

THE TRIBULATIONS OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY IN PHILIP ROTH'S *THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA*

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Abstract. Since its establishment American democracy has always been challenged to a greater or lesser extent. If neoliberalism and the reign of finance constitute democracy's major contemporary challenge, in his 2004 alternate history novel, *The Plot Against America*, Philip Roth ostentatiously chooses to set his narrative in the 1940s and explore democracy in the 'what-if' mode, which gives him extra breadth allowing for extravagant flights of fancy. In the tradition of Sinclair Lewis's 1935 novel, *It Can't Happen Here*, Roth's novel juxtaposes an innocent America with an evil one. The latter renders the former heroic, and this brief interlude of a relatively mild form of fascism that takes hold of America ends with the triumph of democracy. Roth seems to imply that American exceptionalism, a safeguard and *Deus ex machina* in the narrative, appears to be at work sheltering the US from any totalitarian excess. This paper examines the narrative's political agenda which turns out to be the assertion of American democracy that can only triumph over a brief suspension of civil rights during a politically dark era for the Western world. Roth's imaginative inquiry into the past can be read as an attempt to reconcile himself with those who had felt offended by his work. The political novel, conspiracy theories, concepts such as 'democratic patriotism' and the work of Seymour Lipset provide the theoretical framework of this article.

Key words: democracy, American exceptionalism, alternate history, novel of American Fascism, conspiracies, democratic patriotism

The Plot Against America, Philip Roth's 2004 novel, is certainly the American author's most political one as it deals with the perils and imperishability of American democracy in a period when the US found itself at the crossroads just before its interventionist turn once again. Roth, a master in blurring the boundary between fact and fiction, seems keen on blurring the frontier between history and fantasy in *The Plot Against America*, an alternate history novel. This genre explores how the course of history might have been altered, if particular events had had a different outcome. In Roth's counterfactual narrative, set in the early 1940s, the US's entry into 'the American Century,' to use Henry Luce's term (see Note 1), is marked by the necessity to secure first its democratic values at home jeopardized by American Fascism. Roth operating on the 'what-if-mode' imagines the American hero and Nazi sympathizer, Charles Lindbergh as President of the US instead of F. D. Roosevelt and a host of forced assimilation policies aimed at American Jews. In this romance-with-fascism American interlude,

anti-democratic forces gain momentum and anti-Semitic sentiment runs loose incrementally for almost two years before the reestablishment of democracy with the re-election of Roosevelt.

The narrative actualizes the ‘what-if-it-happened’ mode that Roth announced in his *New York Times* article, ‘The Story Behind *The Plot Against America*,’ which preceded the novel (Roth, 2004a). Then it moves from the ‘it-is-happening,’ in the US to ‘it-has-happened’ and finally ‘it-is-well over’ with some after-effects. Thus, Roth’s thinking about American democracy takes the form of a ‘thought experiment,’ as he put it in his above-mentioned *New York Times* article. The latter provides useful paratext for the reader to understand the author’s flight of frightful fancy in this novel that relies on realism. Just like Günter Grass’s 1959 novel, *The Tin Drum*, Roth’s narrative puts centre stage a child, whose voice is coloured by adult maturity, to recount the turbulent times that involve a thorough politicization of private lives and in particular those of a Jewish-American family, the Roths from Newark, New Jersey. Therefore, inconspicuous Newark is once again Roth’s milieu ‘for exploring American character in conjunction with American history [...] on a national scale,’ as Michael Kimmage contends for Roth’s Newark trilogy (Kimmage, 2012: 4).

Likewise, Roth puts back on the literary map a sub-category of the political novel, the ‘novel of American Fascism,’ which ‘appeared in the mid-1930s and continued for almost exactly the same time-span as that of Hitler’s Third Reich,’ according to Joseph Blotner’s study of the political novel (Blotner, 1966: 241). This time lag greatly perplexed reviewers and critics who, dissatisfied with Roth’s claim that he simply wanted to illuminate the past, read the novel as an allegory for the Bush-era (Kellman, 2008; Schiffman, 2009). Naturally, the multiplicity and diversity of readings that Roth’s fiction permit can only be to the credit of the work of art. However, in spite of the legitimacy of these readings, Roth needed no allegory to talk about Bush, highly criticized by the American author, all the more so that American Jews were not Bush’s target. Similarly, Roth needed no displacing strategy to talk about African Americans, who, as it has been suggested (Michaels, 2006: 289), precisely suffered the lot the author describes for the Jewish Americans, all the more so that he dealt with this issue in an infinitely subtle way in his 2000 novel *The Human Stain*.

Therefore, the reader may wonder what Roth’s political agenda is. Blotner observes that in ‘reading these novels [dealing with American Fascism] one speculates about still another kind of motivation – that of the author’ (Blotner, 1966: 261). It seems that with this generally well-received, rather consensual, best-selling novel, the controversial author manages to make everyone happy. In his previous work, the author had appeared as an undignified son, a traitor to his community, a misogynist, and a severe critic of America and hence angered different groups of readers. However, in this novel, he seems to pay tribute to his parental figures, to his ethnic affiliation, to women and finally to his country; the narrative appears to assert American exceptionalism which could account for the restoration of American democracy that put an end to the Fascist nightmare

experienced by the Roths. The family's name constitutes the author's wink at autofiction, a genre that mixes fiction and autobiography.

Thus, Roth's fictional family goes through the tribulations of alternate history when their hero, Lindbergh, the man who made the first solo transatlantic flight in 1927 and then earned huge sympathy because his baby son was kidnapped and murdered five years later, emerges as an anti-Semitic leader. Lindbergh uses his charisma and the isolationist sentiment to sign a pact with Hitler and implement anti-Semitic policies, accepted by the mass of ordinary citizens and even by some prominent members of the Jewish community, such as conservative Rabbi Bengelsdorf. The family's unity also falls apart as the elder brother, Sandy is co-opted by a federal agency designed to erase ethnicity, the *Office of American Absorption*, to encourage other Jewish city boys to follow his enthusiastic example. In addition, through his aunt, Evelyn whose boyfriend is Bengelsdorf, he is invited to a reception at the White House. Moreover, the family, under the new Homestead 42 scheme, are 'selected' for relocation to Kentucky, while Philip is running away in the middle of the night to avoid exile. With Lindbergh's disappearance, which gives rise to another conspiracy theory in the narrative that presents the anti-Semitic President as a victim of the Nazis, the ultimate catastrophe is avoided, but Philip's life is marked by fear.

Though the novel is set in the 1940s, it is a narrative of our times if we take into account that the twenty-first century is undergoing a period of 'fashionable conspiracism', as some scholars observe (Keely, 1999; Byford, 2011: 6). Jovan Byford notes that 'there is a market' for books that deal with conspiracies along with 'an increased interest in "speculative history"' (Byford, 2011: 8). The novel draws heavily on this culture announced by its polysemic, somewhat sensational title which points for the general reader to a conspiracy against the most powerful country to boot. Because 'conspiracy theorising is perceived [...] as *politically* suspect and antithetical to "proper democratic politics"' (Byford, 2011: 23), American democracy appears *a priori* compromised. Indeed, the narrative plot relies on a juxtaposition of various political plots vying for dominance – a conspiracy against an American minority group, an internal conspiracy against American Democracy as well as an external conspiracy against it. Moreover, at the centre of these conspiracies American Jews are the ideal 'more visible target group associated with the cabal,' necessary to create the appeal of a conspiracy theory as Seymour Lipset and Earl Raab rightly point out (Lipset and Raab, 1978: 221). In fact, before WWII 'for a substantial proportion of its history the conspiracy tradition was dominated by the idea of a Jewish plot to take over the world' (Byford, 2011: 95). Therefore, the narrative capitalizes not only on the general interest in conspiracy theories but also on conflicting conspiracy theories concerning American Jews.

Moreover, the narrative's use of conspiracies multiplies the pervading fear due to the experience of the 'occult force operating behind the seemingly real, outward forms of political life,' which is the main tenet of a conspiracy theory (Roberts, 1974: 29). The first term of the narrative is fear and the title of the last

chapter is ‘Perpetual Fear’ which seems to linger after the democratic order has been regained. However, the expression of fear that predominates in the narrative as genuinely heartfelt and traumatic is the narrator’s; his victimization as a child growing up in a country threatened by a relatively mild form of fascism points to the necessity to distinguish between real and bogus, authentic and spurious conspiracies in the narrative. The narrative plot guides the reader to make the right choice among the political plots. By the end of the narrative, the reader has no doubt that the isolationists led by Lindbergh and Burton K. Wheeler capitalized on conspiracy theories that targeted Jews to advance their anti-war agenda. Conversely, the resistance led by the journalist, Walter Winchell, who is assassinated when he runs for President, turns the tables by denouncing a conspiracy, the so-called ‘plot against America’ (260). Precisely, it is the plot against American Democracy, seriously undermined by social engineering that aimed at exterminating Jewish culture and encouraging the expression of anti-Semitic sentiment. As for the external conspiracy, which makes the Lindbergh government a puppet in the hands of Nazi Germany, the narrative maintains some seemingly purposeful neutrality. Nevertheless, while the internal and external plots have in common the destabilization of democracy, the main narrative plot has the mission of denouncing the other plots and thus works towards the restoration of democracy.

The novel draws not only on conspiracy culture but also on the history of American Fascism to build an alternate history as the 27-page postscript, which is fairly informative for the reader, makes clear. Roth harks back to history to assess the weight of those undemocratic forces which attempted to oppress freedom in the name of patriotism. Seymour Lipset underlines that

The seemingly philo-Jewish behavior on the part of nineteenth- and early twentieth century American elites did not imply the absence of hostile attitudes and behavior. Anti-Semitism of course existed in America, sometimes on a large scale [...] The United States has not been an exception, even if the anti-Jewish outbreaks have been much less virulent than in other countries. (Lipset, 1978: 160)

Lipset’s balanced assessment provided Roth with the subscript for his novel. The American novelist’s historical imagination was greatly stimulated by these elements. Unlike Sinclair Lewis, who in his 1935 classic novel *It Can’t Happen Here* did not differentiate American Fascism from the German one and was blamed by the reviewers for it, Roth did. In his moderate form of tyranny, the constitutional separation of authorities is never cancelled; it is just undermined though seriously enough to thwart the civil liberties and terrorize the ‘relative few’ (Roth, 2015), which is not so unbelievable after all, given the fact that the US originally operated on two value systems. His extreme version of American history appears, then, as an appropriate frame for the sort of atavistic, memorial fear that seems to preoccupy the narrator in this novel. *The Plot Against America* takes the form of a ‘fictionalized memoir’ (Gross, 2010: 409) and

a political *Bildungsroman* – the adult Philip Roth remembers those frightful years that transformed his parents from ordinary citizens into exceptional ones.

Indeed, the parental portraits in *The Plot Against America* could not be further away from previous ones, such as in *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) or *Patrimony* (1991), thus constituting Roth's late tribute to those treated harshly by the laws of fiction. In this narrative, the father, though not a great achiever, is a staunch democrat, a firm educator and an intrepid dissident. In the juxtaposition of an innocent with a guilty America, a good with an evil one, the father is on the side of innocence and goodness. First, he does not hesitate to protest against the violation of civil rights that victimizes the Roth family on their trip to Washington D. C. This trip is meant to be a pilgrimage to the temple of American democracy, the Lincoln memorial. It is here that the father publicly denounces America's undemocratic drift, which incurs the wrath of Lindbergh's supporters and the racist insult of 'loudmouth Jew.' Then, he undertakes the political socialization of his children, which turns out to be a tougher task for his elder son. In fact, Sanford's admiration for Lindbergh makes him a young collaborator of the government, an active member of the *Just Folks* program. The latter aims at breaking the Jewish community and is directed by Sanford's aunt who is at the head of the *Office of American Absorption* (OAA).

The abrupt awaking of Philip's and Sanford's political consciousness is mediated through what they most cherish, stamp collecting for the former, drawing for the latter, because Lindbergh's icon is involved in their hobbies. While the latter continues to worship his American hero still untainted for him, Philip's nightmare of a huge swastika over his stamps testifies to the corruption of their icon. The absurdity and instrumentalization of governmental policies are shown by the very fact that there is no need for such an assimilation as the very beginning of the narrative highlights. On the contrary, they can only be counter-productive for they awaken the parents to the consciousness of their trampled ethnicity, which entails a struggle to save their country and their ethnicity. Thus Herman Roth finally resigns from his job rather than participate in the *Homestead 42* program that relocates Jews, a reminder of Japanese Americans' lot during WWII. Likewise, from passive resistance he moves to active resistance saving his son's orphaned friend whose mother was killed in anti-Semitic riots. The father, remaining true and loyal to the principles which underlie democracy until the end, rises above the image that his elder son may have of him after his experience in a farm in Kentucky, where just like Lindbergh, Mr Mawhinney becomes another substitute father for him. Interestingly, the latter is thus described by Philip,

a Christian, 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, [...] one of those unassailable Nordic and Anglo-Saxon Protestants who ran America and would always run it— [...] the men who laid down the law and called the shots and read the riot act when they chose to — while my father, of course, was only a Jew. (93)

The narrative counters this 'only a Jew' disparaging portrait of Herman Roth whose actions are guided by what Joel Westheimer calls 'democratic patriotism.' This sort of patriotism 'reflects the love that brings a people together rather than the misguided love of institutions that dominate them' (Westheimer, 2006: 610). The father's alert democratic consciousness, necessary to maintain democracy, makes him a true American.

Furthermore, the category of democratic patriotism is contrasted with 'authoritarian patriotism [...] a resigning of one's will, right of choice, and need to understand the authority; its emotional base is gratitude for having been liberated from the burden of democratic responsibility.' (Westheimer, 2006: 5). Authoritarian patriotism is exemplified by Rabbi Bengelsdorf and his crew of collaborators; contrary to the apolitical uncle Monty who does business as usual, this group is finally persecuted and thus also victimized.

However, Samuel G. Freedman's contention that 'with his grimly brilliant reimagination of America in the early 1940s, Roth has supplied an irresistible victim fantasy' (Freedman, 2005) should be qualified since the narrative equally supplies a stronger resistance fantasy also historically inspired. As Lipset puts it, 'Though extraordinarily successful in the meritocratic competition, they [Jewish Americans] resemble Blacks in their commitment to liberal social reform and in their concern over discrimination against minorities' (Lipset, 1996: 151). Precisely, Roth's depiction of heroism and devotion to democratic values is not only reserved to parental figures but also embraces the Jewish community. If Herman Roth exemplifies resistance at the ordinary citizen's level, Walter Winchell does so at a national level. While Bengelsdorf is unwise enough to support the conspirators, Winchell is clairvoyant and brave enough to denounce them. His radio programs counter Lindbergh's public utterances on the radio that vilify Jewish Americans as alien warmongers indifferent to America's interests. He takes up the gauntlet standing up to Lindbergh, the American icon *par excellence* and master of political marketing, who in his aviator gear and speaking in a plain style seems to mesmerize America. Outspoken in his condemnation, Winchell is the redemptive voice of dissent that means to represent not only the relative few but the whole country and thus his assassination transforms him into a martyr, offering the Jewish community a national hero.

Being at the very heart of resistance, Winchell is the pure Democrat who legitimizes the Jewish claim to Americanness. Critics who expected a complete picture of antifascist resistance in that period were naturally perplexed. As Christopher Vials puts it, 'In making Walter Winchell the locus of resistance, Roth in particular omitted the range of insurgent political forces that ensured that "it" didn't happen here, paradoxically (and perhaps consciously) effacing a cultural history of which his work is a part' (Vials, 2011: 23). Yet, there is no paradox since the novel is a counterfactual one giving Roth the freedom to be highly selective. Moreover, Vials does not develop his parenthetical remark, 'and perhaps consciously,' which points to Roth's (unstated by the critic) intention of highlighting Jewish democratic action above all. If the novel is

about American fascism, it is also about American anti-fascism exemplified by American Jews. Whether Roth consciously intended it or not, the narrative does depict 'a unique people in an exceptional country' (Lipset's title of his chapter dealing with Jewish Americans) and how 'American and Jewish exceptionalism [...are] closely intertwined' (Lipset, 1996: 175). American Jews hone in on their democratic credentials during this period of crisis and prove themselves part and parcel of America. The resilience of the American political system is indicated by the restoration of democracy thanks to the *Deus ex-machina* intervention of Lindbergh's wife, Anne Lindbergh.

Though this intervention is problematic, and Richard Lebow rightly observes that 'Roth's return to history is less credible and developed than his departure from it' (Lebow, 2010: 255), this narrative development offering a rather prestigious role to a woman could have an appeasing effect upon those feminists who had previously objected to Roth's work (see Note 2). Moreover, it does give some credit to the conspiracy theory (part of the narrative plot), according to which the Lindberghs, blackmailed by the Nazis who had kidnapped their son, had to obey fascist orders. Thus, laundering them, to some extent, reestablishes their martyr image and, to a lesser extent, American innocence; as Carl Boggs remarks, 'After all, is it not a matter of common knowledge that the great evils of militarism, war, dictatorship, and political violence emanate from *elsewhere*, from strange lands and even stranger leaders?' (Boggs, 2011: 228).

Furthermore, the twisted Christian imagery that Steven Sampson noted in Roth's earlier novels (Sampson, 2011) persists as Anne Lindbergh acquires a Virgin Mary aura sacrificing her son on the altar of democracy, while Bess Roth shelters the orphaned Wishnow boy. Making the country safe, Anne Lindbergh becomes a substitute mother for fearful little Phil who had attempted to find refuge in a Christian orphanage in the course of the narrative. Thus, Philip Roth's motherland is both Jewish and Christian just like his fatherland since Roosevelt is Phil's 'surrogate father' as Lebow observes (Lebow, 2010: 246). Phil's passion for his stamp collection was inspired by 'the country's foremost philatelist' (1) and 'President Roosevelt was the first famous living American whom [... Phil] was taught to love' (7). Therefore, the narrative defuses tensions between ethnic and mainstream America 'reinforcing an idealized view' of the country, as Timothy Parrish contends (Parrish, 2011: 146). Indeed, the novel exposes the vulnerability of American democracy only to show it triumphant over the pitfalls of history. The country's exceptional resilience is built in the narrative on a politically-conscious anti-fascism that prevented a nascent anti-Semitism from changing America's essentially democratic nature. In his conclusion to the chapter on American Jews, Lipset asserts, 'Can we still speak of American exceptionalism with respect to the position of the Jews? The answer would appear to be yes' (174). *The Plot Against America* exemplifies this view.

In this fable on American Democracy, could the reader finally wonder whether Roth displaces its problem which is not blatant racism but a blatant plutocracy that disregards economic inequalities as Walter Benn Michaels

argues in 'Plots Against America: Neoliberalism and Antiracism'? It seems unlikely for Roth's focus is, indeed, the past which provided him the right frame for reconciliation with parental figures, ethnic affiliation and women. And reconciliation seems to be a political act, but it is ultimately reconciliation with life as the author moves away from fiction and closer to life. Roth's public image, as it appears in his interview to Alison Flood titled, 'Roth Philip insists "I have no desire to write fiction"', is that of a happy retiree in spite of 'a very anxious and a very pessimistic' view of America (Freeman, 2004) he still seems to voice, left now to others to be plotted in fiction.

NOTES

1. The term 'American century' was coined by the press magnate, Henry Luce who in a February 17, 1941 *Life* magazine editorial urged the US to forsake isolationism, enter the WWII and spread its democratic values.
2. Philip Roth is generally perceived as a misogynist and a sexist by feminists: 'Feminists have argued that his female characters are portrayed as less than human' (Roberts, 2011). Interviewing Philip Roth, Hermione Lee uses phrases such as 'the feminist attack on you' or refers to his 'limited view of women' (Roth and Lee, 1984).

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