

Explaining and Resisting Trumpism Post-2020

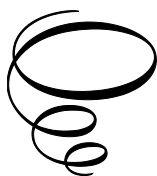
Explaining and Resisting Trumpism Post-2020:

Goodbye Donald

Edited by

Laura Finley and Matthew Johnson

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Explaining and Resisting Trumpism Post-2020: Goodbye Donald

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Edited by Laura Finley and Matthew Johnson

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Matthew Johnson would like to thank his co-editor Laura Finley for her indefatigable efforts on this book and her friendship and mentorship. He would also like to thank the many contributors featured in this book's pages (and will do so in more detail in his introduction). He dedicates this book to Jack Bekerman and his cousin-in-law, who also passed during the final stages of editing. His heart goes out to all victims of the coronavirus—whether they directly succumbed to the disease or suffer due to the social, political, economic, and psychological effects of its spread.

SERIES INTRODUCTION

Peace Studies: Edges and Innovations is a book series edited by PJSA Board Members Michael Minch and Laura Finley. The intent of the series is to fill in gaps in the conflict, peace, justice, and reconciliation literature while presenting texts that are on the cutting edge of the discipline. The series includes both anthologies and monographs that combine academic rigor and accessible prose, making them appealing to scholars, classrooms, activists, practitioners, and policymakers.

Books in the series focus on re-conceptualizing and expanding peace education, looking to and drawing from communities that have been marginalized, overlooked, or forgotten; identifying new understandings of the role that gender, multiculturalism and diversity play in the creation of sustained peace; promoting innovative peacebuilding strategies and movements related to positive peace and justice; exploring the relationship between peace studies and other contemporary problematics, such as climate change and the rights of indigenous peoples; addressing the overlap, interpenetration and symbiosis between peace and conflict studies and other disciplinary areas; and analyzing current issues in criminal justice, with an emphasis on restorative alternatives. Due to the breadth of the topic matter, the series is appropriate for readers of all disciplinary traditions.

In sum, the series aims to promote the most interesting and exciting trends of movements in the field of peace and conflict studies. It is also intended to render more visible the unique contributions of peacebuilders and to promote the mission and goals of the PJSA.

The Peace and Justice Studies Association is a binational non-profit organization with the mission of creating a just and peaceful world through research, education, and action. PJSA is dedicated to bringing together academics, K-12 teachers, and grassroots activists to explore alternatives to violence and share visions and strategies for peacebuilding, social justice, and social change. The organization serves as a professional association for scholars in the field of peace and conflict studies and is the North American affiliate of the International Peace Research Association. Additional information about PJSA can be found at www.peacejusticestudies.org

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INTRODUCTION

While it pains me to admit this both to myself and to the readers of this book, Trumpism has been a sort of “coming of age” phenomenon for me. I turned 30 just a week after the election of the 45th president, and his rhetoric, machinations, and madness would come to define what was a very rocky start to my third decade of life.

Just a few months prior to the election in 2016, I lost my job—and with the loss of my job came the loss of much of my idealism. Back then I didn’t work to make a living as much as I worked to feel alive. I had left my previous job (which had gotten stale to say the least) with no plan as to what I would do next (other than “wander the earth,” to quote Jules from *Pulp Fiction*, and rediscover my passion). Someone selling passion-rediscovery like snake oil reached out to me. At the time I thought it was serendipity, so I ended up moving to another state for another job, another passion, and another misadventure.

The only hope I could cling to in the fall of 2016 was that Trump would not become president—that for all their flaws, the moderate, practical elite would hold the line against the forces of chaos. I was gravely mistaken.

I hate to remind even myself of the enormity of suffering caused or accelerated by the ascension of 45, including immigrant children locked in cages and separated from their parents, attacks on just about every American value and institution worth protecting, and a global pandemic—no need to recount all of it here because we are still living it—but I take it all very personally.

My initial resistance to what this book’s contributors equate to fascism, populism, and/or nationalism came in the form of vigorous—although brief—canvassing for Hillary Clinton in a key swing state, which fell to the red column in 2016 but proved decisive to current President Joe Biden’s victory in 2020. Pennsylvania, for me, was my last youthful stand before all naiveté was stripped away. Not only did I leave the state abruptly upon defeat but was also forced to return to my hometown, which I saw as a dead end. It was either that or face financial ruin due to my extremely high rent and dwindling prospects.

The next phase of my resistance could not begin until I got back on my feet. I struggled with the gatekeepers of unemployment insurance and with my own personal demons, which also tended to function as gatekeepers: I was shattered and lonely. I had left behind everything I had attempted to build for myself outside the comforts (and confines) of home—everything that made me feel like a grown man. I gave it all up after only a year. I was 30, and I felt more lost than I had at 20.

The rage boiled over at my birthday celebration. After three strong drinks, I pined about a woman I had left behind. I didn't know if I would ever see her again. Someone told me to "man up," and my response cost me the two friends who had taken me out. I put a hole in my bedroom wall that night.

I wish I could say that everything improved when I found a new job that summer—not to mention a new love. But it was all just a temporary reprieve from the storm. The job was worse than the last, and when I lost the closest person I had to a father for most of my life—about a year after Trump was elected—the wall of denial came crashing down. Anxiety overwhelmed me. Therapy helped shed light. I had to break away from my job, my relationship, and the false sense of security that had sustained me up to that point. It would be a long journey back to any semblance of inner peace and harmony.

While struggling internally, I felt the need to continue the fight against Trump on another front. Dr. Laura Finley, more than anyone else, made this possible. I cannot express sufficient gratitude to my long-time friend and mentor, who made our 2018 book a reality¹ and the current one as well.

I extend that gratitude to our 2018 contributors and, of course, the current ones, who demand your immediate attention once you get to the bottom of this page (or feel free to skip to the book's contents now).

The contributors of this book represent a wide range of passionate scholars and educators who are not only furthering academic thought but also the greater good. Trump, his ideology, and his millions of follows are not easy matters to address thoughtfully. My hat goes off to anyone who can recognize the humanity of those who would subvert and attempt to overthrow our long-standing democratic tradition—while promoting swift and effective responses.

¹ See Johnson, Matt, and Laura Finley. 2018. *Trumpism: The Politics of Gender in a Post-Propitious America*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

As I write this, I am bracing for another lockdown due to the latest strain of the coronavirus and remembering my previous warning that Trumpism is, perhaps, an even more pernicious virus.² I stand behind that assertion, even though Trump is no longer president. We must do our best to eradicate the infection (and, yes, vaccinate ourselves from it if we can), but we must also have compassion for those infected. They are not monolithic, even if they tend to share certain attributes. And they are not beyond all hope or reason.

As a relatively privileged White man from a lower-middle-class home, I could have found my community among Trumpers, but, with much help from friends, family, books, and teachers, I made a conscious choice to find my community among anyone who would fight for justice. A sense of justice comes with outrage—but not the kind so many aggrieved White folks feel.

Now that my life is a lot more stable, my outrage comes from knowing that the country, indeed the world, can and should be a better place—for all—and that I’m not doing enough to make it so. This can be very frustrating, but it’s also a privilege to feel this way, just as it was a privilege to help produce this book to address some of that outrage.

If you are still reading at this point and you haven’t peered deeper inside the book, I hope that you will. And I hope that you will think about what you can say, write, and do to further justice, peace, and democracy.

With gratitude,
Matthew Johnson

A quick note on terminology: We elected to use “antifa” rather than “Antifa,” as there is no clear preference in the literature. Although there are many versions found online, we used “QAnon” throughout for consistency. We have capitalized “Left” and “Right” when referring to political movements. Authors referred to MAGA in slightly different ways due to the focus of their specific chapter.

² Johnson, Matthew. 2020. “Trumpism is the Real Virus.” *Bainbridge Review*, April 24. Accessed August 19, 2021.
<https://www.bainbridgereview.com/opinion/trumpism-is-the-real-virus-matthew-johnson/>

CHAPTER ONE

WHY SO MANY SUPPORTED TRUMP, WILL CONTINUE TO SUPPORT TRUMPISM, AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

MICHAEL MINCH

Most people in the United States and around the world were shocked that Donald Trump won the presidency in 2016. Historians, political scientists, and others will be engaged in projects of interrogation seeking to discover how that happened for years if not generations to come. It is important to note that he received a shockingly high number of votes in the 2020 election as well. Moreover, hundreds if not thousands of candidates for office, great and small and across the U.S. and the world, will run their campaigns following the model he produced. Indeed, we have already seen this transformation of how to run as a Republican sweep of the political landscape in this country. We have also seen candidates elsewhere run—and govern—as did Trump. Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, for example, stands out in this regard.

I have referred to Trump's election results in 2016 and 2020 as "shocking." I use that word in two respects. First, because his success was deeply surprising to many experts and nonexperts alike. Second, I use the term to indicate a moral shock, a jolt to the moral sensibilities, values, and convictions that most of us hold dear, and can hardly imagine being undermined and mocked with such explicit disdain. Of course, the shock was both more intense and less so in the 2020 election. While he received less votes than Joseph Biden, he did receive over 11 million more votes than he did in 2016 and a larger percentage of votes than in 2016.¹ This surge in

¹ In the 2016 election, Donald Trump won 306 electoral college votes; 62,985,106 popular votes; and 45.9% of the vote. Hillary Clinton secured 232 electoral votes; 65,853,625 popular votes; and 48.0% of the vote. In the 2020 election: Trump won 232 electoral college votes; 74,216,154 popular votes; and 46.9% of the vote. Joe Biden secured 306 electoral college votes; 81,268,924 popular votes; and 51.3% of

his popularity occurred after nearly four years of witness to the horror of his presidency. This fact points us to what I've called Trumpism rather than concern for Trump himself. The deepest worry we must possess and operationalize is not about Trump the individual but Trumpism. I have referred to the "shock" of Trump's electoral successes, but in other ways, his performance was not shocking. The sense of non-shock was (and remains) produced by knowledge about what has been happening in the U.S. for decades in respect to the deterioration and transformation of both U.S. political culture and the Republican Party. Just to the degree one has been aware of the trends and changes, one has had good reason to anticipate a Trump-like candidate and his (or, less likely, her) electoral successes.

I have said that we must continue to worry about Trumpism, so let me say a word about what I mean with this term. I indicate a form of politics that is reactionary and that plays to the fears (drawing from them and producing them) of the Right wing of U.S. political culture. This sector of U.S. political culture has now nearly colonized the entire Republican Party. By "Right" I mean not a set of policy prescriptions that were once closely aligned to the Republican Party, for example, lower taxes, "smaller" government, pro-business law, and an ever-expanding military budget. Rather, I mean, in addition to the fear noted above, the following:

A cultural form which is always aggrieved and outraged, seeing "Whites" and "conservatives" as continuously victimized (e.g., "cancelled").

Always fighting a battle for righteousness against Democratic forces that are evil (the religious language of "evil" is important).

A radical departure from truth both in terms of seeking it or speaking it. This includes a cynicism about truth held by many, i.e., a view that truth simply does not exist in conventional terms or matter in any case.²

A radical departure from knowledge, as a matter of valuing, seeking, or using it, which includes stunning dismissals of scientific conclusions that are settled, conventional, and important.

the vote. Thus, Trump gained 11,231,048 votes in 2020, and Biden won 7,052,770 votes more than Trump. Political scientists draw differing conclusions from these numbers, but we have no need to address that discussion here.

² The question of what truth is, is of course, highly complex. There are various theories of truth for good reasons. Among many fine texts, I recommend most highly, because of its relationship to matters central to this chapter, Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris, eds. 2012. *Truth and Democracy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

A radical departure from moral norms (e.g., truthfulness, compassion, kindness, humility, courage).

By “reactionary” I mean the following:

A cultural and political reaction, now DNA-like in the Republican Party, to conventional politics (often with outrage, resentment, miscomprehension, and deceit) rather than the building of a positive and constructive program of politics. A majority of professional Republicans still embrace some policy preferences that have been attached to the party for decades, but not all of them.³ But, as noted above, Republican politics is no longer about policy in any case.

An authoritarian, even fascist, *zeitgeist* and concomitant set of commitments that are increasing in the party.

A commitment to White supremacy. Indeed, the one thing most obvious about Republicanism today is its desire to retain White supremacy and its fear of losing it.

Antidemocratic sensibilities, commitments, strategies, and tactics. A fear of inclusivity, equality, and freedom for all.

One easily sees the profound overlap of Right-wing politics and reactionary politics. The reactionary as a part of conservatism has been with us since the founding text of conservatism, Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).⁴ In short, by “Trumpism” I mean a reactionary, authoritarian, non-truth-bound, White supremacist form of politics, rooted in cultural forms of fear, resentment, anger, aggrievement, and outrage. These cultural and political dynamics, assemblages, forcefields, ecologies, and technologies are connected to loss and victimization rather than to moral conventions, inclusivity, equality, and hope. They look backward with desire rather than look forward with fortitude. One can easily see by my brief summary of the Right-wing reactionary politics that now define the Republican Party and the professional Republicans who both shape and channel this cultural-political form that it preceded Trump and shaped him more than it is his

³ What jumps out as a matter of jettisoning historic Republican policy, is any pretense to “fiscal conservatism” or “fiscal responsibility.” As a matter of what most defined Republicans, they once cared, or pretended to care, about debts and deficits. Clearly, no longer.

⁴ I highly recommend Corey Robin. 2018. *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*, second edition. New York: Oxford University Press.

production. He is a symptom more than a cause, epiphenomenal more than phenomenal, a byproduct more than a producer.

So far, my claims have been ordinary. There is a robust literature that continues to grow rapidly that documents all I have said to this point with great empirical care. My summary might be more or less the standard view of Trump and Trumpism among political scientists and political theorists. But having laid this groundwork I now transition to a set of claims that are less conventional, or at least less discussed in relation to the question of how Trump came to political power and what can be done to keep Trumpism/reactionary politics from happening again. Specifically, I will explicate four conditions that produced Trump's rise and the politics under review. The first two are epistemological, the third is ethical, and the fourth is an epistemological/moral/political hybrid. When we understand what purchased and fueled Trump's political success, we will be able to better understand what we must do to resist and defeat reactionary politics. I now turn to these four conditions. I introduce them together in summary form and will then explicate each.

First, I note that the first three conditions are all essential to produce transformational social and political change. This is to say I will present here the criteria/conditions in a positive register before I explain how their absence produces the cultural and political geography that births and nurtures reactionary politics.

1. Sufficient information and knowledge held by a sufficient number of critical actors relevant to the question, project, or hope at hand.⁵
2. Sufficient intelligence held by these actors so that they know what the information they possess means and can transform information into knowledge so that knowledge is not only collected but produced. Knowing what constitutes warrant and legitimacy, and what constitutes the warranted and legitimate use of information and knowledge, are critically important features of this criterion. This means that critical, analytical, and analogical thinking, along with standard conceptions of evidence, probability, argument, and fact, are necessary as means of engagement with information and communication about it.
3. Sufficient moral seriousness. It is not enough for actors to be sufficiently informed, knowledgeable, and intelligent. They must also be sufficiently committed to equality and freedom for all, possess a robust sense of justice as fairness, compassion, honesty, humility, courage, and other

⁵ My argument depends on a compelling account of sufficiency. I cannot explicate fully in this short chapter, what would constitute this sufficiency, but I will say enough to support the argument this chapter makes.

virtues that transcend the mere ordinary. Most people demonstrate these virtues (and others) in modestly when it is not costly to do so. The moral seriousness my analysis and theory demands goes beyond such conventional and minimal morality. While it does not call for heroic morality, it calls for moral virtue performed in some costly circumstances (e.g., refusing to obey immoral orders in the workplace, refusing to lie for the president, or to achieve an unjust electoral outcome, or to advance one's chances at winning an electoral campaign).

In short, the presence of the three criteria/conditions above are necessary to produce transformative and important social and political change. Likewise, the absence of these criteria produces conditions where corruption and unjust cultural and political artifacts have the space and freedom to take hold and grow—and do so rapidly and dangerously—at least up to the point where these criteria are put into effect sufficiently so as to slow the growth of reactionary politics and begin to transform and defeat such politics (and the cultural forms in which such politics are rooted). My contention is that Trump, and much more importantly, Trumpism, or reactionary politics, fail to embody these criteria.

In addition, I wish to explicate one more condition that underlies Trump's support and the reactionary politics that has enabled him:

4. What Chris Ladd calls “White socialism.”⁶ There is a complex of ways that middle class and wealthy U.S. citizens benefit from the tax code and other governmental means of subsidizing their financial arrangements (e.g., home ownership, access to health care). These means of subsidization amount to hundreds of billions of dollars given to mostly White citizens in ways that go unacknowledged. Those who support Trump cannot imagine themselves as recipients of “socialism” or “government handouts,” and, therefore, did not, for example, vote for Bernie Sanders. Rather, they receive government assistance in ways they fail to recognize and can then live within a discourse and mythology of self-reliance. This allows them to lean against the kind of progressive politics they identify as “socialism” or “liberalism” (sometimes even “communism”) when they see assistance made available to those who are less wealthy and those who are disproportionately people of color.

I will name this criterion “hidden White advantage,” and it is the hidden nature of this advantage, hidden to those who receive it, that is the key to its

⁶ Chris Ladd. 2017. “Unspeakable Realities Block Universal Health Coverage in America.” *Forbes*, 13 March 2017. Accessed July 21, 2021. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chrisladd/2017/03/13/unspeakable-realities-block-universal-health-coverage-in-the-us/?sh=55cba6ea186a>

power. One can feel free to resent those who receive benefits “unfairly” when unaware of one’s own receipt of similar or identical benefits.

These four criteria or conditions (the first three as deficits of the positive characteristics I’ve outlined) are causes of support for Trump and Trumpism/reactionary politics. It remains for me to explicate these four conditions (particularly the first three) and explain their causal relationship to Trumpism. My final task will be to address ways we can and must produce the conditions that will defeat these causes so that just, peaceful, virtuous, and hopeful politics can replace the politics of reaction, fear, resentment, and cynicism that have become characteristic of our historical moment and threaten our future.

First Deficit: Insufficient Information and Knowledge

First, I note the need for “sufficient information and knowledge held by a sufficient number of critical actors relevant to the question, project, or hope at hand.” Let me begin with the matter of “critical actors.” Readers might suspect I have experts and/or governing officials in mind with this terminology, but I do not. I am thinking of ordinary citizens. Of course, some persons have outsized influence and what they think, believe, and do is of great influence and consequence. But I do not think the defeat of reactionary politics and the health of democracy rests on the hands and voices of these persons alone. And in any case, they too are produced by cultural and social forces. Yes, I wish that Republican lawmakers and professional Republican thought-shapers in the news media and elsewhere would have different opinions, judgments, and communications. And I harbor this same wish for no small number of professional Democrats also. But these individuals have come to embrace the views and commitments they have through larger cultural and social systems that involve citizens more broadly. So, concerning ourselves with critical actors who shape antidemocratic politics *directly* is crucially important, but these individuals are not the only critical actors. In a country where we could be a democracy, and many of us aspire to democracy—all of us are, at least potentially, critical actors. So, let us imagine the concept of a critical actor as ranging from more to less critical along a spectrum, but let us not engage in elitism or epistocratic illusion (let alone, desire). I have no interest in arguing that only a small percentage of us matter when it comes to our politics. From the perspective of democracy, in fact, we would want to expand the number of citizens who are critical actors, and one way to do that would be to

communicate with them as though their judgments and actions are indeed critically important.

Second, a word about information and knowledge. The distinction between the first condition and the second is important. It is one thing to have access to information and knowledge (first condition); it is another thing to be knowledgeable (also, first condition); and it is yet another thing to know what to do with the information and knowledge one has (second condition). My students can amass more information in a weekend via the internet than their great grandparents would have amassed in their lifetimes, but this wealth of information they might acquire does not make them “smarter” than their great grandparents. Nonetheless, while simply having information and access to knowledge is not enough, it is necessary. To speak of the necessity of information and knowledge is to implicitly invoke several concerns. Among them are questions of how we can determine what are truthful and nontruthful claims and conclusions. Also, the question of the meaning of truth arises. What might it mean to say, “this claim is truthful?” Also, the question of the relationship between truth and power arises. Is “truth” essentially what the powerful say it is (as Thrasymachus and Foucault argued)?⁷ I will engage some of these matters momentarily.

Third, as I have noted, the question of what is meant by “sufficient” and “sufficiently” must be addressed. I have used this term in a few different connections in summarizing the criteria above. I will offer an account of sufficiency that will hold in all the respects or areas of concern where I claim sufficiency to matter. My discussion of information, knowledge, and sufficiency will be a tapestry rather than a linear process where three distinct concepts are presented and explicated. I will keep the concept simple, although I note that below the simple account I will offer, a complexity of mathematical probabilities and emergent data reside.

Fourth, my use of “White socialism” or what I will call “hidden White advantage” will be brief. I reject the idea of “White socialism” because it depends on the notion that socialism names a set of economic benefits

⁷ Thrasymachus is a character in Plato’s *Republic* who is an interlocutor with and opponent of Socrates and seems to have been a sophist at work in Athens (although from Chalcedon). See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*. Colin Gordon, ed. (Harvester Press, 1980). Foucault’s thought is complex on this matter and associating him with Thrasymachus as I have done here can be read as a bit unfair to him. But his argument about the relationship between truth and power is, as I have indicated, roughly that power produces truth, and in any case his thought is well worth investigating in this and other respects.

closely aligned with, or a part of, the welfare state. But this is an anemic understanding of socialism, which is, among other things, not simply interested in redirecting wealth and benefits in reaction to needs experienced by the poor. Socialism, in fact, names a comprehensive project of building a deep democracy of just and peaceful means to produce human security for all. It is less interested in redistributing wealth in piecemeal fashion than it is in building societies that produce wealth in egalitarian ways in the first place. My caveat aside, even though I do not like Ladd's use of "White socialism," more importantly, I take the point of his essay to heart. With this summary of what I will offer below, we now dig a little deeper into each condition, and connect them to Trumpism and reactionary politics.

First, to the matter of "sufficient information and knowledge held by a sufficient number of critical actors relevant to the question, project, or hope at hand." Let me begin with a claim. We are in an epistemic crisis. Peter Kaufman writes that we are witness to

sustained, systematic attacks against fact—against traditional sources of knowledge, evidence, and truth... Our media and information ecosystem—television, radio, the Internet—is now flooded, often purposefully, with falsehoods, bad information, and errors. The RAND corporation has given a name to this phenomenon, one marked by "... a blurring of the line between opinion and fact; the increasing relative volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience over fact; [and] declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information"; they call it 'truth decay.'"⁸

Hannah Arendt reminded us that when exploring the depravity of twentieth-century fascism, totalitarianism, and the "banality of evil" present in these forms, that the "ideal subject of totalitarian rule... is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., standards of thought) no longer exist."⁹ George Orwell

⁸ Peter B. Kaufman. 2021. *The New Enlightenment and the Fight to Free Knowledge*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 89. See, Jennifer Kavanaugh and Michael D. Rich. 2019. *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation. The conclusion that we in the United States (if not elsewhere) are in an epistemic crisis is broadly shared. For example, see Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. 2018. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁹ Arendt quoted in Michiko Kakutani. 2018. *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 11; and in Kaufman, 89. See also, Lee MacIntyre. 2018. *Post-Truth*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

wrote that the “really frightening thing about totalitarianism is not that it commits ‘atrocities’ but that it attacks the concept of objective truth: it claims to control the past as well as the future.”¹⁰ Three immediate problems are related to this epistemic crisis, each a crisis in its own right. One is the concomitant distrust of, and attacks upon, expertise that are so prevalent. We see this in numerous spheres daily but most obviously in the rejection of and sneering anger toward medical professionals, scientists of all kinds, and the academy in general. A second is that ignorance spreads and deepens ignorance. A very aggressive regression is ongoing and seems unlikely to end soon. Like wildfire fueled by dry tinder and strong winds, ignorance begets ignorance in breadth and depth with fecundity. Third is the destructive nature of falsehood. The misinformation and lies and the general state of ignorance altogether are not benign. They destroy institutions, families, and individual lives. Not only our political culture but also our entire social fabric, from religion to education and everything in between, is being torn asunder. This is where Arendt’s comment hits hardest. It is one thing for professional ideologues to produce falsehood and ignorance to further their perceived mission (and become wealthy doing so). It is another still for otherwise ordinary and decent people to be transformed into persons who mirror the cynicism and nihilism that is the stock in trade of those who manipulate them.¹¹

Before I move to the matter of sufficiency, I will say one more thing about the meaning of a “critical actor” as I am using the term. I have stated that I do not limit the concept to experts or elites, and that under the premise and aspiration of democracy, all citizens would be treated as critical actors. But here I want to add two senses in which a person may be critical to a process, decision, or outcome. The first is simply that in the push and pull of politics, including votes cast for candidates and referenda but not limited to voting, persons are critically important to the degree they work together and form a force more powerful than oppositional forces. This kind of cruciality is what lies behind the excited or anxious appeal for people to vote, and the anger and horror felt by those who are offended by voting restrictions. One way to be a critical actor is to throw your lot in with others who desire the same

¹⁰ In Linda M. G. Zerilli. 2012. “Truth and Politics,” Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris, eds. *Truth and Democracy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 54.

¹¹ Of course, any list of persons who participate in the cynicism, nihilism, and manipulation would be long, but some names are all too easy to register, for instance. Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Laura Ingram, Tucker Carlson, Rupert Murdoch, Roger Ailes, Kevin McCarthy, and Donald Trump, among them.

objective and contribute to the win. One might contribute in any number of ways apart from voting, of course. One might help shape a vision, communicate a policy, or do tedious, backbreaking, or even dangerous work as a critical actor. One is critical because bending history in the right direction is the result of multitudinous efforts large and small, celebrated (or reviled) and hidden. It is in this sense, that democracy's beckoning is for all to be critical actors.

The second respect in which a person might be a critical actor is in regard to how one can influence the thought and actions of others. Experts and elites often perform this kind of cruciality, but the power of one's contribution is not necessarily tied to one's wealth, celebrity, expertise, or media exposure. Sometimes history hinges on a cluster of ordinariness: ordinary people, ordinary motivations, and ordinary actions that add up to something beyond the ordinary. Serendipity sometimes occurs.¹² I imagine that when Margret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has," she meant this in both of my senses of "critical actor." So, sometimes some persons must "step up" and use their considerable power to be a fulcrum, a bridge, a conscience, a leader, and do what only a few others can do. We expect elected officials to legislative and executive branches of government, and religious leaders, for example, to act in this way. These persons are critical actors to be sure, but they never act alone.

With a sense of epistemic crisis and the meaning of a critical actor in mind, let us turn to the question of what would count as sufficiency when thinking of the need for sufficient information, knowledge, and critical actors. For a deep look at the meaning of sufficiency in the context I am using the term (unlike its use in natural science), I would make considerable use of the Hong-Page Theorem and the Condorcet Jury Theorem. I will summarize each as follows.

The Hong-Page Theorem: Under the right conditions, cognitive diversity among participants in a collective decision-making process contributes to that process making right decisions better than increasing individual participants' reliabilities or abilities.¹³

¹² On the role of serendipity in building peace, and to my mind, with lessons for political action, see John Paul Lederach. 2005. *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹³ Scot Page and Lu Hong. 2001. "Problem Solving by Heterogeneous Agents," *Journal of Economic Theory*, 97: 123-63.

Condorcet's Jury Theorem: If citizens vote independently and if the average voter is sufficiently well motivated and more likely to be correct than not, then as a democracy becomes larger (i.e., the number of voters become larger), according to the law of large numbers, the probability that the *demos* will be right increases, even to the point of 100%.¹⁴

Neither of these theorems are generally used to explicate sufficiency, but my use of them in this way is not entirely novel because sufficiency, as it concerns us here, is closely related to gaining a majority. The mathematical and statistical work that supports these theorems is considerable, but they cash out in easily understood claims that are buttressed with ample empirical evidence. The Hong-Page Theorem names a discovery that is also found in a literature written for nonexperts, now often called the “wisdom of the crowds” thesis or perspective.¹⁵ It is also, to my mind, related to what we are now learning about swarm intelligence and resiliency.¹⁶ For a system, organization, or process, for example, to be resilient, one necessary ingredient is widely distributed assets. One doesn’t want all the eggs in one basket, so to speak. Condorcet’s Theorem was put forward with clarity in a famous article by Brian Barry. He writes,

If we have a voting body of a thousand, each member of which is right on average fifty-one percent of the time, what is the probability in any particular instance that a fifty-one percent majority has the right answer? The answer, rather surprisingly perhaps, is better than two to one (69%). Moreover, if the required majority is kept at fifty-one percent and the number of voters is

¹⁴ Marquis de Condorcet. 1776. “Essay on the Application of Mathematics to the Theory of Decision-Making,” in Keith M. Baker, ed., *Condorcet: Selected Writings*. New York: Macmillan Press, 48-49.

¹⁵ See James Surowiecki. 2004. *The Wisdom of the Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economics, Societies, and Nations*. New York: Doubleday; Cass R. Sunstein. 2006. *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge*. New York: Oxford University Press. Hélène Landemore (2013) uses both the Hong-Page Theorem and Condorcet’s Theorem richly in her, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Aboul Ella Hassanien and Eid Emary. 2016. *Swarm Intelligence: Principles, Advances, and Applications*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press; James Haywood Rolling, Jr. 2013. *Swarm Intelligence: What Nature Teaches Us About Shaping Creative Leadership*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Rick Falkvinge. *Swarmwise: The Tactical Manual to Changing the World*. North Charleston, NC: CreateSpace Publishing Platform; Andrew Zollli and Ann Marie Healy. 2013. *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*. New York: Simon and Schuster; and Judith Rodin. 2014. *The Resilience Dividend: Being Strong in a World Where Things Go Wrong*. New York: Public Affairs Books.

raised to ten thousand... the probability that the majority has the right answer rises to virtual unity (99.97%).¹⁷

What drives the Condorcet Jury Theorem is the law of large numbers. For example, if you toss a coin a relatively few times, say 100 times, the split between heads and tails may be 58:42, which is a considerable deviation from 50:50. But if you toss the coin, say 1000 times, and the split comes to 520:480, you have an outcome much closer to 50:50.

So too, with many voters (or critical actors, in other regards). The larger the number, the more probable that the group outcome will mirror the right decision/outcome if each voter is 51% likely to be right. Of course, and importantly, this theorem works in the same way if each voter (or actor) is 51% likely to be wrong.¹⁸

As to a sufficient number of critical actors who are sufficiently knowledgeable and have sufficient information, I take the Hong-Page Theorem and the Condorcet Jury Theorem to have the following value. Among actors in an association, let's say a society, where at least some minimal democratic features are available (e.g., the right to vote among nearly all adult citizens, the presence of a free news media, the availability of information and knowledge to all)—small differences can have large outcomes in the case of large numbers. "Sufficient" need only mean that a small majority with a small adherence to x rather than y is satisfactory, if x is preferred, or understood to be better or truer, than y . "Satisfactory" here means satisfactory so as to establish sufficiency. An example may be seen in concerns about living wages driving inflation and the consequent inability to ever escape what end up being, in effect, insufficient wages. A common complaint against raising an hourly minimum wage to a livable wage, around \$15 to \$20 in the U.S., is that it will make goods and services too expensive as employers must raise the costs for them to the public to cover the wages. Thus, a vicious cycle is the result. But this complaint misunderstands at least two things. First, let's say you own a popular and successful hamburger franchise. The average burger is \$3.00. You've been paying your employees less than \$15 an hour, but now the law stipulates you must pay them \$15 at a minimum. You now must cover the difference and raise the price of your burgers to do so. Does each burger now cost, on average, \$4.00 or even \$5.00? No. This is why: the law of large numbers. Since you run your

¹⁷ Brian Barry. 1964. "The Public Interest," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 38: 9. 90

¹⁸ See Robert E. Goodin. 2005. *Reflective Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 97-108.

business well, and it is popular and successful, you have many customers. You do the math and learn (perhaps to your great surprise) that if you raise the price of a hamburger by 15 cents, you'll cover the new wages. How many customers will you lose because what was a \$3.00 burger now costs \$3.15? Chances are—none. The second observation often missed by critics of minimum wages, is that the inflationary motivation of capitalists to raise prices is not generally driven by market necessity but by avarice. We typically see, for example, that when the cost of houses rises, rental units become more expensive also. But there is no intrinsic reason for this. One is not related to the other except for the artifice that landlords see an opportunity to make more money. It does not matter if greed is widely distributed or even if it is systematized. It is still greed. My example, in concrete material terms, means that raising the cost of a hamburger by 15 cents is sufficient insofar as it meets the need under review (paying for new higher wages) and that 15 cents an hour is a small thing that makes a big difference, i.e., employees who were once living below the poverty line and unable to find decent housing, can now find rentals that are affordable, and live materially decent lives—so long as landlords do not raise the cost of those rentals simply because they can.

In each case of the question of sufficiency, there is a tipping point. It is almost always hidden, but it is there. At some point a person who is only 49% likely to be right, might become 50% likely, and then, again, 51% likely to be right. We can substitute “sufficiently informed” for “right.” At some point someone who is insufficiently informed becomes sufficiently informed. Why? A threshold is crossed: a book is read, a conversation is had, a tragedy or victory is experienced. Something changes, however small, and it nudges someone from an opinion or vote or action for x to an opinion, vote, or action for y . At a societal scale, what is sufficient to overcome the problem of ignorance is to do just enough to inform just enough persons with just enough knowledge that just enough thresholds are crossed. Everyone who crosses a threshold from x to y is a critical actor in this sense even though most people do not recognize this in themselves or others.

One reason Trump and reactionary politics was and is widely supported is because of widespread ignorance among too many citizens in the U.S. On this front, strategies and tactics to inform and build knowledge among these citizens should keep the value of the Hong-Page Theorem and the Condorcet Jury Theorem, the law of large numbers, and the meaning of sufficiency I have sussed out of this theoretical and empirical work in mind. To the question of how we make information and knowledge available to Trump supporters in ways that will grab and hold their attention, I will say

that those who do not support Trump have so far failed to give adequate answers. It is *not* simply a matter of giving better arguments, and it *is* a matter of connecting with people in respect to emotions, sentiments, and shared values. But once relationships of openness and trust are created based primarily on shared emotions, sentiments, and values—space is opened for the sharing of information and knowledge too—if presented in concrete, not abstract, terms.

Second Deficit: Insufficient Intelligence, Critical Thinking, and Truth

The second condition I summarized above is about sufficient intelligence, the ability to employ critical, analytical, and analogical thinking to make good use of the information and knowledge one has. I now address this challenge. The U.S. is an information-soaked society, and, although falsehood, misinformation, and manipulation are profoundly important problems we must solve, there remains easy access to a wealth of truthful and important information and knowledge so that even Trump supporters can frequently stumble upon it. The question that now concerns us is how we might address the problem of persons who embrace reactionary politics because they suffer a deficit of intelligence. I worry about my use of the term “intelligence” here. On its face, it seems nothing more than a careless and callous slander. To diminish the worry that I have resorted to lazy slander, I note two things. First, I use “intelligence” as a brisk way of referencing a complex of ideas that include, as I’ve noted, critical, analytical, and analogical thinking—the ability to think well by the standard of ordinary conventions—as I summarized above. There are other ways of being intelligent (e.g., “emotional intelligence”) that I leave aside. Second, we are all both intelligent and rather unintelligent (just as we are all knowledgeable and ignorant)—just about different things. There are adults who believe wild conspiracy theories and unsupportable notions that would make a 12-year-old blush—who also hold down demanding jobs and otherwise seem to navigate the practical difficulties of life.

That said, part of what makes support for Trump and Trumpism shocking to most of us is that such support flies in the face of what a seemingly modest grasp of intelligence would allow. One must be aware, of course, that while ignorance and a lack of intelligence is often genuine (we must at least at times conclude it is genuine, when all indicators point in that direction), it is also the case that (as I noted above) it is now normal to feign lack of understanding among those in Republican circles. I mention this pretense

because the strategies of addressing ignorance and lack of intelligence are only partly about increasing knowledge and helping people to become better critical thinkers. There are moral problems at stake also, and they demand discourse about morality (as will be discussed below). However, morality aside for now, how might we interrogate and understand the problem I am calling a lack of intelligence? And what might we do about it?

Above I said that the best response to ignorance is not giving better arguments. But under the rubric of improved critical thinking, I will say that teaching people to recognize and give an argument is important, and this is why. Packed into the idea of an argument's integrity are the necessities of understanding the concepts of evidence, probability, fact, fallacy, falsification, deduction, induction, theory, and rationality altogether. Of course, persons who have little exposure to these tools will have little sense that they might want them, let alone need them. Moreover, persons who live in a subculture wherein their opposition to critical thinking is inculcated, cultivated, and rewarded will find such rationality as a threat, perhaps even "evil." No one sharing a conversation with a Trump supporter will find a receptive interlocutor who says in good faith, "Yes, please!" to the question, "Can I offer you a lecture on critical thinking and argument?" Nonetheless, I think the deficit of intelligence and critical thinking to be important—and subject to be addressed in the following way.

When discussing ignorance above, I declared that building a relationship with a partisan of reactionary politics, based on shared emotive and sentimental judgments, and on the deeply related basis of shared values, is necessary. But if a relationship gets underway, and becomes increasingly mutually respectful, it will open up to risk, vulnerability, windows of humility, and the chance to hear one another make increasingly challenging claims. These are dynamics of friendship, of course, but also of seeking to be a helpful person to another person. They are markers of compassion and decency too. Indeed, they are traits demonstrated by people who care about the world and other human beings. Under such a description of relationship-building, information and knowledge can be shared, indeed, perhaps such a relationship requires the sharing of new information and knowledge. And part of the knowledge that might be shared can be knowledge about critical thinking and the meaning of intelligence. Again, and importantly, this is about small steps that produce big outcomes, crossing major thresholds that may be invisible to everyone.

This leads us to the question of truth. I begin by modifying a claim about justice made by Joshua Cohen:

As for the anxiety that comes with the concern to get truth right: that comes with the territory of taking truth seriously. We can live with it, should not live without it, and should not enlist philosophy to provide therapy for that anxiety.¹⁹ It is necessary to take questions about truth and truthfulness seriously, and yet doing so leads one into highly contested territory. For our purposes in this chapter, I can avoid the demanding philosophical questions that attend to the meaning of truth. But not because they do not lurk underneath the discussion and would eventually need to be engaged if space allowed. A critically important part of the epistemic crisis that gives rise to Trumpism and reactionary politics is (1) the misunderstanding of what might properly constitute truth (under any theory of truth) and (2) the belief apparently held by many Trump supporters that there is no such thing as truth, or truth that can be known, in the political world. Any given Trump supporter might hold either of these views, or both of them. Moreover, while many of his supporters would claim to believe in social and political truth (what we might call this worldly truth), they engage in action that betrays such a claim. That is, while purporting to believe in truth, they perform epistemic nihilism.²⁰

Truth has always had a troubled relationship to politics, to be sure, as Hanna Arendt and others have made clear.²¹ But to jettison any effort to grapple with truth as a necessary guide for politics is to invite disaster. This is not to say that efforts at explicating and protecting truth are always valuable or even benign, as often such efforts are destructive and have frequently been cruel. A challenging paradox is this. On one hand, responding to the epistemic crisis I've noted and to the needs identified in my first two criteria addressed to the problematics of ignorance and lack of intelligence/critical thinking necessarily leads us to consider the meaning of truth and truthfulness and its importance and/or threat. On the other hand, to take truth and truthfulness seriously is to court the possibility of hubris, self-righteousness, dogmatism, the foreclosure of valuable inclusivity and diversity, and the production of stalemate, conflict, and even at times, violence, in social and political affairs. Wendy Brown calls one side of this tension the "Nixon problem," but we could also call it the Bush, Jr. problem

¹⁹ I have quoted Cohen verbatim except I have substituted the word "truth" for the word "justice." Joshua Cohen,

"Truth and Public Reason," in Elkins and Norris, *op. cit.*, 250.

²⁰ We cannot discuss it here, but an interesting irony is this: Surely a large number of Trump supporters disavow this worldly truth while believing passionately in other-worldly truth. A startling example of this is a woman who claimed in July 2021 that she was vaccinated against COVID 19 "by Jesus Christ" and, therefore, did not need a pharmaceutically produced vaccine.

²¹ Hannah Arendt. 1968. "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future*. New York, 223-59.

and, most relevantly and acutely, the Trump problem. She calls the other side of the dilemma the “Plato problem” i.e., “governance by truth,” the “moral agenda problem, the religion problem, but also the rationality and even technology problem.”²² How to walk the tightrope between these dangers is a question that should beckon our careful attention. How do we insert the desire for truth into public reason while avoiding the dangers present in that insertion?

Various strategies have been put forward to this end.²³ As I have said often in this chapter, we do not have time to interrogate and evaluate them. But I do suggest that we scale up our discussions of truth in relation to public reason and politics from the simplest claims to which we can agree and see how far we can get. For example, we might begin with the notion that just insofar as we might be able to know truth generally, and, therefore, in principle, in one case or another—it would be a good thing to know it. Second, we might agree that whatever truth might be, it entails *accuracy* when accuracy can be had. Third, we might agree that since we know accuracy can be known in many contexts, we ought to pursue fidelity to accuracy under criteria that are consensually understood to provide for this pursuit (e.g., empirical, scientific, academic, and journalistic standards). Fourth, we might agree that as we pursue accuracy, we can concomitantly come to embrace aspects of truth just as we share agreement about the accuracies under review. Fifth, we could come to agree that while rival conceptions of truth are worth interrogation—and at least of possible use—some conceptions of truth are not. Sixth, at this stage perhaps we could agree that truth is worth vigorous pursuit, even if we do not agree on all the means of that pursuit and we do not agree, precisely, on what we mean by “truth” (are prayer, scientific research, Quaker—like deliberation and discernment toward consensus, or Artificial Intelligence and certain algorithms legitimate means for the pursuit of political truth?). Seventh, maybe we could also agree that there is a positive correlation, and perhaps even an intrinsically necessary relation, between truth and truthfulness such that we are bound to various modes of inquiry and communication if we agree to the forgoing, such that we would in fact, seek to build mechanisms, protocols, institutions, and more, that seek to explicate, protect, and use these modes of inquiry and communication. This endeavor would then also

²² Wendy Brown, “Speaking Truth to Power, in Elkins and Norris, 88. The dangers of so-called “moral agendas” and of religions are often overdetermined in my view, but they certainly are not fictitious.

²³ For a rich discussion of many of the options before us, I recommend Elkin and Norris, *op. cit.*

produce a policing function, seeking to identify and hold accountable those who do not adhere to the forgoing. In short, there are tensions between truth and truthfulness on one side, and public reason and politics on the other, but we should (and can) work hard to diminish and minimize them, even if we know we can never eliminate all of them. Notice that in this paragraph I have referred to the “we” who might share the build-up of interest in and work for truth and truthfulness. I will not offer a discussion of the complexities of how this “we” might be constituted but will mention that in a democracy, it would entail a very large set of persons, potentially all of them.

In conclusion, the commitment to truth requires a number of things in terms of epistemology and in terms of morality (here I faintly echo Rawls’s distinction between the rational and the reasonable). It involves, for example, a commitment to accuracy and a refusal to lie or deceive. It also requires a number of sustained actions, including the effort to seek truthful information and knowledge.²⁴ I end with a note about one of the requirements. It is ordinary to think of truth as right *doxa*. But it is also right *praxis*. There are virtues of truth and practices of truth, and they are necessary not only for people to see the truth but also for truth to *be*. That is, truth is constituted by *praxis* just as it is constituted by *doxa*. Jeremy Elkins writes about Burke in this way: “The point of politics for Burke was not to tally opinions, but to test them, not simply to empower political will, but in large part to evaluate it, and in this, a respect for truth was crucial. ‘Such is the power of truth,’ he remarked.”²⁵ Wittgenstein said that the truth can only be spoken by one who is *at home* in it.²⁶ We can only know truth to the degree that we live truth. *Doxa* and *praxis* are not independently related to truth, connected only in parallel, so to speak. Rather, they are intrinsically related such that each is incoherent without the other. The person who lives in good faith in relationship to truth, i.e., the one who seeks to know and abide by truth, lives in a hermeneutical—and practical—circle. It is a virtuous circle wherein one observes the world, and then moves to reflection and analysis. This analysis is social in character, not an isolated mental act of an

²⁴ See Bernard Williams. 2002. *Truth and Truthfulness*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, Chapter 6; and José Medina. 2013. *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*. New York: Oxford University Press, 3-55, 90-185, 250-315.

²⁵ Jeremy Elkins, “Concerning Practices of Truth,” in Elkins and Norris, *op. cit.*, 29.

²⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, eds. 1980 Peter Winch, trans. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 35.