



THEME 02

The future of Trumpism

TRUMPISM

UNITED STATES

SOCIO-CULTURAL
TRENDS

After four years, it seems Donald Trump will be leaving the White House. But his influence on American politics and society will remain undiminished, even after his electoral defeat. When we distinguish between Donald Trump as a person and reflect on “Trumpism” as a movement, a number of important sociocultural developments and tensions come to light.

Our observations

- Trump was invaluable to the memeconomy with his [utterances](#), [facial expressions](#), [narcissistic personality](#), and the occasional [mysterious post](#). Memes played an important part in the Trump campaigns of both 2016 and 2020, and Trump was even proclaimed “[meme God](#)” for proving that the power of memes is real.
- In the nearly four years of Trump’s presidency, many structural wrongs have come to light and specific interest groups have explicitly spoken out on behalf of their cause. Examples are [#MeToo](#), since October 2017 (sexual abuse), [Extinction Rebellion](#) and [Friday for Future](#) (climate change), both initiated in 2018, [Black Lives Matter](#) (racial inequality) since 2018 and gaining growing support, [feminist groups](#) against “[toxic masculinity](#)” (gender equality), but also conspiracy theorists such as [QAnon](#) and increasingly popular [militias and anti-government groups](#) such as [Proud Boys](#) and [Boogaloo](#), and the [Oath Keepers](#) and [American Contingency](#).
- Our values, norms and customs, traditions and historical consciousness, as well as our technology are changing increasingly fast because of the [information revolution and digitalization](#). On the one hand, this has given our modern societies and economies more cultural freedom than ever before, but on the other, the relatively stable sociocultural equilibrium of our society is [disrupted by it](#). On a societal level, this results in movements that resist this (e.g. populism, escapism), while on a phenomenological level, more and more people suffer from psychological problems, because the natural “[rhythm](#)” of their experience of reality is disrupted. This manifests itself in an altered “[structure of feeling](#)” characteristic of our time, which is expressed, for example, in new forms of [art](#) and the cultural evolution of film genres (e.g. [horror](#) or [humor](#)), [video games](#) and [music](#).
- Lawrence Grossberg opens his recent book [Under the Cover of Chaos](#) (2019) with “The most obvious and pervasive feature of Trump’s highly visible and almost entertaining ... if also terrifying performance, is the normalization of a frenetic chaos and hyperactivism” (p.3). The consequence of this, according to Grossberg, is that support for anti-reactionary (i.e. the New Right) groups with an authoritarian, conservative agenda, is growing amidst this chaos and confusion. In the past years, there have been more books of this kind that posit that Trump actively creates chaos and disorder around him, such as with his daily [working method](#) regarding political files, his [staff choices](#) at the State Department, the strategic deployment of [fake news and misinformation](#), and the history of his own [business empire](#).
- Three years ago, we wrote about the [historical repetition of periods of “crisis”](#) and that we’re in the midst of a twenty-year crisis period that began with the financial crisis of 2007 and would change into a wider socio-political crisis in the coming years. The book [The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy - What the Cycles of History Tell Us About America’s Next Rendezvous with Destiny](#) (1997) by William Strauss and Neil Howe shows that the history of the U.S. knows several periods of crisis in which social and political systems were criticized, followed by a “high” period of growing trust in public institutions and a feeling of collective consciousness and recognition of the value of societal goals. In a recent book, George Friedman writes that the U.S. will experience both a transition of the socio-economic as well as the institutional cycle in the coming decade. The title of the book is [The Storm Before the Calm: America’s Discord, the Coming Crisis of the 2020s, and the Triumph Beyond](#) (2020), because the transition from such a cycle to another is always accompanied by enormous social and political disruption, followed by a new period of stability.

Connecting the dots

In the coming months, Donald Trump will be leaving the White House (or [not](#)?) and it appears as though the U.S. will change direction under Joe Biden. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether and if so, how, the U.S. will rid itself of Trump's legacy. Because when we set aside the person Donald Trump and reflect on the underlying Trumpism, if we consider Donald Trump a junction at which underlying trends meet that form the Trumpian paradigm, we are better able to see the fundamental forcefield that led to the rise of Trump. Here, we reflect on the sociocultural domain so as to better understand what Trumpism represents.

First, Trumpism definitively ushered in a post-truth era. From the perspective of cultural history, we've seen strong criticism since the 1960s of the idea of an objective, universal truth, as propagated by modern philosophy with an emphasis on deconstruction, perspectivism and relativism. Trumpism builds on this by giving this epistemological transition a concrete, political reality. On the one hand, this is happening because Trumpism effectively uses new modes of expression and epistemic strategies made possible by the internet and social media, such as fake news, filter bubbles, [zone flooding](#) and [information overload](#). Due to fragmentation, our shared, collective reality with set standards is increasingly declining, and it's becoming less and less clear how to act in it, what we should believe and how to position ourselves, though the number of perspectives on this has multiplied. As a consequence, a lot of people have become more critical of the process of arriving at the truth and acquiring knowledge, and the postmodern, critical mind has now become a social and political reality and the previously purely theoretical epistemological issues have gained societal relevance since the sixties.

On the other hand, Trumpism is also part of the [ocular democracy](#) of the past years that is facilitated by social media, where the performance or "spectacle" is deemed more important than the substance of whatever claim is made. Trump himself is a showman, who cares more about his own performance than the truth of his claims and has caused the fragmentation of truth to now also be a societal and political phenomenon. But in addition to undermining the modern idea of truth with postmodern irony and deconstruction, Trumpism also brings a new perspective on knowledge and our experience of the truth: Trumpism can be understood as a complex, metamodern phenomenon. We've written before that this applies to the [coronavirus](#) as well: the coronavirus is a complex phenomenon that we can understand and view from different perspectives, analyses and solutions have a high degree of moral ambivalence, and it's a constitutive element of the Earth or the world population as a superorganism because all means and attention are directed towards it. This also applies to Trumpism: the rise and attraction of Trumpism should be understood from different perspectives (e.g. [economy](#), [media](#), [geopolitics](#)), debates concerning Trumpism inspire spirited moral discussions, and, far more so than with other American presidents, everyone has an opinion about Trump and what he stands for. So, underneath Trumpism, we see the tension between ideology and irony, and with that, the tension between modernism and postmodernism in political manifestation. That's why "[authenticity](#)" is such an important value of Trumpism, meaning

that politicians should be concerned with concrete problems people have, so as not to become alienated from citizens, and leaders should embody and convey a truly experienced sense of life.

But what is this sense of life? We've now known for more than [a hundred years that God is dead](#), but we're still burdened by a nihilistic base mood and there are no Grand Narratives anymore. Trumpism is the nihilistic wrecking ball or "sledgehammer" pur sang, killing all sacred cows and challenging everyone and everything. With this, it also activates all interest groups to participate and raise their voice in the societal debate: from sustainability advocates to those that address structural wrongs to groups previously living on the fringe of society. This is how Trump facilitates an enormous *memeplex* of groups with certain narratives in search of meaning and recognition of their ideas and interests. It's no coincidence then, that Black Lives Matter, climate movements, feminist groups, but also the far-left and far-right have reared their heads in the past four years under Trump. Precisely because Trump has such aggressive and provoking methods, everyone is forced to relate to this somehow, which brings up for discussion more and more social and cultural themes. Now that this critical societal genie is out of the bottle, it won't be easy to put it back. This begs the important question how we can still organize a substantial, societal discourse in which we seek common ground.

Finally, Trumpism also represents a forcefield that feeds and thrives on chaos and disruption. On the one hand, this is a reaction to the disruptive impact of globalization and digitalization on our daily lives and societies. In a state of flux and immense transition, it's appealing to resort to the familiar (e.g. Trump's nostalgic Make America Great Again) as well as cling to [strong, authoritarian leaders](#) in these times of great change. On the other hand, Trumpism in fact responds to this by actively propagating and exacerbating chaos and confusion. We've written before that in our late-modern society, there's a deep, latent desire for [collapse](#). This stems from the belief that the current social, economic and political systems are so stuck or corrupt that it's better if they perish entirely than for us to improve them incrementally. This makes Trumpism a manifestation of [accelerationism](#), that would have us accelerate societal, economic and technological changes to ensure creative social destruction. This theme has always played a role in American history, as the work of Friedman and that of Strauss and Howe shows.

In the context of these four trends, Trumpism is the necessary negative force that wants to alert us to the shortcomings and structural flaws of social and cultural systems but is unable to formulate an answer to this itself. At the same time, completely ignoring Trumpism is not the answer either, neither is concealing, outlawing or criticizing it as a whole. In the [ongoing dialectic](#) of historical and cultural development, new [paradigms](#) and solutions will therefore relate positively to it. Only when the positive aspects of Trumpism are erased (e.g. cultivating a critical mind regarding knowledge and truth, complexity thinking, the search for authenticity in the midst of accelerating and systemic change) can a robust and politically innovative socio-cultural narrative for the future be formulated.

Implications

- In this note, we focus on the sociocultural domain of Trumpism, but there are other domains where Trumpism has arisen as a coherent paradigm. Geopolitically, Trumpism represents a retreating movement of countries from the world, with a stronger emphasis on national and global interests. In Trump's own words: "[The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots](#)". Trumpism is therefore compatible with a [shifting world order and new hegemonic cycle](#), and facilitates international "communicative action", with which other, non-Western countries can highlight their own "narratives" (e.g. political-economic ideas, ideas about ethics, nature and being human).
- Economically, since the financial crisis of 2008, we've been seeing [fewer signs](#) of the process of globalization. Trump both accelerates the process of de-globalization, with his protectionist measures and the trade war with China, for instance, but he also represents a new phase in the continuous [historical evolution of globalization](#) in which geopolitical, demographic and economic relations can change to such an extent that countries can no longer determine the rules of play of globalization and international economy. Trumpism is thus also a form of selfishness, as countries no longer seek win-win situations, but view the world as a Hobbesian state of nature with a zero-sum battle of all against all.