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Election 2016: Think Globally, Act Nationally

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The triumph of Trump is seen as a failure of globalization—but it is also a sign of the equal and opposite failures of social science and global studies, which must learn from each other if we have any hope of rebuilding our beleaguered democracy. On

the one hand, it is clear that technocratic political science failed to comprehend the nationalist fears and aspirations of millions of Americans. Structural models of strategic political behavior (such as median voter theory, incumbent advantage, and social psychology of materialist interests) failed even in their own terms. More constructivist analyses of populism, patriarchy, and the historical appeal of fascism yield more insight, but even 21st-century projections of Peronism and its ilk failed to offer sufficient insights leading up to the election. Our traditional understanding of populism apparently cannot grapple with the dynamics of backlash in advanced economies in the information age.

On the other hand, at first glance global studies appears to offer an understanding of fundamentalist reaction to neo-liberalism, sometimes in the form of globalized religion and sometimes in nationalist withdrawal. But this global academic imaginary is also incomplete, as it does not engage national political institutions and the liberal and social democratic resistance they may represent. Too many progressive intellectuals rail against "the system" as structurally determined ("rigged") or take refuge in our privileged cosmopolitanism ("I'll move to Canada")—without taking responsibility for informing ourselves and our communities about the nuts and bolts that influence our capacity for change and representation. Regardless of field, we need to study and teach citizenship: the repertoire of legal rights and strategic litigation, voting regulations and suppression strategies, histories of social movements, and the implications of budgetary and tax policy decisions.

This tragic election reminds us that we have a responsibility to incorporate engaged social science in global studies, and that rumors of the death of the national and international are premature.

We need to better manage and advocate the democratic governance and rights that are still available in advanced economies—whatever their limitations or history—because authoritarian populists and neo-liberals know how to subvert them while we are busy theorizing the inadequacy of the public sphere. Those of us who have lived under and studied dictatorships know: never turn your back on a loaded political institution. Hillary won the popular vote, and lost the Electoral College—just like Gore—and when we lost momentum in our national environmental politics, we lost a generation of action on global warming. Now, the failures of national party politics will deliver a climate change denier as head of the Environmental Protection

Agency. Just as political science argues that at the national level, “all politics are local”—constructed by grassroots contests and interests—global studies must now consider that all global politics are local too.

This tragic election reminds us that we have a responsibility to incorporate engaged social science in global studies, and that rumors of the death of the national and international are premature. We need to produce, disseminate and train our students and the public with concrete, policy-relevant skills, tools, and information to transform our societies from the ground up—not just promote global sympathies or provide generalized analysis, no matter how critical. Otherwise, we cede the potential for political action to media-savvy manipulators and soulless policy wonks. This week, I happen to be giving a lecture on the ideology of anti-globalization and I included a slide about how many jobs were actually lost to NAFTA vs. how many gained and where, and how to think about the social costs of trade as a political issue. It is no accident that the big break in the vote was college education. Colleges and universities, for all their shortcomings, still enable individuals to think through their respective interests and the common interest in more reasoned terms, rather than respond to the challenges of globalization and cultural change based on vague fears.



Although I am heartsick to live in a divided nation (and have personally witnessed as well the rise of the right in India, Turkey, Austria, and Hungary), I have come to realize that the “forgotten masses” are really a mix of the admirable, clueless, wounded, and scheming—and yes, some *are* “deplorable.” They do not deserve the government that a bare plurality of voters chose, that substitutes scapegoating for social justice. So yes, listen to their stories, feel their pain, and advocate transformational global alternatives—but also address their intellect and desire for self-determination, harness the communication era more strategically, and insist on our common humanity.

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