

# Taking Stock: One Year after Trump. “What is the Root Cause of this Unexpected Political Swing”

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## Prefatory Note:

*This post addresses the need for dialogue with the political, economic, and cultural ‘other,’ that is, those multitudes acutely alienated from and angry with secular globalism and the Enlightenment legacy often equated with ‘modernity’ and ‘modernization.’ At the core is a search for closure on the nature of reality as well as feelings about equity (given many dimensions of inequality) and ethical innovation (revisionist approaches to gender, sexuality, marriage). Does reason or faith or tradition provide greater closure? Can the Thomistic grand synthesis of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century be repeated under 21<sup>st</sup> Century condition in the rough waters of controversy generated by Trump and Trumpism? Is this too Western a way of putting the problem? I write as an American, but there are many parallels in other countries. The first step is to admit being out of touch with the ferment below the surface. A second step is a matter of identifying what is to be included, what excluded.*

What is going on? Commentary on the Rise of Populism

## Confessions of Political Myopia

To avoid any impression of condescension, I will begin with a humbling root question, “Why have I been so out of touch?” After all, I have become deeply aware in recent years that intellectual elites generally have little understanding of wider public sentiments that animate upheavals and distress in America and several foreign societies. I had big trouble back in the 1970s grasping the grassroots strength of Nixon’s ‘moral majority,’ which I haughtily dismissed as the ‘immoral minority’ (perhaps, my dismissive precursor of Hilary Clinton’s ‘basket of deplorables’). The inspiration for this essay comes not only from personal experience but from a recent reading 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 America.’ Trump rode to power on a demagogic appeal (foolishly discounted by the media and Beltway wizards as a campaign ploy never meant seriously) mobilizing his base with inflammatory language about jobs, jobs, jobs buttressed by fear-mongering about terrorism, blaming Goldman Sachs capitalism for unfavorable international trade deals (above all with China), illegal and unwanted immigrants (that is, Mexicans and Muslims) who tarnish the American dream, and above all Islam as a menacing threat. By and large, he put the right-wing cultural agenda to

one side, while embracing its patriotic tropes, which is hardly surprising given his own freewheeling Manhattan celebrity life style that included powwows with the notorious and lewd sexist Howard Stern, not to mention the tape of his Hollywood conversation. The deeper observation here is a scary confirmation of America's susceptibility to demagogic appeals, ethnic and religious scapegoating, and strong intimations of racism.

There are two distinct concerns regarding this tendency toward misperceptions of political reality in America, and elsewhere in the world, that overlap: one is being out of touch with the swift currents of right wing opinion that have abruptly risen to the political surface in recent years to sway the multitudes in populist directions; the other is the failure to understand what is at the root of this unexpected particular political swing, which sometimes may turn out in some cases to be nothing more revealing than skillful, imaginative, unscrupulous, persevering marketing and access to major funding sources, but in more serious situation there are disclosed rips in the societal fabric that seem beyond rep



air, providing a deliriously ready audience for a demagogue intuitively attuned to the harsh rhythms of discontent unnoticed or dismissed by the established political elites. Trump confounded, and continues to confound, conventional wisdom over and over again, by reading the tea leaves of discontent with alarming accuracy.

Professor Richard Falk (image right)

It is undoubtedly the case, at least in the U.S., that part of the failure of perception is a combination of self-segregation and the widespread tendency of intellectuals to underestimate the political skills of those whose focus is on emotions, religion, and traditional values rather than reason, science, and evidence. To illustrate, not a single person in my social milieu will own up to being a supporter of Donald Trump. In effect, the insularity of my social networks puts me out of touch with what the Trump constituency feels, thinks, fears, and hopes for. The Trump/Bannon formula for electoral victory a year ago, surely abetted by a dismal Clinton campaign, abandoned several familiar Republican positions—especially mounting a critique of neoliberal globalization, and its core reliance on international trade and unhampered capital flows, as well as taking nasty jabs at the Washington establishment, including the standard Republican Party handlers.

An Egyptian Detour



Amr Moussa (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

I was in Cairo meeting friends shortly after the dramatic events in Tahrir Square in February 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 opinion believing that Amr Moussa was sure to be elected Egypt's next president in the country's first ever free election scheduled for the following year. Moussa was a non-charismatic high profile civil servant in the Mubarak government and former Secretary General of the Arab League who opportunely welcomed the democratizing movement 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 in the opening round. 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 fragile period of uncertain transition from dictatorship to constitutional democracy. The point is to underscore how out of touch were these most knowledgeable of urban secular Egyptians about the convictions and outlook of the rest of Egyptian. It also became clear that they greatly underrated the organizational strength of the MB and other Islamic oriented political groups that dominated the countryside and much of Egypt other than the middle class and elites 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. 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 Egyptians I had contact with expected and accepted MB full participation in the public life of post-Mubarak Egypt, including the political process, regarding the organization as a religiously oriented and secretive but respectful of law and nonviolent, and this entitled to be dream of an inclusive Egyptian democracy that was the widely shared dream of most Egyptians in the weeks following the successful uprising. These knowledgeable urbanites anticipated at the time that the MB would at most win 25-30% representation in the legislative assembly, and did acknowledge that if they ended up doing much better there

would be trouble, all the while strongly doubting that this would not happen. Well, it did, causing an immediate reassessment by Egypt's urban elites, which expressed itself by way of an instantaneous retreat from the democratizing hopes and expectations that had dominated the Tahrir Square moo, and a switch of allegiance to the Mubarak era presidential alternative. In this spirit, the realigned secularists voted for Ahmad Shafik in the runoff election in June 2012 between the two top vote getters in round one. Round two produced a narrow 52%-48% victory for Mohamed Morsi, the Brotherhood candidate, a result eventually, although reluctantly certified by the Supreme Council of the Egyptian Armed Forces that was supposed to be the neutral supervisor of the post-Mubarak transition, but more and more leaned toward questioning the legitimacy of a governing process under the control of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The earlier Cairo outlook was not wrong about the other part of its assessment of the political scene, which had insisted that MB leadership of the country, as distinct from its minority participation as part of a democratic opposition, was neither acceptable nor viable. It is notable that even the Brotherhood originally accepted a limited political role for itself in the first months after Mubarak was overthrown, seeming acknowledging that it should not seek control as distinct from participation. On this basis, the MB even made a rather unusual pledge for any political party, committing itself not to compete in certain electoral districts in the country and not to put forward its own candidate for the presidency. It later quietly renounced the pledge, likely sensing its strength and historic opportunity, and did go on to win the presidency, but at a high cost to itself. Before realizing that its victory would set off a chain of events that would turn out to be a crushing defeat, the MB experienced an intense backlash in Egyptian society confirming that it too was dangerously out of touch with the red lines of the urban elites and the balance of forces in the country. The Brotherhood obviously greatly underestimated the leverage and convergence of interests that joined the Egyptian Armed Forces, the Gulf monarchies (excepting Qatar), the governments of the United States and Israel, as well as the segments of the working classes and of course the Coptic minority. This formidable array of opposed forces produced in 2013 a counter-revolution in the form of a seemingly popular military coup, a new leader—Abdel Fattah el-Sisi—bloodier and more autocratic and repressive than Mubarak. The new leadership immediately criminalized the elected MB leadership of the country, and labeled the Brotherhood a terrorist organization with the tacit approval of its allies in the region and beyond, and autocratically denied political space even to secular activists who were unwilling to accept this renunciation of democratic hopes for Egypt.

This extended look at Egypt is descriptive of broader global trends, confirming that being dangerously out of touch is not only an affliction of Western elites stunned by the unexpected and shocking successes of Brexit and Trump. In the Middle East where politics are highly polarized, both sides are out of touch, miscalculating at great cost to society and to themselves, and totally unprepared for 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 some 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 even these structures late in the presidential campaign of 2016 when he apparently thought he was going to lose by

contending that the electoral process was 'rigged' against him, even equivocating in public about whether he would accept an adverse outcome, a tactical move evidently supported by the Russians. And then later, after he was officially installed in the White House, Trump irresponsibly 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 in such states as California and New York.

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' and 'Breitbart news.' These counter-narratives were invoked brashly to contest such visually clear conclusions as the size of the crowd attending Trump's presidential inaugural ceremony as compared to the size of the crowd that 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 were to unleash his followers assigning them the almost unimaginably subversive mission of reversing the outcome. The success of this kind of fact-free discourse also raised the ultimate epistemological question about whether or not an overall respect for truth in the public realm was still expected of politicians, suggesting the possibility that reality was becoming a function of ideology or faith, not fact or evidence.

The Trump victory in 2016 mooted these particular challenges to some extent, shifting the tactical locus of opponents to the wrongdoing of Trump and his entourage, especially such potential impeachment and discrediting issues as 'collusion with the Russians,' 'obstruction of justice,' and 'improper financial dealings.' Implicit in these charges was the concession that blatant and consistent lying if not quite okay, was still not so disqualifying as to challenge Trump's right to remain president even it placed his victory under a dark cloud due to the evidence that Russian meddling swayed enough votes in a close election. This apparent acceptance of this retreat from an ethos of truthfulness seems misguided in a number of respects. Manifest lying breaks the trust between state and society without which a democracy cannot function properly. As such is far more corrosive for a democratic 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 de facto acceptance of a leader who lies consistently and willfully. In other words, it is not just the Breitbart alt-right, the bevy of outrageous late night talk show hosts, and Trump's use of a Twitter account that cleared the populist pathways leading to Trumpism, but we the people and our materialist indulgences and indifference to or ignorance of the torments of stagnant wages and growing challenges directed at even middle class living standards due to sharply rising costs of health, education, and housing.





The constitutional order remains under unprecedented pressure not only because of the way Clinton lost or Trump won, but also because the dominant faction in the American deep national security state lost, and lost badly and for the first time since 1945, although it has in 2017 staged a strong comeback spearheaded by the appointment of generals McMaster, Kelley, and Mattes to key posts.

It is crucial to distinguish between business/financial establishment interests that were mostly content with a Trump/Republican victory from the national security oriented think tanks and government elites that were earlier deeply worried by Trump's campaign language questioning the global alliance network and attacks on foreign regime-changing interventions, especially as played out in the Middle East. But on the security agenda Trump has seemed to give way—he upped the military budget, backed off from his earlier promised confrontation with China and expected soft policy toward Russia, escalated tensions with North Korea and Iran, and maintained continuity in the Middle East, throwing even greater support in the direction of Israel and Saudi Arabia than his predecessor.

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 worldview and 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 remains successful in avoiding the apparent grand strategy revisionism of Trump without necessitating his removal from power.

Trump's real views, especially on global issues, 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, and assignment of combat units of special forces to carry out 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 by many Republican hawks 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

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 majority of citizens 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 why a pre-fascist depiction of current political life in America, and by indirection, the world, is sadly, *not* out of touch.

### 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 surfacing in many national variations as polarization, and with it disillusionment with the worth and promise of political democracy.

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 faith-based posture that emphasizes the purity of the nation, puritan family traditions, an ethos of hard work, good jobs, and religious values, and thus supposedly hostile toward casino capitalists and foreign intruders, advocates of gay rights and legalized drugs, free traders, and secularists. Their liberal antagonists 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, sparing no expense to maintain full spectrum military dominance. 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 and its friends 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 persuasively argues 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 and repressing the rest of us. As Atzmon provocatively insists, 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 well-being by this American version of populism preaching economic

nationalism at Trump rallies.

What makes the Trump phenomenon truly populist is its anti-establishment outrage and the high level of susceptibility 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 is a master of such demagogic politics who 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 revolutionary warfare against the entire edifice of constitutional 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 multitude of skirmishes but no open warfare, which may be the most accurate way of portraying Trump's first year as president.

### 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, bringing to power an autocratic leader adored by the masses more for his style than his substance, and feared and hated by displaced elites who seem unable to generate a mobilizing program of their own or a charismatic alternative leader. 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, entitling 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 rather 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 domestically and internationally.

These autocratic leaders in 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 quite at ease with Xi Jinping or even Duterte 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 welcomed 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 and walls rather than fluid boundaries facilitating flows of capital and workers. ISIS (or DAESH) has been a 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 allegiances and networks however far flung. By proclaiming its caliphate in 2014 in Iraqi and Syrian territory that it then controlled, ISIS seemed to territorialize its sense of political



community, which fortunately turned out to be a huge strategic mistake. 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 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 internationally legitimated geographic boundaries.

Finally, it is this collision between antagonistic conceptions of communities 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 species sustainability. The ultimate evasion of reality by Trumpism is its willful blindness when it comes to showing respect for the ecological integrity of contemporary human existence. The decision of the Trump White House to refuse participation in the Paris Climate Change Agreement is probably the most destructive blow against sustainable global governance than was the imposition of a punitive peace on Germany after World War I.

Trump also intrudes his bluster in ways that subvert nuclear restraint. His words threatening annihilation of North Korea and confrontation with Iran cast the darkest shadows over the present and future.

At issue is more than Trump. I want to live and die in a world of inclusive political communities. I also regard as imperative forms of ecological inclusiveness that extend to all of nature, animals, plants, soil, air, water, glaciers, mountains, ravines, and valleys.

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