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Right Now: The New Year



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

“[S]ocial media had provided a breeding ground for fanaticism, authoritarianism, and nihilism. It had also proved to be easily manipulated, not least by foreign agents.”

– Jill LePore, These Truths

President-elect Biden may succeed in forming an administration that represents differences of race, ethnicity, religion, sex, and gender identity but the disruptive differences regarding

truth, reality, meaning, and understanding which now rock the foundations of a social and political order are not so easily represented.

This is because the reliability of any representation is at the very start questioned and more disturbingly rejected without question. Whether the percentage of Americans that are so anti-realist, in the philosophical sense that there is neither truth nor reality independent of what we say they are, decreases, and that faith in rational/empirical investigations of the way things are independent of our views and theories regains its hold on American political and social order is an undecidable issue here at the start of 2021.

What we do know is that no such order of things has been ever built on such undecidability, on aporia — the absence of a clear path. Such absence has proved fatal in America's response to the coronavirus pandemic. Cyberspace's "reality" of disembodied communication antiquates non-synthetic life; the logic of the algorithm antiquates the slow emotional, sensuous, imaginative, rational responses of our human faculties. Immersion in web life is an immersion in the hyperreal; and here, where an infinitude of clashing narratives bombard in a never-ending shitstorm, a shared path, a common understanding can no longer be found.

"You see, we were always looking for that one case to end it all. And that case hasn't come up yet."

– Thurgood Marshall, 1977

Fear of losing white majority privilege, of whiteness ever being "great again" has run through the American Mass Psyche since the first slave rebellions, not in colonial America but in the Caribbean, models of freedom seeking revolts to reappear in America's own revolt, a revolt in which no thought was given by the Founding Fathers of freeing their own slaves. Washington didn't free his slaves upon leaving office, a precedent which like his refusal to accept a monarchy-like lifetime presidency, would have established a tradition.

Progressives didn't take up Jim Crow's inequalities but limited their equality interests to white farmers and white wage workers. The New Deal was inattentive to racial discrimination and racial inequality, but Truman created a commission on civil rights, To Secure These Rights in 1947 although the G.I. Bill extended aid in education and housing only to whites.

The Civil Rights Act passed in 1964 yet remains a Liberals' legislation and all the acrimony of white privilege challenged is here pasted to the word "Liberal." Deep resentment in this attaches to the word, along with new indictments of government which Reagan proclaimed as restricting personal freedom, free enterprise, and the First and Second Amendments. The sins of government blossomed in FDR's New Deal, a socialist move to redistribute wealth from workers to welfare claimants. In the full swing of Conservatism, Liberals were pummeled as secularizing a Christian society, pushing diversity upon a white unity shaped by exclusion of difference, defiling sacred traditions of marriage and biological certainties of identity,

pushing God out of public education, and displacing the traditional/nuclear family with single parenting.

This is a lot, as they say, but also a lot that Liberals see not anger making but rather as good, positive, and progressive and not as sins and failures they should amend.

It is in this divide of what is morally good and bad that the country teetered at the time of Donald J. Trump's election.

“The rationale for Trumpism is not simply policy-based, or economic. Rather, resonating under Trumpism and the promise to Make America Great Again (MAGA) is a white political theology which is deployed in a new “spiritual war” for the soul of America and indeed, the soul of the West. More troubling is how this “spiritual war” articulates itself in the new culture wars and, for some, the inauguration of a geo-political apocalypse which finally resolves the clash of civilizations.”

– S. Romi Mukherjee, “Rendre sa grandeur à l’Amérique, une théologie politique blanche”

If Trump was not then and is not now the champion of wealth redistribution in the face of huge economic inequities, planet Earthly health recovery, worker ownership replacing the age old labor capital divide, and public education and health services equity, was not fighting a war against poverty, racism and war itself, what then was and is his magnetism, a magnetism that continues to draw 74 million Americans?

Is it too simplistic to say that eight years of a black man as president kicked the resentment of white ego to an explosive level, that a white/orange man promising to “Make America Great Again,” translated as “Make American White Again, could and would become president? Was the neoliberal market efficiency, supply side, globalized, financialized ideology in any way meaningful to those who fell in love with Trump?

The real dark mystery of power was never with the “Deep State” but rather increasingly with the arcane magic of globalized, financial capitalism, flourishing in “The Information Age” because digitalized, accelerated communication gave investment, ownership surveillance, and labor control powers the analog world could not give it. Trump was excluded from all this, a court jester on the periphery of the real Wall Street players, and so filled with the kind of unforgiveness Nixon held for the liberal Ivy League crowd.

Trump's followers shared these passions. Was the Liberal/Progressive/Democratic Socialist ideology meaningful in any way to that flock except as enemies of God, Guns and Free Enterprise? That supposedly “free” enterprise was a banner the way “capitalism” never is in the American Mass Psyche because that word, capitalism, has never been brought to a meaning as purified and un-indictable as the word “free.” It never has and never will in the hyperreal of American exceptionalism, from military and financial-digital exceptionalism to moral and humanitarian.

“Everything conspires to make us forget the socially constructed, and hence arbitrary and artificial, character of investment in the economic game and its stakes.”

– Pierre Bourdieu

Trump's presidency has given the worst devils of the American Mass Psyche permission to roam freely.

But to his followers he is in the seat of power wherein he can make a last stand for a country founded by white men. All diversity caravans will be stopped by a Wall. The words "diversity" and "multi-culturalism" become call to arms, red flags that enrage, surpassed here only by the signifier "socialist," one much used yet floating free of any shared understanding beyond government control of your life.

"Woke" and full of mindfulness, veganism, gentrification, working on line at home during a pandemic, busy gender identifying, stock monitoring, Mee-tooing, climbing the meritocratic ladder and busy language policing, Liberals are blind to the appeal made by a white/orange man who identifies strongly and proudly as white, male, heterosexual, rich, racist, homophobic, xenophobic, and a proud owner of a trophy wife and all the women he can grab by the pussy.

It is in this perceptual divide emerging from alternate reality frames, from cultural constructed life-worlds, from what is not foundational or absolute but "arbitrary and artificial," that the country has teetered upon in the four years of Donald J. Trump's presidency.

"The coronavirus pandemic may represent the greatest failure of governance in U.S. history, and responsibility for the extent of its ravages falls squarely on Donald Trump."

– James Fallows, "How Far Should Biden Go?" The Atlantic January/February 2021

Death and destruction, lies and delusion, vindictiveness and slander, hate, fear and a crazed, wicked vileness are the legacy of this Trump presidency.

Instead of devoting his years in office to lessen the burdens that a wicked and vile economic system had placed on the nation's majority, he chose to transform the presidency into an accelerant to all the frustrations, pent up anger, confusion, fears, worries, anxieties, insecurities, the dysphoria building since Reagan mapped out a plan for a top 20% plutocracy.

Trump set as much on fire as he could. And he did it to bring others to cheer him at rallies, to see the blind bend to the caprices of his own nature, corrupted and darkened in a father/son relationship Freud would have marked as "textbook."

Someone was bound to throw a match on that growing pile of lives, working and middle class, scheduled for extinction. Sixteen years of Democratic presidents, Clinton and Obama, had not blocked the course of that extinction. Trump exploded it all, fed his ego upon it, but in this he was like Black Lives Matter protestors who exploded the growing discard pile of black lives, building since the Founding Fathers announced that among all of "These truths" so self-evident there was not this truth: that color didn't exclude you from life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that enslaving and oppressing others because of color dismissed all of

“We the People” as unworthy and tainted. This was a desecration at the country’s very beginning.

Trump has been an accelerant to matter that doesn’t vanish when he does.

Whether Biden can reduce the combustibility of American society depends first on whether the combustibles are located, say, where Bernie Sanders found them, or whether they fracture further into lunatic delusions and illusions which have now been elected to Congress and not to an asylum.

Such aberrant thinking emerges from a lack of real embodied interrelationships with others. We now live in the absence of such interrelationships to the point that others are always only seen as conspirators or dark manipulators of our lives, or as enemies to crush.

The pandemic’s demands, trials and tribulations have replaced absence with presence and so put many in a finer light. The entire medical community has risked their lives to save the lives of others. Every kind of “analog” worker has become visible as important, their services brought clearly to view. True, the pandemic has exposed the inequities of economic and social status, revealing once again that those of color and the poor suffer the most not because of choices made or because the government has taken away their freedom, but because the order of our society has made them vulnerable.

“Brutality is more and more dominating social relations, and the economic machine of production is ruled more and more by inescapable automatisms.”

– Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *Breathing*, 2018

I find two pathways out of our aporia: one, simply has to do with the fact that whatever bad habits the Trump regime has given country and citizens, the pace of change plus a kind of neo-human, algorithm controlled abbreviated attentiveness and retention will undoubtedly vacate the past and narrate perhaps extreme paradigm difference, or, less innocuously, repeat the narrative and the man — a white man without the orange tint — without recognition.

Certainly, however, reality independent of human “worlding” such as the increasing dire effects of global warming as well as a society only working for the top 20% will force change.

The second pathway has to do with the finer light that bathes our humanity, something we can find if we look closely at those around us. The good, as Blake explained in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, constrains our energy and passion, blocks us with the paternalistic “NO!” It doesn’t make good copy, compelling drama, crushing tweets or sensationalist spin and spectacle. Such words do not “crush” on social media, or stir up flash mobs, or draw listeners to a demagogue.

In those we love who we have lost in this year, so many lost, we can summon visions of their true goodness. We can see the finer light. If we maximize this and make it our way of being in the world, we can find a path to share. We’ve had a mean and vindictive president but like

any of Shakespeare's villains who darkened the dramatic world, this one man does not represent the world or display the finer light of humanity that is there to be seen in others.

No one who has seen a loved one die, seen the pandemic's hurried rush to our mutually shared mortal end has time in their hearts to "crush," to abduct, shoot, beat, poison, slander, debase, or damage lives, the lives of others who have, like oneself, a path we share in common. This is a path and a destiny powerful enough to ground a salvageable society, an equitable society. This too is what the pandemic has shown us.

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Joseph Natoli has published books and articles, on and off line, on literature and literary theory, philosophy, postmodernity, politics, education, psychology, cultural studies, popular culture, including film, TV, music, sports, and food and farming. His most recent book is *Dark Affinities, Dark Imaginaries: A Mind's Odyssey* .