



Book Review

Gregg Barak (2024) *Indicting the 45th President: Boss Trump, the GOP, and What We Can Do About the Threat to American Democracy*. Routledge

Raymond Michalowski

Northern Arizona University, United States

ISBN: 9781032454771

Indicting the 45th President: Boss Trump, the GOP, and What We Can Do About the Threat to American Democracy begins with a bold claim: “Trump is an outlaw... He habitually breaks laws of all kinds while remaining a free person” (Barak, 2024: xxiv). Given the frequent use of inflammatory, anti-Trump rhetoric in this book, Trump supporters would likely dismiss it as an example of “Trump Derangement Syndrome”—the work of someone “so opposed to the U.S. president that they are incapable of seeing any good in what he does” (Flaherty, 2018). Far from being an anti-Trump screed, however, Gregg Barak’s latest book provides a rich display of *evidence*, both broad and deep, supporting the claim that Trump is, indeed, an outlaw.

Barak’s journey through Trump’s crimes and corruption begins with the 13 state and federal investigations of his business practices between 1973 and 2015, when Trump decided that his first political position should be President of the United States. The narrative then moves to Trump’s crimes as president—use of the Oval Office to direct federal spending toward his business interests, attempting to overturn the 2020 election, two impeachments by the House of Representatives for “high crimes and misdemeanors” related to electoral malfeasance, and significant findings of guilt in criminal and civil proceedings in 2023 and 2024. These findings include a judgment that Trump’s primary business, the Trump Organization, committed systematic fraud, a civil court ruling that Trump was guilty of rape “as many people commonly understand the word ‘rape,’ ” (Herchenroeder, 2024), and Trump’s conviction on 34 felony counts of falsifying documents in violation of election law in the Stormy Daniels hush money case (Manhattan District Attorney’s Office, 2024). Taken together, these detailed descriptions offer substantial support for Barak’s proposition that the word “criminal” appropriately applies to the 45th President.

Indicting the 45th President blends two narrative styles: argument and analysis. First—and more compellingly—the book is a polemic, that is, a piece of writing that “strongly attacks a particular opinion, person, idea or set of beliefs” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). Barak does not hide the fact that his goal is to convince readers that Trump’s crimes and corrupt practices are so endemic to the man, and so harmful to the nation and the world, that Trump is not only unfit for political office, but deserves to be imprisoned. Barak bases this claim on granular details of how Trump used his transactional instincts, crime-boss organizational practices, and an affinity for corruption and lying to increase his wealth, expand the influence of his “brand,” and aggrandize the reach of his personal and political power. In doing so, Barak makes a plausible case that Trump should have been, and remains, an ideal candidate for prosecution under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization Act (RICO).



The second narrative style is socio-political analysis. Barak considers how Trump transformed the legal and political liabilities that would normally disqualify someone from political office into acceptable—and even *laudable*—qualities in the minds of supporters. Here, we see the transformation of Donald Trump from a corrupt and criminal businessman to an aspiring presidential candidate. Despite his many actual bankruptcies in the real world and his many other wrongdoings, Barak shows how Trump parlayed his self-curated image as an entrepreneurial genius into national name-recognition and fame via 186 episodes of the popular TV show, *The Apprentice*.

Trump's TV persona created a televisual aura of mastery that helped him win the 2016 Republican nomination. Trump's claim that, "I alone can fix it" seemed plausible to many voters familiar with his made-for-TV image as an effective and authoritative CEO (Applebaum, 2016). Through direct appeals to what Trump calls "the people," a common trope used by autocrats and dictators, Trump captured the energy of the former Tea Party, transforming it into the much larger "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) coalition—to date the most politically influential social movement of the twenty-first century.¹

Although Trump lost the 2016 popular vote to Hillary Clinton by three percentage points, he carried enough battleground states to win the electoral college and the presidency. Barak considers how, despite losing the 2020 presidential race to Joe Biden, Trump used his now well-perfected art of the cult—and the support of an energized MAGA "base"—to challenge the integrity and outcome of the election. Mobilizing Republicans behind these claims enabled Trump to take complete control of the Republican Party by making support for his "big lie" the litmus test for party leadership positions and campaign funding (Setner, 2024).

In view of Trump's seemingly inexhaustible supply of "get out of jail free" cards, Barak asks early on, "How many years of accumulated lawlessness and abuse of power would it take before the criminal law would, if ever, catch up with Teflon Don?" Barak suggests that we can find a partial answer to this question in the 2023 and 2024 judgments against both Trump and the Trump Organization—in other words, a half-century. In the approach to the 2024 presidential election, it is unclear whether these judgments and pending cases against Trump will survive appeals or be overturned by a second Trump presidency. What we do know is that Trump's courtroom losses have not weakened his standing with his voter base. Legal judgments of systemic corporate fraud, rape, and felony falsification of documents have done little to dent the enthusiasm of Trump's supporters, and they may have increased the solidarity of his voter base (Orth, 2024).

During his campaign for the presidency in 2016, Trump boasted that, "I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose voters" (Diamond, 2016). Trump's continued appeal to a near-plurality of voters shows that he read the room correctly, at least when it comes to Americans on the political right. That fact leaves us with the troubling question of why someone with the history, temperament and instincts of an organized crime boss, and the "morals of an alley cat" as President Biden has said (Goldmacher & Swan, 2024), as well as a string of bankruptcies and criminal convictions to his discredit, is viewed by nearly half of America's voting population as presidential material, even as someone who will "save" America.

Answering this question is not the primary goal of *Indicting the 45th President* and Barak leaves the issue, for the most part, to the penultimate chapter, "American Mythology, Bipartisan Alienation, and Partisan Politics." This is a particularly important part of book because it brings socio-political analysis to the previous enumeration of Trump's criminality. Here, Barak considers, or reconsiders, four factors that he suggests offer insight into Trump's continuing political attraction: the overproduction of elites; the "brainwashing" of Trump supporters by right-wing media; economic hardships visited on the working and lower middle-classes by decades of neoliberal economics; and the use of endemic American myths to move what had been a fringe right-wing political narrative to the center of American political discourse. Without going into the detail these propositions deserve, I suggest that the first two are less-convincing explanations for Trump's enduring attraction than the latter two.

In its search for scientific *laws* governing social revolutions, the theory of elite overproduction underestimates the role of historical contingency in human social events. The problem is, as Neil deGrasse Tyson (2016) observed, "When human behavior enters the equation, things go nonlinear. That's why Physics is easy, and Sociology is hard." Attempts by sociologists and others to find immutable transhistorical and transcultural laws of human behavior necessarily flatten complexity in favor of uniform explanations. In my view, at least, the theory of the overproduction of elites cannot explain the multifocal forces

¹ Three other movements, "Occupy Wall Street," "#MeToo," and "Black Lives Matter," have also had significant social impacts in the first third of this century. At this point, however, none of these has achieved the organized strength and positions of political power comparable to the MAGA movement.

and multivocal narratives that created and continue to sustain the MAGA movement. Insofar as this is an epistemological standpoint, thoughtful others might disagree.

The role of mass media in explaining the Trump phenomenon is a complex one. Throughout *Indicting the 45th President* Trump supporters frequently appear as dupes of the right-wing media. I do not find this portrayal persuasive. After living for a quarter century in a rural, working-class center of Trump support, and losing my school board seat there to a concerted right-wing campaign to stack the board with people who support Trumpian ideology, I can say with some certainty that the people who inhabit my back-of-beyond Arizona community are not marionets. They are, rather, evidence that while analyses of media effects can tell us something about the *process* through which certain truth claims are distributed and strengthened, they rarely tell us *why* people choose to consumer particular themes from the daily slop-bucket of mass communications.

In the immediate case, media analysis cannot, in fact, explain why truth claims that are self-evidently correct to those who support Trump frequently appear preposterous, dangerous, and vile to liberals and Progressives who oppose him, and vice versa. The view of people as “brainwashed” by media tends toward a tautological and hypodermic view of media, somewhat like saying, “People watch Fox news because Fox News has duped them into believing that Fox News is ‘fair and balanced.’”

The idea of media brainwashing undervalues the human agency involved in media selection. The passion felt by Trump’s supporters, though abhorrent, absurd, or antiquated to very many of those who live outside right-wing media silos (but often *inside* left-wing media silos) is typically grounded in experiential fears of change to and deep belief in the rightness of *their* culture and *their* religion. What they see is an emergent multicultural, multi-racial, secular, sexually-fluid liberal society that, in their view, violates the most sacred obligations of being human (French, 2024). Discounting those beliefs—and failing to recognize the depth and honesty behind them—is sociologically misleading. It tempts us to imagine that Trump supporters are as we imagine them, not as they actually are. It is also politically risky because it reduces opponents to caricatures rather than thinking subjects who are agents of their own lives, thus undercutting the ability to find effective interpersonal and electoral responses to the appeal of the Trump/MAGA political narrative.

Barak’s analysis of how the MAGA movement was energized by the intersection of economic immiseration with long-standing cultural myths regarding white superiority, masculine dominance, hetero-normativity, and the danger of immigrant Others is more promising. Beginning in the 1980s, and accelerating from then until now, the American middle class has been split into two tiers by the chained and cascading effects of Reaganomics, neoliberalism, and globalization (Edsall, 1988; Reich, 2024). While a well-educated, technical elite saw their incomes rise and lifestyles improve, blue-collar workers and lower echelons of white-collar workers saw their incomes stagnate, kept afloat only by the increase in two-earner households and rising debt (Reich, 2024). Many living in smaller cities and towns witnessed their communities hollowed out by the concentration of wealth in global cities (Sassan, 2001).

The resulting frustration and anger could have become the foundation for a new, pro-labor, social democratic movement committed to promoting economic equality for all and cushioning the worst blows of capitalism for the least well-off, rather than a government devoted to maximizing profits for corporations and unearned income for wealthy investors. During their 2024 electoral campaign, Kamala Harris and Tim Walz, as candidates for the positions of U.S. President and Vice-President respectively, offered a glimmer of what this sort of social democracy might look like. Whether they would be able or interested in carrying out their promises in the face of opposition from the corporate and investor classes who have been the primary beneficiaries of neo-liberal capitalism as it has been practiced since the 1980s remains uncertain as of this writing.

Instead, as Barak describes in detail, many (though certainly not all) of those on the shorter end of the economic stick, helped along by paleo-conservative thinkers and politicians, found that blaming various Others offered an easier and more familiar pathway for explaining why their dreams were further unattainable.

Blaming the Other for social problems has deep roots in American politics. Nearly a century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois (1935) wrote about the “psychological wages of whiteness” that enabled the planter elite of the former Confederate South to convince poor Whites to identify with the interests of wealthy Whites rather than poor Black folks with whom they shared a common class position. Today, paleo-conservative ideology, fronted by the Party of Trump has, as Barak observes, provided an appealing narrative directing the resentments and fears felt by disaffected groups, particularly White working-class men, toward a variety of Others: ethnic minorities, immigrants, non-traditional women, LGBTQ+ populations, and a shadowy left-wing elite that presumably controls the American economy and culture.

How should we think, sociologically and politically, about the beliefs animating the MAGA movement and Trump’s popularity? The practical problems many Americans face, and the fears of some that mainstream American culture is changing,

have foundations in reality. The inequality and economic pain imposed by neoliberalism is real. American cultural mores regarding sex, gender, race, religion, and lifestyle are more open and accepting than they were 50 years ago. Unfortunately, as Barak contends, when these realities mix with sexist, racist, patriarchal and xenophobic “myths” in American cultural history, it produces the kind of pernicious populism represented by Donald Trump. The appeal of a promise to reverse the tide of cultural change is so strong that it renders Trump’s history of crime and misdeeds unimportant in comparison to his promise to “fix it.” The opportunity cost of this toxic mix of real conditions and right-wing fever dreams is disabling rational discourse in search of peaceful ways toward a more equal social democracy.

As of this writing (August 2024), there is a possibility that Donald Trump may become the 47th President of the United States through: 1) a legitimate 2024 electoral victory; 2) corruption of the electoral process similar to what Trump and his supporters attempted after the 2020 election; or 3) threats of—or actual mob violence by—his most ardent MAGA foot soldiers, more violent and more dispersed than the January 6, 2021, riots at the U.S. Capitol.

The potential for a second Trump administration makes *Indicting the 45th President* timely reading for those concerned with the state of contemporary American politics. By laying bare Trump’s long history of shady business practices, political corruption, consorting with organized crime, and harassment of business and political opponents, Barak provides a foursquare argument for why Trump is not only unfit for the presidency, but for *any* office, whether governmental or corporate. Should Trump fail to win in 2024, this book will remain important reading for those interested in understanding how the nexus of capitalism, politics, and corruption that has shaped American governance since its founding can, under the right circumstances, bring dangerous demagogues to power.

References

- Applebaum, Y. (2016, July 21). “I alone can fix it.” *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/trump-rnc-speech-alone-fix-it/492557/>
- Cambridge Dictionary. (2024). Polemic. In *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved September 30, 2024, from
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/polemic#>
- deGrasse Tyson, N. [@neiltyson] (2016, February 5). In science, when human behavior enters the equation, things go nonlinear. That's why Physics is easy and Sociology is hard.[Post]. X
<https://x.com/neiltyson/status/695759776752496640?lang=en#>
- Diamond, J. (2016, January 24). Trump: I could ‘shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose voters.’ *CNN Politics*
<https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/23/politics/donald-trump-shoot-somebody-support/index.html>
- DuBois, W. E. B. (1935). *Black reconstruction in America*. Harcourt, Brace and Co.
- Edsall, T. (1988, June). The return of inequality. *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1988/06/the-return-of-inequality/670313/>
- Flaherty, A. (2018, July 18). Trump's diagnosis for critics: ‘Trump Derangement Syndrome’. *Associated Press*.
<https://apnews.com/united-states-government-48225d1360864dcb861b12e5cda12a32>
- French, D. (2024, August 25). Christian persecution narrative rings hollow. *New York Times*
<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/25/opinion/christianity-evangelicals-persecution-faith.html>
- Goldmacher, S., & Swan, J. (2024, June 24) Six takeaways from the first presidential debate. *New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/28/us/politics/presidential-debate-takeaways-biden-trump.html>
- Herchenroeder, K. (2023, January 18). A federal judge has gone to great lengths to make clear Trump really did rape E. Jean Carroll. *Mother Jones*.
<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2024/01/a-federal-judge-has-gone-to-great-lengths-to-make-clear-trump-really-did-rape-e-jean-carroll/>
- Manhattan District Attorney’s Office. (2024). D.A. Bragg announces 34-count felony trial conviction of Donald J. Trump.
<https://manhattanda.org/d-a-bragg-announces-34-count-felony-trial-conviction-of-donald-j-trump/>
- Orth, T. (2024). After the Trump verdict, most Republicans say they're OK with having a criminal as president. *YouGov*.
<https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/49617-opinion-change-post-trump-hush-money-guilty-verdict>
- Reich, R. (2020). *The system: Who rigged it, how we fix it*. Knopf.
- Sassen, S. (2001). *The global city: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton University Press.
- Sentner, I. (2024, July 17). How has Trump transformed the Republican Party? Look at the platforms. *Politico*.
<https://www.politico.com/interactives/2024/republican-platform-trump-changes/>