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Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been, America?

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A few days after the US presidential election, I was asked to take part in the panel discussion "No Changes in the West? What is with the US?" as part of "The Battle over Culture" series in the Old Theater in Lublin, Poland.[1] Along with two other speakers, I was asked to analyze the current situation in the US, including what had led to such election results, and talk a bit about predictions for the future. "In the aftermath of the US presidential election, what direction will the US take? Why is the United States so divided?" were the two questions proposed by the organizers that were supposed to guide the discussion and I reckon they are also a good starting point for this response note, though I want to reverse the order in which I will address them.

Going to bed on the evening of November 5 in Poland I was quite hopeful that Kamala Harris would win the election. Therefore, I literally woke up to a surprise reading the news the following day. Now that I think of it, I should not have been surprised at all because there had been so many signs and signals of Donald Trump's victory that my expectations were more wishful thinking than a probable outcome of the elections. As we have the tendency to mingle with people who share our political, cultural, or religious views and analogically subscribe to information bubbles via the specific orientation of newspapers and TV news we select, we oftentimes forget that the conclusions we draw based on such information may not necessarily be valid and reliable. George Packer began his analysis of US decline in his 2013 publication, *The Unwinding: Thirty Years of American Decline*.[2] He followed it up with *Last Best Hope: America in Crisis and Renewal* in 2021—right after the end of Trump's first term as the president of the US.[3] Packer also presented the conclusions from his book in *The Atlantic* with the eponymously titled essay "How America Fractured into Four Parts" and I think it is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand the polarization of American society.[4] In his texts, Packer examines how the end of bipartisan America has resulted in a growing divide in society that has led to the development of four

narratives symbolizing four factions, from moderate to extreme on both sides: Free America, Real America, Smart America, and Just America. What Packer notices in his analyses is that the gap, particularly between the extreme factions, more resembles a rupture that can hardly be sutured than the divisions we could observe before.

It has to be noted that Trump in a skillful manner took advantage of those relegated to the margin on the right. However paradoxical it seems from an outsider's perspective—how plausible is an image of a tycoon mulling over the fate of the poor, the needy, and those in dire straits?—the truth is that both in the US and in Europe, Poland included, there are enormous numbers of people whose problems have not been addressed by subsequent governments. They have felt misunderstood for a long time and thus it is easy for them to fall for the populist call. But is it only their fault? I will leave that as a rhetorical question, though I think the answer in both the US and in Europe is the same. However, for anyone wanting to bridge such gaps in their respective societies, they must not ignore the consequences of polarization and populism, because these processes are not over. We have seen analogical changes in Europe with subsequent elections won by rightist leaders. Trump's election in a way legitimizes such choices in the future. There is already a lot of such rhetoric among politicians on the Polish right before the upcoming 2025 presidential election in Poland.

Moreover, the populist turn in the US and in Europe is largely rooted in anti-intellectualism. Already during his first campaign and then his first term Trump was not predominantly supported by American intellectuals, including writers and artists. He adopted the discourse propagated by Sarah Palin in her campaign, who identified "real" Americans with simple people. Trump added overt sexism to that recipe and waged a war against intellectuals. The result? I am afraid machismo culture will be fully in the picture and will dominate the discourse in different areas, including US internal affairs and foreign policy. It can already be seen in the Cabinet and staff nominations Trump has made so far (not to mention the demeaning language that he uses). And what surprises an outsider once again is that such large numbers of women have voted for Trump and Vance's tandem vision.

One may wonder why such attitudes still resonate in the twenty-first century, particularly among women. But again—if one leaves one's electoral bubble, it soon turns out that American society is highly patriarchal. In my view, it is also one of the most important factors why Hillary Clinton lost to Trump in 2016 and Kamala Harris in 2024—they are both well-educated women. With the new–old president, a male-dominated vision of the country, society, the family, and finally politics will be inevitably reinforced. What will be the effects? It is hard to predict all of them, but the trajectory has already been determined and this vision come true may not be so favorable, even for its (initial) supporters. Having seen similar anti-intellectual and proconservative movements in Poland for many years, I have to admit they are always alarming, as they inherently preclude critical thinking ("Why should I think about other options when I know what is right and what is wrong?") and release demons of uncontrolled *laissez-faire* ("I am the sole and only authority and no one is going to tell

me what I should or should not be doing"). Such attitudes of fellow citizens influence our lives to a great extent and one of their outcomes is an opened door for hate and violence in everyday life. In the US, we saw its culmination in the January 6 attack on the US Capitol in 2021. We also see it in Europe through the normalization of hate and abuse in political discourse and everyday communication, on the internet, and in real life. People have always had different opinions or views but they have somehow coexisted. Now it seems that these differences are irreconcilable, and the situation begins to resemble what we saw in the 1930s in Europe—in Italy and Germany, right before World War II. Unfortunately, such processes are irreversible, as harm has been already done. It will take years, even generations, and a lot of effort and perseverance to shift the pendulum to the other side.

Finally, there is *the* issue of immigration which, according to some analysts, tipped the balance for Trump's victory. Writing in *The New Yorker* in 2015, Jeffrey Toobin called the situation around immigration legislation in the US "American Limbo" and the only changes since then have been to the detriment of immigrants and their families.[5] The news and reports have identified countless examples of violence, abuse, mistreatment, family separations, and deaths of those trying to cross the border to the US. New punitive measures have not been accompanied by any legislative breakthroughs. The COVID-19 pandemic suspended repercussions for a while, but it was a short hiatus. Trump's first term revolved around the construction of the wall on the US-Mexico border. This time he has promised both to defend the borders and conduct mass deportations. Derogatory language about immigrants from his first term in office turned into even more demeaning slanders during the campaign. Will he keep the promises he made? I fear he will. Even if they are not fulfilled entirely, few groups will be left unscathed. And such rhetoric is in line with conservative European attitudes to the immigration crisis. It exacerbates anti-immigrant sentiments in Europe and once again authorizes European politicians to act in a similar manner. Boats to Europe sink, leaving hundreds dead in the Mediterranean Sea; fences and walls capped with concertina wire are constructed around Europe (to defend "Fortress Europe"), including the wall on the Polish-Belarussian border, which is scary in its likeness to the fence on the US-Mexico border …

I keep reading both Polish and American newspapers, reports, and analyses to find some answers and prepare for the potential development of the situation. It seems that the circumstances look like a sinusoid. On the one hand, there are all the dire predictions, that we all know will come true to some extent. On the other hand, there is the rule of law and legal restrictions and regulations that are supposed to prevent catastrophes from happening. As I am writing this reflective response, I still hope that at least some of the safety fuses will keep the disaster at bay if need be …[6]

Notes

[1] The title of my response has been inspired by a short story by Joyce Carol Oates first published in 1966. It is also the title of one of my undergraduate seminars that I taught a few years back. Together with the students, we attempted to "diagnose" the contemporary socio-political situation in the US, examining current changes through the context of the vicissitudes of American history.

[2] George Packer, *The Unwinding: Thirty Years of American Decline* (Faber & Faber, 2014).

[3] George Packer, *Last Best Hope: America in Crisis and Renewal* (Jonathan Cape, 2021).

[4] George Packer, "How America Fractured into Four Parts," *The Atlantic*, July/August 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/07/george-packer-four-americas/619012/

[5] Jeffrey Toobin, "American Limbo," *The New Yorker*, July 20, 2015, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/07/27/american-limbo

[6] As I am proofreading this essay, I am finding it harder to hold on to hope.

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