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Trump and Our Collective Disorientation

Many people of good will have succumbed to Trump. I don't mean that they have given up on resisting his administration, or that they have come to agree with what they think he stands for. What I mean is that they have bought into his narcissistic idea that it's all about him. The media doesn't help things, with its focus on every tidbit of chaotic news that comes out of the White House, its endless analysis of every Trump Tweet, and its fascination with the streams of surprise announcements ("clarifications") and delusional statements emanating from the incapable-of-empathy crowd that is the Trump administration. Trump's personality is so much larger than life, and he's so good at keeping the spotlight trained upon himself, that we have come to the point where many of us cannot see the forest for the tree—the giant sequoia! the Sunland Baobab!—that is Donald Trump.

About a month after Donald J. Trump was elected President of the United States, the blog of the radical publishing house *Verso* posted an essay by the scholar and author Nikhil Pal Singh called "Trump and the Present Crisis." The opening sentences went like this: "Donald Trump's election to the US Presidency produced shock and disbelief for liberals, progressives, and leftists around the world. Here, in the US, it has been accompanied by a collective nausea that refuses to pass." Fifteen months later the collective nausea still hasn't gone away.

I think it's about time it did.

Just after the words quoted above, Singh made his key point: "The desire to parse and explain what enabled the disastrous outcome of a Trump Presidency with Republican Party control of the US government is understandable. Most of the early analysis, however, neglects longer term accounting for how we got here, and thus contributes to our collective disorientation... The fact of the matter is we did not suddenly awake in a different country the day after Trump ascended."

The election of Trump, and the rise of what might be called "Trumpism," may rightly be perceived as a crisis, which is defined as "a time of intense difficulty or danger" and as "a

time when a difficult or important decision must be made."

While it may be true that we are living through a crisis, people who "think systems" are aware that nothing *causes* a crisis. Instead, we understand that a time of intense difficulty, trouble, or danger—what we call a "crisis"—arises from a large number of events that somehow come together, in time or in our collective thinking, in a way that freaks everybody out. At least everybody who's paying attention. For a hint as to what is to be done, let's travel back in time, a little more than 50 years.

"The Ideas That Are Lying Around"

During the Depression and the years of World War II the role of government in managing the economy grew substantially. In macroeconomic terms the United States prospered in those Postwar years, although the benefits accrued mostly to the white majority. Still, the vision of a strong federal government—a government that, unlike The Market, is at least theoretically subject to the will of the population—was widely shared, to the point where it became the *de facto* political consensus in the United States. By the early 1960s, that consensus was characterized by "a realistic willingness to accept the existence of labor unions, the rights of minorities, and some role in economic life for the federal government." This consensus, which journalist Godfrey Hodgson says "blanketed the scene and muffled debate," was being led by a dominant Democratic Party.

How dominant? In 1962 the President was John Kennedy, and both houses of Congress were overwhelmingly Democratic, far more so than the current Congress is Republican.

Two years later, in 1964, the ultraconservative Republican Barry Goldwater lost the election to Lyndon Johnson in one of the greatest landslides in U.S. history. Goldwater got 52 electoral college votes to Johnson's 486. Compare that to Trump's electoral college victory of 304 votes to Clinton's 227. Johnson won the popular vote by 23 percentage →→

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points—61 percent to 38 percent—winning 44 states in the process. Compare that to 2016, when Trump won 30 states and, lest we forget, actually lost the popular vote (unless you believe the President’s claim that “millions and millions of people” voted illegally for Hillary Clinton). After the 1964 election Democrats controlled 2/3 of the seats in both the House and the Senate.

It was in 1962—in an overwhelmingly liberal and Democratic United States—that a conservative economist at the University of Chicago named Milton Friedman published a book attacking this political consensus. His book, *Capitalism and Freedom*, articulated a libertarian “let the market decide” ideology that was a ringing challenge to a consensus that seemed to many at the time to be unchallengeable.

Twenty years later, in 1982, as Ronald Reagan was enacting Friedman’s vision, *Capitalism and Freedom* was republished, which gave the author an opportunity to reflect on the less-than-enthusiastic response his book had received in 1962. “What then,” Friedman asked, “is the role of books such as this?” He offered a couple of reasons, the first of which is simply “to provide subject matter for bull sessions.” But his second reason for articulating an unpopular vision is worth thinking about. The reason to speak when no one appears to be listening, he said, is:

“to keep options open until circumstances make change necessary. There is enormous inertia—a tyranny of the status quo—in private and especially governmental arrangements. Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.”

Indeed, that’s a good summary of the reason that Nygaard Notes exists: to do its small part in keeping unpopular or little-known ideas alive. And while I couldn’t disagree more with Friedman and his advocacy of unbridled capitalism, the idea of articulating alternatives to the status quo is an important one. One that the left would do well to take on more systematically. Especially in the age of Trumpism.

That’s because Trumpism is not The Crisis, but only the *symptom* of a crisis, what I will call The Big Crisis. The Big Crisis is the forest that is being obscured in the public mind by the tree of Trump. The more we allow ourselves to be distracted by the Trump drama, the less we will be thinking and talking about The Big Crisis. For an idea of how to unwind ourselves from this collective disorientation, we turn now to a proposal I first offered back in 2011. ♦

The First Rough Draft of History

It’s common practice, at the end of each year, for the media to look back on the previous year and publish a bunch of articles about The Year’s Top News Stories. I cast a skeptical eye on this practice back in 2011, and I made a proposal that I think we may do well to revisit now, as it may be useful (in adapted form) in addressing the collective disorientation induced by Trumpism.

Back then I pointed out that The Year’s Top News Stories are selected somewhat arbitrarily, but that the inclusion decision was based largely on ratings, or more broadly the overall “popularity” of the stories. Put crudely, I said, a top story is one that sells papers, which is another way of saying that a story’s elevation to Top Story status is determined, in large part, by The Market. The rise of online news—with its incredible capacity to report on exactly who is looking at precisely what—only accentuates the problem.

These many years ago I suggested a different approach for media organizations to use in choosing Top Stories, one that isn’t based on which stories draw the most eyeballs for advertisers. You can go back to Nygaard Notes #474 to read my proposal, but here’s an excerpt that I think will give you the gist of it. I wrote:

“I’ve just suggested that the selection of The Year’s Top News Stories is largely determined by The Market. Such selections happen after the fact—that is, at the end of the year in which the stories appeared. But the before-the-fact decisions about what gets into the news cycle in the first place are also heavily influenced by The Market. This dynamic contributes to a high level of ignorance among U.S. news ‘consumers,’ and for a simple reason: The news items that draw the largest numbers of viewers—and thus draw advertisers, and thus become eligible for ‘top story’ status—are not necessarily the news items that best ↗↗↗

→→ *help us understand our world. This is hardly a controversial point, and the failure to address it says much about the priorities of those who run our media system. Or, rather, it says much about the system itself, and the priorities that it mindlessly enforces in the service of profit.*

“What if we were to choose our Top Stories—and not just after the fact, but also before we went out to cover them—by taking a different approach entirely? What if we were to project ourselves into the future and imagine that we were historians looking back on the media of today? What would historians of the future consider today's Top Stories?”

“If I were such a historian, I would start by trying to see some major themes. Looked at in this way, I think that a story would be judged to be a ‘Top Story’ to the degree that it illuminated the themes that a future historian of the United States might consider to be the major themes of the era. Imagine a history book about the early 21st Century. What Big Themes might merit their own chapters?”

At the time I was speaking to media makers—reporters and editors—but I will now suggest that this basic idea of Big Themes can be used by news consumers and activists—you and me—to help us fight the sense of helplessness and confusion that washes over us with the tsunami of real and fake news that the Internet offers us every day.

Think Like an Activist Historian

Reporters like to describe journalism as “the first rough draft of history.” But journalist Jack Shafer, writing in *Slate* in 2010, said that this is because “Journalists hope that one day a historian will uncover their dusty work and celebrate their genius. But that almost never happens.

Historians tend to view journalism as unreliable and tend to be dismissive of our work. They'd rather work from primary sources—official documents, photographs, interviews, and the like—rather than from our clips.”

I agree with Shafer, and I hope that future historians are smart enough to deserve his trust. But, for those of us non-historians living in the age of Internet News I think the constant stream of sensational and ratings-driven news reporting does end up having the effect of shaping our overall impression of the nature of our world. If we're passive about news—that is, if we let other people decide what gets our attention—then it's bound to affect our thinking.

To deal with this problem I suggest that we decide for ourselves where to direct our attention. But how does one go about doing this? I suggest we utilize the “Historian of the Future” approach that I outlined above, but adapt it by considering ourselves not simply Historians of the Future but as *Activist Historians* of the Future. Looking back, an activist would want to know not only the nature of the Big Themes of the present era; she would want to know the nature of the social forces that will, by that time, have led us to a better place, or to a worse place. As always, the historical judgement as to “better” and “worse” depends on where the viewer is situated. That's a discussion for another time, but it's important to keep in mind.

An Activist Historian of the Future would ask themselves: Looking back, what do I wish I would have known or understood that I did not know or understand at the time?

Anybody can do this. As this series continues I'll indicate how one might carry this out. Maybe it will help us to be a little less disoriented as we try to keep up with unfolding events. ♦

Thinking about The Big Crisis

A few months ago I commented on the “increasingly freaked-out social order that we have in the United States of the 21st Century.” I was partly referring to the great number of individuals and institutions that are so upset about the very idea of Trump in the White House. But my other meaning may not have been so clear. I was referring to the various aspects of what might be called The Big Crisis, in which long-established structures, institutions, and ways of thinking are weakening or failing. As The Big Crisis deepens and increasingly makes real change inevitable, the currently-dominant ideas and ways of thinking will yield to new ideas. Familiar structures and

institutions will die and new ones will be born. The nature of the changes that The Big Crisis breeds is not settled. What is to come will depend, as Milton Friedman put it, on the ideas that are lying around.

I call it The Big Crisis, but if you google that phrase you'll mostly find references to the big *financial* crisis of 2008. What I'm talking about is much bigger than that. It's not unrelated to what Joanna Macy calls The Great Turning. (www.ecoliteracy.org/article/great-turning#)

What are some aspects of The Big Crisis? I have ↗↗↗

→→ suggested a list of seven broad areas where we see enormous changes happening, changes that are shaping how we live, and will shape how we live for generations to come. My seven areas are:

1. Inequality and Resource Allocation
2. The Decline of the U.S. Empire
3. The State of U.S. Democracy
4. The Browning of America
5. Climate Change/Humans and the Environment
6. The Evolving State of Capitalism
7. Social Health

These are arbitrary choices, and there are others that people who respond to public opinion polls would likely mention—war and peace, national security, immigration, terrorism. How about technology? And of course, in the real world the items on my list, or any list, intertwine with and affect all the other things on the list; they are not separate, although they are listed separately. Systems of domination, for example, affect all of them, whether the system is white supremacy, patriarchy, classism, or something else. Capitalism has everything to do with Inequality. Our Social Health is shaped by the functioning of U.S. Democracy. And our Democracy will be hugely affected by the Browning of the United States. And so on and so forth.

You may want to make your own list. That's a good idea, but take care when doing so that you remember to consider your vantage point. One's position in the social order will inevitably color one's choices. The construction of the list will likely look different if constructed by a high-income white male corporate executive than it will look if constructed by a low-income indigenous woman who works for that corporation. The amount of time you have

to think about it is also a factor, as is one's education, history of civic involvement and/or activism, and many other factors.

So the process of constructing your list should be an education in itself! But the list is only the first part of the process. Once you have your list, how do you use it?

I will suggest that, when looking back on the present day from some point in the future (as a historian/activist of the future) we would want to consider three things.

1. What were some of the key crisis points, the areas in which our decisions and actions now shaped the future from which we are imagining we're looking back? This is the question that produces our list of Crisis Areas, such as my list of seven areas mentioned above.
2. Since we are living now, we have a responsibility for the decisions being made and the actions being taken now. So here's the question I asked earlier: Looking back, what do I wish I would have known or understood that I did not know or understand at the time?
3. As I attempt to educate myself to be best equipped to participate in shaping our collective future, where do I go to get the information and tools that I need to take wise and effective action?

The remainder of this series (however long it goes; I haven't written it yet) will be me trying to apply my own advice to my own list of the seven crisis points that I've identified as contributing to the Big Crisis through which we are living. We'll start with the subject that happens to be first on my list: Inequality and Resource Allocation. ♦

“Quote” of the Week: *Exceptional. Purposeful. Consequential.*

*“The full meaning and importance of American inequality rests on three observations. First, American inequality is **exceptional**. By any measure, we are more unequal now than we have ever been, and we are more unequal—by a long shot—than our peers among developed and democratic nations. Second, contemporary American inequality is **purposeful**. American inequality is not an unhappy consequence of unrelenting market and historical forces; it is a direct and tangible result of public policies whose very design and intent was to redistribute income and wealth upwards. Third, American inequality is **consequential**. American inequality hurts not only those that it leaves behind, but does great damage to our more general economic and democratic prospects.”*

That's from the digital project “Growing Apart: A Political History of American Inequality,” by Colin Gordon. Found on the website of “Inequality.org” <https://inequality.org/research/growing-apart-political-history-american-inequality/>

A Crisis of Inequality

Here's a simple three-step process for becoming an activist: Step One – Identify the problem; Step Two – Educate yourself about the problem; Step Three – Join with others to address the problem.

My Step One, which grows out of years of activism, study, and life experience, leads me to place Inequality and Resource Allocation on my list of some of the major crises of our age. Put simply: Who Gets What, and Is It Fair? In case you doubt the designation of inequality as a crisis, we'll start with a few comments published in recent weeks.

“Our democracy is in crisis. Inequality has never been higher. For every dollar worth of wealth that a white family has, a black family has less than a dime.” These comments are taken from the website of the group *United for a Fair Economy*, (UFE) in the section called “Why inequality?”

Here's a headline from a few months ago in *The Business Insider*: “The world is facing an inequality crisis.” And these words from the website of Oxfam: “The inequality crisis is worsening. 82 percent of the wealth created last year went to the richest one percent of the global population, while the 3.7 billion people who make up the poorest half of humanity got nothing.”

Of course, one can find sources that say this is not a crisis, such as a 2016 paper from the libertarian CATO Institute called “Five Myths about Economic Inequality in America.” That paper starts out by stating “But even if inequality were growing as fast as critics claim, it would not necessarily be a problem.” So, you can read that if you like.

https://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa797_2.pdf

I obviously do think that we have a crisis of inequality, and I believe that much of the problem is socially created, and is thus changeable by the efforts of humans. In support of my position, consider these words, from an August 7, 2017 report by the Institute for Policy Studies called *REVERSING INEQUALITY: Unleashing the Transformative Potential of an Equitable Economy*: “The US economy's deep systemic inequalities of income, wealth, power, and opportunity are part of global inequality trends, but US-style capitalism and public policy make inequalities more acute. ... These inequalities do not spring mainly from technological change and globalization, though both compound and complicate the rift. Instead, imbalances of power and agency embedded in our political and economic system are the main drivers and accelerators

of inequality.”

The sentiment is echoed by *United for a Fair Economy*, in their “5 Things About Inequality You Didn't Learn in Economics Class.” Here are the five things:

1. Inequality is Intentional.
2. Creating a Middle Class Was Intentional.
3. Excluding People of Color From The Middle Class Was Intentional.
4. This Inequality Has Had Devastating Impacts on Families.
5. Money in Politics Is Undermining Our Democracy.

(All of these are explained on their website:

www.faireconomy.org/the_story

The process of educating ourselves about inequality will be an ever-unfolding process. But since the whole point of this Nygaard Notes series is to help people to focus and orient ourselves, I'll offer some ideas about how, in the current media/information environment, one might direct one's attention to this issue.

Start by Reading. Start with Books.

The first thing you want to do when trying to focus your attention on an issue is to learn enough about it that you get an idea of what you do not know. That will guide your quest for understanding. The best way to start to do this is to read a couple of books (or more) on the subject. But, which books? That's not easy to answer, but in a society where myth and propaganda routinely transform the absurd into cultural common sense (I'm talking about the USA here), you won't want to rely on the best-seller lists. I'll suggest three books that I found when I looked around. I will stress that I haven't read any of them, and that's because the books that I *have* read are quite dated – the first significant piece I wrote on inequality was published in 1999! So I did not want to recommend 20-year-old books. But my research tells me that the following three books are worth a look in the year 2018.

Book #1: Noam Chomsky: *Requiem for the American Dream: The 10 Principles of Concentration of Wealth & Power*, published by Seven Stories Press in 2017. This caught my attention because of the many books, articles and speeches by Chomsky that I have taken in over 40 years. The New York Times says that Chomsky “focuses here on ... financial inequality in America and what he calls its corrosive effect on democracy.”

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Book #2: *The Great Inequality* by Michael D Yates, was published by Routledge in 2016. This book caught my attention via an article by the author on the subject of inequality, years before the book was published. Writing in *Monthly Review* in 2012, Yates pointed out that “The Occupy Wall Street (OWS) uprising has put inequality squarely on the political agenda, with the brilliant slogan, ‘We are the 99%.’” Then he said this: “Given the prominence that OWS has given to inequality, it is useful to know what causes it. We cannot just look at the facts, dramatic as they might be, and say that something is wrong or that all we need is to take money from the rich and transfer it to the poor. What is needed is a theory of distribution, because this can give us guidance on what political strategy might best confront the underlying forces that generate inequality.”

Book #3: *The Color of Wealth: The Story Behind the U.S. Racial Wealth Divide*. Co-authored by five experts associated with *United for a Fair Economy*, this book was published in 2006 by *The New Press*. When studying any issue—*any* issue—it’s important to look at what I call the URL: The Unavoidable Racial Link. This book does just that, as this brief excerpt from the very first paragraph indicates:

“Why do people of color have so little wealth? Because for centuries they were barred by law, by discrimination, and by violence from participating in government wealth-building programs that benefitted white Americans. Understanding the roots of the racial wealth divide will lead to more understanding of racial inequities in general and more understanding of how to reach equality.”

This book was written in 2006, before the financial crisis of 2008; the racial gap is even worse now than it was 12 years ago.

So, we start the process of orienting ourselves by reading a book or two. Then what? I’ll pick up this thread in Nygaard Notes #626. ♦

Greetings,

I’ve talked to a lot of people who tell me (directly or indirectly) that they have felt disoriented since the election of November 2016. The implications of the racist backlash that delivered Donald Trump to the White House will be felt for decades. This issue of Nygaard Notes is the first part of a series aimed at helping people get unfrozen by the enormity of the disaster that is Trumpism. And the place to start is by focusing not on Trump, but on the huge social, economic, and cultural forces that make up the soil in which organisms like Trump can grow.

Sorry it’s been so long since the last Nygaard Notes. This is a big subject, took me a while to do the research and to straighten out my thinking. Please let me know what you think!

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