

Mourning in America: Trump and the traumas of the twenty-first century¹

Neva Goodwin [Tufts University, MA, USA]

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Trauma is the word of the year. It may also be the word of the century.

The trauma of finding our country led by a vindictive president who appears to have little empathy for the people, especially for those with fewest resources, is a knife that has opened our hearts to the larger traumas that have been building around us.

What do we know about trauma? There is a relatively new body of good research and understanding on the subject of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. Individuals who are diagnosed with PTSD are described thus:

PTSD negatively impacts a person's daily life, resulting in fractured relationships, depression, inability to maintain employment, diminished cognitive and psychosocial functioning, substance abuse, high-cost healthcare utilization (\$34.9 billion in inflation-adjusted charges for hospitalizations (2002–2011)), and increased suicide risk due to experiencing symptoms of PTSD... Insufficiently treated PTSD becomes chronic and is associated with serious suicidal ideation and behavior. Approximately 7% of the U.S. population, and 11.2–17.1% of veterans, will have PTSD sometime in their life... As of June 30, 2016, more than 868,000 veterans with PTSD received disability compensation, with an estimated cost of \$17 billion/year. In the general population, 27% of suicides are associated with PTSD.²

The trauma that I am talking about includes the trauma that in some groups partially accounts for Trump's election, and in other groups is an immediate reaction to it; but it goes well beyond this political scene, to be more generalized and more widespread. I will go on to discuss an historical background, and an alarming global future, but first let me say a little about the groups that voted for Trump.

¹ This paper is dedicated to the memory of Dr Richard Rockefeller, who alerted me and many others to the prevalence and implications of PTSD, and trauma in general, in the modern world. I thank Edgar Cahn, Dick Chasin, Rick Doblin and Anne St Goar for their very helpful comments on the paper.

² Document submitted by the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 18 October 2016, to request permission to submit a full application for Breakthrough Therapy Designation.

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The largest group among Trump supporters were white males at the lower end of educational attainment. Arlie Hochschild, in *Strangers in their Own Land*, has done a brilliant job of describing many of these people, and why they belong to the Tea Party, hate government, and deride environmental protection – even though none of this appears, to most observers, to be in their self-interest. Hochschild differentiates between economic and emotional self-interest. The latter has to do with feelings about fairness. As virtually all other groups (women, minorities, immigrants, disabled, endangered species, etc.) appear to be “getting in line ahead of them” to receive support (“handouts”) from government, the under-educated white male, especially in the American South and in the Rust Belt, feels that his lifetime of hard work is belittled and overlooked in favor of the objects of bleeding-heart liberal sympathy. Tea Party members have made a choice between government, which they see as on the side of everyone else, and the free market, which they feel is impersonally fair and gives them a chance. As I will note below, this choice, and the beliefs behind it, have been carefully nurtured.³

As important, the people in Louisiana whom Hochschild came to know intimately have been, in her words, “in mourning for a lost way of life”. It isn’t only the jobs that have been lost to globalized cost-cutting and automation; it is the fishing-hunting way of life that depended on pine forests, and healthy waters that have been polluted by vast industrial complexes. Those industrial complexes are accepted because they appear to offer the possibility of jobs, through which to regain a sense of pride and honor. It is easy to keep returning to the economic irrationality of believing in jobs that are largely a mirage; Governor Bobby Jindall impoverished Louisiana to lure in oil companies with “the lowest business taxes in the entire country”. Oil companies provide something like one tenth of all jobs in the state even as they have decimated the seafood and tourism industries, and even as big corporations have squeezed out so many small businesses.

At both state and county levels across the U.S., right-wing, anti-environmentalist beliefs – and votes for Trump – tend also to be found in areas of high exposure to toxic pollution. But these logical paradoxes are less powerful than feelings; and the feeling among Tea Party members is a combination of indignation that they have somehow been tricked out of their piece of the American Dream, and deep, continual anxiety about loss of jobs and status, and of familiar cultural and natural landscapes.

This deep anxiety and resentment feeds into a state of trauma – not usually as intense as what is called PTSD, but a state that is, I believe, becoming more widespread around the world. Studies of PTSD, leading the way to increased knowledge and understanding of trauma in human life generally, have been undertaken in countries such as Israel and Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the experience of trauma can be traced back for centuries. There it appears that genetic markers for trauma have carried some symptoms over multiple

³ Many people have described how this happened. A relatively early summary may be quoted from economist Susan George: “Starting from a tiny embryo at the University of Chicago with the philosopher-economist Friedrich von Hayek and his students like Milton Friedman at its nucleus, the neo-liberals and their funders have created a huge international network of foundations, institutes, research centers, publications, scholars, writers and public relations hacks to develop, package and push their ideas and doctrine relentlessly.” *A Short History of Neo-liberalism: Twenty Years of Elite Economics and Emerging Opportunities for Structural Change* (Conference on Economic Sovereignty in a Globalising World, Bangkok, 24-26 March 1999)

generations,⁴ at the same time as devastating events have repeatedly reinforced the PTSD-like characteristics that are held in mind, body and spirit.

As more has been learned about trauma, more has also been learned about resilience. Here is a brief summary of what is now known about why, when different adults are exposed to the same traumatic experiences, some develop the symptoms of PTSD, and others do not:

- There is some genetic factor such that some people are born with more resilience than others
- An individual who has in her or his life someone who can be trusted to be loving and supportive will have more resilience than one who has no such support
- Children who live in severe poverty and deprivation are likely to be less resilient than those who have been able to feel more secure about having their physical needs met
- A child suffering poverty and deprivation will be less likely to suffer reduced resilience to PTSD if he or she has grown up in a stable community of supportive people, whether or not they are blood relations

As I go on I will mention a variety of reasons for believing that trauma is widespread in the 21st century. The last bullet-point about resilience may be relevant if we ask ourselves whether this century is really different from others. Acute poverty and physical deprivation are notably less than they have been for much of human experience; what may be new is the extent to which children in many parts of today's world grow up without a stable community of supportive people.

As humanity moves into the huge, perhaps overwhelming, challenges of the 21st century, we carry with us a build-up of trauma from the events of the 20th century. Consider the horrors of the Holocaust; the suffering in large parts of Europe and Asia during and after the two world wars; or the massacres directed by despots like Stalin, Pol Pot and the rulers of North Korea. Colonial rule in Africa was followed by conflict, disease and government oppression – that continent now has an enormous contingent of orphans who have lived through rape, violence and destitution. China also emerged from colonial status, experiencing the world's largest famine, the madness of the Cultural Revolution, and now a new economic revolution that has lifted millions from poverty but tossed them into a market economy that pursues profit while trampling on human health and other rights, as well as on the health of the environment. In India the world's second largest famine occurred while food was being exported from the hardest-hit regions – the result of a market operating without regard to human need. India has now caught up with China in the extent of pollution, and of pollution-caused illness and death. In Latin America, as in Africa, giant multinational corporations, supported by governments (including, significantly, that of the U.S.) have caused violent deaths along with severe environmental abuse.

The 20th was not the only century of human history marked by violence and famine, but it was unique in combining these with two other vast changes. One was the extent of population growth, which has multiplied the number of people on the planet by about seven times over the last hundred years. Some places have thrived with more workers, but in other parts of the

⁴ The new field of epigenetics explores what kinds of life experiences may be physically carried across generations, in the germ plasm, or possibly elsewhere. The extent of this possibility – separate from the "nurture" effects that traumatized persons may have on their offspring – is not yet clear; certainly less than Lamarck supposed, but probably more than is allowed for in Mendelian genetics.

world, especially where population growth was most rapid, local systems were overwhelmed by the numbers of people to feed, house, and provide sanitation for. Demographic shock may also be related to cultural and social changes. In Japan, China, Italy, Russia and other countries where the birth rate has now dropped *below* the level needed to maintain the size of the population, there is a new struggle to find ways to care for a bulging population of elderly. In other places social turmoil occurs when intra- or international migration is a cause of rapid population growth – as in parts of Europe. In the U.S. the search for explanations for the present political climate has noted that those who shifted from previous support for Obama to vote for Trump are disproportionately found in counties where there has been rapid rise in non-white populations.⁵

The other exceptional trend over the last three generations was the rapidity and the reach of technological change. Medical and sanitary advances were the major cause of the population explosion, as they allowed a much greater proportion of infants to live into adulthood. Technology has, of course, also been a major force for economic growth; over the last 70 or so years there has been a substantial shrinking of the percentage – and, by some measures, the absolute numbers – of people living in desperate poverty around the world. But economic growth itself has become increasingly toxic. The form it has taken in recent decades has greatly increased inequality, as information technology, robotics, and other innovations work through the market to amplify the rewards, or lack thereof, to winners and losers in the system. It has also contributed to prospects for ecological disasters that may turn back much of what we have known as progress in civilization. People are feeling this intuitively, if not consciously.

One of the outstanding features of the time in which we live is the terrifying prospect of global climate change, regarding which it has been said that contemporary humankind is suffering from “Pre-Traumatic Stress Disorder”.⁶ Whether we squarely face what this will likely mean for the coming years, or whether we simply can’t bear to look at the facts, it is getting ever harder to avoid the gut-knowledge that the world is rapidly becoming markedly less beautiful, rich and generous to its human inhabitants. Tens of thousands of species disappear forever every year. Large coastal land areas will be submerged; diseases will multiply and spread; food from the oceans and the climate-stressed fields will be scarce; fresh water will be expensive or unobtainable for ever more millions of people; environmental refugees will swell the ranks of unwelcome migrants; and armed conflicts will reach many people who had assumed they were safe.

Armed fortress living will be increasingly common among the rich, and will doubtless create some areas of relative security, but the people inside will be their own prisoners. They will find it difficult to visit the beautiful natural areas in the United States, or the cultural jewels of other continents. Many of these cultural jewels are already being sacked in the raging conflicts of the Middle East and elsewhere; many of the world’s natural beauties are already eroding under pressure from climate change – as well as from actors in the market economy. The rich

⁵ “Immigrant Shock: Can California Predict the Nation’s Future?” Emily Badger, Feb. 1, 2017 *New York Times*. For a poignant metaphor on the effects of population growth, here is an image put forth by Isaac Asimov, in an interview with Bill Moyers. Imagine two people living in an apartment where there are two bathrooms; each one can use a bathroom whenever she wants, for as long as she wants. But then suppose the population is multiplied by 7: now there are 14 people living there – but still only two bathrooms. Now there are lines, bangings on doors, arguments – it is much harder to maintain freedom and democracy. (The bathrooms, in this image, may be seen as standing in for our finite Earth, with its source and sink functions.)

⁶ I first heard this term from Thomas Homer Dixon and Carolyn Raffensperger, separately

are not immune to pre-traumatic stress, as this century heads for various forms of catastrophe; their awareness and response will be important for any hope we may have for a constructive response to the threats we face. An indicator of awareness is a comment by the investor, Seth Klarman, warning that the Trump administration could lead to a major stock market correction and “global angst” among the investor class.⁷ But some of that angst is already translating into escapist survivalism among those who can afford to buy land in New Zealand, or build bunkers out of former missile sites in the U.S.. The work of Dr Richard Rockefeller, to whom this piece is dedicated, is an example of a more responsible kind of reaction among the one percent.

Next to climate change, the other most outstanding source of widespread 21st-century trauma is the growing feeling that at least 99% of the people are largely helpless before the power of the giant corporations. Government in the United States is, to a terrifying extent (the ascension of President Trump only makes this more obvious), controlled by Big Ag., Big Pharma., and Big Petrochemicals. Slightly less obvious, because they don’t produce anything tangible, are their enablers – the global consulting firms – and the final skimmers of profits, in the financial industry. These, in various combinations, continue to be major forces in toppling or raising up various governments around the world – never to the benefit of the people.⁸

When we speak of the forces that have, to a greater or lesser extent, taken over and degraded the public realm, we cannot leave out the roles of the intelligentsia and the media. The economics profession has played a large role in defining the “free market” as the great bulwark against the kinds of overweening government that were to be found in the Soviet Union – or in the United States. These disparate government types were bizarrely lumped together as Milton Friedman and his allies, with support by the Koch brothers and other beneficiaries of petrochemical money, fed the market solutions message to the public via Fox News, right-wing radio, and the like.

A little example of how this message permeated and echoed was an absurd debate I heard in the late 1980s, between an ecological economist and a speaker from the libertarian Cato Institute. It was absurd because each spoke as if one of these institutions was entirely to be trusted, and the other was the enemy. As though the market can operate “freely”, let alone to the benefit of the people, without being nudged and regulated by government – as if government could do everything markets can do, as well or better! And as if “the market” was just one thing, while in fact, those markets that come closest to the “free” ideal preached by Friedman and his popularizers are dominated by small businesses, not by giant corporations. Yet this debate continues in the same absurd, polarized and simplified form.

Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, in their 2010 book, *Merchants of Doubt*, do an excellent job of describing how the public was given a false picture of science, especially that of climate change. The petrochemical industry has used bad science and clever marketing to cast doubt on the need for urgent action against climate change. Many of these writers and spokespeople were ready and willing to fight *for* the market, *against* government, because they felt they were upholding capitalism in the Cold War. Industry continues to benefit from an anti-science, anti-government atmosphere fanning hatred of all regulations – even those

⁷ “A Quiet Giant of Investing Weighs in on Trump”, Andrew Ross Sorkin, Feb 6, 2017, *New York Times*

⁸ A useful source on this is *The New Confessions of an Economic Hitman*, by John Perkins. Obviously not all individuals in these parts of our economy are bad people. In each of these industries one can find companies that are doing more to solve problems than to create them, and that are only tangentially involved in the starkly widening gap between the fortunate and the unfortunate people of the world.

intended to protect the environment and provide safety nets for people who are suffering in a rapidly changing economy.

Early in this paper I cited some reasons to believe that white, Christian, male supporters of Trump feel themselves to be a discriminated-against minority. This is noteworthy because until fairly recently this was the demographic that had least reason to feel this way – and that, indeed, enjoyed a belief system which allowed them to discriminate against other minorities (as well as females, who are rarely in the minority). It is important to add, to the reasons for widespread trauma in the modern world, the experience of discrimination, which is liable to create and perpetuate a lifelong trauma for those who suffer it. This includes Blacks in much of the world; Jews, over a long history; native peoples, wherever their lands have been taken over by a more powerful set of newcomers; and women and girls in those places where their inferior status leaves them subject to violence, without recourse.

The above does not exhaust the topic of trauma in the 21st century, but it may make it easier to understand its scope.

Included in a feeling of trauma is often a wish to find an enemy. There is indeed an enemy of all humankind – a cluster of enemies; and they can be identified. They are not the quarter of the American electorate who voted for Trump. Their voting decision was fueled by their distress; and it is a distress that is widely shared, though different groups understand the causes very differently. Humanity's real enemies today – those who stand against addressing the huge difficulties that face the world – include “experts” that insist you have to choose between governments and markets, as well as governments that are hostage to a cluster of powerful, very rich actors. Humanity's enemies today are the giant corporations that profit in the short term from business as usual while diverting attention from the huge difficulties that face the world – most of all, climate change, inequality, discrimination, and corruption of democracy.

Much of humankind shares the traumatizing knowledge that large forces are doing great harm to our livelihoods, our families, and our beloved places. The mourning is not only taking place in America, and it is interpreted and acted on in a wide variety of ways. Some of the ways are violent, including what we call terrorism; some are beautiful, such as the marches of January 21 of this year, around the world; and some are designed (as I believe the Trump vote was) to create disruptive change. There are grounds for finding common cause among many of those who feel a crying need for a fairer, kinder, safer world.

Can we imagine such a better world?

In order to address the great social and ecological challenges we face, we need, for sure, better, more effective government, freed from the chokehold of money. In the U.S. this requires campaign finance reform, along with voter registration and education efforts, to overcome the suppression of voting by the underprivileged. Perhaps even more critical is to get control over the contracting-out system whereby private contractors, hidden from public view, now outnumber the federal civilian workforce by 3 or 4 to 1.⁹ This is enormously

⁹ See June A. Sekera, *The Public Economy in Crisis, A Call for a New Public Economics* Springer, 2016. Contrary to public opinion, the federal government workforce is essentially the [same size now as it was in the 1950s](#), under Eisenhower; it has, in fact been shrinking, so that there are now fewer government employees than there were under Reagan. The Freedom of Information Act does not cover government contractors; they are paid by the government, but not accountable to the public.

lucrative for the corporations that have the contracts – and that keep hold of them, in part, through a cozy relationship greased by campaign contributions.

We also need a very different, very lively market sector, dominated by small businesses, many of them locally grounded, including various socially responsible modifications of profit-maximizing capitalism, such as cooperatives and Benefit Corporations. Large corporations could again (as was the case in the 19th century) be held to charters that spell out their contract with the people. A re-chartering movement is probably as important in this realm as campaign finance reform is for the restoration of responsive government.

Reforms to markets and governments are necessary so that both institutions can work on behalf of the vast number of people who are economically insecure, increasingly left out of the existing systems. While technology is filtering away ever more of the jobs of the past, fewer and fewer people can be funneled into the specialties of the future. What will be needed, however, is more of the care work that for most of human history has been underappreciated and underpaid – when paid at all. Societies will need to address how the fruits of technology-enhanced productivity can be apportioned among all the people, while acknowledging the critical work of the core economies of households and communities.

Such a market, such a government, such a society would need to work together in recognition of planetary limits. In order to more equitably share the Earth's finite resources, cultural shifts are required, to elevate the values of cooperation and compassion over competition and greed-defined success.

Right now, in opposition to any such possibilities, the forces that are determined to reap short-term profits, regardless of long-term harm, have strong allies in President Trump and his team; but it is not just this president who is the cause of so much harm and loss, in this century of loss. The votes for Trump, and for others like him, in other countries, have their seeds in the trauma of a past and a future of loss. As we address the threats we face – threats to livelihoods, to democracy, and to our ecological surroundings – we must also be mindful of a widespread need for emotional healing.

Author contact: neva.goodwin@tufts.edu

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