

Joe Biden Will Fail to Bring Back ‘Normal’ Politics. What’s Needed Now Is a Populism of the Left

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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Theme: [History](#)

Analysts are still grappling with the fallout from the US election. Trumpism proved a far more enduring and alluring phenomenon than most media pundits expected. Defying predictions, Trump improved his share of the overall vote compared to his 2016 win, and he surprised even his own team by increasing his share of minority voters and women.

But most significantly, he almost held his own against Democratic challenger Joe Biden at a time when the US economy – the incumbent’s “trump” card – was in dire straits after eight months of a pandemic. Had it not been for Covid-19, Trump – not Biden – would most likely be preparing for the next four years in the White House.

Of course, much of Trump’s appeal was that he is not Biden. The Democratic party decided to run pretty much the worst candidate imaginable: an old-school machine politician, one emphatically beholden to the corporate donor class and unsuited to the new, more populist political climate. His campaigning – on the rare occasions he appeared – suggested significant cognitive decline. Biden often looked more suited to a luxury retirement home than heading the most powerful nation on earth.

But then again, if Trump could lead the world’s only superpower for four years, how hard can it really be? He showed that those tinfoil-hatted conspiracy theorists might be right after all: maybe the president is largely a figurehead, while a permanent bureaucracy runs much of the show from behind the curtain. Were Ronald Reagan and George W Bush not enough to persuade us that any halfwit who can string together a few cliches from a teleprompter will suffice?

No return to ‘normal’

The narrowly averted Trump second term has at least prompted liberal pundits to draw one significant lesson that is being endlessly repeated: Biden must avoid returning to the old “normal”, the one that existed before Trump, because that version of “normal” was exactly what delivered Trump in the first place. These commentators fear that, if Biden doesn’t play his cards wisely, we will end up in 2024 with a Trump 2.0, or even a rerun from Trump himself, reinvigorated after four years of tweet-sniping from the sidelines. They are right to be worried.

But their analysis does not properly explain the political drama that is unfolding, or where it heads next. There is a two-fold problem with the “no return to normal” argument.

The first is that the liberal media and political class making this argument are doing so in entirely bad-faith. For four years they have turned US politics and its coverage into a simple-minded, ratings-grabbing horror show. A vile, narcissist businessman, in collusion with an

evil Russian mastermind, usurped the title of most powerful person on the planet that should have been bestowed on Hillary Clinton. As Krystal Ball has rightly mocked, even now the media are whipping up fears that the “Orange Mussolini” may stage some kind of cack-handed coup to block the handover to Biden.

These stories have been narrated to us by much of the corporate media over and over again – and precisely so that we do not think too hard about why Trump beat Clinton in 2016. The reality, far too troubling for most liberals to admit, is that Trump proved popular because a lot of the problems he identified were true, even if he raised them in bad faith himself and had no intention of doing anything meaningful to fix them.

Trump was right about the need for the US to stop interfering in the affairs of the rest of the world under the pretence of humanitarian concern and a supposed desire to spread democracy at the end of the barrel of a gun. In practice, however, lumbered with that permanent bureaucracy, delegating his authority to the usual war hawks like John Bolton, and eager to please the Christian evangelical and Israel lobbies, Trump did little to stop such destructive meddling. But at least he was correct rhetorically.

When I’m speaking to foreign leaders, I’m telling them: America is going to be back. We’re going to be back in the game.

— Joe Biden (@JoeBiden) [November 10, 2020](#)

The Guardian declares: 'A new start', with a 'Free 16-page Joe Biden souvenir supplement inside'.

Before we get too dewy-eyed, look at how the Guardian did exactly the same job of rebranding the US in 2008. Obama went on to bomb seven Muslim countries: <https://t.co/ah4NlglbtV> pic.twitter.com/Hp8olGzcpo

— Media Lens (@medialens) [November 11, 2020](#)

Equally, Trump looked all too right in berating the establishment media for promoting “fake news”, especially as coverage of his presidency was dominated by an evidence-free narrative claiming he had colluded with Russia to steal the election. Those now bleating about how dangerous his current assertions of election fraud are should remember they were the ones who smashed that particular glass house with their own volley of stones back in 2016.

Yes, Trump has been equally culpable with his Twitter barrages of fake news. And yes, he cultivated rather than spurned support from one of those major corporate outlets: the reliably rightwing Fox News. But what matters most is that swaths of the American public – unable to decide who to believe, or maybe not caring – preferred to side with a self-styled maverick, Washington outsider, the supposed “underdog”, against a class of self-satisfied, overpaid media professionals transparently prostituting themselves to the billionaire owners of the corporate media.

Once voters had decided the system was rigged – and it *is* rigged towards the maintenance

of elite power – anyone decrying the system, whether honestly or duplicitously, was going to prove popular.

Endebted to donors

Trump's appeal was further bolstered by styling himself a self-made man, as his campaign riffed on the long-standing myths of the American Dream. The US public was encouraged to see Trump as a rich man prepared to gamble part of his own fortune on a run for the presidency so he could bring his business acumen to USA Ltd. That contrasted starkly with Democratic party leaders like Clinton and Biden who gave every appearance of having abjectly sold their principles – and their souls – to the highest-bidding corporate “donors”.

And again, that perception – at least in relation to Clinton and Biden – wasn't entirely wrong.

How can Biden *not* end up trying to resurrect the Obama years that he was so very much part of during his two terms as vice-president and that led directly to Trump? That was why corporate donors backed his campaign. They desire the kind of neoliberal “normal” that leaves them free to continue making lots more money and ensures the wealth gap grows.

It is why they and the media worked so hard to pave Biden's path to the presidency, even doing their best to bury political stories [embarrassing](#) to the Biden campaign. Maintaining that “normal” is the very reason the modern Democratic party exists.

Even if Biden wanted to radically overhaul the existing, corporate-bonded US political system – and he doesn't – he would be incapable of doing so. He operates within institutional, structural constraints – donors, Congress, the media, the supreme court – all there to ensure his room for manoeuvre is tightly delimited.

Had his main rival for the Democratic nomination, Bernie Sanders, been allowed to run instead and won the presidency, it would have been much the same. The important difference is that the existence of a President Sanders would have risked exposing the fact that the “world's most powerful leader” is not really so powerful.

Sanders would have lost his battles trying to defy these structural constraints, but in the process he would have made those constraints far more visible. They would have been all too obvious had someone like Sanders been constantly hitting his head against them. That was precisely why the corporate class and the technocratic leadership of the Democratic party worked so strenuously to make sure Sanders got nowhere near the presidential race.

Resistance posturing

Biden will do his best to achieve what his donors want: a return to the neoliberal “normal” under Obama. He will offer a sprinkling of initiatives to ensure progressive liberals can put to rest their resistance posturing with a clear conscience. There will be some “woke” identity politics to prevent any focus on class politics and the struggle for real economic justice, as well as some weak, corporation-friendly Green New Deal projects, if Biden can sneak past them past a Republican-controlled Senate.

And if he can't manage even that ... well that's the beauty of a system tailor-made to follow the path of least financial resistance, to uphold the corporate status quo, the “normal”.

But there is a second, bigger problem. A fly in the ointment. Whatever Biden and the Democratic party do to resurrect the neoliberal consensus, the old “normal”, it isn’t coming back. The smug, technocratic class that has dominated western politics for decades on behalf of the corporate elite is under serious threat. Biden looks more like a hiccup, a last burp provoked by the unexpected pandemic.

The neoliberal “normal” isn’t coming back because the economic circumstances that generated it – the post-war boom of seemingly endless growth – have disappeared.

Plutocracy entrenches

A quarter of a century ago, the Cassandras of their day – those dismissed as peddlers of false conspiracy theories – warned of “peak oil”. That was the idea that the fuel on which the global economy ran either had peaked or soon would do. As the oil ran out, or became more expensive to extract, economic growth would slow, wages would fall, and inequality between rich and poor would increase.

This was likely to have dramatic political consequences too: resource wars abroad (inevitably camouflaged as “humanitarian intervention”); more polarised domestic politics; greater popular dissatisfaction; the return of charismatic, even fascist, leaders; and a resort to violence to solve political problems.

The arguments about peak oil continue. Judged by some standards, the production peak arrived in the 1970s. Others say, with the aid of fracking and other harmful technologies, the turning-point is due about now. But the kind of world predicted by peak oil theory looks to have been unfolding since at least the 1980s. The crisis in neoliberal economics was underscored by the 2008 global economic crash, whose shockwaves are still with us.

On top of all this, there are looming ecological and climate catastrophes intimately tied to the fossil-fuel economy on which the global corporations have grown fat. This Gordian knot of globe-spanning self-harm urgently needs unpicking.

Biden has neither the temperament nor the political manoeuvre room to take on these mammoth challenges and solve them. Inequality is going to increase during his term. The technocrats are again going to be exposed once again as impotent – or complicit – as plutocracy entrenches. The ecological crisis is not going to be dealt with beyond largely empty promises and posturing.

There will be lots of talk in the media about the need to give Biden more time to show what he can do and demands that we keep quiet for fear of ushering back Trumpism. This will be designed to lose us yet more valuable months and years to address urgent problems that threaten the future of our species.

The age of populism

The ability of the technocratic class to manage growth – wealth accumulation for the rich, tempered by a little “trickle down” to stop the masses rising up – is coming to an end. Growth is over and the technocrat’s toolbox is empty.

We are now in the age of political populism – a natural response to burgeoning inequality.

On one side is the populism of the Trumplers. They are the small-minded nationalists who want to blame everyone but the real villains – the corporate elite – for the west’s declining fortunes. As ever, they will search out the easiest targets: foreigners and “immigrants”. In the US, the Republican party has been as good as taken over by the Tea party. The US right is not going to repudiate Trump for his defeat, they are going to totemise him because they understand his style of politics is the future.

There are now Trumps everywhere: Boris Johnson in the UK (and waiting in the wings, Nigel Farage); Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil; the Le Pen dynasty in France; Viktor Orban in Hungary. They are seeding the return of xenophobic, corporate fascism.

The corporate media would have us believe that this is the only kind of populism that exists. But there is a rival populism, that of the left, and one that espouses cooperation and solidarity within nations and between them.

Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Sanders in the US are the first shoots of a global reawakening of class-conscious politics based on solidarity with the poor and oppressed; of renewed pressure for a social contract, in contrast to the worship of survival-of-the-fittest economics; of a reclaiming of the commons, communal resources that belong to us all, not just the strongmen who seized them for their own benefit; and, most importantly, of an understanding, lost sight of in our industrialised, consumption-obsessed societies, that we must find a sustainable accommodation with the rest of the living world.

My latest: The increasingly desperate task of capitalism's perception managers is to dissociate our economic system from the emerging environmental crisis – to break our understanding of the causal link between the two
<https://t.co/S4Aby314FX>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [October 25, 2020](#)

This kind of leftwing populism has a [long pedigree](#) that dates back nearly 150 years. It flourished in the inter-war years in Europe; it defined the political battle-lines in Iran immediately after the Second World War; and it has been a continual feature of Latin American politics.

Warped logic

As ever, the populism of the nationalists and bigots has the upper hand. And that is no accident.

Today’s globalised wealth elite prefer neoliberal, technocratic politics that keep borders open for trade; that treat the labouring poor as human chattel, to be moved around on a global chess board as a way to force wages down; and that ensure the elite can stash its ill-gotten gains away on island sanctuaries far from the tax man.

But when technocratic politics is on its death bed, as it is now, the corporate elite will always settle for the populism of a Trump or a Farage over the populism of the left. They will do so even if rightwing populism risks constraining their financial empires, because leftwing populism does much worse: it upends the warped logic on which the corporate elite’s entire

hoarded wealth depends, threatening to wipe it out.

If the corporate elite can no longer find a way to foist a neoliberal technocrat like Biden on the public, they will choose the populism of a Trump over the populism of a Sanders every time. And as they own the media, they can craft the stories we hear: about who we are, what is possible and where we are heading. If we allow it, our imaginations will be twisted and deformed in the image of the deranged totem they choose.

We can reclaim politics – a politics that cares about the future, about our species, about our planet – but to do so we must first reclaim our minds.

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This essay first appeared on Jonathan Cook's blog: <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/>

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