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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

RESEARCH PAPER

# The Rise of the Right and the Adoption of the Clash of Civilizations: When Democracy Spawns the Antithesis of Liberalism

Azmi Bishara | December 2016

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Series: Research Paper

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## Abstract

This study presents three main hypotheses. First, the conflict currently underway in advanced western countries is a conflict between two cultures, each with its own value, class, cultural, and political component—or between cultural identities. Second, Russia and China have adopted the credo of the clash of civilizations against the spread of democracy and liberalism, with the view that these are western constructs. Third, the gap between, on the one side, the elites who embrace liberal values in alliance with the marginalized sector, minorities, and women and, on the other side, the white working class, people in rural areas, and others has led to a weakening of the newly forged and historic tie between democracy and liberalism, and a shift to a growing conflict between them.

## The Rise and Features of the Populist Far Right

The election of Donald Trump has been the subject of a deluge of commentary and analysis following the initial shock experienced by most media outlets and pollsters, who had discounted the possibility of a Trump victory. Large swaths of the intelligentsia, east and west, remain astounded by the electoral behavior of American voters. They are astounded at the voters' tolerance of the candidate's abrasive personality and his erratic behavior. They are also startled to see public support of ideas that, until Trump's ascent, were assumed to be unspeakable in the culture of liberal "political correctness."

Among these stunned observers there is a unanimous conviction that Trump is not fit to be president of the United States, and that it is unthinkable for such a man to hold office, given its importance and effect on the world's largest economy and on global politics as a whole.

During the election campaign, one could easily mistake Trump's political language for that of someone having just walked out of a New York bar, where some guys had been enjoying a few happy-hour drinks after work. His discourse reflected the typical banter of conservative guys on a night out, as they get sidetracked into a discussion of international politics after watching something on the TV screen, or after a terrorist attack—each of them concocting ways to teach those terrorists and the states they come from a few lessons. Should they turn to domestic politics, the problem would boil down

to inept bureaucracy, corrupt politicians, the establishment's ignorance of "real life," and the hesitancy of leaders and their inability to be decisive and make the right decision. Women who had the nerve to be smart would be mocked, and bold references would be made to skin color, gender, ethnic origin, religion, and so forth, reflecting the angry politics of a narcissist convinced that only he holds the answers to all the problems baffling politicians and experts. Needless to say, these supposedly magical solutions are impossible to implement; inexplicable suggestions rest on ignorance of the facts and are internally inconsistent.

That is, however, the talk that goes on between some grown men, resentful about the changes to the world around them. They have a sense that their country is being taken away from them and find it hard to relate to it: a black president; a woman presidential candidate<sup>1</sup> whose husband, were she elected, would have been "first gentleman"; gay marriage; funding health insurance for people whom they perceive as lazy and unemployed; and unregulated immigration, which they also complain is funded by taxes. Ironically, the United States is a country built by immigrants, yet these are immigrants who have settled, generation after generation, and who tend to develop a deeply ingrained sense of belonging and belief that they are the native population; this group believes and that the world's poor are flocking in to eat into the wealth that they have accumulated through their own hard work and the toil of their parents and grandparents.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Clinton's candidacy might have been a factor in helping Trump get elected, not just because she is a woman, but also because she represents the ruling establishment oligarchy and because of the widespread impression that she is a child of the spoiled ruling elite and lacks credibility.

<sup>2</sup>Although Hilary Clinton received a higher proportion of the votes of Latin Americans than Obama did in 2012, Donald Trump also raised the Republican share of the Latino vote by two percent, including those with Cuban and Venezuelan roots who voted for Trump against the Democrats' policy for rapprochement with the Cuban regime. In fact, long-settled and well-integrated American immigrants who have adopted the values of the conservative current out of their desire to affirm their American identity are mostly dismayed by the new waves of immigration. The influx of immigrants re-poses the question of their identity, which they had left behind, and erases the lines between them and the new immigrants. Historically, we have witnessed this with the wave of hostility from Central and Western European Jews at the flow of Russian Jews westwards, who were escaping the waves of anti-Semitism in tsarist Russia. Equally, some well-integrated immigrants from minority groups are sometimes seen defending the existing regime, noting that they have succeeded through ability and hard work, and that those who criticize the regime and hold it responsible for their failings should attribute their misfortunes to their laziness or involvement in crime and drugs and so forth.

This cultural-political assemblage, or discursive assemblage if you like, is not limited to the United States. These days, it is prevalent among large sectors of societies across all the economically advanced western countries. When an ambitious individual from within that culture decides, in the right circumstances, to turn this bar banter into a political discourse to appeal to people's baser instincts and exploit their fears, buried or open, and when this perspective is adopted by weighty political and social forces, then you have something akin to the phenomenon of Donald Trump. This exists and is currently expanding in all developed countries in Europe and North America, and in some Eastern European states like Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic which aspire to be culturally grouped with the West.

These trends coincide with another growing phenomenon presenting itself in many countries around the world, irrespective of their level of socioeconomic development: the rise of what is usually called the "nationalist right" whose discourse revolves around the notion of sovereignty and the vital living sphere of the state as components of an authoritarian regime's ideology. This generally entails a rejection of any critic of the encroachment on human rights and the use of political oppression as a pretext for intervention in the internal affairs of the state; the equivalence of state sovereignty with that of the ruling regime or of the presidency, which knows no limits, other than those acceptable to the regime; and a narrow margin of freedoms that grow and shrink according to the interests of the regime. The clearest example of this trend is embodied by Vladimir Putin and the transformations of the Russian regime into a tsarist republic. Other examples, to varying degrees, are also found in India, Turkey, Egypt, the Philippines, and elsewhere.

Aside from the Russian president's genuine nationalist orientation—influenced, it would appear, by the likes of theoretician Aleksandr Dugin in everything related to the restoration of Russia's role both globally and in the Eurasian vital sphere, and by Ivan Ilyin, the conservative right-wing monarchist and white émigré theorist after the Bolshevik revolution. President Vladimir Putin has also used the Russian nationalist trend to confront popular criticism in the shadow of the drop in oil prices and economic stagnation, directing resentment against the values of global liberalism promoted by the West. This is, in effect, a rather cheap ploy and means of propaganda to which leaders in the Third World resort, such as Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi, which blends discourse with nationalist slogans, allowing the froth of national pride to cover up the failure in

development policies, the dire economic situation, and the leaders' awful record in issues of human and civil rights.

Putin has lent support to illiberal parties in Western Europe, such as the French National Front party and its leader Marine Le Pen. He sees Russia as "a state civilization held together by the Russian people, the Russian language, Russian culture and the Russian Orthodox Church."<sup>3</sup> This form of right-wing nationalism is generally accompanied by a tendency to veil hostility to democracy and to the notion of human rights with a nationalist gloss.

The prevalent dogma in China and Russia sees the spread of democracy as an extension of western civilization, and therefore as a tool of western hegemony. In short, this means that, globally, the theory of the clash of civilizations is currently being adopted by these two major powers, particularly Russia. If Samuel P. Huntington (1927–2008) were alive today, he might be shocked by my assertion that the clash of civilizations has become a Russian and Chinese doctrine of international relations. If he thought hard, however, he would find the idea logical. His theory on the clash of civilizations has been taken up in the United States by the conservative nationalist right, which believes in power politics in international relations. It is precisely these forces that believe in this political credo who are ruling Russia today. They are right-wing conservative Russian nationalists. Much the same applies to China, although the economic policy model and the ambitions on the world level are different.

It is not strange, therefore, that Russian policy should intersect with right-wing movements in Western Europe of the kind described above, such as the French National Front, or that there should be mutual admiration between Putin and Trump. More worrying is the admiration of sections of the traditional left for Putin for similar reasons, including the focus on sovereignty and the vital sphere, as though these were anti-imperialist concepts in themselves (while in fact they are anti-imperialist to the same

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<sup>3</sup> "League of Nationalists," *The Economist*, November 19, 2016. On the subject of Putin supporting and funding nationalist parties in Europe, and boosting the populist trend, *The New York Times* wrote that "Ms. Merkel needs to fend off a resurgent Russia that is promoting its brand of illiberal democracy by backing right-wing parties throughout the Continent and fanning the flames of populism. But with Mr. Trump openly admiring Russia's president, Vladimir V. Putin, even maintaining economic sanctions imposed on Moscow over conflicts in Crimea and Ukraine will be a challenge." See Alison Smale and Steven Erlanger, "As Obama Exits World Stage, Angela Merkel May Be the Liberal West's Last Defender," *The New York Times*, November 12, 2016.

extent that Fascism was against British and French imperialism in the first half of the 20th century). They are also in agreement over economic protectionism, which, in the view of the traditional left and the rising populist nationalist right in the United States and Europe, and regimes of the ilk of the current Russian regime, is a good thing simply because it claims to be against globalization.

The problem is that such a perspective does not recognize that the Left and Fascism are supposed to oppose globalization from totally different starting points and for different reasons. They criticize different aspects of it, and if they coincide in supporting a populist “leader,” that means one of them has lost sight of his. Something similar happened in the 1930s, a period when Fascism was triumphant and took advantage of that intersection, calling itself national socialism, or Nazism—which it must not be forgotten is the German acronym for national socialism, in the simultaneous expression of nationalist social demagoguery.

Presently, five key and interrelated elements unite the new right-wing movements in Europe and the United States:

1. Hostility to the elites and the establishment, specifically the language of political correctness and the culture of liberalism. In fact, this discourse against the cultural elite and its political influence is formulated by economic and political elites as well, but it adopts a tone of popular hostility to the ruling establishment and makes use of extreme right-wing elements that were always outside the establishment.
2. Hostility to globalization and free trade, with the view that the nation is losing out to foreigners and others who wish to impose their will. This hostility usually comes with leanings toward economic protectionism, also supported by sectors of the Left, albeit for different reasons.
3. Speaking to people’s fears on mass migration and waves of refugees.
4. Speaking to nationalist emotions and people’s fears of the loss of their countries’ identities because of multiculturalism, and the loss of white male dominance because of the empowerment of women, minorities, and other groups.
5. Islamophobia and the linkage of Islam and terrorism. Interestingly, groups that were anti-Semitic in the past have swapped this for hatred of Islam and Muslims.

These movements advocate, without hesitation, a populist position against politicians in general and hostility to politics and politicians usually from an anti-democratic stance. If



they win an election, however, these populist trends shift to defending politics and politicians against “the media” and “the courts,” usually expressing themselves using populist majoritarian approaches opposed to the intervention of constitutional courts in political life in defense of the principles of liberal democracy. They believe the courts impose the values of the minority on the majority. Here, populism wears the mask of democracy to defend politics and politicians in a struggle with the values of liberalism that constitutional courts are mandated to protect.

We ought, however, to make a distinction between this trend and the ideology of the neo-conservatives. Neo-conservatism is a manifestation of cultural and political globalization. Neo-cons were an elite who spoke the language of the Left in terms of a global mission, the difference being that they did not preach a message of revolutionary liberation of the proletariat internationalism but called for the liberal democracy, the American version specifically, to take on its global responsibility. They swapped the export of revolution, of which the Soviet Union had been accused, for the export of democracy, supposedly by the United States, from their point of view. This is the opposite of the tendencies of Trump and others who are opposed to the export of democracy. According to Trump, in his speech on foreign policy on April 27, 2016, the foreign-policy mistakes that led to chaos in the Middle East “began with a dangerous idea that we could make western democracies out of countries that had no experience or interests in becoming a western democracy.”<sup>4</sup>

It is true that the neo-con call to export democracy led to imperialist wars and the destructive occupation of Iraq and the nationalist and religious resistance to it, but the motives of these neo-cons, though imperialist in themselves, differed from the motives of both conservatives and liberals, and also those of the extreme right. For example, the neo-cons were not anti-Islam in itself, and even promoted the idea that there was no contradiction between Islam and democracy; however, they saw the main cause of terrorism being corrupt dictatorships, not Islam, making it necessary, therefore, to export democracy to the Muslim world. They even criticized US allies like Egypt and Saudi Arabia over freedoms and human rights, and if they were in power right now, they would no doubt intervene against the Syrian regime, for example. In fact, they previously

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<sup>4</sup> Transcript: Donald Trump’s Foreign Policy Speech, *The New York Times*, April 27, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/us/politics/transcript-trump-foreign-policy.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/us/politics/transcript-trump-foreign-policy.html?_r=0)

threatened this type of intervention before the resounding failure of the export of democracy to Iraq.

In contrast, Trump is indifferent to issues of human rights in allied countries, and it is likely that he will strengthen relations with allied regimes in the Arab world and the Sisi regime in Egypt. Trump considers the crimes against humanity committed by Bashar Al-Asad's regime, as well as issues of human rights and democracy, of secondary importance compared to US interests (the "America First" approach). In his view, there is no contradiction with Asad continuing to be in power in Syria. In this respect, he is not just different from the neo-cons, but also from the ideological right that has allied with him and which is hostile to Syria and Iran for reasons that also have nothing to do with democracy. In the future, Trump's sole motivation for taking a stance against Asad may be to confront the expansion of Iranian influence in Syria, that is without direct intervention, a war, in Iran itself. But this is by no means certain.

## The Adoption of the Clash of Civilizations on the Domestic Front: Economic and Cultural Dimensions

In giving some context to what led to these developments I would like to begin with what might be termed the cultural background. This has not received nearly enough of the attention it merits when dealing with the subject of this paper—which is typically analyzed solely in economic and political terms. Talk about the effects of the financial crisis of 2008, and the de-industrialization of some traditional working-class regions as a result of the transfer of production overseas in search of cheap labor, is well known. All of this contributed to provoking the anger of sectors of labor against globalization and free trade. This can be seen clearly in the ruin of post-industrial regions of the United States, and in the industrial regions that were traditional strongholds of the British Labor Party but which voted against the position of that party in favor of Britain leaving the EU. Also, many traditionally Democrat-voting states in the United States went for Trump, meaning that the white working class has shifted toward voting for the right and is more likely to adopt anti-migration and anti-immigrant positions.

The table below depicts two key factors: 1) stability in the electoral map that goes as far as the formation of a "political identity," and if we broadened the perspective slightly, we can detect voting stability at the district level; 2) a shift in the states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Iowa, and Wisconsin from voting for the Democratic candidate

(in the last seven elections, more or less) to the Republican candidate Donald Trump in the last election. This is a graphic illustration of what we set out to analyze above.

**Table 1: US Presidential Election Results 2016 by State Compared with Previous Elections since 1988.**

State			Results of the vote in previous presidential elections 1988 - 2012 <sup>5</sup>	Results of the 2016 elections
1.	California	CA	Voted Democrat in 6 out of 7 elections	55
2.	New York	NY	Voted Democrat in all 7 elections	29
3.	Illinois	IL	Voted Democrat in 6 out of 7 elections	20
4.	Washington	WA	Voted Democrat in all 7 elections	12
5.	New Jersey	NJ	Voted Democrat in 6 out of 7 elections	14
6.	Massachusetts	MA	Voted Democrat in all 7 elections	11
7.	Minnesota	MN	Voted Democrat in all 7 elections	10
8.	Maryland	MD	Voted Democrat in 6 out of 7 elections	10
9.	Oregon	OR	Voted Democrat in all 7 elections	7
10.	Connecticut	CT	Voted Democrat in 6 out of 7 elections	7
11.	Hawaii	HI	Voted Democrat in all 7 elections	4
12.	Rhode Island	RI	Voted Democrat in all 7 elections	4
13.	Vermont	VT	Voted Democrat in 6 out of 7 elections	3
14.	Delaware	DE	Voted Democrat in 6 out of 7 elections	3
15.	Dist. of Columbia	DC	Voted Democrat in all 7 elections	3

<sup>5</sup> *The Hill Newspaper*, October 24 2014: <http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/house-races/221721-how-red-or-blue-is-your-state>

State			Results of the vote in previous presidential elections 1988 - 2012 <sup>5</sup>	Results of the 2016 elections	
16.	Maine	ME	Voted Democrat in all 7 elections	1	3
17.	New Mexico	NM	Voted Democrat in 5 out of 7 elections	5	
18.	New Hampshire	NH	Voted Democrat in 5 out of 7 elections	4	
19.	Nevada	NV	Voted Democrat in 4 out of 7 elections	6	
20.	Colorado	CO	Voted Republican in 4 out of 7 elections	9	
21.	Virginia	VA	Voted Republican in 5 out of 7 elections	13	
22.	Ohio	OH	Voted Democrat in 4 out of 7 elections	18	
23.	Pennsylvania	PA	Voted Democrat in 6 out of 7 elections	20	
24.	Michigan	MI	Voted Democrat in 6 out of 7 elections	16	
25.	Iowa	IA	Voted Democrat in 6 out of 7 elections	6	
26.	Wisconsin	WI	Voted Democrat in all 7 elections	10	
27.	Florida	FL	Voted Republican in 4 out of 7 elections	29	
28.	West Virginia	WV	Voted Republican in 4 out of 7 elections	5	
29.	Tennessee	TN	Voted Republican in 5 out of 7 elections	11	
30.	Missouri	MO	Voted Republican in 5 out of 7 elections	10	
31.	Louisiana	LA	Voted Republican in 5 out of 7 elections	8	
32.	Kentucky	KY	Voted Republican in 5 out of 7 elections	8	
33.	Arkansas	AR	Voted Republican in 5 out of 7 elections	6	
34.	Texas	TX	Voted Republican in all 7 elections	38	
35.	Georgia	GA	Voted Republican in 6 out of 7 elections	16	
36.	North Carolina	NC	Voted Republican in 6 out of 7 elections	15	
37.	Arizona	AZ	Voted Republican in 6 out of 7 elections	11	

State			Results of the vote in previous presidential elections 1988 - 2012 <sup>5</sup>	Results of the 2016 elections
38.	Indiana	IN	Voted Republican in 6 out of 7 elections	11
39.	Alabama	AL	Voted Republican in all 7 elections	9
40.	South Carolina	SC	Voted Republican in all 7 elections	9
41.	Oklahoma	OK	Voted Republican in all 7 elections	7
42.	Mississippi	MS	Voted Republican in all 7 elections	6
43.	Kansas	KS	Voted Republican in all 7 elections	6
44.	Utah	UT	Voted Republican in all 7 elections	6
45.	Nebraska	NE	Voted Republican in all 7 elections	5
46.	Idaho	ID	Voted Republican in all 7 elections	4
47.	South Dakota	SD	Voted Republican in all 7 elections	3
48.	Alaska	AK	Voted Republican in all 7 elections	3
49.	North Dakota	ND	Voted Republican in all 7 elections	3
50.	Wyoming	WY	Voted Republican in all 7 elections	3
51.	Montana	MT	Voted Republican in 6 out of 7 elections	3

A culture of ethnically defined nationalism, one not based on citizenship, is clearly spreading in Europe and the United States, particularly among older adults nostalgic for old times. The country had once been “theirs,” but with the rise in Muslim migrants in Europe, and non-white non-Protestants in the United States, there is a growing sense that these countries have been stolen from them. It is this belief that underlines the relationship between collective national identity and the identity of the state.

It is true that the working class in these countries is angry and frustrated with the widening gap between poor and rich, and growing inequality. However, this does not explain the vote for Trump. The behavior of the working class, or large sections of the white working class, in these countries can be understood from a completely different

angle as a reaction to the *growth* in equality, not its absence. Along with the growing gap *between* the classes and the polarization between rich and poor, equality rates for African Americans, women, and others have risen *within* each class. If we insist on an economic approach to the issue, this development can be seen as competition between wage earners (blue- and white-collar workers), which benefits capitalism in general, a system certainly represented by the likes of Trump.

Between 2005 and 2013, incomes for African American households earning over \$200,000 increased by 138 percent, compared to an increase of 74 percent for the total US population. Similarly, the number of estimated African American millionaires increased from 25 in the 1960s to 35,000 today, and the African American elite was able to propel Obama to two terms as president of the United States. Nevertheless, the class gap among African Americans remains wide. American women today make up almost half of the labor force (49.9 percent of the total) and hold senior positions in some of the world's biggest companies, such as PepsiCo, Archer Daniels Midland (food and retail), and W. L. Gore (industrial products). Women also earn almost 60 percent of university degrees in the United States. Finally, the US Supreme Court ruled on June 26, 2015 for same-sex marriage and thus obliged all states to legalize it.<sup>6</sup>

Needless to say, Trump and the group of finance and business tycoons surrounding him do not represent the interests of workers. They do, however, undoubtedly benefit from the heated competition that has embedded itself within the working class, which has resulted in resentment directed toward minorities, foreigners, and others. These strategies would be familiar to any trade unionist since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but cannot be understood in this specific historical moment without reference to the cultural dimension. Hence the explanation lies hidden in competition *within*, and not *between*, economic classes. This allows populist politicians to mobilize camps across classes, which are united by a loathing of liberal values and a fear of the empowerment of the marginalized. This is the fear that expresses itself through the affirmation of identity.

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<sup>6</sup> Nora Lustig, "Elections in America: It is also about rising equality", VOX, November 29, 2016, <http://voxeu.org/article/equality-may-have-helped-trump-win>

## A Struggle between Two Cultures

I believe that the missing dimension to current analyses is the cultural dimension, which is not always given adequate attention and often turned into an identity issue. The forces competing in the US elections and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom on June 23, 2016 (and which Trump saw as a harbinger of his electoral victory), do not represent classes in the classic economic sense, but cultural alignments that undoubtedly include the economic-class dimension. However, the component that gives the economic-class dimension its political significance is the cultural-class component that formulates and reformulates interests and emotions like anger, resentment, and fear in political language.

What we are currently witnessing, therefore, is a struggle between two cultures: the first is dominant among culturally, socially, and politically liberalized social groups, which can be characterized as middle-class groups in the service, academic, and technocratic sectors, and others whose members live mostly in big cities. These groups benefit from globalization and free trade. While not totally free of racism and feelings of superiority, and not without fear of others either, they are nevertheless more able to accommodate differences because they are dominant and powerful. In addition, a growing proportion of them have in principle adopted a liberal morality due to socialization and the outcomes of intergenerational conflict.

The second culture is a traditional conservative cross-class culture, mainly predominant in the rich and poor conservative countryside that looks with suspicion and distrust at the decadent culture of the big cities. At times of crisis, these conservatives are joined by new social groups damaged by modernity and globalization and resentful of the elites and the establishment. They include broad swaths of the white working class and groups of the middle class that have fallen into poverty as a result of a number of reasons including the predominance of large monopolies, loss of employment, the stock market crises and failed investments, and the inability to afford property prices in the cities.

**Table 2: Results of CNN Exit Polls with 24,558 respondents on the US Presidential Election of 2016<sup>7</sup>**

	Hilary Clinton	Donald Trump	Other candidate / no answer
<b>Gender</b>			
<b>Male (47%)</b>	41%	52%	7%
<b>Female (53%)</b>	54%	41%	5%
<b>Age</b>			
<b>18-29 (19%)</b>	55%	36%	9%
<b>30-44 (25%)</b>	51%	41%	8%
<b>45-64 (40%)</b>	44%	52%	4%
<b>65 and older (16%)</b>	45%	52%	3%
<b>Race</b>			
<b>White (71%)</b>	37%	57%	6%
<b>Non-white (29%)</b>	74%	21%	5%
<b>Education</b>			
<b>High School or less (18%)</b>	46%	51%	3%
<b>Some college (32%)</b>	43%	51%	6%
<b>College graduate (32%)</b>	49%	44%	7%
<b>Post-graduate (18%)</b>	58%	37%	5%
<b>Area Type</b>			
<b>Urban (34%)</b>	60%	34%	6%
<b>Suburban (49%)</b>	45%	49%	6%
<b>Rural (17%)</b>	34%	61%	5%

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/election/results/exit-polls>



These two camps are not internally harmonious at all, but what marks out the current stage is the combination of these various forces with multiple interests, backgrounds, and aims into two camps. One appears liberal and elitist in its culture, but not necessarily in its social class, while the other is populist, nationalist, and against foreigners and migrants in its culture and political discourse. The first is more secular; the second more religious. In addition, the first brings together citizens with generally higher educational attainment than the second.

Social media no doubt contributed to the empowerment of sections of the second camp to become directly politically involved without the censorship of the elites who control, edit, and filter the media. The professional media controlled by economic and cultural elites filter the information not just by distinguishing between truth and fantasy, and fact and rumor, but also in terms of values. Social media, however, allowed groups of the second camp to express themselves directly without passing through the control of the elite. For example, Trump's followers on Twitter reached 16 million. The mechanisms for the expression of mass culture at the current historical moment are complex and evolving, and the main media channels work hard to get along with this culture, flatter it, and reproduce it for consumption. It is worth mentioning that Trump himself is a billionaire who graduated from an Ivy League university attended by children of the wealthy, and is also a New Yorker—one of the main centers of the first cultural camp according to the categorization above. Yet to the people who voted for him he does not seem part of the elite. This is not because of his modesty, a virtue he is not blessed with, and not because he represents the interests of the people; it is because he represents the identity of that camp and speaks its language.

## Distinction between Liberalism and Democracy

Here I would return to theoretical and historical distinctions I made in my books *Civil Society* and *The Arab Question*, and which I also referred to in three of my works on the Arab revolutions. These are distinctions between liberalism and democracy, where the proof of its necessity has been provided again and again by developments.

The combination of liberal democracy was not always present. It is a relatively new phenomenon. Historically, democracy was not liberal and liberalism was not democratic. That is, the foundation of democracy in general is broad popular participation in decision making and parliamentary representation determined by elections. Its main value is equality, which is particularly apparent at stages of pro-democracy struggles. Liberalism,

on the other hand, rests on the freedoms of the individual and the protection of people's private sphere, including private ownership. Its main principle is liberty and the values that derive from it.

Liberalism, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was mainly an intellectual, economic, and political current of the elite. Advocates of the idea were concerned with the protection of these values as a means to guide relations between state, society, and the individual, and their defense from arbitrary authority, whose role was supposed to be limited to the defense of freedoms. It seemed to them that a condition for the preservation of civil liberties and the defense of the private sphere was to avoid the participation of the masses, who mostly did not adopt these values, in the decision-making process. If decisions were left to the easily led masses, this would be easy prey to the deceptions of a demagogue, and the results would be disastrous.

In my opinion, the confluence between democracy and liberalism occurred after World War II, once the dangers of populist demagoguery and the distance between liberal ideas and the masses had become apparent. Elections in the age of mass culture led to cases of extremism following the economic crisis at the end of the 1920s and claims of a historic nationalist oppression, a sense of fear over identity, accusations of the decadence of the elite, and fascist regimes.

Since that time, democrats and liberals have endeavored to link, or even equate, the principles of democracy, rights, and civil liberties because there was a pressing need for supra-constitutional principles to protect liberties from accidental majorities that might not believe in those values. After World War II, a new historical reality emerged where liberal democracy developed from the interactive dynamics of those two forces. This did not necessarily lead to the linkage of the values of liberalism and democracy, which was only the case for limited groups of liberal democrats. During major crises, this linkage between democracy and liberalism is undermined for large swaths of the public, and it is possible for someone like Trump or Marine Le Pen to take advantage of the popular mindset in circumstances of broad popular participation (that is democracy) against liberalism and liberals. Such a scenario should not be too difficult to understand for us in the Arab world, and I suspect that nobody needs to be reminded of the many cases where the masses have been relatively easily mobilized in our region against these values, on the grounds that they are a foreign import that threatens stability and the existing way of life, in order to justify the power of the most oppressive dictatorships against the people to the beat of this populist demagoguery.

## On Populism

I would like to pause here for a few moments to consider populist demagoguery. In ancient Athens, the demagogue was a leader of the public who provoked their anger against the rich and the corrupt rulers. At first, the term did not have negative connotations; these developed with the emergence of demagogic political discourse in the form of incitement that did not balk at exploiting ignorance of their audience and the preconceptions they had. It also gave expression to what the people wanted to hear. This does not suppose the speaker's belief in everything he says. He might be ideological and believe what he's saying, but designs a demagogic discourse according to what he thinks people want to hear based on instincts, leanings, and fears, buried or open. Then again, he might not be ideological, perhaps just cynical (in the modern and contemporary sense, opposite to that of the ancient Greek philosophical sense). This happens when the populist political goal is to reach power by any means.

History has shown that there are flexible forms of populism that do not find it difficult to change positions and discourse according to circumstances. Although Trump certainly believes in some things he says, everything he says is demagogic and expresses what large sections of the people want to hear but are unable to say, or too ashamed to say. Perhaps he could have allied with pragmatic populists like himself to run the state after his election, but he has chosen instead to combine rewarding some of the populists who helped him during the elections. He is appointing businessmen who believe in their ability to run the state as though it were a "business" better than the politicians can, as well as ex-officers from the military and conservative politicians and others from the far right. We should not exclude the possibility that the far right, like the far left, is elitist and not necessarily demagogic, in the sense that it says what it believes to be true.

Trump wants to "make America great again" just as Putin wants to "make Russia great again," like others who want to restore the glories of China, Serbia, Hungary, France, and Britain. All of them want to restore a greatness built for the most part on the same illusion. Mostly, this national greatness they wish to recreate meant oppressive regimes that nobody wishes to live under and which have found their expression in struggles to dominate what they consider their vital spheres, and have ignited wars, including world wars. Similarly, the greatness of the nation and the state they are preparing for their audience is exactly what weakens human and citizen rights. Maybe the extreme right thinks that the desired greatness of one's country contradicts the greatness of other countries.

Trump did not invent the strategy of framing the identity of his supporters by pointing the finger of blame at the “other” in the same society—a key tool of populism. The Republican Party for decades adopted the principle of “us versus them.” Richard Nixon, in his 1968 presidential campaign, succeeded in exploiting the racism of southern whites, even though Barry Goldwater, Republican presidential candidate in 1964, used the same strategy in his campaign and failed to win election. Ronald Reagan demonized African Americans who benefited from welfare programs and won the support of voters in the northern suburban areas. George H. W. Bush used the same strategy against African American convicts, and George W. Bush exploited people’s unease with same-sex marriage to secure his victory in 2004. This political opportunism is familiar at elections, but it helps keep discrimination alive and lends it legitimacy from time to time.

Political opportunism does not make the Republican Party a populist party, but the American political scene shifted rightward with the rise of the rank and file Tea Party movement,<sup>8</sup> and toward populism for the factors mentioned above. Add to this the resentment against the Obama presidency, the alleged bailouts of African Americans and Latino debtors, the national debt, the Obamacare health reform, and the stance toward the Republican Party establishment.<sup>9</sup> The clearest expression of populism’s political leap forward remains Trump’s victory inside the Republican Party over candidates of the party establishment, and his candidacy and then victory in the presidential elections.

## A Growing Support Base for the Populist Far Right

The election of Donald Trump and Brexit show the transformation of the nature of the working class in both the United States and Europe. The working class has become more populist as a result of its sense that the elites and the mainstream political parties have abandoned it economically. There is also the gap that separates it from the elites

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<sup>8</sup> Supporters of the Tea Party are wealthier and more educated than the general public in the United States. They tend to be white, male, married, older than 45, and supporters of the Republican Party. They are more conservative than Republicans in general on a range of issues, and are strongly opposed to the policies of the Obama Administration on ideological grounds. This is according to a New York Times/CBS poll conducted April 5-12, 2010 with a sample of 1,580 adult respondents, and a total of 881 of Tea Party supporters were oversampled. See Kate Zernike and Megan Thee-Brenan, “Poll Finds Tea Party Backers Wealthier and More Educated,” *The New York Times*, April 14, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Greven, “The Rise of Right-wing Populism in Europe and the United States—A Comparative Perspective,” *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, May 2016.

politically and culturally. The white working class in the United States voted for Donald Trump; he also won the “forgotten” voters in the Rust Belt in the Northeast, that is, the areas devastated by de-industrialization. Those were the people the opinion polls failed to capture because of difficulties in reaching them online or by telephone, and mostly because pollsters were not interested in that electorally inactive demographic since many of them had not voted for years, or had never voted at all. The same trend applied to Britain during the referendum on leaving the EU, where huge numbers who voted to leave had never voted in previous general elections.<sup>10</sup>

At the end of the 1990s, far right movements such as the case of Patrick Buchanan in the United States, the National Front Party under Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, and Jörg Haider in Austria,<sup>11</sup> recorded—as stated publicly via the media or as expressed by the party itself—huge shocks for democracy, and western democracies in general, in terms of the increased voter support they achieved. At the beginning of the new millennium, their support bases grew with the influx of refugees and the ramifications of globalization—both issues linked to the economy and identity. Thus, the support base of right-wing populism has been around for 25 years, escalating with the big increase in emigrants and their reshaping of the countries’ identities. Other relevant factors include the de-industrialization that has also reshaped the economies of these countries, and the low growth rates that failed to increase since the economic crisis of 2008.

The far right coincided with escalating populism and took advantage of it. As a result, the populist right was able to advance in the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Finland, Slovakia, and Croatia, and actually came to power in

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<sup>10</sup> “Brexit, the US and the revenge of the deplorables,” *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, November 9, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> “Austria’s Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), founded in 1955, is an example of right-wing populists’ extremism as well as their programmatic flexibility. Until 1980, former national-socialists played important roles. Subsequently, the FPÖ governed as junior-partner in a grand coalition with Austria’s social democrats until, in 1986, Jörg Haider won the FPÖ’s leadership, remaining chairman until 2000. Over that period, he moved the party back toward the right and broadened its base to include working class voters with an increasingly anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim message. Pan-German nationalism and the playing down of national-socialism characterized the FPÖ’s message.” See Thomas Greven, *ibid.*

Hungary<sup>12</sup> and Poland.<sup>13</sup> In Germany, the Alternative für Deutschland party, since its formation in 2013, has made astonishing gains in local elections and appears set to cross the threshold to take seats in the Bundestag in the upcoming elections. Its popularity lies exclusively in its hostility to foreigners and multiculturalism; it also promotes Islamophobia, warning of the increase in the number of Muslims in Germany. Neo-Nazis undoubtedly voted for it, but its electoral base draws more on a populism that speaks to German citizens fearful of foreigners and globalization, including those on the right and in the center of the political spectrum.

These forces are also mutually supportive—Stephen Bannon, executive director of Donald Trump’s electoral campaign, for instance, invited Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, coordinator of Marine Le Pen’s campaign, to cooperate and to “work together.” The invitation was sent via Twitter just a few days after Trump’s victory. Nigel Farage, the interim leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) who led the Brexit campaign, was among the first politicians to visit Donald Trump after he won the election.

In Europe, the repugnance felt by the National Front in France, and a number of other European right-wing, ethno-nationalist parties, toward American leadership of the world order, especially under Obama, has contributed to their forming alliances with the regime of Vladimir Putin in Russia. In 2014, Marine Le Pen received a \$9.8 million loan from “First Czech-Russian Bank” based in Russia on the justification that French banks would not agree to the loan. Her party further announced in February this year that the party intends to apply again for a loan from Russia worth \$29.3 million if French banks refuse to provide

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<sup>12</sup> “In Hungary, the governing party Fidesz began moving towards illiberal authoritarianism in 2010. The governing coalition under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán adopted a new constitution and restricted the freedom of the media. Fidesz, founded in 1988, is yet another example of right-wing populist party’s flexibility. It started as a mainstream liberal alliance and moved to the right only after electoral failures. Today, Fidesz can be considered a national conservative populist party, favoring interventionist economic policies. Its concept of the Hungarian nation is threatening to neighboring countries because it includes their citizens of Hungarian descent.” See Thomas Greven, *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Matt O’Brien, “The stunning truth that explains the rise of the far-right in Britain and elsewhere,” *The Washington Post*, May 31, 2016.

it. The party will be using the money for its campaign during the next French presidential elections.<sup>14</sup>

Generally speaking, extreme nationalist forces in different countries adopt suspicious, if not outright hostile, positions toward each other. The internationalism of the nationalist far right is a contradiction in terms; nevertheless, the cooperation referred to above, the fact that they all benefit from the victories of the others, and the sense that they are part of a single wave are phenomena derived from the fact that their opposition is not just another camp in each country but exists on the level of the western countries as a whole. About one week after the Trump victory and Nigel Farage's first "official" visit to Trump,<sup>15</sup> Farage wrote in the *Sun* tabloid that "voters across the Western world want nation state democracy, proper border controls, and to be in charge of their own lives. Further political shocks in Europe and beyond are coming."<sup>16</sup>

The populist right tends to define the people as a culturally homogeneous ethnic unit with a shared history and distances itself from the idea of citizenship as the cornerstone for national building. Its strategy is to present itself as defending the identity of the people and its "way of life" and favoring the interests of the ethnically defined people over the interests of "others"—generally meaning migrants who are depicted as favored by the cosmopolitan and culturally decadent elite. The populists have a range of styles for the calculated breaking of liberally imposed supposed taboos, with a crudeness that confuses the listener, who takes it as honesty and not hypocrisy (although the crudeness may in

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<sup>14</sup>James McAuley, "Is Trump reaching out to Europe's far right before he talks with the heads of the states?", *The Washington Post*, November 12, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> The UK Independence Party (UKIP) under the leadership of Nigel Farage saw first successes at the elections for the European Parliament and has performed well nationally since 2011. While considered to be part of the radical right by some observers, the party has been able to distance itself from the extremist British National Party (BNP) by highlighting their (economic) libertarianism and their inclusive concept of a British nation. Nevertheless, the current influx of refugees to the European Union has highlighted UKIP's skepticism regarding immigration.

<sup>16</sup> Griff Witte, Emily Rauhala and Dom Phillips, "Trump's win may be just the beginning of a global populist wave," *The Washington Post*, November 13, 2016.

fact be accompanied by lies and hypocrisy). In addition, there is a reliance on emotions and the use of personal insults, conspiracy theories, and even violent metaphors.

Populism is a political discourse mostly associated with a specific political ideology (left or right, religious or secular), but the relationship between populism and ideology is, as indicated above, complex. Populists are often less ideologically committed and seem pragmatic and flexible when necessary. For example, the National Front, under Jean-Marie Le Pen, carried a far-right message with an anti-Semitic nature for decades, and mainly relied on the support of voters from the middle class, small business owners, and farmers, as it adopted neo-liberal positions bordering on social Darwinism. The party was able to achieve some electoral success, such as in elections to the European Parliament and in the first round of the 2002 presidential elections. The current leader, daughter of the party's founder, has worked to change the demonized image of the party in order to expand its support base. In the end this resolution involved the suspension of membership of the historic leader and founder of the party, Jean-Marie Le Pen, in 2015, at the instigation of his daughter who succeeded him as party leader in 2011. The decision to suspend him came because of his statements on the Holocaust. Additionally, his radical followers were suspended from the party. This also involved a transformation in the party's position from anti-Semitism to being anti-immigrant and anti-Islam. Similarly, the support for economic liberalism turned into a protectionist anti-globalization.<sup>17</sup> The discourse changed according to the expectations of its constituency and to broaden its support base among groups susceptible to its right-wing nationalist discourse.

The extreme right in the United States, which will have a place in some elements of the coming Trump Administration, undoubtedly thinks that America's greatness clashes with Russia's greatness, but populists like Trump will be more pragmatic in dealing with Russia. In every form of populism there is necessarily a pragmatic element that varies from instrumentalism and cynical populism to frenzied populism, which only remains in touch with reality by means of the pragmatic need for control. Our region has known examples of all these forms of populism. Hence, the perplexity of the Chinese premier and Russian president, who also dream of the greatness of their countries, concerning the nature of the forces set for the Trump Administration: are they the forces of pragmatic populism or of irrational populism, or the American extreme nationalist right?

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Greven, "The Rise of Right-wing Populism in Europe and the United States – A Comparative Perspective," *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, May 2016.



Trump's populism also tends to be contradictory, as reflected in his promises to lower taxes but to also increase investment in infrastructure. Spending on infrastructure, which is rundown and worn out in Trump's view, requires tax hikes and not reductions. As for building a wall with Mexico, the situation is worse. He is more concerned with building ties with businessmen at the moment and breaching the custom of US presidents since the Nixon Administration, by receiving a congratulatory call from Taiwan.

On Palestine, patience is required to keep up with Trump's pronouncements, which range from enthusiastic support for the so-called "peace process" and a claim to the ability of being neutral on the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, to his speech before AIPAC where he declared that the settlements were not an obstacle to peace, that Israel should not be pressured or the United States should not impose solutions on the parties, and that he would move the US Embassy to Jerusalem in recognition of Israel's sovereignty over it.<sup>20</sup> His position supporting the Israeli far right expansionist positions became clear even before entering the White House.

## Are There Any Prospects?

Experience confirms that participation in actual government limits the ability of right-wing populist parties to use their most important storyline of a political elite governing the country against the political will of the people because they lose their position as the mouthpiece for the "silent majority." However, they can still exploit the issues of foreigners and minorities. In Austria and the Netherlands, for example, widely felt disenchantment with the populists in government followed from the need to move beyond their favorite issue areas (refugees, identity, sovereignty) and to shift from simple, common sense solutions to the bargaining and compromises needed to run a state and reach actual solutions.

Trump was elected by a sector of American society that did not comprise a majority of US voters, and one that certainly did not comprise a majority of that society. That he won with a smaller share of the popular vote—46.21 percent (62,851,402 votes) as against 48.17 percent (65,527,581) for Clinton—was thanks to the federal system which grants representation to the states in the electoral college (306 of the electoral college votes for

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<sup>20</sup> For more on this subject see Tamara Kharroub, "Trump's 'Ultimate Deal' on Palestine/Israel," Arab Center Washington DC, December 8, 2016. [http://arabcenterdc.org/policy\\_analyses/trumps-ultimate-deal-on-palestineisrael/](http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/trumps-ultimate-deal-on-palestineisrael/)

Trump versus 232 for Clinton) and gives weight to the distribution of the population and not just its density. This helped empower the cultural-political camp to which the populist politician gave expression.

This means, however, that there are other large groups who will defend not just their interests, but also their “way of life.” These groups are mostly found in America’s major cities and their economic and political clout outweighs their demographic weight. I am almost certain that Trump’s main challenge will be domestic in the struggle over the economic, political, and cultural identity of the United States, and not the problem of the Middle East or Pacific Rim, despite the significance of those regions. Trump will provide many reasons for political mobilization, and the question is whether these groups will be able to connect culturally with groups in the other camp who will be damaged by Trump’s policies.

The self-confidence of the liberal political forces on the East and West Coasts of the United States and in the EU led them to try to impose specific values in their dialogue with democratic forces in Third World countries, before backing them against the dictatorships and oppressive regimes, even though those values were not an intrinsic part of mainstream liberalism but belonged to a subculture in the major cities of the United States. The recent US elections have sent a reminder to liberal-democratic forces that it is preferable to make a turn to the insides of their own countries, their rural areas, and their workers to discover that the values they promote have not taken root for large sections of their own societies and peoples.

**Table 3: CNN Exit Polls**

	Hilary Clinton	Donald Trump	Other candidate / no answer
<b>Race and gender</b>			
<b>White males (34%)</b>	31%	62%	7%
<b>White females (37%)</b>	43%	52%	5%
<b>Black males (5%)</b>	82%	13%	5%
<b>Black females (7%)</b>	94%	4%	2%
<b>Latino males (5%)</b>	63%	32%	5%
<b>Latina females (6%)</b>	69%	25%	6%
<b>Others (6%)</b>	61%	31%	8%