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Greening the Media

We Stand at a Difficult Moment in History

Why did Donald Trump win the election, given his bizarre views and behavior?

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We stand at a difficult moment in history.

Our President is dueling with the dignity conferred by his office, courtesy of his personalized criticisms of women, whether they work for Fox News or MSNBC, and the general lack of gravity and thoughtfulness on display in his venal Tweets.¹

But that's just the beginning.

Mr. Trump thinks he constructed the stand-off between Qatar and Saudi Arabia in order to resolve difficulties in the region, and has taken the Saudi side, even as his beloved military relies on the Qataris to provide headquarters for its next assaults on the Arab world.²

He says that climate change is a Chinese invention designed to destabilize the U.S. economy and has refused to sign the G20 accord that saw the world's major powers reaffirm the need for vigorous, multilateral environmental reform.³ Meanwhile, otherwise very reserved, careful scientists refer to the "biological annihilation" of thousands of species caused by anthropocentric conduct.⁴

And now he argues that the entirety of "Western civilization" is in peril.⁵

The Annenberg Public Policy Center's Fact Check service is working overtime to keep up with the mendacity and ignorance that derive from Trump, his supporters—and his wilder opponents.⁶

His critiques, aimed at any and all opposition, and even science itself, have created a surge of reaction against him and the United States around the world. We are dramatically unpopular virtually everywhere, other than in the eyes of Israelis and Russians.⁷

Given that context, what on earth explains Mr. Trump's domestic success? How can he deride women so disgracefully? How can he get away with knowing so little about our own foreign policy—one of his primary Constitutional responsibilities? How can he lead the only major political party in the democratic world that denies the reality of climate change? And what is he referring to when he speaks of threats to Western civilization?

We cannot enter the President's mind—and perhaps that is best for all concerned.

But we can look at the kinds of people who voted for him and examine some history to ponder why they did so.

Amongst women, 9 out of 10 African Americans and 7 out of 10 Latinas did not support Mr. Trump in the 2016 election. But a little over half of white women did so. And among white women, those without college degrees mostly voted Republican.⁸

Geographically, fallen manufacturing towns in the Midwest, numerically dominated by white folks, saw a significant turn away from the Democratic Party and towards Mr. Trump. Ohio, Iowa, and Michigan voted for him, when most observers—and the Clinton camp—assumed they would not.⁹

OK—that sounds plausible; in fact, it’s undoubtedly true—but why is it so? What can a Manhattan billionaire and maestro of fictive capital, born to wealth and boasting an Ivy-League education, offer people with none of the above?

The ethnographer Arlie Russell Hochschild went to rural Louisiana, on the bayou, the year prior to the last election. Her mission was to delve into the lives of disenfranchised voters. She found that a sense of lost white-male pride in the capacity to provide for families was crucial to women and men alike; many of Trump’s female voters wanted a return to a world where they didn’t work outside the home.¹⁰

But there is something more.

The 1950s are often invoked nostalgically as a period of prosperity for white Americans. In the midst of that period, the political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset argued that although the economy was growing, many people feared a loss in status and were vulnerable to conspiracy theories about those they saw as eclipsing them.¹¹

In keeping with that view, the American National Election Studies indicate that many Trump supporters believed Obama was a Muslim.¹² They presumably saw this as a sign that they were losing their grip on the nation in the same way they feel threatened when hearing workers speaking Spanish.

But we are not simply dealing with a group of irrational bigots, derided by Clinton during the Presidential campaign as in ‘the basket of deplorables.’¹³

Rather, these are people who, like many others, are anxious. They have suffered from the deregulation that has characterized our economy since Reagan was elected and gathered pace under Clinton and Obama as much as any Republican. And these voters have also seen a demographic shift that makes them feel less central to the national narrative.

In characterizing this dread of dispossession, we should be careful not to focus only on the anxieties of working-class white Americans. For “among white people without college degrees who voted for Trump, nearly 60 percent were in the top half of the income distribution. In fact, one in five white Trump voters without a college degree had a household income over \$100,000.”¹⁴

The journalist Jesse A. Myerson underlines a key political point about devoted Trump supporters: their anxiety “is associated with paying taxes; with jealously guarding their modest savings; with stopping black people from moving nearby and diminishing the value of their property and thus the quality of their kids’ schools; and with preserving the patriarchal family structure that facilitates it all.”¹⁵

This might explain why small-business owners in the U.S. are not worried by his rejection of climate science and withdrawal from the Paris Accord. Tough talk about America-first, and a shoot-from-the-hip rejection of international agreements, please this group as much as they nauseate progressives and cosmopolitan capitalists.¹⁶

Trump’s patriarchal psychology defines the moral politics of this class stratum and the cultural hierarchy it embraces—hence the desire to defend “Western civilization.” Cognitive linguist George Lakoff argues that for progressives, Trump’s sense of morality seems like a child playing “opposite day”: he frames everything they hold dear, from egalitarianism to environmental protection, as immoral.¹⁷

The President’s clarion call of economic nationalism and climate-change denial, and his denunciation of

professional women and hysterical rage at anything and anybody in his way, look remarkably like the blend of hope, anxiety, and anger that so often resonates with segments of our electorate.

This latest difficult moment in our history is therefore an opportunity to reflect on how systematic inequality in the U.S. is articulated, again and again, through race, money, and anxiety.

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