Introduction

Fragments, ruptures, and resurgent structures in the 2016 US presidential election – cultural sociology's new pathways forward

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“What the hell just happened?” is the question, our contributor Matthew Norton suggests, that people around the world asked when they woke the morning after Election Day. The contributors to this special AJCS issue offer a wide range of answers to this question. They also specify the conditions that precipitated its asking. In the process, they innovate theoretically and methodologically, suggesting how cultural sociology can explain the peculiar civil society and political processes that allowed Trump to win and which still may flourish in the Trump age.

Donald Trump's victory on November 8, 2016 punctured a discursive environment that promised its opposite. In the run-up to Election Day, opinion polls indicated that, though the race was close, Hillary Clinton would likely be the next president of the United States. The lifeblood of Trump's campaign was his insistence that America's political, media, and cultural elite were not only out of touch with “the forgotten men and women of America” but that they were sneering as they enriched themselves at the people's expense. Trump's victory appeared to perform his message. But did it? Trump won by an historically unimpressive margin, by more electoral votes than George W. Bush had to secure his wins, but by fewer votes than Barrack Obama garnered in his. Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, gaining 2.8 million more votes nationwide. Exclude California and New York, however, and Trump won the remaining 48 states by 3 million more votes than Clinton. Beating the odds, Trump's victory raised the specter of greater disruption to come.

The 2016 election was riddled with contingency, punctuated by frequent and unexpected invocations of illiberal symbols, and fueled by genre shattering performances. Its narrative flow was rapid and disjointed. The campaign season felt interminable, even as the horse race seemed to unfold at breakneck speed. Serious, potentially campaign-ending developments entered the election story at one moment, only to morph into mere distractions, drifting away without resolution the next. During its last four weeks, citizens witnessed the release of the Hollywood Access tape, FBI Director James Comey reopening and reclosing the Clinton email server investigation (just two days before Election Day!), and charges of Russian tampering in the election. If the presidency symbolizes America and its citizenry, does Trump's victory suggest that a tidal shift in national identity and trajectory is underway? Which returns us to Norton's question, "What just happened?"

The contributions to this issue describe core democratic institutions in crisis, their authority having grown deeply unsettled. They describe a fragmenting civil sphere, and they identify the emergence of a politics of rupture that draws its energy from the pleasures of irrationality. Alongside these portrayals of straining institutions, we find representations of cultural structures which had receded from the political arena but in 2016 found forceful reanimation. Institutional fracture and symbolic resurgence illuminate the conditions that gave rise to Trumpism, and explain how the Trump campaign sparked new, more dangerous forms of identification and solidarity amongst a significant portion of the American public.