

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Discontents, Doctrines, and Disruptions

Janusz Reykowski. *Disenchantment with Democracy: A Psychological Perspective*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020)

Stanley A. Renshon and Peter Suedfeld (Eds.). *The Trump Doctrine and the Emerging International System*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021)

Washington DC, January 6, 2021

As I began this review, an armed right-wing mob of thousands, self-organized via social media and led by various self-styled “militia” groups, stormed the U.S. Capitol building. They were incited by the defeated president, Donald Trump, who refused to accept his loss of the 2020 election by a margin of seven million popular votes and an electoral vote margin of 306–232. The mob believed Trump had “invited” them to march in order to prevent Congressional certification of Joseph Biden as president-elect. Some rioters erected a makeshift gallows and chanted “hang Mike Pence” (who as Vice-President was charged with presiding at the certification), calling him a “traitor” for not violating Constitutional procedures by scrapping the election results certified by the individual states. One rioter proudly messaged her children that “we were looking for Nancy [Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives] to shoot her in the friggin’ brain, but we didn’t find her” (Kornfield, 2021).

For several hours Trump watched the insurrection on television, while doing nothing either to protect Congress members and staff or to secure the Capitol building. When he later told the rioters to go home, he added that “We love you. You’re very special” (Petri, 2021). Seven days later the House of Representatives impeached Trump for “inciting violence against the Government of the United States.”

To the millions of American citizens and other people worldwide who had thought of the United States as the cradle, promoter, and guardian of democracy, these events were traumatic, and their implications for the American political future ominous. Suddenly disenchantment with democracy, and the violence that flows from that disenchantment, were not phenomena that happened “elsewhere”—in Hungary, Poland, Brazil, Turkey, the Philippines, or Myanmar—or in rumors of discontent in such democracy stalwarts as Sweden, Germany, and France. Rather, *this* Washington disenchantment played out in full view of everyone, at the very center of American democracy. Perhaps even more disturbing was the fact even in the hours after the assault on the Capitol, over half of the Republican members of Congress voted not to certify election results in at least one of the states. And so Israeli political scientist Ehud Sprinzak’s (1991) analysis of how a “crisis of legitimacy” lies at the heart of domestic terrorism seemed to play out, live and in color, on television sets around the world.

The Mass Politics of Disenchantment

Janusz Reykowski's *Disenchantment with Democracy* thus arrives at an important time. What happened? Perhaps we can learn from his analysis. What can be done? Perhaps we can draw upon his experience and wisdom. The book is a translation and reworking of six essays previously published in Polish academic journals between 2011 and 2017, to which is added a fascinating final chapter on the 1989 Polish Round Table, which—against all odds—managed a peaceful transition to liberal democracy at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its East European bloc. As cochair of one part of the Round Table negotiation, Reykowski himself played a critical role in its success. Ironically, the subsequent decay of this democracy and the rise to prominence of the “Law and Justice Party” provides many of his examples of “disenchantment” with democracy in Poland. Poland’s creep toward authoritarianism recently reached into academia when the government demanded “public apologies” from historians writing about Polish complicity in the Holocaust (Higgins, 2021).

Democracy, Reykowski suggests, replaces punishment and coercion with individual rights and freedoms. It emerges from economic development and promotes human development and autonomy. Reykowski’s survey of psychological mechanisms or “mentalities” relevant to democracy could be an analytic guide to recent events, whether in Washington, Warsaw, or Myanmar’s Yangon. Democracy is *supported* and sustained by a “modern” worldview and humanitarian sentiments (or—under the right circumstances—rational self-interest). On the other hand, democracy is *threatened* by strong fear (especially fears about survival), which can in turn energize strong collective social identities that set off intergroup bias and prejudice (which are really forms of “symbolic violence”), rigidity, moralistic thinking, and authoritarian aggression. In principle, democracy can regulate many ideological differences, *if* common values are strong enough to prevent one side from monopolizing the symbolic space. Political psychologists seeking to understand the January 6 insurrection in Washington will find in this book many psychological and attitudinal tools for their research.

Interests and Markets

But there’s more. For Reykowski, the political world and hence the vicissitudes of democracy extend beyond psychology. Chapter 3 describes *realistic conflicts of interest*: not only conflicts about getting one’s “daily bread” but also competition to gratify symbolic needs such as respect, honor, and self-esteem. Such realistic-interest conflicts can be exacerbated by cognitive factors such as perception and trust, as well as more emotional factors such as narcissism, hatred, and envy.

Interest conflicts are not only psychological, for they are also embedded in the realities of the social structure and institutions of the market system, which permit the powerful to focus on “market freedoms” while denying asymmetries of power (e.g., corporations versus employees) that create social-class structures. At the top of such hegemonic structures, elite groups enjoy their privilege; however, this marinates and thereby strengthens the envy and discontent of those at the bottom. And so these victims of structures of privilege turn away from “shared culture” and—most important—a shared sense of rules, and are pushed toward anger and rebellion.

Market systems also ignore externalities such as environmental degradation or social disruption, which can have devastating social and psychological downstream effects. For example, the Texas electrical grid and utility system were designed according to “market principles” developed by a Harvard economics professor. Their February 2021 collapse following severe winter storms and cold, despite warnings based on several storms of previous years, demonstrated the perils of reliance on “market mechanisms” (Krugman, 2021) and the potential for anger when these mechanisms fail.

Reykowski’s analysis of interests and markets, distributed across Chapters 4–6, should be essential reading for analysts of January 6. Especially in the last several decades, American social and political life has become rife with economic and social inequalities, across and within racial and

ethnic groups. And although academics may emphasize the “merit” aspect of “meritocracies,” in sociological terms, most meritocracies are simply examples of hegemonic structures. The reality of globalization and the threats of climate change (as well as policies to combat it) have transformed employment opportunities, jeopardized self-regard, and stirred up fears—especially in the interior of the country (sometimes insultingly described as “flyover country” by coastal elite groups; see, for example, Bourdain, 2016). Over the past several decades, the “American cowboy” icon so dear to the American male psyche has come to the end of his round-up. In 2020-21, the existential crisis of the Covid pandemic may be a final straw.

So how can democracy survive? Reykowski suggests *dialogue* as a way of strengthening democracy. The book concludes with an account of the structure and functioning of the Polish Round Table as an example of deliberative democracy that has been successful for at least two decades.

A Pivot to Elite Politics and Leaders

How do political leaders contribute to the functioning and fate of democracy? Stanley Renshon and Peter Suedfeld have edited 14 contributions that explicate and analyze a putative “Trump Doctrine” of foreign (and domestic) policy. Palgrave Macmillan formally published the book on August 28, 2020, which suggests a late spring deadline for small changes and a couple of months before that for major changes. In the context of the often surprising and unanticipated extraordinary events of the rest of 2020, any attempt to fit Donald Trump’s ever-changing and elusive policies into a rational framework would have been a daunting challenge. Sometimes the reader has a sense of suspended animation: Policies and actions are described in the present tense, and there are references to Trump’s “first term.”

In an introductory chapter, Renshon discerns six principles or “pillars” of Trump’s “Conservative American Nationalism” doctrine: for example, “America First,” antiliberal cosmopolitanism, standing alone and apart if necessary, strength and resilience, maximal repeated pressure, and flexibility. Using content analysis of selected Trump speeches and tweets, Suedfeld and his colleagues attempt to transform this “America First” doctrine label into several cognitive, motivational, and interpersonal emotion themes and measures in Chapter 2. A chapter by Henry Nau attempts to place Trump within familiar foreign-policy typologies—nationalism, realism, and conservative (or liberal) internationalism; while a following chapter by James Carafano identifies him as a “defensive realist,” similar to Reagan’s quest for “peace through strength.”

But then things get complicated. Martha Cottam recounts Trump’s tortuous interactions with advisers and traces his decision-making on specific topics such as North Korea, trade policy, or NATO. Thomas Preston opts for “patterns” rather than “doctrine” as the most appropriate description of Trump’s policies. Douglas Foyle shows how public opinion divided in similar ways regarding Trump’s foreign and domestic policies.

Specific chapters on several areas of the world follow: Jeremy Lamoreaux on Russia, Michael Beckley on China, Lawrence Kuznar on North Korea, Michael Doran on the Middle East, and Amnon Cavari on Israel. The book concludes with chapters, by Robert Singh and Colin Dueck, that set Trump’s foreign policies in a broader historical context and speculate about how long they will last after the end of his presidency.

Is There Really a Trump “Doctrine”?

After the fact, it is usually possible to bring rational arrangement to the most confusing set of facts, but that is no assurance of its accuracy or usefulness in prediction. And so we may ask whether Trump’s words and deeds really do constitute a coherent rational doctrine. Or did he instead act in ways that remind us of Germany’s Kaiser Wilhelm II (Winter, 2018; see also Cohen, 2017):

flamboyant and erratic behavior, verbal bombast, childish language, a bullying interpersonal style, views changing by the day—or even the hour—often in response to the last person talked to, and a “dangerous susceptibility to sycophantic flattery and backstage intrigue” (Röhl, 2014, p. xvi)? Even the Kaiser’s impulsive marginal scribbles on official documents, preserved in their published versions (to the amusement of generations of scholars), can be seen as a kind of early 20th-century tweet.

For Trump, quite another “doctrine” seems to emerge from his “psychopathology of everyday life”—tweets, going off script in speeches, and spontaneous exultances at rallies. This is a *doctrine of white male supremacy* (sometimes with “Christian” implied or stated). It stretches from the 1973 Justice Department lawsuit against Trump and his company for racial housing discrimination, through his 1989 full-page ad in four New York City newspapers demanding the death penalty for the five defendants in the “Central Park jogger case (who were eventually exonerated by DNA evidence), his persistent endorsement of the Obama “birther” fantasy, his description of Haiti, El Salvador, and African nations as “shithole countries” (Mark, 2018), his attempt to ban Muslim immigrants to the United States, his Justice Department’s ending the use of “consent decrees” to pressure police departments with a history of systemic civil rights abuses, his description of the Charlottesville white supremacists as “good people,” his repeated attacks on the Black Lives Matter movement, his September 2020 call for the Proud Boys and other white supremacist groups to “stand back and stand by,” his ridicule of Kim Jong-un’s size (“little rocket man”) and Elizabeth Warren’s Native American heritage, his “China virus” and “kung flu” nicknames for Covid-19 (which have been repeated in many violent attacks on Asians and Asian Americans; see Liu & Hatzipanagos, 2021), and his forcible separation of little children from their families—*brown* families, it should not be forgotten—along the U.S. border with Mexico.

And How Has It Worked for the United States?

Trump’s first “doctrine” was financial, laid out in the ghost-written pages of his 1987 book, *The Art of the Deal*. Drawing on money inherited from his father (with some perhaps wrongfully kept from his siblings and cousins; see Mary Trump, 2020, pp. 167–177, 190), Trump is and always has been rich (though his finances have often been under great stress and actual and threatened losses). But over several decades, many of his businesses have not been conspicuously successful: for example, several casinos went bankrupt, a shuttle airline defaulted on its debt and suspended operations, a professional football team folded after two seasons, and a “university” and a foundation were both dissolved in the face of fraud charges and lawsuits. And as I write (February 2021), Trump remains vulnerable to massive potential liabilities arising from bank demands and government claims.

Did Trump’s political “doctrines” fare any better? Given its production schedule, *The Trump Doctrine* necessarily tells an unfinished story. Now that his term as president is finished, however, we can ask how well his putative “doctrines” have worked over four years. Here are some early returns:

- North Korea’s nuclear weapons and launch capacity is not less (and may be more) than it was in 2017 when Trump threatened “fire and fury.” U.S. intelligence has suggested that Trump’s efforts to stop North Korea (Crowley, 2020) from enriching uranium (“UN atomic watchdog,” 2020) and developing nuclear weapons and long-range missiles (Sanger, Wong, & Crowley, 2019) have been a dismal failure (Boot, 2020; Sanger & Choe, 2020).
- Iran’s desire for nuclear weapons has not been diminished by Trump’s attempt to scuttle the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (or “Iran Nuclear Deal”).
- Almost all nuclear arms-control treaties have been allowed to lapse (Erlanger, 2021).
- Russia has continued its cyberattacks on American elections, government departments, and corporations.

- China continues expanding its influence among developing nations, while looking for advantage among the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) nations abandoned by Trump in 2018 when he withdrew the United States from the TPP.
- There are signs that European allies are rethinking their economic and perhaps political relationships with Russia and China (Crowley & Erlanger, 2021).
- Neither Iran, Venezuela, nor Cuba has experienced the “regime change” that Trump tried so hard to bring about.
- Finally, just as an ice sheet as big as the American state of Delaware was breaking off from the Antarctic continent, thereby contributing to rising ocean levels, Trump withdrew the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement (Patel & Gillis, 2017).

Domestically, Trump’s attempt to repeal health-insurance coverage failed. His infrastructure program never got off the ground. And four years of construction produced only 40 miles of new wall on the 1,954-mile border between the United States and Mexico, along with 400 miles of replacement and upgrading of prior barriers (“Trump’s border wall,” 2020).

The Twin Crises of 2020–21

Two major events that occurred during and after the production of the book, however, suggest the failure—indeed, the *absence*—of any “Trump Doctrine” beyond a personal megalomania that echoes the erratic narcissism of the German Kaiser one hundred years earlier. Instead of a reasoned, calibrated science-based response, the COVID-19 pandemic elicited streams of Trump denials and deceptions (see Woodward, 2020); ever-shifting pronouncements, speculations, and policies (including injecting of a disinfectant (see Trump, 2020); and personnel shifts both threatened and actual. Throughout 2020, he mocked wearing masks and other public health precautions (Victor, Serviss, & Paybarah, 2020). During his time in office, the United States had loss of life from the COVID-19 pandemic that was greater than that of any other country, with more Americans dying from COVID-19 than were killed in the battles of World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War combined (Tompkins, Smith, Bosman, & Pietsch, 2021). In addition, the resulting economic and employment collapse wiped out most of the gains since Trump’s term began.

The second event, of course, was the January 6 mob insurrection. Regardless of the specifics of Trump’s legal responsibility, the foundation of this vivid expression of “disillusionment with democracy” was Donald Trump’s oft-repeated insistence that he had actually won the 2020 election. For example, here are some of his claims—each demonstrably, even wildly false—from his remarks to the mob just before the attack on the Capitol (Trump, 2021):

- “We won this election and we won it by a landslide. This was not a close election.”
- “This year they rigged an election. They rigged it like they’ve never rigged an election before.”
- “Over the past several weeks, we’ve amassed overwhelming evidence about a fake election.”
- “Using the pretext of the China virus and the scam of mail-in ballots, Democrats attempted the most brazen and outrageous election theft. And there’s never been anything like this.”
- “We’re leading Pennsylvania, Michigan, Georgia. By hundreds of thousands of votes and then late in the evening, or early in the morning, boom. These explosions of bullshit.”

Were Trump’s beliefs about the 2020 election delusional or deliberate? It may not matter, for in any case these vivid words, delivered by someone experienced in the hyperbole of real estate and reality TV, had and may continue to have undoubted charismatic and emotional appeal to many disoriented and discontented followers, thereby turning their “disenchantment with democracy” into violent insurrection.

Doctrines and Disenchantments

Looking back on the four years of Trump's presidency, especially his responses to the COVID-19 disaster and his sustained attempts to spread doubt and disenchantment with American elections and thereby democracy, one might ask whether there *ever* was a formal coherent "Trump Doctrine" in any reasonable sense of what those words mean. That is, what guiding principles can be inferred from his past words and actions that will explain and predict the future—beginning with the future we have seen in the last 12 months of his term? I suggest that the "real Trump doctrine" is a *psychological* doctrine. Again, I borrow a characterization of Kaiser Wilhelm by his most eminent biographer (Röhl, Bridge, & De Bellaigue, 2013):

All his life, evidently in keeping with his entire personality, he must have lived in a world of his own imagining which he then imposes upon reality and experience. . . . The view of the world which he made for himself and outlined for us was wrongheaded to a grotesque, truly tragic degree. (p. 1215)

A Doctrine in Exile?

Hours before his successor's inauguration, Trump moved into Florida exile with the words, "We will be back in some form." And so we may expect his beliefs or claims about the 2020 election to be a major theme of any Trump doctrine-in-exile. This, too, would recall Kaiser Wilhelm, who lived out his decades of exile in the Netherlands with the unwavering belief that Germany had not been militarily defeated in World War I, but rather had succumbed to a far-ranging "stab-in-the-back" conspiracy of socialist politicians, other countries, and various religious groups (Röhl et al., 2013, p. 1214).

Summing Up

How can such analyses—political or psychological—of Trump's doctrines help us deal with the larger society's disenchantment with democracy? Shouting down discontented citizens and voters is probably not the answer. Helping people adjust when their lives have been disrupted and dislocated by technological, economic, and social trends—whether by education, relocation assistance, or stronger "safety nets"—is a more effective way to tamp down discontent and preserve democracy. And in the long run, opposing attempts of dominant groups to preserve hegemonic structures by fostering divisions among subordinate groups can block or mitigate such trends before they become disruptive.

Some especially appropriate words of advice on this score come from Anthony Bourdain, the gourmet chef whose career broadened into a concern with global dimensions of the human condition. Using the theme of *sharing food*—a primordial image of affiliation and mutual regard—his words echo Reykowski's analysis of the success of the Polish Round Table (Bourdain, 2016):

Just repeating and repeating and repeating the outrages of the opposition—this does not win hearts and minds. It doesn't change anyone's opinions. It only solidifies them and makes things worse for all of us. We should be breaking bread with each other and finding common ground whenever possible. I fear that is not at all what we've done.

A Comment on the Book Production Process

Perhaps a concluding comment on production problems of both books is appropriate. In *The Trump Doctrine*, for example, "Taliban" and the name of Minnesota's senior senator are misspelled,

and the name of North Korea's leader is wrongly hyphenated. Michigan Representative Rashida Tlaib—one of those progressive Democrats whom Trump told to “go back and help fix the totally broken and crime-infested places from which they come”—is identified as a Republican! *Disenchantment with Democracy*, a product of the distinguished second-oldest university press in the world, nevertheless has numerous serious errors of copyediting and proofreading. Fortunately, these errors and omissions may distract from the reading but not from the argument.

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