

## What's the Matter with the World? Commentary on the Rise of Populism

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### What's the matter with me?

To avoid any impression of condescension, I will begin with a humbling root question, "What's the matter with me?" After all, I have become deeply aware in recent years of how out of touch intellectual elites generally are with wider public sentiments in America and several foreign societies that I have visited in recent years. I had my own trouble as long ago as the 1970s grasping the grassroots strength of Nixon's 'moral majority,' which I haughtily dismissed as the 'immoral minority' (perhaps, the precursor of Hillary Clinton's 'basket of deplorables'). The inspiration for this essay comes not from self-scrutiny but from a rereading of Thomas Frank's non-prophetic, yet deeply illuminating, much discussed, and influential 2005 book, *What's the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*.

Frank is non-prophetic because he presupposes that cultural values (family, tradition, flag) rather than material concerns would remain at the heart of American distress. Trump rode to power on a demagogic appeal (the great leader heeding the voice of the people while scorning the political establishment), mobilizing his base with inflammatory promises about jobs,

jobs, jobs (obviously a campaign ploy never meant seriously), blaming neoliberal capitalism, unfavorable international trade deals (especially with China), and telling American workers that illegal and unwanted immigrants (that is, Mexicans and Muslims) were stealing their jobs by accepting lower pay and dispensing with benefits, and in the case of Muslims, endangering their safety. By and large, Trump put the right-wing cultural agenda to one side, which is hardly surprising given his own freewheeling Manhattan celebrity life style, including overtly sexist powwows with the notorious Howard Stern and Trump's vulgar Access Hollywood tape with Billy Bush, the randy nephew of George W Bush. The deeper meaning here is the scary confirmation of the susceptibility of the American working class along with some wily opportunists to demagogic appeals, scapegoating, intimations of racism, and glimpses of a possible fascist future for the country.

There are two distinct concerns regarding this tendency toward misperceptions of political reality in America, and elsewhere, that overlap: one is being out of touch with the swift currents of opinion that have abruptly emerged in recent years to sway the multitudes in diverse populist

directions, although more effectively on the right, but also on the left (Bernie Sanders' class warfare against the 1%); the other is the failure of the more moderate strands of society to understand and offer credible alternate responses to what is at the root of this unexpected particular political swing, which could still turn out to be nothing more than skillful, imaginative, and unscrupulous grassroots organizing, but more darkly conceived might be disclosing a torn social fabric that seems beyond repair, and offering a healthy serving of red meat for an historically attuned demagogue.

### **An Egyptian Detour**

I was in Cairo meeting friends shortly after the dramatic events in Tahrir Square in 2011 awaiting UN permission (that never came) to visit Gaza on behalf of the Human Rights Council. Amid the tumult and excitement, I was struck by the unanimity of informed opinion in Cairo that was convinced that Amr Moussa would be elected Egypt's next president in the country's first ever free election to be held the following year. Moussa was a non-charismatic former high profile civil servant in the Mubarak government and onetime Secretary General of the Arab League who opportunely welcomed the democratizing turn in Egypt, and quickly became the preferred candidate of the Cairo urban cognoscenti. As it turned out Moussa never made it to the second and deciding round of the presidential elections, receiving less than 12% of the vote. The point here is not whether Moussa was good or bad, or whether he might have been the best candidate to serve as leader of Egypt in this period of uncertain transition that was supposed to guide the country from decades of dictatorship to the fresh air

of constitutional democracy. My point is rather to take note of how out of touch were these most knowledgeable members of Egypt's urban secular elites. They failed to grasp the convictions and outlook of their fellow citizens spread throughout the entire country. They also greatly underrated the organizational strength and popular appeal of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic oriented political groups that were active and effective outside Egypt's two big cities of Cairo and Alexandria.

In the Egyptian case, this detachment was in large part a reflection of the secular/Islamic split that plagued the region ever since the success of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, but it was also expressive of how out of touch the urban educated classes are with the sentiments and outlook of the countryside and Egyptian village life. My other recollection from 2011-12 visits to Cairo related to the feelings of the seculars about the participation of the Muslim Brotherhood in the post-Tahrir electoral process. Most with whom I had contact early on actually welcomed the full participation of the MB in all phases of Egyptian society, including the political process, regarding the organization as religiously oriented and pious, but respectful of law and a recent record of nonviolent resistance even in the face of brutal repression. These knowledgeable urbanites anticipated that the MB would at most win 25-30% representation in the national legislature, and did conjecture that if the Islamic forces ended up doing much better in these parliamentary elections there could be big trouble, all the while strongly believing that this would not happen. Well, it did, causing immediate distress among Egypt's urban elites, and an almost instantaneous retreat from the

democratizing demands and expectations of the Tahrir Square uprising to a renewed, if reluctant, decision to back the Mubarak era presidential alternative candidate. Accordingly, the majority of these disenchanting Egyptians voted for Ahmad Shafik in the runoff election in June 2012 between the two top vote getters in round one. Given the wide margin of victory by the Islamic candidates in the earlier legislative elections and the dominance of the several Islamically oriented candidates in round one of the presidential elections, the results in the round two runoff between the two top candidates produced a surprisingly narrow 52%-48% victory for Mohamed Morsi, the Brotherhood candidate. This outcome was eventually, although ambivalently certified by the Supreme Council of the Egyptian Armed Forces that was supposed to be acting as the neutral supervisor of the post-Mubarak transition.

Yet, the Cairo outlook was not wrong about the other part of its assessment of the political scene, which insisted that MB leadership of the country, as distinct from minority participation, was not acceptable and would not be accepted. It is notable that the Brotherhood seemed itself to accept a limited role for itself in the first months after Mubarak was overthrown, even making the initial unusual pledge not to compete in certain electoral districts and not even to field a candidate for the presidency. The MB later renounced the pledge, likely sensing its strength and historic opportunity, and went on to win the presidency. That it later endured a vicious backlash suggests that MB was itself dangerously out of touch with the red lines of the urban elites, underestimating their great leverage and convergence of interests with the

Egyptian Armed Forces, the Gulf monarchies (except Qatar), and the governments of the United States and Israel. The outcome to date has been counter-revolution, a military coup, a new leader—Abdel Fattah el-Sisi—bloodier and even more autocratic and repressive than Mubarak, criminalizing the MB as a terrorist organization with the backing of its allies mentioned above, and depriving secular democratizing activists of any open political space.

This extended look at Egypt is suggestive of broader global trends, confirming that being politically out of touch is not only an affliction of Western elites stunned by the successes of Brexit and Trump, and the rise of the hard right in Eastern Europe. In the Middle East where politics are highly polarized, both sides were out of touch before and after the Arab uprisings of 2011, miscalculating at great cost to themselves, and then seemed surprised by the intensity of backlash politics that have so far reflected an anti-democratic balance of forces in the region and beyond.

### **Trending Toward Illiberal Democracies**

In the United States and Europe where polarization is deepening, there remains respect for the rules of the game set by procedural democracy, that is, political choices determined by generally fair elections and a constitutional framework that institutionalizes checks and balances. In the United States, Trump shook these structures late in the presidential campaign of 2016 when he thought he was going to lose by claiming that the electoral process was 'rigged' against him and even equivocating in public about whether he would accept an adverse outcome. And then later when

already installed in the White House he contested the Clinton margin of victory in the popular vote by contending wildly that several million unlawful immigrants had been fraudulently registered to stack the vote against him. The fact that Trump offered not a scintilla of evidence for either challenge seemed not to bother even slightly his political base. His close advisors were darkly creative, inventing a large arsenal of 'alternative facts' invoked brashly to contest such visually clear conclusions as the size of the crowd attending Trump's presidential inaugural ritual as compared to how many showed up eight years earlier for Obama. For anti-Trump critics these developments raised foundational issues about whether the constitutional order would be resilient enough to prevail if Trump had lost the election and then unleashed his followers assigning them the mission of reversing the outcome. The success of this kind of fact-free style of governing also raises the ultimate epistemological question about whether or not a credible respect for truth in the public realm continues to apply to the discourse of politicians.

A further turn of this particular screw involves the Trump approach to climate change, highlighted by his decision to withdraw American participation from the 2014 Paris Agreement, which was seen as a major international step to safeguarding the future from the most severe harms attributed to global warming being forecast by a strong consensus among climate scientists. In effect, the repudiation of the Paris Agreement strikes a blow against reason and science, indeed turns its back on the whole Western Enlightenment tradition that has

shaped modernity for better and worse.

The fact that Trump won in 2016 temporarily mooted these particular challenges to American constitutional governance, shifting the tactical locus of his opponents to allegations of wrongdoing, especially such potential impeachment issues as 'collusion with the Russians,' 'obstruction of justice,' and 'financial dealings.' Implicit in these charges was the concession that blatant and consistent lying if not okay, was not so disqualifying as to cast doubt on Trump's right to remain president. This seems misguided in a number of respects. Manifest lying, especially when combined with anti-science, breaks the trust between state and society, and as such is far more dangerous to the future of the republic than the several wrongful acts being regarded as grounds for impeachment. In part, the media and the people, and the advertising mentality of a consumer society, are all complicit in this nearly open conspiracy to tolerate the leader who lies consistently and willfully, and turns his back on science and reason. In other words, it is not just the [Brietbart](#) alt-right and the bevy of outrageous late-night talk show hosts that cleared the populist pathways leading to Trumpism, but we the people and our materialist indulgences.

Again, the constitutional order remains under unprecedented pressure not because Clinton lost or Trump won, but because the dominant faction in the American deep national security state lost, and lost badly and for the first time since 1945. It is crucial to distinguish between business/financial establishment interests that were mostly content with a Trump/Republican victory as shown by the sharp rise in stock prices from the

national security oriented think tanks and government elites that remain deeply worried by Trump's campaign language questioning the global alliance network and his attacks on the regime-changing interventionary diplomacy, especially as played out in the Middle East. Once elected, Trump seemed to relent, incorporating the national security establishment into his governing entourage, and departing from his apparent neo-isolationist policies that so worried the Washington faithful.

What remains to be determined is whether the Rule of Law can hold minimally accountable the dual domains of militarism and neoliberal capitalism. Perhaps, the Rule of Law lost out years ago, and we are just now awakening to this somber reality thanks to Trump's disruptive modes of governance. Scenarios in this vein are likely to dominate most upcoming episodes of the unfolding Trump tragicomedy. Maybe the center stage contest is not this at all but will be determined by whether the internationalist faction of the deep state is successful in taming the apparent grand strategy revisionism of Trump without necessitating his removal from power. Trump's real views are opaque, and his surface mercurial qualities of contradicting himself make the adaptation scenario more probable than the removal alternative. Either taming or removal both appear to be suitably responsive to the imperatives of the current phase of global capitalism and its dependency ties to the American led global security system. This system consists of a vast costly network of foreign bases, navies in every ocean, the military domination of space, including cyberspace, sending mercenary to fight abroad, and assigning combat units of special

forces trained to carry out secret armed missions in over 130 countries. Trump was not feared or opposed by the national security establishment because of his pledges to repeal Obamacare or overhaul the tax structure for the benefit of the very wealthy. He was feared and opposed because his campaign rhetoric were perceived to raise unacceptable challenges to the stability of the world economy and were interpreted by most deep state aficionados as gesturing toward a possible dismantling of the American global state that had 'governed' the world since 1945.

### **Out of Touch, Out of Contact**

A revealing partial explanation of being out of touch with the various drifts of opinion in one's own country is a consequence of being out of contact. Despite rather extensive social and professional relationships, I have not a single friend or acquaintance in the United States who owns up to being a Trump supporter. This partly reflects self-segregation, partly class division, partly group think, and partly geography (I did have expatriate friends who preferred Trump, fearing Clinton escalations in the Middle East and a drift into a new cold war, and were not attentive to the cruel forms of harm that Trumpism seemed intent on foisting on vulnerable people in the United States).

Liberals and intellectuals in the United States are generally middle class in life style and outlook, rarely in meaningful existential touch with either the very poor or the very rich, and as a result are not privy to their fears, pain, anger, and agenda, or their affirmations and affiliations. This circumstance of being out of contact contributes to toxic polarization, mirrored in the inability of political parties to cooperate any

longer for the sake of the national public good. Among other negative effects, such polarization leads to legislative gridlock and perceptions by the public that the institutions of government have become weighted down by lobbyists, special interests, and intense partisanship, and have lost much of their legitimacy. In such a race to the bottom, the winners are business and the military, which is part of the ugly pre-fascist picture of political life in America, and by indirection, the world.

### **Is the Enlightenment to Blame?**

At the root of these developments are deep tensions between the rational and scientific legacies of the European Enlightenment and religious orientations that rely on faith and revealed truth. On the Enlightenment side are secular values and ideals associated with the human equality and respect for scientific evidence. On the religious side are attachments to traditional values of family, flag, and church. Both orientations are rooted in their own dogmas that exclude the belief systems of their opponents, undoubtedly providing the ideational infrastructure of what has now surfaced as polarization.

In one respect, this is a crude rendition of Hegelianism versus Marxism, with the Hegelians giving priority to the dialectics of the idea whose time has come, while Marxists, in their various schools, in general lend priority to material conditions, class relations, and self-interest. Oddly the right-wing populists are mainly taking a ideational or emotional stand based on the purity of the nation, austere family traditions, an ethos of hard work, good jobs, and religious values, and thus supposedly against casino capitalists and foreign intruders, advocates of gay rights and

legalized drugs, free traders, and secularists. Their liberal opponents are generally comfortable with global capitalism according to the precepts of Goldman Sachs, free trade, outsourcing, and minimally regulated capital as advocated by the Bretton Woods Institutions (World Bank and IMF) and World Trade Organization, and, of course, whatever investment it takes to maintain full spectrum military dominance for the United States. The two sides converge with respect to militarism, with the Trump right invoking patriotism, arms sales, and national security while the liberal establishment emphasizes the indispensable role of American military superiority in keeping the country safe and the world more peaceful and global markets more stable than they would otherwise be.

Does making these acknowledgements amount to a nihilistic and solipsistic admission that there is no way to justify prevailing patterns of political alignment beyond their caprice? Not at all. Yet, as Gilad Atzmon brilliantly shows in *Being in Time*, a politics of reason has been thrown disastrously off course by the impact of a liberal discourse infected by the taints of 'political correctness' and 'identity politics,' which substitutes conformity and allegiance for truth-seeking and acknowledgements of the impurities of social reality. Without a suitable discourse respectful of the contingencies and unevenness of reality we cannot find the pathways to humane political behavior. To be sure, the Mammonite discourse of the Trump brand of right-wing politics is certainly no better, offering a greed-saturated form of materialism that feeds the limitless appetite of the very richest among us while manipulating, repressing, and disorienting the rest of us. As Atzmon instructs, this absence

of a trustworthy discourse by which to express grievances and aspirations is why it clears the air to admit that our epoch has become 'post-political,' at least for now.

Yet there is even more than 'discourse,' a synonym for clear thought, at stake. There is self-esteem, ethical values, and the meaning of life that is jeopardized by the tradition-breaching dogmas of secular elites. Thus, controversies surrounding abortion, gay marriage, legalized marijuana, and even gun control are too often being given precedence over considerations bearing on material wellbeing by this American version of populism despite the rhetoric of 'jobs, jobs, jobs' at Trump rallies. What makes the Trump phenomenon truly populist is its anti-establishment outrage and the intense responsiveness to demagogic appeals on the part of his followers. This demagoguery blinds adherents to their true material self-interests and misidentified their real social enemies. By rejecting reasoned discourse, including commitments to truth and evidence, the capacity to manipulate mass opinion and play on such repressed emotion as racism and class envy is without limits. Trump has shown himself so far to be a master of such demagogic politics. He has yet to commit definitively to whether in the end he will strike a deal with the anti-populist elites that have been running the system or proceed to wage open anti-system warfare in which either he will win or if he is losing, proceed to tear down the entire edifice of governance at home and abroad. Of course, a third way is also possible, a condition of no-peace, no-war, in which there ensue a series of dangerous skirmishes but no open warfare.

## **Concluding Remarks**

A wide variety of populisms, other than the American version, have gained control of the governing process of several important countries, and in each case despite widely different national circumstances, have brought to power an autocratic leader adored by the masses more for his style than his substance, and feared and despised by displaced elites. Whether it be Putin in Russia, Modi in India, Erdoğan in Turkey, Sisi in Egypt, or Duterte in The Philippines, the leader claims to have a special capacity to interpret the will of the people, validating the circumvention of the Rule of Law and conventional truth telling, professing an ardent and exclusivist nationalist ideology that pretends, at least, to abhor the cosmopolitanism of elite tastes and the globalization of economic life. Except for Duterte and Trump these popular autocrats have been relatively prudently inclined with respect to political risk taking. Putin and Erdoğan have tried to enlarge their regional spheres of influence with mixed results, and have encountered some costly adverse reactions.

These autocratic leaders in of what have become 'illiberal democracies' seem more at home when dealing with authoritarian figures in other societies than with counterparts in countries that still qualify as functioning constitutional democracies. Trump seems more at ease with Xi Jinping or even Duterte or Kim Jong-Un than he does with Angela Merkel or Emmanuel Macron. What this portends for the future is unknowable at present. Will there emerge a tacit alliance of autocrats that represents the global ideological sequel to the shattered edifice of democratic expectations that had given rise to the Warsaw based, U.S.

funded brainchild christened as the 'Community of Democracies' with 110 governments signing on at its founding fifteen years ago? As of 2017 neither Poland nor the United States would any longer be welcome in venues catering to real life democracies!

Instead of the anticipated 'twilight of the nation state' we are experiencing its worldwide resurgence, energized by a counter-globalization movement that emphasizes borders, walls, and nationalist identities rather than fluid boundaries facilitating flows of capital and workers. ISIS (or DAESH) is a revealing partial outlier, as are the more radical versions of political Islam more generally. Instead of territorial enclaves these movements affirm exclusivist Islamic communities whose extension is not geographically identifiable by boundaries on a map, but rather by far flung allegiances and networks. By proclaiming its caliphate in 2014 in Iraqi and Syrian territory that it then controlled, ISIS seemed to refine its sense of political community, but seems unable to sustain such a territorial base in the face of strong opposition mounted under the aegis of militarily superior state actors. By insisting that its rise was 'the end of Sykes-Picot' ISIS was also announcing to the world that it was not altogether anti-territorial, but was also not beholden to the European state concept crudely imposed on the Middle East by a colonial driven statecraft after World War I.

It is this deterritorializing of community combined with the embrace of militarist and terrorist versions of jihadism, as well as of the equally deterritorialized technologies of the digital age that makes such movements so disruptive of traditional territorially based forms of security. Territorial states win renewed

support from their national populations by celebrating patriotic virtues associated with flag and country, identifications that correspond with their primordial sense of community (providing ideas and causes worth dying for) spatially defined by geographic boundaries.

Finally, it is this collision between antagonistic conceptions of community in space that define the modern geopolitical landscape. This sense of political engagement is being increasingly itself challenged by communities in time that spring to life in the ecological landscape where the principal preoccupations are with the multiple challenges of global warming toward future species sustainability. The ultimate evasion of Trumpism is its willful blindness when it comes to shows of respect for these vital ecological dimensions of contemporary human existence.

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