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Anger and Identity in the Divided States of America

Abstract: Pankaj Mishra's *Age of Anger* provides a paradigm for making sense of the current global rise of authoritarian populist movements that sanction violence and social unrest. This paper uses Mishra's framework and primary themes to illuminate the extraordinary 2020 U.S. Presidential election and its aftermath, including a mob attack on the U.S. Capitol building: a violent attempt by angry loyalists of Donald Trump to stop a peaceful transfer of power. After presenting evidence that Trumpism is a unique form of populism, the work closes with some discussion about how to mitigate such movements.

In his provocative work *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, Pankaj Mishra provides an extremely useful comparative-historical framework for making sense of recent events, placing them within a coherent set of broad and long-term trends.[1] Specifically, he presents a striking investigation of current, shared global experiences – e.g., the rise of right-wing extremism, violence, social and political unrest – that define an era dominated by universal angst, resentment and outrage, a time when divisive messages are magnified by newer forms of social media that fuel seemingly intractable culture wars, both within and between nations.

I will use Mishra's framework and primary themes to illuminate the extraordinary 2020 U.S. Presidential election and its aftermath, including a shocking mob attack on the U.S. Capitol building: a violent attempt by angry loyalists of Donald Trump to stop a peaceful transfer of power to his newly elected rival, Joe Biden. This main focus is further related to other such major events around the world, including some suggested by Mishra's book.

This paper starts with an overview of how Mishra's arguments predict and then explain the rise of what may be called 'Trumpism' and its persistence in the current global context. In some ways Trump and Trumpism – an authoritarian, right-wing form of populism – fit remarkably well within the paradigm put forward in *Age of Anger*, yet I will argue that in some aspects they are notably unusual and uniquely American. Trumpism's potential threat to U.S. democracy deserves particular attention because of the real and symbolic weight of America as a model for liberal democracies everywhere (a very different sense of 'American exceptionalism' than the version usually sold by the political right). Finally, I contend we must address something that Mishra and most public intellectuals do not: what practical steps can we take to unravel the threads of dangerous populist movements? In the U.S. case, can the most disruptive parts of movements like Trumpism be dismantled?

1. History of the Present: Sowing the Seeds of 'Negative Solidarities'

Mishra's basic point is that the present global rise of combative, increasingly violent forms of right-wing populism was set up quite some time ago. Viewed in their proper context, the vicious attacks of far-right nationalist groups on their own democratic governments, their national institutions, and their fellow citizens are neither sudden nor random. Rather than bewildering, they are instead predictable.

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[1] Punkaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017).

What is today justifiably called a worldwide, modern 'crisis of democracy' has been brewing, says Mishra, since the eighteenth century, when new and powerful forms of 'liberalism' took hold. While Enlightenment thinkers began to peddle a historically radical ideology focused on universal, individual human rights – including the entitlement of common people to happiness and personal fulfillment – a new class of industrial capitalists simultaneously began to show the power of mass production to supply common people with a wealth of material goods while preaching the gospel of economic modernism and trade liberalization. In short, what we are experiencing now is effectively the result of the failure of Enlightenment liberalism to deliver the goods as promised after it was widely embraced as the way forward. Or more precisely, Mishra argues that, in comprehensive terms, liberalism has brought great benefits to a relative few, mostly in the West. Global capitalism has distributed its bounty in a highly unequal way, while the arrival of globalized social media has made it possible to spread, exponentially, the lifestyles and assured privileges of the 'haves' along with the frustrated disillusion and disappointment of the 'have-nots'.[2]

What Enlightenment liberalism has bequeathed to everyone is a "culture of individualism" that, Mishra says, "went universal, in ways barely anticipated by Tocqueville, or Adam Smith, who first theorized about a 'commercial society' of self-seeking individuals", and he continues:

> Thus, individuals with very different pasts find themselves herded by capitalism and technology into a common present, where grossly unequal distributions of wealth and power have created humiliating new hierarchies. This proximity, or what Hannah Arendt called 'negative solidarity,' is rendered more claustrophobic by digital communications, the improved capacity for envious and resentful comparison, and the commonplace, and therefore compromised, quest for individual distinction and singularity.[3]

Whereas those bound by these 'negative solidarities' could once count on traditional community or family ties to absorb the shocks of modernity and technology, they now feel left behind, exposed, disregarded and disaffected.

Mishra also disputes as myth the narrative that liberal modernism has mostly proceeded peacefully in the West or that, for example, U.S. progress should stand as a model for the rest of the world. Instead, he recounts a brutal slog into modernity: social Darwinism, race wars, crimes against ethnic and religious minorities, and so on. Thus, Mishra contends that "the history of modernization is largely one of carnage and bedlam rather than peaceful convergence"[4] and he locates the birth of modern fascism not with Hitler or Mussolini but with their obscure and inspirational predecessor, Gabriele D'Annunzio, a self-proclaimed messiah who briefly held an area of Italy during a power vacuum following WWI. D'Annunzio's crusade encompasses all of the hallmarks of today's authoritarian, nationalist counter-movements: a return to some former greatness, a violent purification of society from the perceived abuses and inequalities imposed by a decadent 'elite', and purging masculinity of any flaccid weakness.

As promises of Enlightenment liberalism fail to materialize, Mishra suggests that "the old West-dominated world order is giving way to an apparent global disorder",[5] while returning to 'what was' is not a real option. Essentially, the world is in for a rough ride. We can expect the continued growth of sociopolitical movements that incorporate "[a]n existential resentment of other people's being, caused by an intense mix of envy and sense of humiliation and powerlessness [which] poisons civil society

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[2] Ibid., 7, 13.
[3] Ibid., 12-13.
[4] Ibid., 17.
[5] Ibid., 34.

and undermines political liberty, and is presently making for a global turn to authoritarianism and toxic forms of chauvinism".[6]

The relevance of all this to a discussion of Trumpism should be painfully obvious by now. Though Mishra is referring to non-Western nationalists who are reacting to a recent colonial past, he might as well be speaking of Trump's base when he writes that they, "suffer from the fact that old certitudes about their place in the world – including their sense of identity and self-worth – have been lost along with their links to traditional communities and other systems of support and comfort and sources of meaning".[7]

Mishra's formula aids us in seeing how Trump's rise to capture America's Republican Party is a logical apotheosis: Trump's movement is both foreseeable and typical – just another demagogue in a storm of right-wing populism.[8] Nationalism has been 'going global' since the late 19th century, and all such movements demonstrate "An anxious struggle for existence, a deep fear of 'decadence' and emasculation, and a messianic craving for a strenuous ethic, a New Man and New Order".[9] Mishra's description of Gabriele D'Annunzio might as well be for Trump and much of his base: "a parvenu who tried to pass himself off as an aristocrat ... an opportunistic prophet for angry misfits ... who saw themselves as wholly dispensable in a society where economic growth enriched only a minority and democracy appeared to be a game rigged by the powerful".[10] The ironic difference from other historical movements is that Trump's base supports its primary oppressors.

Trump's supporters resemble the disaffected foot soldiers of nationalist movements everywhere, people who feel cheated or left behind in relation to modern, consumerist promises and who espouse hatred of the perceived beneficiaries of a biased government and economy.[11] As Mishra puts it, "[r]egardless of their national origins and locally attuned rhetoric, these disenfranchised men target those they regard as venal, callous, and mendacious elites. Donald Trump led an upsurge of white nationalists enraged at being duped by globalized liberals" and "while supporting despotic leaders they talk endlessly of their superior 'values' – a rhetoric that has now blended into a white supremacist hatred, lucratively exploited by Trump, of immigrants, refugees and Muslims".[12] Trumpism, then, may be seen as the latest act in a long play, since the history of the U.S. is littered with white supremacy, racists laws and segregationist policies (e.g., against Chinese immigrants and African Americans).

Yet, however much our angry present may be explained by the past, there are aspects of the current era that are historically unprecedented – predictable only in their unpredictability. These aspects are best described as 'postnormal': they create new, specific 'conditions' for anger and resentment in what Zia Sardar[13] calls postnormal times, characterized by "uncertainty, rapid change, realignment of power, upheaval and chaotic behavior ... an in-between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have yet to be born, and very few things seem to make sense".[14] Sardar argues that the postnormal phenomena of 'complexity, chaos, and contradictions' are now the primary features of our

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[6] Ibid., 14.

[7] Ibid., 13.

[8] Ibid., 8, where Mishra observes, "demagogues of all kinds, from Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan to India's Narendra Modi, France's Marine Le Pen and America's Donald Trump, have tapped into the simmering reservoirs of cynicism, boredom, and discontent".

[9] Ibid., 30.

[10] Ibid., 2.

[11] Mishra wisely states that nationalism is ultimately: "a mystification, if not a dangerous fraud with its promise of making a country 'great again' and its denunciation of the 'other'; it conceals the real conditions of existence, and the true origins of suffering, even as it seeks to replicate the comforting balm of transcendent ideals ... [for] ... people who feel left behind by the globalized economy or contemptuously ignored by its slick overlords and cheerleaders in politics, business, and the media". Ibid., 274.

[12] Ibid., 76, 6.

[13] Ziauddin Sardar, "Welcome to Postnormal Times", *Futures*, 42 (2010), 435-444.

[14] Ibid., 435.

era's zeitgeist, and that together they affect all natural and social systems, including epistemology. This means that, by default, 'any' political or economic system will face problems of instability and a sense of being unmoored from the past.

The world has become increasingly complex since everything is connected to everything else; in both the economic and geopolitical realms, globally interconnected developments increasingly happen simultaneously and with greater speed. For example, consider how suddenly and simultaneously Russia, China and India have risen to test the world order established by US hegemony. When such systematically intertwined changes come, thick and fast, then "no single model of behaviour, mode of thought, or method ... can provide an answer to all our interconnected, complex ills. The 'free market' is as much a mirage as the suggestion that science or liberal secularism will rescue us from the current impasse".[15]

Sardar, like Mishra, acknowledges the role of social media and the advent of a 24-hour news cycle to sow chaos and disinformation, yet Sardar also stresses the exponential speed at which all web-based, digitized systems can create chaos (e.g., the instantaneous nature of financial trades pushed by computer algorithms). As to contradictions, Sardar particularly considers those that proceed from the accelerating nature of changes that progressively force people to face paradox and uncertainty, including uncertainty about knowledge itself. This psychosocial condition created by the experience of "too much change, too fast", meaning our limited ability to deal with the 'pace' of change, is famously analyzed in Toffler's bestseller *Future Shock*.[16]

One pillar of Mishra's argument is that the Enlightenment experiment has created immense inequalities, both within and between nations; rather than guaranteed uplift for all, vast swaths of the poor and uneducated have been left further behind. This includes a gap in the acquisition and use of factual knowledge, as opposed to 'information', yet all is increasingly produced and consumed on the web. People who are ignorant, either willfully or by circumstance, are easily manipulated by the powerful, even more so in uncertain times. Postnormal times mean that uncertainty and potential for conflict is perpetual, and perhaps such times also forecast what is the most important feature of Trump's populism – that it is 'postfactual'.

2. Creating Trumpism: Nurturing Negative Solidarities

Clearly, a lot of Trump supporters are angry and have lost faith in their government. In response to the rise of Trumpism, the Trump administration's undisguised attacks on democratic institutions and traditions, and to the startling events associated with the most recent U.S. Presidential election,[17] many

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[15] Ibid., 437.

[16] Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970).

[17] Details of incidents associated with the 2020 U.S. presidential election are generally well known – a simple review of them should suffice. Begin, perhaps, with revelations that Trump and his 2016 campaign staff were aware of Russian efforts to favorably influence the 2016 election, including hacked emails and phony websites dishing dirt on his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton. Trump's 2020 campaign not only welcomed additional Russian meddling in that election, but under the threat of losing U.S. aid and support, Ukrainian leadership was pressured to back a politically damaging narrative about his rival Joe Biden's son, Hunter. Clandestinely, Trump's personal lawyer was sent as an operative to emphasize the threat, and Trump himself went so far as to bully Ukraine's newly elected president, Volodymyr Zelensky, in a personal phone conversation – revelations that finally led to Trump's impeachment. When Trump lost the 2020 election, he and a cabal of supporters refused to acknowledge defeat and tried coercing state legislatures and election officials (most infamously, Georgia Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger) to overturn the election by 'finding him more votes', disallowing votes for Biden, declaring state elections illegal, and even sending alternate slates of electors that would cast their votes for Trump in the tally that officially closes the election. Trump menaced his own Vice President to refuse the results of the electoral votes when the tally was presented to the senate. Trump helped organize and publicize a 'stop the steal' rally on January 6, 2021, encouraging supporters to interrupt the senate's proceedings to transfer power to president-elect Biden, leading directly to an angry, violent mob breaching the Capitol in an unprecedented insurrection that forced the building into lockdown; legislators had to flee for their

pundits and observers have posed questions such as: How can this happen in the United States? Why do so many people among Trump's Republican base vote against their own interests? To fully address such questions, Mishra's grand scheme may be augmented by some more unique aspects of the U.S. context: What else is making us angry? In what ways may Trumpism be distinguished from other populist movements?

In the last few decades, in a postnormal U.S., we find creeping apathy and a jaded disassociation from the political process generally. This trend has given more license to those who would manipulate political and economic systems, and has surely added to the sense that chaotic things simply 'happen' to individuals who, already, keenly feel their vulnerability to forces beyond their control. We might ask: what are U.S. Americans doing instead of engaging in politics?

An interesting answer is supplied by sociologist George Ritzer, who speaks to how the advent of modern advertising and credit has transformed citizens into distracted 'hyper-consumers', and normal social life into priorities for shopping and entertainment. Consumer capitalism has created what Ritzer calls "cathedrals of consumption" (e.g., lavish shopping malls and Disney World).[18] New types of consumerism overwhelm consumers with choices, constantly create new wants, and 're-enchant' the habit of consuming as a daily practice that promises to deliver both happiness and meaning. In exchange for the brief joy of a new product or service, this 'new religion' requires an endless cycle of spending, consuming, debt anxiety, and long hours at work to pay for it all. "The beauty of this system for capitalists", says Ritzer, "is that people are kept in the workplace and on the job by the need to pay the monthly minimums on their credit card accounts and, more generally, to support their consumption habits".[19] One may reasonably assert that, in the US and the West, consuming has become our primary, if not our exclusive, civic responsibility.

So, are U.S. Americans these days more distracted and tired than they are angry? Much more than the Gulf Wars of previous decades, recent images of conflict, suffering, and carnage from Afghanistan, and now Ukraine, is recorded and viewed in real time. Rather than our living room televisions, the ugliness of war now appears on our cell phones – literally placed into our hands. And mostly what we see is devastation, especially for common people or non-combatants. It's too early to tell whether this new way of consuming warfare will shock us long and hard enough to jolt us into prioritizing peace, either at home or abroad. But given the 24/7 news cycle, siloed news outlets, and the new consumerism enumerated by Ritzer, it seems rather doubtful. If we add to these confused, postnormal times the more openly-voiced suspicions that all information is somehow untrustworthy, then perhaps people are driven quickly from anger to exhaustion, and then resignation.

We must also consider the appeal of populism even when economies are reasonably functional and people's prospects aren't bleak. With the decline of stable social and national institutions – the order they provide and the normal roles they require – conflict, or war itself, against real or perceived enemies, can begin to organize life. This may be observed of both foreign and domestic terrorism. For example, war correspondent Chris Hedges, after a long career, concludes "[t]he enduring attraction of war is this: Even with its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living. Only when we are in the midst of conflict does the shallowness and vapidness of much of our lives become apparent".[20] Behind all modern populist movements is a call to war.

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lives, while Trump refused to intervene and apparently spent hours enjoying television coverage of the event. For such actions, Trump was impeached a second time – also unprecedented – but his party refused to cooperate in removing him from office and many continue to back Trump's delusional claim that he won the election.

[18] George Ritzer, *Enchanting a Disenchanted World* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge, 2005).

[19] Ibid., 26.

[20] Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 3.

In comparison to authoritarian populism in other advanced, Western nations, some distinguishing features of Trumpism are: how long and how carefully it has been nurtured by the conservative political party, the primacy of religious belief and practice among its supporters, and its nature as postfactual.

The Trump cult is not something that happened randomly or suddenly. It is instead the result of decades of Republican Party efforts to hold onto power by fostering fear and anxiety, especially among white Christians. At least since 1968, when Richard Nixon was successfully ushered into the White House by their 'Southern Strategy' – i.e., purposely using wedge issues like race, abortion, and gun rights to appeal to white voters in traditional Democratic states – Republican strategists have made villainizing their opponents as either dangerous or anti-American into something of an art form. President Reagan, in the 1980s, was noted for undermining trust in government itself, while House Speaker Newt Gingrich in the 1990s made it a practice of Republicans to refuse bi-partisan compromise to the point of shutting down the government. That obstructionist stance has been perfected under the long-standing influence of Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell, affecting a kind of gridlock that makes a poorly functioning government a self-fulling prophecy. In brief, the overarching strategy cultivates division, practically requiring Republican representatives to demonize both the opposition and its supporters, to attack the political system, and to refuse bipartisan compromise. Trumpism, then, represents a willingness of Republicans to proceed that much further along the path to censuring not just 'liberals' but, more importantly, a constructed 'liberal' version of the United States.

Unlike other technically advanced and powerful nations, the U.S. remains highly religious. Fundamentalist, Evangelical, and Charismatic Christians – groups who reliably vote Republican – constitute around 40% of the U.S. population.[21] Despite Trump's categorically non-Christian attitudes and behaviors, these conservative Christians overwhelmingly identify as Republicans and remain a large proportion of Trump's base. Likewise, white supremacists emphatically identify as both Republican and evangelical Christians. Robert Jones, in *White Too Long*, argues that white supremacy is inextricably intertwined with American Christianity; from his extensive survey research he reports that, rather than church attendance, the best predictor of someone claiming a Christian identity is how high they score on a racism index.[22]

Drawing heavily from European scholarship, the excellent work *Populist Discourse* (2019) demonstrates that populism is a complicated and slippery concept. Its editors provide definitions of populism as: 1) a strategy; 2) an ideology; 3) a discursive style; and 4) a global phenomenon.[23] However, as a right-wing populist figure, Trump fits any and all of their conceptual categories. As a discursive mode, they say populism requires a strong figure who stands as the genuine mouthpiece for 'the people' – one who clearly defines and vilifies those on the other side as impure enemies, and delivers to adherents a sense of moral superiority and assurances that they are always right (regardless of factual truth). Yet note: these are identical to characteristics that describe charismatic, religious fundamentalism. And it is the central nature of religious fundamentalism that distinguishes Trumpism from, e.g., European forms of populism (in this light, Trumpism may be compared to Modi populism in India; in fact, Trump's brand is arguably the model and inspiration for Modi's).

Heather McCallum-Bayliss uses conceptual metaphor theory and quantitative cognitive analysis of Trump's public remarks to conclude that he revealed as a conqueror rather than a populist – i.e., he is

[21] Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy: Religion, Brotherhood, and the (Un)Making of Terrorists* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 429.

[22] Robert Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

[23] Encarnación Hidalgo-Tenorio et al., "Introduction: Unravelling Populist Discourse", in Encarnación Hidalgo-Tenorio et al., eds., *Populist Discourse: Critical Approaches to Contemporary Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

centered on solidifying his own power and self-aggrandizement over any real concern for 'the people'.[24] Yet, this analysis is another that does not consider the importance of the religious and racist narrative that drives Trump's base; they know that he is self-serving, even a lying narcissist,[25] but he supports their essentialist vision of a white, Christian social order, and this is why he gets a pass. In this sense, 'the people' are using Trump rather than the other way around. This also explains why all viable Republican candidates must become some version of Trump.

It's common for analysts to express the deep, political divisions between Democrats and Republicans in terms of 'culture wars' stemming from differences in economic class, education, and geography. However, for hordes of these cultural warriors who embrace Trumpism, religion is paramount. Republican strategists have successfully coupled fighting Democrats with God's calling, so that the culture wars are melded to the greater religious war of God's Kingdom against the triumph of liberal secularism. Elsewhere, I argue that, "[f]or many, 'patriot' simultaneously signifies a place in *God's* army – modern-day Crusaders against creeping secularism, sacred warriors fighting for America as a (white) Christian nation, designated by Providence to preserve 'God's Kingdom' around the world".[26] I don't think this point could be overemphasized.

Trump has not only granted license to be mean and virulently contemptuous, openly at war with an 'enemy' of liberal, Democratic 'snowflakes'[27] – his brand of populist rule moves the U.S. precariously into a postfactual era. Many of his followers admit that Trump chronically lies, but they also admire his bold habit of espousing his own 'truths' (or, as his aide Kellyanne Conway suggested, "alternative facts") – particularly when aligned with what they value or believe about America.[28] It's not just that Trump models a 'refreshing' dismissal of polite civil debate: he legitimizes the idea that facts and truth are merely a matter of what you prefer to believe.

It's common fare for authoritarian demagogues to attack a free press and to marginalize as treacherous both scientists and other educated 'elites' – Trump has done this routinely, labeling mainstream press outlets that oppose him 'lame-stream media' and declaring that troublesome scientific studies (e.g., about preventing the spread of COVID or climate change) are not just unreliable, but part of some conspiratorial 'liberal' (read Democratic and secular) agenda. Such attacks are likely necessary to assert authoritarian control within any democracy.[29] But Trump's most enduring legacy is truly more damaging to democracy: making it acceptable for his followers to construct reality from belief, unencumbered by the need for real facts, and then to ignore any inconvenient truths that dispute that reality.

Mishra emphasizes the growing role of new forms of social media[30] to promote not just an agenda but alternate world views: "Marshalling large armies of trolls and twitter bots against various

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[24] She states: "A Conqueror does not need to represent the people and Trump does not". Heather McCallum-Bayliss, "Donald Trump Is a Conqueror", in Hidalgo-Tenorio et al., *Populist Discourse*, 255.

[25] It's important, of course, to acknowledge the persuasive power of social media platforms to influence people's reality: a portion of Trump supporters actually believe the lies.

[26] Brad Bullock, "A Postnormal Election in Postnormal Times", *World Futures*, 78 (2021), 87-100; see 97-98.

[27] Though highly relevant, space limitations prevent a discussion of hate speech; e.g., see Caitlin Ring Carlson, *Hate Speech*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021); Stanley Fish, *The First: How to Think About Hate Speech, Campus Speech, Religious Speech, Fake News, Post-Truth, and Donald Trump* (New York: Atria, 2019).

[28] Along with other scholars – see, e.g., Ewan Speed and Russell Mannion, "The Rise of Post-Truth Populism in Pluralist Liberal Democracies", *International Journal of Health Policy and Management*, 6(5) (2017), 249-251 –, Hildago-Tenorio et al. underscore the "post-truth" nature of movements like Trumpism (which, typically, includes racism, xenophobia, anti-elitism or anti-intellectualism, and anti-globalism); see Hildago-Tenorio et al., "Introduction", 6.

[29] See Steven Livitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018). Their comprehensive study claims that the most important criteria for identifying authoritarian leaders are: denying the legitimacy of opponents, tolerating violence, and attacking the press.

[30] See also Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford U.P., 2016).

'enemies' of the people, the contemporary demagogues seem as aware as Marshall McLuhan that digital communications help create and consolidate new mythologies of unity and community".[31] Yet beyond this, postnormal times seem to have created a universal, global dualism where people everywhere are grouped into one of two camps: those for whom progress is forward and unknown, and those who somehow hope to go backward. This dualism has now metastasized in the American body politic, and it operates to tug the U.S. in two, diametrically opposed directions. As the Capitol insurgency illustrates, the U.S. is literally at war with itself.

Trump understands the power of the web to spread a false message – the greatest blow to his power was not losing the 2020 election, but the decision by Twitter to block his account.[32] For those who reject autocratic rule in favor of strengthening democracy in the U.S., even the potential to re-elect Donald Trump as president in 2024 comprises a particular nightmare, but despite Trump's considerable personality cult, any other aspiring demagogue will find it easy enough to raise the banner. Trump's postfactual legacy likely means further entrenchment into opposing camps touting very different 'realities' about America, even if one is notably manufactured from lies and misinformation. In this context, a declaration by Hannah Arendt from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* remains especially disturbing: "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., the standards of thought) no longer exist".[33]

3. What Now: Unraveling Negative Solidarities

As a diagnosis of current times, Mishra's *Age of Anger* is truly a stunning 'tour de force'. Here again is Mishra's argument in a nutshell: autocratic nationalism is "a seductive but treacherous antidote to an experience of disorder and meaninglessness: the unexpectedly rowdy anticlimax, in a densely populated world, of the Western European eighteenth-century dream of a universally secular, materialist, and peaceful civilization".[34] In a steady voice, he also delivers a global prognosis that is rather bleak: effectively, we can expect additional retreat into authoritarian populism and various forms of tribalism, more rage, and violence. In the end, however, he leaves us all rather in the dark as to what we might do about this. He finishes the book with a call, especially for the West, to engage in some transformative thinking.

Mishra well-deserves his acclaim as a public intellectual, but like many analysts he sticks with reporting and raising our consciousness. He ultimately refrains from practical suggestions about what to do now in the *Age of Anger* – as dangerous times and existential crises loom, it's hard not to feel he's like a fellow who raises the alarm that the house is burning, gives a detailed explanation of how it will burn, but then doesn't join the bucket brigade. Maybe the house will burn down and something better built atop the ashes, but I assume that the transformative thinking Mishra calls us to is about finding effective ways to pour water on the fire.

I've spoken already to some unusual ways that nationalist populism has emerged in the U.S. – including a type of racism and white supremacy developed from a long history of slavery in a religiously Christian nation – and I'll remain focused on recent, watershed events surrounding the

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[31] Ibid., 269.
[32] The $44 billion takeover bid of Twitter by Elon Musk now complicates matters, since he originally announced plans to restore Trump's account; in May 2022, the rather unpredictable Musk announced he had suspended that decision pending more investigation into 'misinformation' and 'fake accounts' on the popular site. In October, 2022, he reinstated his intention to buy the company.
[33] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1976), 474.
[34] Ibid., 166.

2020 election. However, in an effort to further extend the usefulness of Mishra's analytical scheme, I'll address issues of immigration and national identity in the U.S. before turning to some ways that troublesome movements like Trumpism might be undone.

Mishra certainly mentions increasing immigration into the West – both as a cause of growing nationalism, and as the ironic result of production and consumption patterns established by global capitalism touted by the West. People generally migrate either for resources or to flee conflict and violence stemming from a lack of resources. While selling the Enlightenment dream, Mishra says that "liberals and technocrats rarely considered such constraining factors as finite geographical space, degradable natural resources and fragile ecosystems".[35] It's instructive, though, to put current immigration trends into historical context. Varying estimates of world population in 1920 center around 1.86 billion people,[36] whereas today it stands at about 8 billion – meaning that in only a hundred years human population has increased more than four-fold. Mishra is right to stress how the Enlightenment raised expectations about individual rights and quality of life. The speed and volume at which the promised beneficiaries have increased, however, is an essential reason that the demand for a Western, capitalist lifestyle has not been satisfied. There is hope that a set of universal human rights, already embraced in principle by a vast majority of nations, may still become a global reality. But the promise that modernism would distribute a cornucopia of material goods to all, arguably utopian from the start, now stands revealed as sheer folly. Any effective policy to address real issues associated with immigration, terrorism, and climate change will have to take human numbers into account.

Immigration and population trends deserve particular attention in the U.S. for many reasons. America is truly a nation of immigrants: not only are the overwhelming majority of citizens descended from mostly European settlers or the people they enslaved, but about 15% of the current U.S. population is comprised of people born elsewhere, with Mexicans constituting about a quarter of these. The U.S., known historically as the land of 'plenty' and 'opportunity,' remains a top receiving nation for immigrants and, by comparison, has received during its short history the largest and most diverse population of immigrants in the world. Now the world's third most populous nation, the U.S. has grown from about 106 million in 1920 to a country of 334 million today, more than tripling in size. Just since 1965, the number of immigrants in the U.S. has increased by 400%, and without the arrival of immigrants each year, America's population would actually be decreasing. All of this is highly relevant to the rise of Trumpism and what comes after.

It has long been a Republican strategy to weaken the power of the social contract by starving government and then running on a platform that it doesn't work. Especially after 9/11, conservatives have used the 'global war on terror' to great effect, spinning a narrative that creates Islamophobia and a perpetual 'us versus them' scenario captured best in Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*.[37] The backdrop of global culture, where external threats are everywhere, is vital to this narrative – not just to stir up feelings of nationalism but to shift discussion away from inadequate domestic policies. Immigrants and refugees are easy targets for populist fury.[38]

Mishra notes how Trump gained attention using "repeated threats to Mexicans and Muslims".[39] Simply witness Trump's attempts to build a wall along the U.S. border with Mexico and thwart travel

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[35] Ibid., 18.

[36] See Population Reference Bureau's official website, *prb.org*. This is about the same size as today's worldwide population of Muslims, a group Mishra argues has been largely failed by liberal modernism.

[37] Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

[38] Mishra does discuss this in a subsequent piece. See Punkaj Mishra, "The Religion of Whiteness Becomes a Suicide Cult", *New York Times* (2018), *www.nytimes.com*.

[39] Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 272.

into America from Muslim countries.[40] And Mishra previously observes, "[i]n the absence of reasonable debate, conspiracy theories and downright lies abound, and even gain broad credence: it was while peddling one of them, 'Obama is a foreign-born Muslim', that Donald Trump rose to political prominence".[41] There is reasoned debate in America, just not among Trump and most of his supporters, who see no reason to debate anything.

Posing the question of why so many Trump supporters vote against their self-interest overemphasizes rational individualism; tribalism and national identity provide better frameworks for the answers.[42] Political wisdom holds that winning elections is about jobs. Nationalist populism isn't about jobs but rather preserving a cherished cultural identity. High anxiety and anger from the notion that Caucasian culture is being undermined by non-white or Muslim immigrants is the common theme behind nationalist movements throughout the West. For his supporters, Trump's slogan 'Make America Great Again' easily translates to 'Make America White Again', the thrust behind the Republican use of 'replacement theory'.[43] But more than elsewhere, nationalist populism in the U.S. incorporates a primacy for maintaining America's religious identity: specifically, that of a 'Protestant', Christian nation.[44] Concern about America becoming a secular nation is what consistently motivates religious conservatives to vote Republican, along with a form of Christianity that comfortably coexists with racism and xenophobia.

Liberals mistakenly continue to believe that rational thought and reasonable presentation of facts will ultimately win the day. Liberal modernism's value-neutral tenets naively ignore the essential fact that people finally understand themselves and the world through a shared cultural story. What selective cultural or historical knowledge is chosen to construct the story we live in matters profoundly. People can, and often do, create and populate conflicting cultural narratives.

While Trump's far right supporters routinely call themselves 'patriots', it's important to distinguish them instead as nationalists, using national symbols to validate their vision of America. For them, the flag they prominently wave at protests and rallies represents an America carefully selected from the past, an exclusively White, Protestant Christian America that's never truly existed. America is now undeniably at odds with the official country described in the 2020 decennial census: a country that's no longer predominantly white, nor Christian, nor racially segregated, nor rural, nor male-dominated.[45] They prefer to live in a different national story about where the country is going, a country authenticated by Trumpism, unchallenged by demographic or scientific facts: appeals from the left tied to virtue, facts, or 'patriotism' are unlikely to alter this dynamic. The riotous Trump supporters who

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[40] Mishra also comments on how "Samuel Huntington fretted in his last book, *Who Are We? The Challenges of America's National Identity* (2004), about the destruction of white American culture by Hispanic immigration – a theme taken up vigorously by Donald Trump promising to make America great again". Ibid., 274.

[41] Ibid., 176.

[42] White conservatives who vote Republican typically cite group values like patriotism and national security when choosing a president; see Larry Bartles, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the Gilded Age* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2008).

[43] Consider that 'replacement theory' has now moved from the conspiratorial fringe of far-right websites into mainstream Republican dialog. The 'theory' – that Black and Hispanic immigrants are being used by Democratic elites to replace White Americans – has been particularly amplified by the ultraconservative Fox host Tucker Carlson as an effective way to foment anger and increase his ratings.

[44] Conservative Protestants are willing to work with 'Catholic allies' on common issues (particularly abortion). Replacement theory also commonly includes anti-Islamic or antisemitic messages, as made clear in the infamous and deadly white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017.

[45] Trump's administration repeatedly pushed for changes to the 2020 census that experts reported would intentionally undercount documented immigrants. Trump and his supporters continue to assert utterly false claims that illegal voting by undocumented immigrants stole the election from 'real' Americans.

stormed the U.S. Capitol represent not just an attack on American democracy, but a fierce rejection by populists of a conception of the U.S. they've been emboldened to hate.[46]

Those on the left continue to fail strategically because they fall back too much on enlightened self-interest (who does the most for me, a kind of rational exchange theory) or enlightened reason (what are the facts). Moreover, they remain willfully ignorant of the religious values expressed by Trump supporters in this very religious nation, or write it off as whacky supernatural rubbish undeserving of serious attention. Religion is also a force that gives meaning. This is fully understood by Scott Atran, who in *Talking to the Enemy* says of Islam abroad or Christianity in America:

"Secularists see believers as believing in what is crazy; believers see secularists as mired in what is meaningless. Each side demands that the other come to its senses and seek unconditional surrender. Or else. That's a prescription for conflict and war, not for democracy, tolerance of diversity, or global consensus".[47]Atran also states that "[r]eason's greatest challenge – in politics, ethics, or everyday life – is to gain knowledge and leverage over unreason: to cope with it, compete with it, and perhaps channel it; not to fruitlessly annihilate it by reasoning it away".[48]

The rapid spread of social media platforms can encourage political engagement, but alone doesn't ensure activism. These days, on the political left or right, self-expression outperforms political action.[49] As to what to do for countering Trumpism and restoring a healthy U.S. democracy, I've stressed before the importance of reviving modes of 'nonvirtual' social activism that have been effective in the past – sustained grassroots movements; physical and real-time protests that require citizens to take to the streets.[50] Civil rights for African-Americans, ending the Viet Nam War, recognizing the full citizenship of women, homosexuals and same-sex couples: all required this more costly form of activism. In fact, those are the same modes of activism used by conservative movements such as the Tea Party and Trumpism to alter the social and political landscape.

We should also acknowledge that the anger that drives Trumpism, the frustration expressed by Trump's base that their government no longer prioritizes their needs or that educated, urban professionals are content to ignore them or leave them behind is at least partially valid. While it's certainly unfair to single out Democratic 'elites', Mishra correctly states that, e.g., "support for Donald Trump's white nationalism connects with middle-aged working-class men, who have suffered a dramatic deterioration in mortality due to suicide, and an increase in morbidity because of drug and alcohol abuse".[51]

In the closing section, I'll address what is the hardest and unavoidably necessary form of activism for unraveling Trumpism or other forms of authoritarianism: finding ways to establish a dialog with those currently enthralled by nationalist populism.

4. Talking to the Enemy

Trumpism is a form of cultural fundamentalism with a distinctive religious quality. The violence committed by Trump supporters is a form of domestic terrorism; it cultivates, as Mishra says, "the

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[46] Mishra suggests that populists the world over share a suspicion that the 'elites' who control the government are enemies of freedom, and states: "The fierce contempt among these groups in America for Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton reflects more than just a misogynist backlash against the gains of feminism, or deflected hatred of minorities; it reflects a diminished respect for the political process itself". Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 341.

[47] Ibid., 476.

[48] Ibid., 426.

[49] For too many, 'taking action' now means donating to an organization that does your civic work for you, or merely signing an online petition and re-posting links to commentary you 'like' – a form of political behavior labeled 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism'; see Brad Bullock, "Big, Bad Trump", *Critical Muslim*, 28 (2018), 53-64.

[50] See Bullock, "A Postnormal Election in Postnormal Times".

[51] Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 326.

sentiment, generated by the news media and amplified by social media, that anything can happen anywhere to anybody at any time".[52] Trump populists who participate in castigating 'liberals' and 'elites' would be surprised by how much they resemble the Islamic terrorists they hate. The 'near enemy' for Trump's Republicans are fellow citizens who they reflexively reject and villainize, even to the point of using violence and killing for their cause, comparable to radical fundamentalists everywhere. Right-wing Christians who insist that the U.S. and its laws should conform to their own religious notions don't just contradict the indisputable intent of America's constitutional founders to protect religious freedom by separating church and state: their views resemble those of Islamic fundamentalists in theocracies like Iran, ruled by Sharia law. With this in mind, strategies for successfully engaging Trumpists might take a page from the playbook of Scott Atran, a cultural anthropologist and international expert on anti-terrorism.[53]

Both Mishra and Atran recognize similar trends and draw comparisons between the fundamentalist violence wrought by angry and disaffected groups abroad and in the U.S., those who have lost faith in the viability of the current order. For example, Mishra contends that "Trump and his supporters in the world's richest country are no less the dramatic symptom of a general crisis of legitimacy than those terrorists who plan and inspire mass violence by exploiting the channels of global integration".[54] Or, here is Atran: "There's a lot in common, for example ... between the jihadi movement and the Christian Identity Movement vision of Revelation and the bloody apocalyptic fantasies of Tim LaHaye's Left Behind series (around 50 million copies sold)".[55] Returning to Mishra's account of D'Annunzio's revolutionary message of purging and purifying the 'real' country, adherents of Trumpism who resort to hatred and violence compare with Atran's description of Islamic radicals who "learn to live in a conceptually closed community of comrades bound to a cause, which they mistake for the real world" and who preach withdrawal from a corrupt society, mobilizing around a "message of withdrawal from impure mainstream society and of a need for a violent action to cleanse it".[56]

In *Talking to the Enemy*, Atran claims that U.S. anti-terror policies have largely failed because, in overreacting to Islamic terrorism, we have relied on military intervention, occupation, and supporting corrupt governments rather than recognizing the continued power of religion to organize and sustain collective commitment and sacrifice.[57] We cannot expect to sway religious fundamentalists anywhere by running roughshod over their values while appealing to science and reason – even promises of jobs and infrastructure won't be enough. Religion has coevolved with the need to encourage large-scale cooperation among non-kin.[58] Religious rituals, or quasi-religious nationalist ones, foster "cooperation within the group [while] making it more competitive with other groups".[59] Religious fundamentalism,

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[52] Ibid., 10.

[53] Like Mishra, Atran is a formidable public intellectual who is also a co-founder of the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict at Oxford University.

[54] Ibid., 342.

[55] Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*, 473.

[56] Ibid., 268, 270.

[57] In fact, Atran contends that the more costly, absurd, counterintuitive and unreal the religious beliefs required of adherents, the more collective commitment and sacrifice they produce.

[58] Recent work by Joseph Henrich makes a convincing argument that religion was necessary to allow small tribal societies to 'scale up', and that without it there would have been no way to create modern societies that encourage large-scale cooperation beyond kinship ties. Moreover, without effective replacement of loyalty to a Catholic church over kin groups, there would never have been an opening for Protestantism to forge the evolutionary side path from which Western liberal societies emerge. For example, long before the Enlightenment, Protestants insisted on providing its adherents with individual self-determination and literacy. Put another way, religion has ultimately wrought citizens who may openly criticize or personally reject religion (we might call that 'freedom of speech' and 'the separation of church and state'). Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2020).

[59] Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*, 456.

and the terror networks they sometimes spawn, are less about politics and more about feeling a part of a family or tribe that delivers meaning through sacrifice to a larger cause; this is counter to a social goal centered on individual rights or personal advancement.

Atran also reminds us that religion in the U.S. has developed as a voluntary and civic organization. Among our religious conservatives is a historical mistrust of institutional authority that explains, e.g., the appeal of politicians like Sarah Palin – a Charismatic Christian who peppers her speeches with spiritual references that make "the absolute and arbitrary boundaries of 'the sacred' ... markers of cultural identity".[60] Rather than limit religious experience to church activities, there is a call to infuse all aspects of life with religious fervor. Atran notes that "'[a]ction', 'challenge' and 'change' are the watchwords of the Charismatic movement, which encourages people to ... wage 'spiritual combat' where the forces of good and evil, God and Satan, may battle".[61] This is why it's a problem that Democrats are now associated with evil, as in the 'Pizzagate' episodes, or with strict secularism and atheism; they are rendered unpatriotic by default.

Mishra's analysis remains highly relevant, but at least in the case of the U.S., there is more to anger and violence than disappointment with unfulfilled material promises: religion is a problematic constant. On one hand, Atran acknowledges: "It was not Enlightenment views of humanity that drove the abolitionist movement in America in the first half of the nineteenth century ... or the civil rights movement in the second half of the twentieth. It was the religious reckoning against 'the national sin', pulsating from the pulpit in thunderous throbs".[62] Yet Christianity was also essential for reestablishing white, racist control in the post-Reconstruction South: "Preachers in white Protestant churches railed against the loss of traditional sacred values – of honor, duty, and respect – to modern Yankee vices of crass commerce, sexual license, and drunkenness".[63] Atran relates how 'leaderless resistance' cells used by Islamic terrorists were practiced earlier by the Ku Klux Klan, and how the apocalyptic screed *The Turner Diaries* by American William Pierce was not only the inspiration for Timothy McVeigh's 1995 bombing of the federal office building in Oklahoma City, but also for the 9/11 attacks.

The political divide in the U.S. is also a religious divide. So, how to begin bridging the distance? Generally, citizens who care about preserving democracy and rule of law on both sides can create or seek out constructive conversations about a common future. Not all Republicans support Trump or Trumpism (consider The Lincoln Project), nor should liberals join in the populist behavior of hating or shunning them as somehow irredeemable; many are just as appalled by the fascist elements of U.S. populism (like somehow standing for 'law and order' while also bringing down government, or claiming to protect the Constitution while standing behind an insurrection by 'patriots' who attacked the Capitol to stop a critical procedure mandated by the Constitution).

People need viable alternatives to fear, war, conflict; it's imperative to find meaning in a common story. Even those who abhor religion can practice non-hostility to religious people and – without accepting what is unacceptable – seek the threads of a common narrative: what do you most want for the country or the future of our children? Are you for fairly-drawn voting districts? Better schools or better jobs? Mishra himself suggests that finally we must consider "the irreducible human being, her or his fears, desires and resentments. It is in the unstable relationship between the inner and public selves that one can start to take a more precise measure of today's global civil war".[64]

If we wish to blunt or dismantle the anger that drives Trumpism, we have to fashion ways to reengage the angry in uneasy conversations about creating a common national and cultural story, and this won't happen by writing off religion as either silly or irrelevant. We might start by sacrificing a

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[60] Ibid., 472.
[61] Ibid., 465.
[62] Ibid., 470.
[63] Ibid., 470.
[64] Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 35.

superior or dismissive position concerning religion and the religious. Just as those on the secular left, like myself, would be uninterested in arguments that champion religion or promote it, those who are religious should not be forced to convert to secularism as the price of conversation.

Intentional conversations in other countries likely involve non-extremist nationalists who are unmotivated by religion: the function is the same. Practicing respectful engagement with others you disagree with in everyday life – face-to face conversations in real time – is more powerful than virtual exchanges, since neither party can hide behind a buffer or the anonymity that makes online forums so conducive to escalation. Beyond reengaging willing family members, people already share a common space with neighbors and community members: starting local conversations is a form of activism.

One-off events rarely change the dynamic. Willingness to help organize or attend serial events designed for constructive dialog, in libraries or community centers, boosts both the courage and commitment of others to engage. James and Deborah Fallows' bestseller *Our Towns*[65] is full of stories about how common citizens in places across the U.S. have bridged extreme differences in political and religious views to successfully overcome long-standing community challenges, with the common side-effect of tamping down distrust and dismantling what appeared to be intractable conflicts.

As with other forms of activism, this takes effort, time, and some nerve. But even if such forms of civic engagement don't immediately bring healing or common understanding to a deeply divided country, they do have potential to defuse tensions that may easily undermine both a functioning democracy and the rule of law. Atran presents research showing that, in comparison to liberals, U.S. conservatives report less distance between themselves and 'the other side' and argues, optimistically, that "[d]espite the moral differences inside America, and even despite the 'culture wars' that sometimes seem to erupt from them, there is still broad consensus about the 'proper' mix of moral elements within a fairly narrow range compared to other societies around the world".[66]

Atran's book ends with what he calls Abe's Answer. During the American civil war, a woman reputedly berated Abraham Lincoln when he spoke too sympathetically about Southerners when she believed he should have been speaking of destroying them: "'Why madam,' Lincoln answered, 'do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?'" To be effective activists, we also have to listen and learn. Atran concludes, "[o]n some things, we'll find, we won't change minds, and on some things we shouldn't. But who knows what a world could be made if we listen and learn at the camps of fallen angels? Then we must act to make it".[67]

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[65] James Fallows and Deborah Fallows, *Our Towns* (New York: Pantheon, 2018).
[66] Atran, 460.
[67] Ibid., 479.