THEORIES OF TRUMPISM

Peter Harper, November 2020

It has been a genuine puzzle for us liberals: how can Trumpistas actually get like that and stay like that, in the teeth of what seems to us ‘obvious’ reality? And why is the Trumpist base so big? Here some explanatory theories.

TEAM LOYALTY

The American comedian Jordan Klepper offers an attractive explanation for how it might start. Trump holds huge rallies all over small-town America. Nothing ever happens in these places, so a Trump rally is the biggest thing ever. It is a great razzy event and enormous fun. Everyone has a good time. Attendees quickly identify this as ‘their team’, and are eager to adopt the team style, slogans and memes. Well, just listen to the speeches: lock her up, build the wall, stop the steal, make America great again, fake news, the climate change hoax, the liberal conspiracy of covid…. Easy as putting on a tee-shirt, speaking of which there is excellent branding and merchandise. Every phrase from the podium delivers an agreeable emotional jag, and you get rather addicted, want more of the same. *Sieg heil!*

The ‘team effect’ is of course very powerful, as we see in support for football clubs, where the choice is unarguably arbitrary. There is no reason to support Club A rather than Club B, but you do anyway, it’s more fun. Once you have committed yourself, it’s almost impossible to switch. But of course, tribal loyalties are just as strong in politics, with an added veneer of ideological justification. How you hate your opponents, and impute evil to their every action, every utterance! Belonging, and identity are themselves powerfully rewarding.

As many commentators have noted, Americans have physically ‘sorted’ themselves into like-minded parts of town: you get overwhelmingly democratic or republican districts, so it seems ‘everybody thinks this too’. Your whole community agrees with you! The same has happened on a larger scale with ‘Red’, ‘flyover’, largely rural, states in the centre, and ‘Blue’ coastal and industrial states. The great rallies occur predominantly in Red areas, where Trumpism can operate on basic conservative sympathies, and indeed, can weaponise them.

Once everybody you know, and your entire media universe, is an avid Trump supporter, it is inconceivable that anyone except for a few cranks, could disagree. You are bound to win an election with an overwhelming landslide. When this fails to happen, what other explanation is available than outright fraud?

When the mobs stormed the national Capitol in January 2021, it seemed obvious to them that, not only had the election been stolen, but *all members of Congress knew it too,* and were merely *pretending* otherwise. They needed to be reminded by The People simply to stand up and tell the truth, and that would have reversed the election result. I surmise this was taken as the basic process they were trying to trigger: stop lying and tell the truth. And no doubt infuriated by the complete failure to get anywhere at all. The Deep State indeed.

THE ECHO-CHAMBER/HALL OF MIRRORS

Partly blamed on the rise of social media, people have been selecting only those channels of news, information and opinion that reflect their prior beliefs. If this is the only information they have, what else can they think? If contradictory or ‘fact-checking’ processes are absent, then huge and outrageously false claims can flourish. These opinions can be fun and positively rewarding, can give a further pleasant feeling of tribal membership, and also minimise Cognitive Dissonance, an unpleasant experience that our brains will go to some lengths to forestall.

What we see here are *self-operated* selective narratives. Other narratives exist and are available, but are rejected or effectively invisible. This contrasts with state-control of the media (and of course, the narrative) seen in Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, North Korea, Putin’s Russia and Xi’s China, but the effects are much the same. Indeed, what else can people think? It is striking that it took several years after the fall of Germany in 1945 for its population to readjust their minds to what had actually happened, and even more years to understand the dark aspects of Nazism from which they had been shielded: they only got the best bits, and most thought it was marvellous. Really, what else could they think? It takes a lot of unpicking, not merely a single ‘killer fact’.

It is worth bearing in mind that for many people, media-mediated reality is more real that ‘real’ reality. When there is an apparent contradiction, it is the Trump tribe’s custom to go with the media, that is to say, the *right* media. The rest is merely ‘fake news’, and tribalists develop a fine sensitivity to detecting potentially contradictory narratives and diverting them straight into the trash.

This of course raises the question of who controls mass media. To a large extent, for Trumpism it has been Rupert Murdoch. It is quite surprising that a single unelected figure is ‘allowed’ so much political influence, but collectively we seem unable to control this. Is it a puzzle that this process happens only on the Right, or is it obvious? It remains puzzling to me. Presumably the Trumpist right could consider North Korean state propaganda an example of *left-wing* deployment of a false narrative: what they would claim to be trying to avoid.

It is striking that committed right-wing media simply reverse all this, that they are simply telling the truth, while the mainstream media are lying and creating their own hall of mirrors, in which liberals are imprisoned. They call it Fake News and they mean it.

KAYFABE

Sometimes I am reminded of an old ethologists’ test for intelligence in animals. It is called the ‘*Umweg*’ principle, after a German word meaning ‘indirect’ or ‘round about’. An animal A is placed in a three-walled cage with open back. Food F is placed in front of the cage.

A

F

You can imagine: most animals simply throw themselves repeatedly at the front of the cage attempting to get to the food. Smart ones however, calmly walk round the back, find the food and eat it. It might seem offensive to compare typical Trump supporters with not-very-smart animals, but they do seem to be suckers for WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) explanations and policies, related to Daniel Kahneman’s Type 1 (intuitive, heuristic) thinking, as opposed to Type 2 (complex, abstract, trammelled by evidence). An example is Make America Great Again, which is a whole mixture of Hard Power tactics that look good to an intuitive mindset, but have precisely the opposite effect. Liberals understand that American greatness arises from subtle, indirect, soft-power ‘Umweg’ policies, and are horrified by what appears to be sheer stupidity.

Yet in everyday life humans have to deal with startling complexities, and we might ask whether mere propaganda is enough to get people to swallow the totally improbable, even the impossible. Enter the notion of *kayfabe*, a term used in professional wrestling for the double-reality of staged bouts that are presented as real competitions. Millions follow this form of wrestling, and have no trouble in accepting the apparent contradiction: they know it is staged, but behave as if, indeed in some sense actually *believe*, it is not. It is claimed that the wrestling-fan demographic matches the Trump demographic rather closely. They are quite used to the double reality.

This is interesting because it is quite subtle, involving a constant recalibration of reality and make-believe, suggesting that Trump supporters are not so naively WYSIWYG after all. It recalls the wry comment that liberals take Trump literally but not seriously, while conservatives take him seriously, but not literally. Here it is *liberals* that are mocked for their lack of sophistication: surely you don’t imagine he really means it? Yet in another way he really does; he conjures a bogus reality that supporters would really like to be true, and which they repeat until it almost becomes a fact.

The key is that savouring partisan tropes is *enjoyable*. It does not matter whether they have any counterpart in ‘reality’, because the enjoyment comes from the mental and emotional constructs.

*RESSENTIMENT*

This is a French word commonly used by social scientists, which roughly translates as ‘resentment’, but has a strong political colour. Liberals tend not to experience it because they are at the top of the heap, so they don’t know what it means and cannot really empathise. Its essence is the burning resentment, indeed loathing, experienced by people at the bottom of the heap against those at the top, by the losers against the winners.

One aspect of this probably has to do, again, with cognitive dissonance. Nobody says to themselves, “I was lazy, I lacked talent, I couldn’t be bothered, so I didn’t get on. Others did though, God bless them, they deserve it”. No, your brain will find other, more acceptable reasons why *they* got on and you got ‘left behind’, and you resent them.

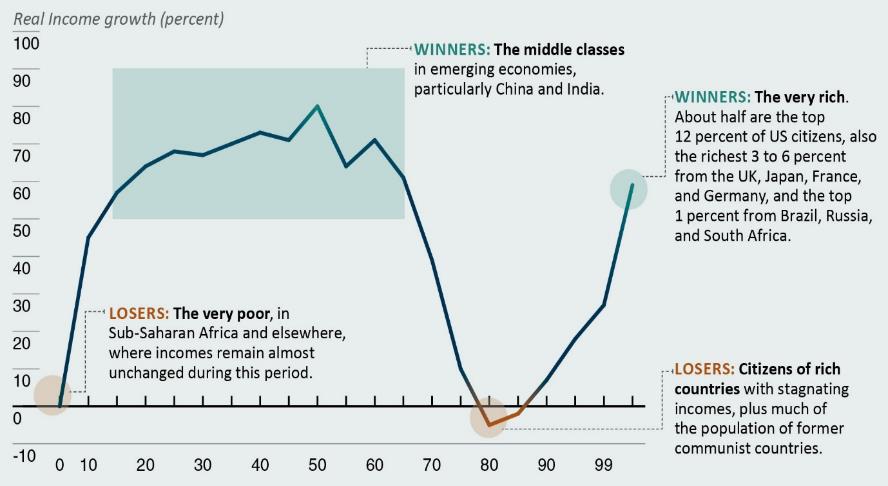
‘Losers’ resent losing of course, but even more they hate the condescension, the sneering, the jokes. Those at the top don’t even know they are doing it, but enjoy rubbing in the distinctions whenever they get the chance. You know who they are: The swamp, the do-gooders, the graduates, the metropolitan elite, the RP-speakers, the latte-drinkers, the fake news media mavens, all those who Quentin Letts calls *Patronising Bastards*. Probably anybody reading this fits the bill.

Famously, demagogues harness the emotional energy of *ressentiment* to build movements and destroy elites and progressive ideas. They can whip up mild resentment into incandescent rage. At a Trump rally you can observe both joyous affirmation and palpable hatred. Polarisation is a significant intention and outcome.

It is worth remarking that behind the general phenomenon of the ‘Left Behind’ are vast economic and developmental forces so slow that they are hard to see up close. They are partly to do with the long-term shift of economic focus as societies move through the modernisation process, from primary to secondary to tertiary sectors. In the ramp-up phase of early industrialisation, heavy-industry is necessarily dominant, and societies completely reorganise themselves around this necessity. Huge populations move from the countryside into industrial towns and create new multigenerational communities with their own distinctive structures, cultures, pride and identity, most notable in coal and steel and heavy industry in general.

But things move on, infrastructure is built, technology and elite tastes change, and the manufacturing sector moves overseas, out of sight and out of mind, where production is cheaper and filth is tolerated. The great industrial communities are left stranded. Do they shrug, mutter imprecations against creative destruction, up sticks and look for work elsewhere? On the whole they do not. They stay where they are, ‘Somewheres’ in David Goodhart’s classification. They suffer enormously and experience bitter *ressentiment*.

The whole picture is nicely encapsulated in the so-called ‘elephant diagram’ that logs the winners and losers from globalisation, shown here. Income classes are ranked along the bottom, from poorest to richest, while their recent income growth is shown on the vertical axis. The most striking feature is a huge growth of wealth for about half the world’s population (shaded section) mostly in the so-called ‘emerging’ economies. This is the basis for optimistic perspectives such as that of the Swedish statistician Hans Rosling, who argues that this is really good: just what we always wanted.



Well, yes it is, but look who paid the price. In the right-hand section of the diagram we see a great V-shape, with the sluggish or negative economic circumstances of the Left Behind, contrasting with the increasingly rapid growth of the already well-heeled elites: the more you have, the faster your income grows. Here you can see the great class divide, and you can see where the wealth went – mostly to the emerging economies – but that would be small comfort for the losers even if they knew it. They are still richer than those who took their jobs, but it doesn’t *feel* like it. They compare themselves with the smart-ass metropolitans, on whom they cast the whole blame. And who, of course, have their own illusions: that their good fortune is *not* a lucky accident, but richly deserved.

It is worth noting that the incomes of those on the right-hand side of the Big V are growing no faster than those on the left. But crucially, these are people with higher incomes anyway, at the upper ends of their societies. It is those on the left who feel most aggrieved and humiliated. If you take the bottom of the V under 10% growth, that’s almost a billion people, and it’s no wonder they can sway elections and referenda.

Here is a stark politico-economic explanation for Trumpism, and indeed Brexitism in the UK. It’s nobody’s fault, but it leaves a thick seam of *ressentiment* for demagogues to mine.

It is worth remarking that this stark division, and ‘the big sort’ is likely to be reinforced by the tendency of the top 20% meritocratic elite to become a closed, self-propagating class. This will further fuel polarisation, r*essentiment* and Trumpism in the future. Something to watch.

‘BLUE-COLLAR CULTURE’

It is sometimes hard for liberals to grasp, but substantial parts of any modern society delight in ‘bad behaviour’. It is similar to the enjoyment we all seem to get from the exploits of naughty children such as ‘Just William’ or Dennis the Menace, who defy authority, break windows, cheat, steal things, beat people up. Their butts and opponents, such as Hubert Lane and ‘Walter’ are derided as effete and spoiled goody-goodies, while authority itself is portrayed as a mean-minded spoilsport force, imposing arbitrary and dictatorial rules for no obvious reason.

Perhaps the adult version of these comics is enjoyment of big heists like bank and train robberies. These guys have got bottle. They cut corners, take risks, lie and cheat, and kill people. Sometimes they get away with it, and are cheered to the rafters. *We stuck it to them*. The emotions are surely related to enjoyment of decorum-defying petrolhead TV programmes, and support for the comically satanic ‘heels’ in wrestling. There is unashamed *Schadenfreude:* Trumpist teeshirts say “Make Liberals Cry Again”.

It might be similar to the sheer fun of rioting and looting, but interestingly, this is often denigrated by Trumpistas as a feature of ‘the other side’, and this denigration perhaps allows them to feel that they are the true guardians of the constitution. We must not forget they feel heroic, the Good Guys, against the us, the *real* Dark Side. But the kayfabe effect allows them to be wicked and righteous at the same time.

Transgressive behaviour is undoubtedly a positive factor in much of Blue Collar culture. It was striking that support for Silvio Berlusconi went *up* after each revelation of a sex scandal. The same apparently happened after revelation of Bill Clinton’s dalliances. Such behaviour is applauded not only by blue-collar men, but by women too. Interviews with Female Trump supporters confirm that they are not at all offended by his sexual predations; on the contrary they applaud them. This is what real red-blooded men are supposed to do, and it turns some women on. Working-class and middle-class women have diametrically-opposed strategies to sexual display, with the one putting all the goods in the window, the other pretending not to. I am supposing here that demure, middle-class women will not vote for Trump, but I am ready to be proved wrong.

One upshot of the sneaking Blue Collar regard for transgressive behaviour, is that the constant litany of Trumpian scandal is counterproductive. Yes, it horrifies the liberals but is lapped up by the base, with the added relish of conspicuous liberal dismay. Cheeking the headmaster. Tee hee! *We stuck it to them.*

This goes to the heart of matter: that running a complex modern society is very difficult and requires citizens to suppress most of their ‘natural instincts’. We have to behave in a highly artificial manner in order to get on with everybody else. There are thousands of rules to obey, some explicit, most implicit. It’s kind of horrible, but most of us get used to it, and in the end it ain’t so bad. Social capital slowly accumulates. In fact, the bargain is so good that there are queues round the block to get in to countries who have absorbed these rules.

Some, however, are much better at retooling their minds, and they tend to run the show. Others are not good at it and suffer substantial disadvantages. On the whole they can rely on the uptight rule-makers to run things effectively. But they find ways to pursue their interests, often by running down social capital, and this is reluctantly tolerated as long as they don’t slay the Golden Goose.

Meanwhile, vote for Trump. ‘He talks just like us’.

THE SAVIOUR

Jill suggests one I hadn’t thought of: dedication to a charismatic leader imbued with almost supernatural powers. This is an important feature of many stories, often with a last-minute intervention of a powerful benign force, the *deus ex machina*, like the arrival of Richard the Lionheart in some Robin Hood stories, or the US Cavalry in many a Western. Many stories contain this feature all through. Detective fiction is a prime case, where we all know the central character has supreme powers of reasoning and will solve the puzzle in the end and deliver justice. We enjoy having confidence in such a ‘universal parent’. Superhero stories are much the same, and we get great pleasure out of knowing all along that, perhaps despite early appearances, the villains are going to get shafted.

How much more thrilling to have a real-life hero in charge! Of course, religious people have various gods or gurus on their side, and invoke them through prayer. Many Christians believe the End is At Hand and the Almighty will smite the unbelievers (that’ll show ‘em!). But on a secular level, you also have saintly or godlike leaders who inspire almost pious devotion, like Gandhi or Nelson Mandela, or (for some) Barack Obama. And of course, the Great Dictators were equally adored by their followers.

Donald Trump also fits this bill. He is larger than life, and his behaviour easily attracts projections of his followers’ imaginations. Boorishness and obvious policy mistakes are not only overlooked, but transformed into positive features. Followers easily develop the sense that their leader is all-knowing and can almost look into their souls, leading to inextinguishable dedication.

And we should not neglect the fact that for many American Christians, there is a strong belief that Donald Trump is being used by the Almighty for His own purposes. It is striking that white evangelicals strongly support Trump, while black evangelicals, with the same theology, do not. I interpret this as meaning that theology is merely used as a cover for white supremacism.

PUT THEM TOGETHER?

I would not like to apportion any weighting to these explanations. Perhaps some apply more than another to different people. But it is probably fairly clear *they reinforce each other*. Once you are in that world, it is hard to escape, and all these effects are likely to keep you locked in.

Part of the problem for liberals is that, if any of these explanations bear merit, Trumpism cannot actually run a complex state, although it thinks it can; to Trumpistas a state is just a reality-show writ large. In the real world, a state depends on competent grown-ups to operate the complexities, like the pilot of an airliner. You cannot run it on the basis of whims and kinship networks.

Yet these are our fellow citizens, a lot of them. They are entitled to their views, and from time to time should surely ‘have their turn’, as they just have. But they can easily wreck the whole thing, largely because they misconceive its nature. Somehow, for the common good, they have to be prevented from taking over the cockpit, but this feels wrong. How do we deal with this conundrum?

Could we somehow give them a ‘safe mode’ dummy show that gives them the satisfactions they crave without endangering the whole operation? Are we back to Bread and Circuses? But here we have committed our cardinal elitist sin, us and them, with us doing the deciding. Tricky.

HOW MIGHT THIS HELP LIBERALS SEE THE BEAMS IN THEIR OWN EYES?

Analyses like this objectify, and not-so-subtly denigrate, our political opponents. Poor things! But presumably we are also subject to the same forces, and it’s worth going through them to see how.

Fairly obviously *belonging to a team* is pretty powerful. You become used to the culture, the jargon and the standard tropes. Like the others, we enjoy the jag of a sneering put-down or an agreeable left-wing fantasy, and we seek to minimise cognitive dissonance.

We self-isolate into our own media bubbles: who deliberately buys a Sunday paper with an opposite slant? No, you’d rather go without, they feel toxic. You might be subjected to cognitive dissonance. This is polarisation from *our* side.

We embrace fuzzy kayfabe thinking in not examining the internal consistency of progressive thought. It’s easy to believe we should raise the minimum wage, control rents and prices, legalise drugs, but we rarely follow through to think about the consequences. We love the idea of nature and the natural, but are invisibly dependent on trashing nature to support bourgeois lifestyles, as long as you can’t see it. We believe in multiculturalism but we still live in nice parts of town with people like ourselves. We would be horrified if the neighbours started scrapyards in their front gardens or dropped litter or started an FGM clinic, and we’d blame them for any spike in petty crime. It’s all full of hypocrisy.

Liberals experience some cousin of *ressentiment* in particular loathing of ‘wicked capitalists’ and the super-rich. We are not so much jealous or resentful, but we enjoy the sense of righteous anger, just as Trumpistas do.

It would probably take a serious Rightist to catalogue the hypocrisies of the Left properly. Our inconsistencies are largely invisible to us, as theirs are too. But at least *we* can see theirs, and through them, might come to understand ourselves better.

A programme of weekend seminars beckons!