

Post-Modern Trumpism and Loneliness: The Rise of Vulgar Authoritarianism

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Loneliness



In Hannah Arendt's pioneering book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she criticized the failure of many to understand the appeals of fascism to modern citizens. She wrote that many observers gave fairly rote justifications for its rise and appeal in an apparently advanced and enlightened country like Germany, the birthplaces of Goethe, Kant, and Beethoven. Some claimed that it was the depressed economy that was responsible. Others in the German context pointed to defeat and humiliation in the First World War. Some reactionary conservatives claimed it was declining moral standards and the collapse of religiosity. And Arendt accepted that many of these might have something to do with it. But her ultimate explanation was far simpler and yet strangely more acute. Modern Germans were lonely.

The technologically oriented modern world, focused on the production of wealth and new economic values had driven many Germans from their homes in rural areas. There they had expected to grow into secure jobs in traditional forms of work whose ancestry went back centuries. Instead, they found themselves in big cities where they knew no one and were exposed to forms of life with which they had no familiarity, and which seemed to evolve and metastasize from day to day. Coupled with the realization that myth of endless capitalist expansion was simply that, a mythology brutally desacralized with the advent of Depression and unemployment, countless Germans found themselves alone and poor in a world that seemed strange and unreal to them. In this context, their capacity for resentment and radicalization deepened and could gnaw at itself in bitter isolation. It was only a matter of time before many of these same Germans gravitated to the simplifying but rhetorically powerful movements who promised them belonging, prosperity, and of course revenge against the manipulative alien parties who had manipulated them and infected their country.

Today, Arendt's analysis still has a great deal to teach us about the appeal of hard right movements to lonely individuals. Much has been written about the rise of Trumpism—its relativism, its appeal to traditional values to efface all standard political conventions, its vulgarity, its populism—but relatively little attention has been paid to its psycho-social foundations beyond traditional appeals to working class ennui and economic malaise. Here Arendt can still be our teacher. But we must update her insights considerably by looking at how our now post-modern technological world engenders new but still seductive hard right movements.

Technology and Capitalism

It seems strange today to think of how anyone could be lonely. Technology, especially telecommunications and the internet, have brought about a global village where billions of people can interconnect with one another in an instant. Often all that is required is a cell phone with a decent enough data plan. People are connecting with one another at a rate that would bewilder even such prophets of the post-modern world as Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard. Moreover, the

economy is booming. After a recessionary dip in the last 2000s, the 2010s have seen recovery and job expansion in the United States and many other OECD countries.

Any yet hard right movements like Trumpism thrive because people say they are deeply anxious and losing their country. They feel alienated and like they no longer connect with their communities. Many claim that Western Civilization itself-whatever that means-is under assault by hordes of turbaned and hooded immigrants bringing foreign religions and customs. How is this possible? With immense capacities to communicate, and interconnected economy, and Western Civilization still mostly retaining its position as a globally hegemonic, how is it that these hard right movements exist. I believe the answer lies more deeply, in the political economic processes of post-modern capitalism and its alliance with the powers of technology. Much as in Arendt's day, these same forces continue to propel a culture of loneliness and anxiety. But they do so in a unique way.

In the United States and other Western countries, reactionary conservatives have long made idols of both Christendom and the dollar. They wanted a white, Christian society organized according to traditional mores that were widely approved by democratic majorities. At the same time they wanted robust capitalist societies in which barriers to capital expansion and wealth creation were liquidated as rapidly as possible. What was never accepted was the fundamental tension between these two positions. The stability of a traditional way of life is in no small part dependent on maintaining forms of wealth creation and their affiliated technologies to the extent possible. But one of the features of capitalization, especially in the post-modern era where technology enables the movement of wealth and the creation of new industries with unparalleled rapidity, has been precisely to upend these traditional forms of wealth creation and their affiliated technologies. At points capitalist firms will move themselves around the globe. At others they will simply outdate industries; coal being an ideal example. These will demolish traditional forms of wealth creation and the communities which depend on them. And this is only the surface tendencies.

Echoing observations by Edmund Burke decades before, in the middle of the nineteenth century Karl Marx wrote that in capitalism "everything that is solid melts into the air." He was referring to capitalism's tendency to upend traditional forms of life and their affiliated mores. Strangely, it has largely been the deepest conservative critics who acknowledged this tendency and sought to explain it. Writers such as Max Weber, Joseph Schumpeter, and George Grant recognized that capitalism-for all its variations-has an uncanny ability to transform societies by liquidating barriers, including moral barriers, to the pursuit of profit. In some circumstances this could mean liberalizing the public sphere. In other circumstances, it meant colonizing the globe to establish new markets and tear down competition.

We can see the impacts of this everyday. We live in a society where capitalist firms continuously create new values through the production of new products and technologies which are affiliated with diverse ways of life. In effect, capitalism produces social difference by encouraging people to express their individuality through consumption. Bohemian hipsters assume their identity through purchasing the right clothes, drinking the right beer, and pushing for the legalized sale of narcotics. Emancipated women are expected to earn a big salary, wear the right clothes, and buy cars that would make a yuppie blush. And of course, we have a President who has transformed the very idea of truth into a kind of marketable value, determined by popularity and campaign donations. And this is simply the case in the Western world. It boggles the imagination to conceive of the social transformations wrought by capital in economic giants such as China and India, where growing disparities in wealth and development have led to immensely different ways of living in various parts of the country.

Trumpism and Capitalism

We can now bring this analysis full circle to update Arendt's analysis of loneliness and the appeal of fascism. Modern capitalism continuously revolutionizes both the forms of wealth creation and the affiliated technologies present in a society, and the values that society professes. Far from being an ally of traditional, "Christian," society, it has demolished even the possibility of tradition. And it will continue to do so at an accelerating rate.

Recognizing this and dealing with it extensively would require a deep rooted commitment to critique and analysis of contemporary trends in political economy and our growing dependence on technology. But this is rarely undertaken, in no small part because the powers that benefit from these very tendencies have no interest in seeing them abetted. The consequence is that the many individuals who are increasingly outdated by these trends, and left alone in a society they no longer recognize, turn to the modern technologies which helped render them obsolete. There, they do not turn to the global polis and the wealth of information provided by modern technologies. Instead these individuals look inward, towards groups and individuals who feel the same sense of alienation and loneliness. Rather than look to the complexity of these social trends, and recognizing the breadth of the problem, these individuals find powerful figures like Trump and Steve Bannon who are willing to profit from, and direct, the powers caged in their resentment. The finger is pointed not at the roots of social trends, but at its symptoms and critics. Migrants, leftists, intellectuals and employees in the knowledge sector, cosmopolitans and so on. These provide an easy and vulnerable outlet for lashing out. So a few hundred Muslims wearing a burka, or a Professor teaching a class on post-colonial theory for two hours a week, become the subject of paranoiac projects. They are tormentors who emerge to tear down society. All the while, what is ignored is that figures like Trump and Bannon, who deploy the might of capital and technology to advance their own power and egos, are the most individualized catalysts for the real forces undermining tradition and society. The vulgar authoritarianism of Trumpism is the result of these radical trends in our society. It gives expression to the resentment of the lonely and alienated whom these trends have left behind, and deliberately channels their energy against the weak and vulnerable to prevent recognition of the real roots of the problem.