

Trump in the White House

THIS IS NOT NORMAL. Presidents-elect of the United States of America do not send out tweets advocating that people who burn the American flag should be jailed or deprived of their citizenship [LINK: <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/29/politics/donald-trump-flag-burning-penalty-proposal/>]. Incoming presidential administrations do not feature among their number an outspoken white supremacist, even if he calls himself a "white nationalist" instead [LINK: <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/14/steve-bannon-white-house-racism-fear>], or a prospective Secretary of Education who has made it her life's work to dismantle the public educational system in the United States [LINK: http://www.slate.com/articles/life/education/2016/11/how_trump_and_education_secretary_betsy_devos_would_gut_public_education.html].

In my view the whole situation is shocking, but not necessarily surprising -- not if we take a clear view of the facts.

To begin with, consider three things that we know based on electoral numbers.

1) The election was close. Very close. 100,000 votes going the other way in three states (Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin) would have swung the results the other way [LINK: <https://newrepublic.com/article/138754/blame-trumps-victory-college-educated-whites-not-working-class>]. The New York Times reports [LINK: http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/11/08/us/elections/exit-poll-analysis.html?_r=1] that Hillary Clinton's numbers among Black, Hispanic, and Asian voters were not as strong as Obama's were, which seems to have accounted for some of the outcome -- had those voters turned out and voted for Clinton as strongly as they had voted for Obama, Clinton might have won the election. Despite all of that, Clinton still seems to have won the overall popular vote by almost 2.5 million votes [LINK: <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/hillary-clintons-popular-vote-lead-donald-trump-now/story?id=43888531>]. So Trump's electoral victory should not be mistaken for any kind of general shift of the entire population of the United States towards the kind of racist, misogynist, anti-global nativism consistently characteristic of the Trump campaign's pitch during the election.

2) Although currently-available exit polls are rather unreliable, and should be taken with a serious grain of salt, we have some good evidence to suggest that Clinton's loss and Trump's victory resulted in large part from white voters overwhelmingly voting for Trump regardless of gender, levels of education, or levels of income. According to an analysis in the New Republic [LINK: <https://newrepublic.com/article/138754/blame-trumps-victory-college-educated-whites-not-working-class>], 63% of white men voted for Trump 63% versus only 31% who voted for Clinton; white women voted 53% Trump-43% Clinton. College-educated whites were also strongly pro-Trump: college-educated white men voted 54% Trump versus 39% Clinton, and college-educated white women voted 51% Clinton and 45% Trump. College-educated white women were the only white demographic group that Clinton won. (Non-college-educated whites voted even more strongly pro-Trump: 67% overall, 72% of men and 62% of women.) In addition, votes swung between the two major political parties the most dramatically in rural counties that are overwhelmingly white. According to a Washington Post analysis [LINK:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/11/10/people-are-oversimplifying-the-reasons-for-trumps-victory/?utm_term=.bed80cdeb120], the 253 counties that swung 25 percentage points or more towards the Republican party compared to how they voted in the 2012 presidential election were places where 65% or so of voters live in rural areas -- and which are 95% white, compared to a 77% national average.

3) This was not about low-income people revolting against a system that had left them behind. CNN exit polls [LINK: <http://edition.cnn.com/election/results/exit-polls/national/president>] indicate that 52% of voters making less than \$50K annually - 36% of the electorate -- voted 52% for Clinton, but among voters making more -- 64% of the electorate -- 49% voted Trump, 47% voted Clinton. The median household income in the United States is about \$52,000, so if this were primarily an election about economically distressed people insisting that the government do something to help them, we would probably have seen that half of the population with comes below that median point voting for Trump...but that is not what we saw at all. Relatively well-off voters, who are also disproportionately white, were more strongly pro-Trump than those less well off.

What does all that mean?

It means that this was not an election about most voters' "material interests." Most of the people who voted for Trump are likely going to be hurt when and if his administration repeals the Affordable Care Act (aka "Obamacare"), eliminates and privatizes Medicare, messes with Social Security, implements tax breaks skewed towards the upper income brackets, and initiates more military responses to various global crises by withdrawing from alliances and generally undercutting diplomacy. So the kind of electoral analysis prized by mainstream Anglophone Political Science isn't likely to get us very far.

Which is fortunate for those of us who are not mainstream Anglophone Political Scientists! My read, my explanation, of the election comes from my sense that people were voting -- as I would suggest that they actually *always* do -- based on a vision of what kind of country they want to live in. Which is after all the basic "constructivist" theoretical stance: identity before "interests," where "before" means logically prior and "identity" means not some attribute or collection of attributes but a socially sustained set of claims about who "we" are -- identity as process rather than identity as a static essence. "We are X" as an identity-claim is not a statement of fact, but an active effort to shape and constitute "us" as a particular kind of "us." Identity-claims also stretch out towards the future, envisioning the kind of world that people who claim to be X want to live in.

Based on the quantitative results as well as the broader discourse sustaining the rhetoric from the Trump camp both before and after the election, what this election tells us is that large portions of the U.S. electorate want to live in a country marked by white supremacy, male dominance, and nativist anti-globalism. That's the message that resonated with rural whites, and with whites generally, which is largely what gave Trump his electoral victory. Yes, the Trump campaign also talked about jobs and foreign policy, but framed those in decidedly racist, misogynist, nativist terms: job losses in the U.S. were characterized as being due to immigrants (mainly but not exclusively Mexicans) taking jobs away from whites, corporations moving

production facilities overseas were castigated for being unpatriotic and betraying America, and Hillary Clinton's unsuitability for the presidency was presented with classically gendered tropes about her inability to be tough and firm. And the Trump campaign complemented these discussions with ample ranting about the erosion of "traditional values," which in the United States is mainly code for heteronormative gender roles, and promised to "take the country back"...back from an African-American president who, let us not forget, Trump spent years questioning the citizenship of, fanning the general racist marking of non-whites as inherently alien and suspicious into a smoldering blaze of resentment.

Which is shocking, but should not be surprising. Shocking because many of us had believed that such notions were well on their way to extinction, so their sudden eruption into the middle of public discussions feels like a repudiation of the "progress" we thought we'd made. But it should not be surprising. To borrow a notion from James Scott [LINK:

https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Domination_and_the_Arts_of_Resistance.html?id=tl9q9DbnkuUC], this was a "saturnalia," a moment when hidden transcripts abruptly become manifest, and those not privy to the transcript when it was hidden are caught off-guard. These racist, misogynist, nativist notions had merely gone underground; they were vanishing from broad public view, but were sustained and maintained in more segregated spaces: right-wing talk radio, "alt-right" websites and those conservative news media outlets that provided the "alt-right" with a platform, and private conversations outside of the main public discussions. They only awaited someone to trigger them, and make it acceptable to say in public what many -- many whites -- were already thinking and saying in relatively private spaces. And they were awaiting someone to use such notions to frame economic and cultural anxieties in racist, misogynist, nativist terms, because this allowed people who did not think of themselves as racist and misogynist (and did not think of themselves as "nativist," but preferred the descriptor "patriotic," which is U.S.-speak for nativist/nationalist) to vent their frustrations publicly [LINK:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/18/none-of-the-old-rules-apply-dave-eggers-travels-through-post-election-america>].

The results of the election should also not be surprising in historical perspective. The United States has always been constitutively framed in terms of the "manifest destiny" of the country, a "new order of the ages" (*novus ordo seclorum*) as it says on the Great Seal of the United States, a providential notion supporting a broad tradition of exceptionalist thought and action since before the formal founding of the country. That vision was right from the beginning a *white* vision, articulated against the original inhabitants of the land as justification for clearing them away, and then justifying the subordinate status of the Africans who were brought over as slaves in order to build the place, and then later to justify the importation as subordinates of Asian and Mexican laborers. It's also a decidedly *patriarchal* vision. God is a big dude in the sky, and His dominion is mirrored in the dominion of the husband over his wife and kids. The logic is "we are chosen by God so whatever we do is justified in His eyes." This goes beyond ordinary nationalism or exemptionalism; this is about serving as the Metatron, the Voice of God on Earth. Forget Machiavelli; the real logic of "the ends justifies the means" is the possession of unreconstructed idealists.

And -- this is the critical part of the story -- the revelation in question is not one that challenges everyday American living, but rather invests it with transcendent,

universal significance and importance. So "the American way of life" is *intrinsicly* valuable, and it's what "we" "already do." And the "we" in question is white people inhabiting so-called "traditional" gender roles; that's the baseline against which every other articulation struggles. Trump came along and restated that story forcefully, crudely, using "everyday language" and distancing himself from the way that educated elites talk. Coming on the heels of the first African-American president, who simply wasn't "normal" for a large part of the electorate, and facing the alternate of the first female president, Trump sounded like a return to normalcy. So they voted for him in droves.

This also accounts for Trump's tweet, just recently, that people who burn the American flag should be imprisoned and perhaps deprived of their citizenship. Classic nationalist exclusionary rhetoric, which is tossing red meat to his base -- because the flag represents the Idea Of America. So burning it in protest means setting yourself outside of God's Own Plan For Humanity, and you deserve whatever comes your way in retribution. Shocking, disgraceful, profoundly disturbing -- but not surprising.

This election was all about what "America" means in the United States. And as John Ruggie argued way back in 1997, the future of the embedded liberal world order depends on the outcome of that domestic debate. And for the moment the winning position in that debate seems like an oscillation back towards the unilateral United States fighting against non-Christian brown and black Others, seeking to exemplify a narrow vision and expecting divine vindication. That should worry everyone who thinks that the liberal world order -- including things like NATO and the UN, the World Bank and the IMF and the WTO, and the "governance without government" world of NGOs and INGOs that grew up and solidified around those formal international organizations and institutions -- is, if not perfection, than at least preferable to various historical alternatives. The United States' commitment to that world order is an essential part of what makes it all hang together, and a U.S. withdrawal from the world -- which is less "isolationism" than unilateralism and a rescinding of prior binding international commitments in favor of a resurgent sovereign autonomy -- augurs dire consequences.

So what is to be done? We need to be vigilant. We need to refrain from normalizing these results, and we need to resist the temptation to treat this as though it were just "politics as usual." It's not. It's a serious threat to the very notion of "politics as usual" we thought we'd arrived at in a more or less stable way. The fact that these results should not be surprising cannot be allowed to diminish our shock and outrage. Instead we need to use that as an impetus to organize, to advocate, to protect the fragile spaces where critical thinking flourishes -- and to call out racism, misogyny, and nativism where we see it. Remember that Trump's message did not sway most of the population of the United States, and remember that another America is possible, an America that embraces diversity and pluralism and strives to defend liberty and justice and an openness to encounter (even if the United States, like all temporal human organizations, often falls short of that ideal). "E pluribus unum" -- out of many, one -- need not mean that Others should be excluded in order to create unity. It can be read as a perpetual challenge to engagement and dialogue, and that kind of reimagined "manifest destiny" could serve as an alternate mythology on which to base a different world. And in the long run, if we create and protect space for that kind of imagination, that vision might just prevail.