

Trump and the climate: a reflection on politics and the climate problem

When the Paris climate accord was signed just before Christmas in 2015, it caused a rush of speculation about what the agreement actually meant. Victory, or capitulation; progress, or subterfuge? Opinions seemed to be strangely polarised. It was as if this new development had obscured, rather than illuminated the future as it was supposed to have done. Something a bit similar has happened since we knew Donald Trump is to be the next American president. There's both a universal sense that something momentous occurred, and a bewildered search to find out just what it is. And again, views seem to be drawn to two opposites, as if to a pair of magnets.

It is an important thing to understand - everyone agrees about that. Something big has happened in the American experiment. Should we wonder whether "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth"? Or does the world's first and greatest 'republic of liberty' have enough resilience to digest the Trump anomaly and eventually recover its virtue and strength? We do not know. And before we could know, we would need to understand the condition of American democracy and appreciate how it was apparently so easy for a repellant plutocrat to win so much approval.

I don't know the answer myself, but because it's so important, and because there are lots of answers flying a round that appear to me misleading, I thought I would try to find a few guidelines and straighten out my own thinking. Here goes.

Trump is not a politician or an ideologue; he's a con-man

Many things about his campaign, his personal history and his business career strongly suggest Trump is motivated by vanity, and that he has no political program, or any passion for politics at all. That is not to say he has no politically relevant ideas or beliefs, just that the business of politics - debate, building consensus, bargaining, compromise, policy consideration, or even the pursuit of power - don't seem to mean much to him. Clearly, he is interested in having pro-business laws, and he will probably use his power in the interests of his own enterprises, but what seems to interest him even more is celebrity. This being so, he is very likely to delegate nearly all the responsibility of governing, and do what comes easily: "strut and fret upon the stage".

The skill that propelled him into the president's office is that of a canny salesman - guessing what people want to hear, and telling them often, with plenty of covert hints and claims about his power to give them what they want. It follows, that if we want to understand what's going on beneath the stormy surface of American life, we should look for clues in Trump's messages. Not so much his specific proposals like building a wall, but in his blandishments and dog-whistles.

Trump sounds like a fascist

Is he or isn't he? This rather nervous question has been circulating ever since he became a serious contender. The fact of the matter is, it's unanswerable because no final

definition of fascism exists. The closest we have is probably Mussolini's & Gentile's 1932 essay *The Doctrine of Fascism*, which is only specific in naming the doctrines and practices that it repudiates.¹ The big idea, according to the dictator, is that the fascist State is "a higher and more powerful expression of personality ... a force ... it sums up all the manifestations of the moral and intellectual life of man." It is more than political; it is a spiritual force that subsumes individuals, providing a sphere for their collective fulfilment.

You might be thinking, 'this doesn't sound like Trump'. But wait. Mussolini is only trying to bring intellectual respectability to something that doesn't need or deserve it; fascism is action, not belief. No other dictator ever bothered to justify their movement except by its results. Trump has always defined himself as a deal-maker. It is his natural affinity and highest achievement. He is a man of action, who has repeatedly expressed disdain for all kinds of inclusive processes - public interest regulation, legal due process, democratic compromise. He appears to have run his businesses on a principle of exploitation, abjuring the rights of others whenever he was able. The only point of anything, he has often said and implied, is to win.

This approach would have had Mussolini's approval. "The Fascist State expresses the will to exercise power and to command", he wrote. Exploitation (conquest) is the real justification for the State. Fascism is the form of organisation that enables stronger peoples to assume their rightful place in the natural order. "War alone keys up all human energies to their maximum tension and sets the seal of nobility on those peoples who have the courage to face it".

We have no idea what Donald Trump's vision of an ideal State is; I doubt if he ever gave it much thought. But we do know that he views human affairs through a corporatist lens. We can guess his government will strongly favour the interests of business over public goods; militarism over accommodation; and crude wealth creation over social justice. He will be contemptuous of democratic checks on executive authority, and his vision of American resurgence will be a quasi-mythical one, like Mussolini's:

"...the State is not only Authority which governs and confers legal form and spiritual value on individual wills, but it is also Power which makes its will felt and respected beyond its own frontiers".

Umberto Eco's diagnostic guide to fascism

In 1995, the great Italian writer who had seen fascism from the inside and spent a life-time thinking about it, gave us a 14-point identikit, while insisting that fascism never looks the same in any of its re-inventions, but nevertheless depends on all or most of these features, which recur in varying hues and flavours.² It is interesting to consider how relevant this list is to Trump's declared program, his style, his prerogatives and his methods (not forgetting the circle of associates and advisors he is, at the time of writing, assembling around him). I leave it to you to make these connections.

1. A cult of tradition - enthusiastic promotion of an idealised past, wholly or partly fictional, with strong themes of endemic greatness, now waning, but recoverable. The virtues of the past are of an unchanging, once-and-for all kind - which makes change unwelcome or subversive.
2. Rejection of modernism. Contemporary culture, specially its “elites” is degenerate and enfeebling. Science is valued, not for its liberating search for truth, but for the technical productions that are its handmaiden.
3. Action is valuable and invigorating; contemplation is either useless or enervating and misguided. As Eco puts it, “Thinking is a form of emasculation.”
4. Dissent is treason. There is no value in debate or deliberation. Decisions should be mandates. The whole notion of public conversation, and the means of conducting it through a free and impartial press is a delusion and a luxury.
5. Fear and hostility to outsiders as an instrument of solidarity. A core authoritarian value - conformity - is employed to sustain militant forms of intolerance toward minorities, neighbours, religious or ethnic “others”, old enemies and imagined ones.
6. Middle class frustrations of various sorts are exploited , especially against identified ‘elite’ oppressors or corrupters.
7. A conspiratorial style of thought and rhetoric. The idea of rooting out traitors is common and forceful. Belief in conspiracies thrives on passion, rather than evidence.
8. Vengeful humiliation. The idea that present greatness of the national community is denied or sabotaged by a secretive elite, either endogenous or foreign.
9. Pacifism is weakness. It is also treasonous. Conflict is the true destiny of humans and the natural condition of life. “...there is no struggle for life but, rather, life is lived for struggle.”
10. Popular elitism - the claim that ‘this people is the best people’. This is another warrant for a racist story of unification, but also for a form of collective bullying. “Elitism is a typical aspect of any reactionary ideology, insofar as it is fundamentally aristocratic, and aristocratic and militaristic elitism cruelly implies *contempt for the weak*.”
11. Heroism. Believers and followers are a pure breed of superior warriors in a cause that is eternal but threatened.
12. Conflation of power and sexual conquest. Says Eco: “This is the origin of *machismo* (which implies both disdain for women and intolerance and condemnation of nonstandard sexual habits, from chastity to homosexuality).”
13. Selective populism. By this he means that, in a manner exactly opposite to democracy, individuals are empowered, not by their responsibility, but by obedience. The ‘people’ is not conceived as a community of rightful, willing and equal participants, but “as a quality, a monolithic entity expressing the Common Will.” The leader, mystically, and in fact, assumes the duty of fathoming and executing that will.
14. Newspeak, Orwell’s simplified, paradoxical, manipulative propaganda/language, is a characteristic and indispensable instrument of control - of thought, criticism, ambition, truth.

Umberto is careful to explain that fascism is not a species of ideology - a coherent program of political ambitions; neither is it a consistent formula for economic and social reform, nor a vision of a just and stable society. Instead it is more like a pseudo-mythology (phoney because it is stuck together from ill-assorted pieces like a scrap-book). This takes the place of a lucid, defensible social program. It runs on a constant stream of rhetoric, which has no other purpose than to enlist passions and disguise its original poverty.

“...behind a regime and its ideology there is always a way of thinking and feeling, a group of cultural habits, of obscure instincts and unfathomable drives.” It is this resort to primitive power that is really characteristic of those movements that we think of as fascist - a particular way of channeling ancient authoritarian impulses - a modern aberration.

What condition of American society allowed Trump to prevail?

Let's turn for a moment to the troubling question of what's going on in America. Is it true that Trump's support came from economically disadvantaged people? Or from cheesed-off racist xenophobes? Or both? How come these folks, whoever they were, were so charmed they forgave his obvious flaws and fell for his lies? Surely he couldn't have persuaded a normally rational population, even one burdened with many resentments, as Americans certainly are. Here are a few suggestions on this difficult subject.

For 30 years or so, American society has been dividing itself ever more deeply into two intolerant camps. On the surface, their opposition is said to be about political and cultural choices. These have been shoe-horned into old ideological categories, so they still wear familiar labels, like left and right, conservative and liberal, but they have also been fitted into a new 'neoliberal' mould created in these three decades, which has scrambled the old ideas that once sorted right from left. It is no longer easy for any partisan to claim exactly what it is they passionately believe - only that their opponents are hopelessly mistaken.

Plenty of loud declarations about freedom, the evils of big government, sources of prosperity, social justice, criminality, war and peace, moral decay, and the like can be heard all the time - but when examined, nearly all of them melt away. Of coherent, visionary, well-considered, thoughts about how modern democracies ought to work, there is almost none. The place of reasoned argument and debate, a life-blood of democracy, has been taken by slogans and propaganda. Where there was once respectful dissent, workable compromise, and pluralism, there is now hatred and vitriol.

To my mind, this is the key pathology of the US now, the most urgent, and you might think, potentially the most remediable - a kind of unarmed, non-territorial civil war - a self-harm the Americans have decided to inflict upon themselves. It is by no means clear how or when it will end. But it is not the only disease. Think of this as side one of a coin. Side two is this: old people alive today can remember when, in the time between

the two world wars, there arose a rash of dictatorial governments and a wave of enthusiasm for them, that came rather close to rubbing out the world's remaining democracies. Historians and social scientists have been busy trying to explain this ever since. Not everyone agrees that they succeeded. But even if we can't say why this happened, we can certainly give it a name; it is democracy's natural enemy, the belief that societies need authority, not popular consent, in order to flourish and survive. It appears to many observers, including this one, that America is experiencing a revival of this creed - clothed in today's fashion rather than that of 80 years ago, but otherwise the same.

Obviously, people in the 1920's and 30's didn't understand what was happening to them - they were too involved - but if this can happen once, it can happen again. Democracies are both resilient, and fragile. That, anyway was one lesson of that time. But unravelling just which bits of free societies are tough and durable, and which are vulnerable, has turned out to be not so easy. Yet we must know. If one thing has become clear, it is that enemies of democracy are always with us. And the most insidious ones are inside. Democratic governance requires a kind of consent. The people must feel themselves to be together enough to grant legitimacy to their representative system. This cohesion has to be stronger than any sources of conflict that arise among them - at least on balance, and over time. If it is fractured badly enough, for long enough, democratic confidence erodes until finally it is too weak to withstand the blandishments of some whisperer. Then the love of freedom and the joy of citizenship can give way all too easily to the adoration of a leader. It seems to me, that is the place Americans have arrived at.

Thinking about this, I've come to see that the thing to understand isn't economic conditions, or racial tensions, or religious zealotry, and so on. These are like symptoms displayed in the body of society. What we want is causes. And, just like everything political, that means understanding our own nature. Modern scholarship has come to this conclusion. If we want to know how to promote cohesion, we need to know the causes of dissent, and it turns out the driving force behind all our collective behaviour, the motives for our choices and the passions for our commitments, can be discovered in our heads and hearts. We all contain both a larval democrat and a primitive tribesman. They contend on a stage set for us by political systems and operatives, as well as custom and historical accidents. So the other side of the coin is authoritarianism, growing like a cancer.³

Trump will not govern - but we should be very concerned about who does it in his stead

From everything we know, Trump is much too lazy, ill informed and impulsive to do much of the work of running the country. For all we can tell, it doesn't even interest him. We can be pretty sure he will do just what he's doing now (mid-way through his transition) - hold demonstrations and rallies, stirring the passions of his 'supporters', and basking in their adulation. Because he is a vain man, he will not want to be in positions where his incompetence is in plain view, but will contrive to spend his time in office doing what he does best - that is, perform. Because he doesn't like opposition, he will most likely pre-select his audiences. In all this, he will resemble many an autocrat and

pretender before him. But just because he is a clown, it doesn't mean he can't do a lot of damage.

Right now, he is filling the most responsible positions in the executive branch of government with some of the least qualified and most bigoted candidates ever seen in Washington. At the same time, he's assembling a team of close advisors that is fervently partisan and anti-democratic. Nobody really knows what will be the result of all this zeal, once it is unleashed among the levers of power, but it is safe to say, we should expect a rash of extreme neo-liberal proposals, poorly considered policy, yet more additions to the security apparatus of the State, and attempts to further centralise power in the hands of the president.

'Newspeak' in the world of Trump

In the year of the election, people began to wonder more and more about the 'post-truth' world we seemed to have arrived in. The 'fourth estate' appeared to have abandoned its traditional role as arbiter and reporter of truths, including (and especially) inconvenient ones. One of the candidates had clearly adopted a new, bewildering relationship with truth, which didn't elicit outrage, as we expected, but enthusiasm, from his followers. His critics, whether outraged or bemused, called his utterances lies, shaking their heads as they counted them.

But they are not exactly lies. And this mistake might have something to do with how he got away with so many of them, and continues to do so. Harry Frankfurt, the Princeton philosopher, wrote a perceptive little essay about this, pointing out that, in order to lie, a liar must know what is true, and intend to deceive.⁴ But Trump does something different. He has no idea what is true, and couldn't care less. He just says what suits him, making it up, or repeating something. His purpose is not to deceive, but to persuade. His persuasions often entail deception, but that is not the point - he is as deceived as anyone. Frankfurt called such truth-independent speakers "bullshitters" to distinguish them from liars. We might as well call them 'propagandists', when they are in the business of employing bullshit to gain office or exert power, or to otherwise get their way.

When Orwell wrote 1984, he was deeply concerned about this very thing. The age of propaganda worried him as much as anything, and in order to emphasise what he saw as a developing danger he added an essay to the book to show us how trends in the use of language might evolve in a world in which authority was gradually winning its ancient battle with freedom, and democratic norms were being erased one by one.

There has been some argument about whether Orwell exaggerated the power of words, or if he understood the relation between language and thought well enough. But we can put this aside, and agree that every autocrat, and specially the twentieth century totalitarian regimes that should give us most concern, has employed rhetoric as an essential tool, and that in our time the means available to propagandists have multiplied and proliferated so much that we barely apprehend their potential. With this in mind, we

might well say that the concept of 'post-truth' has a hollow ring: it sounds like a muffle, disguising the thing it's supposed to name, when what we want to do is understand it. Post-truth, if it means anything, means the age of bullshit; a vast epidemic of gullibility; lethal carelessness; a cornucopia of ignorance and all its bitter fruits.

George Orwell insisted on one thing - that Newspeak shrank both language and thought. Its whole tendency was to prohibit, to disallow the invention and curiosity made possible by the faculty of language, and thus to limit the scope of thought. "The special function of certain Newspeak words ... was not so much to express meanings, as to destroy them." It also, by its design, compelled the speaker to fit their thoughts with a straightjacket; to make speech "as nearly as possible independent of consciousness."

I don't think anyone could accuse Donald Trump of being another Goebbels. His speech is somehow child-like, even if it is full of a publicist's native cunning, like a salesman. But (unless I'm mistaken) he won't be managing the messages in future, any more than the policies. That will be done by people much more dedicated than he is - and more sinister. It seems to me what 'post-truth' implies is that American society has abandoned that pillar of a self-governing people, a joint commitment to deliberate upon questions of public importance. We've long deplored the widening functional gap between the people and their legislative representatives; we've worried that the complexity of governing now leaves so much decision-making to technocrats; and we've been dismayed by the dumbing down of public discourse. But this is something else.

It is as if our democracy is slowly becoming an island of lotus-eaters - that is to say, a place where democracy is not just impossible, but irrelevant. To be so careless of truth as to elect Trump is to be entranced. As Chris Hedges wrote recently, "A demagogue like Trump is what you get when you turn culture and the press into burlesque."⁵

What about the climate problem?

I'd love nothing better than to be proved wrong, but right now, I can't find any good news at all. Not because Trump himself is a denier (though he is) but because the people he wants in key roles are not just deniers, but committed ones - people for whom the cause of climate denial is an essential bit of their political and cultural identity. These are folks who think the scientists are crooks and frauds; that the IPCC is an insidious plot by the UN; that, if the problem exists at all, it is greatly exaggerated by 'alarmists'; that the whole environment movement is a subversive creature of the left, and all of its judgements must be automatically rejected. For the time being, it looks as if these officials (assuming they get their appointments) are going to become a wall of opposition, not just to climate mitigation policy, but against generating knowledge and informing the public. It could well be a 'dark age' for American research and scholarship on this problem.

Trump himself appears to neither know nor care. He seems to have acquired his opinions on all subjects, including this one, the same way - by trolling conspiratorial websites. His minions need no leadership however. They know exactly what they want to

do. To them ‘global warming alarmism’ is itself a conspiracy, with scientists deeply implicated in it. The way they see things, scientists who pronounce on this issue are not students, but advocates. In other words, they are traitors - political actors in disguise, subverting science in order to advance an undeclared agenda of power and control. This theory of intrigue is so weird it looks a bit mad - unless you share it, that is - even so, because it’s going to be prevalent and potent in the years to come, we must try to understand what’s behind it if we can.

A milder form of denial is asserted by a great many responsible people, as well as lots of folks who are processing various forms and degrees of doubt. This is the place to search, rather than the feverish extremes of Trump land. You can get a feel for this ‘moderate’ version of denial from a lecture delivered by John Howard to the Global warming Policy Foundation in November 2013. In giving an account of his government’s wariness with respect to climate policy, he said this:

“Now all of us, as common-sense individuals, know that the science is never completely in on any subject, and the whole basis of understanding the importance of science to our lives is that it is a source of information derived from intelligent inquiry; it is not a piece of political advocacy. We all know of examples where we believed that the science was in on something, only to discover later on that further research indicated that another point of view should prevail.”⁶

Think about this a moment. First, Howard says, he (and presumably, his audience, virtually all non-scientists) regard the question from the outside dispassionately - with “common sense”. This is to say, to assess scientific judgements you don’t need expertise, just something like *savour faire*. Next he says, scientists enquire; they have no business advocating. And this is so because science is fallible.

Now, this claim - that science is an inferior form of knowledge that should be kept in its place by men of the world - is not new. It was very much on the minds of reactionary thinkers during the age of revolution. It is not a considered position, but rather an intuitive one - and in fact, Howard, in an interview after his address, admitted as much, saying his “instincts” told him global warming could not be as bad as the scientists claimed. The thing is, modern science arose precisely as a refutation of this way of thinking about how knowledge is founded. At its very beginning, science insisted on a modest but radical claim - that all propositions and inferences need (wherever possible) to be warranted by observable, repeatable, and testable evidence. The institutions of science have grown up around this requirement - open publication, peer review, disciplined debate, formal methods for quantifying uncertainty, and so on. But for people like Howard, with no training, no knowledge, and possibly a temperamental aversion to the matter and style of science, none of this makes sense.⁷

To him, the self-imposed limits of scientific enquiry (no scientific inference is ever final, but always open to refutation by new evidence) look like weaknesses. Furthermore, he seems to believe scientific practitioners, being unaware of the limitations of their

enterprise are prone to exaggeration and hubris. Scientific dissidents (whether they actually study climate problems or not) appear to him trustworthy if they downplay or dismiss the urgency and seriousness of the climate issue. In this way, a wholly artificial division has grown up between mavericks on the right, and ‘alarmists’ on the left - at least in the minds of those who share Howard’s view.

This nexus of climate denial and partisan politics is new (less than 30 years old), but distrust of science like John Howard’s (or Tony Abbott’s) has roots extending way back to the origins of modern science in the seventeenth century. Over time, it came to be formulated as a strand of conservative thinking, part of the idea that human rationality is not suitable for designing or planning social institutions and reforms. The core of the idea, to which many of us can assent, goes something like this: societies are organic things, incorporating slowly and thoroughly the accumulated experience and wisdom of a people. All attempts to over-ride this fathomless complexity with ambitious contrivances are doomed to fail - just because our rational capacities can never be up to the task. If I’m not mistaken, this is the thought that was on Howard’s mind.

But I suspect he is mixing up two distinct versions of it, both powerfully articulated in the years following the French revolution. One, due to Edmund Burke, holds that although root-and-branch revolution is always disastrous, organic social change is both inevitable and necessary. It should be the work of wise conservative governors to diagnose those changes and manage them, in the interests of the whole society. Nowadays, this view is often called ‘classical’ conservatism. The other version comes down to us in the work of Joseph de Maistre, who’s view of human nature and capacity was much harsher than Burke’s. Maistre’s model of society was like a human ant-hill - regulated by absolute authorities. Anything less strict would result in chaos, the worst outcome of all. Like other anti-enlightenment thinkers, he seems to have been temperamentally off-side with science, uninterested in its results, deeply sceptical about its methods.

For him, the secure sources of knowledge were shared between intuition and authority - the more ancient and venerable the better. Men, being incorrigibly wicked, have to be constrained by fear and force; nothing else will do. They certainly cannot be entrusted with self-government; on the contrary, a sovereign’s power must be absolute. The foundational claim of science - that any observant, discerning person can make contributions to the body of accumulating knowledge - is a dangerous and delusional liberty. Everything we need to know about the natural world has been revealed by the divine will.

Thinking about this, you can see why the advent of science was accompanied by the evolution of liberal political ambitions. The two human enterprises go together, because prising knowledge away from authority gives people the means to become citizen-governors. Arch-conservatives like Maistre, and his twenty-first century inheritors, as well as all autocrats, know that the institutions of science have to be either suppressed, or subordinated to the State. This idea too can be seen hidden in Howard’s speech. “Climate change is a quintessential political problem,” he said, in a strange echo of

George Orwell's observation about the language of 1984. "... there was no vocabulary expressing the function of science as a habit of mind, or a method of thought ... there was indeed no word for 'Science'".

You can perhaps see Howard's mistake more clearly by thinking about the South African president, who, for some private reasons, decided that his scientists and public health experts were wrong about the causes and remedies of the AIDS epidemic. Just like AIDS, the climate problem would be inexplicable (and mostly invisible) without the diagnostic work of scientists. And politicians would have no idea what was going on, or how to respond. Choosing among remedies, to be sure, entails public policy decisions; but choosing the diagnosis that fits one's "instincts" is as foolish as someone who says they can't have cancer because they don't feel like it. Since Howard is not a fool, we can be certain he is in the grip of a pretty powerful prejudice - against an unwelcome planetary diagnosis, and by implication, against the technicians who discovered it. If a zealous and energetic form of this blindness prevails in the American government for the next few years, as seems certain, it will retard globally coordinated climate responses in ways we cannot yet know.

But it is bigger than this. The idea of progress became a guiding principle of human affairs about two and a half centuries ago - the hope that people could use their gifts of reason, their capacity for tolerance, and their cooperative nature, to bring decent lives to all, and fulfilment to many. Ever since, we have lived with a kind of tug-of-war between the part of ourselves that invented this modern progressive dream, and another part that yearns for something more orderly, less hazardous; a rock of ages, rather than an open-ended adventure. Science and liberty both require us to live in the presence of a lot of uncertainty. That appears to conflict with some part of our nature. Learning to understand and interpret the world in the way science has revealed it, and practicing the duties of democratic citizenship, both demand an effort: to repudiate certain intuitions and unconscious biases. We do this because we have long been persuaded that the rewards of discovery, and of self government are worth it. But we cannot escape the conflict, any more than we can change our human nature.

Research in the social sciences seems to confirm that the political categories of left and right do in fact correspond to something fundamental - a branch in our social nature with roots in the distant past.⁸ The potent forms of climate denial we will see in Trump's government have very little to do with scientific doubt (disputes about evidence), but everything to do with anti-scientific doubt (rejection of science as a source of secure knowledge). Trump's men will not say so - they'll talk about free markets and small government - but listen carefully and you will hear faintly the ghost of de Maistre explaining why democracy is a grievous error.

So a Trump administration that authorises a wide anti-science agenda, inscrutable as that might seem, would be no more mysterious than the persistence of belief in miracles, or hero-worship, or football mania. We will find out soon enough.

Postscript: Yearning for a strongman

Whatever is happening in the USA, and whatever makes American events special, something closely related is happening in every part of the liberal democratic world. Even if we can't see it clearly, it feels scary, because we feel as though the foundations of the 'free world' aren't as secure as they seemed to be only a few short years ago. There are grave concerns that contemporary capitalism is in process of self-destruction, with no alternative economic system in sight. There is the obvious, dispiriting fact that international cooperation is not good enough to avert a slowly evolving climate catastrophe. And there is the decay and corruption of democratic institutions, norms and practices; destruction of the faith of citizens, and the clamour in favour of demagogues.

This time feels like it's make or break for the great democratic experiment in which we've lived. In an odd way, nothing focusses this concern quite like the strange attraction between Trump and the Russian president, and the way it has been accepted and echoed by a large public. How could cold-war antipathy in the US and clear evidence of subterfuge be overridden by this fascination with a macho bullying dictator? Putin's taste for cruelty and intolerance and his record of corruption and murder don't seem to matter any more than Trump's many defects.

Surely, the way to resolve this puzzle is to acknowledge that large democracies need a specific set of conditions if they are to work, and if enough are absent, people tend to revert to modes of collective organising that are more 'primitive' and less demanding. That means deferring to a leadership claimant who speaks persuasively about unity and strength.

So we can actually put Trump to use - as a diagnostic test. A demonstration that it is time to study closely our democratic malaise and figure out what we must do to put it right. If we really think it's beyond repair, then Trump will turn out to be just the first of an ugly series of anti-democrats leading us back to a past we thought never to have revisited. But if we can be clear-headed about our adversity, we might find the resilience of democracy - and thus of the human capacity to live in liberty - has no limits. Or at least none we have yet discovered.

Notes

¹ The Doctrine of Fascism. Benito Mussolini, 1932. World Future Fund: <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/Reading/Germany/mussolini.htm>

² Ur-Fascism. Umberto Eco, *New York Review of Books*, June 22, 1995. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/06/22/ur-fascism/>

³ The work I have in mind here is well explained in Jonathan Haidt's excellent book, *The Righteous Mind* [Pantheon Books, 2012], in which he gives an account of his own research and its background. He based his discussion of authoritarianism - its nature and origins - on the work of Karen Stenner: *The Authoritarian Dynamic* [Cambridge University Press, 2005], which provides a great deal of solid understanding of this theme in human affairs. If you are interested in the fascinating questions of how the moral world of humans came to be the way it is - and the political implications of the answers - then Christopher Boehm's *Moral Origins* [Basic Books, 2012] will give you plenty to think about.

⁴ Harry Frankfurt, 2005: *On Bullshit*. <https://www.stoa.org.uk/topics/bullshit/pdf/on-bullshit.pdf>

⁵ Truthdig, December 18, 2016. http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/fake_news_homegrown_and_far_from_new_20161218

⁶ Howard, a former Australian Prime Minister, was invited to speak to this respectable London based climate denier organisation, because of his well known 'agnosticism' - a kind of euphemism for denial which suggests admirable and prudent detachment. Such agnostics usually claim to be true 'skeptics', to distinguish themselves from the phoney scientist/activists. Text at: <http://australianpolitics.com/2013/11/05/howard-one-religion-is-enough.html>

⁷ It's also possible his training as a lawyer has something to do with it. In science, you are supposed to follow the evidence wherever it leads. Whether the destination is welcome or otherwise is irrelevant. Of course, this doesn't always happen in practice - scientists have biases too; but in the absence of this commitment, we tend to look for the evidence that confirms our existing view, and ignore or neglect anything that contradicts it. Lawyers have years of practice at this. Their purpose, after all, is not to discover truth, but to win cases. Many of them, as a result, don't 'get' what scientists are doing.

⁸ Karen Stenner's landmark study *The Authoritarian Dynamic* [2005] provides the best empirical treatment of this question I know of. She shows that, as individuals, alongside our capacity for democratic institutions and practice, we harbour desires for social conformity (and hence for strong leadership and authority); and for a stable, unchanging social order - and that these dispositions are discreet, and can exist independently or in tandem. Furthermore, they occur in a spectrum of potency in any population or community, and expressions of political preference or prejudice due to them are highly variable, depending on the presence or absence of certain perceived threats or fears.

It follows that liberal democracies can only flourish when these latent contrary impulses are being managed. For instance, necessary change must be rendered non-disruptive, and its benefits demonstrated. Diversity, particularly where it relates to values, has to be seen as enrichment rather than difference; strength rather than division. Equally, it is available to any demagogue to stoke latent opposition and intolerance simply by using rhetoric with the opposite intent.

See: Stenner, K, 2009. *Three Kinds of Conservatism*. *Psychological Inquiry*, 20; 142-159
http://ussc.edu.au/ussc/assets/media/docs/publications/1006_Inequality_Stenner.pdf