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How to Save Politics in a Post-Truth Era?

Ilan Zvi Baron

As the last decade of the Twentieth Century came into view, a slew of Western political commentators remarked on what appeared to be the glowing triumph of Western liberalism and capitalism against the forces of communism. Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" thesis may be the most famous, but alongside his triumphalism was Charles Krauthammer's argument on behalf of the *Unipolar Moment* in which, "The center of world power is the unchallenged superpower, the United States, attended by its Western allies."¹ This glamorization of American power was also articulated by the phrase, "The indispensable nation", which was used by the Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright. One of the authors of that phrase, Sydney Blumenthal, recalled that it was meant to convey how, "Only the United States had the power to guarantee global security: without our presence or support, multilateral endeavors would fail."² While these pronouncements of American glory had multiple audiences, this triumph of the West is surely looking to some like a pyrrhic victory. The election of Donald Trump, pathological liar and egoist extraordinaire, and the self-inflicted wound of a referendum in the UK to leave the European Union (Brexit, as it is known), are warning signs of how the political institutions of the West are at risk.

THE POPULIST SURGE

These two events, which appear to be quite different, are part of a populist turn across the Western world, one that combines a variety of different forces including parochial nationalism, a distrust of elites, and a rejection of expert opinion. The parochialism is related to various forms of racism, anti-migrant ideology and xenophobia. It is not just Trump and Brexit that are evidence of this turn. Other examples include the varying degrees of success of Marine Le Pen of the Front National in France, of the Freedom Party in Austria, and of the AfD in Germany, not to mention the neo-Nazi march in Gothenburg by the Nordic Resistance Movement in late September 2017. In the

US, the so-called alt-right has found a newfound confidence to take their vitriol out into the streets, as evident in the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in early August 2017, and in the UK, reports suggest an increase in racism, or at least of racist attacks, since the referendum.³ The Home Office reported in October 2017, that the rise in hate crimes during 2016/17 was “largest percentage increase seen since” 2011/2012.⁴

To further complicate the situation, it also appears as though the traditional class divides are not as rigid as one might have thought. There is some evidence that suggests how both Trump and Brexit crossed traditional party lines, with traditional blue collar voters turning against the Democrats in the USA and Labour in the UK, and voting for Trump and Brexit. In the UK, this move was not especially surprising since the Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn did little to publicly make the case to Remain, in part because he did not want to be seen to share a platform of the Conservative Prime Minister, but also because he was known as a Euroskeptic.⁵ Whatever the reason, his behavior during the referendum was a clear case of caring more for his own self-image than of acting in the national interest, and shortly after the referendum he came out saying how he wanted to rebrand himself as a populist.⁶

With Donald Trump, it is hard to know exactly where to start: his serial lying, misogyny, blatant incompetence.... Trump’s lack of qualifications led the periodical *The Atlantic*, in the third time since its founding in 1857, to take an editorial stance in the Presidential election:

“Trump ... might be the most ostentatiously unqualified major-party candidate in the 227-year history of the American presidency. These concerns compel us, for the third time since the magazine’s founding, to endorse a candidate for president. ...

Donald Trump ... has no record of public service and no qualifications for public office. His affect is that of an infomercial huckster; he traffics in conspiracy theories and racist invective; he is appallingly sexist; he is erratic, secretive, and xenophobic; he expresses admiration for authoritarian rulers, and evinces authoritarian tendencies himself. He is easily goaded, a poor quality for someone seeking control of America’s nuclear arsenal. He is an enemy of fact-based discourse; he is ignorant of, and indifferent to, the Constitution; he appears not to read.”⁷

Trump's questionable judgement is on display so regularly that even a short highlight is insufficient. Nevertheless, to name three: he has insulted Gold Star families, famously boasted about sexual assault, and pardoned Sheriff Joe Arpaio whose guilt of criminal contempt was but the tip of a list of conduct so unethical that both the ACLU and the fashion magazine GQ published a repost detailing his monstrous conduct.⁸ Even though Trump's approval ratings remain very low,⁹ a surprising number have little trust in media stories about him.¹⁰ While these numbers most likely reflect the partisan divide in the United States more than much else, they are suggestive of a lack of faith in the fourth estate and a degree of trust in someone who clearly is not worth trusting.

A LEADERLESS BREXIT STRATEGY

Two of the Western World's historical leading powers are engaged in what appears to be a race to debase their political institutions and harm the credibility of their leadership, stability and institutional integrity. The colossal incompetence of Trump and of Prime Minister May and the Conservative party are so extreme it would be hard to make it up.¹¹ It is hard to know where to start, or stop, as the dangers posed by President Trump, and Brexit are real. In the UK, those advancing a "hard Brexit" appear to be colossally ignorant, or willfully self-delusional, or perhaps are blatant liars seeking to say whatever they feel will benefit their own interests. The trio of Gove, Johnson and Farage offer a story based on fear of immigrants and concerns about jobs and globalization, deluding people into thinking that their country is lost and overrun by the EU. The anti-EU press in the UK, whose hostility to the EU is hard to fathom for reasons anything other than sheer opportunism and cynicism, also plays an important role in perpetrating this story. Even Boris Johnson noted how it was not accuracy but sensationalism that drove (his) EU news stories.¹² At one point *The Sun* called for the reintroduction of the old blue colour of UK passports, clearly reflecting that the real priority of the Leave camp was symbolism instead of substance.¹³ The current leadership of Prime Minister Theresa May and David Davis, the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU is barely present. In fact, there is no leadership. Their conduct continues to demonstrate stupefying levels of wilful ignorance, and they are clearly unprepared for either the negotiations or the economic and political dangers posed by leaving the EU.

What are we to do? Or more specifically, what is a scholar of politics and a theorist to do? I could march in the streets, sign petitions, join political action groups etc. I have done some of these. But my vocation is the study of politics, and in this particular situation I found myself turning to political theory as a means to make sense out of this mess.¹⁴ This analysis can be found in my book, *How to Save Politics in a Post-Truth World*, where I conclude by arguing that what is missing in our politics is political responsibility, and that this absence is central to understanding the current predicament, but also offers a case for how to redress it.

THE NEED TO RESTORE POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Political responsibility is seemingly absent from the public sphere, and this absence contributed to the conditions under which these crises were possible. For many, the evidence of this absence is an economic one, of how what used to be good jobs can now barely keep one out of poverty. But also at play is a major transformation of the economy where traditional manufacturing jobs are increasingly at risk in the post-industrial Western world. The collapse of the steel industry in the UK, including the closing of the Redcar steel plant in Teesside, confirms the sense of an international marketplace that cannot provide for good manufacturing jobs at home. However, these are not just blue-collar issues. It is a travesty, for example, that in the UK our healthcare workers have been subject to annual pay cuts in real terms since their pay was frozen seven years ago. With inflation now above 3%, the professionals we turn to in times of our greatest need are very likely earning less than what the Government requires immigrants to earn if they want to stay in the country (it is £30 000 for a Tier 2 visa).¹⁵ Skilled jobs are often not coming with a sufficient salary. There is something awry when one could earn more money working for a supermarket than working as a trained health-care practitioner in a hospital. I am not suggesting that we need to provide for some kind of salary control on what different industries pay. Rather, my point is that for large segments of the population, across multiple industries, learning a trade, going to University, and finding a job no longer seems to necessarily offer path for a secure future. These concerns were at the heart of why Michael Moore predicted that Donald Trump would win the presidency.¹⁶ As he wrote on his website during the election campaign, the declining future of the American working-class was an important factor:

“When Trump stood in the shadow of a Ford Motor factory during the Michigan primary, he threatened the corporation that if they did indeed go ahead with their

planned closure of that factory and move it to Mexico, he would slap a 35% tariff on any Mexican-built cars shipped back to the United States. It was sweet, sweet music to the ears of the working class of Michigan, and when he tossed in his threat to Apple that he would force them to stop making their iPhones in China and build them here in America, well, hearts swooned....”

The fate of the working-class remains a serious fault-line in a world where outsourcing and international cheap labour threaten jobs in the post-industrial world.¹⁷ The situation for many is that if rising inflation is not the problem, then poor pay and low job prospects are in industries that once provided for a good life. To add insult to injury, the people that seem to get us into this mess rarely suffer from their decisions. David Cameron is not in danger of having to use food banks.

THE RISING DISTRUST OF POLITICIANS

The economic story is not all there is to it, there is a political story as well that has to do with the increasing lack of trust that people have in our elected representatives, as Anand Menon points out in his piece about rising distrust of politicians.¹⁸ The issue in either case is one of responsibility as accountability. Our political leaders appear able to get away with almost anything and not suffer the consequences of their decisions. It is hard for most of us to appreciate how anybody can have £25 000 to spare for a garden shed in which to write in.¹⁹ It is especially hard when the shed is almost like a personal reward – a place to write his memoirs in – when it was his decision to call the referendum that threw the country into a real crisis for which he had no plan for. The referendum was not in the national interest, it was ostensibly in his interest so he could play a political game within the Conservative party to cement his leadership. He lost that game, quit as PM, resigned as MP, earned a reported £120 000 for an hour-long speech about the implications of leaving the EU,²⁰ and has a £25 000 shed to work in, presumably because he has no room in his house in which to work. Far from accountability, it appears as though he is rewarded for his recklessness.

The same can be said for Boris Johnson, whose entire professional persona appears built around that of a jester who finds it appropriate to recite colonial poetry in Myanmar (he had to be

stopped by the ambassador),²¹ and stated that all Sirte, in Libya, needs to do to be friendly to business is “clear the dead bodies away.”²² These are not actions one would expect of the country’s leading diplomat. Yet he is still in post, and still writes his regular column for the Telegraph. Indeed, the revolving door between Westminster and Fleet Street, in which elected officials also earn money for writing for the press, creates a profound conflict of interest when it is one role of the 4th estate to act as a monitor of our politicians, to hold them accountable, to speak up by highlighting possible deceptions, unethical conduct, irresponsible behaviour, to reveal the inner workings of policy in an open society, and so on.

The leading figures in the UK government aside, it could be argued that Donald Trump has outmaneuvered them in his ability to repeatedly avoid being held responsible for anything. The American context, however, has more problems than just Donald Trump. The dangers of corruption in the US system are very real when Congress becomes a “millionaires club.”²³ The risk of democracy becoming a plutocracy is, in this situation, very real. The media stories about the wealth of elected officials sometimes turns on how their wealth detaches them from the lives of ordinary Americans. This may or may not be true. What is clearer, however, is that the more that personal wealth is tied to the conditions of opportunity for running for elected office the harder it becomes for a diversity of views to be represented fairly and equally. This is not an issue focused so much on money as it is on representation, and the same equation applies to women and minority populations.

When elected representatives do not represent the populace but instead speak to narrow interest-groups, their accountability diminishes and they become beholden to the small and often vocal group that they self-identify with. In this situation, there is little political responsibility because there is no responsibility to the community they are elected to serve. In this case, there are two kinds of political responsibility at issue. When we think of responsibility, the tendency is to understand responsibility according to a causal framework: I am responsible for a particular outcome. This is most easily grasped in our legal understanding of responsibility as liability. There is responsibility as liability or accountability that most of us are familiar with, but there is also the responsibility that comes with membership in a political community. This non-causal account of responsibility²⁴ is important because it differentiates the personal account of responsibility from that which we all have by belonging to a political community.²⁵ However, when membership

becomes an important feature of responsibility it also encourages greater attention onto identity-politics. Unfortunately, identity-politics have served as an easy way to galvanize support against other groups.

RESPECTING DIVERSITY

This kind of identity-politics is increasingly taking hold, as politicians see electoral success by playing up to the culture issues of particular groups for their professional (if not personal) gain.²⁶ This is not to say that these issues are unimportant, rather the point is about a shift in democratic debate away from matters that are in the collective interest of the larger community, and instead in the narrow interests of a particular group, so that the interests of this group outweigh those of all others. The collective interest, however, is not the same as the interest of one particular identity group. This kind of thinking gets us into a zero-sum type of politics, when politics necessarily requires making room for diversity. Zero-sum politics is a recipe for disaster, because it alienates and emboldens at the same time, and it twists all forms of evidence to play into our narratives of who we are and who we want to believe. Politics will never be about everybody getting along, and it is not about the avoidance of conflict. To find politics we have to find political responsibility and appreciate that we live in an uncertain world of endless diversity and potential for change. Political responsibility is thus also about accepting our inherent diversity, and respecting it. For politics to work, it will involve disagreement, but it also has to have respect, and a deep appreciation for the role of our narratives in how we make sense of a complicated world.

As Gérard Araud, the French ambassador to the United States, wrote on Twitter after the election of Trump, “A world is collapsing before our eyes.”²⁷ Indeed. A world is collapsing. It is not hyperbole to say that we could be witnessing the end of the post-war liberal order (although we can share at least some relief in the result of the Austrian presidential election). While this order came with a lot of negative baggage and violence in its political economy and in its international relations (let’s not romanticize the Cold War), it also came with a lot of good intentions about internationalism, pluralism, peace and justice. This post-war order was built on the idea of hope for a better future. The GI Bill, the civil rights movement, feminism, and yes, even the anti-globalization and occupy movements, Black Lives matter, the creation of the NHS, all of these were products of this post-war order even though they are also about trying to repair a broken

world that emerged out of two World Wars and the Holocaust. But now, this world seems to be falling apart at the seams. As a political activist who marched with Anarchists, Socialists, and Democrats, I always knew that the fight for a better world would not follow a straight line. There would be hiccups along the way. But that idea is now shattered. We are not living in any dialectic, where crisis will eventually lead to gradual improvements toward a better world. We are instead rejecting this very idea, and are burrowing down into a false comfort zone of populist insularity and zero sums.

Knowledge is always open to politicization because knowledge cannot be separated from the multiple facets of power. Consequently, what we require is a public sphere where knowledge is used in support of thinking. We have witnessed the removal of thinking and of evidence from politics, turning instead on deploying people's anger, frustration and alienation for the short term professional gain of politicians. What is missing in the public sphere is the responsibility of our leaders to use evidence fairly, without undermining the process of knowledge production; of the state to provide the conditions by which the electorate is able to interpret and engage with politics in a sustainable way; of the people and our politicians to appreciate that politics is about compromise not zero-sums; and our own complicity in how others experience this world. There will be no single fix to the problems of our age, but a good place to start will be to locate political responsibility as a central feature in politics, and for that matter in political and international theory. As academics, we need to do more research into the politics of responsibility, including political theory work about responsibility itself. Political responsibility has to become a defining feature of politics. This will be the great challenge of our age, to identify the institutions necessary for greater responsibility, to develop normative understandings of how to foster greater political responsibility among the populace, to identify the different kinds of political responsibility that exist and why each of them matters for a healthy democracy. When we lose responsibility in politics we are lost. It is time to find ourselves.

NOTES

¹ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1991-02-01/unipolar-moment>

² Sidney Blumenthal, *The Clinton Wars* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003), 155.

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-36964916> ,
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/brexit-vote-hate-crime-rise-100-per-cent-england-wales-police-figures-new-racism-eu-a7580516.html>

⁴ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/652136/hate-crime-1617-hosb1717.pdf

⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-35743994>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/dec/15/labour-plans-jeremy-corbyn-relaunch-as-a-leftwing-populist>

⁷ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/11/the-case-for-hillary-clinton-and-against-donald-trump/501161/>

⁸ <https://www.aclu.org/blog/immigrants-rights/five-reasons-racist-sheriff-joe-arpaiio-should-not-receive-presidential-pardon> <https://www.gq.com/story/joe-arpaiio-history>

⁹ https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/trump-approval-ratings/?ex_cid=rrpromo

¹⁰ <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/10/18/trump-media-fake-news-poll-243884>

¹¹ Ongoing internal contradictions, lack of planning, poor leadership, the contempt of Parliament and ongoing evidence that the Government has no idea of the dangers they are plunging the country into is the news of the day, this story being one of the more recent ones (as of the time of writing): <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-latest-eu-vote-david-davis-shambles-ivan-rogers-theresa-may-a8020126.html>

¹² <https://www.ft.com/content/1912c464-d981-11e5-a72f-1e7744c66818?mhq5j=e6>,
<https://www.indy100.com/article/a-journalist-has-shared-a-story-about-boris-johnson-that-completely-undermines-his-authority-on-the-eu--bkoHJPBuVZ>

The original Facebook page post which was posted on June 17, 2016 (which was still available as of February 2, 2017 is:

<https://www.facebook.com/martin.fletcher.3998/posts/10154422902371062>

¹³ <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1537388/its-time-to-bring-back-the-famous-dark-blue-uk-passport-as-a-symbol-of-our-independence-after-brexit/>

¹⁴ Ilan Zvi Baron. *How to Save Politics in a Post-Truth World: Thinking Through Difficult Times*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/tier-2-general/eligibility>

¹⁶ <https://michaelmoore.com/trumpwillwin/>

¹⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/14/us/union-jobs-mexico-rexnord.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2017-10-16/why-british-chose-brexite?cid=int-lea&pgtype=hpg>

¹⁹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-39761410>

²⁰ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/11/14/david-cameron-paid-120000-for-one-hour-speech/>

²¹ <http://news.sky.com/story/boris-johnson-caught-reciting-inappropriate-poem-in-myanmar-gaffe-11061143>

²² <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/oct/03/sirte-can-become-a-holiday-destination-if-it-clears-the-dead-bodies-says-johnson>

²³ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/why-is-congress-a-millionaires-club/>

²⁴ See, Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics. Revised and enlarged edition, (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1994).

²⁵ On political responsibility that is not based on the liability model see, Jade Larissa Schiff, *Burdens of Political Responsibility: Narratives and the Cultivation of Responsiveness*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁶ See for example, Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005). Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. (New York: The New Press, 2016); Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁷ <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/french-ambassador-says-world-collapsing-9223847>, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-elections/donald-trump-president-wins-twitter-french-ambassador-world-is-ending-a7409086.html>. (The Twitter post was subsequently deleted).

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