cultural code.

With Donald Trump’s election as U.S. president, the ideological estrangement between the United States and its Western allies has reached a new and dramatic climax. To most Western Europeans it is simply unfathomable why millions of Americans have opted to lay their political future in the hands of a man who has long been known for his volatile and fickle personality, and whose potpourri of widely-publicized racist and sexist statements, together with his lack of political experience and penchant for insensitive and blatantly unrealistic approaches to political issues, should have disqualified him as a political leader.

In the run-up to the election, large parts of the Western European public observed Trump’s political trajectory with the same sentiment that accompanies watching a proverbial train wreck; while one part of you desperately wants to avoid it, the other is not sure if what you are witnessing is actually real—and is curious to see what happens next. Hovering over all of this was a general sense that Trump would not actually win, and that we may as well enjoy the bizarre publicity spectacle before it is over. And so the prevalent mode of covering the tycoon’s political ventures was to exploit their entertainment value as we shook our heads at ‘the daily Trump.’ But while many commentators were refusing to take the ‘insult clown’ seriously, Donald Trump cleared hurdle after hurdle to become the most powerful person in the world.

As Europe woke up to the result of the U.S. presidential election, what had been the elephant in the global room became a subject of open discussion. International headlines exploded with the same basic question: Has America become politically insane? Blunt as that may sound, more politely worded variants of the
same concern have been voiced for some time now in public as well as academic discourse. In an interview with Funke Mediengruppe in August of 2016, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, at the time Vice Chancellor, warned of an “irrational America” in the context of Trump’s possible election as U.S. President. But even well before the New York billionaire had entered the race for the White House, the common political vocabulary of Europe and the United States had been shrinking dramatically. Was ist nur mit den Amis los? (“What’s going on with the Americans?”) is a recent publication by renowned journalist and Washington correspondent to Tagesspiegel Christoph von Marschall that describes the intercultural communication problem from a German perspective. In another notable example, French publicist Bernard-Henri Lévy made the Euro-American divide the subject of his book American Vertigo. By the same token, studies with telling titles such as America Against the World: How We Are Different and Why We Are Disliked probe the causes for the increasing ideological alienation between the United States and other Western nations from the U.S. American point of view. And so, more than 180 years after the publication of Tocqueville’s Democracy in America, the question of American exceptionalism remains as intriguing as ever.

But Trump’s political triumph has not only accentuated the transatlantic contrast, it has also deepened the ideological rift within American society itself. To many U.S. observers, Trump’s success is, in Thomas Frank’s words, “the greatest American mystery at the moment.” In search of explanations for the Trump phenomenon, some commentators have arrived at rather drastic conclusions. For instance, following his nomination as the Republican candidate, Brittany King of The Huffington Post offered the diagnosis that “Trump Won Super Tuesday Because America is Racist.” True, racial tensions are far from being resolved in U.S. society, and there have indeed been racist and xenophobic outbursts among Trump supporters. But flat-out dismissing a whole country as a nation of bigots is certainly hyperbolic, especially given the fact that a third of Hispanics voted for Trump despite his repeated references to them as “rapists” and “murderers.” No less astounding, he was supported by 42% of all female voters in a race against a female candidate (see Tyson and Maniam).

So what is it that outweighs all of Trump’s obvious crudities? Wherein lies his powerful draw? Needless to say, there is no one clear-cut reason. Like most political phenomena, Trump’s mass appeal is a product of a combination of factors, some ideological and some pragmatic in nature. They prominently include the fear of global terrorism, the nostalgic longing for a return to a simpler time with simpler answers, Clinton’s unpopularity inside and outside the liberal camp, as well as the simple fact that Trump had the means to fund his own campaign. Another key aspect of Trump’s success is his status as an American icon and stock figure of global pop culture. Indeed, one could argue that entertainment and politics have become so utterly intertwined in U.S. society as to be almost indistinguishable. In “the spirit of a culture in which all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment” (Postman 3), being able to draw attention can all too easily be equated to having something to say. Have Americans become so mesmerized by a cultural mainstream geared towards amusement and recognition value that they have lost all sense for the seriousness of political reality? Or is it to the contrary
that Americans have grown tired of abstract ideological debate and are driven by a collective longing for a straightforward, hands-on political style? After all, what makes Trump a viable political leader in the eyes of many Americans is precisely the fact that he has proven himself “in the real world” by holding his ground in the unforgiving realm of business.

Yet a look at the billionaire’s background quickly reveals that he is neither the self-made man nor the competent businessman he is often perceived to be; not only did he inherit his impressive starting capital but according to various assessments he would have been wealthier today had he not engaged in any business activities at all. However, what is most interesting in this context is not whether or not Trump actually lives up to his publicly projected image, but that to many Americans it is somehow self-evident that financial success qualifies a person as a head of state. Based on a rationale not immediately plausible for European political sensibilities, the leitmotif of personal prosperity keeps coming up when Trump’s suitability for the presidential office is affirmed. In wording that is representative of a line of argument frequently voiced in the mainstream press and on social media, a Trump supporter has been quoted by Carmen Fishwick of The Guardian as saying: “Trump is a self-made man. Regardless of getting a hefty loan from his father, he used that money to make a name and legacy for himself. I hope that Trump’s experience as a businessman will enable our country to operate more effectively when it comes to managing our money.”

Does this commonly encountered reduction of politics to pecuniary matters mean that financial performance stands as the dominant criterion on the ranking list of national values, that, to borrow a pop-cultural phrase, “America’s not a country, it’s just a business”? Especially with the recent surge of anti-American sentiments in the Western world, it has become something of a commonplace to more or less explicitly dismiss America’s cultural predisposition as vapid and money-driven. And yet, for all its oft-observed fascination with the dollar, the United States has also been home to a vibrant tradition of idealistic civic activism that has stood up to the status quo time and again, claiming the rights of disenfranchised groups based on purely moral objections. From the Abolitionist and Civil Rights struggles to the Women’s Rights Movement, the Environmental, Anti-War, and LGBT Movements, U.S. society has spawned a broad spectrum of reform campaigns that fundamentally shaped the globe in the twentieth century.

While this coexistence of strong idealistic and materialistic impulses may strike outside observers as antithetical, both can be traced to the same ideological root, namely the country’s powerful individualistic tradition, which in many ways represents “a fundamental aberration from the historically typical norm” (Lodge 15). Despite all the contrasts that characterize contemporary U.S. society, there is a surprisingly broad consensus across lines of social status, ethnic background, gender, geography, and religious beliefs that the key to mastering collective chal-

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1 This bleak line is uttered in the neo-noir crime film Killing Them Softly (2012) by the character Jackie Cogan, played by Brad Pitt. The film is set against the backdrop of the 2008 financial crisis and Barack Obama’s election victory.
lenges lies in citizens’ private lives. As Barack Obama has described this national attribute, “we will do collectively, through our government, only those things that we cannot do as well or at all individually and privately” (159).

Of course, when trying to capture the essence of a political mentality or culture, it is difficult to completely evade the normative ring of these terms. They are suitable to imply a homogeneity that seems inept when referring to a pluralistic democratic society, and especially the United States, a nation comprised of people from diverse cultural traditions and experiences. And yet, one can assume—with the basic understanding that we are always talking about tendencies, not norms—that it is precisely because U.S. American society has been constantly faced with the challenge of integrating waves of immigrants and synthesizing them into one nation without being able to draw on shared historical and ethnic roots that it has strongly relied on a generally accepted set of values. Gunnar Myrdal has referred to this ideological complex as the “American Creed,” which essentially contains five central elements that have remained nearly unchanged over time: freedom, egalitarianism, populism, capitalism, and individualism. Of all these aspects, individualism seems to be the focal one, as it contains all the others—the right to personal liberty and capitalistic pursuit of profit, as well as the regard for the masses as an assemblage of equal individuals—within itself. It is the dominance of the individualist mindset that constitutes “both a source of vitality and the well-spring of many of the differences between U.S. citizens and other people” (Kohut and Stokes 43).

Indeed, the collective emphasis on self-reliance and the resulting hostility toward state influence is directly linked to political features such as the notorious patchiness of the U.S. pension, health, and welfare systems, the lack of universal educational standards, and the privatization of key institutions ranging from prisons to the Federal Reserve System. While in the eyes of many Europeans the expulsion of state authority from such crucial public sectors makes for a rather precarious sociopolitical landscape, many U.S. citizens welcome this practice as the ultimate instrument of democracy. For in the American mind the regulatory vacuum created by the exiled state power is filled by the classic capitalist ideal of free markets. Even in a world dominated by the unpredictable ripples and earthquakes of a global economy, many Americans conceptualize a free marketplace in the most basic of ways, namely as a commercial and financial environment free of any state interference and ruled exclusively by the supposedly incorruptible mechanism of supply and demand.

2 America’s individualistic national character has been the subject of numerous studies. Although it appears as if individualist beliefs can be found throughout all social segments, group identities presumably also play a role in this context. For instance, it would be reasonable to expect for radical individualism to be less pronounced among African Americans, since historically they have been judged by race instead of personal character and merit. Research results are contradictory on this point, however. For example, while Gaines et al. (1997) have found that U.S. citizens of European descent are most clearly committed to individualist values, Oyserman et al. (2002) have reached the conclusion that African Americans express even stronger individualist attitudes than white Americans. But both studies agree that a communitarian mentality tends to be more marked among Asian Americans.
Unlike in Europe, where the word “capitalism” carried a distinctly negative connotation well into the 1980s and was mainly used by its opponents to criticize bourgeois, exploitative economic conditions, the broad U.S. American public traditionally upheld the capitalist economic order almost unreservedly as a guarantor of personal freedom, prosperity, and equality of opportunity. As conservative political commentator Tammy Bruce put it,

> economic freedom, which gave birth to capitalism, is the means by which people become politically free: it has been the flameholder of the promise for which people by the millions have left their native countries to seek freedom in the United States. What capitalism ultimately represents is an equal chance for all the members of society to improve their own lives. (240–41)

While this almost religious devotion to the salvific power of capitalism tends to be displayed most unequivocally on the conservative side, it is certainly not exclusive to it and instead reflects a broader cultural mindset. As a matter of fact, the economic system regularly makes the top of the list when Americans are asked about the sources of their patriotism (cf. Wolfe 154). For unlike the state, which by definition is based on a degree of centralized organization, the principle of free markets seems to be perfectly congruent with the individualist moral catalogue in that—so the theory goes—different personal talents and potentials can share and shape the marketplace on equal terms. In other words, free markets are understood to be nothing less than the economic manifestation of individualist values.

Against this background, the mass endorsement of Trump can be interpreted less as an isolated lapse in political judgement or a sudden outburst of blatant racism but instead as a logical consequence of a firmly established cultural code. It is based on a deeply ingrained collective assumption that free markets are ruled by a metaphysical mechanism that rewards moral behavior. More than mere venues for economic competition and exchange, they are perceived as a societal filter that helps single out the most talented and worthy individuals.

To trace the underlying logic of this paradigm, it is useful to turn to the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). Even though he is certainly not the only source of individualist ideas and forces in the United States, he remains the figurehead of this most American of intellectual currents and “the single best place to see how the self-rule of classical Stoicism, the Bildung of Goethe, the subjective theology of Schleiermacher, and the revolution of Kant and his successors come to be translated into accessible language [...] and—what is much more important—shown to have a constant bearing on everyday life” (Richardson 322). His eclectic philosophy still stands as an expression of a typically U.S. American sensibility, combining national confidence, optimism, religious fervor, and readiness for iconoclastic experimentation.

Although he is considered one of the less accessible canonized writers, Emerson’s ideological influence seems omnipresent in American life. Especially in the wake of the “Emerson Renaissance” of the 1980s, which brought about a renewed interest in Emerson’s work as well as a broadening of its reception spectrum, his writings have become the subject not only of literary but increasingly also of sociological and political discussion. As “the source of American wisdom” (Mitchell 69), his quotes adorn everyday objects like mugs, bumper stickers, and
T-shirts, and he is also referred to with striking regularity in immensely popular self-help publications from Dale Carnegie’s *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* to Melody Beattie’s *Codependent No More*, Julia Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way*, and Rhonda Byrne’s *The Secret*.

As another interesting indicator of Emerson’s sustained cultural presence, Robert N. Bellah et al. have noted in their influential study *Habits of the Heart: Commitment and Individualism in American Life* (1985) that many Americans chose the word “self-reliance” when asked about their fundamental moral guidelines (55-65). The expression was popularized by Emerson in his 1841 essay of the same title, which remains the *locus classicus* of radical individualism to this day. “Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist”; “Insist on yourself; never imitate”; “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind”: these are some of its best-known epigrams. The fact that these passages were even used for the purpose of marketing sneakers may attest to how thoroughly Emerson’s message of the “infinitude of the private man” (JMN 7:342) has been absorbed into popular culture. His individualistic tenets have entered America’s collective bloodstream and become common cultural property, reaching those who have never read him or, for that matter, even heard of his existence. He thus remains, in Stanley Cavell’s words, “unknown to the culture whose thinking [he] worked to found” (27).

This is also true in the sense that, as is so often the fate of philosophies, the mass-cultural adoption of his multifaceted ideas, notoriously elusive and averse to being locked into one firmly established meaning, has been accompanied by a dilution into simplistic formulas to the point of becoming almost unrecognizable. And depending on which of the various directions of Emerson’s intellectual excursions is shifted into the spotlight, his vision is sometimes celebrated as the ultimate expression of the democratic spirit, and sometimes held accountable for unhealthy authoritarian tendencies in U.S. American society. But regardless of which side is being taken, this critical interest in itself is evidence that Emerson’s intellectual heritage is still a touchstone for understanding cultural phenomena in the United States. As Charles E. Mitchell has observed with respect to this continuing relevance, the “contemporary debate over the meaning of individualism in America is, in effect, a debate over the meaning of Emerson” (11). In the same vein, Denis Donoghue has stated that “[t]o the extent to which the sentiments of power, self-reliance, subjectivity, and independence attract to themselves a distinctly American nuance, its source is Emerson” (37).

Notwithstanding this immense cultural impact, it would of course be inappropriate to plot too straight a line between the Bard of Concord and current political  

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3 These quotes from “Self-Reliance” were recited in a spot that was part of Reebok’s UBU campaign, which ran from June 1988 to February 1989. 
4 In particular, the political apathy of many U.S. citizens as well as the intricate conflicts between the rivaling claims of personal liberty and democratic equality are often directly ascribed to the Emersonian heritage. For example, Christopher Newfield (1996) holds the “Emerson Effect” responsible for authoritarian tendencies in U.S. culture. In a similar vein, David Marr maintains that Emerson’s intellectual influence acts as “a break on the democratic political imagination” (4).
developments. Accordingly, it should be stressed that the intention here is not to make his work directly responsible for political choices made by U.S. voters today, but rather to acknowledge him as one of the main architects of a sensibility that still manifests in the way contemporary Americans think and feel about politics. When exploring what he perceives to be Emerson’s “ghostly presence” in American culture, Randall Fuller has pointed out that

we still do not have a criticism supple enough to suggest how psychic needs and politics, interiority and the subtly felt but often contradictory pressures exerted by various cultural forces, intersect and vector in ways that make particular authors suddenly preeminent, suddenly powerful, suddenly haunting. (76; emphasis in orig.)

The kind of intellectual influence Fuller talks about may be mediate and diffuse, but no less potent for that. And since “Emerson's ideas themselves have been so influential in American life and thought that the Emersonian tradition serves as a powerful means of mapping the leading discursive formations of the last 150 years in the United States” (Marr 10), the Emersonian brand of individualism may hold at least part of the answer to the question that continues to preoccupy the global public: How is it that Donald J. Trump has emerged as the 45th American president? At first glance, it may seem rather far-fetched to draw ideological links between a nineteenth-century thinker whose idealistic philosophy is aimed at life-long mental and spiritual self-cultivation and an uncouth and intellectually unsophisticated tycoon who has become the epitome of dull money worship. But as radically different as these two protagonists may be, their ideological positions cannot be conveniently reduced to the opposition of idealism versus materialism. For the fact that Emerson was a dyed-in-the-wool idealist makes it easy to overlook that even in its most esoteric moments his philosophy holds important implications for the material sphere. Emerson explicitly included the economic dimension in his reflections, and although his model individual is clearly motivated by the ideational goals of emotional and intellectual self-advancement, it is far from being an ascetic. Rather, Emerson declares material prosperity to be an integral part of the project of self-realization. “Man was born to be rich” is his optimistic message (CW 4:53). For him, there is no fundamental rivalry between mind and matter, mundanity and spirituality. Instead he assumes that inner and outer development go hand in hand.

The close interconnection of these two realms is clearly expressed in his language, as he draws on terms from physics and the world of finance to describe moral and intellectual phenomena; debit and credit, investment and profit, force and counterforce are the categories through which he reflects on spiritual values. Conversely, he resorts to the organic imagery of growing, ripening, and blooming to illustrate material interrelations. Believing these realms to be subject to the same principles, he supposes that, at least in the long run, the material balance reflects the degree of a person's spiritual development:

Money, which represents the prose of life, and which is hardly spoken of in parlors without apology, is, in its effects and laws, as beautiful as roses. Property keeps the accounts of the world, and is always moral. The property will be found where the labor, the wisdom, and the virtue has been in nations, in classes, and (the whole life-time considered, with the compensations) in the individual also. (CW 3:136)
With this assumption Emerson stands in a long Protestant tradition. As Max Weber famously argued in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, interpreting prosperity as a visible manifestation of a godly way of life is a typically Protestant trait. Instead of separating “lower” worldly matters from the “higher” sphere of religion, these areas of life are amalgamated through an “acceptance of […] life in the world as a task” (Weber 88). The concept of vocation as calling, which can already be encountered in Martin Luther’s writings, is also taken up by Emerson. But the latter goes even further in establishing a causal connection between internal and external commodities. For even as Protestantism postulates that virtues such as diligence, discipline, honesty, and a restrained appetite for worldly pleasures tend to support the accumulation of wealth, some frictional losses are anticipated in this virtue-to-money production mechanism. In other words, there is no guarantee that good deeds will invariably yield positive material results, since the full reward for a moral lifestyle is still deferred to the afterlife. Consequently, wealth may merely serve as a possible indicator, not as conclusive proof of the presence of virtue.

In contrast, Emerson radically shifts the venue of divine justice into the here and now. “Justice is not postponed,” he assures his readers. “A perfect equity adjusts its balance in all parts of life. […] Every secret is told, every crime is punished, every virtue rewarded, every wrong redressed, in silence and certainty” (CW 2:60). He is confident that the world is ruled by an infallible universal mechanism of justice, which he calls “compensation.” This principle also extends to the commercial marketplace, where it takes on the form of a purifying power that ensures social mobility and vitality:

We complain of [trade’s] oppression of the poor, and of its building up a new aristocracy on the ruins of the aristocracy it destroyed. But the aristocracy of trade has no permanence, is not entailed, was the result of toil and talent, the result of merit of some kind, and is continually falling, like the waves of the sea, before new claims of the same sort. Trade is an instrument in the hands of that friendly Power which works for us in our own despite. (JMN 9:61–62)

What is important here is that the marketplace is not only cast as a kind of social immune system, but is even attributed a magical quality. It is described as being subject to causal forces that are beyond the reach of human understanding and control, so that any attempt to deliberately manipulate its natural dynamics must ultimately lead to the corruption of its positive effects:

We legislate against forestalling and monopoly; we would have a common granary for the poor; but the selfishness which hoards the corn for high prices, is the preventive of famine; and the law of self-preservation is surer policy than any legislation can be. We concoct eleemosynary systems, and it turns out that our charity increases pauperism. We inflate our paper currency, we repair commerce with unlimited credit, and are presently visited with unlimited bankruptcy. (CW 1:231)

Only if not interfered with can this benevolent divine force unfold its supernatural qualities to the benefit of all, so that even as we “aim at a petty end quite aside from the public good, […] our act arranges itself by irresistible magnetism in a line with the poles of the world” (CW 2:64). This confidence in the inherent wisdom and fairness of deregulated markets has long dominated the American under-
standing of economy. It has taken deep root in the American psyche as the twin aspect of individualism.

It is thus hardly a coincidence that it was Emerson’s declared admirer Ronald Reagan—seen by some as “our most Emersonian president” (Diggins 37)—who more than any other U.S. head of state personified American capitalism and the principle of *laissez-faire*. Especially if one does not agree with Reagan’s policies, it is tempting to cast him as a soulless materialist; but it takes only a slight shift in perspective to make his political style appear in an entirely different light, namely as that of a “liberal romantic who opened up the American mind to the full blaze of Emersonian optimism” (Diggins 51). As a matter of fact, rigorous economic liberalization paired with equally resolute cuts in social welfare fully tally with the Emersonian recipe for a healthy society, in which the innate flow of capital stimulates personal initiative and reinforces positive values such as endurance, industriousness, and prudence:

Debt, grinding debt, whose iron face the widow, the orphan, and the sons of genius fear and hate; – debt, which consumes so much time, which so cripples and disheartens a great spirit with cares that seem so base, is a preceptor whose lessons cannot be forgone, and is needed most by those who suffer from it most. Moreover, property, which has been well compared to snow, – “if it fall level to-day, it will be blown into drifts to-morrow,” – is the surface action of internal machinery, like the index on the face of a clock. Whilst now it is the gymnastics of the understanding, it is hiving in the foresight of the spirit, experience in profounder laws. (CW 1:24)

If therefore the motto “Greed is good” has resonated so strongly in U.S. culture, it is important to appreciate that in the American mindscape the pursuit of material possessions is not automatically equated to sheer materialism, and indeed pecuniary aspects are of entirely subordinate importance here. Rather, the capitalist market has a deeper meaning in American culture as “a very intellectual force,” nothing less than “the principle of Liberty; that […] planted America and destroyed Feudalism; that […] makes peace and keeps peace” (CW 1:233; 234). With such theurgic qualities, the marketplace becomes a resonating body that responds favorably to the right moral attitudes and actions. It takes on the role of an incorruptible judge who, in ways not always transparent or logically traceable by the human mind, makes sure that material goods will eventually be distributed exactly according to personal merit. “Let them compete,” as Emerson proclaimed, “and success to the strongest, who are always, at last, the wisest and best” (UL: 6).

Steeped as their culture is in an elusive and yet pervasive Emersonian blend of individualism and capitalist optimism, U.S. Americans are conditioned to implicitly interpret business success as a kind of character quality certification. In the ideological climate of the mainstream United States, Trump’s alleged achievements as an entrepreneur not only distinguish him in the purely economic sense but indirectly also endow him with the nimbus of a moral hero who has emerged victorious from a trial in a competition governed by moral principles. In this spirit, many Americans would probably still agree with Emerson that the “powers that make the capitalist are metaphysical” (LL 1:141).

Trump has been capitalizing on this collective reflex by repeatedly redirecting political debates to the economic terrain. As Thomas Frank of *The Guardian* ob-
served during the campaign phase: “In fact, to judge by how much time he spent talking about it, trade may be his single biggest concern—not white supremacy. [...] Asked about his political excommunication by Mitt Romney, he chose to pivot and talk about...trade.” Predictably, the inauguration speech was likewise dominated by the economic theme, with Trump reiterating his mantra to “buy American, hire American” as the core strategy to “Make America Great Again.” Along the same lines, the President has exhibited the habit of referring to political decision-making processes involving complex political and moral considerations as simply good or bad “deals.” In a telephone conversation with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull on 28 January 2017, Trump was reported in a Washington Post article by Greg Miller to have rejected the recently negotiated refugee resettlement agreement between the two countries as “the worst deal ever” before hanging up on Turnbull. Reverting to the same simplified market rhetoric, he boldly announced his plans to solve the Middle East conflict by making “a bigger and better deal than people in this room even understand” during a memorable press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu on 15 February 2017 (Trump, “Remarks”).

Of course, given Trump’s capricious personality, it is hard to know whether his choice of language is based on political calculus, cultural instinct, or simply personal habit. But the strategy works. And it works because it taps into America’s century-old desire to replace government with the market. Emerson, “the teacher of the American tribe” (Kazin 3), once predicted that “[t]rade goes to make the governments insignificant” (CW 1:233). But if the markets are the better government, the successful businessman may well be the better politician. In a country so strongly committed to meritocratic notions and the ideal of the self-made man, a business mogul of Trump’s caliber is almost by default associated with a cultural elite that is perceived not as just a bunch of rich people but also as the driving force and energetic center at the heart of democratic society.

With this in mind, one can assume that Trump’s tycoon-studded “billionaire cabinet” is not merely an oldboys’ network assembled based on unabashed favoritism. Even though Trump’s cabinet member picks have drawn criticism for being a betrayal of the populist spirit of his campaign, they are in actuality in perfect accordance with the popular sentiment that it is also, and even especially, in the interest of the lower strata of society to be ruled by the economic nobility of “the wisest and best,” as they have been knighted by the authoritative moral mechanics of the market. After all, it was to the cheers of his mostly working-class supporters that Trump promulgated at a rally in Cincinnati on 1 December 2016:

And by the way, I’ve put on some of the greatest business people in the world. One of the networks said: ‘Why he put on a billionaire at Commerce?’ Well that’s ‘cause this guy knows how to make money, folks. He knows how to make money! I’d like to put on

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5 In the course of the press conference, Trump casually remarked to Netanyahu that “I would like to see you hold back on settlements for a little bit.” When the latter, apparently torn between amusement and bafflement, failed to respond immediately, Trump commented on this reserved demeanor as that of a “good negotiator,” Netanyahu picked up on the economic theme by saying that “this is the Art of the Deal,” jokingly referring to Trump’s autobiographical business-advice book (Trump, “Remarks”).
a guy that failed all his life, but we don't want that, do we? [...] I am gonna be putting on the greatest killers you've ever seen. We need that. It's time. (Trump, “President-Elect”)

A week later, in a speech in Des Moines, Iowa, he announced that “some of the people I put on to negotiate, you've been noticing, are some of the most successful people in the world. And one newspaper criticized me: ‘Why can't they have people of modest means?' Because I want people who made a fortune!” again eliciting an eruption of applause (Trump, “President-Elect Victory”).

On the face of it, this public reaction seems mysterious. It would be plausible to expect that lower-class Americans, especially, would prefer to be represented by politicians who share their experiences and understand their day-to-day struggles. Even more baffling, this public reaction comes not long after two devastating financial crises that were caused by an unrestrained economic elite and resulted in catastrophic financial losses for large parts of the American population. Now it appears that, irrespective of a massive wave of public outrage that brought forth the “Occupy Wall Street” movement as well as a gush of critical documentaries and movies, the confidence in trickle-down economics and the built-in justness of the market has miraculously snapped back intact. As early as in “the congressional elections [of 2 November 2010] most Americans have voted for lowering taxes for the rich and for reducing social welfare benefits. Interestingly, most of these voters either already depend on welfare benefits or will be depending on them in the future,” as Boris Groys observed.6

Unless one wishes to attribute a masochist streak to a large percentage of U.S. citizens, this behavioral pattern points to a mass internalization of the individualist credo that the markets, not political regulatory measures, are the ideal agents of social justice. Thus, when exploring the causes for the catastrophic breakdown of financial markets of 2007/2008, which destroyed as much as 21% of U.S. citizens’ capital, numerous American commentators contended that the catastrophe was not caused by too little but rather by too much regulation. As a sample of this apodictic adherence to the myth of perfect self-regulation, prominent economic journalist Robert W. MacDonald offered the following view:

America has now moved into a form of capitalist evolution called Corporate Capitalism. Under this configuration the basic elements of free-market and private ownership remain, but the system is dominated by hierarchical, highly bureaucratic corporations that are fixated on narrow self-interests for profits with little or no concern for the best interests of the nation, society or workers. And therein is the problem.

In other words, the culpability lies once more with the archenemies of individualism, namely the bureaucratic and greedy organizations that agglutinate independent individuals into a heteronomous mass, thereby corrupting their personal integrity and warping the effects of an otherwise immaculate preternatural machinery. This positive bias toward unchecked pursuit of gain is the fruit of a culture that celebrates radical individualism and market-generated reward mecha-

6 Translated from the German original: “Bei den Kongresswahlen haben die meisten Amerikaner dafür gestimmt, die Steuern für Reiche zu senken und Sozialleistungen zu kürzen. Interessanterweise waren es mehrheitlich jene Wähler, die entweder immer schon oder zukünftig auf Sozialleistungen angewiesen sind.”
isms as a panacea for all societal issues. To consider alternatives to the free reign of the market’s mysterious ways, which is construed to be not just one of many possible economic strategies but a redeeming principle dictated by the structure of reality itself, triggers a culturally induced primal fear of jeopardizing the core value of personal freedom.

Now Donald Trump has entered the political arena on the promise to unfetter this natural law by releasing inherent economic flux from the ostensibly stifling barrage of political regulations. The fact that he even met with enough support to launch the peculiarly indiscriminate directive that two regulations are to be eliminated for every newly enacted one underlines that it is not any specific content of an administrative order, but rather the presence of such orders itself that is perceived to be the problem.

And it is not only the conservative camp that has embraced the narrative according to which the market is the preferable alternative to governance. Rather, this latent assumption pervades U.S. American political discourse like a radiating ideational background. Thus, when in the first presidential debate on 26 September 2016 Hillary Clinton drew attention to the fact that Trump has failed to release his tax returns, the first thing she chose to bring into play as a possible reason was that “maybe he’s not as rich as he says he is.” This one sentence reveals the depth of the divide separating American and European political sensibilities: In Europe, politicians usually try to appear less wealthy than they actually are because they want people to still be able to identify with them. Being too rich tends to create suspicion. Quite to the contrary in the United States, where the public is prone to equate affluence to choosing the right and righteous path in life. Here, it is apparently tacitly assumed that being not rich enough is what makes you morally suspect.

Of course this fixation on material success, though encouraged by the distorted echoes of Emerson’s individualistic message, is in itself not Emersonian individualism. The truncated and vulgarized versions of Emerson’s philosophy as they have been adopted into the cultural mainstream are as far from the rich and complex fabric of his ideas as Trump is from being the ideal independent personality that the Bard of Concord once envisioned. In fact, Emerson expressly denounced “vulgar prosperity” (CW 1:62) and even cautioned that “[t]here is nothing more important in the culture of man than to resist the dangers of commerce” (EL 3:191), underscoring that material goods only have merit as secondary signs of mental self-dependence and productivity. But Emerson’s ideas have diffused into the American psyche in patterns that tend to reduce the call for personal autonomy to merely financial aspects, so that a magnate like Donald Trump suddenly seems to fit perfectly into the slot of cultural hero. And even though there is a variety of reasons why he strikes a chord with the American public, the momentum of a national subconscious permeated by the precepts of an individualist ideology should not be underestimated among these factors.

Although individualism, in general as well as in its specifically Emersonian hue, has undeniably been a potent positive force in U.S. American cultural history, it has come with ideological stowaways. Among them is the collective tendency to uncritically presuppose a metaphysical relationship between financial
success and morality. The fact that this attribution process is seldom a product of conscious reflection but rather a culturally imprinted reflex makes it even more powerful. After all, nothing has a stronger grip on us than the taken-for-granted, and therefore unchallenged and unrestrained, aspects of our culture.

**Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CW</td>
<td>Emerson, Ralph Waldo, <em>The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>EL</td>
<td>Emerson, Ralph Waldo, <em>The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1833–1842</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>JMN</td>
<td>Emerson, Ralph Waldo, <em>The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>LL</td>
<td>Emerson, Ralph Waldo, <em>The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1843–1871</em>.</td>
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<td>UL</td>
<td>Emerson, Ralph Waldo, <em>Uncollected Lectures: Reports of Lectures on American Life and Natural Religion</em>.</td>
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**Works Cited**


