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Anticipating the Trump Presidency

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In the weeks prior to the American presidential election I received a large number of independent messages from progressive friends abroad who were either expats or citizens of other countries. I was not too surprised that almost every message expressed hostility to Hillary Clinton, but I was shocked that so many were opting for Trump to win the election or advocating a stay-at-home boycott or third party vote

believing that neither Trump nor Clinton deserved support, and that there was no basis for making one preferable to the other. I shared some of these sentiments, but overcame my doubts about the better option as the campaign wore on, becoming increasingly definite about supporting Clinton, initially as the lesser of evils and later more affirmatively, as she had become a woman unduly victimized by the nasty virulence of Trump's hurtful misogynist slurs. I increasingly felt that my overseas friends were out of touch with the internal dynamics of American society, specifically, not appreciating that Trump's election, in view of his campaign, would be a dark day of foreboding, hurt, rejection, and despair for African Americans, Hispanics, Muslims, women, and supporters of progressive causes.

The views of my pro-Trump foreign friends have over the years been consistently humane and congenial. Their various reasons for being anti-Clinton or pro-Trump resulted from adopting predominantly structural outlooks or reflect preoccupations with specific substantive concerns. The structural arguments were two-fold: first, that both political parties in the US were equally subservient to the logic of neoliberal globalization ('the Washington consensus') that they believed was the source of many of the worst evils in the world, making Trump seem almost like a third party candidate who was challenging the core elements of economic globalization. For them, the only moral response was either to boycott the election altogether, as it made no difference which side won; or alternatively, take a chance with Trump, as he at least seemed likely to repudiate NAFTA and kill the TPP.

A second structural argument, often overlapping with the first, was that the military industrial corporate complex was embraced by the mainstream of both parties, making American global militarism bipartisan. Such a view was reinforced by the degree to which the Washington national security establishment and neocon think tanks overwhelmingly stepped forward to support Clinton, including many prominent Republicans, fearing that Trump would choose a security path that was adventurously dangerous or, worse, might even pursue an anti-militarist neo-isolationist foreign policy. Trump so threatened the Republican national security establishment that Washington's political elite generally agreed he would make an unreliable and irresponsible leader of the American 'global state.' Trump's repeated calls to rebuild America's allegedly broken military capabilities were almost irrelevant, given his disorienting comments about alliances, nonproliferation, and regime-changing interventions. Although Trump's challenge to political correctness in the security domain was anathema to Washington's political class, it was music to

the ears of my foreign friends.

Source: NeoGAF

There is a third version of structural analysis, ignored by my friends abroad, that seems helpful in explaining what happened in the American election. It is the extent to which various forms of ultra-nationalist populism are succeeding in electing leaders throughout the world by large margins, including Russia, India, Japan, Turkey, Egypt, Philippines, and now the United States. The Brexit vote in Britain, along with the rise of right wing political parties in Europe, exhibit a similar backlash against globalizing tendencies and foreign interventions that have in turn engendered menacing transnational migrations of desperate people fleeing war torn zones and escaping from extreme poverty.

These migrations fuel chauvinism in the West that toxically interacts with economic stagnation, high levels of unemployment, terrorist anxieties, and closely related threats to indigenous ethnic and racial identities. In effect, right wing populism is a response to the failures of Western political, economic, and cultural systems to

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Over all, my foreign friends were generally opposed to Clinton's global security agenda, especially as it pertained to Russia and the Middle East, and preferred Trump's vague generalities and even regarded his inexperience as an asset. The pro-Trump arguments here concentrated on Clinton's past record of support for regime-changing military interventions in the Middle East and her support for a No Fly Zone in Syria whose establishment would almost certainly result in a confrontation with Russia that could escalate into yet another American-sponsored regime-changing intervention in a Muslim country. Such an intervention was particularly feared as it could easily lead to a new cold war, with hot war dangers. More than a couple of my correspondents quoted her chilling remark in Libya shortly after Qaddafi's capture and grisly execution, "We came, we saw, he died," feeling that it embodied the heartless geopolitics in the Middle East that had produced the current regional turmoil.

Although these perceptions are anecdotal, I find them revealing and disturbing. Because American elections, especially this one, seem so important to people in other countries, the results are watched closely, sometimes more closely than their own national elections. Early reactions to the Trump victory in Mexico and Russia reveal contradictory priorities in various parts of the world. The Mexican reaction has been reported to be one of uniform shock and sorrow, as well as feelings of deep concern for their relatives and friends living in the US or worries that remittances from America for very poor families would now be in jeopardy or heavily taxed. In the streets of Moscow there was rejoicing, since Russians, whether they liked Putin or not, seemed convinced that Trump would act as a practical businessman and work toward cooperative relations that would help both governments diminish the frightening tensions currently associated with NATO, Ukraine, and Syria, and avoid any further downward spiral in relations that they quite reasonably feared would be the trajectory of a more ideological Clinton presidency.

Outside the U.S., many people, whether American or not, tend to view the Trump victory and the Clinton defeat through a single-issue optic that mostly pertains to *international economic and security policy*. In contrast, those living here in the United States, if drawn to Trump, are likely to be attracted by his anti-establishment outsider outlook combined with their own *internal* preoccupations with *national* economic policy, especially jobs and trade, and cultural liberalism (e.g., gays, pro-choice, race, immigration, and recreational drugs). Trump supporters with a more self-consciously conservative bent believe he would keep the Supreme Court appointment process in Republican hands for the next four years. This prospect alone apparently led many wavering suburban Republicans to vote for Trump in the end, disregarding qualms that might otherwise have kept them home on election day.

In his victory speech, Trump sounded gentle and benign, promising to govern for all citizens as a unifying leader, stressing the need to rebuild the decaying American infrastructure and even offering gracious praise to Hilary Clinton for a hard fought campaign. Unfortunately, this cheerful aftermath is bound to be short lived. Major struggles loom, and will begin as soon as Trump announces his appointments of cabinet members and key staff. Not long after some doubtless provocative choices, bitter policy controversies will emerge as he seeks to implement his programmatic priorities: scrapping Obamacare, NAFTA, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change,

and the Iran nuclear deal. Altogether, this will sadly erase from the books the best parts of the Obama legacy. It is not a pretty picture without even considering whether Trump will follow through on his most notorious pledges: mass deportation of ‘illegal’ immigrants, imposition of an airtight anti-Muslim immigration ban, and the construction a police friendly ‘law and order’ regime to combat ‘black lives matter’ activism and inner city crime.

In this period, American resilience will certainly be tested, probably as much or more than at any time since the American Civil War. The haunting uncertainty is whether the likely incivility of the Trump presidency will *decisively* darken the political destiny of the country, or only be a transitory period of regression. Can the creative energies of resistance and reform build a transformative movement of sufficient strength to balance the Trump juggernaut? On this slim possibility, somewhat prefigured by the primary campaign of Bernie Sanders, our hopes rest for a resilient and resurrected America again dedicated to achieving peace abroad and justice at home.

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There is a final observation that deserves commentary and reflection. It should not be overlooked that Clinton won the popular vote by a comfortable margin (thanks to California) despite her high unfavorability ratings. If not for that peculiar anachronistic American institution—the Electoral College—Clinton would be the winner, Trump the loser, and political gurus would be busy telling us why such an outcome was inevitable. With real world clarity, it is mere cocktail party phantasy to think that American democracy will sometime soon be democratized by counting every person’s vote equally. Entrenched Republican Party interests will never let the US Constitution be so modernized, but what this popular vote does confirm is that the country is almost evenly divided, and that progressive values continue to enjoy a slight majority. It is therefore wildly premature to think that this election signals that the American people have descended into the swamps of racism and nativism, but it will still take a vigilant opposition movement to prevent Trump’s government from imposing its horrendous agenda on our collective future.

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