

Book Review

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Gonzo Governance: The Media Logic of Donald Trump

by: David Altheide

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Doubtless, David Altheide (who is one of the leading voices of media studies) offers a more than interesting book entitled *Gonzo Governance: The Media Logic of Donald Trump*. In this editorial project, Altheide holds that the Capitol insurrections should not be understood as a founding event, but as the corollary of a broader and darker process originally ignited just after Donald Trump reached the presidency. As Altheide puts it, gonzo governance is mainly marked by a combination of ethnocentric discourses and media-inspiring fracturing rules. Although cultural studies have widely focused on the impact of media in society, less attention was played to the fact that media recreates a new (emerging) reality, a point Altheide eloquently supported over years. Having said this, his critical tone equates David Altheide to well-renowned philosophers such as Jacques Ellul, Paul Virilio, Slavoj Zizek and Jean Baudrillard. Anyway, Altheide departs from a more innovative and fresher viewpoint, as I discuss in the present book review. His common-thread argument seems to be that media not only serves as a platform of information exchange but also (under some conditions) is politically manipulated. Plausibly, this point may very well lead democracy into an unparalleled crisis. Of course, it is noteworthy that the media, which contributed directly to presidential elections, is more than journalists, or bloggers, rather it encompasses a set of technologies, key players, dominant commercial interests, pressure groups and even politics, as well as Artificial intelligence oriented to create a pseudo-reality (so to speak where fake news are the most salient example of this). The media logic is the resulting ecology that today governs the structure and the grammar of exchanged messages. By understanding this intersection between media logic and the spectacle of fear ignited by Trump, readers will understand the threats posed on democracy in the US. The Capitol insurrection is simply explained by the political manipulation of fear and the entertainment-based media (by the side of Trump).

In the introductory chapter, Altheide acknowledges that democracy remains in danger by a combination of two significant factors. On one hand, a much deep popular culture, which is moved by the cult of celebrities, opened the doors to messianic leaders who made fear an instrument of entertainment. On another hand, a psychologically-frustrated electorate (citizens) were certainly invited to take part in something important. What is more important, Trump successfully greased the rails of communication formats to

engage directly with a considerable number of relegated citizens. Toying with the idea of making the US great again means changing all check-and-balance powers that ultimately granted political stability in the US. As hotly debated, the term *Gonzo* (influenced by Hunter Thompson's journalism) is a type of literary style that reminds us how fearful disorders authorise the implementation of drastic (if not undemocratic) corrections.

The second chapter explores how Trump constructed his legitimacy through the simulation of political fear. A much deep sentiment of hostility against the foreigner, some minorities and of course illegal migrants. The figure of the 'other' or most probably the negation of the 'other', occupied a central position in Trump's discourses. His narratives received considerable support just after 9/11 and the sentiment of paranoia ignited by the 'war on terror'. Culturally enrooted in the core of American politics, fear (or what is more important the doctrine of the lesser evil) has eroded the basis of republicanism and democracy in the US. Here, as Altheide eloquently observes, fear is commoditised and exchanged as a form of media entertainment not only to captivate the attention of a wider global audience but to enhance media profits (and TV ratings). Needless to say that the fear of terrorism has been used by a different presidents since George W. Bush onwards, but now, it appealed to discredit (degrading) political institutions. Fear operates in the fields of resignation while paving the way for policies that otherwise would be rejected by citizens. Another point of entry in this discussion is the discredit of reliable (scientific) resources as well as the manipulation of journalist sources. The hegemony of fake news derived from the preferred selection of facts orchestrated to protect personal interests, beyond any type of validation or veracity. Altheide poses a philosophical dilemma in his text. The question of whether American citizens have an inexpugnable right to entertainment, there is no clear basis to what extent they can resign democracy in the name of entertainment. This moot point is clearly illustrated in the third and fourth chapters. He coins the term *deadly politics* to signal the devastating effects of COVID-19 on Trump's credibility. The pandemic has shown a sad condition, to say a type of natural experiment to understand better how distorted information leads to deadly consequences (politics). All this happened because of media syndrome (MS) which means the prevalence of media logic, persona and identities culturally framed, exchanged and disposed of for media consumption. To put the same simple, MS not only creates celebrities and global characters but also entire realities. More oriented to create a dark spectacle than striving for stopping the virus propagation, the media has made COVID-19 a captivating horror show.

In the fifth and sixth chapters, Altheide argues that political radicalisation which ultimately crystalised in the Trump-led insurrection can be explained by the combination of two factors. Firstly, media logic and its communicative order are mainly supported by digital technology. Cyberspace, as well as digital technologies, gravitates toward the construction of global identities. Although media logic helps us understand our world, no less true seems to be that it becomes an iron cage (citing Weber) that transforms our perception of reality. Secondly, a long-dormant sentiment of deprivation (frustration) manipulated and directed against political institutions. In a nutshell, media logic was the Pandora Box that deadly wounded American democracy. At the same time, Trump started and ended his administration because of media logic.

The sixth and seventh chapters revolve around the problem of *Gonzo's Governance*. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that unless duly regulated, fear becomes revenge. Paradoxically, *Gonzo Governance* benefited from long-standing support to

demonise the 'alterity', the 'foreigner' or the migrant, expanding the cooption of new organisations to Trump's presidency, but at the same time, it gradually engendered a sentiment of vulnerability in society. This sentiment of vulnerability, which cemented the political authority in the US since 9/11, was certainly aggravated by COVID-19 while emerging hostility re-directed against Trump's administration.

The eighth and ninth chapters bring some reflection on the nature of terror and how it structures power. Like fear, which is a natural emotion which helps us in our survival process, terror is certainly circumscribed in what psychologists dubbed as basic emotions. The problem lies in the fact it may be very well amplified, distorted or manipulated to undermine a certain minority or group. Terrorism not only ignited a climate of hostility against these groups (above all Arabs) but entertained a white audience with what Furedi called terror propaganda. As Altheide notes, fear (and terror) are the cornerstone of the Gonzo Governance. In the process, terrorism acquires a symbolic nature which is filled according to the political interests as well as different interpretations and definitions some voices toy with to justify their counter-terrorism policies (which includes the surveillance of lay citizens and human rights violations). Quite aside from this, terrorism fabricates a certain (shared) national identity which is coincident to separate citizens (us and them, here and there and so forth). In this way, the migrant, the terrorist, and the 'Chinese virus' (a term coined by Trump) are put in equal conditions for these populist discourses. Last but not least, the tenth chapter discusses critically the future of Gonzo Governance. The success in reversing the negative effects of Gonzo Governance seems to be associated with the capacity to understand the real effects of terrorism in liberal democracies as well as the fear as derived products of neoliberalism to indoctrinate citizens. Having said this, the risks of expanding Gonzo Governance to other countries are far from being low. To wit, Altheide emphasises the importance of legal jurisdiction and check-and-balance institutions to placate Gonzo Governance in the future; a good point which makes form this book *Gonzo Governance: The Media Logic of Donald Trump*, a must-read project highly recommended to practitioners, scholars, and readers interested in the nature and future of democracy in these turbulent times.