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EQUALITY AND INEQUALITY, TECHNOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE, AND POLITICS

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We Are Living in a New Environment

What is very clear is that we are living in an economic and political environment that has dramatically changed. Since World War II, the United States has been the linchpin for a whole set of defense and economic alliances (e.g. NATO, NAFTA, among many others) that have guaranteed the economic and political security of a number of countries, including the United States. However, our recent national reluctance to get involved in the affairs of other countries has recently led us to the current state of affairs—where Russian, Chinese, and North Korean influence is becoming much more expansive, and the United States does not appear to be willing to risk much of its political and economic capital except for relationships with authoritarian countries.

The advent of terror appears to have reinforced this belief system (i.e. to keep out potential terrorists and immigrants), so that we now seem to be in an environment described best by the phrases “America First,” “limiting immigrant and civil liberties,” authoritarianism and “economic nationalism.” The aspirational statement on the Statue of Liberty which says “Give me your tired, your hungry, your masses yearning to be free” has apparently been replaced by a proposed 2017 piece of legislation, the RAISE Act (Reforming American Immigration for Strong Employment), the key elements of which might best be stated as “Give me your skilled laborers, your wealthy, your highly educated, your fluent English speakers, your members of an economic elite who are yearning to become even wealthier by coming to the United States.” And of course, if the people happen to be LGBTQ refugees from Chechnya who would otherwise be held in a concentration camp in their home country, they should stay in Chechnya; and LGBTQ undocumented people as well as “Dreamers” should be deported.

We are also in the midst of cyber-warfare with several countries—predominantly with but also with Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea—which illustrates how impossible it is to live in a protected environment where physical fences might keep people out, while electronic systems let people in. We have suffered a cyber-attack by Russia upon our very democratic institutions, verified by all of our intelligence agencies, and yet we are not undertaking substantial federal counter-efforts to prevent this from happening again (Belam 2016). In addition to the verified hacking of the Democratic Party, many thousands of Facebook ads were purchased by Russian organizations in certain targeted states during the 2016 presidential elections—with a special emphasis placed upon “divisive issues.” Similarly Google ads and tweets were directed in the same fashion at people whose votes might be affected. Controversial issues which were targeted include immigration, LGBT issues, gun rights, and banning Muslims from entering the United States (Isaac and Shane 2017).
One needs to keep in mind that a number of the four countries named above generally have not been supportive of LGBTQ people: Russia has been persistent in its maltreatment of LGBT people (Human Rights Watch 2016), some Middle Eastern countries (including Iran) have seen instances of the stoning as well as execution of LGBT people, North Korea does not recognize their existence, while China has only recently started to significantly move in the direction of ensuring rights for LGBT people.

Additionally, we seem to find ourselves in a post-factual world, where all the “factual” evidence may be very clear, but a number of people want to ignore facts and replace them with ideology or “fake news,” which makes it difficult for factually based LGBTQ human rights arguments to be used effectively (Camacho 2016).

And, of course, we need to contend most importantly with the new federal environment. The election of a president in November 2016 was accomplished as a result of a number of factors, including cleverly targeting states that were not emphasized by his leading opponent (Zaharia 2017), as well as appealing to populist concerns resulting in a strategy of nationalism, with undertones of discrimination (Serwer 2017). Then of course, one must add several other major factors: (1) the minority parties won enough voters to ensure that three key states (Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin) went to Donald Trump, (2) globalization, combined with computerization, has had the effect of eliminating millions of jobs, which has given rise to considerable political unrest, and (3) fear of loss of status. The characteristics of this new environment have had very direct impacts upon LGBTQ people; and are dangerous for all marginalized minorities.

Social and Technological Change

Our society has moved from an: (1) Agricultural era to a (2) Manufacturing/Industrial era, to a (3) Service era, but now, (4) our society is moving, as Richard Florida suggested at the 2016 Government Finance Officers Association conference, into the “Great Reset” which began in the 1980s.

Viewed through the lens of this author’s earlier 2015 book, America is divided into two segments: the empowered states which create more wealth than the disempowered states, which are poorer and which depend upon the empowered states to provide them with financial resources . . . (Swan 2015).

The empowered states draw talented people (or “the creative class”) of all types to “mega-cities,” as urban theorist Richard Florida emphasizes in his writings (Florida 2008). By contrast, the disempowered states lose talented people (including both those who are LGBTQ as well as other marginalized minorities, and a whole millennial generation that supports their rights). Each of these groups of states is different—the mountain states are libertarian conservative, while the southern states incorporate strong religious conservatism. The plains states are financially conservative, and the rust belt states face difficult economic transformation issues. The percentage of the population which is LGBT is lower in disempowered states, leading to reduced impact upon political decision-making. (See the chapter by Goldberg and Conron entitled “Demographic Characteristics of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Adults in the United States: Evidence From the 2015–2017 Gallup Daily Tracking Survey.”)

These disempowered states are more dependent upon federal assistance—the “empowered states” typically (but not always) get less than $1 for every $1 of federal tax money they collect while the “dis-empowered states” typically (but not always) get more than $1 for every $1 of federal tax money they collect (with some exceptions). The Republican Party, sensing this difference, has made a determined effort to modify this imbalance by reducing the availability of state and local tax deductions for the empowered states as part of their “Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017.”

The differences between “empowered states” and “disempowered states” for LGBTQ people are quite extreme: A gay couple can now get married in a “disempowered state,” but as soon as information appears in the newspaper about their marriage, they have the potential of getting fired
from their job, losing their housing, and being kicked out of school because those states offer no civil rights protections. Hate crimes and discrimination are more prevalent in these disempowered states.

As Richard Florida suggests, we need to look at the existence of mega-cities as well (rather than organizations) that attract creative people. At this point in time, being part of the “creative class” in our large cities provides great opportunities; salaries are high and opportunities for promotions are abundant for people who are married. Lower and middle income households are seeing slow growth in income while households in the top 20% are seeing significantly faster growth in income.

As we have noted, this fact mirrors data from a Brookings Institution study which discusses the “the dangerous separation of the upper middle class” (Reeves 2015). If people are married and well-educated, their income continues to go up while the income prospects of others remain stable, volatile, or go down. As Richard Reeves more recently notes, our attention has been drawn to people in extremely high income ranges (the 1% and especially the .01%), but the really interesting change is happening in the upper-middle and upper classes (the top 20% or so) where we can see dramatically differing economic lifestyles. Especially important is the way in which upper middle class families protect their children by passing on advantages to them, which are not available to the children of the lower and middle classes. But these families also collect their advantages by way of living in certain areas (“mega-cities”), ensuring that their children go to college and graduate school, obtaining internships for their children, and ensuring that their children have the right training to obtain professional licensure. The impact of these advantages is, Reeves argues, to make it more difficult for children in the lower and middle classes to rise to the upper-middle and upper classes. Richard Reeves argues that collective action should be taken by our society to reduce what he calls “opportunity hoarding”; thereby moving to make our society more equitable (Reeves 2017).

Peter Temin, Professor Emeritus at MIT argues that we increasingly have a society that is looking more like a developing country, with an upper class which has all of the advantages and a lower class that works for poor wages in difficult working conditions. If one looks at the social indicators for the country (health, neo-natal statistics, almost 50% of the population living in poverty), one will see the dimensions of what Temin is saying (Johnson 2017).

From this discussion, it should be obvious that people with only a high school degree or below live in even a more difficult place in this society because of the effects upon jobs of automation, globalization, artificial intelligence and robotics. . . . The higher-paying jobs for people with a high school degree seldom exist (e.g. manufacturing jobs that previously paid $25 per hour), and the people in the lower and now, increasingly, in the middle class do not have the financial capability to qualify for higher education. This is one consequence of our societal movement toward what Florida calls the “Great Reset.” The highly educated “creative class” has driven up housing costs for people who want a place to live in our “mega-cities.” As a result, the people without educational qualifications to join the “creative class” are simply out of luck; and often work dismal jobs. . . .

A recent article in the Minneapolis Star Tribune summarizes the fact that people with a high school degree are separated from college graduates by the greatest gulf ever (Rugaber 2017).

The future for both the lower class and the middle class is indeed problematic, since the effects of robotics, globalization, artificial intelligence, and digitization are having profound effects over the next decade, when it is theorized that approximately 47% of jobs will simply disappear. The problem remaining is what is going to be the societal impact of the loss of these jobs (Reich 2015).

At least one problem is that the vast majority of people with a high school degree who are locked into low-paying jobs have very limited opportunity for improving themselves, and the potential of loss of income is around every corner due to automation and the use of robots. But it is not just low income people whose jobs are threatened. In Japan, a recent story mentioned how 34 financial staff were out of work because computers did the work more dependably; and it warned Americans that this is coming here (McCurry 2017, 1). And a few days after that, a story appeared that employees in one of the United States’s largest financial firms, the Blackrock corporation, were actually being
displaced by computers (Shen 2017). Whole categories of employees, from food service staff to teachers will increasingly feel the impacts of the new digital revolution.

What is important out of all of this is that for the tens of millions of people with both high school as well as college degrees who used to have well-paying service and manufacturing jobs, the jobs may no longer be there. . . . The higher-paying jobs will no longer exist (except for the highly skilled and retrained employees), and the people who do not have either the money or the capability to qualify for higher education will be out of a job. It would appear that this is the unfortunate consequence of our societal movement toward the “Great Reset”; although some writers take the position of Joseph Schumpeter that we will see “creative destruction” of jobs—wherein people displaced from their jobs will retrain themselves to take on higher level jobs . . .

The Impact Upon Politics

People are realizing that these massive economic trends are having a major impact upon our political life. In a webinar sponsored by the American Society for Public Administration, where a book entitled Partsans and Partners: The Politics of the Post-Keynesian Society was discussed, Josh Pacewitz notes that we can no longer use the traditional dichotomies to explain how American politics operates (Pacewitz 2017). He uses two Midwestern cities (one formerly Republican and the other traditionally Democratic) to illustrate that younger citizens no longer prefer to adopt these party labels; and as a result, they have become more independent in their thinking. He indicates that it is the change in the economic configurations of collective organizations that is actually making this happen. Pacewitz notes that it is not hard to see that the hardening of class lines and a form of rootless loyalty to new organizations (not political in nature) is causing this to occur. Pacewitz states that the 1970s style of community governance relied upon business leaders and union bosses fighting for control of federal monies (which provided about 20% of local dollars). Then President Reagan dramatically reduced the amount of money available for local institutions. The 1980s era that followed was one that emphasized financial deregulation and the merger movement, where credit-rich and high asset corporations were combined: The effect was that traditional community leaders were eliminated and replaced by partisan activists in each party. The political parties began to be filled with ideological activists (no longer connected with community leaders). As a result, the interests of the voters (driven by their own personal agendas) diverged from those of the ideologues and the voters became “independents.” Another result was that political operatives framed contests between “populists” (finding out what the people wanted directly, and communicating directly to voters by Twitter) and “cosmopolitan technocrats” (who ran many of the institutions). The results culminated in the national battle between Donald Trump (the populist) and Hillary Clinton (the cosmopolitan technocrat). And, as an example, this has recently been played out in Minneapolis politics with the takeover of the Democratic Farmer Labor Party by those who term themselves “progressives” (who have moved traditional party leaders aside with the help of the “Our Revolution” movement) and in the Republican Party by right-wing ideologues. Some members of the even further left wing of the DFL Party have then self-selected themselves into the Green Party as well as the Socialist party.

This issue is also connected with the issue of who votes in our society. It is a fact that lower income people simply do not vote at high percentage levels. . . . In fact, people with lower incomes, as well as people who feel their status threatened by change, tend not to vote, but when they do, they are easily swayed by candidates who promise to “change” things for them. . . . But when citizens do choose to vote, they have little or no power. In an article which tests how much power average citizens have, Martin Giles (Princeton) and Benjamin Page (Northwestern) used sophisticated measurement techniques and determined that business interests have major impacts upon governmental policy, while interest groups and average citizens have very little impact (Gilens and Page 2014).
Equality and Inequality

Every so often, however, those who are increasingly impacted by the massive economic and technological trends we have discussed above (e.g. lower, lower-middle, and middle-income people) actually do come out to vote, and they will vote for someone who will speak to their fear of loss of status. A recent study of the 2016 election indicates that change in financial wellbeing had little impact on candidate preferences. Instead, changing preferences were related to changes in the party’s positions on issues related to American global dominance and the rise of a majority-minority America: issues that threaten white American’s sense of dominant group status.

(Mutz 2018, 1)

An alternative approach, described in Salena Zito and Brad Todd’s book, suggests that “... institutional loyalty and expert filtering are being discarded in favor of direct communication and deliberate silo-ing” which is building an entirely new political system (Zito and Todd 2018, 5).

Conclusion

The point of this discussion is that the effects of social, attitudinal, and technological change in this particular era are dramatic, and are impacting not only jobs, but also the political behavior of Americans. The recent presidential election, as well as a number of individual political races, is shaping not only our political institutions—but also the way in which the LGBTQ community (which, in large part, allied itself with the “cosmopolitan technocrat” class) is treated in this era. Marginalization of all minorities appears to be one significant outcome of this process. As William Galston notes in “Populism’s Challenge to Democracy,”

Populism accepts the principles of popular sovereignty and majoritarian democracy. But it is skeptical about constitutionalism, inasmuch as formal, bounded institutions and procedures impede majorities from working their will. It takes an even dimmer view of liberal protections for individuals and minority groups.

(Galston 2018, A11)

References


