Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies
vol. 6, no. 1, 2024, pp. 35–53
doi: 10.47060/jaaas.v6i1.209

Murray Rothbard's Populist Blueprint: Paleo-Libertarianism and the Ascent of the Political Right

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ABSTRACT

In his 1992 pamphlet "Right-Wing Populism: A Strategy for the Paleo Movement," libertarian economist and intellectual Murray Rothbard drafted a strategy that foreshadowed the rise of populist politics that was to come some years later. Central to his populist vision was the idea of a "paleo-coalition" consisting of "paleo-libertarians" and "paleo-conservatives" that he saw coming closer to power by addressing the masses directly. This, Rothbard proclaimed, would be possible if a presidential candidate were able to short-circuit the traditional media and appeal to disgruntled parts of the population, namely the "rednecks" and Middle America. With Donald Trump's victory in the presidential election in 2016, Rothbard's ideas seem to have become reality. This article draws on the concept of flyover to describe this special populist framework by analyzing libertarians' appeals and politicizable connections to an imagined "real people" and by historically tracing populism in US conservatism. Based on a discussion of the social functions of pamphlets as contentious formats that are interwoven into social conflict, a close reading of Rothbard's 1992 pamphlet shows the decisive political edge that populists were able to gain by employing the strategies for the "paleo movement."

KEYWORDS

Far-right, new right, conservatism, Ludwig von Mises Institute, neoliberalism, paleo-coalition, paleo-conservatism

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 852205). This publication reflects only the author's view, and the Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

By the beginning of 1992, Murray Rothbard had become fascinated by the possibility of political change. In a speech in January of that year, the libertarian intellectual shared his observations and expressed the opinion that "[t]he radical Right is back, all over the place, feistier than ever and getting stronger!" (Rothbard, "A Strategy for the Right" 11; Ganz, "The Year the Clock Broke"). Exhilarated by these prospects, Rothbard put pen to paper and developed strategic considerations on what the Right needed to do to seize the moment and gain access to power. The scholar activist wrote a pamphlet that from today's perspective reads like a blueprint for the development of a global Right such as we have witnessed in recent years. Drawing on a term that has become ubiquitous in today's political debate, Rothbard labelled his vision "right-wing populism."

Reflecting back on a plethora of unsuccessful attempts to build a libertarian mass base, the intellectual outlined his approach to drawing constituents to the Right. The radical Right he envisioned was a "paleo coalition" of paleo-libertarians, free market ultras, and socially conservative paleo-conservatives who put "America First." In order to achieve this vision, Rothbard looked to attract a constituency that is only seldom described in favorable terms in political debate: He wrote, "[i]n a sense the strategy we are now proclaiming is a strategy of Outreach to the Rednecks," adding that "the 'rednecks' were the real people" ("Right-Wing Populism" 12).

Rothbard's identification of the "rednecks" as the "real people" follows the core operation central to every brand of populism: identifying part of the people as the "real people" and politicizing this distinction by siding with them against a more or less imaginary elite (Müller 21). What needs to be emphasized in these populist binaries, however, is their cultural appeal. One way of accounting for these aspects can be found in the *flyover* concept, which describes "a *cultural* concept" that "describes human relations to each other," and which refers "first and mainly to a *social* and *political* relation between two groups" (Klecker and Pöhlmann). Just like the term "redneck," flyover fictions delineate "the difference between the elites and the people according to central and peripheral places and their resulting cultural hierarchies." Using the term "redneck" in a favorable way, Rothbard weaponized a cultural hierarchy and was able to "*pretend* to be apolitical and 'merely' cultural," it was "not a question of power but a question of the proper way of life" (Klecker and Pöhlmann).

Rothbard was not the first to make use of such strategizing. In fact, this operation has a long history among US conservatives, whose populist aspirations have become increasingly visible since the 1950s. Since then, conservative and capital-friendly politicians have needed to embrace the working class in order to present themselves as being part of "the people." On this basis, it is easy to pit the people against the establishment or against any seemingly unhinged idealism of the Left. Rothbard's

libertarian thinking, however, points to the latest evolution of right-wing populism into the amalgamation of "the people" and ultra-capitalist politics as seen in the far-right politics of Donald Trump.

By focusing on Rothbard's pamphlet and on recent work of scholars and journalists, my aim is to describe the contours of the strategy behind this shift toward populism in the United States. Thus, by portraying the libertarians' appeals and politicizable connections to an imagined "real people," I will show that such strategizing has been a constant feature of conservative politics in the United States since the 1950s. Rothbard's text reflects these visions – and it embodies characteristics that are central to pamphleteering. A close reading of Rothbard's pamphlet shows how the intellectual attempted to merge libertarian ideas with visions for an emergent right-wing. The decisive political edge he outlined in his pamphlet is perhaps more in tune with our political moment than with the time in which it was written (Ganz, "The Year the Clock Broke").

Libertarians and the People

While the mounting challenge of populism has resulted in a vast body of literature on the phenomenon, the core theoretical elements of populism have undergone little change. Populism remains a relatively simplistic political dynamic, a "thin-centered ideology" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 6) that proponents adopt as a style rather than as a deeply rooted set of beliefs. At the core of populism is the imaginary of an antagonism between "them" and "us." While the "them" embodies a corrupted political elite or establishment, the "us" is the pure personification of the people and their common sense. This Manichaean binary is not restricted to a particular ideological worldview. Both constructions purposefully serve as blank spaces, or "empty signifiers" (Laclau), that can be filled with whatever might credibly be sold as representing the rift between the elites and the down-to-earth people.

These populist logics are fundamental to the distinct brand of politics that is libertarianism. This is all the more true since such beliefs are easily coupled with ideas about the true nature of the US-American creed. In fact, perhaps no other political ideology can be considered so specifically US-American as the libertarian ideology, given its firm insistence on civil liberties and its valorization of freedom of the people, of the will, of speech, and – above all – of markets. With its emphasis on the natural right to own private property and engage in free exchange, libertarian thinking seems compatible with the United States in its capacity as the world's capitalist superpower. However, few other non-anti-capitalist political groups position themselves in such strong opposition to the established structural foundations and workings of the US-American political system as libertarians do. This is because there is

one essential enemy of all libertarians, one that is interfering with private property rights in every sphere of life by means of taxation, by means of controlling currencies, of conscription, of centralized federal education and many more means besides: the state. As long as governmental power and restrictions on business or currencies are in place, libertarians will not only be able to stake a claim to fundamental opposition but will also be able to rely heavily on an ideology that creates antagonism by default (Boaz; Doherty; Rothbard, *For a New Liberty*).

By taking up such an antagonistic position toward the state and established politics, libertarians are able to put distance between themselves and other political contenders and occupy a space that is at a remove from the US political establishment. Additionally, libertarians can make use of this position to claim that they embody the true intentions of the founding fathers of the United States. The Libertarian Party is doing exactly that by fusing free market ideology with the purported vision of the founders, as can be observed in some of their rack cards. These are short agitative pamphlets or flyers that are distributed to interested political audiences (e.g. at political rallies) in order to convey the views of the party and mobilize or win over supporters. The rack card "What is?" recounts its origin story in a telling manner:

> The Libertarian Party was created in 1971 by people who realized that politicians had strayed from America's original libertarian foundation, with disastrous results. The new party's vision was the same as that of America's founders – a society where individuals are free to follow their own dreams in their own ways – with "liberty and justice for all." ("What is?")

Here, the party is usurping the founders' vision and simultaneously short-circuiting it with libertarian core beliefs. In this way, libertarianism is presented as the true embodiment of "Americanness."

The first sentence of the quote shows that talk of the country being founded on American principles opens up a narrative of political decay, which is a constant feature in conservative populism. Moreover, it provides a way to connect with the logics inherent to the concept of flyover. In fact, some libertarians make direct use of the catchword flyover in their rhetoric, as a now defunct podcast called the *Flyover Libertarian* shows. But even without direct reference to the term, libertarians' spatial politics reveal a tendency to locate their bases of operation at a remove from the Washington Beltway, "big government," and established politics in places that are often identified as part of the stereotypical "flyover country." This much was already clear at the inception of the Libertarian Party, which was founded in Denver, Colorado, and indeed the party's headquarters are still located in the "Mile High City." The state of Colorado is sometimes described as a particularly fertile ground for libertarian values due to cultural attitudes such as its Western "live and let live ethos"

(Burns 452). The internationally operating, culturally conservative libertarian think tank known as the Ludwig von Mises Institute, named after the Austrian economist, draws on similar anti-elite spatial politics by virtue of being located in Auburn, Alabama, a city of barely 80,000 inhabitants (Slobodian, *Crack-Up Capitalism* 103). The fact that Auburn is located deep in the South adds an additional layer of unsettling meaning, and reveals crucial strategic differences between libertarian factions, given that the biggest libertarian think tank, the Cato Institute, is now based in Washington DC, after being founded in San Francisco in 1977. We will come to these differences later.

The political personnel of the Libertarian Party can also be connected to what have frequently been called flyover states. Their presidential nominees for the 2012, 2016, and 2020 elections, Gary Johnson and Jo Jorgensen, came from small cities in North Dakota and Illinois, respectively. The most influential donors for the libertarians, the Koch brothers of Koch Industries, were born in Wichita, Kansas, and continue to run their operations from there. Interestingly, even those politicians most commonly referred to as libertarians while running as Republicans also have some connections to the peripheral and now poverty-stricken states in the Rust Belt or Appalachia, which nowadays might as well be referred to as "hinterlands" due to their "distance from the booming cores of the supposedly 'post-industrial' economy" (Neel 17). Libertarian icon Ron Paul served as state senator of Texas even though he was born in a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His son, Rand Paul, was also born in Pittsburgh and became a senator of the Appalachian state of Kentucky in 2011. Lastly, the Republican free market advocate Paul Ryan, who served as Speaker of the House of Representatives and frequently identifies the libertarian saga *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand as his favorite novel, hails from Janesville, a small deindustrialized town in Wisconsin, whose first congressional district he went on to represent.

Populism and the Conservative Movement

As outlined above, the populist core logic is not constricted to the Right, and in the United States, the term populism has a long history. It was the People's Party, a left-leaning grassroots mass movement of impoverished and indebted farmers, that introduced the term "populists" into everyday political language in the 1890s (Frank). What spurred on right-wing populism in the 20th century were the New Deal policies implemented after the Great Depression in the early 1930s. The profusion of federal agencies ensuring a functioning economy and banking sector after the Great Depression and the simultaneous building of a social welfare net came under attack for being "big government" from economic and socially conservative interests (Phillips-Fein). Indeed, until the 1960s the New Deal coalition of Democrats, labor unions, and

racial minorities fostered its power (Patel 278), and conservatives were not able to employ populist tactics for their own ends. Populist right-wing figures such as Republican communist hunter Joseph McCarthy were examples of Richard Hofstadter's oft-quoted "paranoid style in American politics" (Hofstadter).

However, when Hofstadter published his analysis, he had already noticed that a successful right-wing populism was burgeoning (7). It was Arizona senator Barry Goldwater who was the first to receive support from a then emerging movement of "conservative grassroots" (McGirr), eventually becoming his party's nominee for the 1964 presidential race. Goldwater's "producerist" (Lowndes and HoSang) ideology, which pitted allegedly economically productive parts of society against unproductive ones, foreshadowed a fundamental principle of right-wing thinking in later years that married "normative conservatism" with libertarian laissez-faire economic thinking in an effective manner (McGirr 10). Simultaneously, this ideology tied in with the idea of economic independence as a fundamental part of "Americanness," an idea that dates back to the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer.

Adding to these efforts, the Republicans embarked upon their "Southern strategy," led by the segregationist governor of Alabama, George Wallace, which looked to target white voters who predominantly voted for Democrats (the so-called "Dixiecrats"). These measures effectively led to a "southern capture of the Republican Party" (Lowndes 6) that from then on exploited deep-seated racial resentments and sided with the segregationists' opposition to civil rights. Thinly veiled racist undertones were seeping into political language and policy proposals – racist "dog whistling" started to become a political tool (Haney-López 13).

All of these new developments paved the way for the successful conservative populism employed by later presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. Both of these California Republicans (or their staff) shared the ability to find words to express the antagonistic binary between the people and the elites. Against the backdrop of claims for civil rights and New Left mobilization in general, Nixon evoked the "forgotten Americans" and the "silent majority." From here it was just one small step to "middle America," a new and compelling term for this burgeoning Republican majority that conveyed to all those who felt themselves to be part of the "middle" an imagined sense of being constantly pressured by the economic and political elites and underclasses (Lowndes 133, 183). Populism had become a pillar of conservative politics and Ronald Reagan was able to employ the slogan "Let's Make America Great Again" to persuade voters to vote for him during his 1980 presidential election campaign.

Accompanying Reagan, rising Republican politicians such as Newt Gingrich now left the well-trodden bipartisan path of US-American politics for a "politics as warfare" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 149). This much more confrontational style attacked many

of the unwritten rules in American politics that had provided "guardrails" for its functioning and stability (97–117). Gingrich's rise to the top of the Republican Party meant that the party moved with him and adopted his majorly confrontational political style. An overhauling of welfare under Democratic president Bill Clinton that further weakened the traditional bonds between labor and the Democrats was forced by Gingrich, who presided over a Republican majority in Congress.

This new strategy proved useful for conservative interests in the decades to come. Barack Obama's time in office, in particular, saw how the antagonistic approach of the Republican Party eroded norms of mutual toleration. Forbearance gave way to hostility and political figures that had been placed on the radical fringes of American conservatism made their entry into politics. As early as Obama's run for the presidency, radical actors such as Sarah Palin were becoming more influential in the Republican Party, and the right-wing Tea Party movement, which resorted to a political mix of extreme social conservatism and radical market policies, was able to shape the politics of the party. The Tea Party movement merged chauvinist resentment with free market principles under the familiar "producerist" umbrella (Berlet). It was no accident that libertarian-leaning Paul Ryan became majority speaker of the House of Representatives as the Tea Party gained influence.

The Tea Party appealed first and foremost to older factions of the petty bourgeoisie, who had witnessed a devaluation of their financial assets due to the financial crisis of 2008 and feared for their economic security, and this stereotypical "middle American" constituency closely resembled the supporters of Donald Trump in demographic terms (Kumkar). Trump himself kick-started his political career in the 2010s. During his two terms in office, Obama, unable to deliver on his campaign promises, became the target of openly racist attacks from an increasingly chauvinist Right that was fueled by a right-wing media ecosystem surrounding Fox News and the Republican Party. It was here, within the "Birther Movement," which doubted that Obama had been born in the United States, that Donald Trump rose to political prominence. While the Republicans' switch to antagonistic confrontation had eased Trump's rise to the top of the party, his own populist strategy, however, more closely resembled the very ideas Murray Rothbard had developed decades earlier in his 1992 text "Right-Wing Populism."

Libertarians, Intellectuals and Pamphleteering

Before addressing the content of Murray Rothbard's 1992 text, it is important to reflect on its form. In analytical terms, Rothbard's essay ought to be considered a pamphlet. As a literary form, pamphlets derive their status from their social function and political uses (Monot, "Pamphleteering"). This goes against the more common

assumption that seeks to define pamphlets principally by referring to questions of format (e.g. shortness, unboundedness, and inexpensiveness). Pamphlets are particularly deeply embedded in political battles and experience a surge in use during revolutionary times (Warner, *The Letters of the Republic*; Bailyn; Darnton). This literary genre always expresses some sort of protest, as George Orwell, an avid pamphlet collector, knew (7–8). With their writing, pamphleteers contest power and aim to antagonize people. Often highly polemical in tone, pamphlets admit no conciliation or middle ground; indeed they go all in for one side and one side only (Angenot). By setting some parts of the public against others, pamphlets make a bid to appeal to those who sense some sort of exclusion from the dominant discourse and thereby mobilize counterpublics (Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*; Fraser). Thus, in a play on the double meaning of the press and pressure, pamphlets, as printed matter, literally "press" (that is, pressurize) social orders and the political opponents of their creators in order to effect change (Bebnowski, "Mit Druckerzeugnissen Druck erzeugen" and "Die Umkodierung des Proletariats"). Rothbard's text has all of these qualities as well as an additional, decisive one: Pamphlets are "made" rather than written, as their status as pamphlets results from large-scale public perception, a sort of "popular literacy" or "popular philology," as Pierre-Héli Monot shows in his reflections on the form ("Poor, Nasty, Brutish and Short" and "Art, Autonomy, Philology"). Different observers have stressed this point. Journalist John Ganz writes that "every single neo-Nazi that came out of the woodwork in 2016 and 2017, [sic!] mentioned Rothbard, who was [a] Jew from the Bronx, as being a key figure in their journey rightwards" (Ganz, "Don't Cry for Argentina"). According to historians Quinn Slobodian and Dieter Plehwe, "right-wing libertarians" returned to the strategy he outlined in his pamphlet "innumerable times" (100).

That Rothbard became a pamphleteer is not uncommon for the libertarian tradition in which scholar activists such as this on-off college professor played a crucial role (Doherty 5). It may not be considered all that surprising that a series of important pamphlets that are at the core of the intellectual canon of early US Republican thought and that shaped the political views of the revolutionaries of 1776 are of fundamental importance to libertarians. The pamphlets in question are *Cato's Letters*, written between 1720 and 1723 under a pseudonym by two critics of the British political system, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. They maintained that financial corruption in tandem with increasing debts were threats to the independence of parliament as they would make legislators prone to manipulation (Bailyn 41–45). Rothbard was deeply entrenched in organized libertarianism in the United States and had helped to found the most important and influential libertarian think tank with money

from David Koch in 1976: the Cato Institute. The name of the enterprise had apparently been Rothbard's idea (Ganz, "The Forgotten Man").

This apparent bookishness helped to inspire a Rothbardian vision of revolutionary social change. A student of communist strategy and an avid reader of left-wing theory, this intellectual had a penchant for playing with historically charged concepts and figures and did not shy away from borrowing from the Left what he deemed useful for his aspirations. The economist possessed a strong sense of mission and was ready to take over the helm of the libertarian ship. But Rothbard soon radicalized his vision. And this is where the aforementioned strategic differences between libertarian factions come into play.

In recent years, the story of this trajectory has been told by historians and journalists alike (e.g. Slobodian, *Crack-Up Capitalism* 99–116, "Anti-'68ers"; Ganz, "The Forgotten Man" and "The Year the Clock Broke"). After falling out with Cato leaders, the then 55-year-old economist left the institute and found a new sphere of activity in the Auburn-based and simultaneously more conservative and radical Ludwig von Mises Institute, which had been founded by Ron Paul's former congressional chief of staff, Llewellyn Rockwell. Rothbard and Rockwell developed a position they called paleo-libertarianism. This strand of libertarianism reflected a schism within the libertarian movement that had its roots in the 1960s. Unlike left-leaning libertarians, the faction surrounding Rothbard vehemently opposed ideas of human equality and instead relied on positions of unbridgeable racial and cultural differences (Slobodian, "Anti-'68ers"). Although it may have been difficult to say which ideological end of the political spectrum libertarianism leaned toward generally, the position of the paleos was more than clear, as Rockwell and Rothbard aligned themselves with the far right. From their point of view, in order to become successful, libertarians needed to "defend Judeo-Christian traditions and Western culture and restore the focus on the family, church, and community as both protection against the state and the building blocks of a coming state-less society" (Slobodian, *Crack-Up Capitalism* 104). Their vision of "a capitalist anarchist future" required people to congregate in smaller entities, and it "was taken for granted that these little platoons would divide according to race" (105). Freed from tactical concessions to other parts of the libertarian movement, Rothbard outlined his visions. In January 1992, the *Rothbard Rockwell Report* (RRR), the newsletter put out by Rothbard and Rockwell and the "chief organ of the paleo position" (Slobodian, "Anti-'68ers" 380), published the decisive pamphlet "Right-Wing Populism."

A Right-Wing Populist Blueprint

Rothbard's intervention came at a time when Republican president George H. W. Bush had fallen out of favor in conservative circles. Approaching the 1992 presidential elections, Bush, in spite of his swift victory in the second Gulf War of 1991, had proven himself to be "uncharacteristically vulnerable" (Guan). All this was in spite of a general sense of triumph in the US, with the Cold War being over – and having been "won" by the US and the "West." The main reason for this was the economic recession that had hit in the summer of 1990 and rendered meaningless Bush's campaign pledge to not raise taxes. Furthermore, fulfilling a task inherited from his predecessor, Ronald Reagan, President Bush negotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Canadian and Mexican leaders, thereby sowing fears among laborers of a loss in manufacturing jobs (Guan). Instead of being the usual walk in the park for the sitting president, therefore, the 1992 primaries of the Republican Party turned into a display of conservative fury against the party elite. The primaries featured an illustrious set of political contenders, such as the independent billionaire Ross Perot, former Nixon and Reagan speechwriter Pat Buchanan, and even the former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan David Duke (Ganz, "The Year the Clock Broke").

Murray Rothbard was exhilarated during the Republican primaries. The candidacy of Pat Buchanan, especially, had electrified him. Due to this candidacy, Rothbard even declared that he had found a new haven in the Republican Party again. This seemed largely due to the fact that Buchanan was a paleo-conservative and a member of the John Randolph Club. Founded in 1989 and headed by Rothbard, who named the club after a "nineteenth-century plantation owner and advocate of African colonization" (Slobodian, "Anti-'68ers" 380), its mission consisted of promoting alliances between paleo-conservatives and paleo-libertarians (Slobodian, *Crack-Up Capitalism* 106).

It was around this time that Rothbard published his influential pamphlet. In it, by bemoaning the fact that David Duke had just dropped out of the presidential race, the economist made it unrelentingly clear from the outset that he was willing to support even the most odious candidate on the Right. After this unapologetic opening, Rothbard described what he saw as "right-wing populism." He went on to explain: "The basic right-wing populist insight is that we live in a statist country and a statist world dominated by a ruling elite, consisting of a Coalition of Big Government, Big Business, and various influential interest groups" (Rothbard, "Right-Wing Populism" 7). In true pamphletary polemical prose, Rothbard then set out to attack "the updated, twentieth-century coalition of Throne and Altar" (7). While the throne represented big business, the altar consisted of statist intellectuals who had become "part of the ruling class" (7). Because of this, the Right had to change course from attempting to convince intellectuals of their mission to a strategy of building libertarian cadres and

addressing "the masses directly, to short-circuit the dominant media and intellectual elite" (13). Strategically, "those groups who are most oppressed and who have the most social leverage" (8) were to be targeted. By tapping into age-old producerist sentiments on the Right, Rothbard stated that the true mission of libertarians rested in right-wing populism, as they needed to "expose and denounce this unholy alliance, and to call for getting this preppie-underclass-liberal media alliance off the backs of the rest of [them]: the middle and working classes" (8).

That Rothbard alluded to the middle came as no surprise. As far back as 1973, two years after the Libertarian Party was founded, Rothbard published his book *For a New Liberty*, which came to be known as "The Libertarian Manifesto." Alluding to the Communist Manifesto, in many ways the urtext of the manifesto genre (Puchner 2), Rothbard put to paper his commitment to a fundamental change in the inner workings of state and society – and notions of the middle were to play a key role.

Specifically, this libertarian intellectual had drawn a connecting line between his vision and the concept of Middle America that Republicans had introduced during the conservative populist swing in the preceding years. To Rothbard, Middle Americans were "that vast middle class and working class that constitute the bulk of the American population" who were suffering under "rising taxes, inflation, urban congestion, crime, [and] welfare scandals." And Rothbard was quick to add that Libertarians "can show that government and statism have been responsible for these evils, and that getting coercive government off [their] backs will provide the remedies" (Rothbard, *For a New Liberty* 391). As the historian Daniel Bessner has shown, it was here that a revolutionary strategy was taking root: "Middle Americans served the same role as Marx's proletariat. Like Marx, Rothbard maintained that a particular segment of society, alienated from the nation's power holders, were the agents of social change" (447).

At first sight, relatively well-off Middle Americans seem like an odd choice for a political shock troop. However, seen through the lens of flyover, Middle America – and the middle in general – is a good target for a populist strategy malleable enough to transport multi-dimensional anti-elite attitudes. One meaning of Middle America rests in its spatial dimension. In this sense, Middle America is the region between the oceans, far removed from the coastal elites. But Rothbard also pointed toward the middle as an expression of social class and status. As Cornelia Klecker and Sascha Pöhlmann make clear in their reflections, the term "flyover" combines spatial and economic dimensions in "a complex cultural metaphor of class relations in America" (15). Similarly to the flyover metaphor, the Middle therefore serves as a way to blur differences "so that class differences among the good Flyover people may remain unaddressed, not to mention issues of gender, race, or other aspects of identity" (20).

The ideal of belonging to the middle class adds more layers of meaning to this understanding. From this perspective, Middle America can be used to create an imagination based on averageness or representativity that is the exact opposite of elitism (23). Furthermore, by referring to the writer Sarah Kendzior, Klecker and Pöhlmann hint at an additional meaning that is connected to the flyover trope but can be seen as being part and parcel of the middle or Middle America: "I live in the middle, and when you live in the middle, you see things from all sides" (22). What this notion evokes is *common sense*, which is key to the American ethos as well as fuel for populist sentiment.

In this spirit, Rothbard outlined a tentative "right-wing populist program" in his text. In it his readers were able to find a range of talking points familiar in libertarian and conservative camps. The author perceived these to be outcomes of the prevailing system in the United States, a system in which he saw "no fundamental difference" to "left-wing populism" ("Right-Wing Populism" 6). Over the course of eight points, Rothbard proposed that right-wing populists had to "concentrate on dismantling the crucial existing areas of State and elite rule, and on liberating the average American from the most flagrant and oppressive features of that rule" (8). This evocation of the average American also drew on his assumptions about Middle America. What his agenda meant in more concrete terms was slashing taxes and welfare and abolishing those racial privileges that he perceived not only in affirmative action but also in the "entire 'civil rights' structure, which tramples on the property rights of every American." The cops would need to be unleashed in order to "[t]ake back the streets," which meant both coming down hard on criminals and clearing the "streets of bums and vagrants" (8–9). Rothbard arrived at the position of the ultimate libertarian fever dream of abolishing the Federal Reserve and destroying the banks. Rothbard made sure, however, to end on the conservative mainstay of defending family values. In his vision, this would necessitate a bid to "get the State out of the family, and replace State control by parental control. In the long run this means ending public schools and replacing them by private schools" (9).

If these points do not already sound eerily familiar in the wake of Tea Party attacks and Donald Trump's presidency, the second to last point certainly does. "America First" was claimed by Rothbard to be a "key point" in his strategy. In pre-empting the political slogan of Donald Trump, Rothbard attacked the sorry state of the economy and appealed to the people, writing that "the average family" was "worse off now than it was two decades ago." "Come home America," wrote Rothbard in vivid terms, adding, "Stop supporting bums abroad. Stop all foreign aid . . . Stop gloabaloney, and let's solve our problems at home" (9). The paleo coalition, then, had the goals of merging policies of law and order with free market principles in order to circumvent

state power, and employing racialized conservatism and unfettered patriotism to cut ties to international commitments.

But Rothbard did not stop at outlining a political program. Importantly, in the remainder of the pamphlet, and against the backdrop of strategies put forward by Cato and the Libertarian Party, Rothbard envisioned a path to power that stood in sharp contrast to these competing libertarian visions. To him, the Cato Institute's quest for influence by means of intellectual debate and established political networks – the "Corridors of Power" ("Right-Wing Populism" 9–10) – had resulted in cozying up to power. Rothbard deemed the Libertarian Party to have become politically irrelevant (10–12). He considered it a "happy coincidence" that the party's significance dwindled in the wake of the collapse of Communism. With the Cold War obsolete, hopes rose "that many conservatives would now rejoin us in an anti-interventionist, anti-global America First foreign policy" (12). These new allies were the paleo-conservatives, a much needed addition to the paleo-libertarians.

It was from here that Rothbard began to strategize. He anticipated a reversal of the intellectual trickle-down strategy, as outlined most prominently by another libertarian icon, the economist Friedrich A. Hayek, and as pursued by the existing Libertarian institutions (Slobodian and Plehwe 100). Rothbard did not seem to care much for institutions at all, as long as the "paleo-libertarian movement" proved able to be a "new, revivified reincarnation of the Grand Old Right of my youth" ("Right-Wing Populism" 12). And this was where the "strategy of outreach to the Rednecks" (12) came in.

In addition to "hippies" and "preppies" (rich and influential people, such as the Koch brothers), Rothbard identified the "rednecks" as the smallest paleo-libertarian constituency and saw the need to attract more of them if his vision were to be successful ("Right-Wing Populism" 12). The "rednecks" were a concrete social group that served as a stand-in for a political contingent driven by uncontrollable political resentment, as became clear from Rothbard's historical analogies. The strategist looked back in history and conceived of a role model for his cause, a man he saw as a right-wing populist: Joseph McCarthy. Indulging in a type of reactionary jouissance, the paleo-libertarian thinker described a feeling of excitement while talking about the former senator's actions in the House Committee on Un-American Activities: "there was a sense of dynamism, of fearlessness, and of open-endedness, as if, whom would he subpoena next? The sainted Eleanor Roosevelt?" (13). It is easy to dismiss Rothbard's vigilante-like fantasies, but what shone through in these passages first and foremost was his astute sense of the value of entertainment in politics. "Centrist politics, elitist politics, is deliberately boring and torpid," Rothbard proposed, explaining that "right-wing populist politics is rousing, exciting, ideological, and that is precisely

why the elites don't like it: let sleeping dogs lie" (13). The subtext was that the people, driven by their scorn for the establishment, would react; that the sleeping dogs would awaken.

It is especially eye-opening to read this paleo-libertarian populist vision through the lens of Donald Trump's political ascent because Rothbard was proclaiming a media strategy to reach the masses. He stated that McCarthy was willing and able to "short-circuit the power elite . . . and reach out and whip up the masses directly" ("Right-Wing Populism" 13). Moreover, what in Rothbard's estimation had ultimately stopped McCarthy were two issues Trump had no problem with later. First, McCarthy had had "almost no movement behind him; he had no political infrastructure" (13). Moreover, McCarthy "was, unfortunately, not suited for the new medium – television – that he had been using so effectively to reach the masses directly" (13). With far greater financial means at his disposal, and as the candidate of the Republican Party, Trump was starting out from a much more advantageous position. Moreover, this presidential candidate, who fully adopted a right-wing populist style, proved to be a wizard on today's equivalent of 1950s television: the new social media platforms that were specifically designed to reach the masses everywhere they went, and all by means of a quick swipe on their smartphones. Thus, seen from this vantage point, Rothbard was outlining a vision of directly targeting constituents that was to be realized with the ascent of social media in the 2000s.

In terms of intellectual traditions, Rothbard was in fact describing a revolutionary path to power due to his being steeped in Marxist thought. This was not only in terms of his firm class-analytical approach but also in terms of the strategy itself, with Rothbard drawing his insights from Lenin and quoting the Russian revolutionary's 1905 pamphlet "What Is to Be Done?" in the last section of his pamphlet ("Right-Wing Populism" 13–14). He argued that a true right-wing populist coalition was needed and saw it forming in the paleo coalition. Rothbard called for "charismatic political leadership" in order to effectively break the message to "the working and middle class directly" (13). Political entrepreneurship was needed to "forge a paleo coalition to split off heartland and paleo-conservatives from official and neo-conservatives" (13).

Toward the end of his pamphlet, Rothbard's vision reads like a plan for Trump's ascent – and his lasting popularity – in its reversal of calls for a grassroots movement. Grassroots activity was simply too boring and it would "never get off the ground, unless it is sparked, and vivified, and energized by high-level, preferably presidential political campaigns" (14). In order to achieve outreach to the "Rednecks" and win over the Middle American masses, Rothbard estimated that the new movement was in dire need of "a presidential candidate, someone whom all wings of anti-Establishment rightists, can get behind, with enthusiasm" (14). A quarter of a decade later,

this vision was to materialize. Having died in 1995, Murray Rothbard did not live long enough to see his ideas coming to fruition.

Conclusion: Unleashing the Right's Joy in Confrontation

In hindsight, Rothbard's pamphlet reads like a blueprint for the right-wing populist surge of the last decade. But Rothbard's ideas and strategy did not come out of nowhere, seeing as US conservatism had significantly shifted toward movement politics and thereby increasingly relied on a populist strategy since the 1960s. But like few others, this libertarian was able to connect his vision to newly emerging concepts such as Middle America – and he was also bold enough to appeal to the supposedly impulsive and vengeful lower reaches of US society, which he saw as being embodied in the "Rednecks."

On the brink of the 1990s, and perhaps spurred on by the collapse of the Soviet Union, contrary to the conservative mainstream that dominated the Republican party at that time, Rothbard was now willing to go further and propose a more radical strategy, the repercussions of which were to enduringly transform conservative politics. Even back then, with the open adoption of racialized science and the full-fledged attack on any "statist" political institution, the paleo movement had stepped away from acceptable democratic politics. As historian Quinn Slobodian shows, the paleo movement and its libertarian masterminds stood at the cradle of the Alt-Right that was on the cusp of branching out worldwide (Slobodian, "Anti-'68ers").

But it took almost another quarter century and great disillusionment with the political establishment in the wake of George Bush's and Barack Obama's presidencies, as well as an unrelenting barrage of mainly conservative attacks at the fetters of US democracy, for Rothbard's vision to gain political traction. As the writer John Ganz puts it in a paraphrase of a statement Rothbard made during his aforementioned speech at the John Randolph Club in 1992, the "clock broke" in that year, only to tell the right time again when Donald Trump ran for president (Ganz, "The Year the Clock Broke"). Furthermore,

> Trump was in part the product of his [Rothbard's] will, of his ideas, his prodigious body of writing, of the political alliances he built, of the intellectuals he trained and influenced, a lifetime of bile, spleen, and hate against what he saw as the establishment. (Ganz, "The Forgotten Man")

Murray Rothbard's 1992 pamphlet can be seen as a momentous document that envisioned profound political changes. As a pamphleteer, he picked up different political threads from within conservatism in order to weave together a new political fabric in the paleo coalition. For the as yet uninitiated, this text may have served as a stand-in for a political program due to its poignancy, unrelentingness, polemics, political

vehemence, and brevity. But there was more to it than that. Aside from outlining hard political strategy and scheming, Rothbard encouraged his readers to find excitement and joy in political confrontation. In a sense, Rothbard allowed his companions to become "trolls" and to indulge in the theater of provocation, of hitting and hitting back harder. All these strands were able to be combined into something new in the dual ascent of social media and Bonapartists such as Donald Trump. In his remarks on the then leading medium of television and his idea that audiences could best be targeted from the highest echelons of politics, from the presidential level, Rothbard envisioned the power of "short-circuiting" the well-trodden paths of party politics and antagonizing constituencies in an increasingly fractured demos.

The concept of flyover is particularly helpful when it comes to understanding the political logics at play in this complex and often antagonistic political landscape. This is because it allows us to dissect shifting political allegiances in a flexible and metaphorical way by focusing on intersecting dimensions such as culture and class and combining them with notions of spatial positions that signify hierarchical dimensions. In this regard, the flyover concept enables associative reinterpretations of social phenomena that can easily get lost in often stultifying traditional analyses of political partisanship and tradition.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Quinn Slobodian, who pointed me toward Murray Rothbard's pamphlet and his strategy.

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Peer Review

This article was reviewed by the issue's guest editors and one external reviewer.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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