

A Post-Hoc Causal-Layered Analysis of American Trumpism

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What's Rationality Got to Do with It?

All of us who are concerned for peace and triumph of reason and justice must be keenly aware how small an influence reason and honest good will exert upon events in the political field.

- Albert Einstein

"All your dreams will come true."

- Donald Trump

This piece is comprised of a causal layered analysis to accommodate elements of world-view and myth/metaphor specific to the United States and more universal themes. This is post-hoc causal layered analysis that acknowledges rationalization after-the-fact as a human need to construct justifying narratives of decisions that were not at all rational (Kahneman & Tversky, 1986; Sen, 1986; Quattrone & Tversky, 1988; Jost, Hennes, & Lavine, H., 2013). The emerging consensus on the 2016 presidential election was that rational choice was overridden by feelings of injustice and internalized resentment by a heretofore quiescent and passive working class who preferred pursuing a "golden age" expressed and amplified by Mr. Trump. The political forecasters were of a class expert at surfing the waves of social and political change while a significant number of Trump voters were long caught in the wash. With changing demographics, erosion of faith in institutions of all sorts and the ambiguous futures of work as we know it is small wonder then that many wanted to return to what they perceived as the terra firma of "Great America". (Taylor, 2016).

A Causal Layered Analysis of Trumpism

1. Litany

Mainstream news media had, for the better part of the 2016 presidential campaign treated Trump's candidacy as a novel curiosity. From the very outset the outrageousness of his comments on illegal immigration in general and Mexican illegal immigration in particular as a threat to the nation, were widely covered. His rhetorical style was so bombastic and so shocking that media coverage got his message of America in decline and his prescriptions the only possible remedy out at almost no cost to his campaign. He was especially astute at establishing a "dishonest media" narrative early that had the effect of obliging many news organizations, to give time to his campaign surrogates who would constantly repeat that narrative, casting any fact-checking into doubt as media bias. Many of his mass rallies were covered in their entirety with little or no commentary until they were completed when many viewers would tune out. His full-throated condemnation of the Affordable

Care Act, much hated by conservatives, aligned him with rank and file Republican Party stalwarts, especially its “Tea Party” Wing of populist activists. (Libby, 2013) Meanwhile he savaged his Republican primary opponents as establishment politicians who will only give voters more of the same, often insulting them with near schoolboy taunts. Yet this behavior was received as a kind of breath of fresh air among Republican primary voters. He shocked the political world, winning primary after primary in state after state, finally securing his party nomination. He would now give full attention to portraying his Democratic Party opponent, Hillary Clinton as “crooked” and inept in her handling State Department emails through her private server, leaving some classified information open to hacking. His many unsubstantiated charges against her would resonate with his voters who seemed unmoved by facts. (D’Antonio, 2016) His voters saw him as a change agent and would mobilize on his behalf.

With all national and key battleground state polls giving Hillary Clinton a comfortable lead, the election was viewed as being preordained. Yet, Trump would win with breakthrough wins in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin with margins of less than 50,000. Under the Constitution’s prescribed Electoral College formula, Trump won the electoral vote overriding the nearly 3 million popular vote majority that Clinton held. Donald J. Trump would thus become the 45th president of the United States.

2. Social Causes

The ideological spectrum in Western liberal democracies has been narrow, focused between liberal and conservative; both invested in the political institutions as developed from a constitutional core. However, from the early 1980s and the emergence of extreme income inequality and lessened social mobility, faith in governing and corporate institutions declined. This led to intensified disaffection manifesting in the Tea Party movement in 2009. This right-wing movement was considerably more potent than its leftist analog “Occupy”. The constant narrative of government serving only elites and the undeserving, minority urban poor resonated in rural America. This message was carried for decades over AM talk radio, a medium that covered wide swaths of those spaces between cities. Hard-right commentators on, but not limited to FOX News continued this narrative of injustice. Online sites run by right wing and Christian fundamentalist ideologues would amplify this perception of assault on traditional values. The ultra-right would eventually come to capture numerous local and state government elected offices leading to a tipping point. Moderate conservatives would be purged. Straying from a limited government, anti-immigrant, anti-abortion and traditional values agenda became politically hazardous for Republicans in all offices and at all levels of government.

The figures below illustrate the massive swing away from the traditional ideological spectrum and out to the anti-institutional margins, particularly to the reactionary side. Figure 1 depicts the conventional ideological map where the vast majority of voters resided in the upper right-hand quadrant bounded by “Liberal” and “Conservative”.

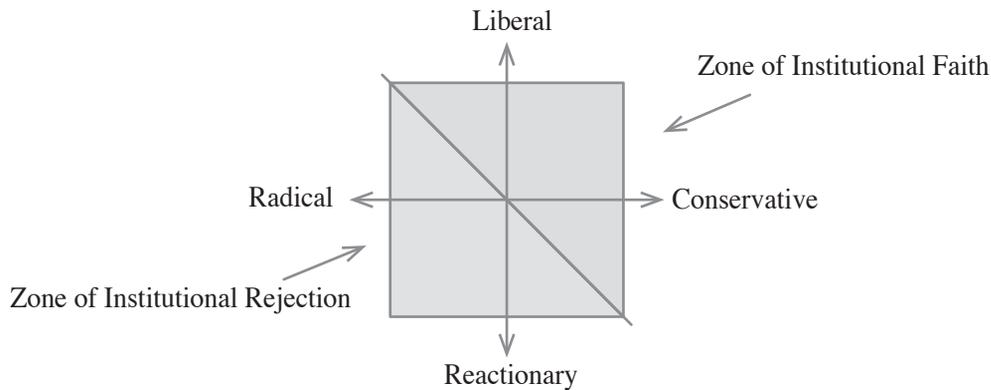


Figure 1. The Ideological Dialectic on the Dimension of Faith in Existing Institutions

Figure 2. below shows the swing among Trump voters to a reactionary ideological territory shown in the dark triangle

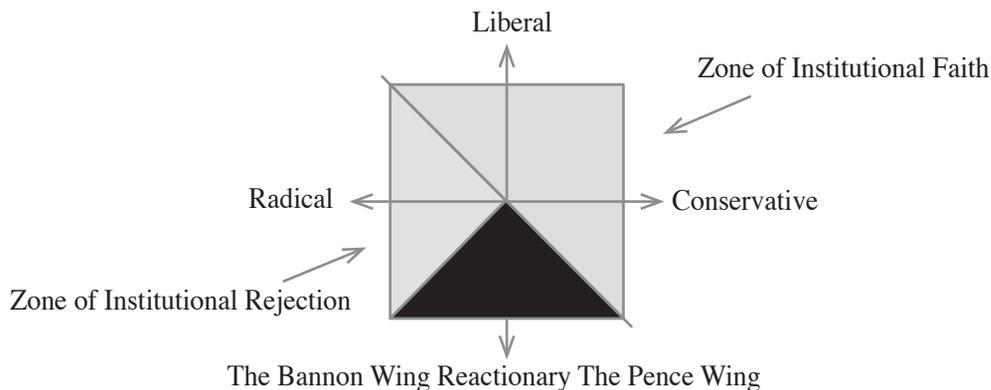


Figure 2. The Post-Election Trump Alliance

3. World View

“The American Creed” encapsulates the primary values ascribed to most United States citizens as unique among nations. Two of these values held in broad consensus among Americans are quite familiar, those being “freedom” and “equality”. The third and fourth lesser known, but significant values are “success” and “pragmatism” which are often bundled as means (pragmatism) to an end (success).

“Freedom” was associated with free-enterprise capitalism and deregulation of business activities, long a mantra among mainstream “country club” Republicans who have been a pillar of the party since its inception. Trump, a businessman, would naturally embrace this rhetoric and find a natural constituency among Republicans for it. This conflation of freedom with deregulation was persuasive, even when objectively speaking, lack regulation has consistently led to tainted foods and medicines, labor injustices and workplace safety, environmental degradation and economic crises from the Great Depression of the 1930s, the savings and loan deregulation of the early 1980s, the “dot com” bubble of the 1990s, energy deregulation in the 2000s, and the housing market meltdown of 2008. However, politics is again, to emphasize, the manipulation of symbols. The spice that Trump added to this was a frontal assault on social justice was to reframe it as “political correctness”, often mocking what would otherwise be basic civil discourse. Making fun of a disabled reporter, racist comments, sexist insults about rivals even in his own party, and bragging about sexual groping were tolerated in the name of freedom from being censored by political correctness.

Projecting the value of equality should have been the most problematic for Trump, a privileged billionaire who never engaged in any meaningful public service in his life. This was handled in one of the most sublime symbols of any campaign anywhere. The adoption of what would become the iconic “Make America Great Again” baseball cap. This headwear was standard issue for working class males everywhere in the nation and became his most successful campaign sales item. It was a symbol of blue-collar solidarity, a group that vehemently held a chip on the shoulder attitude to urban college-educated elites, that, “you’re no better than me”.

Trump’s relationship with success is the personification of a type that can be characterized in the common description of “knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing.” Trump beat his success like a drum throughout his campaign, cleverly obscuring the fact that, in the metaphor of baseball, he was born on third base and thought he’d hit a triple. He rhetorically conflated his alleged success as proof he could make America a success. This was in the face of several well-documented failed business schemes that included a bundle of unremarkable real estate courses that he called “Trump University” which promised success for those who enrolled in it. There was the more spectacular failure of his Atlantic City Casinos that lost, according to tax records, nearly a billion dollars. When these tax records came to light indicating he was able to legally parley those losses into possibly not paying federal income taxes for 10 years, he still brazened that disclosure out by calling it “smart”. That voters were apparently undeterred by his frequently sketchy business dealings, it only seems to confirm an applied principle of political behavior that people vote their aspirations and not their realities. It was if, by voting for him, they were buying a lottery ticket.

Finally comes pragmatism. Americans like what works, often measured by the metric of success, and will turn a blind eye towards how something was made to work. Americans first embraced the “taming of the West narrative” with little thought to the near extermination of native peoples this success brought. Slavery was long justified in the American South because it worked. That Gilded Age Industrialists were able to build their fortunes on the backs of cheap immigrant and child labor seems not to have much diminished their standing as figures of admiration. Once sold on “Make America Great Again”, little consideration was made as to just how this would happen, even in light of a patently impractical signature policy of building a wall on the U.S. southern border with Mexico, and even more astoundingly, getting Mexico to pay for it. Trump’s penchant for bullying those beneath him into compliance has, so far, apparently resonated with his followers who seem to believe that the U.S. can do the same in its international dealings and with what they see as domestic impediments to their preferred past.

4. Myth/Metaphor: American and Universal

The Anglo-American foundation myth has always, glossed over the Spanish settlement of American territories and the explicitly commercial venture that was the English settlement of Jamestown, Virginia favoring the Puritan narrative of “New Eden” in their establishing the Plymouth colony. This narrative saw this new land as God’s gift to the righteous and industrious souls who worked it. This was a persistent myth that would undergird an American civic religion, later according its Constitution scriptural status. George Washington was the father, and later, Abraham Lincoln was Jesus, sacrificing himself to remove the original sin of slavery. Slavery would persist by other means, from the Civil War until at least World War II, but that process was suppressed within the authorized American narrative (Blackmon, 2009).

After the Civil War, industrialists and banks had virtual free rein, which is why the American presidents between Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt are largely unknown. Eventually came the “Gilded Age” or “The Age of the Robber Barons”, depending upon one’s attitude towards those times. Enter Frank Baum, a feminist, virulently racist and politically active writer and author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Baum, 1904¹). While Baum denied it, his Wizard of Oz series were seen as political allegories. The predatory Eastern Banks (Wicked Witch of the East) and monopolistic

railroads (Wicked Witch of the West) exploited the common people. Ill-educated farmers (the scarecrow) and oppressed workers (the tin man) would be led by common everyman (Dorothy) to petition the president (the wizard). Dorothy wore silver (“free silver movement”) slippers (not ruby which was a Hollywood device to show off one of their first color movies). To round out Baum’s imagined political alliance was the figure of William Jennings Bryant, a roaring populist orator but disappointingly ran for President as a Democrat (a cowardly lion). For these naïve bumpkins the president was a wizard. They marched to Washington, D.C. (Emerald City) via “yellow brick road” (gold standard). Glenda the good witch (a connected lobbyist) got them access to the President/Wizard. He would negotiate a deal to have them earn favor by defeating the remaining rival witch. He knew that if they failed he wouldn’t have to deliver and his fingerprints wouldn’t be on the attempt. Against all odds they succeeded. He’d then be revealed to be literally using smoke and mirrors to maintain the aura of magic, mystery and authority that underlies all apparatuses of social control as described in the chapter “The Grand Inquisitor” (Dostoyevsky, 2013). The wizard ended up satisfying his constituency by delivering symbolic tokens to them (a heart-shaped watch for emotion, a diploma for intellect, a medal for courage). In the end it was the wizard’s powers of persuasion and his skilled use of symbols that maintained his legitimacy.¹

The Wizard of Oz myth essentially reveals the timelessness of the grievance to movement to cooption process. “We won’t get fooled again”, but then we always are as aspirations override realities among credit card debt strapped Americans.

At its deepest level two world-views are in fundamental conflict in American political culture best expressed in the Old Testament vs. New Testament. One can read the Old Testament as the story of a people apart and maintaining their identities over millennia. They were the first nationalists. It is a chronicle of faith and persistence as a people. It also justified the displacement, and slaughter of others not anointed by God. It is particularly focused on land promised by God as reward for their fidelity to his commandments. The consequences that issued from straying from the covenant were vivid. God’s wrath would rain fire and brimstone, bring about plagues and natural disasters upon all who strayed from his laws. God’s anger would be visited also to the unbelievers, and the enemies of their faith who competed for their land. The faith of the Hebrews would be tested from Abraham to Job as icons of pure unquestioning belief beyond rational calculation.

Nation as a people united by religious faith persists even in post-Enlightenment America where the founders’ wisdom separating church and state has dimmed. In parts where people indeed “cling to their guns and religion” the American foundation myth of Winthrop’s “New Jerusalem” persists (Dunn, 2015). These are where people’s first names are often of Old Testament origin. In their worldview America was founded on Judeo-Christian values and pre-ordained by God that is still a core belief of the blue-collar White-Anglo-Saxon Protestant. America was seen as their promised land where the sweat of one’s labor would bear abundance. It is worth noting that Old Testament passages are often held in near equal esteem to the New Testament among many American fundamentalists.

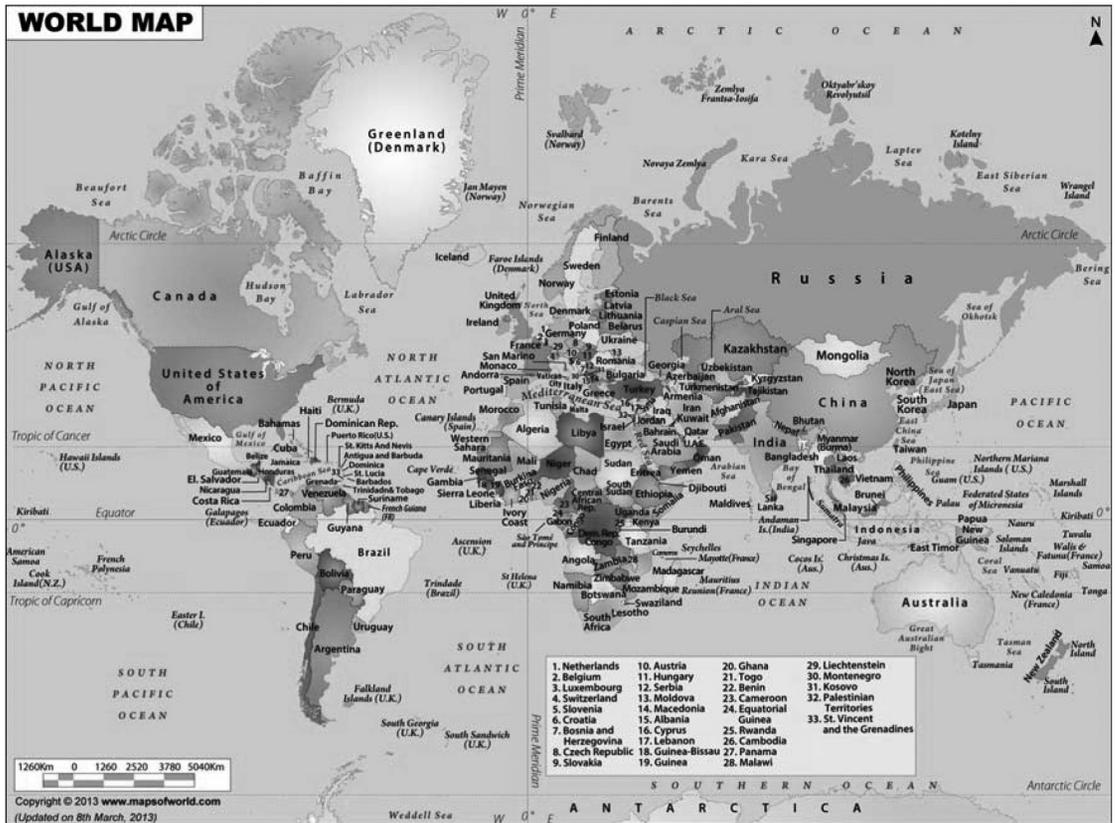


Figure 3. The Trumpian World View as a Map

Of course most Trump supporters are not comprised of Christian fundamentalists. Mr. Trump himself is highly secular in his habits, and hardly a model of Christian piety, but he espouses a world-view that conforms to an Old Testament sentiment. His closest political advisors include White nationalist Steve Bannon, but son-in-law Jared Kushner, who is an observant ultra-Orthodox Jew. This also aligns with his apparent affinity for Vladimir Putin, himself a Russian nationalist. As suggested in figure 3, this view is that of a political map projecting the world as flat with northern and southern latitudes distorted to make North America and Northern Eurasia look much larger than they actually are. In Mr. Trump’s world-view, size matters.

The New Testament world-view departs from the Old Testament in its universalism and relative accommodation to different views. This is evidenced in how its core books, the Gospels, are written from four perspectives. The post-Gospel books include what are essentially memoranda from Paul managing churches proliferating throughout the Roman world. Christianity became marked by inclusiveness of believers over the exclusivity of the Judaism of that time. This is seen in the different orders of priests and nuns in the Western Church and the wide variety of flavors found in the Eastern Church. Of course Christian sectarianism manifested intra-faith slaughter, but as metaphor, it is aggressively universal. It is a cosmology that aligns with other great faiths, transcending identification with nation as people apart. Christianity would thrive on conquest and frequent forced conversion, and religious divisions still profoundly drive historical process, yet the metaphor of a universal Christendom persists. The nation-state system that carries that seed of a universal world system functions on bonds over divisions, seeing as absurd the idea of border walls. The world as jigsaw puzzle rendered in figure 3 is now supplanted by the world as holistic system

shown in figure 4 below:

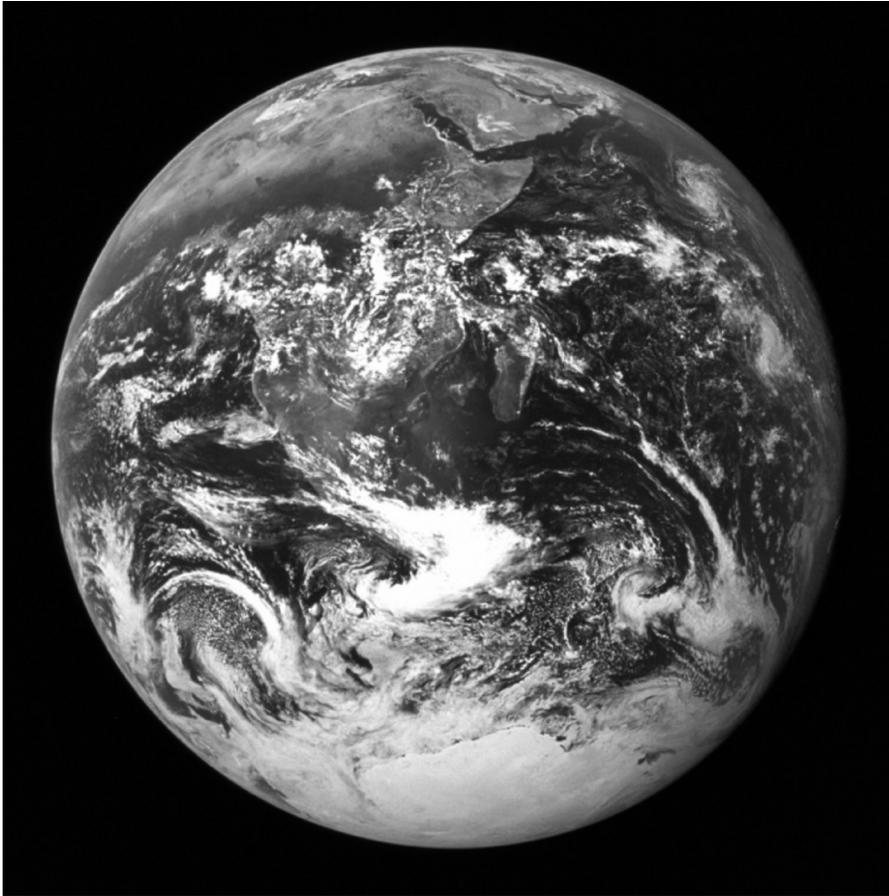


Figure 4. Earth as Seen from Space

This Revolution Will Break Your Heart

We, as futurists, are not in the business of prediction. This should go without saying but is noted here for the benefit of non-futurists who might be reading this. We, however, are not immune from proffering forecasts of hope. We can hope that the many episodes of more and more extreme hyper partisanship witnessed over the past few years will have reached a climax, though there is no indication of any downward inflection in that trend. The business of political prognostication has taken a significant hit with the climatic events of the Brexit vote and Trump. That noted, the post-Enlightenment project of human betterment through rational guidance should not be abandoned especially since this Trump episode may not be novel. America endured Andrew Jackson, an Amerindian exterminator. The nation was once so polarized that it experienced a literal civil war. The populist movement, a reaction produced by the wrenching transition from an agrarian to industrial economy at the cusp of the 19th and 20th centuries, diminished to obscurity over time. Labor movements, women's suffrage, wars, assassinations, riots, civil rights, impeachments, LBGT rights, terrorist attacks, have all been treated as apocalyptic in the moment, and yet peoples emerge from these events with a coherent normalizing post-hoc narrative. As referenced by Lewis 2016 in, *The Undoing Project*, we invent new normals all the time.

This is by no means suggests a call for complacency or wait-and-see passivity to this administration. Scholars and practitioners in our field in particular have a responsibility to future generations. Those of us involved in long-term policy analysis must continue to speak truth to power. Action researchers, artists, writers, and performers must also be “Toto”, the little dog in the *Wizard of Oz* who initiated the whole tale by being naughty and the one who pulled back the curtain to reveal the wizard for who he was.

We can reasonably expect this revolution to go the way of others; from euphoria, to faction, to incompetence to counter revolution and at least partial restoration that this author describes as “the return of the king”. But again, this pattern should be managed and understood as requiring struggle. Ultimately we get the futures we deserve.

Note

1. For readers not familiar with the 1939 classic movie *The Wizard of Oz* which retains elements of the allegory described above, two key scenes revealing the Wizard as a fraud and yet still capable of manipulating through the distribution of tokens can be viewed via these YouTube links: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZR64EF3OpA>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ky7DMCHQJZY>

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