



THE AXE TO THE ROOT

*Is the nation-state in the
21st century fit for purpose?*

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*Lay then the axe to the root,
and teach governments humanity.*

— THOMAS PAINE

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE AXE TO THE ROOT

We live in a time of strange pressures.

A few days after 9-11 I flew through New York City. I was flying from Brazil on my way back home to the UK. I had a layover. A number of people told me not to go. I was the only passenger to exit the plane at Newark. I was the only person in the silent arrivals hall. There was only one officer on duty at the immigration counter, sitting amidst what felt like miles of empty counters.

As I approached I saw that he was sitting with his blond head buried in his hands. I handed over my passport. He looked up briefly, took it, stamped it and handed it back to me without saying a word. My mouth fell open, and I said, "Is that it?" "Yes," he replied, without looking at me putting his head back in his hands. I stood there for a moment, staring at his bowed head and left.

I made my way on public transport from Newark to Boston and then Boston to Portland, Maine. The eeriness I had felt getting off the plane grew. I walked around in Boston gawping at the number of flags on display. There were literally thousands of flags of all sizes on every available surface.

Getting on the Greyhound at Boston's South Station a radio was blaring local news. A bus driver had been killed by a

passenger coming up behind him and cutting his throat. The other passengers eyeballed me as I walked slowly to the back of the bus. The atmosphere was unlike anything I had ever encountered, drenched in a sick feeling of tension and fear. It felt like something bad was about to happen. Nothing did.

I'm a traveller. I've been travelling to the us for thirty-odd years, the first time when I was 14. I've travelled all over the world. I've travelled on every continent. This was new.

A few days later I made my way to Logan International Airport in Boston to fly back home. One of the 9-11 flights had flown from Logan. Normal commercial flights had just resumed so the airport was in chaos.

I got through security without any issues. In the lounge I called my parents to tell them I was safely through. As I was speaking I looked up and saw that I had been surrounded by a dozen security officers. They signalled me to cut my call short. With hundreds of people silently watching me they escorted me to a makeshift desk.

Three officers questioned me politely, another two dug through my luggage, another two read my notebooks, while another official went through a massive dot-matrix printout of names to see if my name was on the list. Two just watched me silently. They let me go after half an hour of questioning.

These experiences were not pleasant of-course. Since then I

have been stopped a handful of times but never for long. My mind imagines what it would be like to be deported or even detained.

I think about those who have been detained and deported. I think about the injustice of being singled out because of your skin colour or religion. I think about Guantanamo. I think about Barack Obama - a constitutional lawyer who authorised assassinations and drone strikes. I think about the state of exception. I think about Donald J Trump.

The election of Donald J Trump has provoked a wave of hysteria domestically and globally. I see people posting articles about his mental instability and his unhealthy diet. Perhaps he'll get impeached because a shrink says he's a narcissist with a bad diet?

Comedians skewer him. In one potent sketch Dave Chapelle and Chris Rock, two African-Americans, witness their white friends' growing horror at the news of a Trump win on election night. "This is the most shameful thing America has ever done," one white man says. Chapelle and Rock look at each other and laugh uproariously.

There is a widespread belief that Trump, in the name of a greater common good, will make the world a far nastier, far bloodier and far more unjust place.

Globally the last time I witnessed this much consternation was with the election of Mohamed Mursi of the Muslim

Brotherhood to the Presidency of Egypt. Both elections represent a vicious backlash to a secular globalized and largely Western elite.

An Islamist was democratically elected to the most populous Arab state in the world. Lukewarm objections were raised when he was deposed a year later, returning Egypt back to Mubarak-era authoritarianism.

Trump's election provoked perhaps far deeper shock for liberal Western elites. While it's possible to dismiss the Egyptian elections as an anomaly in a country that has not seen a democratic election in generations, it's impossible to similarly dismiss the US election.

The horror provoked by a Trump-presidency for coastal elites, by Europeans and the former colonies seems to have fuelled the Trump White House in its first hundred days. In turn his actions in this time have served to strengthen the notion that a Trump-presidency is an aberration, a mistake that could take on tragic proportions globally.

The challenge of course is that from the perspective of Trump's power base, he is doing everything he is in the name of a greater good. Trump's power base, those (mostly white) Americans disenfranchised by the forces of globalization, is looking to him to right many wrongs. He is obviously attempting to do this through the instrument of the nation-state. Trump's great - and simple - clarion call is for justice. His power base is responding to that call.

The inherent limitations of the nation-state mean that the Trump agenda will almost certainly fail. They will not see "America Great Again." They will in fact, as countless constituencies before have experienced, live a form of tragedy.

In power is an unthinkable figure, a supposedly non-establishment actor, a rogue businessman, fighting the corner of the white working-class disenfranchised. They have someone who is unafraid of voicing their deepest concerns, no matter how offensive and politically incorrect. Unfortunately this rhetoric will find itself dashed against the realities of the state, of hard cold numbers and a growing political insurgency.

The most likely outcome of the Trump agenda is sixty-million-odd people being further disenfranchised by the promises made to them. Of course the unintended consequence is the destruction of civil liberties, at an unknown scale, that comes as part of Trump's failure.

Trump's power base will join a global community of disenfranchised. They will join young followers of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Europhile civil servants in the UK, Workers Party apparatchiks in Brazil, and ANC youth workers in South Africa to take just a few examples. They all have one thing in common. The promise made to them by those who captured the state in their name was betrayed.

These betrayals lead to a question.

Is that nation-state in the 21st century fit for purpose?

My answer is “probably not.” To borrow a phrase from Ashis Nandy, do we need to re-examine our “romance with the state”? Perhaps we need to take a harder look at the efficacy of the state as an instrument of achieving our goals?

The state also sits at the heart of the global multilateral order. The fragile system of international law, the institution of the United Nations and the organs of international diplomacy all rest on the primacy of the state. Any questioning of this primacy, *de facto*, raises troubling questions about the nature of the international multilateral order and its survival.

The betrayals shaking the foundations of the state reverberate through to the foundation of the multilateral order that has so far held since the Second World War. The first one hundred days of the Trump Administration have clearly demonstrated the fragility of this order and its dependence on US leadership. There is now a question of US treaty obligations being met, the State Department has ceased to function and current budget proposals include sharply curbing US financial contributions to the UN leaving multiple agencies partially defunded.

The upshot of all this is that guidance from the vast apparatus of US international diplomacy has disappeared, signals to the middle powers for what to do have vaporised and a stable 50-year old balance of power seems to have been lost. Critics of the US Empire might celebrate this development

as an opportunity but it leaves the international system deeply vulnerable. We are witnessing a power-vacuum unprecedented in our lifetimes. The spectre of the post-war order collapsing under multiple emerging pressures is now a credible and plausible risk.

To be clear: I am not arguing for a conservative small state agenda or programme. I do not put my faith in trickle down economics or the market to address our challenges. Nor am I offering lame prescriptions for what we should do. My concerns are much further upstream than the tired old argument of small government or large government.

What are we putting our faith into? What does it mean to see that faith betrayed again and again? What does it mean to be part of the great mass of disenfranchised?

These essays are an invitation into this conversation. All too often we lapse into a reactionary mode that springs from the exigencies of the moment. Instead of pure reaction however, perhaps we can underpin our desire for immediate action for longer-term, slower, conversations? There's a chance that more effective strategies arise from a slower consideration of the recent past.

In the decade and a half that these essays cover, I've witnessed seemingly diverse moments, separated by oceans, separated by history and separated by time. I've witnessed many moments of hope such as the Arab Spring, the election of Lula or Barack Obama. I've witnessed struggle tinged with

hope, such as in India or South Africa. Yet through all this I feel what I've seen again and again is the heartbreak caused by our romance with the state.

Perhaps the time has come, as Thomas Paine suggested all those years ago, to "put the axe to the root and teach governments humanity."

UK

2. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A LITTLE ISLAND

#brexit #ukpolitics #britishempire #scotland

27 June 2016 / Originally published by The Islamic Monthly

“It’s raining Thursday. Brexit. Economic crash. Food riots. Slide into fascism. At war with China. Trenches all across Mongolia. Bloody rain.” — FRANKIE BOYLE, SCOTTISH COMEDIAN

The Island Becomes an Empire

Once upon a time there was a little island. The little island was cold and wet, far from anywhere. The Roman Empire invaded the island and garrisoned troops. They hated it. It wasn’t worth the misery. They abandoned their distant outpost for sunnier climates. Invasions shaped the island. The indigenous population fought, assimilated and fought some more.

For large periods of history the island was seen as part of the same geography as the vast continental European landmass it lay just 21 miles north of. The kings and queens of the island traversed 20-odd miles of water regularly, sometimes seeing this stretch as nothing more than a water feature on their land and sometimes seeing it as a moat to withdraw behind. They left their genes scattered across Europe.

The kings and queens of the little island wrote their royal cousins across Europe quaint letters, “My Dear Cousin...,”

asking them for help, or begging them not go to war. From time to time they helped and from time to time they didn't, instead invading and taking over. All of this changed when the islanders decided that their island was far too small for their appetites. They built ships, sailed across the oceans conquering some 13 million square miles of the Old and New World, creating an empire over which it was said "the sun never set."

This empire was expansionist, mercantile and colonialist. It relentlessly pursued profit. It pursued profits during famines, worrying more about the impact of giving food away on market prices than about millions of famine victims. It drove the Atlantic slave trade (and helped end it by buying off slave owners). It believed unwaveringly in its own deeply racist civilizing mission.

At the core of this mission was a nation called England. England yoked the Irish, the Scots and the Welsh into forming a British identity, one that conveniently funneled the people of all four countries into the very English business of empire building. A globalized economy, believing in the civilizing mission of capital, would not exist without the globalized proto-market that was the British Empire.

This Empire would have gone the way of all racist imperial Empires preceding it, leaving a few things to be proud of, and a lot to be ashamed of. This was not to be, mainly because of a failed Austrian artist called Adolf Hitler. The Second World War saw the declining British Empire — with all its imperial

citizens, white and non-white — take on Hitler's Germany. Even as one myth died, a new and bloody one emerged. Mouthed with an edge of irritation by an old Imperial soldier, it went something like this, "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender."

The end of the British Empire in the middle of the last century did in fact give new life to the reach of these impossible islands. London took its place in the halls of the Security Council, one of the Five Big Powers, ending the twentieth century as the fifth largest economy in the world.

The Unraveling

It has been 16 long, troubling years since. The contours of power in these small islands have changed brutally. Old verities have fallen and troubling new realities erupted on the ground. The 2015 general election held little over 12 months ago is a shotgun blast to the chest of these islands, seemingly representing the end it seems, of the United Kingdom as a Big Power. A pattern that has held across the centuries ever since the islanders decided to become shipbuilders with global appetites has ended. Those appetites have collapsed in on themselves.

In just 16 years the centuries-long burn of a ruthlessly expansionist English energy seems to have exhausted itself.

Half the electorate, representing a quarter of the country, has voted for an isolationist stance. “Britain Exits” is a superstitious spell to ward off the outside, a panicked retreat away from the outside. “Brexit” then is the whimpering war cry of a frightened nation saying little more than “leave us alone.” How did this happen?

Imagine for a moment an election with a choice between two political parties – one on the Right and the other the Left. The Right believes in the Market, the Left believes in the State. In these tough economic times, the Right believes that we should be dramatically cutting public spending whilst the Left believes that we should be increasing public spending dramatically. The Right believes that we should privatize public services, such as healthcare; the Left believes that the sale of public services is a criminal dismantling of the State. And so on. The clear choice is put before the electorate and they decide on the basis of what they believe is best for the country.

The scenario above is what we want to believe. The reality looks a little more like this: the party on the Left is frozen out of power for many years. A reformer comes along and drags the Party to the Right, embracing many of the policies formerly identified with its opponents. This is Tony Blair. The Party of the Left, now the Party of the Center Left, decisively wins power for a decade. This is the Labour Party.

In this situation arises a new Party, a Party to protect against this lurch Right by both mainstream parties. These are

the Liberal Democrats. In the last tussle for power in 2010 citizens refused to give any one party the majority required to rule. The Party of the centre, the Liberal Democrats, allied themselves in a surprise move with the Party of the Right, the Conservatives, to form a coalition government.

The Conservatives led by David Cameron embark immediately on their ideological agenda to radically rollback the State by undertaking an unprecedented cost-cutting exercise. This experiment is called “austerity.” The Labour Party elects a leader promising a return to the Left, a promise of a return to our imaginary scenario where Right is Right and Left is Left. This is Ed Miliband.

During the course of the next five years in power the junior partner in the government (the Party of the Middle: the Lib-Dems) abandons almost every single one of its positions. In doing so it betrays those who believed in their promise of protecting against the worst excesses of the Right. During these five years a Party of the Far Right emerges, challenging the Conservatives for not being Right-Enough. This is the UK Independence Party, or UKIP, who are a little too white and a little too xenophobic for a party that claims not to be racist.

Then, the horizontal power-struggle between Left and Right gives rise to what can be thought of as a new vertical power, a Party of the North. This Left-leaning Party of the North declares the triumph of the Right in the South to be corrupt and demands independence. This is the Scottish National Party (SNP). Their demands for an independent Scotland

are narrowly defeated by a close-fought referendum. This seemingly averts what could have been the most serious constitutional crisis in the history of the union. Seemingly, David Cameron is seen wiping his brow and muttering, “That was close.”

This was the situation on the eve of the 2015 general election.

The results of the general election that May morning in 2015 revealed a battered new political landscape. Along the Left-Right axis the Party of the Centre, the Lib-Dems, have been wiped out, with almost their entire leadership being savagely punished by the electorate thereby losing their elected seats.

The Party of the so-called Left, the Labour Party, predicted to be neck-to-neck with the incumbent Conservative Party of the Right, has fallen far behind. They have fallen far behind mainly because of the vertical the Party of the North, the SNP, have attacked and taken virtually every single seat north of the border. Labour’s historic Scottish heartlands cease to exist. The seemingly averted constitutional crisis is back, now in the form of 50 or so tartan-clad elected members ready to utilize every means available to members of parliament to press a resurgent claim.

This includes the youngest MP in 350 years, a 20-year old who beat a political mastermind of the Labour Party. The SNP are now the third largest party in Parliament. Through all this, the number of people voting for the Party of the Far Right, UKIP, has grown astonishingly, with 3.8 million people voting

for them even as they end up with only one MP.

In the immediate aftermath of the elections, Miliband, humiliated at the polls, steps down as leader of the Labour Party. In his place comes Jeremy Corbyn, potentially the most unlikely candidate ever to lead the Labour Party; a socialist MP, a rank outsider and someone who has spent decades banging the drum of leftist politics. He is a political outsider if there ever was one, a Bernie Sanders of the UK. The Labour Party elite are truly appalled at such vulgarity.

Blair comes on the air, arguing that such a return to retrograde Left-wing politics as represented by Corbyn is a fatal choice that the Party will not recover from. No one listens to him. He lied about Iraq. Why should anyone listen? Corbyn wins by a landslide. The people’s revolt against the elite marches on.

Prior to the 2015 elections, in order to appease a phalanx of Conservative Eurosceptic MPs, Cameron agrees to a referendum on Europe if he wins the general election. He didn’t have to do this but he did so because of a decade-long internal cage fight of the Conservative Party. In other words, he did an internal deal:

...get me into power and I’ll give you a fair shot at the country voting on its 43-year old EU membership.

As Cameron takes office in May 2015, for the second time the country stands dangerously divided along multiple dimensions — Left and Right, North and South, old and young.

Drinking the Brexit Kool-Aid

In February 2016 Cameron announced the EU-Referendum would be held in June, leading to a six-month campaign. Two of his old friends, London's now ex-Mayor Boris Johnson and Cameron's charmless Lieutenant Michael Gove lead the "Leave" campaign, while Cameron lead the "Remain" campaign. This formalizes the split within the Tory Party. The Euro skeptics sharpen their knives and begin carving out a particularly virile series of lies. The Remain campaign is labeled as "Project Fear" by Leave as they paint a bleak picture of post-Brexit life.

Polling prior to voting day showed numbers that were too close to call; the country was clearly split again. Most people were of the opinion that the Remain camp would win a narrow victory. Putting aside campaign noise, few really believed that the Leave camp would succeed in ending an integration effort that began in earnest after the Second World War, almost 70 years ago. In hindsight the results are fairly simple to explain, with 52 percent voting Leave and 48 percent voting to Remain¹.

The votes fell cleanly across a series of fault lines, in the words of the Financial Times, "Two tribes of old and young, rural and urban, traditional and metropolitan, and above all those fearful of globalization, and its beneficiaries."²

The seduction of the Brexit spell is that it would cure these islands of all the ills of living in a globalized world. British steel lofted by British muscles to build British homes for British people would become a reality. As one Leave voter put it the

1. **EU referendum:** full results and analysis [↻ https://www.theguardian.com/politics/ng-interactive/2016/jun/23/eu-referendum-live-results-and-analysis](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/ng-interactive/2016/jun/23/eu-referendum-live-results-and-analysis)

2. "Stark divide runs through Britain's two tribes" [↻ http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/eb5ba9ca-3a22-11e6-9a05-82a9b15a8ee7.html](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/eb5ba9ca-3a22-11e6-9a05-82a9b15a8ee7.html)

day after on Facebook — "My £1 is still worth a pound in the UK." No, not really.

During the campaign the blame for current ills fell squarely on those most visible — immigrants. Brexit is also an anti-immigrant or an anti-Muslim spell. It will now white wash and Euro-wash the population from scavengers who are different to "us" who are blamed for wrecking the economy. This line of attack bought the xenophobic Faragistas into the Leave camp as they lied about the impact of immigration on the economy.

On June 16, Labour MP Jo Cox is murdered on the street by a 52-year-old allegedly shouting "Britain First." On June 23, islanders went to the polls under some extremely dark clouds. Ignored in this whole tragic argument is a second major causal determinant of misery on the ground. This is the austerity — the rollback of the State by the Conservative Party, an ideology first promulgated by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. Interestingly, the primary architects of austerity, Cameron and chancellor George Osborne, have basically been ejected from office.

The problem is that the second lieutenants of austerity, like Michael Gove and Iain Duncan-Smith, are also architects of Leave. A government that puts them back into office would likely be a government that doubles down on austerity.

The reality of a provincial little England, whitewashed and happy, will never come true partly because it was never really true. These islands became rich because of a ruthlessly

mercantile spirit of overseas expansion, Industrial Revolution and the British Empire, not because the inhabitants of this island kept their heads down in the rain minding their own business, as Brexit presupposes.

The myriad forces of globalization, once so handsomely benefitting these islands, cannot be stopped or contained by a provincial nationalism. The borders cannot be put up against capital – because keeping it in is the same as keeping it out. It's that simple. The calculus of Leave-campaigners is already unraveling. A number of “Leave” geographies are desperately reminding the Leave-political-elite of their campaign promises. The Welsh First Minister declares that Brexit must not “lose a penny” for Wales. Such a utopian aspiration would be nice for the 53 percent Welsh majority who voted to leave, but it's hardly a simple matter of London saying, “Sure, here's the cash”.

While the short-term volatility of the markets might be contained (or they might not), the larger long-term economic questions are troubling. Will businesses relocate out of a closed market? Will we see capital flight? Will Britain be able to access the European single market? How much will that cost? Is there a risk that there's no financial benefit with every political downside? Most importantly, will the overall calculus of money leaving the islands for the EU square with the money no longer coming into these islands?

The government-to-come will have to try to square some vicious integrals. What will happen when we formally invoke

Article-50 of the Lisbon Treaty announcing our exit from the EU? What impact will both the short-term volatility of the markets and the ire of European leaders have on the British economy? What pecuniary punishment will the Europeans attempt to impose in order to discourage other Exiters? What impact will a second Scottish referendum have on the islands? What if a Scottish referendum leads to the dissolution of the United Kingdom? What exactly is our negotiating strategy? Boris-bluster probably won't cut it.

No one knows the answer to these questions but all the early signs are worrying. The tragedy, of course, is that the grievances at the heart of Leave are real and the demands for justice come from a place of real pain. The diagnostic of the causes of that pain are, all too often, just plain wrong.

Blaming immigrants is easy. It's a cheap little diagnosis coming from cheap little minds. Blaming the EU is easy. No one really loves the EU. The numbers are really hard. This lends an anti-elite air to the Leave camp. But they just don't know, they cannot know. So what we have is not an anti-expert stance, but a profoundly anti-intellectual stance. Whilst a lot of genuine criticism could be applied to the EU, the arguments of the Leave campaign amount to little more than tactical lying.

In reality the pain animating Leave voters stems from having to compete in a global economy and from austerity imposed by the Conservative party through two election cycles. It is worth remembering that these two election cycles squarely belong to the wider war against British trade unionism and

labour begun by Thatcher decades ago.

Unfortunately, drinking the kool-aid of Brexit may well kill the patient which was the confused message of Remain all along. The leaders of the Leave camp have a little too much in common with Jim Jones: charismatic, power-hungry and fatally ungrounded. Now they stand to lead these islands.

Whatever the outcome and whatever fantasy campaign promises were made by the Leave campaign, the fact is there is no leadership, there is no plan, there is no clear road forward through the forces unleashed by Brexit.

While it is easy to blame the Brexiters and the Leave camp for this moment, the forces that have led us to a profoundly unequal society are a product of our political system. The interplay of Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, New Labour and SNP party-dynamics have led us to this point.

As we head into another leadership contest, we will see the disenchantment of the voting public with its political classes become complete. What little faith the electorate has left in the political classes, left and right, will vaporize as the scale of breakdown becomes clearer and clearer. It will leave a vacuum unlike any seen before.

These islands are now most likely set on a path to becoming what they once were, a little island, cold and wet, far from anywhere.

Coda

PM Theresa May triggered Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty on 29 March, 2017 formally beginning a 2-year countdown for the UK to exit the EU. On 18 April she called for snap General Elections.

Yemen

3. THE STRATEGIC VACUUM IN YEMEN

#aqap #collapse #friendsofyemen #peaceandconflict

13 March 2013 / Originally published by the Royal United Services Institute

Yemen is the newest country on the Arab Peninsula with one of the youngest populations in the world. Half of Yemen's twenty-four million people are under the age of fifteen. At the same time, however, Yemen represents one of the world's most ancient civilisations, mentioned in Hadith, with Sana'a being one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world.

Yemenis face increasingly daunting problems including: weak government institutions; declining resources; regional lawlessness; conflict; insufficient development and humanitarian responses; and political deadlock. This is leading to an increasingly dire humanitarian situation and civil unrest, which threatens to spill over beyond Yemeni borders.

The population is set to double within the next two decades. 90 per cent of wheat and 100 per cent of rice is imported. The near exhaustion of aquifers and streams threatens to make Sana'a the first capital in the world to run out of a viable water supply.

These facts are, of course, not new.

The international community's principal strategic response

to the crisis in Yemen is the Friends of Yemen initiative. Launched by then Prime Minister Gordon Brown, the Friends of Yemen is essentially a gathering of major donors and the Yemeni government. The fifth Friends of Yemen meeting took place a week ago, held in London and jointly chaired by the UK and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This fifth gathering continues, to its credit, to actively keep Yemen squarely on the international agenda.

As a strategy, however, the Friends of Yemen process is unlikely to significantly impact Yemen's trajectory. The process does not address any of the underlying challenges that Yemen is facing. Any successful strategy must clearly address three requirements for action: resources, capacities and strategic direction.

1) Resources

The current status quo in Yemen is sustained by billions of dollars in international aid and cash handouts which provide emergency fuel, infrastructure development, water, sanitation and education.

The recent meeting focused in part on the USD \$8.1 billion in pledges made at the last Friends meeting in New York. This sounds like a lot of money (only Saudi Arabia has disbursed its pledged funds). But how much money does Yemen actually require?

An internal study conducted for the Government of Yemen in

2010 estimates that for Yemen to reach its growth potential (estimated by the World Bank at 4.4% growth in non-oil GDP annually till 2020), it requires an annual investment of approximately USD \$30 billion per year. The same study suggests that Yemen requires a minimum USD \$2.8 billion of private sector investment matched by USD \$1.250 billion per year from donors. In short, even if pledges for USD \$8.1B were met (currently only 10% of pledged money has been released) Yemen would not be on track to achieve its growth targets. It is hard to imagine an annual investment of USD \$3B in FDI flowing into Yemen anytime soon.

Then there's the issue of Saudi largesse. It's rumoured that the current status quo in Yemen is maintained by anywhere between USD\$ 3-4 billion of direct handouts from Saudi Arabia to Yemeni non-state actors. If, as some analysts predict, the Kingdom goes into a succession crisis in the next year, this source of funding could entirely dry up as Saudis turn inwards to resolve a potentially explosive situation. This could lead to a massive additional gap in funding that will directly cause a food and fuel crisis across Yemen that the international community is ill prepared to address. (The current UN Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan is short USD \$700M.)

2) Capacities

Even if we assume a miraculous best case resource scenario, where Yemen has all the resources it needs, there is the issue of capacity. It's a basic truth that in order for any strategy to

be successful the capacity to implement it is also required. In the Yemeni case this is a tremendous challenge.

A few years ago one Yemeni Deputy Minister was overheard to remark that he employs a staff of eighty people and only five of these people are useful. His point was that he didn't have the capacity to implement anything much. While he may have been exaggerating, there are countless cases of young democracies failing to address their more pressing challenges simply because there is no capacity to do the work.

South Africa is a telling example of how the challenges of capacity threaten to undo every political gain achieved since the end of Apartheid.

3) Strategic Direction

The success of any strategy is dependent upon setting clear strategic direction, both internally within Yemen and externally. Where exactly are funds going to be deployed? To what end does capacity need to be built? How exactly are Yemen's growth and stability challenges going to be met?

To put it another way: Yemen is running out of water and oil. Some projections say that this will happen by 2018. Loss of oil revenue will mean that Yemen does not have the reserves to import food. What exactly is being proposed to address these fundamental challenges? As resource challenges bite, the security situation will unravel and demands for Southern secession will increase. What is the 'competitive counter-

punch' being proposed?

There is, unfortunately, no joined-up strategic approach being proposed. The international community, in sticking to a neo-Soviet aid model, is all but guaranteeing that the fledgling Yemeni experiment in democracy will unravel in the years to come.

Finally, the success of any national strategy requires extensive buy-in across different sectors of society. The task of political leadership, of a President or Prime Minister, is to facilitate this buy-in, to bring people along, to cajole, to cut deals where needed and to pull in favours where possible. This would be a formidable task for any Yemeni leader even if there were a strategy to be rolled out.

Yemen is facing the perfect storm of systemic challenges. As a country it is facing down problems that the rest of us may well be facing in the coming decades. While there is plenty of activity, much of it is akin to flying a plane on autopilot in a storm.

Three steps can be taken in order to address the situation:

1) Develop a more inclusive international process

The current Friends of Yemen process is a Track-1 process between governments. It accepts recommendations from civil society actors and has very little engagement with the business community. If the international community believes

that Yemenis need to engage in an inclusive process, then we must recognise that the same is true for us.

2) Support national stability through sectoral stability

The current approach to investment in Yemen has no underlying strategy. A sector-based approach would provide a strategy. This would mean focusing international and domestic efforts on the key sectors that Yemen as a country cannot survive without - this would include food and agriculture, water, energy, healthcare, and the financial sector. A key indicator of stability would be increased FDI flows into these areas which is the only way for Yemen to meet its growth requirements.

3) Don't plan, prototype

Yemen is a fragile state. This means that the context for any development work is extremely complex and fast moving. Traditional planning-based approaches are completely unsuited to such contexts. Instead, a rapid prototyping-based approach should be taken in which a broad portfolio of efforts is incubated. A rapid cycle approach would provide increased capital to any efforts that show signs of success. Ownership of initiatives should be spread across different stakeholders, with evaluation focused on making assessments in order to identify the most effective delivery partners. This would help alleviate the strain on government for delivery.

Yemen as a country desperately requires a real strategy.

Instead, what we currently have is a strategic vacuum. Until this vacuum is honestly addressed, any political settlement will be subject to realities on the ground, which will ultimately overwhelm efforts. Neither Yemen nor the international community can afford this.

Coda

In January 2015 the Yemeni Government fell in the wake of Shia Houthi rebels entering the capital, ushering in 2 years of war and conflict.

USA

4. CHOP WOOD, CARRY WATER

#obama #potus #uselections #trump

3 November 2008 / Originally published on Worldchanging

This piece was written a few hours before Obama's first electoral victory was announced.

"Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water."

— ZEN SAYING

Tomorrow we will be changed. Today we are who we are. It is rare to know the moment of change. It is rare to know that tomorrow we will awaken to altered landscapes, to altered psyches. It is rare to know this moment. While many, many words have been penned about the landscape on the other side of the event horizon, I feel a need to linger here for a few more moments, for just a little while longer. My feet drag ever so slightly, scuffing the ground. As I sit here, far away, on the other side of the ocean, in my little cottage in Oxford, I feel the strange sweetness of this moment, this little moment that will be lost and swept away in the roaring tides of what is to come. It's a fleeting, perhaps sentimental moment, but it speaks to me.

It tells me to remember that while things will change beyond our wildest imaginings, some things are still certain, some things will not change. While some will wake to joy, others

will wake to tears. While the events to come may blow our minds, while we may suffer, while the winds are going to blow loud and strong...some things will remain constant. Our work will not get any easier. The promise of these moments to come is inevitably the promise of more work, of a renewed effort, no matter what happens, of the work that so many of us have already given our most sacred labour to. Perhaps others will join us; perhaps the weight in our hearts will lighten, perhaps not.

Will we continue to work? What will drive us? What will we wake to in the morning? How will we feel? Who will we be? All these questions remain to be answered but one thing is certain, the work will remain. As we enter into the space of excitement — this staggering, overwhelming, vertiginous sense of change, I would like to wave this moment goodbye, to send it off gently and to thank its voice with its tiny, hard wisdom.

See you on the other side.

Coda

8 years later Donald Trump is sworn in as 45th President, on a platform of reversing President Obama's achievements.

India

5. INDIA EATS DEMOCRACY

#globalization #indiashining #modi #mythofprogress

22 February 2005 / Originally published on Worldchanging

How does one even begin to make sense of a drama as deep and wide as India?

Coming back from a recent trip to India, I'm somewhat puzzled by the many contradictory attitudes that India evokes within me. I find that I have a deep love of India that's shot through with frustration and confusion. On the one hand, I see India as the home of a great civilization that's still growing and changing; a country imbued with vast curiosity and openness, one that's cosmopolitan and rural, that's the home of Bollywood (an unapologetically South-Asian phenomenon) and is without a doubt a global power. I love how India flies in the face of received wisdom — for example I'm struck by the fact that both Kerala, one of modern India's most successful states, elected a Communist government in 1957; while West Bengal, one of India's most culturally sophisticated states, has been run by the Communist Party (India) for twenty-seven long years. These oddities give me a gleeful sense that the laws of the known universe somehow work differently in India. It's not just a bastion for difference but a source of difference.

On the other hand I see the extreme deference that Indians have for status and power. I wonder at how easily Indians who are highly educated are willing to dismiss centuries-old

belief and knowledge systems as mere “superstition.” I see a country where the poor are treated like they’re sub-human. I see a country all too willing to step on the powerless in order to succeed at the global game. I feel that the myth of “India Shining” so feted by non-Indians and Indians alike is somewhat simplistic. So, how is one to understand India today?

While flipping through Indian cable television it occurred to me that India is now being recognized as an “emerging power” or “world leader” or a super-state because she has learnt how to express herself fluently in Western categories. Now we can read Indian writers writing in English, we can watch Indian movies more or less in English (Mira Nair & others), we can watch Indian music videos in Hindi that look like classic MTV videos (“world music”) and we can watch Indian adverts in Hindi that look like anything you might see in London. At the other end of the spectrum, India is not just fluent in “soft power” but has also demonstrated her familiarity with “hard” forms of power; Indian elite engineering colleges are excellent, the Indian software industry is bringing in billions and to top it off India speaks the hyper-elite language of nuclear weapons. Now that India can express herself in a language (or languages) well understood by the West, the West is recognizing India as a power. Prior to that India expressed herself in terms incomprehensible to the Western ear and was seen largely through crude Orientalist stereotypes.

Comprehending Indian reality is difficult in part because our eyes are naturally drawn by this Indian fluency in Western

categories. Stories about India are either about the poverty-stricken India of Orientalists-past or they’re about how India is succeeding in the things that we ourselves deem to be valuable, for example in technology. Indians themselves encourage and show-off these very same things to non-Indians. Nobody really wants their country to be known for corruption or poverty and it doesn’t make sense to show off those things which the West doesn’t value or, for that matter, understand. This however leads us to serious distortions in our understanding of India. Pavan K. Varma in his excellent and eye-opening book, *Being Indian: The Truth About Why the 21st Century will be India’s* explains the difficulty as follows:

The Indian reality is both transparent and opaque simultaneously. What is visible is as much a part of the truth as what remains unseen. Foreigners see what is overt, and conflate it with their preconceived notions of ‘the great Indian civilization’. In the process many assumptions evade critical scrutiny, and a great many inferences are either incorrect or partially true. But foreigners can be forgiven their errors. Not so the Indians. Over the years the Indian leadership, and the educated Indian, have deliberately projected and embellished an image about Indians they know to be untrue, and have willfully encouraged the well-meaning but credulous foreign observer (and even more the foreign scholar) to accept it. What is worse, they have fallen in love with that image, and can no longer accept it as untrue.

Interrogating our images of India and penetrating the

opaqueness of Indian reality matters, as Varma tells us, because India “is much too important today, and its potential far too significant in the coming decades to be held hostage to simplistic myth-making.” One example of the complexity of the relationship between image and reality is the oft-heard claim that India is the world’s largest democracy. Without detracting from this claim, which is undoubtedly true, a closer look at the functioning of Indian democracy reveals a bloody and somewhat disturbing edge. Of the various models of democracy at work around the world, from the Swiss Cantons to Lee’s Singapore, Indian democracy surely surpasses all in its raw, bare-knuckled brutality.

Suketu Mehta explores this brutality up close as part of his astonishing and wide-ranging study of Bombay — *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*. Mehta’s account of how democracy in India functions (at least on one level) makes for chilling reading. He tracks the story of a young Shiv Shena strongman- a thug and murderer called Sunil who also happens to be an entrepreneur running a successful cable business. Sunil was part of the apparatus that helped the right-wing, Hindu nationalist party, the Shiv Shena, gain control of Bombay. Mehta concludes Sunil’s tale, somewhat wearily, by admitting:

Sunil will inherit Bombay, I now see. The consequences of his burning the bread seller alive: when the Sena government came in two years later, he got appointed a Special Executive Officer; he became, officially, a person in whom public trust is reposed... He is idealistic about the

nation and utterly pragmatic about the opportunities for personal enrichment that politics offers. Sunil, in fact, can be held up as an exemplar of the capitalist success story... The fact that a murderer like Sunil could become successful in Bombay is both a triumph and failure of democracy. Not all politicians are as compromised as he is but the ones who aren’t have to rely on people like Sunil to get elected.

It’s in interstices such as these- complex, deeply disturbing and yet dare-we-say hopeful stories — that India reveals herself to us. They can be read in a number of different ways. Varma, for example, argues that democracy has survived and grown in India precisely because it provides people like Sunil a route to power. The millions upon millions of Indians who live in urban slums or who are low in the caste system can see a pragmatic road that leads them clearly out of their current situations. These routes also function as release valves, ensuring that millions of Indians not only have hope but slowly and surely have an increasing stake in the system. Indians, argues Varma, are not democratic by nature, rather they’re deeply attracted to power. Democracy has given Indians an institution that they can work in order to gain personal power. Indians have come to accept democracy — a Western category if there ever was one - on their own terms and for their very own reasons.

India’s fluency however in the categories of the West points to a somewhat different destiny than simply being a better copy of the West or even being a true counter-player (as China might be). India’s genius lies in her ability to speak

multiple languages. Indians can and have been both Indian and Western in a way that Westerners (at least increasingly) are not. To be white and Danish or French, to pick two random examples, means being Danish or French and not Danish-Indian or French-Indian. Ashis Nandy, one of India's foremost public intellectuals explains how for Indians the "boundaries of the self are not as sharply demarcated in terms of belief, faith or identity, categories that the moderns feel comfortable with". Historically, this is how India coped with waves of invaders and with colonialism. In his classic study on the effects of colonialism on the Indian and British psyches, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, Nandy writes that Indian "...culture protects itself — against cosmologies which are proselytizing, hegemonic and committed to some secular or non-secular theories of cultural evolution — by projecting the idea that the Indian is compromising; he has a fluid self-definition, and he is willing to learn the ways of his civilised brethren unconditionally, provided such learning is profitable."

This ability to live and thrive with blurred "boundaries of self" with fluid self-definition, ensures that Indian culture has a certain resilience in the face of the homogenising storm of globalisation. Whereas the French worry and fret about the impact of US culture on their heritage, the Indians lap it up. They take the stuff that Hollywood produces and make it Indian, for Indians, with no fuss. The streets of Mumbai are awash with ten year-old street vendors peddling bootleg Harvard Business School Press paperbacks. For Indians intellectual property regimes are an irritant, a barrier to innovation.

This fluidity, resilience and ability to assimilate are reasons why the twenty-first century may well turn out to be Indian. Call it courage or foolhardiness, in its engagement with the world India does not fear becoming not-Indian. In other words, democracy has not eaten India, rather India has eaten democracy.

Coda

Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi from the right-wing BJP party wins a landslide election in 2014. Modi was once described as a "textbook fascist."

South Africa

6. DEMOCRACY, AGE 10

#anc #postapartheid #joburg #soweto

15 April 2004 / Originally published on Worldchanging

Ten years into South African's experiment with democracy, votes are still being counted for the April 14 elections. As predicted, the African National Congress has consolidated power and once again swept the polls clean in a landslide victory claiming over 69% of the vote.

I find myself in Johannesburg. The pathos of South African history finds expression in the most sublime, inspiring and worldchanging of civil projects. Juxtaposed against this civic energy is a curious ambivalence to democratic politics. The run up to the elections feels like a remarkably mundane and low-key affair. Driven by this uneasiness, I set out, on the eve of the elections, on a mission to untangle the relationship between South Africa's vast appetite for change and its seeming indifference to the drama of state politics.

The Troyeville house that I work from when in Johannesburg is patrolled by Bobby, a big, brown rottweiler. The only thing (other than food) that arouses Bobby from his usual languid stupor is an unknown black person entering the grounds. Then his gentleness melts away and his rottweiler genes ignite in a series of terrifying snarls that most black visitors feel is the last sound they'll ever hear. Bobby is a South African rottweiler and has either been trained, or somehow learnt, that his job is to scare black people. His lumbering

presence around the house is a constant reminder of how deep Apartheid's roots really go.

Despite such karmic disturbances, I'm attracted to South Africa because of the dynamism and creativity of its people. I find it interesting that so many of the South Africans I meet and speak to, while acknowledging the depth of their challenges, possess an extraordinary tenacity and single-mindedness about wanting to change things. This results in work as diverse and inspiring as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Constitution Hill and CIDA City Campus.

When I arrived in South Africa a few weeks ago I had imagined that the country would be ablaze in a state of celebration and campaign frenzy. It had been fourteen years since that extraordinary day when Nelson Mandela had walked out of his Robben Island prison and ten years since he had swept to power in South Africa's first democratic elections, heralding a peaceful transition that few had expected. Instead of excitement, I found myself greeted by a strange coldness that seemed to surround ten years of democracy and more specifically the April 14 elections. No one I met was talking about it and few people seemed really interested — at least in public.

It isn't as if South Africans no longer care about the state of their nation — far from it. The response from civil society to South Africa's problems has been to create a culture of direct and creative intervention. This culture operates on very different cycles to that of formal politics. Things happen

relatively fast. CIDA City Campus was founded, with virtually no resources, by Taddy Blatcher in 2000. Today it operates out of a skyscraper in downtown Johannesburg, has over sixteen hundred students and is graduating its first class this year. The impact of the Creative Inner Cities Initiative, founded in 2002, can be seen in inner city Johannesburg in the form of public art, street theatre and employment opportunities. The vision and dedication of one man over little more than three years caused the transformation of an ugly, garbage strewn, violent little hill in Soweto to the beautiful Soweto Mountain of Hope, with its theatre groups, landscaped organic gardens and children's playground - which was visited by Kofi Annan in 2002. This response then is not about trickle down economics and slow moving policy discussions but something of a very different nature.

My radar blips the first night I get here. A friend of a friend, who looks like a banker, tells me that he "isn't interested in politics..." As we talk it turns out that he runs a social investment fund, which I think is odd for someone who isn't interested in politics. The next day in the office another South African friend, Anthony Prangely, who runs the Gumboots Foundation tells me that he's looked at all the parties contesting the elections — the trouble is that hardly anyone inspires him. Those who do inspire him, such as Patricia de Lille (ex-Pan African Congress firebrand who recently founded the Independent Democrats), don't have the means to deliver on this inspiration. Such attitudes are widespread and puzzling enough for me to grab my notebook and light out across the quilt-work of Johannesburg in order to

explore the nature of South African democracy.

One of my first stops is Soweto. Sitting at the end of the Old Potch Road, Soweto is a township on the outskirts of Johannesburg created by the Apartheid government to house black people far from any white population centres. It's vast, sprawling and charged with energy. It has high crime rates and even higher unemployment rates (approximately 65% of South Africa's black population are unemployed). The poor transport links and generally bad infrastructure don't help. Soweto houses over three million people today and is considered to be the political heartland of the ANC — who came to power in 1994 and have been running government since.

One black teacher here tells me that 80% of her students are not registered to vote. Even though she's encouraging them to do so, she doesn't plan to vote herself. I discover that she'd been very active in the 1994 elections that brought Nelson Mandela and the ANC to power. I speak to a young film-maker at the Soweto Mountain of Hope. He tells me that he doesn't really trust the election results because the ANC are bound to win and the opposition is so weak. He's indignant that none of the other political parties bothered campaigning in Soweto — even though it might be somewhat suicidal.

Back in the heart of downtown Johannesburg, a high-crime area abandoned by most white people, is the Creative Inner Cities Initiative which runs classes on everything from sign-making and silk-screening to metal-working and writing.

A young theatre student called Mocheko patiently explains the political situation to me. In 1994 the people were clearly demanding freedom and now that there is political and civic freedom people are now questioning the nature of the freedom they've gained. They're asking "What is freedom?" He has just produced a community play exploring this question. The flavour of the question was more along the lines of 'this is the freedom we've been promised? Something isn't right.' I hear the same question echoed by other young black people I speak to.

I feel that ten or fifteen years ago these very same people would have been heavily politicised and involved in the struggle. The coming of democracy has in some weird way de-politicised their activism. There seems to be a curious paradox here. My expectation was that the coming of democratic politics (and associated freedoms) would result in the unleashing of huge political energies. Instead what seems to have happened is that the initial flare of energy that engaged so many people in politics beyond the ballot box, and the ANC to power, has died down. As this energy dissipates, many who were previously political actors and many others, whom I at least expected to be political actors, are demonstrating a puzzling ambivalence to participation in democratic politics.

What's going on here?

The political scene can be characterised by the image of a large, solid wildebeest sitting comfortably in the bush while

being surrounded by a mangy bunch of predators. They can do little more than lob sods of mud at the barn-like sides of this animal. From time to time the wildebeest takes a lazy swat at the sods of mud and once in a while finds energy to club down a particularly annoying party.

The wildebeest is the ANC or rather the so called tripartite alliance, formed by Mandela's party — the African National Congress (ANC), the Coalition of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), who together form the government of South Africa. They lead by a majority that is both deep and wide. It seems to be a foregone conclusion that the ANC is going to win the elections on April 14.

There seem to be four main reasons why the ANC is going to win these elections. First, many people think the ANC and President Mbeki are doing a good job — even if they are screwing up on HIV/AIDS (an estimated 10% of South Africans have HIV/AIDS) and Zimbabwe and struggling with internal corruption. Second, the ANC is still seen as the party that liberated the blacks and in doing so saved South Africa from an Israel-Palestine style conflict. Third, while there are a number of parties contesting the elections, no credible opposition has emerged in the last ten years. Finally, the ANC have a door-to-door campaign machine that is unrivalled by any other party in the country.

That the ANC will be the ruling party for many years to come seems to be an undisputed and well understood fact here.

In pondering South Africa's civic energy it dawns on me that a distinction needs to be made when using a phrase like 'political apathy' — I'm starting to doubt that it exists in the way we understand it in the West. People turn out at the ballot box and people certainly have expectations from the State but they don't seem to want to have much to do with being a part of it beyond that. Rather than apathy, there seems to be a culture of silence around the elections.

It seems clear that the civic players I met, spoke to and am aware of are not apathetic in any sense of the word. Rather there are two cultures at work here, the culture of civil society and the culture of democratic politics. The tectonic nature of the fault-line between these two cultures was revealed to me through a story I heard about another teacher. It goes like this:

There's a dynamic black woman, we'll call her Busi, who runs a pre-school in Alexandria, the second largest township in Johannesburg. The Democratic Alliance (the official opposition) invite her to stand as their councilor for the township. She refuses. Her refusal is surprising because she's highly critical of the ANC. She explains her refusal as follows. Even though she feels betrayed by the ANC, even though she feels a deep sense of disillusionment with the ANC, she still loves them. In addition to her love for the ANC, she explains that if she entered politics and took up a position with either party, she'll lose some of her standing and position within the community — she'd be labeled a partisan. Such labeling will almost certainly have repercussions on her work, as an

activist and on her ability to get things done. She decides not to stand.

One way of making sense of Busi's story is through the idea of Ubuntu, an idea held dear to many Africans, which can be defined as 'I am who I am because of others.' Ubuntu as an aspiration and ideal means, in effect, that self is defined through harmony and unity in community and not through opposition with others. It's a particular attitude which was strengthened during the Apartheid years in black African communities because there was a common enemy to fight against. In the years leading up to the end of Apartheid and post-Apartheid the main forces to threaten the unity of black communities has been party politics. Party politics is shifting African notions of Ubuntu in favour of more atomistic models that necessarily come about with the disintegration of traditional communities and communal values. I can't help but notice Independent Election Commission posters on the roads reminding people that their vote is secret and they don't have to reveal who they voted for.

In the years leading up to his death in 1977, the charismatic activist Steve Biko attempted to create, through SASO (South African Students Organisation), an alternative political force to the ANC. While many would credit the collapse of SASO's political power to Biko's death at the hands of the Apartheid government, it's a fact that the ANC fought a running battle against Biko's supporters which split black communities, especially in Soweto. Today in KwaZuluNatal (KZN) the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the ANC have split

communities in a similar way. Political divisions resulted in some particularly violent battles which peaked during the 1994 elections sparking fears of civil war. While this has died down now, the only reported violence leading up to the current elections occurred in KZN in clashes between the ANC and IFP.

Party politics fits badly with Ubuntu. Massive support for the ANC then reflects Ubuntu, while divisive, knife edge voting does not — as is evident in KZN.

The deeper causes of both civic dynamism and political ambivalence are pretty much the same — a deep love of community. This is reflected, not so much in people's words, but in their actions. In a sense, modern democratic politics is threatening the notion of African community.

The African intelligentsia is well aware that democracy cannot be exported whole and complete from the West, that an African democracy must be forged from the heat and dust and pain of Africa. The question of how to do this rages on with no clear answers in sight. I take comfort from the fact that it's early days yet. The democracies of Europe and the USA were far from stable in their early days: compared to how they were doing ten years in, South Africa is doing well and is extremely stable.

I realise that while in the West our notions of true community are nothing more than the stuff of nostalgia, in much of Africa community still defines self — even if it is under

attack from modernity. I realise that in such a situation my understanding of what constitutes political apathy is out of whack. I realise that my notions of freedom are out of whack. My Hunter S Thompson-like indignation around politics is out of whack. As South Africans head home from the polls and I head home to London, I'm reminded of Paul Theroux's comment that "Being in Africa was like being on a dark star."

Post-Election Update¹

- 89 percent of registered voters voted in 1999 against 76,7 percent this year, so it's dropped by 12 percent
- Only about 56 percent of the total eligible voters voted (38 percent of total eligible voters in support of ANC)
- 62 percent of colored and Indian voters registered
- 48 percent of voters under 25 are estimated to have registered (no stats are available on how many of them voted)

- *"The lower turnout showed a notably significant degree of unhappiness at the way politicians have behaved."*
- *"...while black voters were willing to consider alternatives, they do not believe there are viable opposition parties."*
- *"...alienation definitely contributed to the significantly lower turnout of colored and Indian voters"*
- *"...the second most popular vote was therefore not for the DA, but a 'no vote'. It indicates serious dissatisfaction and that many people did that consciously as a way of protest."*

1. Source: 18 April, 2004 Sunday Independent, by Christelle Terreblanche. (Note that Terreblanche is a fierce critic of the current government.)

Brazil

7. LULA DREAMS A DREAM

#lularevolution #brics #brazilpoli #imf

2 January 2004 / Originally published on Worldchanging

I just got back from a trip to Lula's Brazil. The sheer magnitude and scale of what's unfolding there is staggering. In order to grasp it, we need to understand that the Lula revolution is in effect asking surely one of the most important questions of our times:

Can the 21st Century State be a vehicle for radical social change?

The significance of the Lula story goes well beyond the fate of Brazil's poor, who effectively put him into office. The political implications of the failure of a Lula government may well be to shake the foundations of the nation-state — one already swaying under the stiff wind of the international finance regime — even further. If a Lula government should fail, staffed with its social revolutionaries and backed not just by decades of political and economic experience but also of innovation in governance, (all of whom are clearly hell-bent on radically addressing issues such as poverty and social inequality) fails — then what does this tell us about the nature of the State in our times?

If, of course, the experiment succeeds then Brazil and the Lula story will assume mythic proportions. Brazil will become the model for a 'country of the future' and other developing

countries across the world will flock to the Brasilia Model. In fact, this is already happening. Brazil's approach to poverty, HIV/AIDS, energy, technology, food and even space policy is being closely watched across the world. During the course of the year Lula visited 27 countries, including ones deemed pariahs by the US, such as Syria and Libya. Brazil played a key role at the Cancun WTO talks, leading the G-20+ revolt.

Either way, it's surely no exaggeration to say that the unfolding of the Lula Revolution represents nothing less than one of the greatest political dramas of our times. What Lula is trying to do is stretch the rules of the game as far as they'll possibly go. Want to get a sense of the scope of what Lula's attempting? There's no better way than to take a look at his cabinet. Here's a short tour:

Finance

Perhaps the most sensitive post on Lula's cabinet, that of Finance Minister, was given to Antonio Palocci, former mayor of the city of Ribeirao Preto and a doctor specializing in preventative medicine. Dismaying those who expected Lula's government to go to war with the IMF (Brazil currently has around \$260 billion of debt), Palocci instead sealed a deal with them and then "compounded the heresy" by setting forth on a fiscal path that saw 14 billion reals lopped off government spending. Wall Street has been pacified upon hearing that Brazil needs at least "one more year of arrocho (tourniquet) and neo-liberalism in order to save [Brazil] from chaos." It's

perhaps obvious that the continued flight of the Lula revolution will depend both on his and his ministers' abilities to tread an increasingly perilous path; that of trying to marry social justice with the demands of the international financial regime. Putting one foot wrong would make Lula's promises to tackle poverty and social inequality impossible. Possible scenarios could include a major dispute with the IMF, a moratorium on debt repayments (unlikely), the possible nationalization of the energy sector or a lack of fiscal restraint which could also easily trigger IMF sanctions. This would send the Brazilian economy into meltdown, which would make Lula's promises to tackle poverty and social inequality impossible.

Environment

Marina Silva, 44, the Environment Minister, comes from a rubber-tapping area in the Amazon state of Acre. Silva has dedicated much of her professional life to defending the forests. In one of the hottest and most controversial developments since taking power, despite opposition from Silva, Lula responded to pressure from the farm lobby and approved a temporary decree allowing genetically modified soya to be grown in Brazil. The crops are ostensibly for export and not to be used in Brazil. Last month in a piece headlined "*Amazon may be levelled by the humble soya*", The Guardian reported that:

The left wing president, Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva, has publicly expressed a belief that the Amazon is "not

untouchable". But in Santarém, the figures for expansion are startling. According to local officials, this year there are around 7,500 hectares (18,500 acres) of soya in production. Next year it will more than quadruple to 35,000 (86,500 acres). A year after that, the predictions are for a further doubling. Cargill, the US food giant, spotted the potential and built a vast soya terminal on a river bank in the town. The company is being challenged by the Brazilian government's environment agency, which is concerned that the terminal was built without an environmental impact report; but the evidence points to an escalation in development all around.

State

Minister of State, Tarso Genro, who is also head of the special secretariat of the new Economic and Social Development Council, was twice Mayor of Porto Alegre (birthplace of the World Social Forum) and developed and implemented "participatory budgeting" during his term. Prior to that he worked as a labour lawyer for twenty-five years.

We get a taste of the intellectual pedigree of the Lula Revolution in "*From Brazil to the world, or Twenty theses for a democratic theory of the state*" published a few months ago on Open Democracy. Tarso maps this trajectory of the accumulated experience of a generation of Brazilian intellectuals and activists via a series of reflections on the problems and possibilities of a way of governing that is at once democratic, socialist, and popular.

Energy

Energy Minister, Dilma Rousseff, is a 55-year old former urban guerrilla who is also an economist with extensive experience in the energy sector. Rousseff fought the 1964-85 military regime, spent three years in jail and was tortured. Later, she got a doctorate in economics from Campinas University and was the finance secretary and twice the energy secretary of Rio Grande do Sul state. With the energy sector struggling in Brazil, Rousseff's pre-ministerial attitude towards the nationalisation of power has prompted private sector fears that nationalization might become the first major event in the sector under her rule. Rousseff advocates a wider use of wind power in Brazil, quoting Bob Dylan: "The answer, my friend, is blowin in the wind."

Land Reform

Miguel Rossetto, Minister of Land Reform, is referred to by one right-wing think tank in the US as "a member of the PT's most radical wing and a supporter of illegal land invasions." This is in regards to his links with MST, Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement, through which hundreds of thousands of landless Brazilians seize fallow farmland.

Having said that, thousands of people from the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) marched in protest to Brasilia last month and saw the president come to meet the protesters rather than wait for them at his palace. His rather blunt and

bold message to them: “For those who are in a hurry, I ask you to wait until the end of my [four year] term.” In an interview in December Lula reiterated his intention of settling 400,000 landless rural families and providing another 130,000 with property rights by the end of his term of office.

Social Welfare

Running Social Welfare is Benidita da Silva, Brazil’s first Afro-Brazilian woman senator, who comes from an inner city slum and reputedly still lives there. Da Silva is an interesting barometer for the tensions within the Lula cabinet. There’s a row going on somewhere in the background where Da Silver is being accused of ineffectiveness and inaction. Her defence is that the austerity measures have meant that her ministry is starved of funds. She is currently under siege on a number of fronts and may not survive for too much longer in this position. See *“The Frying of a Black Minister in Brazil”* for one version of the story.

Culture

How many countries can boast a Culture Minister who has jammed with Jimi Hendrix? Not surprisingly, perhaps the most popular appointment was of Brazilian national music icon Gilberto Gil as Culture Minister. In a two part article tracking eight days with Gil, Minister of Cool, The Observer describes his appointment as follows:

Since the Sixties, Gil has been one of the most famous singers and composers in Brazil and in the middle of that decade was part of the dadaist and popular anti-establishment movement called Tropicalia. His oblique lyrics criticising the military dictatorship of the time landed him in prison, and then exile in London for two years. Since January this year, in the most exquisite case of chickens coming home to roost, he has been Brazil’s Minister of Culture.

While the appointment might seem to be a minor one, Gil’s brief ‘the democratization of culture’ will impact a number of areas. An obvious one is Gil’s personal crusade to use hip-hop as a way of dealing with youth issues in Brazil’s favelas.

Last Thoughts

Sitting on the top floor of Edificio Italia, Sao Paulo’s tallest building, I asked Oscar Motomura, one of Brazil’s most respected business strategists, what advice he would give to Lula and he told me “I’d tell him to invite the people to join him. That’s all.”

In the middle of 2003 Lula ran a campaign to head off impatience from the people on the progress he has made to date. The campaign presented the simple message that in order to build a house one has to first build the foundations and that people need to be patient while Lula works on building solid foundations. This has been Lula’s message to the electorate to date. If however the Lula Revolution is

to live up to its ambitions then Motomura's advice is sound. Lula needs to stop acting as if government is something that simply happens to the people, as opposed to something that the people actively participate in, build and take responsibility for together.

Coda

Dilma Rousseff, Lula's first Energy Minister and former urban guerrilla succeeds Lula as President. During her second term impeachment proceedings are brought against her. On 31 August 2016, the Senate removed President Rousseff from office by a vote of 61–20.

Egypt Pt. 1

8. DR. ABDALLA VS. THE STATE

#mubarak #egyptpoli #cairo #aljeelcentre

3 February 2004 / Originally published on Worldchanging

While blessed with political stability have we forgotten what it means to have the awesome power of the state ranged against us?

This is my home. I was born here. I was lucky, in that I went and studied in Cambridge and got my doctorate there but few people have that chance. I've come back here because this is my community. I want others here to have that chance.

Located within a section of Old Cairo known as Ain al Sera, Dr Ahmed Abdalla runs the Al-Jeel Centre. It sits at the meeting point of three traditional industrial districts; the tanning, pottery and car-mechanic districts. While mostly a residential area, a population explosion and shortage of housing has meant that all the original housing has been extended, brick by brick, wall by tottering wall. Most of the housing is 'informal' in that it had been built without planning permission from the authorities. Originally maybe fifty thousand people lived there. Today it's over one hundred thousand, many of them children who work in the three industries.

Al-Jeel was established in 1994. The purpose of the Centre, in the words of Dr. Abdalla, also its founder, is to do "something impossible" — it aims to be both an academic research centre

for child labour issues but also an activist centre of sorts, to bring research down from its ivory tower in an effort to address issues of child labour in a very hands-on, very non-academic way.

What makes Dr. Abdalla somewhat of a strange fish, however, isn't simply his very worthy work on child labour issues. Rather it's the fact that the charming Al-Jeel compound, with its bright bubbly children and colourful murals, located behind a police station, is home to one of the fiercest and most vocal critics of the Egyptian quasi-military regime — he just so happens to be one of the world's foremost researchers on child labour issues to boot.

There are several messages scrawled across the vast wall of his work.

As a dissident he teaches us the age old lesson to always and consistently speak out for what we believe in, no matter what the situation, no matter what the weather — and most importantly that it's possible. His work as an academic-activist teaches us the necessity of blurring the boundaries between action and reflection and stands as an inspiring example of praxis at a time when academia seems ever more intent on riding out the storm without getting its hands dirty. As a citizen he teaches us what is possible in a hostile civil climate if only we choose to try.

Al-Jeel currently runs something called 'The Child Club' which provides young children (up to the age of sixteen)

— many of whom don't have a hope in hell of getting to school — a place to go, a place to learn and a place to express themselves. Every single piece of art created by the children is either up on the walls of the Centre or can be found in huge Japanese albums, specially procured for archival purposes. Each piece is carefully labelled with a date and a name. Dr. Abdalla explains how the Child Club was founded:

The establishment of the Child Club was on September 11 — the day that America was burning. Some were happy — I was very grim. We have awakened a giant which will do great harm to the Islamic world. My response was to do something constructive and we formally established the Child Club, which was our little symbolic contribution. The Child Club has significance. Everything is documented, everything is in albums.

Dr. Abdalla has been a visiting professor and lecturer in a vast number of universities; ranging from all the Ivy League schools (Harvard, Princeton and others) as well as universities in Bulgaria, Germany, India, Japan and Sri Lanka, not to mention the University of Cairo and others in the Middle East. All very respectable.

Every culture has a thin red line. It determines the degree of freedom in that culture. Most law-abiding citizens simply accept the line as they would a geological feature: they wouldn't dream of crossing it and choose to play firmly below it. As an academic star Dr. Abdalla clearly had this choice. He reminds us that there are those few who make a career out of

crossing this line. This is an art because if you spend too much time on the far side of the line you're liable to end up in jail or simply dead — à la Che Guevara.

The art comes from knowing how and when to poke a sharp stick through the line and clamber through — ignoring the shrill protests of those around you. The art lies in knowing how much time to spend on the far side, which flags to plant there and when to skip back across. It requires a particular sensibility; a sense of timing and judgement, rather like skipping back and forth across a busy train track.

Dr. Abdalla is remarkable because he has carved himself a thirty year long career of crossing this line, a feat more remarkable due to the very real fact that the Egyptian regime, (mis)governing one of the most populous countries in the Middle East, has little tolerance for those crossing the red line.

Amnesty International's summary for Egypt in 2003 sets the context bluntly:

At least 32 prisoners of conscience were sentenced to prison terms of up to seven years. At the end of 2002, 28 prisoners of conscience, including seven people imprisoned in previous years, remained held. Thousands of suspected supporters of banned Islamist groups, including possible prisoners of conscience, remained in detention without charge or trial; some had been held for years. Others were serving sentences imposed after grossly unfair trials before military courts. Torture and ill-treatment of detainees continued to be

systematic. At least 48 people were sentenced to death and at least 17 were executed.

During this game of high stakes chicken with the Egyptian regime, Dr. Abdalla has authored countless books and articles on child labour as well as the issue of democracy in the Middle East and in Egypt. These have been published in English, Arabic, French, German, Japanese and Spanish. He is one of the few authors to have written critically about the military regime in Egypt and lived to tell the tale.

“That’s when they came and had to decide if they wanted to imprison me. They didn’t.”

Those of us lucky to have grown up in relatively stable political climates have all but forgotten what it means to live in close proximity to the thin red line. We’ve forgotten what it means to challenge it and transgress it, to take a real honest-to-God risk for the sake of our political and cultural values. Recent events in the States concerning One Stolen Election have woken us up to the fact that the line is very real — it never went away, we just stopped paying attention and when we did, well... welcome to the New World Order by Dubya.

As Dr. Abdalla points out (in “Egypt before & after September 11, 2001”), regardless of who becomes the next President of Egypt, the political system is sick and requires a cure before it’s too late. His consistent message across the decades has been that “the curing doctor must be the Egyptian people themselves.”

There comes a time when we need to sharpen our sticks, take a deep breath and poke through. Those of us without a death-wish need to learn fast. We need to attune our senses to the vibrations along the line and in this learning lies hope.

As we left Al-Jeel, waving to the swarming children, I was struck by the fragility of it all. Looking at it from a certain angle, there was not a lot there. A small building, a middle-aged, grey haired man and a crowd of grubby child labourers. But there was also much more than that. What was it that transformed that man into a challenger of a regime that ruled some seventy million people? What was it that transformed a group of child labourers into the most alive and excited bunch of young people I'd seen in a long time? Whatever it was, it was that something that we need more of - and Al-Jeel was blessed with it in abundance.

Egypt Pt. 2

**9. MUBARAK STEPS DOWN:
THE BIRTH OF A NEW EGYPTIAN STATE**

#mubarak #muslimbrotherhood #egyptianrevolution #arabspring

11 Feb 2011 / Originally published on Religion Dispatches

* This piece was written approximately 16 hours before news of Mubarak's resignation was made public.

It's been a little over two hours since Mubarak gave his speech; twenty-four hours since the Muslim Brotherhood announced it would not be fielding a presidential candidate in post-Mubarak elections; a week since Iran's Grand Ayatollah Khamenei tried to paint the Egyptian Revolution a shade of '79; eighteen days since protests began in Egypt; and thirty-seven days since Mohamed Bouazizi died in Tunisia from self-immolation, sparking the deepest and most widespread changes within the Arab world in generations.

In the hours before Mubarak appeared on state television, rumours about his impending resignation swirled through the streets of Cairo, shot across time and space through Twitter and Facebook, and bounced off satellites to reach millions of televisions around the world. The mood in Tahrir swelled with the crowds, as more and more people hit the streets, anticipating the sweetness to come. I spoke briefly to a friend sitting in a café close to Tahrir. "We're just waiting, we're on the edge, he was supposed to appear half an hour ago. There's a rumour that the Army around the Presidential Palace have gone. We shall see inshallah..."

On the other side of Mubarak's second televised address since protests began in Egypt, I still cannot entirely believe what I heard. Commentators across the spectrum are also expressing shock at Mubarak's words. Through the shock, however, one idea shines clearly, like an indestructible and beautiful diamond: Mubarak's time is at an end. And his end signals the end of an era when it was acceptable for an Arab strongman to refer to the people as his children. It's over.

In the moment of realization that it's finally over comes the shock of another realization: something new is coming. The moment of birth dawns, flickering with the first rays of a new sunrise, as the stars of a very dark and cold winter night slowly fade from the sky. Perhaps less obvious than the end of the old, the faint contours of something new are emerging counterpoising the death of the oh-so-very-tired. Visceral, extremely bloody and painful, new life is new life, to be celebrated in all its mewling imperfection. It signals new beginnings, new possibilities and new terrains.

What form will new life take? What is the nature of a new Egypt? Is it tall and strong? Does it have a mind of its own? What color will it be? Red, blue or green? Will it look different from what we expected? What developmental trajectory will the new Egypt carve for itself? What forces, old and new, will seek to shape it? Is the destiny of all nations the end-state of a liberal democracy?

The Mexican "deprofessionalized" intellectual Gustavo Esteva once said that with the international development

and aid industry, a people's dreams have already been dreamt for them. As the Egyptian people arise to shape a new future, what dreams are they still dreaming? Is there an opportunity here to exercise political imaginations and create something that does not exist?

If we, just for a tiny moment, suspend the dominant fear of religion coming from the West, what do we hope for? If we stop operating from a place of fear and start operating from a place of imagination and possibility then what can a new Egypt look like? Is it possible to start looking for signs of the truly new? Can we protect these seeds and then start to nurture and grow them in the coming months and years? Can Egypt forge an evolutionary leap when it comes to the tired old nation-state? Is there a role for Islam in the formation of a new state?

As we continue to fight, to heal, to celebrate and head back to our homes, let us carry a simple question with us: What do we want a new Egypt to look like?

Coda

The Muslim Brotherhood win power in the first democratic election held in generations. They are deposed within a year of assuming power. Former Mubarak strongman Sisi takes over. We see a return to a Mubarak-era authoritarian state.

10. CODA: CORRUPTIO OPTIMI QUAE EST PESSIMA¹

Originally published July, 2016 in Topia: Impossible I'm

Possible, Kaospilots

It's been a hard sixteen years. It's perhaps tempting to audit the century so far through some sort of catechism, a litany of names that if repeated enough would somehow undo the spell and free us from injustice.

We walk our paths coated with the dust from a thousand moments of fear. Each of these moments carries a particular horror. But the spectacular horror that blasts across social media is not what keeps me up at night. It's not that horror turning my feet to lead as I face the future.

There is the moment, when an atrocity occurs and the calls for blood grow louder and louder. It's the collective echo of a lynch mob played across our simultaneously shrinking and expanding screens. It's the inevitable threshold where we cross, and join, to greater or lesser degrees, a drumbeat of voices howling for blood, for retribution.

I have experienced that moment of horror with increasing frequency. I can feel in my bones the vibration of voices raised, of denunciations of inhumanity, of monsters in our midst. I hear animal voices distorted, calling for the elimination of these monsters, calling for death to rain down in the name of some perverted justice. These voices echo from shore to shore, from the shining city on the hill.

1. "The corruption of the best is the worst" — see *The Rivers North Of The Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich* for more.

And I'm afraid. Because these calls do not arise from a love of justice, but from fear, rage and anger, from a desire for retribution. In that desire lies the permission to transgress all laws and all norms, but all in the name of a higher calling — for our children, for peace, for justice or for our nation. That road is the road to hell. That road is the road that leads directly to a camp above which float the words “Arbeit macht frei.”

Every horror perpetrated against humanity was perpetuated in the name of a higher good, a utopian value if you like. The only way human beings can tolerate the horrors they visit on each other is if they believe they are acting in the name of a higher good — for what could be, not what is. The torture of men and women is really only possible if it is done in the name of freedom. This is why a Madeline Albright can dismiss the deaths of Iraqi children and a member of Isis can saw the head off a journalist. Both are the same phenomenon. This is why voices calling out for justice, the drumbeat of the lynch mob, are a perversion, a corruption of all that is good.

As we contemplate the road, what will we stand for? Will we stand for reality as it is? Or a reality that should be? Will we sharpen our hearts and minds to resist the siren call of the utopian? How we answer these questions will determine everything.

ZAID HASSAN

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