Once upon a time a Trump was just a bad smell

Elizabeth Pollitt

It's 2016, Donald Trump has just become President-elect of the United States. The political direction underpinned by a resounding, and often Manichean, rejection of the 'ruling elite' in favour of what was presented as the will of the people, commonly known as populism (Kinnvall 2018; Norris, 2020).

Trump's campaign was fuelled by vitriol and hyperbole, hooking its claws into enough Americans to mark a significant shift to the right (Kellner, 2017). The simple and sinister way Trump's campaign triumphed was through taking advantage of ontological insecurities that are common in a postmodern world (Bauman and Donskis, 2016; Kinnvall, 2018) and presenting an alternative set of 'truths'; rejecting the mainstream information channels and institutions that have traditionally presented what Lyotard (1979) would describe as 'grand narratives'. Therefore, it's no surprise that 2016 was the year that 'post-truth' was named the word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries (Flood, 2016; Kinnvall 2018).

So, how does a country go from voting for the first Black man to serve as President of the United States – for two terms – to voting for the bumbling, bigoted, business tycoon that is Donald Trump? Donald Trump, a presidential candidate who had multiple sexual assault allegations against him, including from a minor; and who had allegedly exploited tax loopholes which meant he had not paid any federal income tax for a number of years (Kellner, 2017).

Kinnvall (2018) argues that ontological insecurities are what provides the perfect bedrock for populism to thrive. She continues by explaining that populist campaigns, like Trump's, exploit this ontological insecurity through, what she terms, fantasmatic narratives such as 'Make America Great Again' - coupled with rhetoric that lays blame for the country's alleged downfall on 'the other': often the migrant, or the racial minority. Whilst Kinnvall's (2018) research focuses on the rise of populism in Europe, it's easy to apply her theory seamlessly to Trump's win in 2016. To expand on this, Bauman and Donskis (2016) suggest that ontological insecurity is an unavoidable condition of the postmodern world we live in. In their book, Liquid Evil (2016), they perfectly explain the various ways that evil permeates into every corner of our conscious and subconscious existence – from the 'breaking news' filled with stories of war, terror, corruption, and natural disaster; to the more covert evils that see the mass-deregulation of corporations which threaten our working condition to

benefit the pockets of the business elites in their ivory towers. To apply Kinnvall's concept to the 2016 Presidential Election, we must consider the United States' precarious relationship with race and ethnicity (Abramowitz, 2018). Abramowitz (2018) argues that race and ethnicity are a common cause of polarisation in the United States and an individual's stance on race and ethnicity tend to align to other political positions for example, racism in America tends to come from the white, Christian right who are also more likely to be pro-life and fiscally conservative (Abramowitz, 2018). Unfortunately, the ontological insecurity that provided the ammunition for Donald Trump's campaign stemmed from having eight years of Barack Obama as President of the United States – the first Black man to hold the title. As the first Black President, he was regularly scrutinised in the media, often through a racial lens amplifying race as a symbol of his Presidency (Ramasubramanian and Martinez, 2016). This added noise from the media could provide an example of Bauman and Donski's theory in practice, with white supremacists of the postmodern world feeling unable to 'switch off' from Obama's Presidency. This could have led to a growing sense of ontological insecurity amongst the white far-right, resulting in a 250% rise in the membership of far right and white supremist groups following Obama's election in 2008 (McGreal, 2010). This is a statistic that the United States should be deeply, deeply ashamed of and one that symbolised the

growing division of a nation, facilitated only by the technological apparatus of a postmodern society (Castells, 2009).

During the period between 1994 and 2018, internet usage amongst Americans increased from 6% of the population to 89% of the population with 95% of Americans having access to mobile phones by 2018 (Pew Research Centre, 2018). The same research shows social media usage jump from just 5% of Americans in 2005, to 69% by 2016 (Pew Research Centre, 2018). Due to these statistics, it's evident that Trump benefited from the new social technologies, and we can use Castells' (2009) theory to understand the logistics in more detail. According to Castells (2009), this technology enables a critical feature of our postmodern society to take place, the emergence of a network society. In his book The Rise of the Network Society, Castells (2009: 7) observed:

> "If society does not determine technology, it can, mainly through the state, suffocate its development. Or… change the fate of economies, military power, and social well-being in a few years."

Whilst Castells' book predated the 2016 election, he foreshadowed the grim consequences of the Trump campaign: if you have enough power, you can change the fate of the economy, the military, and social wellbeing through a manipulation of technology-enabled social networks (Castells, 2009). The Trump campaign achieved this through their scandalous coalition with Russia who were able to run targeted political advertisements and spread misinformation on social media which absolutely influenced the outcome of the 2016 Presidential Election (Abramowitz and McCoy, 2018; Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018). According to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), "fake news" stories that put Trump in a positive light were shared 30 million times on Facebook, a stark contrast against the 8 million "fake news" stories that did the same for Clinton. To add even more

depth to Castells' concept of a network society, we can look to Habermas and McKee's work on the public sphere.

The work of Habermas and McKee on the public sphere are broad in nature and we only need to look at one characteristic of the public sphere in detail to help understand the 2016 Presidential Election results. The specific characteristic of the public sphere in question exists as a direct result of the postmodern society: fragmentation (Habermas, 1998; McKee 2005). Habermas warned of public sphere fragmentation and noted that the increased diversity of public sphere participants, as a result of voter emancipation that took place in the 20th Century, could lead to an erosion to the decision-making capabilities of a public sphere that is traditionally homogenous and cohesive in nature (1998).

McKee (2005) Identifies that this fragmentation has already taken place and it is an unavoidable condition of our postmodern societies which sees us divide ourselves into silos that best represent our interests, beliefs and narratives. There are two factors contributing to the deepening fragmentation of our online public spheres, to the benefit of campaigns like Trump's, and they are (i) homophily, and (ii) targeted content based off our data footprint. Homophily contributes to fragmentation and our public spheres becoming more like echo chambers due to our desires to be around people we have shared thoughts and values with (Cota, Ferreira, Pastor-Satorras and Starnini, 2019).

Unfortunately, the latter of the two factors is more sinister. Zuboff (2019) explains that we are the product when we use social media, by this she means that the data we produce is sold to organisations resulting in targeted marketing. Unfortunately, it transpired that one of the organisations Facebook had sold its user data to was Cambridge Analytica (Adams, 2018). This had huge implications for the virtual public sphere, as this enabled mass-targeting of political content and misinformation to strengthen the political divide which benefited the Trump campaign and, arguably, led to his win in 2016 (Adams, 2018). If we link this back to Kinnvall's (2018) work on the rise of populism, we can see how easy it is for alternative narratives to spread through these silos. Whilst this looks bleak for the public sphere, McKee's understanding of the phenomenon offers a level of optimism, explaining that individuals can look beyond the fragmented public spheres and reach a consensus that isn't mutually exclusive (2005). This, however, is possibly too optimistic to apply to what transpired in 2016 because Trump's campaign left the United States racially, ideologically and culturally polarised (Abramowitz and McCoy, 2018).

It is always challenging to try to understand people with whom you viscerally disagree with, much less through a compassionate lens. Through exploring the postmodern condition of constant fear and ontological insecurity, facilitated by new social technologies through the fragmented public sphere we can begin to understand how a man like Donald Trump could ever be elected to the highest office in the United States. This reflection on Donald Trump's Presidential Election in 2016 may now feel out of date as we sit firmly in the comfortable knowledge that he never made it to a second term, but it is not. Division in the United

States still exists and will continue to deepen unless we significantly change how we access our information. Our public spheres must open back up to be more inclusive, we must strive towards social cohesion and hold our politicians and public officials to a higher standard. As a society, we must be mindful of the minefield of narratives that we exist amongst and overlay critical analysis wherever we can. A postmodernist society is our reality, and we must allow the 2016 Presidential Election to serve as a stark reminder of its dark potential.

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