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The Old World

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To defeat Trump's nightmarish vision, we can't keep clinging to liberalism's dead or dying ideas.

The old world is dying. We are in a dangerous interregnum — between periods, with several paths to take. With the election of Donald Trump, we have taken steps down a very dark one.

But to get off it, we cannot return to the path that led us here. We are here precisely because we have gone down that path for so long.

Trump represents a break with many aspects of neoliberalism. His campaign has lurched toward barbarity and promises to replace the whip of the market and the universal worker with fear of difference, nativism, the protection of decaying privilege, and the interests of an aspirational business class that is too weak to complete in global markets.

Such forces have long been building. But the Democrats, the principal party charged with opposing them, never identified these forces' true cause and failed to formulate appropriate solutions. They chalked it up to a moral failing of individuals — to the irredeemable “deplorables.”

Last night's election showcased the full expression of those forces. The ruling class we once knew doesn't rule in quite the same way as it once did. Its ideas no longer hold sway. What exactly will take shape to replace it is yet to be seen.

But as conservatism is refashioned, American liberalism has come into its own crisis. Liberalism isn't withering away — it is being torn asunder. Its center has fallen out.

The vacuum that was left behind became a spawning point for ideas that blamed immigrants and others for the economic anxiety and misery neoliberalism brought. But American liberalism had no compelling response, nor solutions to the very real pain so many were feeling. Its coalition eroded as a result. It ignored the widespread decay and kept injecting the diseased body with the same medicine. “America is already great,” Hillary Clinton said in response to Donald Trump's signature phrase “Make America Great Again” — as if such a response offered any reassurance to the masses of people who hadn't felt such greatness for a long, long time.

If liberalism is to become an effective counterweight, it can't continue to offer up such lackluster ideas. Electoral coalitions can't be built upon the old technocratic, neoliberal platforms.

It is not enough to say you believe in and support diversity — we need an active and robust training and jobs program that makes economic security a reality for both workers of color and white workers who are suffering. It's not enough to say you support women's abortion rights — we need a minimum wage that gives poor and working-class women an *actual* ability to choose whether or not to exercise their rights.

It's not enough to tinker with health care and drive up prices, as Obamacare has done — we need a universal system. It's not enough to slap the hands of finance after it throws the world into a crisis — we need to fundamentally reorganize how finance works. It's not enough to be satisfied with the current jobs report — people want good jobs, not precarious ones.

Trump tapped into this. We need to as well.

We should not celebrate the defeat of liberalism before we are on a better path. But we do need to understand it. Liberalism has fallen on its own sword. To defeat the alternative that Trump represents, we can't keep clinging to its dead or dying ideas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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