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## BS x DJT = 8/11: Presidential Nonesuch on the Beltway

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A decade ago, Harry Frankfurt republished his 1986 essay, “On Bullshit,” in hardback duodecimo. In the lapidary fashion of analytic philosophers of a particular age and mental cast, his subject was displayed without subheadings or explicanda. The perspective was that of the casual if acute observer of contemporary life in place of the specialist in search of a thesis. Frankfurt (2005) reasoned that it is only appropriate to conclude that the distributive quantity of bullshit is “[o]ne of the most salient features of our culture” (p. 1). Yet this salience is also largely taken for granted, giving rise to an impoverished appreciation of “what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves” (p. 1). For his part, he proposed to lend philosophical form to the inattentively scrutinized.

After a measured if selective discussion of bullshit’s lexical *frisson*—how it differs in nature from both truth (obvious enough) and lying (with which the ephebe might confuse it)—Frankfurt zeroes in on the definition he wants. Bullshit, we are told, is not so much a false statement of fact, nor even a deliberate attempt to mislead others about a given state of affairs, but rather a disregard for *either* the truth or the falsehood of what is being claimed. This disregard, moreover, is not a discrete instance of absent-mindedness, but a thickly contextualized program of fakery. The main liability in the drift from empirical anchoring is cognitive: the bullshitter’s “indispensably distinctive characteristic is that he misrepresents what he is up to” (p. 54). The motive for deception, in turn, is convenience: bullshitting is so prevalent because it allows us, in Frankfurt’s assessment, to avoid “paying attention to anything except what it suits us to say” (p. 60).

Fine and good. But what determines the suitable? In his closing paragraphs, Frankfurt advances two partial answers, each a variant of an *argumentum ad ignorantiam*. First, the proliferation of things that someone might be expected to know something about—in politics most evidently, but also in literature, art, academia, entertainment, and society generally—has expanded dramatically in an internet age, leaving even the best informed unable to speak with authority across the table of interests.

Second, the erosion of certitude about empirical observations has, according to Frankfurt, led to an increased reliance on subjective measures of truth. Fact has duly been replaced, at least in some quarters, with sincerity, as if, in (neo)-neo-Cartesian fashion, one might at least know oneself amidst the noise in one’s environment. An experienced horse in the academic stable, Frankfurt thinks this unlikely, even obfuscating and phony: “insofar as this [an undue confidence in self-knowledge] is true, sincerity itself is bullshit” (p. 67).

## II

From its book publication in 2006, Frankfurt’s essay has inspired a cottage industry of riffs and responses: everyone, it seems, wants to pile on. Among the pilers and compilers are those who, like Laura Penny (2006) or G.A. Cohen (2002), seek to locate bullshit culture in its native entertainment and academic habitats: “your call/your opinion is important to us,” etc. There have also been attempts to parse bullshit empirically through

the elucidated responses of so-called “bullshittees” (Pennycook, Cheyne, Barr, Koehler, & Fugelsang, 2015; Smagorinsky, Daigle, O’Donnell, & Bynum, 2010). Finally, bullshit culture has been reattached to its author—the bullshitter or bullshित्रix. This last is the route taken by Aaron James in his 2012 volume, *Assholes: A Theory*, and its contemporary election-season smash-up, *Assholes: A Theory of Donald Trump* (2016).

For those who missed the first go-round, *Assholes: A Theory of Donald Trump* helpfully recycles the *prima materia* of James’s “theory.” What is an asshole? An individual, so James, who meets three conditions:

1. he [sic] allows himself special advantages in social relationships, and does so systematically;
2. he’s motivated by an entrenched (and mistaken) sense of entitlement;
- [and]
3. he’s immunized against the complaints of other people (2016, pp. 4-5).

The key qualities here are insulation, consistency, and motivation. There is no such thing as the “accidental asshole”—someone who is prone to doing “stupid shit,” in other words, but with indefinite and inconsistent application. Nor is contrition part of the behavioral pattern of the true asshole. Jerks may apologize, he argues, but inoculation against public opinion means that the asshole will adhere to the Jowett principle of tough mindedness: never apologize, never explain. The asshole, on the other hand, is not a mere bullshitter (though each of James’ conditions are consistent with Frankfurt’s), showman, jackass, or boor; an entrenched sense of entitlement impends a more disruptive effect on the social order than these epithets suggest. All the same, the label of asshole or “ass-clown” (the asshole in clueless mode: read, Kanye West) should not be affixed in James’ view to Hitler or Stalin, whom he categorizes as “psychopathic . . . different cases” [p. 51]).

In the 2012 *Assholes* volume, James moves from taxonomy to typology. Having told us what to look for in an asshole, and how assholes differ in kinship from non-, near-, and pseudo-assholes, he provides a bestiary of asshole figures: the Political Asshole (read: Dick Cheney, but also bully boys like LBJ and Chris Christie), the Corporate Asshole, Entrepreneurial Asshole (e.g., Steve Jobs), Royal Asshole, and (with an eye to the 2008 financial crisis), Delusional Asshole Banker. Those with extra time on their hands and a delight in parlor games of a middlebrow cast might consult the Reddit thread devoted to the book and the material maintained by the author on [www.onassholes.org](http://www.onassholes.org). Who’s in and out? Is Lance Armstrong an asshole? How about A-Rod? (Spoiler alert: James cites an insider’s report that the Yankee slugger “is really a nice guy.”) Is asshole gender-marked? (Yes.) Are assholes born or made? (Made.) Are there more assholes today than ever before? (Hard to say.) How do assholes and suckers interact? (As you might think.) Can the same person be both a “dick” and an asshole? (Perhaps not if female.) And so forth (James, 2014).

### III

In *Assholes: A Theory of Donald Trump*, by contrast, such water-cooler speculation is replaced by The Donald himself, rear and mostly center. What, then, is the distinctively Trumpian asshole that vaults its subject to the object of a theory? Trump is the “winner” (James’ sub-title assessment) because he combines, with an eye to the essential features of the type enumerated above, the attributes of the showman, bullshitter, and ass-clown to create a peculiarly compelling image of the nativist hero in a time of uncertainty and intolerance. He is also, according to James, a readily identifiable “party-spoiler,” both as a character trait and a target of Republican disaffection. Ever eager to be the life of the party, but also to piss on the carpet if attention turns elsewhere, Trump qualifies as a kind of *trompe-l’oeil* creation—an effect of the “lying eye” of Baroque painting that renders as two-dimensional illusion the three-dimensional immediacy of experience.

Somewhat disarmingly, James decides that there is finally too much of the Trump Lie to be conveniently attached to a label. Hence the generation of a “theory” of Trump that, in a two-page synopsis of the first and longest part of his book, concludes that the subject of his investigation is not so much a thing as an impression. Trump finally succeeds (if he does) because he is an unrivalled entertainer who “keeps us guessing” (p.

53). “We are thus drawn to him even in revulsion” (p. 54), in part because of “[o]ur pleasure in the spectacle” (p. 54), and in part because of “our confusion about his type” (p. 54). After so many pages devoted to cognitive modeling (James’ academic focus when not writing about assholes), it is not so much a “theory” of Trump that wins the day as an understanding of what it is about Trump that moves us.

The end. Or maybe not. 54 pages of double-spaced duodecimo make a very slim volume even by the standards of slim volumes established by Frankfurt’s *On Bullshit* and James’ 2012 predecessor book. But what more is there to say once the “theory” in the title has been explained or explained away?

For his part, James dedicates the remainder of *Assholes: A Theory of Donald Trump* to an interweave of his subject’s populist appeal, what in a Hegelian vein might be called the “ruse of unreason,” and how bodies politic (body politics?) operate when not commandeered by assholes. Beyond our addiction to spectacle, James decides that one key source of Trump’s appeal lies in our visceral if largely unarticulated anger at the economic inequalities wrought by globalization. The *laissez faire* principles enunciated by classical liberalism, now extended to global markets, have in recent years failed to live up to their rhetoric of making all boats rise.

Instead, abetted by attenuated welfare state subsidies, certain yachts have become extraordinarily buoyant while the mass of dinghies and sampans have capsized or been forced to take on water. Trump, and likeminded prophets of doom and redemption, put their finger on the problem while promising to return to us our birthright of equal opportunity. As James summarizes it: “[t]his is the story of democracy losing ground to authoritarianism because of our economic unraveling. It’s our story, and it invites us to undertake a republican reaffirmation of our social contract” (p. 81).

#### IV

Characteristic of James’ enterprise however, here as well as in his earlier “Assholes” volume, is his attempt to relate this narrative of unraveling to the textbook history of political philosophy. The appeal is manifest: the issues that matter to us today are ones that must have mattered, with appropriate adjustments, to the writers and thinkers who have preceded us and shaped our intellectual sensibility. Conversely, the canon of “greats” is enlivened by application to contemporary problems. How else, we might ask, have they become greats in the first place?

Were it only this easy. The persona James projects in his Trump exposé encourages him to link Trump to the extra-judicial monarch envisioned by Thomas Hobbes as “Asshole in Chief” (p. 63). “For Hobbes, the sovereign who is trying to look awesome would present himself as ‘mortal god,’ which inspires fear if not fanatical devotion. Whatever keeps up the intimidating Wizard of Oz optics is golden” (p. 63). Everything about this claim, its attribution as well as its language, is an anachronism. James knows this. The sovereign Hobbes frames in *Leviathan* is neither intimidator nor magician. He is self-evidently not concerned about his self-image (“looking awesome”); at no point does Hobbes depict him (so James) as “thwart[ing] the public interest, capitalizing on [his] position for power or profit” (p. 63).

James is on firmer ground in his subsequent invocations of Rousseau, Locke, and Rawls as agents in the triage he proposes (“saving the marriage”) for the social contract in western democracies. Yet even here, there is something breathless in a 1,000-word tour, of Rousseau on popular sovereignty, Rawls on distributive justice, a psychological assessment of the Trump-Christie contretemps, the folkways of California surfing culture (more on this below), colloquies with his father-in-law-to-be about contemporary politics, and Trump reflecting on the size of his penis.

It is not that the points in this scattergram admit no pattern. But their scattering demands the kind of conceptual scaffolding James knows he can’t provide in the space available to him for the audience he targets. Associations are therefore more often inferred than explained, transitions demoted to “and another thing” sa-

lience, and arguments left to blot rather than profile. If the final chapters of James' book, moreover, come across as a conversation with an American public that might or might not be listening, its final paragraphs leave us with the impression that he himself has tuned out. After 120+ pages of Trumpism and its alternatives, we end with a discordantly Voltairean note of private virtue: "I wrote this book in part as a letter within the family. I hope Ken [his fiancée's father, who harbors an ambivalent affection for Trump] and I can keep up the nice [sic] conversations and, in our common reason, understand each other better" (p. 127). An acknowledgements page follows.

Beyond the limitations of form that such a decrescendo might reflect, there is a suspicion that James' real subject lies elsewhere. Trump, that is to say, is a symptom of broader and more vexing problems in contemporary politics and society, and if a "theory" is to be had, it will be through a delineation of these rather than in a jaunty exposé of the GOP's Lord of Misrule. Having run aground on this fact, James resorts to what publishing deadlines and the general wish to promote the values of participatory democracy encourage: I might not be right about Mr. Trump, he seems to be telling us, and I certainly don't claim have all the answers. But let's keep talking about it, refining our positions and listening to each other's viewpoints. If nothing else, such an approach is certainly preferable to "paying attention to nothing except what it suits us to say."

All of which in a time of disquiet seems eminently reasonable, not to say refreshingly levelheaded, even just plain "nice." James is, by his own admission, "not an asshole" but rather, to borrow from a Harvard-trained James of a different era (William), a "healthy-minded soul" eager to engage comments and commentators across the political spectrum. Optimistic and open-minded (but neither naïve nor vacuously "positive") he exudes an appealingly American brio. A PhD in Philosophy but also a surfer dude who honed his moves at the famed "Lowers" of San Onofre State Beach, James comes across as both the suitably consecrated inheritor (to speak with Pierre Bourdieu) and a man of the common touch.

Indeed, as he presents it, surf culture's "buzzing wave" might be taken as a model for the contractarian (or is it libertarian?) wisdom he espouses. The pursuit of surf and turf, that is to say, is one of structured self-interest in a common endeavor "way off the grid, away from the reach of the state." It offers an equilibrating balance between the demands of ego and alter, individual and community, and "while fights do break out" (and potty mouth informs the lingua franca), "surfers," James assures us, "share waves by generally accepted rules of right-of-way . . . the next [wave] is yours; just chill out about it" (p. 95). "Chill" and "laid back," in fact, are terms that recur with some frequency in James' RateMyProfessor assessments. His RMP chili pepper might even be thought a sporty *pendant* to his Harvard University oak: "yes," one rater opines, "this man is hot" ("RateMyProfessor," 2016).

The impression that the reader comes away with at the end of *Assholes: A Theory of Donald Trump*, is also one that can be attributed to James' 2012 volume: its author, one senses, tested the surf but couldn't, for whatever reason, quite nail the pipe. Part of the reason, no doubt, is atmospheric: the waves, though promising on the horizon, simply didn't break as one had hoped. The wind was up, the swell uneven, the season elusive. Whatever. Targeting a Midcult readership with the publication industry's winged chariot hurrying near made it impossible to pack the board and go home. Instead, one went to press with the manuscript one had, the ride one was able to muster, no matter how different from what had been envisioned in those pregnant moments in the foam. But not to worry: the current round of Celebrity Asshole will undoubtedly give way to others even more arousing. The waves will return. The next one, buddy, is yours.

## V

Leaving James and Frankfurt to the side, however, we might usefully inquire further into the broader so-

cial-cultural emanations that Donald Trump puppets. With the recent election results now in, Trump's electoral-college victory (henceforth referred to as "8/11") puts the matter squarely before us. Even if he failed to win the popular vote, 60,000,000+ Americans selected him as their choice on a Presidential ballot: a figure roughly equivalent to the combined population of California and New York State.

As in most every election, "free" or otherwise, the decision to vote Trump on 8/11 predictably meant different things to different voters. Many, we are told, checked his name on the ballot because they could not stomach voting for Clinton. Others voted the party line, eagerly or with reservation. A great number were apparently inspired by the restless and infinitely plastic American mantra of "change." Some no doubt bought into Trump's sound-bite projections for the economy, immigration, foreign affairs, and trade. Others still found his nativist, "America first" rhetoric endearing. Not a few, one guesses, were simply being piratical, casting a vote to cast doubt on the public purpose of the media circus that shapes US Presidential election campaigns generally and favors huckster-showmen on the order of D.J.T.

Most striking, however, is the sense gleaned from blogosphere and election commentary threads that a critical mass of these 60-odd million genuinely admire their candidate. Trump is a winner not merely because he is wealthy, charismatic, and a buccaneering businessman. According to posters in a CNN article discussing the recent election, he is also "sincere," "honest," a "man of integrity," and—perhaps most astonishingly, given his steady stream of "locker room" racism and misogyny—someone "who feels for others in his heart." Someone identified as "a white woman with a Master's degree" asserts <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/09/opinions/election-trump-victory-opinion-roundup/> that she voted for Trump "for moral reasons" ("Trump's Shocking Win," 2016).

Such remarks seem absurd—so patently nonsensical, in fact, as to warrant the tag that has adorned many a commentary on Trump's political base: "Surely, they're joking!" Yet there is no evidence that the authors of these remarks, and the many others with similar convictions, are being false to themselves. In fact, the sincerity that Frankfurt found so quixotic as a partial defense of the bullshitter's predilections is arguably what the liberal establishment has never quite "got" about Trump Nation. To laud him for his honesty and empathy might be bracingly counterfactual. Those who do so, however, are, in common with Frankfurt's factotums, indifferent to such a charge. What they are ultra-sensitive to, by contrast, is the establishment's sneering dismissal of their right to speak and be heard: not merely in voice or opinion, but also as a question of geography, work status, social habitat, religious orientation, speech pattern, dress code, and diet. Collectively, such identity markers reinforce social and economic divisions between those able to maneuver strategically in an urban, globalized, credentialed, and tech-savvy world, and those who cannot.

There is another factor at work. Polling research by Matthew McWilliams on the statistical characteristics of Trump supporters emphasizes the relevance of what Adorno and his co-authors, in their influential 1950 book of that title, baptized the "authoritarian personality." As McWilliams summarizes his findings: "[r]unning a standard statistical analysis, I found that education, income, gender, age, ideology and religiosity had no significant bearing on a Republican voter's preferred candidate. Only two of the variables I looked at were statistically significant: authoritarianism, followed by fear of terrorism, though the former was far more significant than the latter" (n.p.).

If this factor turns out to be statistically significant in determining Trump's voter support (McWilliams' sample size, at 1,800 respondents, is small), it would help explain the peculiarly mesmeric attraction that The Donald exercised over his following in campaign rallies and through online forums. The appeal is on both the giving and receiving ends of the authoritarian scale: Trump supporters would be seeking to identify themselves with an ostensibly strong leader to counteract their own powerlessness; they would also, however, adopt the characteristics of that leader as justifying their aggression toward disempowered members in outsider groups.

Hence the free pass Trump was allotted by his supporters for both his uninformed policy assertions and the “locker room” talk directed to women and racial minorities as outgroup figures. Hence also the propensity of Trump rallies to devolve into violent, slogan-chanting spectacles anathema to the sublimated rhetoric of GOP insiders. Far from being rhetorical bombast, Trump’s claim that he could stand in the center of Times Square and randomly shoot passersby without alienating his base emerges as prescient social-psychological diagnosis. Through the dynamic of transference, his murderous act would reverse in a gesture what his supporters have so long labored under as their perceived disempowerment at the hands of establishment elites.

If the Trump triumph cannot be fully understood as the success of latter-day Calibans exacting revenge against their bureaucratized captors, we need to broaden our scope of analysis. What is at stake is a disenfranchisement that cuts across conventional metrics of poverty and exclusion. For the demographic of urban, college-educated, middle-class and upper-middle-class Trump voters, disaffection clearly knows other sources. What might these be?

McWilliams’ second factor of influence—the post-9/11 escalation of the threat of terror, offers a promising lead. The more complete the breakdown of accepted rules of engagement (terrorism, of course, seeks their total abrogation), the greater the degree of anomie. To the extent that dictatorial and authoritarian organizations are terroristic, in turn, they foster absolutism as a countermeasure. External threats, however, are not the only triggers for psycho-social investments in strong bullshitters like Donald Trump. There is also the conviction that wealth and opportunity differentials in the wake of the 2008 recession remain awkwardly compatible with advances in technological and (through universal higher education) institutional belonging. Never have so many people, in other words, had access to so much information or more and varied opportunities for connectivity. Never have more Americans sought post-secondary training in more flexible terms and with a broader diversification of program emphases.

As has often been suggested, however, the ease and range of communication may also inhibit meaningful interpersonal relationships by trivializing their content. The ability to erase errors at the touch of a PC key encourages a more spontaneous, but also less exact, attention to language. Messaging in real time and texting in smart time reduce the complexity, and therefore the nuance, of both the message and its conveyance. Technology that permits almost everyone to be in contact with almost everyone else almost all of the time etiolates elective affinities and denigrates sociability to cutting-edge mechanisms of access. In this way, the dreams of media empowerment foster social and political alienation as much as they do creative belonging.

Precisely because talk is ubiquitous (and encouraged to be ubiquitously flat), a meaning vacuum is created without the means to fill it. Authoritarian ass-clowns, particularly where they enjoy celebrity status, offer ready-made if ultimately self-defeating panaceas: without leaving the universe of media simulacra, vanquished standards are magically re-introduced. “Brilliant!”; “sad!”; “terrible!”; “very unfair!” Why do we trust these staccato judgments? Answer: they emerge in tweet form from the ass’s mouth itself.

A similar process can be witnessed in the expansion of American higher education to embrace universal access. The broadening of opportunity through the social consecration of an academic degree has also invited its own troubling forms of disempowerment. To the extent that degree programs are undertaken for purposes of social and economic mobility, they are subject to the same forces that control more conventional consumer goods and services. The greater the available supply of a given commodity, the lower its market price; the more BA/BS degrees in circulation, the less important, *eo ipso*, the function of such a degree as sorting and ranking mechanism.

In this climate, other criteria—level of degree, major field, and status of degree-granting university—acquire correspondingly greater importance. Because most of the “opportunity” for first-generation matriculants is generated at the undergraduate level in non-elite colleges and universities, however, the mere acquisition of a first degree in field X from non-flagship Y is arguably a less powerful lever of upward socio-economic mobility than it has ever been.

The more restricted nature of university matriculation (whatever its claim to enrol all high-school graduates) suggests that attendant frustration may operate in a somewhat different key than it does in the mass media universe. Specifically, college grads with substantial debt and unpromising job prospects will be less likely to invest in the compensatory fantasies offered by a Donald Trump. As a feature of the social psychology we have advanced, however, the “ruse of higher education” is indelible. The belief that America and its institutions have failed a sizable segment of the American people in the name of unprecedented claims to greater access and opportunity has brought into disrepute so-called paternalistic views of public service by the liberal elite and inspired a frenzied, not infrequently violent, search for new prophets of redemption. In cargo-cult fashion, and consonant with the visceral evangelicism of much of DJT’s base, Aaron James’ ass-clown qualifies as such a prophet.

How will a Trump reign on Pennsylvania Avenue play out? This is a matter vexingly difficult to predict. As Barak Obama discovered in short order, running for President is very different from being President. Institutional constraints will force Trump and Trump Nation to come to terms with the unfeasibility of many of his scattershot campaign pledges. The “Trump Reversal” may become a new term of art in the Beltway political landscape. To the degree that master and apprentice are united in a discourse decoupled from conventional canons of fact and evidence, however, such reversals may not make much difference in the level and volume of his domestic support. By definition, Hillary, not DJT, is the liar. As with Tertullian’s much earlier (and somewhat better grounded) testament to *fideism*, one believes because it is absurd.

Until, that is, one believes no longer—refuses the label of “fidel” equal to that of “castr(at)o.” The therapeutic release that Trump promises his legion of the repressed and oppressed will predicably trigger its own law of diminishing returns. Like the dupes and dopes taken in by the Duke and Dauphin’s “Royal Nonesuch” in *Huckleberry Finn*, Trump’s pure products of America may eventually conclude, with whatever degree of resignation or rancor, that they have been made fools of yet again, this time by non-elite elites cloaking their exploitative behavior in the fashionably time-worn rhetoric of redemption.

In Twain’s novel, the Duke and Dauphin, like Beltway politicians of record, are left to retire with their lucre, libraries, and lecturing gigs in disgraced self-righteousness. In 2020 if not sooner, Trump might also find himself relegated to that good night, tweeting angrily if ineffectually in the blogosphere about his defenestration.

Or perhaps not. It is too early to say. What I term 8/11 stands somewhere between the posits of 7-11 and 9/11—between an act of terrorism, in other words, and a bag of corn chips. Where will Trump’s Presidency stand in 2020? Where will we stand?

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