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# A Corrosive Decline

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I moved to Copenhagen, Denmark six months into Barack Obama's presidency in the summer of 2009. Living outside of the United States, I mostly look back through mass media and social media, conversations with family and friends, and return visits. The longer I have lived abroad, the more memories of what used to be—from cultural feelings to understandings of political norms—fade and the more the country changes; neither are stable. From this mediated position, I have spectated the rise and spread of the so-called Tea Party movement, Trump's first term, and now this. I am occasionally asked to offer expert commentary on a place, my prior home, that has changed without me.

What I see from Denmark is the corrosive effect of a global hegemon's declining influence abroad and its caustic domestic politics being spread in different languages and different directions. An outlandish statement or event gets bounced through mass media, social media, memes, the international press, and internet spaces into personal conversations many thousands of kilometers away in a different language and devoid of context other than the sheer absurdity (or horror) of the topic of the hour. Fake news, wokeness, and other neoepithets are then reformulated and repurposed into English loan words in a different political environment.

It seemed easier to separate mediated political discourse from views in my local community when I lived in the US. Talking to neighbors, colleagues, and other people, in often short exchanges through casual interactions, grounded my outlook. The heat of right-wing AM radio and cable news infotainment percolated but did not often come up at the dog park or drinking a beer while watching a football game at a bar. Trump's latest campaign combined the malicious vitriol of the rise of Fox News with the strikingly inane sensibilities of the 1980s supermarket tabloids that I giggled at while standing in line with my mom as a child. Political opinions of citizens mattered in the Reagan years, but I did not feel like the UFO or Elvis Presley sightings reported in the *Weekly World News* were believed by people, except my aunt. She believed. I do not

wish to idealize this period of US history, but this absurdist vein of American culture largely occupied the margins. It was not the focal point of political discourse.

We also need to recognize that the pulls away from political norms do not solely originate from the United States. Two of the world's leading misogynists, whom I leave nameless, do the majority of their misogynizing outside of the United States yet are spread through mediated connections to men in the United States and Denmark. While it is common to discuss the increase of right-wing racial nationalism in contemporary Europe and the United States, I feel like this misses the fact that it did not go anywhere. Trump did not invent American racism any more than Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany or other parties in Europe did within their national borders and local contexts. Neither are political leaders in this vein in Europe or elsewhere little Trumps or Trump-like. This omission and these comparisons flatten understandings of local political and cultural geographies into an American-centric view of the world akin to the color commentator in the mockumentary *Best in Show* relating dogs to American football for uninformed viewers.[1]

Anti-intellectual veins of political culture sit alongside the absurdist and racist Christian nationalist in the rise of the populist right. But I object to overintellectualizing our understanding of this phenomenon and especially its leaders. The Trump administration's all-out assault on anything and everything it can label and deride is not four-dimensional chess. Poorly drafted executive orders, policy reinterpretations, DEI scapegoating of tragic accidents, and tariff and military threats are brutal and important, but I believe people around the world with a reasonable knowledge of history and politics have a better idea of their significance than acolytes in the second Trump administration. The will to destroy of this administration is much stronger than its desire or ability to build.

I also believe that we do a disservice to public debate by completing the intellectual work of making sense out of the disarray of Trump's positions that his administration neglects or is incapable of articulating into a clear strategic doctrine. When the *Economist* publishes articles like its recent "The Trump Doctrine," it is doing that intellectual work and bringing the clarity that the administration lacks.[2] Trump uses threats of military and economic force to fulfill imperial ambition, and we need to take seriously what this might mean to people in Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland), Panama, Canada, and the Gaza Strip. This has broader geopolitical implications for the entire Middle East, Ukraine, and Taiwan, but this does equate to the Trump administration having strategic vision.

Now I am landing directly in the crosshairs of these forces and Trump's petulant gaze. In winter 2025, I am beginning work on a collaborative research project that seeks to elevate the position of marginalized, especially Indigenous communities within the Nordic-Baltic green transition strategy debate. My research location is Kalaallit Nunaat.[3] It is not my role or position to speak for people other than myself, especially not Indigenous people. From Denmark, I see an uneven colonial contest between Denmark and the United States, a subplot in the current scramble for the

Artic made possible by global heating, driven by the quest for mineral and fossil fuel extraction, and global power struggles. As De La Soul reminded us, "Stakes is High." To be clear, all the United States's putatively legitimate interests regarding Kalaallit Nunaat could be met working through strong existing partnerships with the Kalaallit Nunaat and Danish governments. Security, increased militarization of the Arctic, trade, investment, and mining are all possible within established relationships and channels.

After Trump breathed new life into his first term thought-of-the-moment by restating his desire to turn Greenland into an American possession, most people seemed to believe his threat of military force was a negotiating position. I do not have more insight into the closed-door discussions of politicians than reading local newspapers, but press reports, both here and abroad, suggest that a conversation between Donald Trump and the Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen did not go well.[4] After the first salvo in this exchange, Denmark is recalibrating its position, and the Trump administration seems insistent, unmoved, yet unfocused.

Writing in early February 2025, I think it better to comment on the broader shifts, rather than gaming out scenarios for Kalaallit Nunaat. Politics in Denmark and Europe are driven by their own logics and caution should be exercised to not discipline their concerns into US debates and understandings. As the Trump administration pulls back government support for clean energy, energy policy and market forces are past the tipping point of change. Trump brings uncertainty to the structural reorganization of the global economy, but he will not reverse it.

Our research project is built around transformative justice, a concept and set of practices created by and for marginalized communities to respond to violence without recreating state-based violence.[5] Our goal is to explore possible synergies between transformative justice and environmental justice to recognize historical violence and empower underrepresented communities in environmental decision-making. One stepping-off point is to recognize the many harms inflicted on Indigenous People in Kalaallit Nunaat through Danish colonialism.

There are many commonalities between Danish colonial violence and that inflicted upon Indigenous peoples and people of color within and outside of the United States by its government and other actors. Forced settlement, child separation, and the forced sterilization of women are a few harms among many. We can ask questions about how the forced sterilization of Indigenous women in Kalaallit Nunaat and Canada compare to Latina women in Los Angeles in the 1970s?[6] How did it impact them, their families, and their communities? Different histories, different colonial and racial orders, yet did similar acts of violence create similar harms upon these women? What, if anything, can done in redress? Transformative justice offers a set of tools to address historical violence and, we propose, issues of environmental harm before they occur. Deploying transformative justice's community-focused principles first, preharm may be a way to redistribute power, reduce environmental harm, and reach informed consent (or consensus) in the communities hosting new projects being promoted as

contributing to environmental sustainability such as offshore windfarms or mining projects.

Rare earth ores are seen as crucial for the green transition.[7] One of largest known deposits of rare earth elements in the world is on the California–Nevada border, the site of the Mountain Pass Rare Earth Mine.[8] After multitudes of spills of radioactive wastewater, the mine was shuttered but eventually reopened with new procedures. China is currently the world's largest extractor and refiner of rare earths and has export controls to give preference to domestic manufacturing and to maintain their supply into the future as a matter of long-term strategic interest.[9] Exploration is ongoing, but other underexploited sources include the floor of the Pacific Ocean, Ukraine, and Kalaallit Nunaat.

It is a signal of the regression of our political environment that it sounds radical to suggest that people in Kalaallit Nunaat should be the ones to decide their own future and the use of their land. Just as important, Indigenous People in Kalaallit Nunaat do not have a special responsibility to provide the materials for the world's quite ridiculous desire to put a microprocessor in every object, nor the more practical use of rare earths in electric vehicle batteries. But neither do they bear a greater responsibility for refraining from environmentally destructive activities than do larger and more powerful countries.

In the end, when looking at the chaos wrought by the second Trump administration, the most immediate impact is the (re)shattering of established norms of discourse and acceptable action. In my best understanding of history and the current state of the world, I think that positive political outcomes are produced by powerful people, institutions, and citizens being reasonable, at least as much as formal governance systems. I harbor no idealism about the greatness or exceptionalism of the United States. The US Constitution and the government system it framed supported the (attempted) genocide of Indigenous people in the Americas, slavery, colonialism, foreign wars of aggression, child labor, and the right of individuals to own weapons of war. It is folly to think that merely the American political system can restrain Trump's and now Elon Musk's hurried rampage to blow past the Project 2025 goal of creating a Christian nationalist ethno/racial state to putting into action the wildest of techbro dystopian fantasies of eviscerating the regulatory bodies, government institutions, and the financial system itself. The unmooring is apparent in the way major US newspapers are covering Trump's Gaza "plan," too meek to even name it ethnic cleansing, the term itself a euphemism. As Trump abuses traditional US allies, including Denmark, it lays bare that the United States is the greatest threat to peace and stability in the world.

## Notes

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[1] *Best in Show*, 2000.

[2] "The Trump Doctrine: America's New Foreign Policy," *The Economist*, January 18, 2025, https://www.economist.com/weeklyedition/2025-01-18

[3] NordForsk, "Transformative Environmental Justice (EnJUSTICE)," https://www.nordforsk.org/projects/transformative-environmental-justice-enjustice

[4] Richard Milne, James Politi, and Gideon Rachman, "Donald Trump in Fiery Call with Denmark's Prime Minister over Greenland," *Financial Times*, January 24, 2025, https://www.ft.com/content/ace02a6f-3307-43f8-aac3-16b6646b60f6; and Mathilde Højgaard Jensen, "Medie: Trump var 'aggressiv og konfron-te-rende' i opkald med Mette F.," *Børsen*, January 24, 2025, https://borsen.dk/nyheder/politik/medie-trump-var-aggressiv-og-konfronterende-i-opkald-med-mette-f

[5] TransformHarm.org, "Transformative Justice: A Brief Description," https://transformharm.org/tj_resource/transformative-justice-a-brief-description/

[6] Naja Dyrendom Graugaard and Amalie Ambrosius Høgfeldt, "The Silenced Genocide: Why the Danish Intrauterine Device (IUD) Enforcement in Kalaallit Nunaat Calls For an Intersectional Decolonial Analysis," *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning* 2 (2023): 162–67; Rebecca M. Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America, 1950-1980* (Rutgers University Press, 2011); and Leonardo Pegoraro, "Second-Rate Victims: The Forced Sterilization of Indigenous Peoples in the USA and Canada," *Settler Colonial Studies* 5, no. 2 (2014): 161–73, https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2014.955947.

[7] Lisa Depraiter and Stephane Goutte, "The Role and Challenges of Rare Earths in the Energy Transition," *Resources Policy* 86, Part B (2023), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2023.104137

[8] "MP Materials," https://mpmaterials.com/

[9] Nabeel A. Mancheri, "World Trade in Rare Earths, Chinese Export Restrictions, and Implications," *Resources Policy* 46, Part 2 (2015): 262–71, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2015.10.009