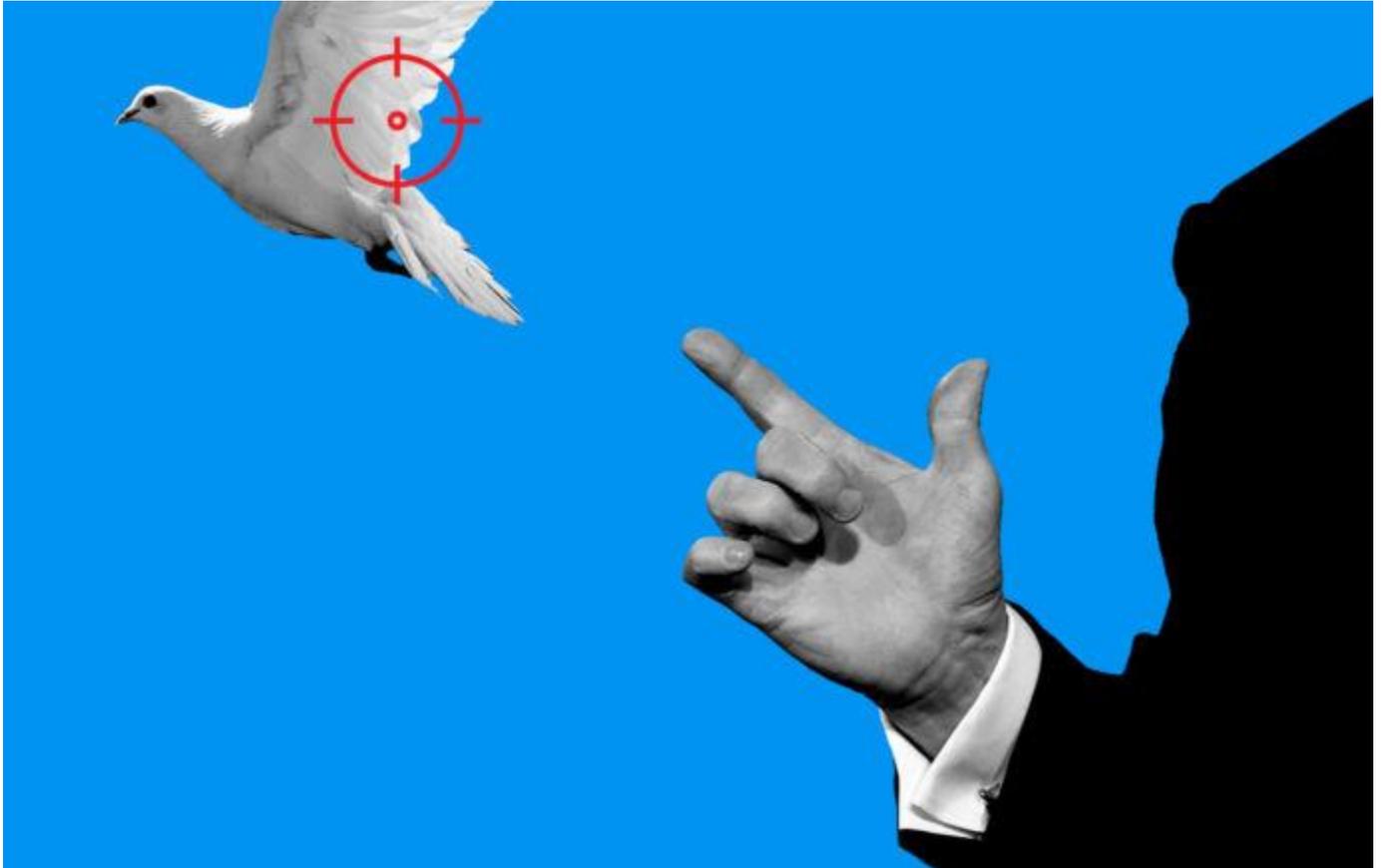


# Does Trump's Rise Mean Liberalism's End?

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Humans think in stories rather than in facts, numbers, or tables, and the simpler the story, the better. The story that has ruled our world in the past few decades is what we might call the Liberal Story. It was a simple and attractive tale, but it is now collapsing, and so far no new story has emerged to fill the vacuum. Instead, we get Donald Trump.

The Liberal Story says that if we only liberalize and globalize our political and economic systems, we will produce paradise on earth, or at least peace and prosperity for all. According to this story—accepted, in slight variations, by George W. Bush and Barack Obama alike—humankind is inevitably marching toward a global society of free markets and democratic politics.

The plot line of this story, however, began to lose credibility starting with the 2008 global financial crisis. People who, in the nineteen-nineties and two-thousands, expected that playing by

the rules would allow them to rise and flourish suddenly began to fear that they had been duped, and that the system did not work for them. The Arab Spring has turned into an Islamic Winter; authoritarian regimes in Moscow, Ankara, and Jerusalem are abandoning liberal-democratic values in favor of chauvinistic nationalism and religious extremism; and even in the liberal strongholds of Western Europe people are having second thoughts. Now the tidal wave of disillusionment is making its way to the very country that has pushed the Liberal Story to the rest of the planet, sometimes at gunpoint—the United States. As American citizens feel let down by decades of promises and assurances, their disenchantment may sweep Donald Trump into the White House, to the horror and astonishment of the established élites.

Why are people losing faith in the Liberal Story? One explanation is that this story has indeed been a sham, and that, instead of peace and prosperity, the liberal prescription has produced little more than violence and poverty. This, however, is easily refuted. From a historical perspective, it seems evident that humankind is actually enjoying the most peaceful and prosperous era ever. In the early twenty-first century, for the [first time in history](#), more people die from eating too much than from eating too little; more people [die](#) from old age than from epidemics; and more people commit suicide than are killed by war, crime, and terrorism put together.

Another explanation for the loss of faith in the Liberal Story is that people care more about their future expectations than about their past achievements. When told that they no longer suffer as their ancestors did—from famine, plague, and war—people don't count their blessings; rather, they enumerate their debts, disappointments, and never-to-be-fulfilled dreams. A person who has lost his job at a Rust Belt factory takes little comfort in the knowledge that he hasn't died from starvation, cholera, or the Third World War.

Unemployed workers are right to fear for their futures. The Liberal Story and the logic of free-market capitalism encourage people to have grand expectations. During the latter part of the twentieth century, each generation—whether in Houston, Shanghai, Istanbul, or São Paulo—enjoyed better education, superior health care, and larger real incomes than its parents. In coming decades, however, owing to a combination of ecological meltdown and technological disruption, the younger generation might be lucky to just stay in place. As people lose faith in the system's ability to fulfill their expectations, they become disillusioned even amid unprecedented peace and prosperity.

A third possibility is that people are worried less about stagnating material conditions and more about dwindling political power. Ordinary citizens across the world are sensing that power is shifting away from them. As countries become increasingly dependent on global currents of capital, goods, and information, governments in London, Athens, Brasília, and even Washington have less power to shape the future of their own territories. Moreover, in the twenty-first century, most of the major problems are likely to be global, and the national political institutions we have inherited are incapable of handling such problems effectively.

Disruptive technologies pose a particularly acute threat to the power of national governments and ordinary citizens. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, progress in the form of the Industrial Revolution produced concomitant horrors, from the Dickensian coal pits to Congo's rubber plantations and China's disastrous Great Leap Forward. It took tremendous effort for politicians

and citizens to put the train of progress on more benign tracks. Yet while the rhythm of politics has not changed much since the days of steam, technology has switched from first gear to fourth. Technological revolutions now vastly outpace political processes.

The Internet suggests how this happens. The Web is now crucial to our lives, economy, and security, yet the early, critical choices about its design and basic features weren't made through a democratic political process—did you ever vote about the shape of cyberspace? Decisions made by Web designers years ago mean that today the Internet is a free and lawless zone that erodes state sovereignty, ignores borders, revolutionizes the job market, smashes privacy, and poses a formidable global-security risk. Governments and civic organizations conduct intense debates about restructuring the Internet, but the governmental tortoise cannot keep up with the technological hare.

In the coming decades, we will likely see more Internet-like revolutions, in which technology steals up silently on politics. Artificial intelligence and biotechnology could overhaul not just societies and economies but our very bodies and minds. Yet these topics are hardly a blip in the current Presidential race. (In the first Clinton-Trump debate, the main reference to disruptive technology concerned Clinton's e-mail debacle, and despite all the talk about job losses, neither candidate addressed the potential impact of automation.)

Ordinary voters may not understand artificial intelligence but they can sense that the democratic mechanism no longer empowers them. In actuality, the most crucial choices about the future of ordinary voters and their children are probably made not by Brussels bureaucrats or Washington lobbyists but by engineers, entrepreneurs, and scientists who are hardly aware of the implications of their decisions, and who certainly don't represent anyone. But voters can't see them or address them, so they lash out where they can. In Britain, voters imagined that power might have shifted to the European Union, so they voted for Brexit. In the United States, voters imagine that "the establishment" monopolizes all the power, so they are determined to give the system a kick in the groin and prove that they still have a say. This makes Trump the perfect candidate. Precisely because he is utterly unthinkable to the mainstream elite, he is the ideal way to prove to the system that the ordinary voter still retains some power—if only the power of mayhem.

This is not the first time the Liberal Story has faced a crisis of confidence. Ever since this story gained global influence, in the second half of the nineteenth century, it has endured periodic crises. The first era of globalization and liberalization ended in the bloodbath of the First World War, when imperial power politics cut short the global march of progress. This was the Franz Ferdinand moment. Yet liberalism survived this maelstrom and emerged stronger than before, with Wilson's fourteen points, the League of Nations, and the Roaring Twenties.

Then came the Hitler moment, when, in the nineteen-thirties and early forties, fascism seemed for a while irresistible. Fascism blamed liberalism for subverting natural selection and causing the degeneration of humankind. Fascists warned that if all humans were given equal value and equal breeding opportunities, natural selection would cease to function. The fittest humans would be submerged in an ocean of mediocrity, and instead of evolving into supermen humankind would become extinct. In the end, however, liberalism proved itself fitter.

The liberal phoenix next faced a challenge from the left, during the Che Guevara moment, between the fifties and the seventies. While Fascists found the liberal story soft and degenerate, socialists accused it of being a fig leaf for the ruthless, exploitative, and racist system of global capitalism. For “liberty,” the socialists said, read “property.” The defense of the individual’s right to do what feels good amounts to safeguarding the property and privileges of the middle and upper classes. What good is the liberty to live where you want when you cannot pay the rent, to study what interests you when you cannot afford tuition, and to travel where you fancy when you cannot buy a car? Even worse, by encouraging people to view themselves as individuals, liberalism separates and prevents people from uniting against the system that oppresses them, thereby perpetuating inequality.

Since liberalism and capitalism were two sides of the same coin, much of this left-wing criticism stuck. Revolutionary and anticolonial movements throughout the world looked longingly toward Moscow and Beijing, while liberalism became identified with the racist European empires. By 1970, the United Nations had nearly a hundred and thirty member countries, only thirty of which were liberal democracies—and most of these were the old colonial powers. Liberal democracy seemed an exclusive club for aging white imperialists who had little to offer the rest of the world, or even to their own youth.

Liberal democracy was saved largely by nuclear weapons. NATO adopted the doctrine of mutual assured destruction, according to which even conventional Soviet attacks would be answered by an all-out nuclear strike. Behind this monstrous shield, liberal democracy and the free market managed to hold out in their last bastions, and Westerners got to enjoy sex, drugs, and rock and roll, as well as washing machines, refrigerators, and televisions. Without nukes there would have been no Beatles, no Woodstock, and no overflowing supermarkets. But in the mid-seventies it seemed that, nuclear weapons notwithstanding, the future belonged to socialism. In April, 1975, people all over the world watched on TV as helicopters evacuated the last Yankees from the rooftop of the American Embassy in Saigon, and many were convinced that the American empire was falling.

In fact, it was Communism that collapsed. In the eighties and nineties, the Liberal Story yet again crawled out of history’s dustbin, cleaned itself up, and conquered the world. The supermarket proved to be far stronger than the gulag. More important, the Liberal Story proved to be far more supple and dynamic than any of its opponents. It triumphed over traditional empires, over fascism, and over Communism by adopting some of their best ideas and practices (such as government-sponsored education, health, and welfare for the masses). By the early nineties, thinkers and politicians alike could proclaim “the end of history,” confidently asserting that all the big political and economic questions of the past had been settled, and that the liberal package of free markets, human rights, and democracy remained the only show in town.

But history has not come to an end, and following the Franz Ferdinand moment, the Hitler moment, and the Che Guevara moment we now find ourselves in the Trump moment. This time, however, the Liberal Story is not faced by a coherent ideological opponent like imperialism, fascism, or Communism. The Trump moment is a nihilistic burlesque. Donald Trump has no ideology to speak of, just as the British Brexiteers have no real plan for the future of the Disunited Kingdom.

On the one hand, this may imply that the present crisis of faith is less severe than its predecessors. At the end of the day, people won't abandon the Liberal Story, because they don't have any alternative. They may give the system an angry kick but, having nowhere else to go, they will eventually come back.

Alternatively, people may look further back and seek shelter with other stories, traditional nationalist and religious tales that have been pushed to the side in the twentieth century but never completely abandoned. This is arguably what has happened in places like the Middle East, where nationalist extremism and religious fundamentalism is on the rise. However, for all their sound and fury, movements such as the Islamic State don't offer any serious alternative to the Liberal Story, because they don't have any answers to the big questions of our era.

What will happen to the job market once artificial intelligence outperforms humans in most cognitive tasks? What will be the political impact of an enormous new class of economically useless people? What will happen to relationships, families, and pension funds when nanotechnology and regenerative medicine turn eighty into the new fifty? What will happen to human society when biotechnology enables us to have designer babies, and to open even larger gaps between the rich and poor? You are unlikely to find the answers to any of these questions in the Bible or the Koran. Radical Islam, Orthodox Judaism, or fundamentalist Christianity may promise an anchor of certainty in a world of technological and economic storms, but in order to navigate the coming twenty-first-century tsunami, you will need a good map and a strong rudder, as well.

The same is true for slogans such as "Make America Great Again" or "Give Us Back Our Country." You can build a wall against Mexican immigrants but not against global warming; you can cut Westminster from Brussels but you cannot cut the City of London from global financial currents. If people cling in desperation to outdated national and religious identities, the global system may simply collapse in the face of climate change, economic crisis, and technological disruption that nineteenth-century nationalist myths and medieval piety can neither fathom nor solve.

Mainstream élites therefore look in horror at events such as Brexit and the rise of Trump, and hope that the masses will come to their senses and return to the fold of the Liberal Story in time to avert disaster. But it might be much harder for the Liberal Story to survive the current crisis of confidence, because the traditional alliance between liberal ethics and capitalist economics that has long underpinned the Liberal Story may be unravelling. During the twentieth century, the Liberal Story was immensely attractive because it told people and governments that they don't have to choose between doing the right thing and doing the smart thing; protecting human liberties was both a moral imperative and the key to economic growth. Britain, France, and the United States allegedly prospered because they liberalized their economies and societies, and if Turkey, Brazil, or China wanted to become equally prosperous they had to do the same. In most cases, it was the economic rather than the moral argument that convinced tyrants and juntas to liberalize.

In the twenty-first century, however, the Liberal Story has no good answers to the biggest challenges we face: global warming and technological disruption. As the masses lose their

economic importance to algorithms and robots, protecting human liberties may remain morally justified—but will the moral arguments alone be enough? Will élites and governments go on valuing the liberties and wishes of every human being even when it pays no economic dividends to do so? The masses are right to fear for their future. Even if Donald Trump loses the coming election, millions of Americans have a gut feeling that the system no longer works for them, and they are probably correct.

No matter who wins in November, we will therefore be left with the task of creating a new story for the world. Just as the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution gave birth to the novel ideologies of the twentieth century, so the coming revolutions in biotechnology and information technology are likely to require new visions. In “Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow,” I explore one such novel ideology that currently takes shape in Silicon Valley. If the Liberal Story promised salvation through globalization and liberalization, the new meta-narrative promises salvation through Big Data algorithms. Given enough biometric data and enough computing power, an external algorithm can understand humans better than we understand ourselves, at which point authority will shift away from humans to algorithms, and democratic elections and free markets—as well as authoritarian dictators and rigid ayatollahs—will be as obsolete as chain-mail armor and flint knives.

We already hear experts calling for algorithms to take over in fields such as educating children (an A.I. mentor for every student), combating obesity (your mobile phone will mastermind your diet), and reducing greenhouse-gas emissions (the Internet of Things will take care of that). The potential implications also range widely, from the benign through the creepy to the downright dystopian. I doubt whether the gurus of Silicon Valley have really thought through the full social and political consequences of their ideas, but at least they are thinking in fresh ways. When humans lose their ability to make sense of rapid global change and the old story collapses and leaves a void, we need new ways of thinking, and we need them fast. At present, though, we are still in the nihilist moment of disillusionment and anger, in which people lose faith in the old story but before they have embraced a new one. This is the Trump moment.

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