

First Thoughts after the American Elections
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Watching the results of the election come in on Tuesday night was a surreal experience. It was like finding oneself living in an alternate reality-- like a nightmare, except that the moment for awakening from it never arrived. As Donald Trump's victory began to seem definitive, it felt like we had been kicked in the stomach. It was suddenly hard to breathe.

Searching wildly for something to which the experience could be compared, some recalled the results of the Brexit referendum, which again had defied the pollsters. Others, especially New Yorkers like us, thought first of September 11, 2001, when in the space of an hour or two the world suddenly seemed to have turned upside down.

Since Tuesday, we have been trying to digest the indigestible, to make sense of this catastrophe without naturalizing or normalizing it. The same questions come up again and again. Why did this happen, and why did we not see it coming? Why did so many people hate Clinton so much? How did Trump voters ignore or overcome Trump's glaringly obvious flaws? How much of the Trump vote could be explained by disappointment with globalization, neoliberalism and rising inequalities? How much of it could be explained only by sexism, racism, and xenophobia, fear of the country's changing demographics on the part of the white majority? How much of it could be explained by the mistakes of Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party?

Little by little, we have started to breathe again, if only with pain. We have started to try out some answers. It has seemed possible to put in some perspective the political landscape revealed by the election results. For one thing, this was not a landslide victory. The huge expanses of red on the electoral maps are misleading. Hillary won the popular vote, though not by much. Technically, the Electoral College, which has to ratify the vote, could even decide in mid-December to award the election to Hillary, though that does not seem likely. In any case, it was only roughly 25% of eligible voters who voted for Trump. 47% of eligible voters did not vote at all. Those who did not vote can be accused of indifference to Trump's blatant racism and sexism, and that is a serious accusation. But their abstention can also be explained by lack of enthusiasm for Hillary's middle-of-the-road position of business-as-usual. The Clinton campaign and the Democratic Party are clearly guilty of underestimating the deep disaffection with business-as-usual among white voters. But there are places for that disaffection to go. There have been anti-Trump demonstrations in the streets of many cities. There is open talk of Senator Elizabeth Warren as a candidate for the presidency in 2020.

Racism and xenophobia, which the Trump campaign played on so shamelessly, are the first factors one thinks of when trying to make sense of how wrong the polls were. These

are feelings that even the racists and xenophobes know are not respectable and must be hidden, except among the like-minded. It is not a bad thing that those who entertain such feelings will now hesitate to express them; not so long ago, they would not have hesitated. But it is inconvenient that they will not express them to pollsters, whom many Americans see as an extension of the government and the reigning culture of so-called “political correctness.” In the privacy of the voting booth, a certain amount of politically incorrect emotion found its ugly voice.

The media are declaring that it is too soon to tell with any confidence why the polls were wrong. But some things are already clear. For example, many of those who chose not to vote last week, including some young people and people of color, had turned out to vote for Obama in 2008 and 2012. So had a not insubstantial number of white Trump voters. To some extent, this fall-off in the total number of votes cast might be explained by misogyny—discomfort with voting for a woman president. But it also implies that for many, racism was not what made their decision. Obama managed to convince people that he stood for real change. Hillary Clinton did not. For all his failings, Trump did better at mobilizing the “change” vote. Like Bernie Sanders, he spoke successfully to fears that, with globalization, the moderately satisfactory way of life sometimes described as “the American dream” had been lost forever. In the swing states of the Rust Belt, it was especially resonant when Trump hammered home his message about the impact of trade agreements on job loss, wage stagnation, and falling status for the working class, or what in America is known as the “middle” class or “ordinary working people.”

Objectively speaking, Clinton’s policies were no doubt much better for this sector of the population than Trump’s, whatever they turn out to be. Yet that is not how things looked to the people most involved. On the economy, Clinton was seriously vulnerable. We will never know how much her campaign was hurt by her earlier support for the trade pacts or by those well-paid speeches she made on Wall Street, which were brought to us during the election campaign by WikiLeaks and will now be published with annotations by her fiercest enemy on the left, Doug Henwood. We may never know how many people stayed home not because of misogyny but because their abhorrence for Trump was not counter-balanced by enough enthusiasm for Clinton, seen as a representative of the complacent elites who have benefitted from globalization.

The feeling that the world had turned upside down comes, of course, from the long list of reasons why Trump is, indeed, abhorrent, indeed almost uniquely abhorrent, even in an office which has not historically been filled by the noblest of individuals. It is still hard to believe that voters, whatever their complaints about Clinton, would not do everything in their power to stop such a person from occupying the highest office in the nation. Trump is a buffoon whose business ventures have repeatedly failed, who has a clear record of cheating his creditors, his contractors, and his employees. He admitted to not paying federal taxes and claimed this made him “smart.” He has no political experience and no history of public service. He spent much of the campaign insulting every constituency he could think of, including military veterans. At no point did he show any respect for the truth. Many commentators did nothing but count up the lies he told each day--it was often a full day’s work. None of this seemed to matter to his supporters. He

won many votes in the same constituencies he had insulted. Christians who want to make abortion illegal seem to have ignored Trump's bragging about his sexual assaults on women and voted for him anyway. It boggles the mind.

Before the election, one poll showed that Americans found Trump more trustworthy than Clinton, whose public statements were infinitely more scrupulous and accurate. How could this be? Clearly the assumption was that with Trump, what you see is what you get: a narcissist and a blowhard, perhaps, but someone who claims to be nothing more. With Hillary, on the other hand, those who found her untrustworthy were implying that although she said the right thing, you had no idea what she was really thinking or feeling. Was this simply a double standard that forces women to be diplomatic and then complains that they are artificial when they practice diplomacy? A majority of white women voted for Trump: 53%.

We are trying hard not to list the progressive measures that Trump and his supporters are now likely to try to roll back: legalized abortion, gay marriage, affordable health care, and so on. We are trying not to think of what a Republican majority on the Supreme Court will do to a wide assortment of rights people have learned to take for granted. We are trying not to think of the impact the Trump administration could have internationally, whether by aggressively blaming China and Mexico or expressing his admiration for Putin, whether attacking the Iran deal or denouncing climate change as a politically correct fiction. We are trying, on the other hand, to remember that when there is political reaction, it is proof that there has first been progress. And, as D.D. Guttenplan wrote in The Nation, "that elections are only the beginning of the contest for power." Guttenplan concludes: "The next four years will test our country - and our movement - like nothing else we have seen in our lifetimes. Welcome to the fight."

Less than 24 hours after the election results, thousands of people have been pouring into the streets of American cities to protest the election, to say they are there and vigilant. This is where the hope lies.

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