# Trump and Brexit: Beyond 'Why Trump Won'

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Political and academic analyses of Trump's election victory, like the analysis of the results in the Brexit referendum, has initially largely focused on the role of class, race, gender, and to some extent region. For weeks, we have taken the task to "explain Trump" to be the task to explain why so many people voted for him.

Asking that question leads us to the analysis of different demographic groups, their interests and their ideologies and an analysis of the capacity (or not) of different candidates and parties to appeal to them. Asking that question has also been an occasion for different parts of the left to blame other parts of the left. That analysis has its place but it neglects the failures of the political system preceding both Trump's victory and the Brexit vote and it risks missing what is at stake in terms of the possibility of fundamental institutional changes, which would affect all social groups, though certainly not all groups equally.
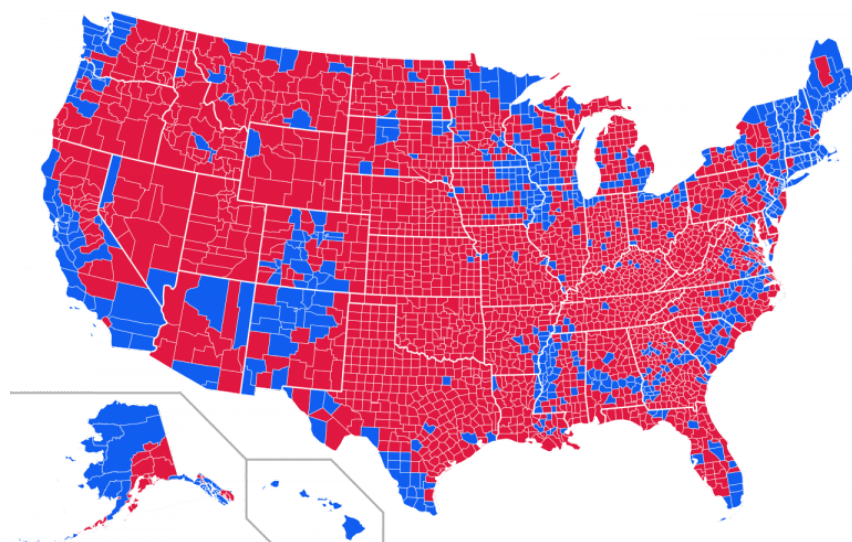
My colleague Michael McQuarrie has recently argued that sociology "has a Trump problem": He argued that we need to take sociologists' failure to understand and predict the working class vote for Trump seriously as a result of deep-seated intellectual dispositions. But that may have been sociology's Trump problem before the election. Since the election, a different kind of Trump problem has become apparent: Sociology, like most social sciences tends to default to thinking in terms of individuals, groups, and ideologies rather than taking institutions seriously. To the extent that sociologists have thought about institutions they have tended to assume a very stable political context. We sociologists have not practiced our vocabulary for the real range of variation in political systems and the real range of possible political outcomes for some time. Any analysis that does not consider the full range of outcomes risks minimizing what is at stake in current events.

We might expect sociologists of stratification to analyse individuals and groups and we might expect sociologists of education, of medicine, and of science to examine changes in policy while assuming the form of the political system as stable. But political sociologists have not been immune to a version of this problem: Political sociologists, particularly in the US but also elsewhere, have developed a very sophisticated language for asking "who wins", that is, "which social movement or political grouping, with what strategy can influence policy", taking the parameters of the contest largely for granted.

Work that identifies more self-consciously as "critical" has focused on critiquing existing institutions with diagnosis that might strike later observers as both too alarmist and not alarmist enough given what may now unfold. This work has also tended to assume the stability of institutions, even while ritualistically declaring them full of contradictions and inherently prone to crisis. Yes, critical work has also been a place for imagining alternative orders, but the fact that these were only positive alternatives set against "reproduction" as the main danger betrays a debt to an idea of progress that previous generations of critical theorists had buried in the light of bitter historical experiences of war, violence and mass displacement.

There are complex reasons for this assumption of stability, some of them pragmatic and psychological, some of them deeply intellectual. Sociology and political science has a tendency to treat events, including wars and regime changes, as "external" disruptions to what it considers its "real" object of study. It has not helped that social science research has privileged not only the West but also more particularly the UK and US, both of which are exceptional in their formal political stability when viewed from the centre of their empires.

Both Brexit and Trump were preceded by a significant weakening of liberal democratic institutions, most notably the newsmedia and political parties on both sides of the political spectrum. Related to the weakening of political parties, we can observe a difficulty in recruiting and retaining a political class that functions on terms other than its own.

In the UK, the result of the Brexit vote – a plebiscite in a country that has no constitutional role for or regulation of plebiscites – has to be explained as much by a divided conservative party and the reckless leadership of David Cameron as by the views of people who voted in favour of "leave". Whatever we think of Jeremy Corbyn as a party leader, the process surrounding his initial leadership bid has revealed that "New Labour", sociologically speaking, refers to a clique rather than to a specific set of ideas, and it has revealed the damage this clique has done to communication within and recruitment to the Labour Party.

Of course, we must analyse the long-term failures of the Democratic Party in the United States as Josh Pacewicz, for example, has begun to do based on his research. But liberals and leftist across the world are now realising how much they have also depended on a functioning *Republican* Party in the US.

Pollsters have pointed out, that, demographically speaking, the UK and the US are the same country before and after a narrow referendum or vote. We can analyse cultural structures to highlight continuities of racism, nationalism, and sexism. But in both cases, electoral defeat, however narrow, may have profound consequences. It has fundamentally strengthened the hand of some players who are not defined primarily by their ideological content but stand out by their willingness to exploit the weakness of institutions for their own advantage regardless of the consequences. In both cases the institutional antecedents of the event do not bode well for the ability of larger groups of elites to mitigate ill-effects even in their own self-interest.

Some of our tools for observing political processes might make us slow to intellectually acknowledge the fact that regime change is a possibility. While some analysts look to the next election based on polling data and approval ratings, many people already feel like they live in a distinctively new period of history: This past July, about three weeks after the Brexit vote in the UK, the writer Ian McEwan highlighted that the experience of reading newspapers and talking politics had fundamentally changed. He likened the public to "Kremlinologists" who were reduced to

gossiping "below the stairs" about what a small clique of people might "really" be thinking and planning to do. This gossip is a symptom of the concentration of power in very few hands. In the UK, we are still watching below the stairs five months later, effectively without an opposition in parliament, with little control of a small group of leaders from within their own party, and with widely-read newspapers engaged in a campaign that includes targeting individuals members of the judiciary; in the US many have already averted their eyes after one month of a similar but more clearly stage-managed show.

History reminds us of the greater range of outcomes in terms of political forms. The comparison to the 1930s does point to similarities in terms of a turn away from trade and in terms of the prevalence of racist ideologies. But the alternatives for countries like the US and the UK are not "Hitler" or "Fascism" versus "just another lost election", especially when we consider a relative lack of organization on the right on the one hand and the distinctive problems of the current economic model, current communication technologies, a shift of power away from the west and environmental degradation on the other hand.

Will liberal democratic institutions assert themselves, either through inertia, as they have in some previous crisis, or through some project of active organising within and across and outside political parties? It is too early to tell. The US and the UK are different countries, and observers might disagree on the prospects for each. I have in the above perhaps rather exaggerated the similarities between the crises, which the two countries are facing. Worryingly of course, though distinctive countries and cases, they are not independent of each other. War on a larger scale than we are already seeing could engulf both, for example.

Sociologists and political scientists have a vocabulary for analysing different types of authoritarian regimes and different types of state failure that we might now have to undust to examine the forms of political power that are emerging more closely. Richard Lachmann has raised the possibility of a "Bonapartist" Trump, for example, who might try to use a combination of vigilantes, and police power to silence opponents, which "could mean that the U.S. will not have a fair, contested election for the foreseeable future." We also need to further develop our language for the political forms among and within and between states that emerge as part of the systemic aspects of current developments.

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