

The Novel of American Authoritarianism

Christopher Phelps

Associate Professor of American Studies
Department of American and Canadian Studies
CLAS / Trent Building
University of Nottingham
Nottingham, NG7 2RD U.K.

US voicemail: 713 588 0779
UK office number: 0115 9514211
UK home number: 01636 816046

christopher.phelps@nottingham.ac.uk

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CHRISTOPHER PHELPS*

ABSTRACT: Fictional literature portraying the descent of the United States into dictatorship is assessed critically and divided into three cultural-historical phases, each specific in class modality. Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's Column* (1890) and Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1907) project a plutocracy violently imposed to forestall working-class revolution. Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* (1935) and other mid-century novels envision a demagogic American authoritarianism, with working-class and lower-middle-class grievances exploited to amass personal power. In the Cold War and neoliberal eras, class recedes from salience in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004). Despite Atwood's brilliant evocation of totalitarian patriarchy and the extraordinary interiority of Sherwood Anderson's *Marching Men* (1917), the novels of American authoritarianism are on the whole characterized by aesthetic implausibility, one-sided apprehension of authoritarianism's class dynamics, and failure to treat white supremacy as central.

KEYWORDS: authoritarianism, autocracy, totalitarianism, dictatorship, populism, demagogy, demagoguery

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IN HIS TRACT *THE AMERICAN DEMOCRAT* (1838), James Fenimore Cooper described three forms of rule: a republic, premised on sovereignty of the people; an aristocracy, in which the few are the repository of power; and despotism, “a government of absolute power” in which a leader “governs without any legal restraint on his will.” In forging a republic, the United States had achieved “a distinctive principle”: “all political power is strictly a trust, granted by the constituent to the representative.” Writing in the context of expanding white male suffrage and the workingmen’s parties of Jacksonian America, Cooper acknowledged that democracies are susceptible to demagoguery, appeals by “men sufficiently audacious...as to persuade a people to act directly against their own dignity and interests.” Yet while “the demagogue always puts the people before the constitution and the laws,” Cooper held, republicanism held the answer to its own problems, the limitation of powers reflecting “the obvious truth that the people have placed the constitution and the laws before themselves” (Cooper 1969, 75-76, 89, 91, 155).

The imagining of an authoritarian America has always manifested the cultural moment of its production. Cooper embodied the nationalist self-assurance of the early republic, premised on dynamic market revolution, expanding slavery, and dispossession of the land of indigenous peoples and rival nations. That material dynamism allowed him to set aside his fear that authoritarian politics might undermine American democracy; the republic, whatever its challenges, would endure. To be sure, anxiety over menaces posed to republicanism would periodically resurface, including even uneasiness about monarchical restoration, but American political culture’s predominant nineteenth-century confidence in its righteous republic does much to explain why neither the author of *The Last of the Mohicans* nor his literary

contemporaries produced a fictional account depicting dictatorship in the United States. Not until a more vexed moment, the turn of the century, would American novelists begin to imagine that potentiality in full-fledged fictional form, as vast Gilded Age discrepancies of wealth and power, combined with periodic capitalist crises, made a despotic outcome far more conceivable. As the novel of American authoritarianism has unfolded since, its history supplies ample further illustrations that any novel of the future is also a novel of the present, a truism particularly evident in these novels' ideological assumptions of class, race, and American reality.

Class modalities, especially, have shaped literary portrayals of the American state's descent into dictatorship. Three broad narrative scenarios of American authoritarian rule correspond to successive contexts of history, political economy, and labor-capital relations. The first novels to posit an American authoritarianism, Ignatius Donnelly's hallucinatory *Caesar's Column* (1890) and Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1907), forecast a capitalist imposition of autocracy from on high. Cooper's earlier insight that demagogic populism might be the more likely source of American authoritarianism would be left unexplored until the era of mass politics and expansive state-building of the mid-twentieth century, when a second array of novels including Sherwood Anderson's *Marching Men* (1917) and the several novels of the 1930s and 1940s inspired by the Louisiana kingfish Huey Long, notably Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), explored the potential for a populist simulacrum of radicalism that would convert legitimate working-class and lower-middle-class grievances into the self-interested gain of opportunist politicians. In the Cold War and neoliberal eras, with the suppression and retreat of labor militancy, class all but evaporates in the third phase in the novel of American authoritarianism, particularly in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Philip

Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), in which a politics of gender and ethnicity is disembodied from social class.

Throughout this entire tradition, alternating frameworks of national-political ideology have positioned authoritarianism in opposite ways. One casts authoritarianism as un-American, a violation of national tradition, the work of usurpers who eviscerate the Constitution and thereby destroy the nation's liberal-republican heritage. The other identifies homegrown American authoritarian attitudes and constituencies that indicate autocratic developments are the culmination, rather than the violation, of American history. Lewis and Roth epitomize the first approach; London, Anderson, and Atwood the second. It is tempting to describe these respective framings as liberal and radical, but that would be needlessly schematic and obscure the potential for dialectical synthesis, for it is possible to cast the relationship between authoritarianism and American history in a dual manner, as demonstrated with alacrity by bluesman Eric Bibb in his song "What's He Gonna Say Today?" (2018):

It's a crazy situation
An' crazy ain't nothin' new
But we're talkin' pure madness here
A nightmare comin' true

...Mesmerised by his money
Hypnotized by celebrity
We've let a rich man's boy climb to the top
And hijack democracy

The hybrid claim that American authoritarianism might be both "pure madness" (a tragic annulment of the stated democratic values that long governed the nation's civic culture) *and* "nothing new" (an outgrowth of authoritarian instincts and practices with roots deep in

American history) contains an important insight that has proven largely elusive in the American novel.

Considerable praise has been lavished upon the novels of American authoritarianism, hailed in recent years for their prescience (Churchwell 2017; D’Ancona 2017; Brody 2018; Klein 2018). This paroxysm of enthusiasm for the form is a consequence of political context, namely heightened anxieties about actual authoritarianism. Authoritarianism is here defined in the explicit political sense of movements or intrigues that are autocratic in ambition, contemptuous of the liberal rule of law, and either pointing toward or achieving a maximal-leader state. This phenomenon presents conceptual issues of longstanding intellectual interest (Adorno et al. 1950) and has resurged as a focus of inquiry in the twenty-first century, both in the news media and social sciences (Stenner 2005; Hetherington and Weller 2009; Hetherington and Suhay 2011; Cizmar et al. 2014; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Sunstein 2018). While attention to authoritarianism is accelerating in the arts and humanities as well (Brown et al. 2018), that literature is less-developed, and this article offers the most comprehensive comparative history and critical examination to date of the fictional literature on American authoritarianism.

The recent applause for the novels of American authoritarianism as a cultural resource of resistance obscures what an unreliable, uneven legacy they constitute. Once the sheer literary feat of projecting authoritarianism as the outcome of the American political project is acknowledged, a close reading reveals them to more deficient than clairvoyant. Those novels that project a purely ruling-class or middle-class basis for authoritarianism occlude authoritarianism’s dynamic appeal to multiple class fractions; others ignore class altogether. Furthermore, the novels of American authoritarianism exhibit a white racial blindspot, being

inattentive to racism despite the centrality of xenophobia and white supremacy in movements ranging from the early Ku Klux Klan to the contemporary alt-right. Finally, all too few novels of American authoritarianism achieve virtuosity or verisimilitude. Even those that transcend the stylistic crudeness that marred Donnelly's pioneering work—caricature, hackneyed dialogue, bizarre plot twists—mirror his shortcomings in failing to achieve interiority into the authoritarian mind and in spinning implausible scenarios as to how an American authoritarian state might crystallize.

A great artistic challenge, to be sure, lies in constructing vivid narratives of how a national polity birthed in opposition to monarchy and boastful of its libertarian-republican heritage could transmogrify into tyranny. This makes the signal achievements stand out all the more: London's projection of fascism years before its actualization, Anderson's psychological sounding, Roth's innovative use of innocent boy as narrator, and Lewis's perfect title, *It Can't Happen Here*. Yet no novel of American authoritarianism rises to the level of a masterwork on the order of George Orwell's *1984* (1948). The closest in fully realized conceptual brilliance is Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*—its author, a Canadian, being the sole novelist to portray an authoritarian United States who is not an American citizen, revealingly.

If a society's literary culture shows little capacity for imagining its own degeneration into political dictatorship, rarely doing so realistically, does that demonstrate the robustness of its democratic culture or its naiveté? Whatever may be the case, American fiction has treated political authoritarianism implausibly, being largely one-sided in apprehension of class dynamics and oblivious to white supremacy. This would not be so surprising were not these novels so lauded. Walter Benjamin was correct: there is no cultural document that is not also a

record of barbarism—including, he might have added, the very documents that purport to condemn barbarism.

Looking Forward: The Plutocratic Future, 1890-1919

The first novels of American authoritarianism were works of social protest and catastrophism that envisioned harsh plutocratic rule. Conveying some of the first proletarian themes in American fiction, their bleak augury was the work of those who shared in popular desires for a more egalitarian and democratic future but foresaw, as had Marx, that class struggle may end “either in a revolutionary reconstitution of the society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes” (Marx 1998, 2). Issued in a context of militant labor movements and ruling-class ruthlessness (Fusfeld 1980), they envisioned a class-struggle scenario in which radical workers straining toward power would provoke counter-revolutionary dictatorship, a postulation akin to Ambrose Bierce’s definition of “grapeshot”: “an argument which the future is preparing in answer to the demands of American socialism” (Bierce 1906, 140).

The earliest of these was the outlandish, bigoted, wildly popular *Caesar’s Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century* (1890). It was the outpouring of Ignatius Donnelly, an Irish Catholic Minnesotan politician who began as a Republican lieutenant governor and three-term Congressman before deciding a struggle was on “between the few who seek to grasp all power and wealth, and the many who seek to preserve their rights as American citizens and freemen” (Hicks 1921, 88). Supporting first the People’s Anti-Monopoly Party, then the Greenback Party, he served as a Minnesota state assemblyman with Farmers’ Alliance support and later drafted

the preamble of the Omaha Platform of the People's Party, the most widely read document of agrarian populism. He started writing *Caesar's Column* the day after Minnesota's state legislators defeated his bid for a U.S. Senate seat in 1889. Its bitter radicalism led to the manuscript's repeated rejection for being "extravagant and unjust toward the wealthier classes," as one publisher put it (A. G. McClurg to Donnelly, December 30, 1889, Reel 90, Donnelly Papers).

Donnelly's blood-soaked nightmare was a conscious inversion of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1888), the quintessential utopian novel. Although Bellamy's vision has been characterized as "authoritarian socialism" (Lipow 1982), *Looking Backward* intimated a democratic transition to a consensual co-operative commonwealth: "There was absolutely no violence. The change had been long foreseen. Public opinion had become fully ripe for it, and the whole mass of the people was behind it" (Bellamy 1898, 57). Donnelly, by contrast, foresaw civilization's destruction. Set in New York a hundred years hence, *Caesar's Column* posits that by 1988 the United States will be run by "the Oligarchy": "There was a golden age once in America—an age of liberty; of comparatively equal distribution of wealth; of democratic institutions. Now we have but the shell and semblance of all that. We are a Republic only in name; free only in forms" (45). Political parties, judges and juries, governors and statehouses, Presidents and Congress: all are controlled by a small group of extremely wealthy men with a bearing of aristocratic *hauteur*. The cabal meets in a magnificent chamber. "In the center stood a large table," Donnelly writes, "and around it about two score chairs, all made of dark tropical wood. It was like the council chamber of some great government, with the throne of the king at one end." All power is vested in this New York financial-district conclave. "This,"

a guide whispers, "this is where they meet. This is the real center of government of the American continent; all the rest is sham and form" (62).

In certain respects Donnelly was visionary; *Caesar's Column* anticipates an air force, strategic bombing, chemical warfare, and even the internet (special mirrors with buttons that when pressed bring delivery of food or global news). He was dutifully conventional, however, in his moralism and bigotry. The Oligarchy is inspired by Sodom and Gomorrah, with a cartoonish melodramatic villain, Prince Cabano, "the wealthiest and most vindictive man in the city," at its summit (27). Corpulent, displaying "a long, thick black mustache" that could "not quite conceal the hard, cynical and sneering expression of his mouth," he is lascivious, buying women to satisfy his sexual dissipation (117). Lack of scruples powers his success: "It is not *Intellect* that rules the world of wealth, it is *Cunning*" (111). Prince Cabano, we learn, is Jacob Isaacs, a Jew, and "the aristocracy of the world is now almost altogether of Hebrew origin." Jewish financial success, according to Donnelly, was a consequence of historic persecution: "Now the Christian world is paying, in tears and blood, for the sufferings inflicted by their bigoted and ignorant ancestors upon a noble race" (32). That wistful gesture in the direction of tolerance does not inhibit the novel from propounding stereotypes of usurious Jewish bankers who make up a "money power" commanding all nations: "The world is today Semitized" (98). *Caesar's Column* was thus shot through with the same ideological chauvinisms of anti-Semitism and racism that would be exploited by the actual authoritarians of the twentieth century.

Ostensibly radical, it mirrored the ethnocentric, white-supremacist assumptions of the American elites of its day.¹

Caesar's Column predicts, but does not identify with, proletarian revolution. Its viewpoint, represented by Swiss-born narrator Gabriel Welstein, is that of the small producer pinioned between capital and labor, the reformer horrified both by plutocracy and revolution, the Christian seeking conciliation. An expression of the debtor West set upon by creditor East, it distrusts the urban-proletarian multitude cast in Orientalist terms: "The slant eyes of many, and their imperfect, Tartar-like features, reminded me that the laws made by the Republic, in the elder and better days, against the invasion of the Mongolian hordes, had long since become a dead letter"(38). The Oligarchy's opposition, a clandestine Brotherhood of Destruction with millions of members, is led by Caesar Lomellini, whose "skin was quite dark, almost negroid," whose "great arms hung down until the monstrous hands almost touched the knees," and who had the "eyes of a wild beast, deep-set, sullen, and glaring" (149). Second in command is a Russian Jew who absconds to Judea with the \$100 million in his charge. Also belonging to the Brotherhood are the blacks of the South, "as barbarous and bloodthirsty as their ancestors were when brought from Africa" (124). In the novel's unhinged crescendo, the vengeance-seeking multitudes lay claim to the Oligarchy's military airships known as Demons, blockade the financial district, blow the safes, pay off the airship generals, and annihilate the plutocrats. Looting, murder, and rapine break out, all presided over by an insane, drunken Caesar who

¹ *Caesar's Column* should not be taken as necessarily representative of the populist or radical farmer movements of the 1880s and 1890s, but its anti-Jewish character was well-understood by admirers who praised it for just that quality; see W. F. C. Wigston to Donnelly, December 21, 1890, and C. H. Roberts to Donnelly, January 1, 1891 (Reel 95, Donnelly Papers). For upper-class attitudes, compare Brooks Adams's excoriation of "the rotten, unsexed, swindling, lying Jews represented by J. P. Morgan and the gang which have been manipulating our country for the last four years" (Hirschfield 1964, 375).

directs that the carcasses be shaped into a giant putrescent pyramid at Union Square, concrete poured over it to make a monument. *Caesar's Column* ends with the non sequitur of a utopian republic in Uganda, but its indelible image is of horrific carnage.

Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1907) is a deliberate revolutionary socialist correction of *Caesar's Column* and a significant advance upon it, if one limited by class reductionism. While London was notoriously prone to tropes of white superiority, *The Iron Heel* is almost wholly free of ethno-racial aspersions, as well as the puritanical motifs of sexual degeneracy and diabolical conspiratorialism, that made Donnelly's *Oligarchy* such a caricature. *The Iron Heel* opens with a historian seven hundred years in the future presenting an annotated edition of the ancient Everhard Manuscript. In its pages Avis Everhard, privileged daughter of a university professor, chronicles the life of her working-class husband, Ernest Everhard, between 1912 and 1932. Things end badly for their socialist cause then despite socialism's eventual triumph centuries later, by the historian's time. *The Iron Heel* is thus a novel of the disastrous near-future told from a remote humane future. Explaining authoritarianism as a reaction of capitalism to a rising militant working class, London posits the proletariat as heroic, although its class struggles are desperate, beset by forces brutally committed to sustaining private capital accumulation.

Unlike the earlier stages of social progress, writes the future historian, the authoritarian despotism of the early twentieth century was "a step aside, or a step backward, to the social tyrannies that made the early world a hell" (London 1934, x). *The Iron Heel's* plutocracy—again a capitalized Oligarchy—is not a cabal of usurers as in Donnelly, but a composite of sectoral interests: "the large capitalists or the trusts...composed of wealthy bankers, railway magnates, corporation directors, and trust magnates" (153). This group, the "one percent" that "owns

seventy percent of the total wealth," dominates the Senate, Congress, courts, and state legislatures through a "brain" that "consists of seven small and powerful groups of men," one being the controllers of the railroad companies, who work "practically in unison" (154, 158).

The Iron Heel aims to dispel the naïve social-democratic hope that capitalism may be reformed gradually. The oligarch who figures most prominently in *The Iron Heel* is Mr. Wickson, a principal shareholder in the Sierra Mills, a company that troubles Avis Everhard's middle-class conscience because it shunts aside a worker who lost his arm in an industrial accident, exemplifying capitalism's indifference to humanity. Wickson carries himself with an impressively composed assurance informed by "the aristocratic ethic or the master ethic" (66). As Ernest Everhard speaks before the Philomath Club, an enormously wealthy Pacific Coast elite, Wickson sneeringly dismisses his talk with a single word: "Utopian." Everhard's cocky socialist denunciation of the Philomath men leaves most of them flustered, but Wickson coolly states, "We are in power. Nobody will deny it. By virtue of that power we shall remain in power. ...We will show you what strength is. In roar of shell and shrapnel and in whine of machine-guns will our answer be couched. We will grind you revolutionists down under our heel, and we shall walk upon your faces. The world is ours, we are its lords, and ours it shall remain" (96-97).

While London's color-blindness is an advance over *Caesar's Column*, it causes him to obscure the heterogeneity of the American wage-earning class. Gone is the multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-national American working class that is present, if caricatured, in Donnelly; the proletariat is reduced to an undifferentiated exploited mass. The portrait is in other ways pitiless, stripped of left romanticism. As proletariat and plutocracy struggle over the surplus, the regime crushes the socialist press by removing its postal privileges, defeats strikes, and

fosters collusion of Wall Street and the United States Treasury. As the dream of a legal evolution toward socialism vanishes, provocateurs incite a premature bid for proletarian power that is suppressed in a grotesque bloodbath. "It's no use," Everhard laments. "We are beaten. The Iron Heel is here. I had hoped for a peaceable victory at the ballot-box. I was wrong. Wickson was right. We shall be robbed of our few remaining liberties; the Iron Heel will walk upon our faces; nothing remains but a bloody revolution of the working class" (175).

The distance travelled from *Caesar's Column* to *The Iron Heel* reflects the transition of American radicalism from agrarian populism to socialism. London criticizes small-proprietary individualism—the trust-busting restoration of competition advocated by farmers, small business, and professionals—as atavistic and undesirable, since large-scale production is more efficient and powerful. He champions the proletariat, yet without idealization, for he includes not only working-class revolutionaries but strikebreakers and a complicit labor caste represented by conservative unions. Informed by the pitched labor battles of its age, *The Iron Heel* foresees dictatorship as a mechanism to suppress radical labor by use of a formidable military with powers of mass conscription and the Mercenaries, a special forces. Crucially, London apprehends the importance to authoritarian rule of a psychology of contemptuous rectitude, the Oligarchy being fired by moral conviction: "They looked upon themselves as wild-animal trainers, rulers of beasts" (299). Such an ideology, the Everhard Manuscript underscores, is critical: "I cannot lay too great a stress upon this high ethical righteousness of the whole oligarch class. This has been the strength of the Iron Heel, and too many of the comrades have been slow or loath to realize it. Many of them have ascribed the strength of the Iron Heel to its system of reward and punishment. This is a mistake.Prisons, banishment

and degradation, honors and palaces and wonder-cities, are all incidental. The great driving force of the oligarchs is the belief that they are doing right” (300-301).

Plutocracy is also the basis of authoritarianism in Francis Stevens’s *The Heads of Cerberus*, published serially in *The Thrill Book*, a pulp magazine, in 1919. Although far less known than *Caesar’s Column* or *The Iron Heel*, it has a claim to distinction as the only novel of American authoritarianism in the fantasy genre and as the first by a woman, “Francis Stevens” being the nom de plume of Gertrude Bennett, an obscure secretary. Her tale concerns an antique glass vial filled with dust, said to be from purgatory, and capped by a silver figure of the mythical three-headed dog who guards the gates of the underworld. Contact with the dust propels the novel’s protagonists into a disorienting opiate dreamscape through which they arrive in Philadelphia—not their native city, but a Philadelphia two hundred years hence. Now a city-state, Philadelphia is dominated by a Justice Supreme with “power absolute” and an Inner Order, the twelve Servants of Penn, Masters of the City (Stevens 1952, 145). History is erased, information controlled; commoners are called by numbers instead of names; and the male rulers are lecherous and assign power roles for women only on the basis of beauty or domestic ability. An allegory for the defeat of libertarian, democratic, and pacific ideals in the First World War and Red Scare, *The Heads of Cerberus* portrays the new social order as cynical: given to democratic platitudes but hierarchical, abounding in meritocratic titles but dominated by connections, and worshiping William Penn, the Quaker pacifist founder of Pennsylvania, even as it directs machine guns against the people. “Absolute despotism,” the story divulges, arose when the power-hungry rich used the rise of communism and class war in Europe as pretext for repression (154). Only by smiting the Liberty Bell, coated red to frighten and

intimidate the populace, do the protagonists return to the present day, leaving the reader to wonder if a parallel time dimension or hallucination accounted for their experience. Apart from its latent feminism, the *Heads of Cerberus* was original in use of setting, the birthplace of the Declaration of Independence accentuating a vitiation of American civic tradition.

Despite its progression from the bigotry and catastrophism of *Caesar's Column* to a higher plane in *The Iron Heel* and the *Heads of Cerberus*, the novel of plutocratic authoritarianism retained twin liabilities in its obliviousness to race and inability to imagine dictatorship coming to pass in any way except by machination at the highest echelons of American society. Produced in a context of farmers' movements and a reformist middle class, alive to a rising and militant labor movement, and anticipating that a revolutionary proletariat would supply the catalyst for a ruling-class crackdown, these novels spoke to a sharply class-riven society but did not anticipate how important curdled middle-class dreams might be in stoking right-wing discontent. The plutocratic scenario did not envision that plebeian and lower-middle-class strata, discombobulated and seeking order, might move sharply rightward and galvanize an authoritarian impetus independent of major capitalist interests, even to a point of providing the catalyst for authoritarian rule.

It Can Happen Here: Demagogy and Dictatorship, 1917-1946

Of the novels of plutocratic authoritarianism, only *The Iron Heel* would outlast the period of its creation, seen as prophetic (Figure 1) in the interwar years when jackbooted goose-steppers swept Italy and Germany. Its conjecture of capitalist dictatorship seemed predictive given the consolidation of corporatist-militarist regimes seeking to restore cartel

profitability amidst deep capitalist crisis, and as suppression destroyed labor unions and the left. European developments also diverged from the story line of *The Iron Heel*, however. It was the setbacks of the revolutionary working class in 1918-1923 rather than its immediate threat to bourgeois society that made possible its ultimate defeat by the far right. Fascism's initial class impetus, moreover, came not from the wealthiest strata but from a petit bourgeoisie pinned between capital and labor, resentful of national humiliation and made insecure by economic insecurity and hyperinflation (Trotsky 1971). "Social chaos," as one astute journalist reflected, "results when in a period of intensifying class war there is no corresponding growth in class consciousness but in general confusion" (Stolberg 1935, 344).

That the novel of plutocratic authoritarianism was in need of supplanting was also dramatized by the American context, where fears of dictatorial analogues to fascism concentrated upon Huey P. Long, who rose from a poor northern parish, as counties are called in Louisiana, to rule the state as governor and Senator between 1928 and his death in 1935, with clear presidential ambitions. Whether Long "parallels the modern European dictator-tyrant, the Hitler or Mussolini" (John Gunther) or should be understood as a "plain dictator...not a fascist with a philosophy of the state" (Raymond Gram Swing), his meteoric ascension suggested a good-ol'-boy American autocracy (Gunther 1947, 809; Swing 1935, 38). As Long himself drawled, "Just say I'm sui generis, and let it go at that" (Kane 1941, 140).

No wonder that by the thirties the plutocratic novel of American authoritarianism gave way to literary themes of demagoguery, but the first novel to explore such themes, like fascism itself, emerged out of the First World War. Shaped by a piercing acumen that makes it, in retrospect, very far ahead of its time, Sherwood Anderson's *Marching Men* was published in

autumn 1917, a moment of coercive patriotism, imperialist bloodletting, and suppression of the left. *Marching Men* understands militarism's attraction while depicting authoritarianism as a socialism of fools. Its protagonist is Norman McGregor, a miner's son who in childhood acquires the nickname Beaut, bestowed ironically on account of his "towering nose, great hippopotamus-like mouth, and fiery red hair" (11). Beaut flees the grim mining town of Coal Creek, Pennsylvania, for Chicago, where he longs for order and concocts a movement in which working men drill and march together in disciplined formations, military-style. Two inapt interpretations have obfuscated this novel's meaning. One holds that *Marching Men* is "radiantly and romantically symbolic of the rise of the proletariat" (Calverton 1926). The other condemns the novel for its "totalitarian bias" and "defense of political mindlessness" (Howe 1951, 86). Each presumes Anderson's total identification with his protagonist, an assumption never made in relation to *Winesburg, Ohio*, his celebrated short-story collection. *Marching Men* is better read as both an expression of labor's potential social power and a forewarning that American workers might be led astray into a vacuous fetishism of "action." It achieves an exceptional degree of psychological insight into the authoritarian mind, motivated not by greed or lust, as in the plutocratic novel, so much as self-inflation to compensate for personal inadequacy and rancor.

Growing up, Beaut is distinguished by "the quality of intense hatred" he holds for everyone else in Coal Creek (11). He is the son of a miner, Cracked McGregor, whose head is never the same after a mine accident and who, though gentle with his son, is feared by his wife Nance before he dies rashly trying to rescue others in a mine fire. Beaut, who sees the other miners as drunken, ineffectual brutes, is unmoved by a socialist's talk of a new day "when men

would march shoulder to shoulder” in “a coming brotherhood of man” (13) Instead he admires the soldiers who arrive to put down a strike, “stirred by the sight of them marching shoulder to shoulder” (40). His mother, who starts a bakery with her dead husband’s savings, holds the company responsible for the rotten timbers that crushed him, so she extends credit to the miners’ families in a subsequent strike. Beaut, siding with the mine manager, drives them away, leaving his mother with only unpaid accounts. Left energized, Beaut is reminded of a “drunken old oculist babbling of Napoleon” he once heard brag of making money off the miners by selling them cheap spectacles: “He began to think that he also must be like the figure of which the drunkard had talked” (48). Having come to fear Beaut as she had his father, his mother pays his train fare to Chicago. En route he gazes out the window dreaming: “In Chicago he meant to do something. Coming from a community where no man arose above a condition of silent brute labor he meant to step up into the light of power. Filled with hatred and contempt of mankind he meant that mankind should serve him. Raised among men who were but men he meant to be a master” (64).

Beaut begins to realize a Nietzschean will to power as he dominates other men, forcibly, in the warehouse where he works. In his rooming house Beaut reads about Caesar and other general-statesmen who led “thousands of men into battle” and who “appealed to him because in the working out of their purposes they had used human lives with the recklessness of gods” (129-130). A “Napoleonic insight” comes when he returns to Coal Creek for his mother’s funeral. Sitting in the darkened room with her body, he hears a socialist orator on the street and roars out the window that humanity should be “like a great fist ready to smash and strike” (148, 143). As he rides with her coffin to the gravesite, the miners trudge behind in a long

procession up the hill, honoring her for sacrificing everything for them. Oblivious to his own vitiation of their cause, McGregor has a vision of workers marching away their “fear and disorder and purposelessness,” with him at their head (150).

Back in Chicago, McGregor enters law school where he raises his voice and fist in a university classroom to declare, “Why should some man not begin the organization of a new army? If there are men who do not understand what is meant let them be knocked down” (168). Pushed out of the university for this outburst, McGregor passes the bar by studying alone and sets up his law practice in the vice district, his big break coming when he wins a seemingly impossible case. A beautiful daughter of Chicago’s elite falls for his magnetism, while his newfound celebrity allows him to put his marching scheme into action. A bartender acquaintance of his who had fled military service, “a haggard cynical figure who got drunk whenever money came his way and who would do anything to break the monotony of existence,” arranges for his union of bartenders and waiters to march for Beaut with “a motley company of young roughs” (247-248). Beaut’s rabble denounces Chicago as “one vast gulf of disorder” concerned with “the passion for gain, the very spirit of the bourgeoisie gone drunk with desire” (156). The marching men and their song-chants terrify Chicago’s industrialists, but this class *mélange* lacks any program apart from a mood of order, mastery, masculinity, and force. As for labor’s ideals of justice, equality, and socialism, Beaut exhibits only contempt for them. He is both a miner’s son and the personification of the *declassé* *petit bourgeoisie*, a bargain-rate attorney whose mother failed in business. The marching movement supplies no more clarity for the working class than did the drunken oculist babbling about Napoleon. By the novel’s conclusion the marching movement is faltering, mocked by working-class doubters

while the haute bourgeoisie sighs in relief. *Marching Men* is thus neither proletarian-heroic nor totalitarian-admiring. Its pulsings of anger, inebriation, contempt, and violence are Anderson's signposts that this is an irrational challenge to bourgeois society. This would-be American Bonaparte who flatters working people and disdains them mobilizes a hodgepodge of veterans and the lumpenproletariat in a simulacra of labor action: marching, marching, marching—nowhere.

The authoritarian movement in *Marching Men* achieves mass velocity but never propounds an explicit ideology, its vague opposition to the bourgeois order never fusing with dominant interests to achieve state power. These limitations help explain why Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* (1935) enjoys far greater renown, despite its decidedly lesser merits. *It Can't Happen Here* was written two years after Adolf Hitler's seizure of power, allowing Lewis to mine history by combining elements of Nazism with attributes of the populism of Huey Long, whose assassination made the novel a publishing sensation. Richard Rorty calls *It Can't Happen Here* "marvellously plausible," Jonah Raskin "electrifying," but it is difficult to share in their acclaim for a work so jumbled. *It Can't Happen Here* was dashed off in three months, after which Lewis's alcohol dependency was such that "perpetual inebriation" rendered him incapable of reading the proofs according to a biographer (Rorty 1998, 2; Raskin 2008; Schorer 1961, 609). Scattershot, plodding, dotted with odd capitalizations, it has little of the cleverness of *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, Lewis's bestsellers of the 1920s. Lewis himself told a radical New York gathering, "It isn't a very good book—I've done better books" (Schorer 1961, 611). In this period of declension, as one critic perceptively writes, Lewis's writing veered in "abrupt shifts from tough-minded realism to distressing sentimentality, radical social criticism to sympathetic

treatment of reactionary ideas, and taut imagistic prose to strings of clichés and outdated rhetoric” (Lundquist 1973, 104).

Such oscillation between penetration and incoherence is displayed in Lewis’s scrambled views of class. Buzz Windrip, his surrogate Long, is weirdly distant in the narrative. As a self-declared populist who institutes a dictatorship, Windrip combines the plutocratic and plebeian strands in fictional American authoritarianism, a potential strength sorely undercut by contradictory class motifs, with small business, professionals, and the middle class alternately presented as both the well-spring of fascism and the antidote to it. The novel’s hero is Doremus Jessup, the politically independent editor-owner of a small Vermont daily and heir to New England common sense. A local quarry owner rails against “Jew Communists and Jew financiers,” leaving Doremus less than persuaded when friends assure him “it can’t happen here” (Lewis 1935, 19). Yet he finds it hard take the clownish Windrip seriously, finding him “vulgar, almost illiterate, a public liar easily detected, and in his ‘ideas’ almost idiotic” (86). He listens incredulously as a letter from Windrip is read on the radio explaining how he would make America great again:

Summarized, the letter explained that he was all against the banks but all for the bankers—except the Jewish bankers, who were to be driven out of finance entirely; that he had thoroughly tested (but unspecified) plans to make all wages very high and the prices of everything produced by these same highly paid workers very low; that he was 100 per cent for Labor, but 100 per cent against all strikes; and that he was in favor of the United States so arming itself, so preparing to produce its own coffee, sugar, perfumes, tweeds, and nickel instead of importing them, that it could defy the World...and maybe, if that World was so impertinent as to defy America in turn, Buzz hinted, he might have to take it over and run it properly (70-71).

Doremus’s own son, a lawyer, defends Windrip, allowing that he is “something of a demagogue—he shoots off his mouth a lot about how he’ll jack up the income tax and grab the

banks, but he won't.... What he will do, and maybe only he *can* do, is to protect us from the murdering, thieving, lying Bolsheviks...the dirty sneaking Jew spies that pose as American Liberals!" (46). At a Madison Square Garden rally of Windrip's League of Forgotten Men, Doremus witnesses Windrip's cornpone charm and the hope he provides "drab, discouraged people": "He was the Common Man twenty-times-magnified by his oratory, so that while the other Commoners could understand his every purpose, which was exactly the same as their own, they saw him towering among them, and they raised hands to him in worship" (113, 88).

It Can't Happen Here is the first American novel to underscore anti-Semitism and anticommunism as powerful elements in modern authoritarianism. A mish-mash of mendacity, promises, and bigotry enables Windrip to obtain mass support while serving big business. So it is that fascism comes to America, the League of Forgotten Men giving way to the Minute Men (or M.M.s), a paramilitary club prone to "hoodlum wrath" (113). Summary arrests, book-burnings, detention camps, imprisonment of elected officials, executions, and a purge of academia ensue. A corporate state is imposed, strikes banned. Doremus himself is arrested and his newspaper seized after he writes an editorial condemning the Corporatists, or Corpos, as President Windrip's forces become known. Doremus flees to Canada, blaming the responsible citizens whose fear and timidity allowed the dictatorship to happen.

While *It Can't Happen Here* is in many ways an advance in a literary tradition that had either ignored or distorted anti-Semitic and racist themes in American authoritarianism, the achievement is undermined as Lewis simultaneously resorts to racist stereotypes. The Corpos seek to bar blacks from voting or holding office, provoking bloodthirsty uprisings by "hundreds of Negroes, armed with knives and old pistols" and leading to "horrible instances in which

whole Southern counties with a majority of Negro population were overrun by the blacks” (36, 163). Thus the Corps are deplorable for their racism *and* for provoking black rule. A similar gallimaufry exists of gender and sexuality when the Corps’ desire to limit women to maternal homemaking is presented as reactionary, but they are ridiculed as effeminate in ways suggesting pathological homosexuality. Among the M.M.s is “one broad young inspector who was rumored to have a passionate friendship with a battalion-leader from Nashua who was fat, eyeglassed, and high-pitched of voice” (295). Windrip’s organizational secretary Lee Sarason, who in a coup seizes power from Windrip. Sarason is said to share a “gold-and-black and apricot-silk bower” in Georgetown with “several handsome young M.M. officers.” (417). When deposed by the military while a New Underground fights on for democracy’s restoration, Sarason is wearing “violet silk pajamas” (426). Lewis was not the first leftist to paint fascism as gay, particularly following revelations about Ernest Röhm, but already sufficient evidence abounded of Nazism’s homicidal disposition toward homosexuality (“Hitler Crushes” 1934, 1-2; Plant 1986). None of the recent commentaries calling *It Can’t Happen Here* farsighted (Harris 2015; Lozada 2015; Stewart 2016; Nazaryan 2016; Gage 2017), remarkably, acknowledges the novel’s homophobia or retrograde passages on race. An earlier critic is correct to note that *It Can’t Happen Here* is “less a tribute to Lewis’s skill in presenting a major question of the day in fictional terms than to his uncanny sense of what his audience would let him get away with” (Dooley 1967, 227).

As literature, the subsequent novels inspired by Huey Long are worthier but circumscribed by moralism. Hamilton Basso’s *Sun in Capricorn* (1942) concerns retribution, John Dos Passos’s *Number One* (1943) hypocrisy, and Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*

(1946) truth and history. Dos Passos's Senator Homer T. Crawford is a Bible-quoting, folksy producerist—"if every man...got the full value of his production back we could all have a standard of livin' like a millionaire's"—who takes on the "slimy forces of privilege an' monopoly that lurk in the night" (Dos Passos 1943, 62, 294) but goes on benders and sets up his loyal aide in a backroom deal involving oil leases on state lands. Basso's Senator Gilgo Slade is more overtly dictatorial, admiring Julius Caesar, but vindictive politics and bread and circuses—down to a fat lady and a dwarf—are the real concern of a novel about a "man who wants to own the world" (Basso 1942, 219). Warren's elegiac work is less about Senator Willie Stark than the conundrum of how good men do evil and immoral men good. A product of its time and place, it borders on excusing demagogy. "Doesn't it all boil down to this?" asks narrator Jack Burden. "If the government of this state for quite a long time back had been doing anything for the folks in it, would Stark have been able to get out there and bust the boys? And would he be having to make so many short cuts to get something done to make up for the time lost all these years in not getting something done?" (Warren 1946, 133). Burden's subsequent disenchantment, though real, is tempered by a lingering sense of Stark's greatness. In each of these novels, authoritarianism is muted, pushed into the background by themes of demagogy, morality, and corruption.

The Retreat from Class in the Novel of Authoritarianism

It is no accident that the novel of plutocratic authoritarianism (1890-1919) and the slightly overlapping novel of demagogic authoritarianism (1917-1946) coincided with the high point of mass labor insurgency in United States history. The plutocratic approach ascribed

authoritarianism to the depredations of a financial-industrial elite confronted with working-class redistributionist movements from below, while the demagogic approach ascribed authoritarianism to a lower-middle-class populism that manipulates and derails legitimate popular grievances better championed by the labor movement. Before a dialectical synthesis could be forged and a demagogic plutocracy imagined, however, class would disappear altogether in the novel of American authoritarianism. That evaporation reflected labor's successive historical defeats, first in the Cold War, then under neoliberalism. The result was a literary heritage that despite certain aesthetic triumphs was ill-equipped to speak to revived fears of authoritarianism amidst record inequality in the early twenty-first century.

A first stage in this vaporization was the Cold War presumption that America was the linchpin of the democratic free world, which lent the prospect of American dictatorship a new air of implausibility and fostered its fadeout as a significant literary theme.² The long economic boom's promise that capitalism would make everyone middle class fostered a dissipation of class in the few remaining novels that did project an authoritarian outcome. A telling example is *Seven Days in May* (1962), a mass-market thriller by liberal journalists Fletcher Knebel and Charles W. Bailey II that chronicles President Jordan Lyman, whose signing of a nuclear disarmament treaty with the Soviet Union causes his poll ratings to plummet. A plot to overthrow Lyman is mounted by the triumvirate of Senator Frederick Prentice of California, right-wing television commentator Harold MacPherson, and General James Mattoon Scott, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As ringleader, Scott creates a top-secret military unit,

² A broader study of authoritarianism in literature would take up such midcentury works as Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) or Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), but such allegorical or institutional-bureaucratic authoritarianism is beyond the scope of the literal political authoritarianism under consideration here, as is the more diffuse or allegorical anti-fascist sentiment in an earlier generation of novels.

ECOMCON, through which the cabal undertakes “a planned, premeditated attempt to overthrow the government of the United States, in violation of the Constitution” (Knebel and Bailey 1962, 235). As the conspiracy is laid bare, Lyman muses, “It can happen anywhere,” the “it” signifying “a regular damn South American junta” (71). Civilian oversight is saved by a mid-level Pentagon functionary, Colonel Martin J. Casey, who breaks rank to tip off the President, leading to an Oval Office showdown in which Lyman’s fidelity to civic norms prevails as Scott proves insecure beneath his bluster. Patriotic honor, masculine firmness, technocratic calm: *Seven Days in May* sustains Cold War values even as it questions the arms race. Every player in the novel is white and male; class is absent. Apart from one fleeting mention of California defense contracts, corporate interests are all but invisible in this rendition of the military-industrial complex. The conspiracy lacks any social base.

Social criticism of a more thoroughgoing kind could, to be sure, still be conveyed through the novel of American authoritarianism, as is evident in Margaret Atwood’s stunning *Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). Since class had lost its pride of place in radical intellectual culture as neoliberalism from the 1970s onward saw the labor-capital compromise vitiated and the labor movement wither, and as other radical social movements rose to the fore, *Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) uses gender as leitmotif, to brilliant effect. It is, indeed, the only fully realized feminist novel of authoritarianism. *The Heads of Cerberus* had featured women among both its ruling oligarchy and challengers, and *Marching Men* may be read as a critique of male anger and violence, but neither Stevens nor Anderson treated gender systemically in the way made

possible by the far-reaching conceptual revolution of late twentieth-century feminism.³ While therefore justly celebrated, *The Handmaid's Tale* is slight on class and race in ways revealing its continuity with the very tradition of novels of American authoritarianism whose gender deficiencies it so decisively transcended.

Set in a household presided over by the Commander, a silver-haired patriarch, *The Handmaid's Tale* is told through the eyes of Offred, a woman in her thirties. Right-wing Christian evangelical fundamentalism has triumphed, instituting reproductive totalitarianism. The household is a microcosm of the regime, for the Commander is one of the Commanders of the Faithful who forged a Republic of Gilead after their forces “shot the President and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency,” an overthrow justified in answer to Islamic militancy (Atwood 1996, 183). Gilead is labyrinthine in its natalist politics. Its authoritarian logic insinuates itself into daily existence far more intimately than is indicated by its blatant mechanisms—censoring of newspapers, outlawry of abortion and pornography, and requirement of passes at roadblocks—or its enforcers in the Guardian police, military Angels, and spying Eyes. Its most central ritual is the Ceremony, an act of coitus devised to fulfil the Biblical decree to be fruitful and multiply without indulging lust. In it, the Handmaid lies prostrate between the legs of the post-menopausal Wife as the Commander carries out his joyless functional rutting. Offred is reduced to an incubator, the tattoo on her ankle reading, “I am a national resource” (75). Even for the Commander, arousal and orgasm are almost superfluous, impregnation the sole aim. The stakes are high, inordinately so for Offred, for lack

³ While the *Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins (2008-2010) celebrates defiant girl power against the oppressive regime of President Snow, its action-driven plots makes authoritarianism more its setting than subject.

of fertilization within two years results either in the Handmaid being declared Unwoman and transferred to the Colonies or in a ride in the Birthmobile, the highest honor imaginable.

“Traditional values” prove malleable. The Bible is kept under lock and key, to be read only by the Commander in special sessions, now containing such injunctions as the sexist bowdlerization of Marx, “From each according to her ability; to each according to his needs” (127). Offred is a ward of the Commander, her very name a patronymic (“Of Fred”) that obliterates her independent identity. Her thoughts often dart to a lost world before the onset of misogynistic puritanism when women had access to art galleries, reading, and bathing suits. She sustains a subversive friendship with her sardonic lesbian friend Moira even as she battles her feelings of resignation, drifts into memories of her mother, her past husband Luke, and their lost daughter in the time before Gilead, and pursues an affair with the Commander’s chauffeur Nick at the Wife’s suggestion, initially to secure the impregnation that the Commander’s seed is unable to supply, then as unbridled passion.

The Handmaid’s Tale is exquisite in its appreciation of ambiguity, in marked contrast to the jejune division into heroes and villains to which the novel of authoritarianism is so susceptible. An array of women sustain the patriarchy: the Aunts, the Wives, and the Marthas, who perform roles of domestic service. The Commander personifies Hannah Arendt’s banality of evil, looking like “a midwestern bank president,” yet at times Offred likes him and in the end he himself is victim of a purge (97). Conversely, Offred experiences discrete moments of power within her total context of powerlessness. The Commander invites her, without knowledge of the Wife, into a forbidden realm where they play Scrabble and attend a secretive bacchanal. There she discovers that her rebel friend Moira has become a sex worker, her will to resist

possibly having lost out to cynicism. In all these ways *The Handmaid's Tale* affords an intimate understanding of hegemony, the consensual underpinnings of social rule.

Fixated on the sphere of reproduction, *The Handmaid's Tale* is amorphous as to mode of production. Tacitly, Gilead is capitalist: the Commander is clearly wealthy and there is talk of trade and the Econowives of poor men. Chiefly, however, gender *is* class in a world where jobs, money, and property can only be held by men and women are relegated to domestic subordination. Race hardly enters into the narrative, despite—or perhaps because of—Gilead's structural color-codedness (green for the Guardians, red for the Handmaids, black for the Commander, blue for the Wives). Allusion is made to Detroit and “the Resettlement of the Children of Ham” in what was once North Dakota, but African Americans never appear explicitly in Offred's memories or experience (93). Not until the mock-scholarly afterward are “plummeting Caucasian birth rates” evoked to explain Gilead's preoccupation with population growth, or mention made that “racist fears provided some of the emotional fuel that allowed the Gilead takeover to succeed as well as it did” (316-317). Race and class are ancillary in *The Handmaid Tale*, which instead focuses almost exclusively on theocratic patriarchy as Gilead carries out regular Salvagings, or crucifixions, of criminals upon the Wall, including same-sex lovers, a repatriation to Israel of Jews who will not repent, and war in the Appalachian Highlands against pockets of Baptist guerrillas and heretical Quakers.

A concentration on religiously motivated bigotry is also shared by Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004). Redolent of its twenty-first-century moment, when the “war on terror” reawakened liberal worries over authoritarianism, *The Plot Against America* departs from the usual futuristic novel of authoritarianism to explore a counterfactual alternative past, one set

just before the Second World War. In keeping with his habitual mining of his own life for material, Roth innovatively employs as the novel's narrator a seven-year-old, stamp-collecting Jewish-American boy in Newark, New Jersey, whose wide-eyed innocence affords a molecular perspective on the slow, disorienting erosion of democracy. *The Plot Against America* is dotted with retro allusions to the likes of *PM* and William Randolph Hearst, in an almost antiquarian touch, as if Roth were carrying off the Depression-era novel Lewis ought to have written. The boy's liberal-patriotic family watches in dismay as famed aviator Charles Lindbergh heads an America First effort to prevent U.S. intervention in the Second World War, then wins the 1940 Republican nomination and vanquishes Franklin Delano Roosevelt in a landslide. When President Lindbergh travels to Iceland to meet Hitler and signs an agreement of understanding, the United States becomes "party in all but name to the Axis triple alliance" (Roth 2004, 55).

The narrator's parents refuse to believe the new administration and Congress will implement fascism: "They were Republican, they were isolationist, and among them, yes, there were anti-Semites—as indeed there were among the southerners in FDR's own party—but that was a long way from their being Nazis" (55). This hopefulness crumbles on a family vacation to Washington when a tourist calls the father a "loudmouth Jew" at the Lincoln Memorial, followed by the family's eviction from a hotel on the thinnest of pretexts (65). After a "Homestead 42" plan is announced by the Office of American Absorption to relocate Jews from the eastern seaboard to the hinterlands, one family friend emigrates to Canada, foreseeing an American Fascist New Order. "How can this be happening in America?" asks the father. "This is our country!" "Not anymore," says the mother. "It's Lindbergh's. It's the goyim's. It's their country" (196, 226). When Walter Winchell, the only national figure to oppose these

developments, is assassinated, the devolution of “a free society into a police state” seems imminent (354).

Suddenly Lindbergh vanishes and Roosevelt is restored to office. This dissatisfyingly pat resolution reflects Roth’s core unwillingness to believe authoritarianism could actually take hold in America. For him the lost liberal consensus is the real America. His nostalgia extends to class, for in *The Plot Against America*, class figures as a source of tension within the Jewish community but not in any appreciable way an explanation for authoritarianism. When a self-seeking rabbi becomes a Lindbergh mouthpiece, his opportunism is analogous to the complicity of certain collaborationist Jews in Nazi Germany and Jewish neoconservatives in the Bush administration, a search for personal enrichment that is an affront to the humble lower middle-class world of most Newark Jews, including the narrator’s. Race, similarly, is evaded in *The Plot Against America*, despite its adroitness in handling anti-Semitism. “I was just trying to imagine what it would have been like for a Jewish family like mine, in a Jewish community like Newark, had something even faintly like Nazi anti-Semitism befallen us in 1940, at the end of the most pointedly anti-Semitic decade in world history,” Roth told an interviewer (Thurman 2017). The 1930s were also, he might have added, years of American racial apartheid and world colonialism; Lindbergh was prone to racialism every bit as much as anti-Semitism. Yet *The Plot Against America* barely acknowledges white supremacy. At one point the narrator refers to a Kentuckian as “a long-standing member of the great overpowering majority that fought the Revolution and founded the nation and conquered the wilderness and subjugated the Indian and enslaved the Negro and emancipated the Negro and segregated the Negro...—while my father, of course, was only a Jew” (Roth 2004, 93-94). What elsewhere prevails is a liberal-

essentialist conception of America as a “free society.” To confront, say, Jewish racism or the experiences of African Americans in what he carelessly calls a “Jewish community like Newark” would have required a deeper appreciation of authoritarianism’s class and social origins.

Conclusion

Even former Presidents are now given to say that the American political system has changed “from a democracy to an oligarchy” (Jimmy Carter, in Sullivan and Jordan 2018). This disquieting context has lent the novel of American authoritarianism prestige even though none of its practitioners have managed to portray an American dictatorship as percipiently as Orwell depicted world bureaucratic state control in *1984*.⁴ Novels of American authoritarianism are wanting not merely for stylistic reasons but as a matter of ideology, in particular incomprehension of authoritarianism’s class dimensions and a white racial blind spot. The failings of the novel of American authoritarianism are thrown into sharp relief by the rise of a billionaire populist with a xenophobic program whose primary indicator of voter support is whiteness. The literary tradition’s flawed point of origin, *Caesar’s Column*, was a stew of “Shylock” and “African” stereotypes grafted onto contempt for a proletarian underclass. Its successors’ colorblindness is preferable but in disregarding race they miss its centrality in American authoritarian ideology and practice.

Why no known novel predicting American state dictatorship has yet been produced by a black writer makes for an interesting problematic. It may be that the pervasive quotidian

⁴ This explains why treatments of American authoritarianism contain such curious phrases as “Orwell and Huxley’s America” (Giroux 2015, Section 1) and why in the aftermath of the 2016 election it was *1984*, rather than any of the novels focused on American authoritarianism, that topped bestseller lists (De Freytas-Tamura 2017).

authoritarianism of systematic oppression, from slavery to the present, has provided more than sufficient material for authors of color to explore. When a novel is at last written by a writer of color that imagines an American political movement leading toward state dictatorship—the specific authoritarian scenario under consideration here—it will be intriguing to compare it to prior efforts. The absence of such voices has left the novel of American authoritarianism imperceptive about the white supremacy and xenophobia central to authoritarian movements in American history, even as it has simultaneously been hobbled by class interpretations that are one-dimensional or wholly lacking.

The twenty-first century fear of an authoritarian America arises in a context of vast inequalities of wealth and income combined with precarity, not unlike the Gilded Age origination of the novels of American authoritarianism. As fear of illiberal politics accelerates, so has the propensity to credit this literary ensemble with powers of divination. Prophecy, however, is too heavy a burden for fiction to bear. The novels imagining American authoritarianism do boast extraordinary feats, especially Atwood's gendered dystopia and Anderson's peerless interiority. The former exposes the misogyny commonplace in authoritarian politics while the latter points to a crucial psychological contradiction in the authoritarian leader: "Is it really strong authority that he wishes? In reality he demands rigorous order for others, and for himself disorder without responsibility" (Sartre 1965, 31). The literary abdication on class and race, nevertheless, has rendered the novel of American authoritarianism a flawed legacy, one ill-fitted for a political moment to which it might have spoken with far greater profundity.

Department of American and Canadian Studies

School of Languages, Cultures, and Area Studies

Trent Building, University of Nottingham

Nottingham NG7 2RD

United Kingdom

christopher.phelps@nottingham.ac.uk

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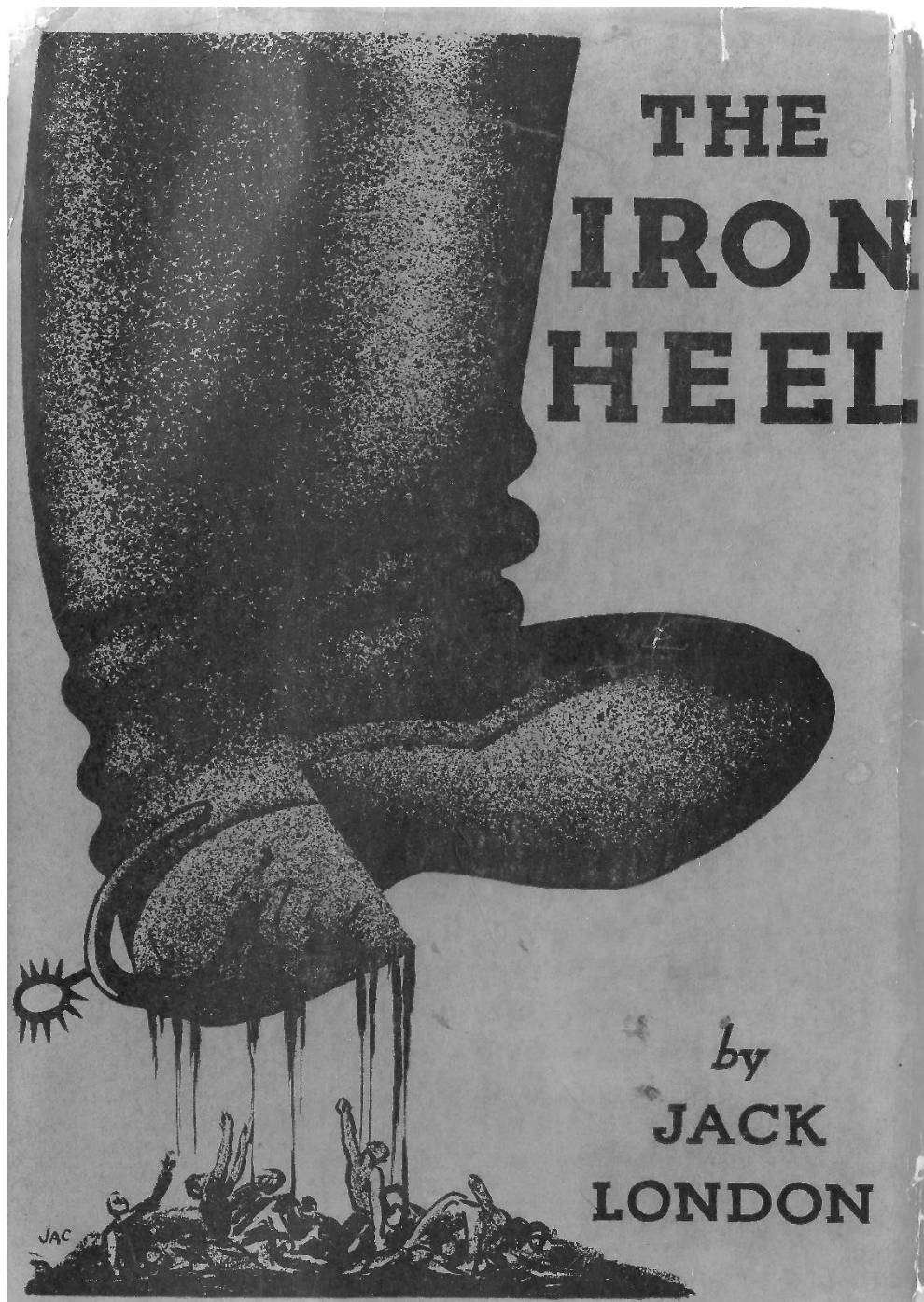


Figure 1. Special *Daily Worker* promotional cover of the 1934 Macmillan edition of Jack London's *Iron Heel*, with charcoal artwork by "JAC," unknown artist in the William Gropper style.

Source. Author's collection.