

The Other America: Donald Trump and the Rise of Populism

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Conservative British politician Michael Gove uttered the most memorable phrase of 2016 during a June 3rd interview with Sky News. “The people in this country,” he declared, “have had enough of experts.”

In ten words, Gove encapsulated the extraordinary political atmosphere of 2016. The people to which he was referring were the British, and the issue was the upcoming Brexit vote. In the run up to the referendum, the overwhelming majority of political, economic, and security experts around the world assessed that Britain would *and should* remain in the EU. A staunch backer of the “leave” campaign, Gove cast scorn on these so-called “experts,” arguing that they were nothing more than an out-of-touch global elite that ignored the will of the people. He told the host: “You’re on the side of the elites. I’m on the side of the people.”¹ Less than three weeks later, Britain voted to leave the EU.

Across the Atlantic, a similar development was unfolding. As Donald Trump mounted one stunning victory after another in the primaries, economic and foreign policy experts became increasingly alarmed, even as they continued to criticize and dismiss him. In March, the Economist Intelligence Unit went so far as to label a potential Trump presidency as one of the world’s top ten risks, on par with jihadi terrorism disrupting the global economy.² Until the very end, nearly every expert and nearly all polls from the major media outlets confidently predicted a landslide Clinton victory. But on November 8, 2016 Americans declared that, like the British, they too had “had enough of experts.” Donald Trump became the 45th President of the United States.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGgiGtJk7MA>

² <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-35828747>

At its core, this election was not about liberals and conservatives. It was about two even more disparate groups: elites and populists. Not just in America, but throughout the world, global politics became increasingly divided along these lines in 2016, with both sides championing conservative and liberal values. But what do these terms actually mean? Where did their ideas originate, and more importantly, where do they want to take the countries that they govern?

To understand these two groups in the American context, and thus get to the heart of the “why did Trump win” question, the natural place of departure is the two mainstream political parties, the stronghold of the elites. In some respects, elite is a bit of a misnomer. Not everyone who allies with the elites is wealthy or part of an exclusive club. Rather, the elites represent the center-left and center-right of American politics and the neoliberal values they promote. Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama all fall into this category. They enjoyed the backing of their respective parties and powerful interest groups that have prospered from America’s standing around the world. Despite their differences on domestic policies, they are supporters of the neoliberal world order, originally espoused at the League of Nations and successfully implemented after Yalta. Despite its spotted track record, this order promulgates globally the ideas of free trade, human rights, democracy, and globalization.

On the other side are the populists, those outside of the political mainstream. The Tea Party, the Occupy Wall Street movement, Donald Trump, and Bernie Sanders are all proponents of populism. They represent a far more incongruent collection of individuals, yet they coalesce around one central precept: The elites are corrupt and have stacked the system in their favor. Whether they believe that the government is too big or too small, gives out too many handouts or too few, suffocates businesses or lets them run unregulated, these populists agree that mainstream politicians do not have their interests in mind. While few of them explicitly call for an end to the entire neoliberal agenda, they are most critical of the efficacy and legitimacy of globalization.

Since the end of the Cold War, globalization has undergone a metamorphosis, transcending its original intention to promote the free movement of people, goods, and ideas. From the conference centers of Davos and Brussels emerged

an ideological component to globalization: globalism. Free movement was no longer an end, but a means to create a worldwide system of standards, laws, and customs in which the power of traditional states would slowly give way to a supranational order based on the neoliberal values championed by the West. Clinton's NAFTA, Bush's attempts to build democracies in the Middle East, and Obama's commitment to seek a "world without nuclear weapons" were, in their own ways, part of this globalist agenda.

Then came the 2008 financial crisis. What began with a few failed banks in New York soon caused havoc on financial markets around the world. In America, as elsewhere, people began to question whether globalization and free trade were all that they were cracked up to be. When corporate leaders responsible for the recession were bailed out with taxpayer's money, people on both the left and right began to think that the system itself needed to be overhauled. "The underpinning of this populist revolt is the financial crisis of 2008," said Steve Bannon, Trump's campaign manager and now Chief Strategist at the White House.³ People questioned not just the legitimacy of their leaders, but the very notion of a supranational order that arose at the expense of strong, independent national governments. Many average Americans started to believe that globalization made them more vulnerable to competition from developing countries, leaving them with stagnant wages and fewer prospects to get ahead. Meanwhile, life at home was becoming increasingly difficult, even as the government was spending billions of taxpayer dollars each year to stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan. As the recession deepened, many Americans began to lose hope in their leaders and their country's future.

In *Hillbilly Elegy*, J.D. Vance elegantly captures this sense of despair and frustration at losing faith in one's country: "As a culture, we had no heroes...Nothing united us with the core fabric of American society. We felt trapped in two seemingly unwinnable wars, in which a disproportionate share of the fighters came from our neighborhood, and in an economy that failed to

³ https://www.buzzfeed.com/lesterfeder/this-is-how-steve-bannon-sees-the-entire-world?utm_term=.ghWJ3xOnD#.xi7ayP5NW

deliver the most basic promise of the American Dream- a steady wage.”⁴ For the conservative white working class, the election of Barack Obama, a liberal, Harvard educated African-American, was a symbol of the growing disconnect between their understanding of traditional America and the direction in which the country was heading. As their despair gave way to anger, these “traditionalists” began to look for alternatives to the established order. They increasingly viewed the Republican Party as part of the same out-of-touch Washington elite that they instinctively associated with the Democrats. The organization of such like-minded neighbors ignited a grassroots movement, and the Tea Party was born.

Mainstream politicians on both the left and right dismissed the Tea Party as a fringe movement, assuming that, similar to the Occupy Wall Street protests, the Tea Party would briefly flare up before vanishing. Academics and think tanks, the very embodiment of global experts, analyzed them from afar without bothering to truly understand their legitimate grievances. Some completely ignored them. Most importantly, the mainstream media, overwhelmingly leftist and elite, became increasingly polarized during the Obama years, and more Americans got their news from outlets that reflected their own political orientation. The media on both the left and the right reached a point where they were unwilling to listen to the legitimate arguments that the others were making, and instead focused on the sound bites that make up America’s frantic, 24-hour news cycle. Both sides were guilty of creating their own echo chambers, but Trump’s victory proved beyond a shadow of doubt that the elite and the vast majority of mainstream news outlets clearly failed to capture the deeper story behind the populist movement.

As people became increasingly wrapped in their own bubble of information, they grew more and more distrustful of those that disagreed. The right came to view everything the left-wing media said as corrupt elitism. The left viewed Fox News viewers as bigoted and ignorant. For the populists, this meant that nothing that came out of Washington could be believed. “This isn’t some libertarian mistrust of government policy, which is healthy in any democracy,” writes

⁴ Vance, J.D. *Hillbilly Elegy*. Harper. 2016. p.188-189

Vance. “This is deep skepticism of the very institutions of our society. And it’s becoming more and more mainstream.”⁵ The rise of “fake news,” intentionally false reports passed off as legitimate news, exacerbated the problem and spread misinformation around the world through the internet and social media. In an atmosphere where facts and data could no longer be trusted, the idea of “post-truth” politics started to make sense.

Into this divided nation stepped Donald Trump, a celebrity billionaire businessman with a powerful story to tell. If all of his campaign speeches could be condensed into one page, this is what it would say:

America is in bad shape. We are at the mercy of foreign countries that take advantage of us through lopsided trade deals. Our politicians and business leaders are in collusion to exploit ordinary citizens and get rich doing it. People who work hard don’t have the opportunities to get ahead. In the last fifteen years, over 70,000 factories have closed down. 70,000! And while those who are struggling can’t find a job, those who live on government welfare are doing just fine. Washington is giving handouts left and right. If that’s not bad enough, we’re letting in Mexican immigrants and Syrian refugees (many of whom might be rapists or terrorists) and giving them benefits that come out of your hard earned paycheck! And if you don’t agree to go along with this, you’re labeled a racist. American culture is increasingly warped by the elites’ agenda to promote a politically correct mentality that demeans the traditional views of millions of Americans.

If we want to fix this sad state of affairs, the first thing we need to do is create more and better jobs in America by redefining how we trade with the rest of the world. We need strong borders and a strong military to protect our interests abroad, and our allies should start pulling their own weight instead of relying on American generosity. We need a culture of common sense and traditional values that support the aspirations of the common man, not the Washington elites.

⁵ *Hillbilly Elegy*, p. 193

Don't look to politicians to fix these problems. They are the problem. They are out of touch with the ordinary citizen and are only interested in helping those who contribute to their campaigns. Only an outsider, someone who is willing to stand up to powerful interest groups, can put the American people first. Only I can make America great again.

This is the story that propelled Donald Trump to the White House. It was a narrative that *felt* true to millions of his supporters, particularly white, rural, working class men and women. After years of feeling that their country had abandoned them and dismissed their beliefs as outdated, Trump personified an identity they could not only relate to, but be proud of. In *Strangers in Their Own Land*, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild concludes: “Trump is an ‘emotions candidate.’ More than any other presidential candidate in decades, Trump focuses on eliciting and praising emotional responses from his fans rather than on detailed policy prescriptions. His speeches—evoking dominance, bravado, clarity, national pride, and personal uplift—inspire an emotional transformation.”⁶ As Bannon put it, Trump “speaks in a non-political vernacular, he communicates with these people in a very visceral way.”⁷ In short, Trump was able to achieve what all successful leaders manage to do—connect with his supporters at a gut level.

Trump supporters like him because he sounds like one of them. His scorn for establishment politicians and use of caustic language appealed to his supporters. As the mainstream media balked at each of Trump’s quips, and Republican leaders increasingly spoke out against his behavior, his support amongst the people actually grew. What the elites failed to understand was that *many Americans really do talk and think like Trump*. Race, gender, and “otherness” have always had a large place in the American psyche. To be sure, this does not mean that most Americans are “bad” people. What it does mean is that they resent being told what to feel and how to think by politically correct elites who do not share the same cultural values.

⁶ Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. The New Press, 2016. p. 225.

⁷ http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/steve-bannon-trump-tower-interview-trumps-strategist-plots-new-political-movement-948747?utm_source=twitter

For those in the big cities and coastal towns of the expert elite, the worldview of Trump supporters is completely foreign. In essence, their argument is: “We don’t need to make America great again because it already *is* great. Globalization has benefited people all over the world, and America is more accepting of other races, genders, and ideologies than ever before. The kind of America Trump wants to create isn’t great at all. In fact, it’s reactionary and terrifying.”

But this caricature fails to acknowledge that Trump supporters in the white working class do have real concerns. Many people in the American heartland are understandably pessimistic about their economic prospects. Entire communities have failed to recover from the 2008 recession. There is also generational disillusionment that transcends political affiliation. Millennials are deeply disaffected. Weighed down by debt, they stay at home longer, marry later, earn less, and consume less than their parents. Many middle-aged and older Americans are living in a country that is socially and culturally unrecognizable from that of their youth. Secularism and leftist ideals have permeated into traditional Christian America, causing many to feel like “strangers in their own land.” Many of them have lost the jobs they held for decades in the towns that they were born and grew up in. Those that want to work may not have the skills to compete for jobs in high tech industries.

Trump promised a panacea for these myriad social problems by tapping into the narrative of a glorious American past. His pledges to put “America first” and to “make America great again” evoked nostalgia for a lost golden age. In a country where the leaders and experts seemed so disconnected from the people, Trump’s message provided hope and excitement to his supporters. As Hochschild puts it, “The ‘movement,’ as Trump has increasingly called his campaign, acts as a great antidepressant.”⁸

There are two Americas. One is a globalized America of the elite and the expert which sees an increasingly prosperous world heading towards universal values

⁸ *Strangers in Their Own Land*, p. 226

and greater interconnectivity. And there is the Other America which feels as if their identity is being stripped away and their livelihoods sold out to foreigners or corporations with technology that makes their skills obsolete. Both groups come from different ideological and cultural backgrounds. Each group suffers from a critical lack of empathy for the other.

But the expert-America and the Other America are both correct. Culture *is* changing. Technology *is* improving. The world *is* becoming smaller. But the uncomfortable reality is that people are left behind during this great transformation. These people were never given the choice to accept or reject the globalist agenda, even when the immediate interests of their family or community were jeopardized. Though offering undeniable long term advantages, globalization unevenly distributes short term benefits, creating both winners and losers. It is a system that then expects the losers, in this case America's working class, to continue to sacrifice their livelihoods for vague ideals and goals that they may never live to see or may not even want. The experts anticipated that these "losers" would continue to support a system that didn't represent their immediate interests. For all the benefits that globalization has brought to the world, many people view it as a force that sacrifices national culture and traditions for the sake of a global identity, created and maintained by the very elites who benefit most from that international order. This notion, more than any other factor, gets to the heart of the populist backlash that fueled the rise of Donald Trump.

No one can predict what will happen in America over the next four years. However, history offers countless warnings to countries that have "had enough of experts." The failure of the League of Nations cast the world back into chaos and war. To be sure, experts and elites are prone to hubris, but they are crucial to the wellbeing of every nation. Michael Gove's words were terrifying in their prescience. A healthy debate between experts and the people is vital for a vigorous, democratic society, but denouncing the knowledge and experience of experts is prelude to tyranny.