



Why Trump (Or, America In Fragments)

by Siobhan McGuirk

People want answers. On social media timelines, in newspapers and blogs, in private conversations, those who cannot understand how Donald Trump has been elected President of the United States are desperate to make sense of it all. Too many people are accepting easy answers. It was neoliberalism. It was misogyny. It was white supremacy. It was fear. It was Hillary. It was the media. It was the FBI. It was Facebook.

In truth, there is no single person, group, ideology, or media moment to “blame”. Ignore the thousand Think Pieces telling you otherwise. No one “let” this happen; there is not one “cause”. Desire for straightforward answers reveals only the depth of denial we face in the United States today. The voting public *chose* this. Across income levels, across numerous states. We chose this. That is how democratic society works. We are all complicit.

People are asking the wrong questions. 'How did Donald Trump win marginally more support in three particular U.S. states?' 'Why were pollsters wrong?' 'Did Democrats choose the wrong candidate?'

The question we are too afraid to ask is simple: 'What is our society, such that Donald Trump could be President?' But this is the question we must ask as we plan the necessary fight back. The answers, like the United States of America, can only be understood in fragments.

I. The ravages of neoliberalism

Rural USA has been decimated by neoliberal policies and trade agreements: laws and deals that have supported private interests, diminished labour protections, rolled back welfare, and consolidated wealth in the hands of the few at the expense of the many. Neoliberalism is an ideology with social as well as economic dimensions, as proclaimed by Margaret Thatcher: 'There is no such thing as society.' Neoliberalism celebrates individualism, a tenet of the U.S. state of mind. It's meant to be an even



playing field. But the closer you are to the top of the pile, the more tax breaks and laws on your side, the easier it is to take care of “you and yours.” For those starting out at the bottom, without social safety nets, access to resources, and labour protections, that effort becomes near impossible.

Across America, factories have closed; wages have fallen; health costs and needs have spiralled. Forget mobility, dreams of social stability have been shattered. While politicians placated, “the economy is recovering” and “unemployment is falling,” the rural poor saw walls crumbling around them. Economic disaster strikes at wallets, bodies and minds.

As Anne Amnesia wrote with devastating eloquence in May, the desperation of people living in the rust belt is not only palatable, it is writ large in hard data:

The number of overdoses in 2014? 47,055 of which at least 29,467 are attributable to opiates. [...] Suicide is up as well. [...] both suicide and addiction speak to a larger question of despair. Despair, loneliness, and a search, either temporarily or permanently, for a way out. And yet this isn't seen as a crisis, except by statisticians and public health workers. [...] There's no sympathy at all.

The “unnecessariat”, she argued, would embrace Trump because he dropped the pretence that everything was fine. He said what they already knew: things are bad. He promised change. Clinton promised more of the same. The choice was easy.

FOCUS: THE ELECTION OUTCOME

This is an important part of the story. But only part. Robert Reich says that Democrats' lean into corporate power pushed "the working class" into Donald's open arms, but takes for granted that "the working class" is white. It is not, and millions of non-white working class people did not vote for Trump. Neoliberalism has ravaged them, too, but they refused to back Trump. They could not overlook the other aspects of Trump's multifaceted "appeal." Neither can we.



II. White supremacist nationalism is real, and it is everywhere

The massacre of Indigenous people; the slave trade; Imperialist expansion; immigration and naturalization policies based on racial "purity"—these are the bedrocks of U.S. society. On these foundations, the ground is not only ripe, but primed for white supremacist nationalism to flourish. And flourish it does.

The United States of America is a profoundly racist society. Racism is not the exclusive purview of the poor. Far from it, in fact. People at all levels within the Criminal Justice system (a professional sector) disproportionately target, beat, shoot and sentence black and brown men and women with impunity. Historically Black churches are being burned to the ground. At our Great Institutes of Higher Learning, black PhDs cannot get jobs. Dating app users proclaim: "no chocolate, no rice, no spice", echoing signs in shop windows that we're told are relics of the past. But this is the present, and Trump is the President-elect.

While some spit epithets, others simply treat their non-white friends and employees with disdain. Last week, a white, educated, liberal, professional man told me to avoid a theme park near Baltimore because "it's pretty sketchy." When I moved to DC, I was encouraged

by similarly situated people to avoid the NE and SE quadrants, because they "aren't safe." Let me translate: 'Black people are dangerous.'

Trump said that too, just plainly. Black people are "thugs". Muslims are terrorists. Immigrants are a threat. His words echo the daily messaging of pop culture. Turn on the TV. Newscasters will tell you the same thing. So will your favourite TV dramas. Yet scriptwriters do not toil in the bible belt. Trump says Mexicans are drug runners and rapists—though he 'assumes some are good people'.

President Obama divided undocumented immigrants into two similar camps: "families" and "felons". That doesn't sound so bad. So we applauded his humanity, as Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers took the law into their own hands and his agencies deported 2.5 million people.

This election has emboldened the far right, and non-white people are justifiably terrified. But Trump has not simply "played upon frustration". He told people that their already existing white supremacist, xenophobic leanings were justified. Whether earning under \$30k, or over \$250k, whether college educated or high school drop out, whether "holding their nose" or laughing in the voting booth, white people across the board backed Trump, at least in part because they share his fear of, and refusal to lose their perceived power—be it financial, social, cultural, or ideological—to those blacks, Jews, Mexicans, Muslims and ill-defined "immigrants" that threaten their place at the top of the pile.

III. Contempt for the poor is a national pastime

It bears repeating: Among white people who earn over \$250,000 per year, Trump won the popular vote. Among white people with college degrees, Trump won the popular vote. Yet we're told that "invisible voters" won the election for Trump. Not "unexpected" or "underestimated," but "invisible." To borrow from Arundhati Roy, there is no such thing as the unseen, only the ignored.

George Orwell said that the British middle and upper classes are taught to hate the poor. His words apply here. Between the Coasts lie the "fly over states." The *Washington Post* names a Nevada town as "the armpit of America." The Police also batter the poor and homeless, regardless of race—abuses that have not prompted national outcry. Trailer trash, white trash, rednecks and hicks populate our nightmares. They are toothless Halloween costumes; Simpsons' punchlines; uneducated and unwashed; ignorant rage personified.

It's a comforting idea that bigots live only in the



FOCUS: THE ELECTION OUTCOME

“backwaters” of America. It’s also useful, justifying the popular idea that poor people have only themselves to blame for their lot. Fragment I exists in conjunction with Fragment III. The belief that everyone can, and should pick themselves up by their own bootstraps transcends party lines. It applies to poor white and non-white people alike, who are dehumanised in different ways, by different groups of people.

Across America, there is little popular support for universal healthcare; free higher education; higher minimum wages; labour protections, or a robust welfare state. Prosperity is the American Dream. Even Trump knows this. “Part of the beauty of me is that I am very rich,” he accurately declared. It appealed to the very poor—and to the similarly rich.

As I watched results from Florida flash up on screen in a DC bar on election night, someone screamed over the boos: “Garbage State!” Another voice asked: “How is this happening?” Her question had just been answered. It has been answered time and again, by every person seriously considering emigrating to Canada or New Zealand post-election. I wonder if those eager emigres believe in open borders for all? And do they still laugh at secessionists, as *they* clamour to leave the country?

As for those living in rural America? They know they are neglected, ignored, and ridiculed by the urban elite. But that “hard work” ideology feeds their political choices too, as Kathy Cramer explains:

...when people think about their support for policies, a lot of the time they’re... thinking about whether the recipients of these policies are deserving. Those calculations are often intertwined with notions of hard work, because in the American political culture, we tend to equate hard work with deservingness. And a lot of racial stereotypes carry this notion of laziness, so when people are making these judgments about who’s working hard, oftentimes people of color don’t fare well... But it’s not just people of color. People [in rural Wisconsin] are like: “Are you sitting behind a desk all day? Well, that’s not hard work. Hard work is someone like me — I’m a logger, I get up at 4:30am and break my back... I’m wearing my body out in the process of earning a living.” Through resentment and these notions of deservingness, that’s where you can see how economic anxiety and racial anxiety are intertwined.

IV. Misogyny (in its many forms) is the desirable norm

Donald Trump endorses this message: “Don’t hold back boys, grab her by the pussy!” Electing him to the White

House legitimises sexual assault in a society that is already defined by rape culture. Trump treats women with disdain, and surrounds himself with advisors who face charges for battery, spousal abuse, sexual harassment and assault.

This is not coincidental. It is not incidental. Trump’s misogyny was not simply “tolerated” or “overlooked” by voters. It was embraced.

Hetero-patriarchal power has been the explicit policy-platform and a badge of honor for the Trump campaign. Members of his inner-circle, his likely Cabinet, promised voters that they would overturn *Roe vs. Wade*, restricting access to abortions, and defund women’s health services in the interim. They want to overturn *Oberfell*, banning same-sex marriage. They oppose equal pay for women. They support religious freedom acts, which sanction multiple forms of discrimination against LGBTQ people.

Transgender women and girls are likely to be hit hardest by “traditional values” policies and health services restrictions. Calls to LGBTQ suicide hotlines have spiked since the election, and transwomen are already calling on their cis-gender allies to stockpile birth control drugs, knowing that access to hormones will soon be impossible for some. The recent decision of major LGBTQ Rights organisations to privilege “more pressing issues” over trans rights appears doubly short-sighted, doubly painful, post-election.

Again, these were explicit policy proposals that *appealed* to a large number of voters. Many Americans—including women—believe that abortion should be banned, that transgender women are an abomination, that “Family Values” must be enforced at all costs. Other women backed Trump because they were “more concerned” about “other issues”. They did not see his actions or statements as a red line, unthinkable to cross. Misogyny, like racism, courses through America’s veins. Some people were never meant to survive

As for Clinton? There is simply no denying that her gender played a role in the election result. Her parameters of acceptable behaviour were circumscribed by her being a woman. A former first lady who doesn’t know her place, she could not be “angry,” or overly “emotional.” She was untrustworthy; “unpresidential,” a Lady Macbeth. Trump had no parameters. An accused rapist and avowedly sexist man termed his opponent “a nasty woman” and 60 million people agreed. If Hillary had been a man, for better or worse, we would very likely be discussing president-elect Clinton right now. (And Fragmented America would still persist, out of sight).



FOCUS: THE ELECTION OUTCOME

V. Bernie was not the messiah (but his popularity should not be overlooked)

Bernie Sanders polled well against Trump. More importantly, voters in key states preferred Sanders over Clinton. During the Primaries, he rode a groundswell of popular support to shock the Democratic National Committee—which promptly conspired to shut down his campaign. Many Bernie supporters, feeling betrayed, refused to back Hillary as a result. It might have cost the Democrats the election. The same populist backlash that propelled Trump to the White House might have elected President Sanders. Might.

Putting aside the fact that pollsters were just proven wrong in their predictions, we can only say that people who voted for Trump might have supported the anti-racist, pro-choice, pro-LGBTQ, climate change-affirming social democrat Bernie Sanders. Or maybe they would have hated him for those stances. Or seen him as a long-standing member of the political elite, whose “revolutionary” efforts had little to no impact on the status quo over forty years. Or maybe Trump would have rolled out his anti-Semitic ads earlier. Who knows? No one. So let it go. Pick a new hero. Better yet, pick a thousand. We’re going to need a lot of them.

VI. Neither was Hillary

Much of the Clinton smear campaign was risible. Email scandals, Benghazi conspiracies, FBI “interventions”, rumours of terminal illness, and, of course, the misogyny. Yet there remained numerous reasons for voters not to throw their weight behind Clinton. As Secretary of State, she ushered in a military dictatorship in Honduras. She regards war as the best option in a multitude of contexts. She has supported corporations and cosied up to Wall St. She has repeatedly made the kinds of remarks that situate her fully in this fragmented, racist, pro-traditional values America—even if she regrets them now.

Her party is also deeply problematic, and has been for a long time. President Obama backs the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a hyper-neoliberal deal widely opposed by the global left. He is delaying judgement on the Dakota Access Pipeline, currently slicing through Indigenous people’s land. His administration drops bombs daily, sells copious amounts of arms, including to Saudi Arabia (currently bombing Yemen), and militarily supports Israel (currently bombing Gaza). During Clinton’s time in office, her Party has supported free trade agreements, mandatory minimum sentencing, and welfare cutbacks—policies that ravaged the poor, people of color, and all but the elite in NAFTA signatory states. Disliking Hillary is not necessarily “anti-feminist,” as Gloria Steinem claimed. It is just as likely to be anti-Imperialist, anti-

racist, and anti-capitalist. The heroes we rally behind must deserve our support.

VII. Trumpism is not new, or surprising

Trump is not a revelation. He is merely an escalation of political ideologies that been promoted and embraced in this country very explicitly, and very recently. Trump-lite candidates are regularly elected to office across America: Mike Huckabee, Mike Pence, Rick Santorum, Michele Bachmann, Scott Walker, Ted Cruz, Sheriff Arpaio, Sheriff Clarke, Jan Brewer, Sarah Palin. These are not unknown names. Some of them will continue their political careers in Trump’s administration. Their racist, transphobic, homophobic, pro-life, climate change-denying, xenophobic, and misogynistic views are a matter of record. Their Acts and laws have already impacted marginalized people in their respective states.

These are people roundly ridiculed on *The Daily Show*—once the ‘most trusted news source in America’. But liberal laughter and mock-horror has not prevented them from passing startlingly oppressive laws over the years, or mobilizing mass support. On November 8, voters worked their way down the ballot to propel a cohort of new explosively right-wing candidates into power at local levels. They did not merely prefer Trump to Clinton. They embraced the Right. Even *The Onion* saw this coming. Its headline the day after the 2012 election ran: ‘After Obama Victory, Shrieking White-Hot Sphere Of Pure Rage Early GOP Front-Runner For 2016’.

Elected officials aside, it has been impossible to miss news coverage over the past year of efforts to cut funding to reproductive health services; of rampant Police shootings, most notably of unarmed black men; of Trans women being violently and legally prevented from using the bathroom; of calls for sympathy for white boys who rape. A hate-fuelled act has featured in the newspaper every single day that I have lived in the USA. Over the past two years, the clarion bell has sounded, again and again. America responded, straight-faced: “All Lives Matter.”

If you did not see this coming, you were simply looking away.

VIII. This Is America

People are grieving; mourning. Eager activists say there is no time for that. I disagree. We have witnessed a death. On November 8, 2016, the illusion of the United States of America as a post-racial, gender-blind, pro-LGBTQ, immigrant-friendly, egalitarian society finally died. It had been ailing for a long time; it’s mask of “safety” and “progress” slowly crumbling away. In the wake of the election, we need an open casket funeral. So we can to



FOCUS: THE ELECTION OUTCOME

see the illusion for what it was.

The urgent fight-back must be built on a broad recognition that America was never “great”—not for everyone. It was not great for non-white immigrants, barred from naturalizing as citizens. Or for women who died following backroom abortions. Or for Native American victims of genocide and ongoing abuse. Or for 3,437 black people lynched 1882-1951. Or for 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry imprisoned in camps 1942-46. Or for workers nakedly exploited by their bosses. Or for the non-whites, non-Christians, non-property owners, and women denied a panoply of rights at some point in U.S. history. Or countless others.

Despite Michelle Obama’s insistence, it is not great now. It may be hard to accept, but we live in a society in which the expected norm is racism, sexism, anti-LGBTQ violence, anti-immigrant sentiment, disdain for the poor, ignorance of the disabled, fear of Muslims and hatred of Jews. We lived here last week. We lived here last year. We have always lived here. America’s “greatness” has always been based on willful exploitation, exclusion, oppression, and dehumanization of “others,” both internal and external to its already militarized borders.

All over the world, people live in the shadow of the United States. Some see it as a promise, even if just a broken one. More know it as a threat. Millions of people woke up on November 9 scared for their futures for the first time. Billions more felt a boot heel that was always already on their neck simply press down harder.

IX. But it doesn’t have to be this way

We will also live here tomorrow. To make sense of President Trump, we have to see the fragments of this shattered America, and try to understand them. This list is not the whole picture, but they are important pieces. So what happens now?

Democrats are calling for calm, even collaboration, while privately seething and internally battling for the “soul” of the Party. It may be too far gone for repair. Third sector cultures are already circling and are declaring “monetise, don’t organise!” telling supporters to donate to “the cause.” Neither are offering answers. If it this election has taught us anything, it is that money does not speak louder than action. And that backing the establishment for revolution is a losing game. It’s time we play a new one.

There is only one question left to ask: When will you join the fightback?

Siobhan McGuirk is a Commissioning Editor for Red Pepper, as well as a Professor of Women and Gender Studies at Georgetown University, Washington DC.

This article has appeared in the UK magazine *Red Pepper* in November 2016. It is reproduced here with the permission of the author. <https://siobhanmcguirk.com/2016/11/13/why-trump-or-america-in-fragments/>



AUSTRALIAN OPTIONS