

Preprint

The chasm between America's people and its mainstream politics and media: Was Trump a missed opportunity?

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Abstract

A dangerous gulf exists between Americans' concerns about their lives, their country and their future, and the proclivities and pre-occupations of the country's politics and media. This is, to varying extents, also the predicament of other Western democracies. The paper draws on several decades of research and synthesis on human progress, health and wellbeing to argue America's political and journalistic cultures are too 'short-sighted' and 'narrow-minded' to address the nation's challenges and problems. These are 'existential' in that they both materially and physically threaten human existence, and also undermine people's sense of confidence and certainty about life. The paper focuses on the US because of its dominant global position, and because its situation is arguably more dire. President Trump offered at least a small chance of triggering a systemic change in US politics. The elite liberal media squandered this opportunity, and instead spent four years focused on trying to remove him from office. Political debate needs to encourage the conceptual space for a transformation in our worldview, beliefs and values as profound as any in human history.

An American story

This is a story about America, an America that, even today, exists largely beyond the serious attention of mainstream politics and media. Rather, these institutions ignore or marginalise the story's deeper significance, at a great cost to the country.

A 2013 survey investigated the perceived probability of future threats to humanity in four Western nations: the US, UK, Canada and Australia (Randle and Eckersley, 2015). Across the four countries, over a half (54%) of people rated the risk of 'our way of life ending' within the next 100 years at 50% or greater, and almost three-quarters (73%) rated the risk at 30% or greater. A quarter (24%) rated the risk of 'humans being wiped out' in this time at 50% or greater.

The US stood out from the other three countries in several respects. It had the highest percentage (30%) who thought humans might be wiped out (19-24% in the other countries). It had a much higher level of agreement with fundamentalist responses to global threats, with 47% agreeing or strongly agreeing that 'we are facing a final conflict between good and evil in the world', and 46% that 'we need to return to traditional religious teachings and values to solve global problems and challenges'. (The results presumably reflect the strength of religion in the US, especially 'end time' thinking among Christian fundamentalists.) In the other three countries only 30-33% agreed with these two statements.

The survey also included questions about how concerned people were about a range of personal and societal issues (Randle et al. 2017). The US stood out here too, with higher

levels of concern about many societal issues, especially political and economic. Two thirds (65%) were moderately or seriously concerned about 'the state of politics in my country', compared to 42-53% for the other three countries; 64% were concerned about 'corruption of politicians/officials', compared to 39-47% in the other countries.

Other surveys around that time told a similar story. In 2011, *Time* magazine reported a poll showing that the US was going through 'one of its longest sustained periods of unhappiness and pessimism ever', adding that it was 'hard to overstate what a fundamental change this represents' (Penn, 2011). Two-thirds of Americans believed the past decade was one of decline, not progress, for the US (68%), and that the greatest threat to the long-term stability of the US came from within, not from outside, the country (66%).

A story in *The Atlantic* in 2012 reported on a survey showing that Americans believed their country was heading in the wrong direction, that their generation was worse off than their parents' generation, and that their children would be still worse off (Penn, 2012):

Americans believe that political corruption, too much focus on material things, and the influence of money in politics are weakening our values and standing in the world. They believe elected officials reflect and represent mainly the values of the wealthy and think the economic system is unfair to middle- and working-class Americans. And they believe that Wall Street is more like a cancer than an engine for economic growth.

US life expectancy stalled from about 2010, then fell between 2014 and 2017, the first three-year fall since World War I and the Spanish flu pandemic one hundred earlier (National Center for Health Statistics, 2019; Prior, 2021). Contributing to the trend has been rising mortality among those in the prime of life, including from drug overdoses, alcohol use and suicides (Prior, 2021). The decline in life expectancy revealed a broad erosion in health, with no single 'smoking gun', a health policy expert said (Achenbach, 2019). 'There's something more fundamental.... People are feeling worse about themselves and their futures, and that's leading them to do things that are self-destructive and not promoting health.'

This was Barack Obama's America. Yet Obama failed to see it. For him, progress was still progress: life was continuing to get better; climate change and other environmental issues were being solved through orthodox policy initiatives (Eckersley, 2019). As he often avowed, the arc of history was long, but it bent towards justice. Obama's faith in progress provided the foundation of his ideological commitment to incremental, rather than radical, political change. As he said in a BBC (2016) interview:

My view of human progress has stayed surprisingly constant throughout my presidency. The world today, with all its pain and all its sorrow, is more just, more democratic, more free, more tolerant, healthier, wealthier, better educated, more connected, more empathetic than ever before. If you didn't know ahead of time what your social status would be, what your race was, what your gender was, or your sexual orientation was, what country you were living in, and you asked what moment in human history you would like to be born, you'd choose right now.

Trump's America and the dominance of race

Enter Donald Trump. A political outsider, Trump did see the America I have described. He acknowledged people's anger and anxiety, most notably in the deindustrialised heartland of America that became his base.

A recent study says researchers have attributed Trump's success largely to 'racialised economics', where economic hardships are seen in racial terms, not personal; they are blamed on 'other groups' (Fabian et al., 2020). But the study, *Bowling with Trump*, suggests that more fundamental to Trump's support has been heightened anxiety and a lack of social attachment or belonging. This increased racial and national identification, which was politicised as racial prejudice and nationalism. This is how the authors of the study describe their findings:

We find that the oft-observed positive relationship between racial animus (prejudice) and Trump's vote share is eliminated by introducing an interaction between racial animus and a measure of the basic psychological need for relatedness. We also find that rates of worry have a strong and significant positive association with Trump's vote share, but this is offset by high levels of relatedness. Together, these two results imply that racial voting behavior in 2016 was driven by a desire for in-group affiliation as a way of buffering against economic and cultural anxiety.This suggests that the economic roots of Trump's success may be overstated and that the need for relatedness is a key underlying driver of contemporary political trends in the US.

When societies come under increasing pressure and strain, as America has, they tend to fracture along traditional fault lines such as class, religion, ethnicity or race. Those in power promote and exploit these fractures. Profound disquiet is easily manipulated, and expressed as more obvious grievances. America is particularly susceptible to racial divisions and antagonism. This tactic is obvious in recent politics, especially with Trump and the far-right. Public policy analyst and economist Jeffrey Sachs (2021) stated recently: 'Stoking mob violence against people of color is typically how rich whites channel poor whites' grievances away from themselves. Far from being a specifically Trumpian tactic, it is the oldest trick in the American political playbook'.

Democrats have also played on these fractures in the sense of using them for political leverage or gain - as revealed in Hillary Clinton's infamous 'basket of deplorables' remark - while also failing to address the deeper, systemic aspects of the problems. The political focus on race is evident in a recent account of how *The New York Times* set up a project that attempted to understand the forces that led to Trump's election (Gurri, 2021). Rather than digging deep into the 'half of America' that had voted for the president, the author says, the newspaper 'chose to blame the events of 2016 on the country's pervasive racism, not only here and now but everywhere and always'. The project's stated mission was to 'reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the center of our national narrative'.

The Atlantic similarly announced in 2021 the launch of a new project on ‘American history, Black life, and the resilience of memory’, because, as a managing editor said, ‘Black people are left out of so many commonly shared American histories’ (Goldberg, 2021). The pre-occupation with race is also seen in the current furore over critical race theory, which looks at America’s history through the lens of racism, arguing racism is systemic in the nation’s institutions, which function to maintain the dominance of white people in society (Anderson, 2021).

The danger in this fraying and fragmentation of public debate and discussion is that we lose sight of the bigger picture, and its more fundamental elements, with the result that we are caught up in perpetual conflicts over what are, at least in part, derivative or secondary causes and consequences. . Improving the lot of the marginalised and disadvantaged, however legitimate and however much it may help them, will not solve the deeper challenges facing humankind. Climate change provides a useful metaphor for this perspective: the poor will suffer most its consequences, and this disparity demands attention, but climate change must be studied and addressed, first and foremost, as a planetary crisis that affects all of us.

The standpoint of ‘we are all in this together’ offers the advantage of creating more generous and tolerant ways of understanding America, encouraging people to look past the rancour and conflict promoted by its politicians and media, their obsession with ‘identity’ politics and protest. For example, the *Bowling with Trump* study notes that Trump’s supporters have been said to be ‘in mourning for a lost way of life’. The liberal media interpreted this nostalgia in terms of historic, white, male privilege. However, this is not the only possible meaning or interpretation: there have been many social, cultural, economic, environmental and technological changes since the 1950s (the oft-cited, historic benchmark) - in work, education, mainstream and social media, relationships, and the family, for example - that have increased a shared sense of isolation, insecurity, uncertainty, risk, and precarity.

Shaping and coloring this situation has been the impact of the social media, especially Twitter, which captured the political agenda in Trump’s time. There has also been the growing political influence of postmodernism, with its multiple narratives, relative truths, ambiguities, pluralism, fragmentation and complex paradoxes. One consequence of both these developments has been a flourishing of conspiracy theories. These developments all served to fragment and divide American society.

Politics and the media define quite arbitrarily what warrants debate and discussion; much that is important is excluded. For all his faults and failings - and there were many - Trump rocked the political establishment to its core, re-energising politics and re-invigorating democracy; the 2020 voter turnout was the highest in 120 years (Schaul et al., 2020). In doing this, however negatively, Trump offered at least a small chance of triggering systemic change.

Environmental writer and activist Joanna Macy expressed this opportunity succinctly: Trump’s election was ‘a very painful waking up’; if Clinton had won, she said, ‘we would have stayed asleep’ (Jamail, 2017). This was a relatively common view among environmental

and leftist commentators, especially around the time of Trump's victory. They saw Trump as exposing the failings of the entire US political system and its pursuit of a capitalist, imperialist agenda. And they were scathing of the Democrats, notably Clinton and Obama, for their complicity and collaboration in this agenda.

Naomi Klein (2017) said: 'Trump, extreme as he is, is less an aberration than a logical conclusion – a pastiche of pretty much all the worst trends of the past half-century.' Or, as Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers (2017), of Popular Resistance, said in relation to climate change: 'As with many other issues, Trump's actions crystallize the reality we have been facing for many presidential administrations so the movement now knows what it must do.'

However, the elite liberal media spurned this chance for a deeper, wider inquiry, and instead devoted four years to trying to remove Trump from office. In taking this approach, they failed America, and the world. Trump's relationship with the liberal media became one of mutual loathing and goading; it was hugely destructive. In showing such contempt for Trump, the liberal media also derided his supporters, deepening the national division they accused Trump himself of provoking.

It was only later in his term, when the Covid-19 pandemic was devastating the country, and Trump himself looked unlikely to win re-election, that some commentators in the mainstream liberal media began to acknowledge the need to look beyond Trump to understand America's troubles (Eckersley, 2020). But these occasional pieces did not reflect, or challenge, the editorial tone of liberal media outlets.

Generally speaking, during Trump's term, liberal commentary took as a benchmark, a frame of reference, the old political status quo. It was as if they had forgotten the legitimate grievances that took him into office, and believed the task was to restore politics to what it had been before his election, even though everything had changed and needs to change. Much of the coverage implied that there was little wrong with the US that removing Trump would not fix. It distracted attention from the country's systemic failings.

Michael Steele, a former chairman of the Republican national committee, told *The Guardian* after the January 6 Capitol riot (Smith, 2021): 'We stopped paying attention to what was happening around us. We started taking for granted each other and we weren't listening to the things that were driving people's pain and anguish and frustrations. Our political leadership became absorbed in their own self-interest, in their own re-elections.'

Communication theorist Daniel Hallin, writing about the Vietnam War, distinguished between three spheres of political debate: the sphere of consensus, the sphere of legitimate controversy, and the sphere of deviance (Wikipedia, 2021). Only matters falling within the second sphere, the sphere of legitimate controversy, gained attention, Hallin said. The forces reshaping America today mean that debate needs to expand that sphere to encompass more of the sphere of consensus - what was understood to be broadly agreed and accepted - and the sphere of deviance - what was judged to be unworthy, ridiculous or dangerous. With Trump, politics and the media 'zeroed in' on him, when they should have also 'drawn back' to consider the larger social context.

Politics and progress

I am not American, but Australian, living on the far side of the world, so I have no direct experience of American life. I am not a political scientist or policy analyst, steeped in political history and policy detail, but a social researcher into human progress and wellbeing, and the future. But perhaps both these attributes allow me to see more clearly - or at least differently - the bigger picture of American life. This picture is also true, but mostly to a lesser degree, of other developed nations, including to my own.

My research and writing address questions about whether life is getting better or worse (eg, Eckersley, 2016, 2019). It includes how we conceptualise and measure progress, its sustainability, its impacts on people's health and wellbeing, and how these might shape our future. In a nutshell, the scientific evidence shows that there is a widening gap between the science and politics of human progress and development (Eckersley, 2019). Progress as it is pursued politically in the US and the rest of the developed world is environmentally, socially and economically unsustainable, and is undermining quality of life. It cannot last, and it is hurting us. This predicament is not reflected in the dominant indicators we use to measure progress, and which inform our politics.

My work has focused especially on the 'psychosocial dynamics' of progress, notably the social and personal relationships that shape our way of life, and the worldviews, cultural stories, myths and symbols that define reality and give meaning to our lives. My 'American story' illustrates the importance of these dynamics. This has given me a perspective that differs radically from most other analysis, on both left and right.

Take materialism and individualism, two defining qualities of modern Western culture (Eckersley, 2005: 77-104, 2006, 2016). The research literature suggests that, when taken together and too far, they reduce social integration, self-worth, moral clarity and existential confidence and certainty. There is a shift from intrinsic to extrinsic values and goals; from self-transcendence to self-enhancement; from doing things for their own sake to doing things in the hope or expectation of other rewards, such as status, money and recognition. The result is an increasing focus on our own lives and an unrelenting need to make the most of life.

Frustration, disappointment and failure become more likely; loneliness, anger, depression and anxiety are a greater risk. Consumer culture has shifted its relentless messaging beyond what we have to who we are and what we do, from the acquisition of things to the enhancement of the self. It both fosters and exploits the restless, insatiable expectation that there must be more to life. It has created a self that is socially and historically disconnected, discontented, and insecure; pursuing constant gratification and external affirmation; prone to addiction, obsession and excess.

As sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2008) has observed, social ills have their source in today's 'individualised society of consumers', with consuming more being the 'sole road to inclusion', and 'existential uncertainty' now a universal human condition. Single-issue solutions might bring temporary and partial relief, he says, but short of reforming the individualistic way of life, they will not remove the cause.

This situation not only erodes social capital and diminishes our wellbeing; the overconsumption it promotes is also a major driver of climate change and other environmental crises that confront America and the world (which I discuss below). Everything is linked.

The demise of the official future

In the four-nation survey I cited above, three-quarters of Americans (75%) agreed that ‘we need to transform our worldview and way of life if we are to create a better future for the world’; two thirds (65%) agreed that ‘hope for the future rests with a growing global movement that wants to create a more peaceful, fair and sustainable world’ (Randle and Eckersley, 2015). (Percentages were similar in the other countries, unlike the responses to the fundamentalist responses reported above.)

In other words, then, the public is aware of the risks we face and the need for a radical change of course, a new paradigm of progress. Yet our journalistic and political cultures remain stuck in a paradigm that constrains electoral choice and is crippling democracy. The mutually reinforcing cultures of journalism and politics are outdated and dysfunctional, defined by conflict and contest rather than cooperation and consensus, deepening our difficulties rather helping to solve them.

These cultural flaws are both peculiar to politics and journalism - a product of their level of engagement with the world, notably political manoeuvring and policy detail - and also a reflection of their roles in promoting and maintaining more widely a modern Western culture that is itself increasingly outdated and dysfunctional.

It is this failure that lies behind the unease and disenchantment in the electorate, not just political corruption and incompetence and policy mistakes (Eckersley 2007). It is part of a layered political complexity, resulting in what I have described as the ‘demise of the official future’: a loss of faith in the future that governments promise, and on which they base their policies.

Put simply, the official future is one constructed around notions of continuing material progress and economic growth, and scientific and technological advances, to provide an ever-rising standard of living. It is increasingly being opposed by sustainable development as a framework for thinking about human betterment. Sustainable development does not give economic growth overriding priority. Instead, it seeks a better balance and integration of social, environmental and economic goals and objectives to produce a high, equitable and enduring quality of life. The concept of sustainability is gaining ground in politics, but it still falls far short of the changes required.

The demise of the official future is causing a cascade of consequences, including to the ‘psychosocial dynamics’ of progress that I mentioned earlier. Our visions of the future are woven into the stories we create to make sense and meaning of our lives. This ‘storying’ is important in linking individuals to a broader social or collective narrative, and affects both our own personal wellbeing (by enhancing our sense of belonging, identity and agency, for

example), and societal functioning (by engaging us in the shared task of working for a better future).

The extent to which Obama's politics and policies reflected his worldview, his continuing belief in the 'official future', shows why we need to place these fundamental frameworks of how we understand the world at the centre of political debate. Such a debate would be very different from today's emphasis on 'issue' and 'identity' politics, whose elements are kept firmly within the conventional model of progress. The interconnected risks facing humanity cannot be solved by focusing only on the discrete, specific issues that characterize and define today's politics, however legitimate the concerns are in themselves.

In science, paradigms change when they are confronted by a growing body of anomalous and contradictory evidence that they cannot explain or resolve. So it is with politics, which also confronts a growing array of policy failures, unsolvable problems, and bitter divisions - but is struggling to understand or resolve them. We need a new paradigm that better acknowledges and addresses the emerging realities of planetary conditions and limits, and our better understanding of human needs and wellbeing.

There is no reason why political debate cannot be reframed in this way - except for the entrenched cultures of politics and journalism, which are both too 'short-sighted' and too 'narrow minded'. Watching the four-part documentary series, *The fourth estate*, about *The New York Times* and Trump, while I worked on this paper drove home to me just how removed from my 'American story' political journalism has become, how absorbed and obsessed with Washington intrigue, tweets, scoops, and the 24/7 news cycle.

I am acutely conscious of how radical, even fanciful and improbable, my position is. But it is based on a wide range of scientific evidence, however much we choose to ignore that evidence. It is a long shot, but hope for the future rests on long shots. Cultures are so ingrained that they appear to be the natural and right way to look at the world. They tend to be 'transparent' or 'invisible' to those living within them because they comprise deeply internalised assumptions and beliefs, making their effects hard to discern, or study. It is all but impossible to see beyond them to allow for other, fresh perspectives. Yet this is what we must do.

I might add that this is also true of the cultures of scientific disciplines: different disciplines see things differently; they develop different models for explaining and studying the world, which generate different research questions, produce different results and lead to different interpretations of reality. Transcending disciplinary boundaries and perspectives is not easy. But this, also, is what we must do.

Existential threats

The study of future threats cited at the beginning of this paper is about perceptions, not realities (Randle and Eckersley, 2015). Nor do those perceptions necessarily reflect an informed understanding of the risks. Rather, they are likely to be an expression of a more general uncertainty and fear about the future, as discussed in the previous section. Nonetheless, the science validates these perceptions.

Early in 2021 I took part in an online discussion of existential threats to humanity. The global risks include the decline of key natural resources; the collapse of ecosystems that support life and the mass extinction of species; human population growth and demand beyond earth's carrying capacity; global warming, sea-level rise and change in the earth's climate affecting all human activity; widespread chemical pollution of earth systems; rising food insecurity and failing nutritional quality; nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction; pandemics of new and untreatable disease; advent of powerful and uncontrolled new technologies; and widespread human failure to understand and act preventatively on these risks (Council for the Human Future and Australia21, 2021; Eckersley, 2019).

Participants agreed that solutions exist to all these threats - except a solution to our inability to get political traction on the solutions. We will not, cannot, fix problems of such magnitude unless we first accept they exist, and at the political level, we don't - yet! We confront a huge scale anomaly, or reality gap, between the challenges and our responses. From the 1970s onward, we have declared each decade to be a decade of reckoning for Earth's environment, a time when humankind must deal decisively with growing global environmental crises. And as each decade passed without the necessary action, we deferred the reckoning to the next decade. Climate change became a focal issue, scientifically and politically. Now, it is the 2020s that we claim to be the last chance to avert catastrophic consequences. We are in the sixth decade of 'The Reckoning'.

This repeated 'kicking the can down the road' means we have already missed critical chances, at least with some hazards. It is not that nothing worthwhile has been done, but that not enough has been done, with the result that the gulf between what we are doing, and what we now know we need to do, continues to widen. In an email exchange after the online discussion, a leading climate-change scientist said of the latest research on the Paris Agreement goals: 'The sober message is that 1.5°C is gone and a reasonable chance to cap temperature rise at 2°C will vanish quickly without a truly emergency approach to the challenge' (Will Steffen, 2021, personal communication). He and other climate-change experts who participated agreed that achieving 'net zero carbon emissions by 2050', the current political mantra, would not be enough.

What next?

The evidence shows that the political systems of Western liberal democracy (and other systems not considered here) are failing, unable to deal with the nature and scale of 21st Century realities. Blinkered by their cultures, most politicians and journalists do not see the extent of this failure. Without a transformational change in the cultures of politics and journalism, we will not and cannot 'look outward' far enough, and 'look inward' deeply enough, to address the two types of existential threat humankind confronts: the extrinsic environmental and other tangible problems that pose a threat to human civilization and survival, as noted above; and the intrinsic, intangible problems of finding meaning and belonging in today's world, as discussed earlier. This should be the most fundamental layer of political discourse - one which remains largely missing.

The mainstream liberal media embraced Joe Biden's election victory with sighs of relief over his centrist policies and a return to political normalcy. 'Cometh the hour, cometh the man', *The Guardian* proclaimed (editorial, 2020). But the story does not end with Trump's eviction from the White House. The liberal media's celebration of Biden's victory is another aspect of their failure to understand how profoundly things are changing. Political debate needs to encourage the conceptual space for a transformation in our worldview, beliefs and values as profound as any in human history.

Nothing has been settled.

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