

## Review Essay

### Slouching Toward Mar-a-Lago

Jonah Goldberg

*Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy*

New York, NY: Crown Forum 2018.

J. D. Vance

*Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*

New York, NY: Harper, 2016.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

As long as he remains President of the United States and well after he departs, few books that touch on American politics, government, and public administration will be able to avoid the invasive, pervasive, sensational and spectral presence of Donald J. Trump. Almost anything said about such matters will be sensed through the dark clouds, thunder claps, blustery winds, thick mists, sinister shadows, acrid odours, frightening howls and clanking chains of this genuinely unique individual. Love him or loathe him (and there seems little space for indifference between those passions), he cannot wilfully be ignored, finessed or contemptuously dismissed.

Confronted with this singular personality who seems to possess an unnatural hold on his country and to display a bizarre being-in-the-world, some recommend pandering and flattering his insatiable ego. Some try to anticipate, avert, deflect or repel his feints, forays and thrusts. Some appear merely incredulous, dumbfounded and discomfited by their own deference. Some indulge in mockery or resistance. Some stand mute, disconsolate and eager to flee. Whatever cunning plans and clever strategies are contemplated in private by world leaders and followers alike, it is safe to say that there are few who, in the antique idiom of some remote parts of Scotland, find the courage “to stand athwart the Donald in full spate.”

“Trump is a man of hate, violence, and can’t be trusted to make moral decisions. We can’t be silent anymore. He’s on the wrong side of history.”

- Spike Lee (Moran, 2018)

Somehow, however, he must be named, framed and conceptually contained. We must be able to speak cogently and coherently about him. Given the deep currents of emotion—whether of adulation and veneration or of repulsion and revulsion—that flow in response to the mention of his name, restraint and sobriety in thought, word and deed have become increasingly rare commodities. What, then, are we to make of him?

The two books here under review are widely hailed as serious attempts to help explain Mr. Trump to friends and foes alike. Neither one succeeds fully; but, even if you disagree with their main themes, each provides a perspective that can be useful in crafting a mosaic or a montage that will eventually capture the man, his mark on America and the shade he will continue to cast upon the world.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

– Lewis Carroll, 1871, chapter 6.

Jonah Goldberg’s *Suicide of the West* deals in grand themes purportedly pertaining to the whole of Western Civilization, but it mainly addresses only its most potent expression—the singularly self-aggrandizing, world-historical United States of America. J. D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy*, on the other hand, is an intensely personal memoir, focusing on a particular aspect of the larger story—the individual achievement of the “American Dream.” It tells the story as suffered by a single (albeit complicated and not especially attractive) family that is made to stand in for the whole socio-ethnic category of “hillbillies” within the larger American working class.

In performing their respective, self-appointed and self-referential tasks, Goldberg and Vance allow two words—*populism* and *conservatism*—alternatively to be boldly foregrounded and to lurk persistently and portentously in the backgrounds of their narratives. Through an exploration of these terms, it is possible to posit links among Donald J. Trump, American culture and society, and democratic political thought in ways that may be both diagnostic and therapeutic for contemporary political life.

## Why Trump Matters Now

Advocates of the books under review claim that the recent revival of the troubled and troubling phenomenon of “populism” is an important, but poorly understood trend in American political culture. As an idea and as a movement, populism needs to be better appreciated, they say, in order to make sense of the success of the current president. Not only was Donald J. Trump elected in 2016 (albeit with over two million fewer votes than his rival, Hillary Clinton, and thanks to America’s second “peculiar institution” after slavery—namely, the anti-democratic eighteenth-century anachronism, the Electoral College), but he has also managed to retain his core support despite (or because of) overseeing what is plainly the most rude and unruly administration in recent, if not the whole of American history. Although Trump’s election is not the principal theme of either *Suicide of the West* or *Hillbilly Elegy*, each is said to help to reveal why he won.

[Note: at the time of writing, due to reports of his calling his Attorney-General Jefferson Beauregard Sessions “a dumb Southerner,” a “hillbilly” (not in a nice way) and ridiculing his southern accent, President Trump is experiencing a precipitous

decline of up to 14% among his base in the public opinion polls (Quinnipiac, 2018): whether this turns out to be a temporary anomaly or a potential tipping point is uncertain; nonetheless it is nothing if not typical of a Commander-in-Chief who, in the caustic comment of *New York Times*' writer Timothy Egan (2018), "doesn't have the bandwidth for the magnitude of his mendacity."]

Advocates of both books point especially to the concept of "conservatism," noting that most of Trump's supporters accept that label, but have rather different ideas about what the word means other, of course, than being opposite and unalterably opposed to the abhorrent label of "liberal." Pushed to come up with a clear description of either one, most Trump supporters—even the rare articulate and seemingly well-read backers who find themselves defending him on cable news programs and newspaper op-ed pages—come up remarkably short.

The fervent if not frantic search for a special key to President Trump's success is justified by the sheer outlandishness of his rise to power, his demagoguery, his strident claims to unhindered executive authority as well as his evident impatience with simple norms of courteous discourse, customary political protocol and the details of constitutional government. Apparently uninterested in the far-famed checks and balances of American governance, the president contents himself with calling those who refuse or fail to do his bidding as "traitors" and stumbles into the next wasp's nest. He ensures his isolation by blithely ignoring and sometimes belligerently scorning the advice of his private counsellors and the expertise of his administrative advisers, even when John Dowd, one of his most astute lawyers to date, told him just before resigning that his inability to control his lies under oath would put him in an "orange jumpsuit" for the crime of perjury (Panetta, 2018).

<p>The core institutions of American democracy are being battered by an administration that has treated the country's traditional checks and balances with disdain. — Michael J. Abramowitz, 2018</p>
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Accordingly, both the style and the substance of the Trump administration should be of special interest to readers of this journal. His disparaging, defamatory and relentlessly withering criticisms of his own senior public officials and whole departments of government have been unlike those of any former U.S. president or of any leader of another liberal democracy who comes to mind. Moreover, no previous "leader of the free world" has so blatantly placed in senior government positions people with fewer evident qualifications, greater impulses toward depravity, or more explicit instructions to undermine the mandates of the offices that they were ostensibly appointed to fill. As well, no previous American head of state has subjected his official agents and aides to greater personal and professional humiliation and abuse. Less than half-way into his presidency, Donald J. Trump has so dominated and impacted US political culture that no one, regardless of political opinion or affiliation, can deny that his administration has already been "exceptional." Were, however, anyone also to call him "innovative," it would give a new and arguably perverse meaning to the term.

President Trump, put simply, is important to analysts of politics and public policy professionals because public administration is normally the nexus that links political power to the general population through the instrumentality of the state. It consists of mechanisms for the

implementation of authoritative programs and regulations directed by governments on behalf of the sovereign governors, and applied to (with at least the tacit consent of) the governed, who may in turn respond to innovative initiatives with some combination of enthusiastic engagement, routine compliance, idle indifference, sullen resistance or open insurrection. The Trump administration, however, is willfully, self-consciously and boastfully the converse of normalcy.

Effective public administration should turn principles into practicalities without distorting the fundamental purpose of proposed public policies or provoking unnecessary objections to maintaining socio-economic stability. Except in extraordinary circumstances, innovative public administration promotes constructive change toward new goals and adaptations to new circumstances without wholly disrupting customary norms and practices. Above all, efficacious public administration depends upon a public inclined to give reasonable deference to the law and to political authorities committed to its fair and impartial application, but disinclined to Pavlovian responses to authoritarian dominance.

Public sector innovation typically refers to changes that are made within normal or at least recognizable patterns of governance. It usually involves either efforts to do better what was already being done by means of increased efficiencies or sensitivities, or to facilitate new measures and methods intended to promote and extend the public good. Successful public sector innovation presumes a basic level of governmental legitimacy and a sustainable standard of public trust. On the contrary, innovations that take the form of massive disruption or destruction (creative or otherwise) tend to be outliers. Abnormal patterns of governance may include the invocation of hateful rhetoric, proposals to disenfranchise or dispossess minorities, accusations of treason based on mere disagreement and dissent, and calls for the exclusion of racialized, gendered, ethno-cultural minorities and religious groups from the enjoyment of acknowledged liberties and protection under the law. President Trump has made disturbance, distraction and disorder the components of the “new normal.”

The rule of law is an unqualified human good. – E. P. Thompson 2013 [1963]

Campaign calls to illegally “lock up” competing candidates or to mindlessly “drain the swamp” of unverified corruption can and should be disquieting. When repeated too often, they can betoken a desire for radical restructuring of venerable traditions and the jettisoning of previously settled customs and lawful procedures. They are signs of alienation and ultimately angry opposition not only to political personalities, parties and policies, but to the lawful norms and procedures of entire political systems. Such appeals are not instruments of creativity, but tokens of collapse. Innovation does not typically imply the obliteration of what is and its replacement by its opposite.

Calmly considered and seriously contemplated innovation is meant to enlarge and improve, not to destroy and replace. It embodies the Burkean wisdom which asserts that a state without the means to change is also a state without the means to ensure its own conservation. Wherever possible, however, change should be consistent with tradition while being adaptive to novelty. Donald J. Trump’s approach to governing disdains an authentic conservatism that prefers incremental reform to dramatic reorganization and transformation. It rejects as “weak” any innovation that is conceived and implemented within an open and established framework of

administrative practice and an transparent and validated set of constitutional procedures (even when amending constitutions).

All of this may only recently have seemed relatively uncontroversial. In liberal democracies, there has long been a foundational agreement about political processes and the proper ways to go about making changes in the public interest. The consensus has been implicit in the concept of public sector innovation as it is understood and used in journals like this one, as well as among attentive scholars, responsible public officials, and the informed public. With the exception of traditional hunting, gathering and scavenging communities, some unusual religiously based and mainly rural communities, and some rare and mainly aspirational anarchistic communes, governments that neglect or reject the norms of constitutional, representative democracies can be fairly labeled totalitarian, tyrannical, dictatorial, despotic, repressive, suppressive, oppressive, oligarchic, autocratic, theocratic, plutocratic or, of late, “kleptocratic” and even “kakistocratic.” Whatever the specific characteristics of such regimes, ruthless, coercive and violent change by command is not what legitimate public sector innovation is supposed to be (Giroux, 2017a; Giroux, 2017b).

<p>Democracy is facing its most serious crisis in decades. Democracy’s basic tenets—including guarantees of free and fair elections, the rights of minorities, freedom of the press, and the rule of law—are under siege around the world. – Michael J. Abramowitz, 2018</p>
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Alternatively, relatively open systems allow us to differ about important matters such as the relative merits of written versus unwritten constitutions, presidential versus parliamentary elections, the importance of “privacy” and “property” rights and even the correct interpretation of the “right to bear arms.” We may reasonably disagree about the degree to which equity and social justice demand an interventionist state or an activist judiciary. We may express different opinions about tax policies, monetary policies, international trade policies, public transportation policies, immigration policies, education policies, health care policies, and so on; but, principled disagreements over such particulars are secondary to the grounding principles of representative democracy, majority rule balanced with minority rights, due process, natural justice and the rule of law.

Sometimes, however, it is required of us to remind ourselves of this flexible and fluid consensus about the norms of healthy political procedure. This essay expresses a justifiable apprehension that such foundational agreement may not be as sound as it once was—even in the liberal, representative, constitutional democracies in which most readers of *The Innovation Journal* are fortunate enough to live. The tone used here is meant to be cautionary, but not panicky and certainly not (yet) apocalyptic; at the same time, greater minds than mine are increasingly reciting the famous lines of William Butler Yeats (1919):

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold ...

Anxiety about the durability of constitutional democratic institutions is neither uncommon nor unwarranted (Galston, 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Müller, 2016; Runciman, 2018). Echoing the sentiments of the largely discarded American revolutionary hero Tom Paine (1776), sensible people are now saying that “these are the times that try men’s souls.” A sense that we are living in discordant and dangerous times is wide-spread, growing and not without cause.

So, for example, Harvard history professor, essayist and multiple-award-winning journalist Jill Lepore (2018) has reminded us of efforts by historians during the Watergate era to measure the misdeeds of presidents since George Washington in order to determine whether the actions of disgraced president Richard M. Nixon were deserving of special repudiation. By her and other reckonings, President Trump has far exceeded the established limits on proper presidential conduct. She quotes at length the summary of Trump’s brief time in office by the iconic Bob Woodward (2018). Regarding of the current incumbent, she writes:

Heretofore, no president has been proved to be the chief coordinator of the crime and misdemeanour charged against his own administration as a deliberate course of conduct or plan. Heretofore, no president has been held to be the chief personal beneficiary of misconduct in his administration or of measures taken to destroy or cover up evidence of it. Heretofore, the malfeasance and misdemeanour have had no confessed ideological purposes, no constitutionally subversive ends. Heretofore, no president has been accused of extensively subverting and secretly using established government agencies to defame or discredit political opponents and critics, to obstruct justice, to conceal misconduct and protect criminals, or to deprive citizens of their rights and liberties.

Lepore adds a damning comment by William Leuchtenburg, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who supervised the analysis from Theodore Roosevelt to Lyndon Baines Johnson: “However much Richard Nixon deserved impeachment and the end of his Presidency,” he says, “what he did does not match the Trump Presidency in its malfeasance, and in the depth of his failure as President.” There can be no doubt of the gravity of the situation.

## **Populism**

Although it is not the only factor in play, populism is widely regarded as giving energy to the relentless Trump campaign-style rallies that he constantly uses to “rile up” his “base” and keep his ardent supporters in a constant state of righteous resentment and feverish rage. To comprehend the ascent of this aberrant personality from his start as a somewhat shady real estate developer to a boisterous television “reality show” host, and thence to the holder of the most powerful political position on the planet, it is important to comprehend his unwavering appeal to upwards of 30% to 40% of the American electorate.

Vance and Goldberg provide initially appealing examples of efforts to reveal the allure of twenty-first-century American populism. At first glance, their potential to inform and illuminate

is no worse than fair and potentially quite good. If nothing else, the authors' divergent backgrounds and demonstrated writerly talents promise to deliver some badly needed perspective on a populist ascendancy that is detectable not only in the United States, but also in other countries. Leaders as astonishingly diverse as Poland's Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, Italy's Giuseppe Conte, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, India's Narendra Damodardas Modi, the Philippines' Rodrigo Roa Duterte and the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez have all managed to be distended, distorted or deformed to fit, along with Donald J. Trump, into the curious ideological-cum-sociological container called populism. Plainly it takes more than one viewpoint to capture the multiple meanings of the term.

<p>The label “populist” has been having quite a renaissance—applied with reckless abandon as a lazy shorthand for anyone or anything that stands in opposition to the ideas, institutions, or norms that bind together the liberal democratic consensus.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Luke Savage, 2018</p>
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The difficulty with settling on a definition of populism is that it is a famously “thin” ideology. In contrast to openly insurrectionist and revolutionary views from fascism to anarchism that, according to one journalistic summary (Friedman, 2017), offer “a holistic view of how politics, the economy, and society as a whole should be ordered.” Populism offers no such comprehensive view. “It calls,” Friedman continues, “for kicking out the political establishment, but it doesn't specify what should replace it. So, it's usually paired with ‘thicker’ left- or right-wing ideologies like socialism or nationalism.” It is also commonly led by charismatic leaders who are seen—if only temporarily and transitionally with Moses whom we remember as never personally reaching “the promised land” being the archetype—as visionaries. Carrying the “gift of grace,” they are seen as deserving of the loyalty and embodying the aspirations of the people, and are equipped with complete plans or at least guiding principles for the founding of a new society. Their position, however, is precarious. If they falter or fail, their followers can be feckless and quick to abandon them.

As charismatic leaders go, I would add that Donald J. Trump's populist appeal is fragile, since he is not only unsure of what should replace the “establishment,” but it also lacks a very comprehensive and detailed notion of what constitutes the establishment in the first place. It is clear that the establishment stands opposed to the “people,” but it is not clear in what ways.

Since the Trump presidency is well-stocked with billionaires, it is at least plain that no satisfactory Marxian notion of “social class” is involved. Since it has more than its share of Army generals, it doesn't lack for military leaders. And if being among the most powerful economic and military leaders is not a defining criterion for membership in America's “elite,” it is difficult to imagine what is. With President Trump as its dominant amplifier, what seems to matter is a rhetorical commitment to an unspecified inventory of “traditional American values” and a loud, grammatically incorrect and syntactically incomprehensible voice to shout them out in what was once called the “vulgar tongue.” It may seem implausible, but one of the few clear connections between this leader and his followers amounts to a matter of cuisine; Donald J. Trump famously consumes enormous amounts of fast food, whereas the “elites” are thought to prefer more sophisticated fare. Donald J. Trump, in short, appears as a caricature of a populist leader.

Populism, of course, is a term with a substantial North American pedigree. It dates from the late nineteenth century when it was conjured up in the United States in association with a left-leaning, farm-based political party (The People's Party) and various "progressive" movements on both sides of the Canadian-American border—counter-intuitively including former president Theodore Roosevelt's noisy but unsuccessful attempt to regain power as head of the popularly titled "Bull Moose Party" in 1912.

Typified by a yeasty rebelliousness, a firm conviction of their own righteousness and a general contempt for (or ignorance of) the finer points of decorum, many of these organizations were demure in deed and demeanour. For example *The Nation* magazine (Curwen, 2016) wrote of one of Roosevelt's speeches that "his violence of language, his recklessness of assertion, his apparent inability to reason coherently, make of him a spectacle disturbing to his friends and mortifying to the country" and concluded that "there appears the almost insane hatred of Mr. Taft. Roosevelt's supporters," it continued, hardly cared. "No Castilian toreador was ever received with more frenzied shouts of joy in a Spanish bull ring," reported the *Boston Globe* during one campaign swing. It would be foolish to think that Donald J. Trump *invented* bad behaviour.

<p>Trump supporters [have] not been seduced by 'populism.' They are not 'populists.' They have few illusions about the president. They think he's a loose cannon, needy, narcissistic, erratic. They like the way he's an outsider and 'tells it like it is.' They wanted disruption of what they saw as a rigged system; he delivers it, daily.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">– Roger Cohen, 2018</p>
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Contemporarily, the rise of Independent Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders whom numerous public opinion polls identify as the most popular politician in the United States (Buncombe, 2018) and a number of leftist Democratic Party candidates who are coming close to success at all levels of US government are posing a challenge the "establishment" of the dominantly neoliberal Democratic National Committee and the majority of mainstream Democratic office-holders. Whether the growing enthusiasm for younger, openly socialist office-seekers such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez will lead to a statistically significant breakthrough in 2018 is questionable, but it does point to the possibility of at least a slight recalibration of political compasses. It is not entirely wrong, however, to see such upstarts as at least spiritually connected to American populism of a century and more ago.

Noticeable political challenges to the American two-party system are, however, more common on the right-wing of US politics than the left. Segregationists within the Democratic Party briefly formed the "Dixiecrats" who came and went in 1948 (but whose progeny were later crucial to President Richard Nixon's "southern strategy" (1972), and who became the soil which nurtured much of Donald J. Trump's "base." The same demographic gave support to the repeatedly failed presidential candidacies of Alabama governor and rogue Democrat George Wallace in 1968, 1972 and 1976, as it did for Reform Party founder and leader Ross Perot, who sought the presidency in 1992 and 1996, and for Donald J. Trump's aborted campaign for the Reform Party nomination in 2000. All qualify for inclusion within an elastically defined populist ideology. Such mainly momentary uprisings are, however, most often accommodated within the

“big tent” parties and remain signs of passing discontent more than incipient political reorganization. They are mere “footnotes to history.”

In the United States, populist movements and parties may best be understood less as organizations seeking elected office on behalf of definable segments of the population or in the interest of certain policy platforms than as an expression of frustrated dissatisfaction, a disparate and interchangeable set of impulses and prejudices that seem mainly to have settled on the extreme right wing of the already rightward-skewed American political continuum in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Populism may therefore best be defined as a formless belief in the power of ordinary people and their right to control government themselves rather than to cede that power to a small group of political insiders and an economic elite. Its rhetoric can certainly inform socialist political movements, but it remains little more than agnostic on the legitimacy of market capitalism and private ownership of the means of production. (In both its left and right-wing versions, it is critical of big banks, big business and big corporations who seem to care little for the “little guy.”)

In its current iteration, American populism is chiefly committed to market capitalism and is more interested in minimizing the size and influence of government in all but its law enforcement and military forms. Moreover, even there it is becoming increasingly attracted to privatization and to leasing out military tasks to the likes of US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos’ brother Erik Prince, who founded the private mercenary firm Blackwater. So, although its antipathy is spread among “big government,” “big business,” and “big labour,” it is largely funded and represented by well-connected billionaires, but endorsed by no credible trade unions whatsoever.

Uniformly affirming its alleged solidarity with the common people and antagonism toward both the politicians who deceive them and the special interests which exploit them, US populism today is substantially financed by corporate “dark money” and ideologically energized by disproportionately Christian and most often “fundamentalist” religious sects. It cleaves to “family values,” though it is sublimely indifferent to Donald J. Trump’s sexual peccadilloes, financial scandals and multiple moral failings on the premise that the president is merely a vehicle through which God mysteriously works his divine ways.

In line with “white nationalism,” contemporary American populism is sceptical of immigrants, hostile to refugees and scornful to racialized “inferiors” who allegedly undercut or unfairly sap the strength of hard-working people as, for example, in the case of parasitic welfare cheats and predatory drug dealers. Curiously, populists become enraged when someone proposes cutting social security or medicare; consistency, however, is not much displayed or much valued among them. Populism also combines authoritarianism and patriotism with a belief that authentic American principles and ideals of personal liberty, individual opportunity and the ethic of hard work are in jeopardy—largely due to an influx of “illegal immigrants” from what Donald J. Trump infamously called “s\*ithole countries” and to the embrace of “multiculturalism” as opposed to forced assimilation. It celebrates the military and is self-consciously nationalistic, but

it fears the influence of government and the elusive “deep state” that is held responsible for a decline in freedom and opportunity for “real Americans.”

When it comes to assessing populism and the current president, both books are written by men who self-describe as “conservatives,” but who do not rank among (and do not regard themselves as being among) Mr. Trump’s greatest supporters. J. D. Vance is somewhat equivocal, but he mainly worries that Donald J. Trump is “not populist enough,” whereas Jonah Goldberg thinks that populism is “an existential threat to the American way of life.” Goldberg’s book is by far the weightier of the two volumes. Its vocabulary, erudition, intellectual range and attention to both the history of ideas and of the United States of America places it in a different category than Vance’s memoir. The hillbilly book, however, is the more widely read. Which one is exercising a greater influence over American political life now and which, if either, will still find future readers is uncertain. The ultimate test will largely reflect the political success of its readership—either the establishment of the Republican Party in the case of Goldberg, or the insurgency in the case of Vance.

True, anti-establishment posture seems a common thread.... But establishment and elites are themselves quite mutable terms ... Are “elites” and members of the “establishment” state bureaucrats? Academics? The media? Corporate CEOs? People who prefer a glass of sherry to a pint of beer or happen to live in a major metropolitan area near the coast?  
– Luke Savage, 2018

Unlike Vance, who retains political ambitions despite calling off plans to run for the United States Senate in 2016, Goldberg is regarded as a “prominent anti-Trump conservative [who] professes to be horrified by the way our forty-fifth president has eroded the office’s dignity” (Robinson, 2018). For the moment, then, it is Goldberg who speaks more clearly on the matter. It is he who has a chance to have a more lasting influence.

### ***The Hillbilly Elegy of J. D. Vance***

Mr. Vance is an upwardly mobile, thirty-four-year-old, former (and maybe *faux*) “hillbilly” (an often derogatory term for a person of mainly Scots-Irish heritage from the poor, remote Appalachian or Ozark mountains of Kentucky, West Virginia, Tennessee and Arkansas. Depending on his mood and circumstance, he self-reports either as a product of the dispossessed American working class or the precarious middle class. In either case, he celebrates his self-promotional trajectory from at least border-line poverty into wealth and comfort, attributing his rise to a dominating but supportive grandmother, a tenacious cultural background, and his own determination. He has become a successful one-time author, an occasional writer for the late William F. Buckley’s conservative semi-monthly magazine, *National Review*, and an op-ed contributor to the *New York Times*. He enjoys the proximity to political power. He is also a lawyer and a venture capitalist of some distinction. He hasn’t done badly.

Mr. Vance’s book has been praised as a *tour de force* in cultural analysis that provides a profound meditation on the American dream, a chronicle of hardship, and an urgent call for political renewal in the interest of “making America great again.” It has also been dismissed as

“little more than a list of myths about welfare queens, repackaged as a primer on the white working class” (Jones, 2016).

“Vance’s central argument,” writes critic Sarah Jones, “is that hillbillies themselves are to blame for their troubles.” Its insights are commonly hailed by luminaries from Bill Gates to the scribes at *People* and *Entertainment Weekly* as providing unprecedented access into the “forgotten people” of America—the flawed and faulty, but resolute and resilient folk who live between the coasts and out of sight of the cultural elites.

Populism is a pejorative term in the sense that it is accepted as ‘a pathology of democracy,’ and populist leaders are recognized as political manipulators who act on behalf of their own interests by using ‘the common people’ to their own ends.  
– Seren Selvin Korkmaz & Alphan Telek, 2018

The hillbillies and their progeny, Vance reminds is, were once loyal Democrats and uncritical supporters of the “party of the working man.” They confounded the experts, however, by projecting their resentments into national politics and arguably being a decisive factor in the stunning 2016 victory of the current president of the United States. With many former Democratic Party supporters among them, these “ordinary folk” were taken for granted by Hillary Clinton’s political machine. Even when local Democratic Party operatives begged their national office to send more resources to help in mid-western campaigns in Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio (marginally improved numbers in just a few of which would have decisively altered the result of the 2016 campaign), they went largely unnoticed and ignored by Democratic Party strategists. This was a laughably stupid mistake.

These voters, after all, had been important before and ignoring them had already cost the Democratic Party dearly. They were an important part of the “silent majority,” which was crucial to Richard Nixon’s Republican victory in 1972. They contributed to the ranks of the “Reagan Democrats,” who ushered in the *first* celebrity president in 1980 and set the stage for triumphal neoliberalism that has dominated American politics—regardless of the party in power—for four decades. And they are the focus of one of the salient questions raised by J. D. Vance: “Did they abandon the Democratic Party or did the Democratic Party abandon them?”

Ms. Jones (2016) outlines how Mr. Vance has been propelled from the “rust belt”—the formerly prosperous cities mainly in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana and Michigan that were once centres of steel production and heavy industry, but that had faltered largely due to international competition—into employment at Mithral Capital Management. Mithral is a venture capital firm run by Pay Pal co-founder and “almost comically evil Silicon Valley libertarian Peter Thiel” (a member of the Trump transition team). Jones tells us more concisely and more accurately than Vance himself about how his good fortune has made him appear as an ever-so-slightly opportunistic “white trash-splainer” and a darling of the corporate media as they try to construct a politically useful explanation of the current state of American politics.

J. D. Vance is at base (so to speak) a Trump sympathizer (though he confesses that he voted for a “third-party candidate” for president in 2016). He is certainly no admitted friend of the cultural elites. “The populist rhetoric of the campaign,” he complains, “hasn’t informed the party’s approach to governing.” In fact, he excoriates Trump for acquiescing in the “liberal”

argument that “everything wrong in your life is someone else’s fault.” Instead of just complaining about Muslims and Mexicans, Vance feels, Trump should have been promoting genuine working-class values such as self-reliance, hard work, and faith in God and confidence in the future.

[Vance’s] philosophy, while absurd on its face, effectively cripples any momentum toward helping suffering populations and is an old favorite of the Republican Party. It’s the same reasoning that led Ronald Reagan to decry “welfare queens” and Fox News to continually criticize people on assistance for buying shrimp, soft drinks, “junk food,” and crab legs. It gives those disinclined to part with their own money an excuse not to feel guilty about their own greed.

– Jared Yates Sexton, 2018

I do not know, given Trump’s almost two years in power, whether Vance has changed his mind about the president. He remains, however, effusive in his praise for his true “political hero,” retired Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels. Mr. Daniels is currently the President of Purdue University. His right-wing policies both as a governor and as the CEO of an important institution of higher education are similar to, though certainly more consistent than, those of the American president. Appointed by a Board of Trustees which he, himself, had selected as Governor, Daniels has been criticized for “jaw-dropping depths of intellectual dishonesty” (Detmer, 2018: 126) as a result of his efforts to ban Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-present* (2003) from use in schools “anywhere in Indiana.” He has been accused by Purdue faculty of undermining the “very legitimacy of academic discourse,” while imposing “non-disclosure agreements” on the faculty of the “innovative” affiliate (Purdue University Global), expanding labour-exploitative online education and becoming a miracle-worker to some and the epitome of the corporate curse on higher education to others (Curtis & Bross, 2013; Flaherty, 2017; Leef, 2018; Toppo, 2018a). Reacting to universal condemnation, the NDAs which prohibited professors “from talking about non-public matters at Purdue,” including aspects of their teaching such as “course materials” and “methods of instruction” were ignominiously dropped (Toppo, 2018b; Zamudio-Suaréz, 2018), but the mentality lingers on. Vance’s associates are nothing if not controversial.

*Hillbilly Elegy* was first recommended to me as an “anthropological” inquiry into the American working class and especially into the element of the working class that felt drawn to Donald J. Trump. Those relentlessly white, resentfully poor people who lacked educational credentials, economic opportunities and trade union representation were desperate for a reversal of fortune. Feeling abandoned by their leaders, alienated from their government and increasingly isolated in a culture that no longer “looked like” them and that seemed indifferent or even hostile to their plight, they cried out for a voice. They found one in Donald J. Trump, a brash, shrill and self-consciously boorish spokesman for their bitterness. They were further galvanized as a demographic (though not a “class-conscious” social formation) when Trump’s chief opponent, Hillary Clinton, condescendingly attacked them as a “basket of deplorables.” Trump, a self-proclaimed billionaire (Forbes, 2018), gleefully jumped to their defence.

Understanding the alienation of the working class in other modern industrial societies, but somewhat disconcerted by the apparent ease with which religion, racism and resentment seemed

to cohere in parts of the United States and particularly among the most ardent components of Trump’s “base,” I opened *Hillbilly Elegy* genuinely hoping for additional insight. No stranger to certain aspects of American working class culture, I sought further guidance into the world of people who seemed to vote explicitly and obviously *against* their own material interests by aligning themselves with an agent and exemplar of the crudest available version of their “objective” class enemy. Their enthusiasm, it seemed, was not class treason, but collective delusion.

Vance’s stories of hillbilly pathology are peculiarly reminiscent of the “welfare queen” stories deployed against black people during the Reagan years to justify his assault on the social safety net. He is comfortable with explanations of white pathology that rely on psychology and “culture”, but not on structural economic inequality.  
– Hari Kunzru, 2016

It was easy to become engaged in the story of J. D. Vance. (“Vance,” of course, is not his birth name, nor even one of several identities with which his peculiar family history provided him with more or less attention to the niceties of the law). It was, however, one that he formally appropriated as an adult to give himself a closer connection to what he thinks or at least claims to be his authentic roots. He tells the story of being the grandson of “dirt-poor” hillbillies from Kentucky who brought up a “middle-class family” in Ohio. That family—the author, his sister, his drug-dependent mother and a succession of her “boyfriends” —was not representative of any species of the American “middle class” that is displayed in the mass magazines and television programs of the dominant culture. Two generations of domestic violence, criminality and substance abuse are not the stuff of the middle-class people in Middle America that are held up as typical in popular culture then or now.

Nonetheless, Vance’s narrative is fairly convincing as the reminiscences of an adolescent and eventually a young man from humble beginnings who has overcome the disadvantages of his youth and, thanks largely to the a gun-totin’, god-fearin’ and ceaselessly cussin’ grandmother, managed to achieve the American Dream. By the end of the story, J. D. Vance has escaped his heritage, overcome his obstacles, and obtained an unspecified bachelor’s degree from Ohio State University. He has passed through the military, acquired a law degree from Yale University, found himself working as an investor with a global venture capital firm in San Francisco and, later, is featured as a contributor at CNN. His wife, meanwhile, also won a Yale law degree and clerked for US Supreme Court Justice John Roberts, and he, at the urging of US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell with the probable backing of the billionaire Koch brothers, contemplates a run for a US Senate seat in Ohio. After taking the temperature of the race in 2018, however, he decides (mentioning the needs of his young family) to pass on the opportunity “for now.” Vance has the outlines of quite a story.

I had hoped that his narrative would more adequately describe the culture that created him and better explain the attitudes and actions of the people he has left behind. Documents of this sort, after all, can provide valuable data for social scientists to investigate. They can be instructive not only in terms of the experiences of the writer/informants, but also about the social relations and formations that nurture them. I was disappointed on both points, though for the first 150 of its 269 pages, my attention was focused and my interest unflagging.

Upon reflection, however, the content of the first half of *Hillbilly Elegy* reads more like a social worker's case notes summarizing a client's self-reported life narrative than an investigation of a whole sub-culture. And, just as the subject is about to break free, first to the conduit of four-years of military service and then to a (subsidized) undergraduate program at Ohio State, we lose all sense of subjectivity and purpose. Apart from a few reports of social awkwardness befitting a young man with some "hillbilly" in his background, there is remarkably little "culture" discussed. The book has been criticized and his rather contentless claim to a Scots-Irish background has been questioned for its lack of purpose beyond "a claim of outlaw whiteness that has been politically mobilized in the victory of Donald J. Trump's revanchist identity politics" (Kunzru, 2016). Such a dramatic and potentially heroic rise in fortune seems to be in the tradition of Horatio Alger and could, perhaps, have been rendered as an inspiring Dickensian novel as written by Mark Twain.

As our discombobulation limits are stretched baggy, we should remember that President Trump doing things like rattling away on Twitter, settling personal and political scores left, right and centre is undignified, dangerous and weird. It is not acceptable. – Grace Dent, 2017
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Both at University and in the US Marines, however, Vance reveals remarkably little about his ambitions other than that he has some. He tells us next to nothing of his undergraduate studies or his service in Iraq (where he "escaped any real fighting") and in Haiti (where he witnessed "a level of poverty he never knew existed"). Nothing about his studies or even what he studied at Ohio State seems important enough to mention. As for the military, all we learn is that he joined because he "wasn't ready for adulthood." There is no evidence of intellectual curiosity or even a sense of adventure. The main purpose of getting an undergraduate degree appears to be as a means to an end. The same applies to Yale Law School. Yes, there are some desultory comments about feeling out of place, not knowing which utensil to use at a formal dinner, and (astonishingly) being nonplussed by a question from a law firm recruiter who wanted to know why our hero wanted to work at that particular law firm. The fact that he didn't seem to know (much less that he hadn't anticipated the question and fully prepared an answer) goes to the root of my problem with *Hillbilly Elegy*. J. D. Vance spins a yarn about survival and supplies some detail about the dysfunctional family he survived; but, in the end, there is a tremendous hole in the centre of the story. The youngster who endured hardships and overcame them retreats into an empty, lifeless and perfunctory narrator of a biography in which even he has lost interest.

Vance's accomplishments are not to be gainsaid. Although I am considerably older than the author and much closer to his now deceased grandmother's age, and although I did not come from a family of domestic violence, mental illness and drug abuse, I do know something about being the first person in an extended family to attend, much less to complete a university education. So, I empathize with and applaud his still-young life accomplishments under circumstances that might have stymied me. At the same time, it seems that the chronicle is one in which upward mobility is its own reward. Regardless of the barriers scaled along the way, the path to a "good job" and "good money" comes with no sense of social connection and no purpose beyond a cardboard cut-out of "success." And, in Vance's world, the key to success is a

combination of individual grit, contextual good luck and the grace of God (which may or may not be the same things).

Early on, Vance is casually dismissive of social scientists, though he seeds—not always accurately—a few references in the form of citations and footnotes as he goes along. He also repeats the notion that government doesn't have the answers to poverty (though a good part of his success depended, one way or another, on the public purse). And, he plainly endorses right-wing political positions such as austerity measures, privatization of public assets, “right-to-work” (anti-union) legislation, anti-abortion and anti-immigrant laws. He is also a big fan of payday loan sharks. Whether he would join his hero, Mitch Daniels, in wanting to purge Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (which, incidentally, included a generous and favourable treatment of populism, pp. 277-294) as part of a “populist” educational program is yet to be determined (Ohlheiser, 2013; Scipes, 2018).

Populism is the idea that society is separated into two groups at odds with one another—the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite. Most successful populists today are on the right, especially the radical right. Politicians like Marine LePen in France, Viktor Orbàn in Hungary combine populism with nativism and authoritarianism. – Cas Mudde (2017)
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My concern here is that *Hillbilly Elegy* is either considerably less than meets the eye, or is something quite different than what it is reputed to be. It is certainly not a social scientific account of the white working class in rust-belt America nor, as its cover boasts, is it an “analysis of a culture in crisis.” It begins well as a “passionate and personal” memoir and becomes humorous, vivid, urgent, troubling, poignant and even “searing from the inside.” Its publisher tells us that it “is the story of how upward mobility really feels.” If so, upward mobility feels hollow, disrespectful and callous. J. D. Vance has not only left his roots, but he has joined the other side which is happy to use his musings as an “intelligence report,” revealing to the oppressors something of the beliefs and behaviour of the oppressed—all the better to manipulate, motivate and mobilize them to support the economic “ruling class” by deflecting their legitimate complaints onto the “elites” which, it seems, are to be found among the academics, social engineers and big government promoters from whom Mr. Vance apparently learned very little of interest in his climb to the top. If this is “sociology” or “anthropology,” it is closer to what Martin Nicolaus (1968) provocatively called a “criminal enterprise” than a dispassionate, much less a sympathetic or empathetic treatment of social injustice and social distress.

Competent empirical research, of course, can be found which deals with the issues that Vance is widely reputed to address. Such studies, however, are not easily found and, when found, are largely ignored by the mass media and the political chatterboxes who are accurately described as “opinion leaders” in contemporary society. Smith and Hanley (2018, p. 197), for example, recently published a compelling analysis that boldly supports the view that “demography is not destiny” and that “the effects of class are mediated, in the large majority of instances, through biases and other attitudes.” That means, in effect, that social class is neither the *dominant* nor the *direct* determinant of ideas and action. The authors write that “Trump's supporters voted for him mainly because they share his prejudices, not because they're financially stressed” (Smith and Hanley (2018, p. 195). Using multivariate logistic regression analysis, they show that this

package of partiality includes racism and misogyny and favours “domineering and intolerant leaders who are uninhibited about their biases.”

They conclude that, although Trump supporters are likely to be less educated, the chief determinant of votes for Donald Trump is a familiar psychological pattern known as the “authoritarian personality.” Developed and popularized shortly after World War II by T. W. Adorno (1950), “critical theorist” and mainstay of the Frankfurt School, and his associates as they sought to explain the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, the contemporary American version of the authoritarian psychological type displays a “definite structure [of] “prejudices.” Such a conclusion, of course, does not obviate, but rather supplements a “class analysis” (whether presented from the right (Vance) or the left (Adorno); it simply operates at a different level of analysis, but it does complicate simplistic explanatory models. Vance, of course, does not offer any comprehensive “theory,” testable “model,” measurable “hypothesis” or anything akin to a social scientific approach. He is, at best, what literary scholars call an “unreliable narrator” (Booth, 1961, pp. 158-159).

### ***The Suicide of the West and Jonah Goldberg***

Jonah Goldberg is another kind of person with, I choose to think, a more serious purpose. He is an outspoken *conservative* critic of Donald J. Trump, who demanded and got an apology from television comedian Stephen Colbert who mistakenly called him a “Trump ally” (Wulfsohn, 2018). Mr. Goldberg is also an unrepentant forty-nine-year-old intellectual who is a named Chair in Applied Liberty at the American Enterprise Institute, a weekly columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, and a senior editor of the *National Review*. *Suicide of the West* is one of a long line of cultural decline narratives from the Prophet Jeremiah to Gibbon (2010 [1776-1789]) and Spengler (1991 [1918, 1922]). It attests to the decline of empires and of whole civilizations. Applied to the American experiment (Vidal, 2001), the notable chronicles of collapse are merely speculative and tentative ... so far. After all, the USA seems rather short of collapse and may well continue to dominate parts of the world for decades to come.

<p>It often seems as if conservatives have been fretting about the ‘decline of the West’ for as long as there has been a West to fret about. From Edmund Burke panicking about the French Revolution to... – Nathan Robinson, 2018</p>
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There have, of course, been valiant attempts to diagnose the troubles with the USA from the point of view of the political right. Remarkable in the genre was *The Closing of the American Mind* (1989), Allan Bloom’s successful lamentation of the corrosion of American high culture by sex, drugs, rock ‘n’ roll and an affection for Friedrich Nietzsche. Less scholarly imitations followed including the fact-free polemics of the once-admired conservative journalist and now Trump-pardoned felon and film maker Dinesh D’Souza (1991; 2002; 2007).

If nothing else, Goldberg’s *Suicide of the West* climbs several steps back up the ladder of respectability and credibility from D’Souza. It is a sequel to his first best-seller, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (2008). It is

his third book-length treatise in defence of American conservatism, following the somewhat less successful middle volume, *The Tyranny of Clichés: How Liberals Cheat in the War of Ideas* (2012). Working on an apparent four-year production schedule, *Suicide of the West* is arguably his most promising undertaking to date. Intellectuals of the American right including Charles Murray, *Commentary*'s John Podhoretz, David Brooks of the *New York Times* and Arthur C. Brooks, president of the American Enterprise Institute, have invested their names in its promotion. So far, so good.

Goldberg has, of course, also been rather harshly upbraided and berated by the liberal-left. *Liberal Fascism*, wrote Park MacDougald (2018), amounts to little more than the absurd claims that fascism is “left-wing because of its collective and utopian elements” and that Democrats are therefore the “real” fascists. MacDougald also took on *Tyranny of Clichés* and wryly noted that Goldberg, “having spent more than a decade arguing that liberals are mindless crypto-fascists, is here to warn us that incautious rhetoric is tearing the country apart.” Under normal circumstances, this would be demonstration of blatant hypocrisy; however, our circumstances are far from normal and we may be grateful for whatever moderation in tone is being recommended and is actually forthcoming from the conservative seats in the theatre.

As he's aged, and begun wearing his fancy ‘best-selling author’ smoking jacket around the house, Goldberg has supplemented his [popular culture] references with references to philosophers and scholars—Burke, Hume, etc.—in order to appear serious. The effect is similar to that of a chimp wearing a top hat and monocle.  
– Alex Pareene, 2012

So, MacDougald admits that the main theme in *Suicide of the West* is “not a completely crazy argument.” His praise is tempered by the caution that it is “not a particularly profound one either,” but he concedes that, although Goldberg may go on at too much length for his taste and that some of his specific points may be “absurd,” he does have a knack for getting serious ideas over to a mass audience. In view of the source, this is high praise.

Mr. Goldberg's book reveals one of the most difficult problems for any student of American politics—the difficulty in defining what is meant by “conservative” and how it is to be distinguished from its putative opposite, “liberal.” Analytical philosophers, we should recall, encouraged us to be very careful about terms such as freedom and justice, democracy and socialism, or any other controversial or value-laden concept that people use to praise their own views or condemn the opinions of others. We do well to heed their advice.

Clarity on the question of what divides liberals and conservatives in the United States, however, is especially problematic. Political thinking in the United States, it must be remembered, is foundationally an expression of eighteenth-century British liberalism. Americans justified their “revolution” and separation from the United Kingdom in terms purloined from lonely lights like John Locke and the collective energy of the Scottish Enlightenment. Liberalism affirmed individual rights, free market economies and was prepared to accommodate limited democracy. This is uniquely important for the United States because, as the Canadian conservative philosopher George Grant (1969: 17) put it, “the U.S. is the only society which has no history (truly its own) before the age of progress.” So, Americans do not readily understand

their error when they think that the promotion of competitive capitalism is conservative. As Grant continued (1969: 66), they do not “remember that capitalism was the great dissolvent of traditional virtues” and that when Americans venerate *tradition*, the tradition that they venerate is *revolutionary* liberalism as it was understood a scant two hundred and fifty years ago.

There is no purer representative of the modern conservative intellectual than Goldberg. He is a believer in the efficiency of markets, the wisdom of tradition, and the dignity of bourgeois virtues. – Tony Shenk, 2018
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So, for example, when confronted with an American making a claim to be “conservative,” it is well to ask what, precisely, that person seeks to “conserve.” And if the putative conservative goes on to speak glowingly of “capitalism” and to invoke the language of Schumpeter (1942: 83) in his assertion that “the essential fact about capitalism” is “the process of creative destruction,” then the sceptic is well advised to inquire further into the meaning that conservatism has for that person. The kind of society that “liberalism” sought to destroy was the feudal and post-feudal domain of inherited privilege. Liberalism bespoke a commitment to rationalism, science, individualism, personal liberty, limited government, natural rights and equality of opportunity and, especially, freedom of capital. It opposed monarchy, aristocracy, authority, established religion, and an organic theory of the state—all demonstrably conservative values and institutions. In contrast to such a destructive ideology, conservatism has had profound suspicions about change in general, about change that would permit or encourage excessive socio-economic mobility, and about the contribution of technological innovation to social change in particular. Authentic, philosophical conservatives are, by definition, averse to the most fundamental components of capitalism and it is that above all which makes it plausible to argue that the United States was born and remains an explicitly and homogeneously “liberal” society. This, of course, does not imply that Americans agree with one another about political issues. Quite the contrary, from its earliest days, there have been hideously severe and sometimes violent quarrels. They do not, however, disagree about *first principles*.

The heated controversies in American politics these days are not about liberalism, but about *which kind* of liberalism is to prevail. Those who hold to a dominantly eighteenth-century view that emphasized individual liberty, a limited state, and above all the freedom of capital in the “pursuit of happiness” proudly call themselves conservatives. Those who tenaciously self-identify as liberals find their intellectual roots in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, blending their commitment to capitalism with a broader belief in democracy, equality of opportunity, and gradually adding on an expansive embrace of “welfare capitalism,” thus laying claim to a twentieth-century that sometimes reluctantly approved of increased state intervention in economic matters. And those who are now tentatively adopting the identifier of “democratic socialist” (also an essentially contested concept, but not one to detain us here) are threatening to change the political dynamic in the early twenty-first century not only with systemic criticisms of late capitalism, but also with broad commitments to “identity politics” and the cessation of discrimination against people based on sexual and racialized markers. All in all, as Martin Luther King Jr. so nicely echoed the sentiments of nineteenth-century American transcendentalist Theodore Parker (Manker-Seale, 2006), liberalism can be identified with a moral universe in which the arc of its temporal arrow bends toward justice. Determining how far along the path of that arc people think that they have come and how far they think they have yet to go allows us to

draw fairly accurate conclusions about their location on the scale of liberalism that fairly sums up the American experience.

Such notions, of course, would not sit well with followers of Donald J. Trump or, indeed, with any Americans who do not acknowledge that American conservatism (“toryism”) went by sea to Nova Scotia, Great Britain or the Caribbean or by land to Upper Canada (Ontario) or Lower Canada (Québec) after the American Revolution (Hartz, 1955; Hartz, 1964; Horowitz, 1966). Since then, with the possible exception of the antebellum South, America has witnessed only more or less expansive definitions of liberalism—the fundamentals of which derive from the political theory of possessive individualism (Macpherson, 1962) and which are no longer hotly contested.

Most Trump voters cast their ballots for him with their eyes open, not despite his prejudices but because of them. Their partisanship is intense. Hostility to minorities and women cannot be wished away; nor can the wish for domineering leaders. The anger games are far from over.

– David Norman Smith & Eric Allen Hanley, 2018, p. 207

There is, however, one great thundering problem with the portrait of liberalism starting with the possessive individualism of John Locke, moving to the representative government of John Stuart Mill, adopting progressive changes introduced (albeit haphazardly) by Franklin D. Roosevelt and now being challenged by the likes of Bernie Sanders, Kamala Harris, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and any number of dissenters who are emerging from the left flank of the Democratic Party. The problem is that it assumes a “Whig” interpretation of history, a presumption of progress toward a more perfect civil society characterized by ever greater freedom, more equitably distributed and ever growing prosperity and (who knows?) perhaps even some sensible ecological reforms to permit the sustainability of what Lyndon B. Johnson went so far as to call a “great society.” Evidence of the inevitability of improvement, however, is not easily found. And, as George Grant (1966: 127) cautioned young liberals over half a century ago: “Hope for the future has been the chief opiate of modern life [and] the most dangerous quality of [hope] (and this it can easily become) is despair.”

The problem of American liberalism today is Jonah Goldberg’s opportunity. It is also a convoluted problem with which he and other putative conservatives are called upon to wrestle. If he is unable to disentangle his terms and provide a sound basis for a restored conservatism, he will not only help the people of the United States to impose clarity on the current muddle, but he may help rescue them from the sinister implications of Donald J. Trump’s *faux* “reality show” populism and the ominous future of American politics. It is to his credit that he gives it a game try.

## **The Decline of American Pluralism**

This is what Goldberg is really dealing with. It is not creeping socialism, postmodern moral relativism, the eclipse of religion, political correctness, the emasculation of the American male by diverse “feminazis,” waves of heathens lapping up upon the great white shore or even

the anti-gun proclivities of the so-called “deep state.” It is also not what conservatives like to call “liberal/lefty” attacks on freedom, free enterprise, free markets and free access to assault rifles. It has nothing whatever to do with disrespect for the flag. It is also none of the positive achievements of post-World War II supporters of government intervention to promote economic opportunity, social equity or political and legal equality among racialized and gendered citizens, nor is it even the modest restrictions placed upon industry in the interest of environmental sustainability.

There’s class warfare, all right, but it’s my class, the rich class that’s making war, and we’re winning. – Warren Buffett (Stein, 2006)
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The real problem is that these progressive initiatives have been successfully slowed, stopped and in some cases reversed. What is more, such iconic legislation as the *Voting Rights Act* (1965) and judicial precedents (e.g., *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision on the issue of the constitutionality of laws that criminalized or restricted access to abortions) are now being revised and are in danger of either being legislatively repealed or judicially overturned while, at the same time, such initiatives as state “right-to-work” laws and the Supreme Court’s 2010 decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* have set back organized labour and vastly expanded the political influence of private corporations.

It is the success of the neoliberal takeover of public attitudes and public policy, the stunting of the hesitant, tentative efforts of the cautious, progressive prophets who made valiant efforts to deal with issues of poverty, racism, misogyny, and the blowback from imperial adventurism, that have been pretty much stopped in their tracks by the combined forces of wealth and intolerance. The complaints about fomenting “class war” levelled against “progressives” mask the victories of the American ruling classes. Not only have liberal hopes and expectations for a more just and fair society been suppressed, but the greatest divide between rich and poor and the greatest transfer of wealth from the middling classes to the superrich have taken place during the neoliberal ascendancy following the election of President Ronald W. Reagan in 1980.

The established order today is one of unsustainable gaps in income and assets in a society wherein, if the net worth of US households were to be divided equally, the average family would be worth over three-quarters of a million dollars (Federal Reserve Economic Data, 2018). As matters stand, however, the bottom 50% of American families has an average of about \$11,000 (Yellin, 2014). The gap between the top 1% and the top 10% is over 1000%, and that increases by another 1000% over the middle class, which is advantaged by an additional 1000% over the working classes and the poor. Put otherwise, as President Obama admitted in his 2014 State of the Union Address, the average worker must work over a month to earn what the CEO takes in an hour (Marsden, 2014). What’s more, since 1970 the productivity of the United States has increased tremendously, but about 90% of that increased wealth has gone to the incomes of the top 1%. And, to add a global perspective, Oxfam (2017) found that eight rich people, six of them Americans, own as much combined wealth as half of humanity. J. D. Vance’s rather vacuous musings on the fate of the American working class conveniently ignore the *facts* about economic injustice. The crisis facing the United States is not about individual or social psychology, but about the economic structure of late capitalism.

The origin of the resentments leading to the revitalization deformation of American populism and the cause of the delegitimation of the state are one and the same with the cultural malaise that made the presidency of Donald J. Trump possible. Above all, however, it was enabled and facilitated by precisely those economic interests which have dominated American society throughout and that were exposed in the triumph of neoliberalism, the financial crisis of 2008-2009, the subsequent “Great Recession” and the recovery which followed (Taibbi, 2018). That tale, however, will take some years to be fully told.

In the United States at this time Liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. – Lionel Trilling, 1950
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In the meantime, it is safe to say that coming out of the Great Depression and World War II, the United States ventured out upon a road toward an improved liberal democracy. Along with other generally prosperous, mostly modern, formally democratic nations, it accepted the idea that the main systemic function of the public sector was to translate private needs and demands into government regulations and programs (Easton, 1953; Easton, 1965a; Easton, 1965b). This classical approach arose in the optimistic years following World War II wherein the victorious allied democracies sought to build a better, more stable and more democratic world. It described and explained institutional arrangements whereby, in the pseudo-scientific and technocratic lexicon of the day, “inputs” are aggregated, legislated, adjudicated and expressed as “outputs” of “political systems” that, with some exceptions and anomalies, met at least minimal standards of efficacy and accountability. The project was to make the world safe for democracy, the market economy and increasingly rational public policy. Or, at least, that’s what close to three generations of political scientists chose to believe (Gunnell, 2013).

Following World War II, tonic public sector innovation was made possible in political cultures that increasingly eschewed “ideology” in favour of pragmatism and pluralism (Bell, 1960; Lipset, 1960). Leaders agreed with the spectacularly inaccurate assessment of President John F. Kennedy (1962) that we were living in post-political times, fit mainly for the skills of technocrats where “old sweeping issues very largely have disappeared” and debates no longer “relate to clashes of philosophy or ideology but to ways and means of reaching common goals.” Recoiling from the excesses of political extremism, efforts were made to craft a post-totalitarian modernity with increasingly rational, legal processes of maintaining civil relations among competing interests in pluralistic polities. The norms of liberal democracy and the institutions of representative democracy could, it was believed, be trusted to attend to resolving public conflicts, promote “justice as fairness” (Rawls, 1971), ensure the authoritative allocation of values (Qvortrup, 2012), and maintain generally progressive societies in a state of dynamic equilibrium.

In the pluralist, democratic and modified market consensus, more and more people were to be permitted to attend to private pursuits and seek gratification in personal development, the enjoyment of middle-class material goods and the arts, leisure and entertainment available in societies no longer plagued with toxic social conflict and the ideologies that inflamed and sustained them. Indeed, so confident were the denizens of the “free world” that political life was in good hands, they came to believe that excessive citizen participation even in the form of high turn-outs in elections was considered to be unnatural and betokened a decline in democratic decency.

Democracy remained essential, but only insofar as it entailed a competitive struggle for the people's vote among political parties that cheerfully played within well-known rules of fair and free elections wherein leaders "acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (Schumpeter, 1942: 269). More intense involvement was, in fact, actively discouraged by "revisionist" democratic theorists who deemed more robust citizenship to be an unnecessary burden on ordinary people. So, they quietly dismissed the traditional liberal eagerness for an engaged and informed public by claiming that an excess of citizen involvement was actually an indicator of political instability and imminent social conflict (Berelson, 1952; Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954; Milbrath, 1965). Nonetheless, this Western Model was also taken seriously as an aspirational goal for "developing" countries (Riggs, 1964; Braibanti, 1969). It was the ideal of the "civic culture" of freedom and prosperity and democracy described, admired and advocated by liberal political scientists a half-century or more ago (Almond, 1963). For global liberals, there was great reason for optimism which, temporary set-backs such as colonial push-back from the Mau-Mau to Ho Chi Minh notwithstanding, could imagine the promise of the Enlightenment being fulfilled ... some day.

Vance's glorified self-help tome was also forwarded by networks and pundits desperate to understand the Donald J. Trump phenomenon, and the author was essentially transformed into Privileged America's Sherpa of the ravages of Post-Recession U.S.A.  
– Jared Yates Sexton, 2018

How the pluralist consensus came apart, how incivility insinuated itself into government, how ideology re-asserted itself and how we came to the current state of uncertainty in which illiberal, exclusionary, authoritarian democracy—now labelled "populism," but perhaps better understood as "inverted totalitarianism"—is an historical process yet to be fully theorized, described, analyzed and explained, but into which some excellent insights can be gleaned (Kariel, 1961; Wolin, 2017) throughout what James Howard Kunstler (2005) dubbed "the long emergency." In addition, helpful examinations of significant economic difficulties can be found (MacLean, 2018) as well as inquiries into events that help explain aspects of the decline into the present political *malaise* (Gowan, 2009; Streek, 2016; Tooze, 2018).

For the moment, however, it is enough to know that governments are facing crises of legitimacy, battles are being fought over cries of "fake news" and allegiance to "alternative facts," and the previously accepted norms of dignified parliamentary debate, due process of law, procedural fairness and mutual respect among competing groups are in serious danger as they are buffeted by unseemly "twitter storms" and deformed beyond easy recognition (Habermas, 1973).

## **What's a Conservative to Think Do and Say?**

A tentative effort to locate the current perturbation in the overall history of democratic governance has been offered by Bencherki and Basque (2018). Relying on the provocative aphorisms of Nietzsche, they declare that "the will to hold power often manifests itself not as a desire to understand the world, but rather as the desire to change it so that it corresponds to one's

current understanding.” On this view, President Trump is turning on its head Marx’s complaint that philosophers only wanted to understand the world when the point was to change it materially for the better. Instead, he is trying to tell Americans stories that will not change their reality for the better, but will allow it to be understood in a way that fits their prejudices. Donald J. Trump, in appropriating the label of “conservative,” is not just doing damage to the word, but to anyone who hopes to redeem it as a name for a viable, credible and honourable political tradition. As the name becomes corrupted, so the tradition may be lost.

There’s no direction—left, right, forward, backward—out of the oasis that won’t take us back to the desert. – Jonah Goldberg
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Jonah Goldberg seeks to rescue and restore conservatism in America, but he does so in a way that requires some attention to the devilish details. For example, a major theme in his book is the destructiveness of a certain kind of right-wing perspective that is deeply rooted, ugly, and filled with nativism and racism—both remnants of the past and traceable even to colonial times. He identified the pathology of “tribalism, populism, nationalism, and identity politics” in his subtitle and shows it to be wholly inconsistent with admirable American values such as tolerance for diversity, respect for minorities and a foundational respect for due process of law. Common to this pathology, as to any anti-democratic sentiment, is a yearning for the stability and sense of mission to be found in cultural hero, a “great leader,” which is what a portion of the American people may have believed they were getting in President Donald J. Trump.

In this, he has something in common with American liberal scholars who acknowledge that “conservatism might in theory be acceptable,” but that “America has no ‘true’ conservatives” (Hofstadter, 1964; Jenkins, 2013). And, of course, Goldberg is only as conservative as it is possible for an American to be; which is to say that he wants rather to conserve liberalism as it first defined America, as it shaped American history, and for all intellectual intents and cultural purposes *was* America. And, he performs this task in a uniquely American way. He claims that the United States is exceptional—not as Abraham Lincoln’s “last great hope,” Ronald Reagan’s “shining city on a hill,” or Hillary Clinton’s “indispensable nation” (Clinton, 2016), but literally unique, a “one-off,” and never to be repeated. For Goldberg, the existence of the United States of America is a “miracle.” This may not necessarily betoken a divine intervention in human affairs (though Goldberg stresses the importance of religion), but it is at least the result of an almost unimaginable great stroke of luck.

Only in America and only in a time when fortune declared that the political ideas of human rights, the economic ideas of a market economy, the scientific and technological ideas that allowed humanity to extend its dominion over nature, and the proximity of abundant natural resources could the USA as we know it have come to be. The building of the republic from sea to shining sea required only the hand of “Providence to extirpate [the] savages in order to make room for the cultivators of the earth” (Franklin (1791 [2018]: 57). America was ordained to triumph on the continent, in the hemisphere and across the globe.

The first step taught that the taste of victory was made more piquant with the taste of blood. It was as though the indigenous peoples of America had no knowledge of planting and harvesting and as though Benjamin Franklin himself, the “pattern American” according to D. H.

Lawrence (1971 [1924]: 15), somehow read the mind of God and became the spiritual overseer of thought and life in creating the United States, which would subsequently be known as the vehicle whereby liberty, “God’s gift to humanity” (Bush, 2003), and stewardship over nuclear weapons, God’s *other* gift to humanity (Truman, 1945). In the process, the spirit of liberty, the belief in progress and the faith in America’s civil religion ensured the moral validity of all that followed.

The salient point here is not cosmological overconfidence of the claims to divine approval on the part of American leaders, but Goldberg’s reliance on the primacy of *ideas*, not material circumstances, as determinants of history. America would succeed because Americans would believe in the rectitude of its mission and the resulting power to overcome any material obstacle on the path to greatness. It is this connection with the philosophical posture of *idealism* going back to Plato that is crucial to understanding Goldberg’s conservatism. It is a central element in principled, authentic, philosophical conservatism and provides an opposite view to any species of tawdry *materialism* that might emphasize the role of circumstance and history’s dead weight on humanity in explaining human affairs.

Equally important, however, is conservative pessimism concerning the nature of our species. Ever since that mythical unpleasantness in the Garden of Eden, theological thinkers and compliant believers in all of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) have had a pretty unfavourable impression of human moral character. The loss of innocence and the fall from grace imply at least that human passions and preoccupations are things that must be overcome—in the short term by the application of strict discipline on Earth and ultimately by divine redemption. As long as we go about our business on this planet, however, it is a common opinion among the religious and among political conservatives that we risk both immediate disappointment and ultimate hope of salvation if we rely on our overblown sense of our own importance, intelligence and good will.

As white supremacy, ultra nationalism, rabid misogyny and anti-immigrant fervour coalesce, a new and uniquely American form of fascism looms. Could our current moment actually bring about the end of democracy in the United States? – Henry A. Giroux, 2018
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Conservatives hold to tradition because it is a proven guide to good behaviour (after all, we are still here to tell the tale). Conservatives are distrustful of innovation because we are seldom as smart (or as well-intentioned) as we think we are and therefore fail to see unanticipated bad outcomes even from our noblest projects (Oakeshott, 1962). Conservatives are also more inclined to wish to fend off evil than to pursue the good. Pessimism is one of conservatism’s most important characteristics. It arises from the presumption of “the human propensity for evil “as a permanent feature of moral life” and one that is “intrinsic to human beings” (Kekes, 1998, p. 89). On its face, it would seem that President Trump’s mantra to “make America great again” would be inconsistent with authentic conservatism, and this is not wholly incorrect. There is, however, a stipulated exception.

The conservative caution against pursuing perfection is repeated by Goldberg with the singular caveat that the United States possesses the best conceivable set of social arrangements as a result of an immensely fortunate confluence of ideas present at the beginning of the American republic and maintained (albeit shakily) ever since thanks to the enormous perspicacity of those

who created and built the nation. The dismal consequence, however, is that there's nowhere to go but down.

According to Stein's Law (Stein, 1985), a charming corollary to the law of entropy: "if something cannot go on forever, it will stop." Absent careful and conscientious guidance, America cannot go on forever. Therefore, it will most likely stop. This is not a necessary and inescapable fate. America could continue to generate good leaders. The chances are, however, that Americans will commit "suicide" by failing to come up with adequate stewards for its special variant on the already unparalleled Western Civilization. At some point, human venality—even in the greatest nation in the history of the world—will corrupt the soul and corrode the structure. It barely needs to be added that, in Goldberg's opinion, Donald J. Trump is not up to the task of conserving the miracle of America and may well be the instrument of its destruction.

If none of this is convincing, then another way of coming to a similar conclusion might be to employ the language of biology. What Goldberg describes is akin to what biologists call "climax ecology."

Unfixed, unsatisfied, the human being is not a unity, not autonomous, but a process, perpetually in construction, perpetually contradictory, perpetually open to change. – Belsey, 1980, p. 132
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Climax ecology describes any ecological system—a piece of forest, a tidepool or what you will—that has achieved a maximum of biodiversity or complexity. It is sustaining the upper limit of what it can support given the necessary limits of space or oxygen or whatever its life forms require. "As long," says Gregory Bateson (Brand, 1974: 17) "as it's not disturbed, it goes on forever, but one discordant idea introduced and the whole thing falls to pieces."

That, put disarmingly simply, is what Goldberg thinks the United States of America is—a case of cultural climax ecology constantly trying to keep itself in balance, but tragically destined to fall apart. The discordancy of Donald J. Trump is the prime candidate for the mechanism through which American democracy may destroy itself. He is the embodiment of ideas that are inconsistent with American greatness. Goldberg's conservatism must therefore be enlisted in the attempt to modify Trump's policies and practices and to remove his influence from American politics as a prelude to removing him from office. Only then will it become possible to "conserve" what are whimsically called the "better angels" of America.

Of course, this entire line of thought presumes another element of conservatism that may be patently false. Not only may materialist explanations trump (so to speak) idealist explanations of historical events, patterns, and circumstances, but the roles of specific individuals may not matter as much as idealists generally claim. Superheroes and supervillains are convenient symbols upon whom to hang our judgements about history and current events. Of course, it cannot be gainsaid that some particular people profoundly change the course of world affairs. Though we cannot know for certain, it is at least conceivable that our recent past would have been significantly altered if men such as Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong or lesser creatures such as Pol Pot and similar scoundrels died unknown shortly after birth. Likewise, our cultural and scientific stores might have been noticeably depleted if William Shakespeare,

Ludwig von Beethoven or Charles Darwin succumbed to a childhood disease. Still, there would have been Marlowe, Brahms and Alfred Russel Wallace or someone else to fill the gap. Elizabethan theatre, classical symphonies and the theory of evolution would not have disappeared in the absence of particular people of genius. Likewise, in matters of public policy, would there not have been old-age pensions without Bismarck? Would the United Kingdom lack its National Health without Lord Beveridge? Would we not have come up with Standard Time Zones without Sir Sandford Fleming? And, of course, America would have been “discovered” even if all three of Christopher Columbus’ little boats had come to grief in the Sargasso Sea. So, just as our species would have survived the absence of “great men,” it is worth thinking that it will survive one hapless and apparently hopeless figure—however oversized he may appear on various screens and platforms. Donald J. Trump, then, may be much more a symptom than a disease. Imagining that Donald J. Trump’s appearance or disappearance, regardless of timing, accounts for the structure of the theatre rather than the positioning of a particular character on the stage is surely folly.

Yes, there will one day be a world without Donald J. Trump—probably sooner than most people think—so thanks for small mercies. But keep the champagne bottles corked.  
– Tony Burman, 2018

That said, we are left with the problem posed at the beginning. How is the presidency of Donald J. Trump, the rise of populism and the popularity of conservatism (or rather, perhaps, the unpopularity of liberalism as a political brand to be explained and understood?

Seen from Jonah Goldberg’s long-term perspective on the history of ideas and of the United States, there is reason to reflect on the pathologies of liberal democracy as revealed in the last faint gasps of conservatism in the reluctant “revolutionaries” who authored *The Federalist Papers* and opted for freedom from British mercantilism in the late eighteenth century, but who were no friends of democracy or the “common man.” Alexander Hamilton (before he became a Broadway musical written and performed by “people of colour,” was a liberal in his views on political economy, but his liberalism stopped far short of democratic drives and an assault on authority. “Your people, Sir,” he called out to the slave-owning author of the *Declaration of Independence*, Thomas Jefferson “is a great beast” (Smith, 1975). It is not hard to imagine what he might have thought of J. D. Vance, much less his hillbilly relatives. There is reason, too, to ponder the implications of Goldberg’s variation on the theme of conservatism.

Taking the elements of idealism and pessimism and wrapping them in the American flag may not contribute a great deal to the great conversation as established in Plato’s Academy and revived to great profit by Mortimer Adler and the editors at Encyclopædia Britannica Inc. who peddled a magnificent hard-cover set of the “great books” of the Western World, along with a binding essay about the “great conversation that began in the dawn of history and continues to the present day” (Alder, 1952, 1990). Although not exactly a populist project (it is hard to imagine J. D. Vance pouring over the contributions of Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas in his quiet hours at Ohio State), the idea that there is a coherent legacy of philosophical thought that can influence aspects of practical reality is not altogether absurd. Karl Marx, the great materialist, did not have his children act out scenes from Shakespeare on Sunday afternoons in London’s great public parks for nothing!

Learning the importance of caution and modesty when contemplating human nature chained deep in Socrates' far-famed allegory of the cave and giving power over to philosopher-kings has been a time-honoured tradition among conservatives from Plato onward. It does not fit easily in the liberal tradition in the United States, but it is well to keep it in mind. Trumpian populism, Goldberg is right to emphasize, is a dangerous and deadly phenomenon if the supreme republican ideals of the founding fathers of the United States are to be respected. Donald J. Trump would surely have represented the worst of the fears of Hamilton, John Adams, James Madison and John Jay as they contemplated the new republic. Even Thomas Jefferson and Tom Paine might have had second thoughts.

<p>The Chinese has a useful concept: 'the rectification of the names.' Confucius argued that when words no longer describe the world as it is, justice becomes impossible.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">– Jonah Goldberg.</p>
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American conservatism, however sparse, limited, fractional, distorted and deformed it may be, can still be said to exist on the fringes of American political thought and life. Although it has been co-opted largely as an ideological accoutrement for the existing American plutocracy and is taken to heart mainly in the editorial offices of the *National Review* and the catacombs of the American Enterprise Institute, it is basically inconsistent with the dominant ideology in the United States. Making classical liberalism the subject matter of traditional conservatism is a project built upon a fundamental contradiction. The Roman architecture of the great buildings of Washington, D.C. are increasingly anachronistic in the shadow of Trump Tower and the glass and steel fortresses of Manhattan or what Kurt Vonnegut nicely called "Skyscraper National Park." They are ultimately no match for the McDonalds and the Walmarts and the decaying suburban strip malls that increasingly define liberal America. This is not to deny the nobility of the conservative critique of liberalism or of populism, but it is to recognize that such a critique is in conflict with the ideology, the society and the political economy that it wishes to conserve—a "miracle" of human ingenuity that, it partly boasts and partly admits, has reached the pinnacle of human achievement, exhausted its resources and now teeters anxiously fearing its collapse.

American populism, however much in evidence, is also conflicted. A century and more ago, it promised the next step in the American saga, perhaps forgetting that Tom Paine had been banished by the bankers and plantation owners whose American Revolution was high on *liberté*, but far less enthusiastic about *égalité* and not at all interested in *fraternité*. Half slave and half *bourgeois*, the principal thinkers of the American experiment did not forswear aristocracy, but insisted that it be a "natural" and not an inherited aristocracy. The masses were still to be regarded with scepticism, but the new dominant classes were to be open to men of industry and intelligence. J. D. Vance's "Mamma" would not have been welcomed to dinner at Monticello.

Donald J. Trump, it turns out, is a hot-air balloon waiting to be pricked. He symbolizes more than he accomplishes for good or ill. There are patterns of culture and patterns of power that are far more important and far more interesting than he is. At the same time, as was said at the beginning, he cannot be un-noticed. He represents and pushes forward an agenda that is easy to mistake for mere intellectual, moral and material corruption. The scandals, however, are the least of it.

Late capitalism, of which Trump is a symbol and a symptom, is in play. It features a gross accumulation of assets at the top of the economic pyramid, a greater than ever cultural domination through mass and social media, obvious increases in high technology and automation, a ripping away of the public sphere both in terms of political engagement in the common project of democratic governance and the privatization of public services and the public sector generally. Consumer isolation and maxed-out credit cards, unaffordable housing, unworkable public transit and a visible decrease in simple empathy are all hallmarks of the phenomenon. So, too, are frustration, anger and resentment directed against whoever and whatever is at hand and easy target for blame. So, Goldberg's valid worries about tribalism, populism, nationalism and identity politics; so, too, some things that he doesn't mention: addiction, violence and suicide—not of the "West," but of Westerners as individuals, particularly among active duty soldiers and military veterans. (It is notable that, while the United States has been in a state of perpetual war since 1941, the number of military casualties killed by their own hand both on active duty and after leaving the service has been growing to the point where suicide accounts for more fatalities than deaths on the battlefield (Hattem, 2017; Nass, 2018).

<p>Trump remains popular because he us a story-teller and stories do not have the same relation to the truth that other statements have. They do not always refer to the actual world—as science does—but to the world as we <i>already</i> understand it.</p> <p>– Bencherki &amp; Basque, 2018</p>
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The "take away" from reading both *Hillbilly Elegy* and *Suicide of the West* therefore lies as much in what is not written than what is written. Both books are, in their different ways, evidence of a problem, but not necessarily the problem that they are credited with addressing.

J. D. Vance describes life on the margin of American prosperity and his own escape from poverty. He misses the point. He does not have a coherent understanding of wealth and poverty as social conditions. By individualizing and somewhat psychologizing the experience of the American working class and its hillbilly component, he trivializes the problem and then justifies the situation in which the victims of domination and exploitation are not only blamed for their conditions, but are denied the minimal opportunities for remediation and redemption on the Reaganesque ground that government is never the solution, but the main source of the problem.

For his part, Jonah Goldberg's criticisms of the obvious social stresses and their consequences in the United States also fail to diagnose the ill health of the polity properly. Taking aim at those who point to the power of the billionaire class, he disingenuously but approvingly quotes Friedrich Hayek (1944: 108) in asserting that "the power which a multiple millionaire, who may be my neighbor and perhaps my employer, has over me is very much less than that which the smallest *functionaire* possesses who wields the coercive power of the state. That may be so for Goldberg if his neighbourhood sports "multiple millionaires," but it doesn't apply to the small farmer or merchant or to the legions of workers and precarious workers who depend on those "*functionaires*" for the services and supports they minimally provide. Echoing Donald Trump's paranoia about the "deep state," Goldberg identifies the "administrative state" as the enemy of freedom and the cause of social ills.

Though more likely to be the enabler of the private sector in late capitalism (viz., the “bail-outs” of banks and manufacturing industries in order to salvage the economy following the financial collapse of 2008/2009, Goldberg and Vance are as one in seeing the public sector as the enemy which it can be, but mainly when it acts in collusion with the prime institutions and in the interest of the private sector and against the people—whether identified as those largely mercantile capitalists and plantation owners for whom the American Revolution was fought, or the lower orders who were dispossessed in the course of the two and a half centuries that followed.

Like most ideological innovations, liberalism was a double-edged sword. It lay low the remnants of the feudal aristocracy, which at least paid rhetorical respect to ideas of a harmonious community and *nobles oblige*, but it replaced it with Herbert Spencer’s “social Darwinism,” the nightmare of Edmund Burke (1790, p. 112) of “the new empire of light and reason” that “exploded” gentle tradition, and created a society wherein, according to Marx and Engels (1848: 12-13), “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned” and we are left with a “callous cash nexus” in which human relations become those of “open, shameless, direct, naked exploitation.”

Authentic conservatives and genuine populists would be equally appalled.

#### **Note:**

This review essay was written soon after the verdict in the first Paul Manafort trial and news of his decision to “flip” to avoid a second, the plea allocution of Michael Cohen, and news that Allen Weisselberg, the long-time Chief Financial Officer of the Trump Organization, was given immunity for his testimony in various federal government proceedings (Abramson, 2018; Ballhaus and Hong, 2018; Glasser, 2018; Kim & Barber, 2018) and the release of Bob Woodward’s *Fear* (2018). What the immediate and long-term consequences of these and any subsequent embarrassments might be for the tenure of the current American president and the general state of American public life have yet to be revealed.

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