

Election 2018 and The Unraveling of America. The Great Distraction. Rising Social Inequality

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As Americans go to the polls today, November 6, 2018, no doubt some will be thinking of the hordes of immigrants we're told are invading the US southern border. Or they may be remembering the pipe bombs, the killings in Pittsburgh, or the racist murders occurring almost daily elsewhere that barely get press coverage anymore.

If they're Millennials, they may be considering whether even to vote or not, since neither wing of the corporate Party of America—aka Republicans or Democrats—have done much for them over the past ten years. Burdened mostly with low paying service jobs and \$ trillion dollar student debt payments that consume roughly 37% of their paychecks, with real incomes well below what their parents were earning at their age, and with prospects for the future even more bleak, many Millennials no doubt wonder what's in it for them by voting for either party's candidates.

Will Millennial youth even bother to turn out to vote? As an editorial in the Financial Times business newspaper recently noted, "Only 28% of Americans aged 18 to 29 say they are certain to vote this November". Political cynicism has become the dominant characteristic of much of their generation—deepening since the politicians' promises made in 2008 have failed to materialize under Obama and now Trump.

If they're Latinos and Hispanics, as they go to the polls they are aware their choice is either Trump Republicans who consider them enemies, criminals and drug pushers; or Democrats who, in the past under Obama, deported their relatives in record numbers and repeatedly abandon programs like DACA ('Dreamers') as a tactical political necessity, as they say. Who will they trust least? One shouldn't be surprised if they too largely sit it out, harboring a deep sense of betrayal by Democrats and concern they may soon become the next 'enemy within' target of Trump and his White Nationalist shock troops who are being organized and mobilized behind the scenes by Trump's radical right wing buddy, **Steve Bannon**, and his billionaire and media friends.

If they're African Americans, they know from decades of experience that nothing changes with police harassment and murders, regardless which party is in power.

If they're union workers in the Midwest, they know the Democrats are the party of free trade and job offshoring, while Republicans are the party favoring low minimum wages, elimination of overtime pay, privatization of pensions, and cuts to social security.

All these key swing groups of Millennials, Hispanics, African-Americans, and union workers in the midwest—i.e. those who gave Obama an overwhelming victory in 2008, gave him one more chance in office in 2012 despite failure to deliver, and then gave up on the unfulfilled

promises in 2016—will likely not be thinking about the real ‘issues’ as they go to the polls. For the ‘Great Distraction’ is underway like never before.

The Great Distraction

It’s the ‘enemy within’ that’s the problem, we’re told by Trump. And the ‘enemy without’. Or, in the case of the immigrant—it’s both: the enemy without that’s coming in! So put up the barbed wire. Grab their kids when they arrive, as hostage bait. Send the troops to the border right now, to stop the hordes that just crossed into southern Mexico yesterday. Hurry, they’re almost here, rapidly proceeding to the US on foot. (They run fast, you see). They’re in Oaxaca southern Mexico. They’ll be here tomorrow, led by Muslim terrorists, carrying the bubonic plague, and bringing their knapsacks full of cocaine and heroin.

And if the enemy immigrant is not enough is not enemy enough, the ‘enemy within’ is increasingly also us, as Trump adds to his enemies list the ‘mob’ of Americans exercising their 1st amendment rights to assembly and protest against him. And don’t forget all those dangerous Californians who won’t go along with his climate, border incarceration, trade or other policies. Or their 80 year old Senator Diane Feinstein, their ring-leader in insurrection. They’re all the ‘enemy within’ too. The chant ‘lock ‘em up’ no longer means just Hillary. So Trump encourages and turns loose his White Nationalist supporters to confront the horde, the mob, and their liberal financiers like **George Soros**. If all this is not an unraveling, what is?

Not to be outdone in the competition for the Great Distraction, there’s the Democrats resurrecting their age-old standby ‘enemy without’: the Russians. They’re into our voting machines. Watch out. They’re advancing on Eastern Europe, all the way to the Russian-Latvian border. Quick, send NATO to the Baltics! Arrange a coup partnering with fascists in Ukraine! Install nuclear missiles in Poland! And start deploying barbed wire on the coast of Maine and Massachusetts, just in case.

However, behind all the manufactured fear of immigrants, US demonstrators, and concern about violence- oriented white nationalists whipped up and encouraged by Trump and his political followers—lies a deeper anxiety permeating the American social consciousness today. Much deeper. Whether on the right or left, the unwritten, the unsaid, is a sense that American society is somehow unraveling. And it’s a sense and feeling shared by the left, right, and center alike.

Both sides—Trump, Republicans, Democrats, as well as their respective media machines—sidestep and ignore the deep malaise shared by Americans today. Older Americans shake their heads and mumble ‘this isn’t the country I grew up in’ while the younger ask themselves ‘is this the country I’ll have to raise my kids in’?

There’s a sense that something has gone terribly wrong, and has all the appearance will continue to do so. It’s a crisis, if by that definition means ‘a turning point’. And a crisis of multiple dimensions. A crisis that has been brewing and growing now for at least a quarter century since 1994 and Newt Gingrich’s launching of the new right wing offensive that set out purposely to make US political institutions gridlocked and unworkable until his movement could take over—and succeeded. It’s a crisis that everyone feels in their bones, if not in their heads. The dimensions of the unraveling of America today are many. Here’s just some of the more important:

Growing Sense of Personal Physical Danger

Mass and multiple killings and murders are rampant in America today, and rising. So much so that the media and press consciously avoid reporting much of it unless it involves at minimum dozens or scores of dead. There are more than 33,000 gun killings a year in the US now. 90 people a day are killed by guns. While we hear of the occasional school shooting, the fact is there are 273 school shootings so far just in 2018. That's one per school day.

The suicide rate in America is also at record levels, with more than 45,000 a year now and escalating. Teen age suicides have risen by 70% in just the last decade. The fastest rate of increase is among 35-64 year olds. People are literally being driven crazy by the culture, the insecurities, the isolation, the lack of meaningful work, the absence of community, and the hopelessness about a bleak future that they're killing themselves in record numbers.



And let's not forget the current opioid crisis. The opioid death rate now exceeds more than 50,000 a year. These aren't folks over-dosing in back alleys and crack houses. These are our relatives, neighbors and friends. And the 'pushers' are the big pharmaceutical companies and their salespersons who pushed the Fentanyl and Oxycontin on doctors telling them it was safe—just like the Tobacco companies maintained for decades that cigarettes were 'safe' when their tests for decades showed their product produced cancer. Big Pharma knew too. They are the criminals, and their politicians are the paid-for crooked cops looking the other way. All that's not surprising, however, since Big Pharma is also the biggest lobbyist and campaign contributor industry in the US.

So it's 33,000 gun killings, 43,000 suicides, and 50,000 opioid deaths a year. Every year. That compares to US deaths during the entire 8 years of Vietnam War of 56,000! That's a death rate over three years roughly equal to all Americans who died during the three and a half years of World War II! We all got rightly upset over 2500 killed on 9-11 by terrorists. But the NRA and the Pharmaceutical companies are the real terrorists here, and politicians are giving them a complete pass.

Instead of Big Pharma CEOs and leaders of the National Rifle Association (NRA), we're told the real enemies are the desperate men, women and children willing to walk more than a thousand miles just to get a job or to escape gang violence. Or we're told it's the Russians meddling in the 2016 election and threatening our democracy—when the real threat to American democracy is home grown: In recent court-sanctioned gerrymandering; in mass voter suppression underway in Georgia, North Dakota, and elsewhere; in the billions of dollars being spent by billionaires, corporations, and their political action committees this

election cycle to ensure their pro-business, pro-wealthy candidates win.

News of these real killing machines goes on every day, creating a sense of personal insecurity that Americans have not felt or sensed perhaps since the frontier settlement period in the 19th century. It's not the immigrants or the Russians who are responsible for the guns, suicides, and drug overdoses. But they certainly provide a useful distraction from those who are. People feel the danger has penetrated their communities, their neighborhoods, their homes. But politicians have simply and cleverly substituted the real enemies with the immigrant, the mob, and that old standby, the Russians.

Income & Wealth Inequality Accelerating

Another dimension of the sense of unraveling is the economic insecurity that hangs like a 'death smog' over public consciousness since the 2008-09 crash. As more and more average American households take on more debt, work more part time jobs or hours, and adjust to a declining standard of living, they are simultaneously aware that the wealthiest 1% or 10% are enjoying income and wealth gains not seen since the 'gilded age' of the late 19th century. The share of national pre-tax income garnered by the top 10% has risen from 35% in 1980 to roughly 50% today. That's 15% more to the top, equivalent to roughly than \$3 trillion more in income gains by the top 10% that used to be distributed among the bottom 90%.

How could an America that once shared income gains from economic growth among its classes and across geography from World War II through the 1970s have now allowed this to happen, many ask? And why is it being allowed to get worse?

There are many ways to measure and show this economic unraveling. Whether national income shares for workers and wages falling from 64% to 56% of total national income; or the distribution to the rich of more than a \$1 trillion a year every year since 2009 in stock buybacks and dividend payments; or the \$15 trillion in tax cuts for investors, businesses, and corporations since 2001; or Trump's recent \$4 trillion tax windfall for the same; or stock market values tripling and quadrupling since 2009; or stagnant real wage gains for the middle class and declining real wages for those below the median.

Whatever dimension or study or statistic, the story is the same. Economic gaps are widening everywhere. And everyone knows it. And except for that noble, modern Don Quixote of American Politics, **Bernie Sanders**, it appears no one in either party is proposing to reverse it. So the awareness festers below the surface, adding to the realization that something is no longer right in America.



The sense of economic unraveling may have slowed somewhat after 2010, but it continues none the less, as millions of Americans are forced to assume low paying service jobs. Working two or more jobs to make ends meet. Taking Uber and gig work on the side. Going on Medicaid or foregoing health insurance coverage altogether. Moving to lower quality housing and taking on more room-mates. Treading economic water in good times, and sinking and gasping for air during recessions and in the bad times. Just making due. While the wealthy grow unimaginably wealthier by the day.

Never-Ending Wars

The sense of anxiety is exacerbated by the never ending wars of the 21st century. How is it they never end, given the most powerful military and funding of more than \$1 trillion a year every year, it is asked?

Newspaper headlines haven't changed much for 17 years. The war in Afghanistan and elsewhere continues. Change the dates and you can insert the same news copy. With more than 1000 US bases in more than 100 countries, America since 2001 has been, and remains, on a perpetual war footing. All that's changed since 2000 is that the USA no longer pays for its wars by raising taxes, as it had throughout its history. Today the US Treasury and Federal Reserve simply 'borrow' the money from partners in empire elsewhere in the world—while they cut taxes on the rich at the same time.

And the annual war bill is going up, fast. Trump has increased annual spending on 'defense' by another \$85 billion a year for the past two years. Approaching \$150 billion if the notorious US 'black budget' spending on new military technology development—not indicated anywhere in print—is added to the amount. And more is still coming in the next few years, to pay for new cybersecurity war preparation, for next generation nuclear weapons, and for Trump's 'space force'. Total costs for defense and war—not just the Pentagon—is now well over \$1 trillion annually in the US. And with tax cutting for those who might pay for it now accelerating, the only sources to pay for the trillion dollar plus annual US budget deficits coming for the next decade is either to borrow more or cut Social Security, Medicare, education and other social programs. And those cuts are coming too—soon if one believes the public declarations of Senate Republican Majority leader, Mitch McConnell.

Technology Angst

As our streets and neighborhoods become more dangerous, as inequality deepens, as wars, tax cuts for the rich and social program cuts for the rest become the disturbing chronic norm— awareness is growing that technology itself is beginning to tear apart the social fabric as well. Admitted even by visionaries and advocates of technology, the negatives of technology may now be outweighing its benefits.

Studies now show problems of brain development in children over-using hand-held screen devices. Excessive screen viewing, studies show, activates the same areas of the brain associated with other forms of addiction. Social media is encouraging abusive behavior by enabling offenders to hide. What someone would not dare to say or do face to face, they now freely do protected by space and time. Social media is transforming human communications and relations rapidly, and not always positively. It is also enabling the acceleration of the surveillance state. Massive databases of personal information are now accessible to any business, to virtually any governments, and to unscrupulous individuals

around the globe intent on blackmail, threats, and worse. Privacy is increasingly a fiction for those participating in it.

And employment is about to become more precarious because of it. Technology is creating and diffusing new business models, destroying the old, and doing so far too rapidly to enable adjustment for tens of millions of people. Amazon. Uber. Gig economy. Wiping out millions of jobs, increasing hours worked, uncertainty of employment, lowering of wages. And next Artificial Intelligence. Projected by McKinsey and other business consultants to eliminate 30% of current jobs by the end of the next decade. Where will my job be in ten years, many now ask themselves? Will I be able to make it to retirement? Will there be anything like retirement any more after 2035?

Unchecked and unregulated accelerating technological change is adding to the sense of social unraveling of key institutions that once provided a sense of personal security, of social stability, of a vision of a future that seemed more related to the present, rather than to an even more anxiety ridden, uncertain, unstable future.

A Culture Increasingly Coarse & Decadent

When the President of the US brags he could shoot someone on the street corner and (his) people would still love him, such statements raise the ghostly spectre of prior decades when the vast majority of German people thought the same of Hitler. And when one of his closest advisers, Rudy Giuliani, declares publicly that ‘Truth is not the Truth’, it amounts to an endorsement for an era of lies and gross misrepresentation by public figures. With chronic lying the political norm, what can anyone believe from their elected officials, many now ask? It’s no longer engaging in political spin for one’s particular policy or program. It’s politics itself spinning out of control. Public political discourse consists increasingly to targeting, insulting, vilifying, and threatening one’s political opponents. Trump’s railing against politicians and government itself smacks of Adolph’s constant insulting indictment of democratically elected Weimar German governments and leaders in the 1920s. It leaves the American public with a nervous sense of how much further can and will this targeting, personalizing, and threatening go?

But the political culture is not the only cultural element in decline. A broader cultural decline has become evident as well. Americans flock to view films of dystopia visions of America, of zombies, and ever-intense CGI violence where fictitious super heroes save the world. More of popular music has become overtly misogynous, angry, mean, and violent in both sound and lyrics. And has anyone recently watched how high schoolers now dance, in effect having sex with their pants on?

Collapse of Democratic Institutions

Not least is the sense of unraveling of political institutions and the practice of democracy itself. As a recent study estimated, Democracy is in decline in the US, having dropped in an aggregate score of 94 in 2010 to a low of 86 today—when measured in terms of free and fair elections, citizen participation in politics, protection of civil rights and liberties, and the rule of law. The study by the non-profit, Freedom House, concluded “Democracy is in crisis’ and under assault and in retreat.

In America, the restrictions on civil rights and liberties have been growing and deepening since 2001 and the Patriot Acts, institutionalized in annual NDAA legislation by Congress

thereafter. Legislatures have been gerrymandered to protect the incumbents of both wings of the Corporate party of America. The US Supreme Court has expanded its authority to select presidents (Gore v. Bush in 2001), defined corporations as people with the right to spend unlimited money which it defines as free speech (Citizens United), and will likely next decide that Presidents (Trump) can pardon himself if indicted (thus ending the fiction that no one is above the law and endorsing Tyranny itself).

The two wings of the Corporate Party of America meanwhile engage in what is an internecine class war between factions of the American ruling class. More billionaires openly contest for office as it becomes clear millions and billions of dollars are now necessary to get elected.

Voter suppression spreads from state to state to disenfranchise millions, from Georgia to the Dakotas, to Texas and beyond. If one lacks a street number address, or an ID card, or has ever committed a felony, or hasn't voted recently, or doesn't sign a ballot according to their birth certificate name, or any other number of technical errors—they are denied their rights as citizens. What was formerly 'Jim Crow' for blacks in the South has become a de facto 'Jim Crow Writ Large' encompassing even more groups across a growing number of states in America.

A sense of growing political disenfranchisement adds to the feeling that the country is politically unraveling as well—adding to the concurrent fears about growing physical insecurity, worsening economic inequality and declining economic opportunities, and an America mired in never ending wars. An America in which it is evident that political elites are increasingly committed to policies of redistribution of national wealth to the wealthiest. An America where more fear that technology may be taking us too far too fast. An America where the culture grows meaner, nastier and more decadent, where lies are central to the political discourse, and where political institutions no longer serve the general welfare but rather a narrow social and economic elite who have bought and captured those institutions.

And, not least, an America where politicians seem intent on drifting toward a nationalism on behalf of a soon to be minority White America—i.e. politicians who are willing to endorse violence and oppression of the rest in order to opportunistically assume and exercise power by playing upon the fears, anxieties, and insecurities as the unraveling occurs.

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