

The West Celebrates Assad's Fall, But What Comes Next May Be Even Worse



C.J. Polychroniou

12-11-2024 ~ *How can the fall of the admittedly brutal Assad regime create a "historic opportunity" for the Syrian people when the country is now under the control of jihadists?*

The toppling of Bashar al-Assad in Syria was cheered by U.S. President Joe Biden and other major Western leaders, like French President [Emmanuel Macron](#) and German Chancellor [Olaf Scholz](#), as it ended the reign of a brutal regime more than 13 years after Assad's crackdown on anti-government protests ignited Syria's civil war.

Indeed, Biden described Assad's fall as a "[historic opportunity](#)" for the Syrian people, echoing Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, the leader of the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group (HTS) that took over Syria, who [said](#), "This victory, my brothers, is historic for the region."

But wait. Isn't HTS on the list of banned terrorist groups and Jolani a jihadist militant whose journey began in Iraq with links to al Qaeda and later to the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)? So why is the West cheering for al Qaeda and its allies?

The European Union Agency for Asylum [describes](#) HTS as a coalition of Islamist Sunni armed groups that "frequently commit serious human rights abuses, including harassment, assassinations, kidnapping, and torture, as well as unlawful

detention of civilians.” It goes on to say that “civilians have also been extorted and kidnapped for ransom” and that “the group has conducted formal military campaigns, assassinations, hostage takings, and ‘lone wolf’ operations, including suicide bombings,” while “members of religious minorities have been forced to convert to Islam and adopt Sunni customs.”

So, what is going on here? How can the fall of the admittedly brutal Assad regime create a “historic opportunity” for the Syrian people when the country is now under the control of jihadists? But we’ve been witness to this comedy drama before. From 1979 to 1989, the United States (along with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan) armed and financed the Afghan Islamist fighters known as the mujahideen who were fighting the Soviet Union. The plan from the beginning was to keep the Islamist insurgency going for as long as possible, thus sucking the Soviets into a Vietnam-style quagmire.

The Islamist fight in Afghanistan against the Soviets was “the good jihad,” according to Washington. The mujahideen were fighting for peace against an enemy of the Western world and deserved U.S. support. Of course, we know how that turned out.

The Bush administration embarked on a campaign against terrorism following the 9/11 attacks, with the [first phase](#) of the campaign focusing on “capturing or killing bin Laden, destroying his al Qaeda network in Afghanistan, and deposing the Taliban-regime.”

Undoubtedly, bombing into oblivion the Islamists in Syria if the new government, headed by [Mohammed al-Bashir](#) who has been appointed as interim prime minister, fails to lead a new path is a contingency plan that Washington has probably already considered. The job, in fact, could be given to [Israel](#), for whom bombing is second nature. Since the fall of Assad, Israel has already carried out [hundreds of airstrikes](#) across Syria, targeting airports, naval bases, and military infrastructure. And the [U.S. Central Command](#) announced that it has struck more than 75 targets, including ISIS leaders, operatives, and camps.

Hypocrisy and duplicity, followed in the end by astonishing moral and political somersaults, are trademarks of the way Washington and its Western allies approach world affairs and conduct diplomacy. And these elements have been in full display since the start of Syria’s civil war. The [Obama administration](#) provided

support to the anti-Assad forces, primarily to the Free Syrian Army forces and its affiliates, but the CIA began to support other groups as early as 2013 even though they had jihadi orientations. CIA's covert operation against the Syrian regime, known as [Timber Sycamore](#), was a joint effort with Saudi Arabia that had long ties with radical Islamist groups. But regime change is what Washington was after in Syria, so everything else was of secondary concern.

The fall of the Assad regime has staggering implications for security in the region, but the speed with which it collapsed suggests that, in the end, it may have been mainly internal rather than external pressures that made the difference. Syria was under imperialist attack for the past 13 years. The U.S. (along with Turkey) backed and funded mercenaries and terrorist forces against Assad's regime, imposed economic isolation of the country through sanctions, and [denied plans](#) that would have contributed to reconstruction even though aid was desperately needed for civilians. In April 2017, the U.S. even ordered [direct military action](#) against Syria in retaliation for the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime. The Trump administration claimed to have been moved by the deaths of some 80 civilians; yet then-President [Donald Trump](#) refused to lift his ban on accepting Syrian refugees into the U.S.

But the Assad regime had created a hellish place, with [90%](#) of Syrians living in poverty and widespread malnutrition. The country was in a vicious downward spiral. The economy had plummeted by [85%](#) due to nearly 14 years of civil war. The [inflation rate](#) had risen to over 120% in 2024 while [electricity production](#) had dropped by 80%, with power outages having become a common phenomenon. And the only thing that the Assad's regime had to offer was more repression.

Still, the collapse of the regime, now celebrated throughout the Western world, raises more questions than answers. There are too many actors, both inside and outside Syria, with diverse interests and conflicting goals and aims. Assad's regime used secularism as a tool to repress opponents, but there should be no expectations for the emergence of stable secular nationalism in Syria anytime soon. The fear that Syria will face the same fate as Afghanistan is also unfounded. The country has too many hostile factions for a dominant group like the Taliban to take complete control of the country. If anything, it is probably destined to become a failed state like Libya following the overthrow of Moammar Gadhafi in 2011 with the help of NATO, an event that was also widely [celebrated](#) by the Western leaders of the time.

Indeed, when all is said and done, forcing regime change rarely succeeds. In fact, U.S. foreign policy has been an unmitigated disaster in the post-Cold War period, creating more problems that it tried to solve. Think of the Balkans, Libya, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Middle East.

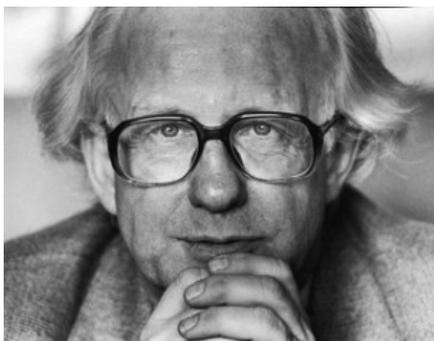
Syria will be no different. It was a hellish place under Assad but will more likely than not end up next as another “black hole” in the lost list of U.S. “achievements” in forcing regime change.

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C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His latest books are *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic and the Urgent Need for Social Change* (A collection of interviews with Noam Chomsky; Haymarket Books, 2021), and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (Verso, 2021).

In Memoriam Johan Galtung (1930-2024)



Johan Galtung

12-09-2024 ~ "A very important reason for forbidding nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction is that they increase the threshold for what is acceptable."

A conventional war is often defended by saying it did not go nuclear. The international legal framework for warfare is already a victim of nuclear arms and can only regain its validity by forbidding that insult perpetrated on humanity. (Galtung 2017).

Professor Johan Vincent Galtung, who passed away on February 17, 2024, is generally known as the founder of the academic discipline or interdisciplinary field, of Peace Research. He started in 1964 the Institut for Fredsforskning (PRIO) in Oslo, Norway. But he himself was much more than an academic. During and after his academic career, he was appointed ten times Dr Honoris Causa and was holder of the Right Livelyhood Award (aka Alternative Nobel Peace Prize) 1987. Let me focus on a few of his many abilities, like his research, his contribution to social science and his practice in creative conflict solution. And memorizing him is for me not possible without paying attention to my personal relation with him.

For me, and for many social scientist, Galtung became an inspiration thanks to his book on *Theory and Methods of Social Research* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967). In that book he introduced the basic concept of the data matrix. In short, the units and variables to be explored are given by the research strategy. Data collection is viewed as an effort to fill the data matrix with values, one for each combination of unit and variable. By data processing the matrix is brought on a form suitable for analysis. Analysis itself is treated step by step from simple tabulation and computation of parameters through hypothesis-formation to theory-building. This serves as the basis for statistical inference and finally the generalisation of hypotheses. So this book presents on a systematic way the basis for multivariate analysis in social sciences!

But also Galtung's own theory development, for example the Center/Periphery Theory, has been used and is still being used by many scientists, also in the area of Peace Research. One of the projects in which Galtung used this approach himself was an research project launched by him via funding by the (former) Council of Europe, carried out by means of a huge international survey using representative samples, a so-called '*Twelve Nation Study*'. This study, carried out in the 1960s and the early 1970s in both East- and West-European countries,

dealt with 'Images of the world in the Year 2000'. The research question was: how do people expect the world to look like in the year 2000 in terms of peace and conflicts?

I had the honor, being a new young inexperienced student and research fellow in Oslo at the time, to participate in this study, together with amongst others: Aake Hartmann (from Norge), Hakan Wiberg (from Sverige), and Knud Larsen (USA). And, how wonderful, Johan Galtung himself took in the year 2000 the initiative to find out who was right in prospecting how the world would look like in 2000! After secondary analysis of data collected by others, we found out that indeed, the periphery was mostly right in its expectations like: the cold war would be over, but international violence would increase. Of course this is only one out of hundreds of studies in the field of Peace Research that Galtung carried out, on his own or in collaboration with others, all over the world.

Later, already during, but much more intensively after, his academic career, Galtung started developing his '*Transcend Mediation*' theory and method, and successfully practicing that method in different international conflicts. This mediation practice may be considered as a fruitful basis for conflict resolution on micro- meso- and macro- level, ending in *Positive Peace*. This 'Positive Peace' concept is of course more than just lack of violence; it is considered by him as the ultimate aim of peace building! That is also, nearly mathematically, presented in his so-called Peace Formula:

$$Peace = Equity \times Harmony / Trauma \times Conflict$$

That process of peace building also includes the process of reconciliation. Maybe not so well known are Galtung's ideas on reconciliation.

Reconciliation is a process aimed at putting an end to conflict between two parties. It includes a closure of hostile acts, a process of healing and rehabilitation of both perpetrators and victims. Reconciliation processes often require the intervention of a third party. That party attempts to manage the relationship between perpetrators and victims (Galtung, 1998).

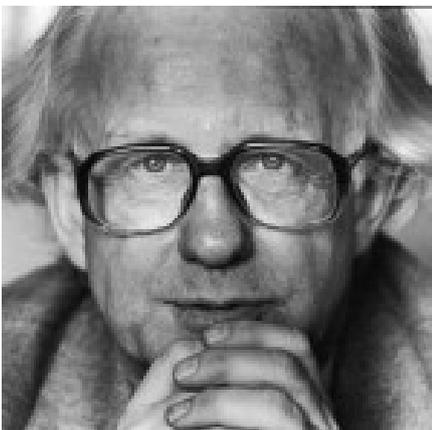
During the reconciliation process the victim can seek restitution for the harm from the perpetrator by having the perpetrator punished or give compensation. Another possibility is that the victim 'gets even' with the perpetrator through revenge. This may bring some gratification, but it may not automatically bring healing from trauma.

Based on his experience as a mediator in many conflict areas, Johan discusses in his article *“Twelve creative ways to foster reconciliation after violence”* different approaches to reconciliation. He concludes that no single approach is capable of handling the complexity of the situation after violent events, thus combining approaches makes more sense. The parties involved in the conflict should be invited to discuss these approaches and therefore be able to arrive at the best combination for their own situation. (Galtung, J. (1998) 3R: Reconstruccion, Resolucion, Reconciliacion. Gernika: Gogoratzuz.

Besides his important work in the field of Peace Research Johan Galtung was for many young students and scholars an inspiration, a mentor, teacher, colleague and, for me personally, one of the promotores of my PhD dissertation on *‘Ideology and Mass Media’* (1986) at the University of Amsterdam, and also a very dear friend.

The following article *‘Twelve creative ways to foster reconciliation after violence’*, based upon Galtung, 1998, was published by *Intervention*, 2005, Volume 3, Number 3, pp. 222 - 234.

Twelve Creative Ways To Foster Reconciliation After Violence



Johan Galtung

12-09-2024 ~ *Based on his experience as a mediator in many conflict areas, the author discusses twelve approaches to reconciliation.*

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Key words: conflict theory, peace work, reconciliation

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During the reconciliation process the victim can seek restitution for the harm from the perpetrator by having the perpetrator punished or give compensation. Another possibility is that the victim 'gets even' with the perpetrator through revenge. This may bring some gratification, but it may not automatically bring healing from trauma.

The perpetrator may seek release from his guilt through submission, penitence or apology and asking forgiveness.

Since reconciliation essentially takes place between perpetrator and victim, either of them can block the process. In that case, the trauma and guilt live on, and eventually may fuel new conflicts.

In this article twelve different approaches to reconciliation will be discussed.

1. The 'blaming the circumstances' approach

During the process the third party tries to change the perspective of both perpetrators and victims on the cause of their conflict. Cultural factors and/or structural deficits in society are identified as the real underlying causes of conflict. Reconciliation is possible as soon as both parties agree on these causes. The key word here is 'agree'. 'Outer conditions made you a perpetrator and me a victim. That is not a good reason for us to hate each other, for you to feel excessive guilt, or for me to develop a victim psychology. We can close the vicious

circle and heal our psychological wounds. We can even reconcile with each other and put the past behind us. We can join forces and fight those conditions that pitted us against each other in horrible acts of violence.'

Even if this is not the full truth, it can be more than half the truth. Moreover, it can be self-fulfilling.

Outsiders, like peace workers, may suggest that perspective as a way of thinking about their own situation. This may best be suggested to one party at the time rather than the parties together. This avoids the victim getting upset by seeing the perpetrator grab the opportunity 'to cash in' more on his professed guilt. It is important they first arrive at an exculpatory position, and then bring them together to celebrate a joint approach.

The peace worker's task is to carefully and tactfully open the eyes of all parties on the potential peaceful aspects.

2. The reparation/restitution approach

X has harmed Y. X is conscious of his guilt; Y is conscious of the trauma. X comes to Y and offers reparation or restitution: 'I'll undo the harm done by undoing the damage'. At the simplest level, for example a tenant buying a new vase to replace a broken one, to the most complex level of countries and alliances at war with each other; money, goods and services are used to undo damage. Sometimes the relation is direct, sometimes via institutions like insurance companies (e.g., for damage done to cars in accidents; countries are not yet insuring against damage in wars). However, as any house- or car-owner knows: there is also the inconvenience and time lost in the process. Reparation must always be at a higher level than simple replacement cost. This approach will only work when the harm done is reversible.

When trauma has been caused and is deeprooted, any restitution borders on an insult to the victim. There is an element of 'buying oneself off the hook' by attempting to make the victim forget what happened. The harm is reduced to a commodity to be traded: 'By mistake I took something from you, here, have it back with an extra 10% for inconvenience and time lost'.

The task of the peace worker is to explore all possible arguments with the perpetrator and the victim so that they fully understand what is involved if this is the approach chosen.

They both have to accept the approach, so that the perpetrator does not offer

something that falls on barren soil, or worse - increases the aggression. Moreover, the victim should not be further harmed by expecting a restitution that never comes, for whatever reason.

Another task that may fall to the peace worker is that of suggesting what might constitute a concrete act of restitution. People might have limited idea of what would be suitable, and this aspect must be taken more seriously than finding a gift for an anniversary. In addition to being wanted by the victim, the act of restitution must convey the correct symbolic message. That is also relevant for the perpetrator. He may for instance, be afraid that the act of restitution is an implicit admission of guilt and can be held against him as a confession. He may also worry lest the act does not lead to closure as a condition for reconciliation. He may wonder about the time perspective: are we talking about one act, or about a repetition, such as every year, like the anniversary of the violent act?

Restitution is a transaction, a two-way action that must contain balance and symmetry. The instrument to ensure that is a contract, signed by both perpetrator and victim. The peace worker should know how to draw up a document of this type; in short, s/he has to be a bare-foot lawyer, in addition to a theologian and a psychologist for reconciliation tasks. There may be objections that a contract is too formal, not sufficiently spontaneous, symbolic, or healing. However true, for those who choose this approach, that may be a minor matter.

3. The apology/forgiveness approach

X has harmed Y; X is conscious of his guilt, Y is conscious of the harm. Both are traumatized. X comes to Y, offers 'sincere apologies' for the harm, Y accepts the apologies.

Metaphors of turning a page, opening a new chapter, even a new book, in their relations are invoked. The slate is wiped clean, and will now be inscribed with positive acts. There is agreement that what happened is 'forgotten' and not to be referred to again.

However, is it also 'forgiven'? Does 'I accept your apology' mean 'I forgive you'? This is definitely not true and may have a variety of meanings. Some possible translations

- 'I apologize'='I wish what I did to be undone and promise, no more'
- 'I accept your apology'='I believe what you say, let's go on'

- 'Please forgive me'='Please release me from my guilt to you'
- 'I forgive you'='I hereby release you from your guilt to me'

Thus, forgiving goes one-step further in relating to the trauma of guilt. Guilt is in the spirit, and arises from the consciousness of having wronged someone. This establishes a relation to the victim, to one's own ego, and to any God/State believed in. The victim can only release the wrongdoer from the first form of guilt. To some, that is the only guilt acknowledged or perceived.

A positive effect of this approach is a bond of compassion between X and Y. A negative effect is its superficiality. Just as restitution is good for people with money, apology is for those good with words. X agrees to see the harm as wrong, as something he wishes undone, and Y helps him by saying that you can now live as if no harm was done. Yet, the root causes of the violence remain and are untouched.

For the peace worker this is very different from the reparation/restitution approach. There is a transaction which requires both parties to be willing, meaning that either one can sabotage the process. This can occur if the victim does not accept the apology, or does not to forgive; or if the perpetrator does not to extend an apology, or not ask for forgiveness.

In addition, whereas there is something economic and contractual in the process of restitution, this transaction is spiritual/psychological. Both parties have to be 'in the mood' to enter this relationship. This is frequently preceded by a feeling of 'having looked into the abyss'; it is this, or hatred, retribution rather than restitution, with no end of the violent cycle.

The peace worker has to have it all in his/her mind and hands, actively steering the process toward closure. It requires knowledge, skills and above all human tact, with the only training mostly on the job.

4. The theological/penitence approach

This approach consists of a well-described, well-prescribed chain: submission-confession-penitence-absolution; to and from God. The penitence is mainly self-administered: prayer, fasting, celibacy, joining a monastery, and flagellation. The belief is some pain in this life is better than eternal pain in the after-life. Absolution thus releases the perpetrator as the sinner from his guilt unto God.

One problem is that this only works for the believer, or for the person who at least

has some belief. There is little in this approach for the atheist.

A religious leader, in this case, holds the role of peace worker. What should he be encouraged to be a good peace worker on top of his theological role? The basic point has already been mentioned: to broaden the perspective. The priest helps by paving the way for reconciliation with God, and thereby for the believer, with the self. To do this he may have to strengthen the faith in self and help remove doubts. However, the other, the victim, still remains and is the forgotten party in this transaction.

In looking at the approaches already discussed, broadening the perspective means taking something away from one, or more of them. Obviously, the priest cannot make full use of the previously mentioned 'blaming the circumstances' approach, because he stresses the individual responsibility of the sinner. Yet, he can make use of the reparation/restitution approach and the apology/forgiveness approach.

What is recommended is that the priest, as peace worker, must include the victim. In some cases, the victim might say: 'Leave me alone, I have had enough suffering. I do not want to add more by having to meet him again, accept some act of restitution, or even listen to his insincere apologies. None of that will ever undo what has happened.' This reaction is understandable, and the peace worker may have to be a go-between if the direct encounter is judged to be too hard on either, or both. Rather than bringing them together, he may have to rely on an individual dialogue with each of them.

5. The juridical/punishment approach

This is the secular version of the above. The successor to God is the State. The judge takes the role of the priest. The prescribed process above now reads submission-confession-punishment by seclusion-readmission to society. The logic is the same. The perpetrator is released from the guilt toward 'society'; the other two forms of guilt remain. For problems, see above. 2)

How do International Tribunals work in terms of collective violence? Much as one would expect: the accused tend to be the perpetrators of person-to-person violence, those who kill with machetes and gas chambers, not those who kill with missiles and atom bombs; and they would tend to be the executors of violence rather than the civilians giving the order, or setting the stage. As a result, the general moral impact will probably be relatively negligible.

Yet tribunals exist, with a major one for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide being created. As conceived of within the juridical/punishment framework, they will all have more or less, many of the problems discussed above. The key to the solution is broadening the approach by adding other solutions as well.

The name of the peace worker, in this case, is the judge (and, to a much lesser extent, some of the prison personnel).

Like the priest the judge is also used to adding additional aspects to his juridical profession, which, like the priest, implies that what happens is according to the Book.

What should he look for to be a good peace worker on top of his juridical role? He should realize that the task is not finished when the relation to the International Community (of States) has ended because the prison sentence has been served. The perpetrator-state perspective is too narrow. Imprisonment does something to the body by limiting physical movement; yet leave the capacities of the spirit basically untouched, and in some cases, enhanced. The judge should add the skills of the priest, and the priest may have to learn how to do the theological/penitence approach with non-believers. Then there is also the possibility of adding the restitution and apology approaches. This could even be included as part of the sentence with a tacit or explicit understanding that the success of the process could shorten the sentence, but not include amnesty. The truth has presumably already come out through the well-tested methods of the juridical approach, with evidence, testimonies, pleas (pro et contra), and final evaluation.

6. The co-dependent origination/karma approach

In Buddhism it is believed that although any human being at any point can choose not to act violently, the decision is influenced by his karma, his moral status at that moment. This karma is the result of the accumulation of 'whatever you do, sooner or later, comes back to you'. But the victim's karma, and their joint, collective karma also contributes to this decision. All karma flows from the merits and demerits of earlier action.

Since these intertwining chains stretch into the past-lives, the side-lives of the context and the after-lives of the future, the demerit of a violent act cannot be placed at the feet of a single actor only. There is always shared responsibility for bad karma. Hence, the way to improve karma is through an outer dialogue, which

in practice means a round-table where the seating pattern is symmetric, allocating no such roles as: defendant, prosecutor, counsel, or judge, and with a rotating chairperson.

Preparation for these round-table dialogues should include meditation as an internal dialogue, with participants trying to come to grips with the forces inside themselves. Thus, in Buddhist thinking, there is no actor who carries 100% of the responsibility alone; it is all shared. Whereas Christianity can be accused of being too black and white, Buddhism can be accused of being too grey. However, the idea of cooperating to plug the holes in the boat we share, rather than searching for the one who drilled the first hole, and having a court case on board as the boat is sinking, is appealing, both for conflict resolution and for reconciliation.

In conflict theory, the concept that comes closest to this is the conflict formation. The first task in any conflict transformation process is to map the conflict formation, identifying the parties that have a stake in the outcome, their goals, and issues, as well as defining any conflict of goals.

The peace worker can use the mapping tool of the conflict worker, and proceed in basically the same way. He can have dialogues with all parties over the theme 'after violence, what'? He can identify conflicts, hard and soft, and try to transcend them by stimulating joint creativity. Or, he can bring them all together and be the catalyst and facilitator around, rather than at the head, of the round table. Conflict work and peace work are closely related, and this approach is based on the combination of inner dialogues (meditation) and outer dialogues, with or without the peace worker as a medium.

The karma approach is an excellent point of departure, given its holism, neutrality and appeal to dialogue. In that sense it is actually a meta-approach, above or after the other approaches, accommodating all of them, like the *ho'o pono pono* approach outlined at the end. It is an attitude, a philosophy of life, beyond the stark dichotomy of perpetrator-victim, and in that sense different from the preceding five, and similar to those approaches that follow.

7. The historical/truth commission approach

In this approach the basic point is to describe, in great detail, what actually happened. In trying to explain it, letting the acts, including the violent ones, appear as the logical consequences of the antecedents. The assumption is that deeper understanding may lead to forgiving. Although 'getting the facts straight'-however ugly - is important, there are serious problems with this approach.

To begin with, mere understanding does not always result in forgiveness. The hideous acts stand out, whether they include the names of perpetrators or not. Also, if they are not pardoned, why should they receive impunity, or get off the hook? It may be argued that the perpetrators will also read the report that establishes their guilt to the victims, to themselves and to the God they may believe in, and will be tormented by that and by social ostracism. That is punishing, not forgiving.

Next, this does not by itself produce the catharsis of an offered and received apology, nor the hoped for and offered forgiveness. Truth alone is merely descriptive, not spiritual.

Furthermore, this approach does not deal with the question 'how do we avoid this in the future?'

Lastly, it limits the process to professionals whose task is to come up with the official version. It may be far better have 10 000 people's commissions, in each local community and each NGO, using round-tables which involve all parties whereby they themselves try to arrive at a joint understanding and reconcile in the process.

The task of the peace worker is to organize these dialogues and to ensure that the findings flow into some general pool. One way to accomplish this is to put at the disposal of the citizens in any part of a war-torn society, village, ward, company, or organization, a large book with blank pages to be inscribed. The book will become a part of the collective memory, no doubt subjectively formulated, but that also has its strengths. Rather than the truth lawyers and historians who think they can establish a single book that will encompass thousands of truths.

Contained in the book would be descriptions of violence and traumas, not only what happened but also how it touched them and wounded them. Added to that would be their thoughts on what could have been done, on reconstruction and reconciliation, the resolution of the underlying conflict, and their hopes for the future. In other words, the citizens would establish their own truths for themselves.

Something like this was done by the Opsahl Commission for Northern Ireland some years ago, and no doubt played a role in externalizing the conflict by seeing it as something to be handled objectively, outside the participants.

Soka Gakkai in Japan has also done an impressive job collecting the war memories of many women in 26 volumes, thereby establishing a collective memorial to be consulted by future generations. However, the major task of the peace worker is to give the search for truth the two twists indicated while remaining truthful to empirical facts: counter-factual history, what might have happened if, and the history of the future, how do we avoid this in the future. Again, let 10 000 dialogues bloom.

8 The theatrical/reliving approach

This approach would use exactly that: involving all parties, in numerous exercises to relive what happened. This is not about documentation and 'objectivity', but of reliving the subjective experience. The ways to do this are numerous; telling what happened as it happened, as a witness to a historical/truth commission is already reliving, revealing and relieving. To have the other parties do the same, adds to the whole.

To tell the stories together, in the same room, adds a dimension of dialogue, which can easily become very emotional (that's not how it happened! is that why you did it?) Then, to stand up, re-enact it up to, but not including, the violence, may have a cathartic effect provided there is an accompanying tension release through dialogue. The parties may even switch roles, which some might see as coming too close. However, it depends on the parties involved, like in a negotiation sometimes it is better to keep the parties separate. The important point is to arrive at a deeper understanding, which is more emotional and less descriptive.

An alternative approach is, of course, for a professional to write this up and present it on national television for common consumption. In general, this should not be excluded, but should occur in plural, not with the idea of writing one play to finish all plays.

A basic advantage of the theatre approach, however rudimentary and amateurish, is that it opens windows so often closed to positive social science: what might have happened if and how do we avoid this in the future? The actors can relive history up to the point where it went wrong and then, together, invent an alternative continued scenario, up to inventing alternative futures, with theatre as future workshops. A play can be rerun at any point; history, unfortunately cannot.

The peace worker would have to talk with all parties in advance, have them tell their truths about what happened and then get their general consent for the

theatrical approach. It should be done with the real parties as actors, and very close to the real story. For example, in a sexual harassment conflict in a school with a student complaining that the teacher made advances and the teacher denying that this was the case. In this case, the principal may say, show us what happened. In such a real case those who watched concluded that the teacher did not 'go too far', but also that the girl had good reasons for having apprehensions about what might have happened next. In a concrete situation there are so many dimensions to what happens that words are hardly able to catch it all. Enacting may help explore those dimensions.

Others may be called on as stand-ins for roles or scenes too painful for the real participants to enact. The drama can also be rewritten so that 'any similarity with any real case is totally coincidental'. The point is to give vent to emotions in a holistic setting by enacting them, taking in as much of the totality of the situation as possible. Writing the play, before and/or after it was enacted, can also prove very valuable.

Technically, videotaping may be useful, not only to improve the accuracy of the enactment ('let us take that one again, I am not sure you captured what happened'), but also to be able to stop the video and say: 'this is the turning point. This is where it went wrong. Let us now try to enact an alternative follow-up, what should, and what could, have been done'. Obviously, making and enacting conflict-related theatre is an indispensable part of the training of conflict workers for reconstruction and resolution, not only for reconciliation.

9. The joint sorrow/healing approach

This approach is carried out in the following way: joint sorrow is announced for all conflicting parties. The myth that some people 'gave' their lives during the armed conflict is explored for what it is: those people had their lives taken away from them by incompetent politicians who were incapable of transforming conflict, themselves incurring little or no risk but willing to send others into (almost) certain death, and spreading that death to others in the process. Without opening a new front against the political and military class as a common enemy, war as such is deeply deplored. People dress in black, sit down in groups of 10-20 including people formerly enemies. They examine the basics: how could the armed conflict have been avoided? How can it be avoided in the future? Are there also acts of peace that can be highlighted and celebrated?

To discuss how an armed conflict could have been avoided is not new; any country that has been attacked may engage in that debate on each anniversary (one conclusion is often to keep the powder dry, and be better armed next time). To discuss this together with the aggressor who jointly deplore war, any war, as a scandal and a crime against humanity, searching for alternatives both in the past and the future, is a relatively new and promising approach.

The main issue at point is the togetherness. As time passes, more meetings in take place, including gatherings of veterans on both sides. The other side of the military story; evaluating victories and defeats in the light of new information gained may fascinate them. If they are soldiers in the real sense, then there may be no need for any reconciliation. They were professionals doing a job, unfortunately destructive rather than constructive. All professionals, even soldiers, want to know whether they did a good job; few would know this better than the other side.

The task of the peace worker is not to organize encounters of demolition experts however, but to have veterans meet civilians, civilians meet civilians, and to have both of them meet the politicians who gave the orders. The question to be asked is: when will any acts of war, and not only cruelty on the ground, come with the names of those responsible on them? Who ordered that bombing, killing X civilians? Not only the well-known names at the very top of the hierarchy, their orders are usually general, but the generals whose orders are specific. Such encounters should not become tribunals. The focus is on healing through joint sorrow, not on self-righteousness. The model could be a village, town, or district recently hit by natural disaster. There are local fault-lines and enmities; although no one would accuse any one on the other side of a fault-line of having caused or willed, a disaster. Yet, there are casualties and massive bereavement with visible signs of shared, joint sorrow across fault-lines, such as flags on half-mast and people in black.

Of course there is also healing in this. Right after a war may be too early for joint sorrow. Nonetheless, after some years the time will come and that opportunity should not be lost.

10. The joint reconstruction approach

Once again, the point is to do it together. German soldiers used a scorched earth tactic in Northern Norway, leaving nothing to the advancing Red Army and driving out the inhabitants. Would it be possible for those inhabitants to

cooperate with the soldiers after the war is over, making the scorched earth bloom again, coming alive with plants, animals, and humans, with building and infrastructure?

A good thing would be to have civilians from the same nation come and participate in the reconstruction. Of course, they should not be representatives of the perpetrators of the violence, and may even be their antagonists (like sending conscientious objectors to clean up after the soldiers, the non-objectors).

However, they would demonstrate that there are both hard and soft aspects of that nation, as of any nation, that could count toward depolarization. Moreover, there would be no direct confrontation between perpetrators and victims; years may be required before that could safely occur.

Nevertheless that should remain the eventual goal. Which brings us back to the point about revenge: by violence going both ways not only harm but also guilt may be equalized (to some extent); the parties meet as moral equals. Yet, it would be far better to build moral equality around positive, constructive acts rather than negative ones.

Hence, the argument would be for soldiers on both sides to disarm and then meet, but this time to construct, not to destruct. Then victims could meet with victims, commanding officers (COs) with COs, etc. This could serve as preparations for perpetrator and victim meeting, both of them together trying to turn their tragedy into something meaningful through acts of cooperation, rather than inserting some third parties in-between.

Once, when the present author was suggesting this approach in Beirut there was an interesting objection: this will not work here. In Lebanon there were not two parties fighting each other, but seventeen. Ammunition was used like popcorn, peppering houses, very rarely hitting the openings, yet still leaving bullet-scars all over. The response could be: no problem, get one former fighter from each group, give them a course in masonry, put seventeen ladders parallel, have them climb to the top and repair the facades as they descend.

Use the high numbers as an advantage. What a TV opportunity - provided there is also a spiritual side to the joint work.

That last point contains the crux of the matter. While rebuilding is a concrete, practical act, reconciliation is mainly spiritual. What matters is the togetherness at work; reflecting on the mad destruction, shoulder-to-shoulder and mind-to-

mind. The preceding four approaches could give rich texture to the exercise: joint sorrow would seep in even if rebuilding could also be fun. Reflection on futility would enter. For this to happen, those who did the destruction should also do the construction, facilitating reliving on the spot. In doing so, two or more parties will find together a deeper, more dynamic, truth. Also, they will realize how deeply they share the same karma or fate.

In this, the peace worker should remember that there is much more to reconstruction than simply rebuilding physical infrastructure. Institutions have to function again; there are heavily war-struck segments to care for, refugees and displaced persons to resettle. There is much to be overcome by reconstructing structures and cultures. War hits all parties in some way; some lightly and some more heavily. It is inconceivable that no one from the former enemies will cooperate in joint reconstruction.

11. The joint conflict resolution approach

If joint reconstruction might be possible, how about joint conflict resolution? After all, that is what diplomats, politicians, and some military to some extent attempt to do. Nonetheless, there are two basic problems with this approach regardless of the quality of the outcome. It is top-heavy, anti-participatory and therefore in itself some kind of structural violence, often excluding the very people on whose behalf they presumably are negotiating behind veils of secrecy. Often they are protected elite who may not themselves have been the physical or direct victims of violence and may even be responsible for unleashing that violence.

So the argument here would be for general, even massive, participation. Two ways of doing this have already been given: the therapy of the past, having people discuss what went wrong at what point and then what could have been done; and the therapy of the future, having people discuss and imagine how the future would be if there is work done in favour of a more sustainable peace, and what that work would look like, starting here and now. In short, having people as active participants in conflict resolution; as subjects, not only as the objects of someone else's decisions or deeds

It is in this process that human and cultural healing, as well as structural healing, would take place. As previously mentioned, a major form of horizontal structural violence before, during and after a war is polarization; what could be more depolarizing than reconciliation through joint efforts to solve the problems?

The psychological costs might be considerable; but the social gains would be enormous. What would be required would be for the ideas to flow together in a public joint idea pool.

Here the peace worker becomes a conflict worker again, trying Conflict Transformation By Peaceful Means. For example, efforts were made in the 'before violence' phase; is it now easier or more difficult in the 'after violence' phase? No doubt it is more difficult in the sense that there is more conflict-related work to do: reconstruction and reconciliation. But is the resolution, or transformation, also more difficult?

This can be argued both ways. On the one hand, the violence may have hardened both sides. The victor, if there is one, feels he can dictate the outcome, having won the violent process.

The loser thinks of revenge, and may never accept the outcome in his heart. Yet, there may also be acceptance, even sustainability, if the terms are not too harsh. Also, there may be a fatigue effect; whatever the outcome, never the violence again! How long the fatigue effect lasts is another matter.

One problem, mentioned above, is that the tasks of reconstruction are so pressing that reconciliation, let alone resolution, often recedes into the background. The peace worker has to keep the resolution discussion alive. Above we have given many examples of how reconstruction and reconciliation can transform the whole society so that a conflict that once was very hard can be softened. In this way, Germany will probably ultimately have no border problems, because the borders wither away within the super-national organization, the European Union. It is an overarching structure that has reduced the polarization in Europe's midst, and made transformations possible in the long run.

12. The ho'o ponopono approach

A man is sleeping in his home when he hears some noises, he gets up, catches a young boy on his way out, stealing money. The police are called, and the young boy is now a 'juvenile' known to the police, obviously a 'delinquent', and as they say: 'three strikes and you are out'. The place is Hawaii. In Hawaiian culture there is a tradition in a sense that combines reconstruction, reconciliation, and resolution, the *ho'o ponopono* (setting straight). This concept may be known through cultural diffusion, e.g., to the owner of the burglarized, violated house. He looks at the boy and thinks of him serving twenty years in prison, and he looks at the police. 'Hey, let me handle this one'. It transpires that the boy's sister is ill

and the family is too poor to pay for medication. Every little dollar counts.

Ho'o pono pono is organized. The man's family, neighbours, the young boy and his family, all sit around the table; there is a moderator who is not a member of the families or neighbours, the 'wise man'. Each one is encouraged sincerely to present his/her version; why it happened, how, what would be the appropriate reaction. The young boy's cause is questioned, but even if accepted, his method is not. Apologies are then offered and accepted, forgiveness is demanded and offered. The young boy has to make up for the violation by doing free garden work for some time. The rich man and neighbours agree to contribute to the family's medical expenses.

So, in the end, the story of the burglary is written in a way that is acceptable to all; the sheet of paper is then burnt; symbolizing an end to the burglary, but not to the aftermath.

This may be questioned as rewarding the burglar. However, if this restores all parties, reconciles them, and resolves the conflict, then this should be point.

Regardless, it may sound simple, but it is not. This approach requires deep knowledge and skills from the conflict/peace worker bringing the parties together, as does being the wise person who is chairing the session. There is rehabilitation for the victim, paying respect to his feelings, giving him voice & ear, apology and restitution. There can be manifestations of sorrow, even joint sorrow. A new structure is being built bringing people together who never met before, sharing the karma of this conflict, imbued with the culture of this way of approaching a conflict. There are efforts to see the acts in the light of extenuating circumstances; nature, structure, culture, with restitution and apology followed by forgiveness as integral parts. So are the elements of penitence and punishment that builds ties between victim and perpetrator. The karma element may also be at work in this approach.

The truth element is obvious, as that all parties have to tell their truths (making it easier for the perpetrator). This is also theatre : *ho'o pono pono* is a reconstruction of what happened, with the parties as actors, all acting jointly.

In short, Polynesian culture puts together what Western culture keeps apart. There is coherence to these processes, which gets lost in the Western tendency to subdivide and select, and more particularly to choose a punishment approach. So, perhaps a cul- ture that has managed to keep it all together is at a higher level

than a culture that, out of this holistic approach to 'after violence' (including 'after economic violence'), selects only a narrow spectrum?

Conclusion

Some conclusions flow naturally from these explorations. First, there is no panacea. Taken singly, none of these approaches are capable of handling the complexity of an 'after violence' situation; healing the widely diverse wounds, closing the violence cycles, reconciling the parties within themselves, to each other and to whatever higher forces that may exist.

One reason is that they are all embedded in dense nets of assumptions, some of which may be cultural.

Westerners would have no difficulty recognizing *ho'o pono pono* culturally specific, or 'ethnic', but tend to claim that theological and juridical approaches are universal, using Western = universal. However, human stupidity has to be tempered with human wisdom, which, in turn, has to be taken from wherever we can find it.

Cultural eclecticism is a must in the field of reconciliation, we cannot draw on any one culture alone; taken in combination these approaches may make more sense. The problem is to design the best combinations for any given situation, and that obviously requires knowledge, skill and experience. Some of the twelve belong quite naturally together, in twos and threes:

- the 'blaming the circumstances' approach (1): nobody is guilty, and the karma approach (5): we are all guilty/responsible, together, are perspectives that may have great conciliatory effect;
- the reparation/restitution approach (2) and the apology/forgiveness approach (3) complete each other, and may work if the case is not too hard;
- the penitence approach (4) and the punishment approach (5) also complete each other, and may release the perpetrator from guilt;
- the historical approach (7) and the theatrical approach (8) complete each other, providing an image of factual and potential truths;
- the joint sorrow approach (9), the joint reconstruction approach (10) and the joint resolution approach (11) are based on the same methodology;
- *the ho'o pono pono approach* (12) is very holistic, in a sense incorporates all others.

As there is some validity to all approaches, why not try them all? There are good

rea- sons to do this. The 'blaming the circumstances' approaches may blunt the trauma and the guilt, and pave the way for more symmetric approaches, with shared responsibility. *Ho'o pono pono* practiced within all sectors in a society might deepen that impact. The three 'joint approaches' (9, 10, and 11) could be initiated at an early stage, at a modest level, to gain experience. At the same time, history commissions and theatre groups will begin to operate. If someone has broken the law by committing crimes of war, against humanity, and genocide, they will of course have to be brought to justice, facing the State, the Community of States, and his/her God.

The time has then come for the two approaches that, together, give the meaning to the concept of reconciliation that most people usually have in mind: forgiveness, to the aggressor/perpetrator who deserves being forgiven. In a transaction, two-way traffic is required. What flows in the other direction is a combination of a deeply felt apology based on an undeniable truth, and restitution; in some cases to be televised nationally.

However, this transaction will only lead to healing-closure-reconciliation within a con- text of all the other approaches, as a crowning achievement. If attempted too early, it may fall flat, particularly if outsiders enter and say, 'well, you surely have been through tough times, but it is all over now so why not shake hands and let bygones be bygones!' Trauma, including the trauma flowing from guilt, may fill a person to the brim and beyond. Feelings that overwhelm the survivors have to be treated with respect, and respect requires time.

In all of this, two traditions have crystallized with clear contours: the priest and the judge. They carry prestige in society because they know the book that can open the gates to heaven or hell, or to freedom or prison. The other ten approaches are less professionalized if we assume that historians do not have a monopoly on truth, or playwrights on drama. For all approaches a versatile, experienced peace worker would be meaningful and helpful. He does not declare people as either damned/saved, or guilty/non-guilty. He is trying to help them come closer to each other, not to love each other, but to establish reasonable working relations that will not reproduce the horrors. The bitter past should become a closed book, what happened should be for- given but not forgotten. In doing so, he will have to work with the priest and the judge without letting the asymmetry of their ways of classifying human beings become his own.

One simplified, superficial, but yet still meaningful, way of doing reconciliation work is to invite the parties to discuss them. They all more or less know what happened, but may be divided over why, and what comes next. The twelve approaches are presented, possibly with the peace worker acting some of the roles. The parties around the table are then invited to discuss, and through discussion to arrive at the best combination for their situation.

In the present author's experience this is possible, even in war zones. Furthermore, something important can occur: as they discuss reconciliation, some reconciliation takes place. The approaches begin to touch their hearts, even if the outer setting is only a seminar. Of course, this is nothing but an introduction to the real thing, but from such modest beginnings waves of togetherness may spread - even from the most turbulent centres.

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1) Throughout this article the masculine terminology is used. Therefore 'he' should be read as 'he/she' and 'his' should be read as 'his/her'.

2) A personal remark: doing six months in a Norwegian prison provided ample opportunity to reflect on the functions of punishment. Yes, I broke Norwegian law by refusing to do the punitive extra six months of a (to my mind) senseless alternative service. I wanted to do peace work. The imprisonment did not reform me; I would have broken the same law again. But I felt guilt, not for having broken a law, but for having broken the ties to family, friends, and fiancé. They said, don't worry, we can take it, but some of that guilt remained.

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French PM's Ouster Shows Deep Cracks In Legitimacy Of Europe's Neoliberal Order



C.J. Polychroniou

12-08-2024 ~ The French left and far right joined forces to reject austerity, exposing the hollowing of the political center.

France's National Assembly approved a no-confidence vote in Prime Minister Michel Barnier on Wednesday — just three months after he was appointed by the highly unpopular President Emmanuel Macron.

The rapid collapse of Barnier's government reinforces the long-held view among political experts that a parliamentary multiparty system has more checks and balances and responds more readily to the will of the people than the U.S. presidential two-party system. And no, the collapse of the government does not mean that France is hurtling toward a U.S.-style government shutdown. French institutions are strong, and the country's laws ensure that the public sector continues to do its work uninterrupted even in the absence of a government and a budget.

Yet, the government's collapse speaks volumes of the political legitimacy crisis facing not only France but much of Europe in the age of advanced neoliberalism. Centrist parties are in decline across the continent, and the once ascendent left parties are now facing an existential crisis while the far right is marching steadily into the mainstream. It is not a pretty picture by any stretch of the imagination, but it fits with [Antonio Gramsci's reflection](#) that "the old is dying and the new cannot yet be born."

Two months ago, Barnier unveiled to his cabinet a deficit-slashing 2025 budget that sparked vocal opposition, even before all the details were released. [Manuel Bompard](#), a lawmaker for the left-wing, action-oriented [La France Insoumise](#) (LFI) party described the spending cuts, which included \$66 billion in deficit reduction, as “the most violent austerity plan that this country has ever seen.”

France is under pressure from the [European Commission](#) to bring its widening deficits and growing debt under control; the budget cuts targeted mainly welfare, health, pensions and local governments. But without a majority in government, Barnier’s budget scheme was going to be rejected, especially since Marine Le Pen’s far right National Rally party had made it clear that it also opposed the austerity measures. Public discontent in France over Macron’s policies has never been higher. A recent poll reveals that [78 percent](#) of the French public disapprove of his leadership.

On December 2, Barnier tried to push the budget through the lower chamber of the National Assembly by activating a provision of the French Constitution — article 49.3 — which allows the government to pass legislation without a vote, but also opens up the opportunity for Parliament to put forth a no-confidence motion. [Article 49.3](#) has been used many times in the past, but no-confidence motions rarely succeed in the French political system precisely because of the multitude of political parties represented in the National Assembly. But since both LFI and National Rally lawmakers opposed the proposed budget, and the government had failed to secure the [Socialist vote](#), the stage was set for the toppling of Barnier’s government. No French government had lost a confidence vote since Prime Minister George Pompidou’s in [1962](#), but the cruelties of capitalism have reached such heights that even far right leaders in Europe, unlike their counterparts in the U.S., oppose the attack on social programs and services.

It is a mistake to think that the far right’s support for the welfare state is empty marketing. Unlike the parties of the center left, which have moved so close to the right of the ideological spectrum that they now occupy the position once held by conservative parties, Europe’s far right parties have included a distributive agenda in their electoral programs for many years now, which is one reason why across Europe parts of the working class are turning to the far right. In June, [57 percent of blue-collar workers](#) (*ouvriers*) voted for the National Rally in the first round of the French parliamentary election. However, while Europe’s far right parties are defending the traditional welfare state, they are employing a “new

form of distributive logic” by categorizing people as either “deserving” or “undeserving,” as political scientist [Juliana Chueri](#) has so astutely pointed out. Under this right-wing framework, welfare benefits should be exclusive to native citizens and more widespread to those with longer employment records. Migrants are simply excluded from any welfare state benefits.

The collapse of the French government also forcefully reveals that the country’s political establishment is at a critical legitimacy juncture. The same can be said about Europe’s economic powerhouse: Germany. Germany’s own government, a [three-way coalition](#) comprising the center left Social Democrats, Greens and the neoliberal Free Democrats, is now history. It collapsed over economic and budget disagreements and a [snap election](#) has been set for February 23, 2025. Meanwhile, east Germany has become home to the far right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. This past September, [AfD](#) became the first far right party to win a state election in Germany since the Nazi era. Its popularity has been growing rapidly over the past several years while mainstream political parties are on the decline.

There is also a new influential anti-establishment player in German politics, the national-populist [Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance](#) (BSW) party. Founded by a former member of [Die Linke](#), a German socialist party that is now in a crisis, BSW espouses anti-NATO, antiwar, socially regressive and anti-immigrant rhetoric while promoting left-leaning economic policies. The rise of BSW validates the view that the rising stars in Europe’s political landscape are, unfortunately, parties that attempt to garner support by defending the welfare state at the expense of immigrants, LGBTQ people, and other oppressed groups.

What happens next in France is that Macron will most likely stay in office until his second term ends in May 2027, even though he is facing growing [calls to resign](#). Meanwhile, the choice of the new prime minister will be very complex as no party in the current National Assembly has a majority. If Macron insists again, like he did with the selection of Barnier this summer, on finding a new prime minister without involving political parties, another government collapse could very well be in the cards. Neither LFI nor the National Rally are in the mood to do Macron any favors. Not only is he responsible for the current crisis, his brutal neoliberal policies have helped fuel the surge of Le Pen’s far right National Rally party — as well as the French left in the form of the [New Popular Front](#) coalition. Indeed, in the upcoming months and possibly years, France’s political landscape may well be

shaped by an old-fashioned contest between radical left and far right forces.

As for Germany, once dominant but now desperate as it sees the once economically beleaguered nations of southern Europe — Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal — growing quickly while its own economy may in fact end the year in [stagnation](#), anti-establishment parties (AfD, BSW and perhaps even Die Linke) will likely figure prominently in the country's political arena ahead of next year's federal elections.

The establishment parties in Europe's two most powerful nations are in political disarray. Whether it will be the left or the far right that fills the void, or whether the system manages somehow to return to business as usual and postpone the implosion until a deeper crisis surfaces, remains to be seen.

Source:

<https://truthout.org/articles/french-pms-ouster-shows-deep-cracks-in-legitimacy-of-europes-neoliberal-order/>

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C.J. Polychroniou is a political scientist/political economist, author and journalist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in U.S. politics and the political economy of the United States, European economic integration, globalization, climate change and environmental economics, and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a columnist for *Global Policy Journal* and a regular contributor to *Truthout*. He has published scores of books, including *Marxist Perspectives on Imperialism: A Theoretical Analysis*; *Perspectives and Issues in International Political Economy* (ed.); and *Socialism: Crisis and Renewal* (ed.), and over 1,000 articles which have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into a multitude of languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical*

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How Republics Succeed, Falter, And Fail



*John P. Ruehl -
Independent
Media Institute*

12-07-2024 ~ The United States today faces inherent challenges that have weakened the republic, making lessons from the Roman Republic even more necessary to avoid greater political instability.

The U.S. enjoys many strengths that give it an edge over other republics, such as a decentralized and innovative economy that draws global talent and unmatched military strength. Yet the Roman Republic, which had its own comparative advantages, ultimately fell to autocratic rule, and the U.S. faces a similar fate if it fails to protect institutional integrity and unchecked power continues to grow.

Reform is crucial to the continuity of republican governance, yet history shows it is often compromised by entrenched power. Political dysfunction and the growing influence of corporate interests threaten to undermine the foundational principles

of the U.S., posing a risk to its long-term stability.

From its inception, the United States has struggled to address its internal contradictions in ensuring fair treatment for its inhabitants. Autocratic tendencies also emerged early, with second President John Adams's [Alien and Sedition Acts](#) targeting political dissent, immigrants, and free speech. Abraham Lincoln later [expanded executive power](#) during the Civil War, bypassing Congress to preserve the Union and abolish slavery, the most contentious and significant political question since the country's founding. Despite such departures from Constitutional procedure—sometimes for good reasons—the system's checks and balances ultimately resisted later executive overreach, like FDR's [failed Court-Packing plan](#).

Individual political challenges to republican systems are concerning, but the erosion of republican culture also leads to irreversible shifts in the political framework. Political bribery, unchecked imperialism, and government serving corporate interests over citizens combine to steadily capture the system. A select group of actors has crafted a continuous, increasingly scripted cultural-political spectacle, contributing to civic decline. As a result, the public has reduced active participation in governance in exchange for the passive right to cheer or criticize from the sidelines.

The fall of the Roman Republic, which endured for centuries before giving way to tyrants and emperors, offers useful context—lessons on not only what values to uphold but also on how reform attempts can backfire. Half-hearted efforts to fix inequality and instability often strained the system, pushing it closer to dysfunction and leading it to autocracy. Understanding Republican Rome's successes and failures offers lessons for addressing today's challenges.

A balanced republican political system encourages elites to compromise, build consensus, and compete for public approval, qualities the early Roman Republic struggled to develop after its establishment in 509 BC.

The Senate, dominated by the patrician aristocracy, functioned as an advisory body in theory, but in practice, it [exercised significant control](#) over finances, foreign policy, and much of the legislative process. Nonetheless, there was strong competition among patrician families for the two annual consulship positions. These roles, filled through the *cursus honorum* (course of honor), ensured that

two capable leaders rose to the position in an established hierarchy, and shared short-term executive authority, limiting any concentration of power.

Consuls often entered the Senate or assumed other political positions after their terms, where they could be prosecuted for misconduct. This rotation and accountability meant leaders' interests lay in the smooth running of the state, rather than amassing personal prestige for their role or for past glories.

The design of Roman statues also supported this culture, celebrating the civic virtue of individuals over personal achievements. Statues portrayed aging and imperfections, in deliberate contrast to the [idealized perfection](#) of Greek art. The Republic also barred actors from government, viewing their imitation of life as deceptive and unworthy of public office.

Like other effective republican city-states, Republican Rome thrived on political engagement, though participation was uneven. The Republic's [seasonal political process](#), shaped by agricultural cycles, military campaigns, and religious festivals, advantaged wealthy landowners who could afford to leave their estates for politics, perpetuating uneven and inconsistent efforts to address problems. Political advancement in turn often hinged on military successes, making military campaigns common and sometimes pursued for personal ambition rather than strategic necessity.

Yet this seasonal structure still created predictable opportunities for many citizens to travel to Rome to participate in political affairs, ensuring concentrated and focused decision-making during key periods. It also provided ways to reduce the power imbalance between the patricians and plebeians, or commoners. The [Conflict of the Orders](#) (5th to 3rd centuries BC) brought about significant gains for plebeians. Mass strikes disrupted Rome's economy and soldiers refused to fight, forcing reforms such as the creation of another legislative assembly, [the Concilium Plebis](#), alongside the [Comitia Tributa](#).

Additionally, after 451 BC, legal safeguards via the Twelve Tables and the establishment of the Tribunes of the Plebs—two annually elected magistrates with executive power to protect plebeian interests—were also won.

During the 4th century BC, plebeians gained greater social mobility, including the right to intermarry with patricians, opening access to [the consulship](#), Senate, and [positions of religious authority](#). After 338 BC, the Latin Rights extended certain

privileges to non-Roman communities in Italy, such as intermarriage and participation in commerce. While full citizenship came gradually, these measures [integrated new populations](#) while preserving the identity of Roman citizens.

Despite the Republic's growing wealth and territories, inequality remained rife. Plebeians were the backbone of the army and bore the brunt of imperial expansion but reaped few rewards. Longer military service in support of campaigns left them unable to tend to their farms, indebting many. Patricians often capitalized on this by purchasing their lands, while the use of [enslaved labor](#) from conquests diminished plebeians' bargaining power as essential workers. Many moved to Rome, swelling the urban poor.

Earlier republics, [including Rome, had periodically erased debts](#) and eased slavery to reset economic balances, but such measures waned in the Late Republic. Expansion also strained governance, as new territories were home to communities who had fewer rights than Roman citizens and [paid heavily in taxes](#), further exposing the Republic's systemic inequities.

Policies aimed at addressing inequality often ended up exacerbating it. The Lex Claudia ([218 BC](#)), for instance, barred senators and their sons from owning large commercial ships to prevent them from dominating Rome's expanding maritime trade. But this mostly benefited wealthy plebeians and other elites who could afford their own fleets, widening economic disparities.

Richer plebeians also disproportionately benefited from privileges [like access to higher office](#), enabling only some to join the senatorial elite. Meanwhile, the [equestrian order](#) emerged as a distinct wealthy class rooted in Rome's cavalry. Though largely lacking formal political power, members enjoyed elevated benefits and economic strength that deepened Rome's social stratification.

Many new elites became populist reformers, or [populares](#) ("for the people") who were opposed to the senatorial elite, known as [optimates](#) ("best men"). Distinctions between the two groups [were not always strict](#)—the [populares](#) included both new aristocratic elites and sidelined senatorial factions seeking to [reclaim influence](#) lost to dominant [optimates](#). The motivations of [populares](#)-aligned politicians ranged from genuine reform [to self-serving opportunism](#), and they used plebeian support to shift the power dynamic in their favor. [Alliances were fluid](#), showing how Roman politics often prioritized status

and influence over rigid ideology.

Elite infighting further motivated the plebeians to demand greater equality by leveraging their numbers and citizenship powers. Political gridlock became more frequent, and violence escalated. Prominent pro-plebeian leaders like Tiberius Gracchus (133 BC), Gaius Gracchus (121 BC), and Publius Clodius Pulcher (52 BC) were assassinated, alongside many of their supporters. In this way, Roman politics devolved into a zero-sum struggle where the defeated often faced death.

The use of violence and intimidation to damage plebeian interests, coupled with ongoing inequality, made them more inclined to [break with political customs and precedents](#) when it suited their cause. Power was increasingly extended in executive positions, with *populares*-aligned Gaius Marius [holding seven consulships](#), and citizen soldiers showing increasing loyalty to individual commanders rather than the state.

Marius's eventual defeat by patrician-allied Lucius Cornelius Sulla led to a dramatic overcorrection. During his dictatorship (82–79 BC), Sulla's constitution aimed to curb instability by empowering [the old aristocracy and Senate](#), severely weakening the tribunes, and restricting the [powers of citizenship](#).

The emboldened aristocracy did little to address underlying economic inequality. Ambitious figures like Pompey, through military power, and Marcus Licinius Crassus, through immense wealth, exploited these tensions to consolidate power and play kingmaker. Sulla's reforms ultimately collapsed under Julius Caesar, whose plebeian-friendly policies bypassed the Senate by leveraging popular assemblies, exposing the new fragility of Rome's legal system.

The [growing glorification of individual leaders](#) reached a turning point when Caesar became the first living Roman to appear on a coin, a stark departure from tradition. After being declared dictator for life, his assassination by senators angered the public and triggered a power struggle and civil war. This ultimately led to the rise of Caesar's adopted heir, Octavian, who centralized authority in 27 BC and later became known as Augustus.

A facade of republican governance was maintained, but many Romans, associating it with chaos and instability, willingly traded their political rights to escape oligarchic rule, violence, and uncertainty. When rumors spread of Octavian relinquishing his special powers, public sentiment opposed the idea.

With the establishment of the Roman Empire, an urban proletariat dependent on state-sponsored food distribution and entertained by spectacles like gladiator games became increasingly pacified under the strategy of “bread and circuses,” solidifying the new order.

A reshuffling of the nobility, suppression of opposition, and unchecked territorial expansion fueled instability in Republican Rome. However, persistent inequality remained the Republic’s core weakness for its 500-year existence, coupled with flawed attempts to address it.

These pose lessons for the U.S. today. Inequality remains a core challenge in the U.S. Once marked by strong social mobility, at least for white residents, it [has declined since the 1940s](#), initially due to the end of the post-war boom but now reflecting deeper systemic flaws. Compared to the EU, U.S. social welfare lags, while policies like corporate bailouts underscore how citizens bear the debt burden while large corporations profit from government intervention and lucrative contracts. A [culture of consumerism](#) encourages U.S. citizens to take on debt, [mirroring the problems of the Roman Republic](#), instead of building a more efficient economic system.

Though there are notable similarities between Republican Rome’s challenges and those faced by the U.S., the latter faces its own unique set of issues. In Rome, the wealthy were directly involved in political life, using their influence to shape decisions. In contrast, U.S. elites exert control through representatives, who, while not typically from the uppermost of the wealthy social classes, are incentivized to serve their interests. This indirect control reduces the accountability of the elite, as their influence is masked by the modern U.S. political structure and hidden from public view. Though corrupt or inefficient politicians can be removed or prosecuted, those truly pulling the strings remain largely untouched, allowing the pay-to-play political system to continue unabated.

Rome’s political processes grew opaque and less respected, a trend increasingly seen in contested U.S. elections in recent decades. While skepticism arose among Democrats after George W. Bush’s controversial victory [in 2000](#) and Trump’s [2016 win](#), these doubts remained within institutional boundaries. However, election denial escalated dramatically with [Trump’s response to Joe Biden’s 2020 victory](#), and the ensuing 2021 insurrection marked a major challenge to the peaceful transfer of power and trust in electoral integrity.

Restoring trust in the process requires clear rules on voting, role assignment, and transparency in procedures. Laws crafted through open processes rather than private deals are crucial, allowing citizens to view the electoral process and governance as fair, smooth, and rooted in mutual understanding.

However, the dangers of unrelenting public political engagement have become more pronounced. Modern technology enables 24/7 politicization, and constant campaigning distracts from governance and risks citizen burnout. Public apathy allows organized elites to dominate politics, and, [according to legal scholar Ganesh Sitaraman](#), expanding the electorate can even amplify factional power since only well-resourced groups can effectively mobilize and strategize.

The U.S. judiciary remains distinct in its reliance on common law, a system shared by a few English-speaking countries, allowing adaptability through evolving precedents as new cases are brought forward. The use of juries places foundational responsibility on citizens' moral and legal judgment, ensuring public participation. However, this system [is increasingly vulnerable to politicization](#), as judicial appointments and voting processes for judges and other judicial/law enforcement positions risk undermining impartiality and fairness.

The Founding Fathers meanwhile opposed political parties, fearing factionalism would fracture national unity. Today, the two major parties and their supporters increasingly treat politics [as a sports rivalry](#), prioritizing spectacle over policy debate. Both parties leverage entertainment for engagement—Ronald Reagan became the first actor-president in 1981, followed by entertainer Trump in 2017, while Democrats have [consistently relied on the power of celebrity](#) to attract voters. This reliance on high-profile public figures allows citizens to disengage, as these amplified individuals are granted tacit approval to shape policy—even when they lack the expertise to do so—reducing the public's role in democratic governance to passive spectatorship.

Violent rhetoric undermines the culture of compromise essential to republics. While Trump is [commonly associated](#) with this trend in the U.S. (and remains its most persistent voice), [Democrats have also contributed](#). Political violence, once largely directed at major figures in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s, [now increasingly threatens local officials as well](#).

Comments about the existential danger posed by political opponents have been

consistently undercut by post-election embraces. President Obama [welcomed Trump to the White House](#) after the latter's election victory in 2016, [just as Biden did in 2024](#), while Trump also softened his tone toward them after victories. These radical shifts in messaging reveal the performative nature of politicians' language and weaken the credibility of political discourse.

A healthy republic resorts to war as a last option, relying on public support and deliberation. Yet although Congress holds the constitutional authority to declare war, it has not done so [since 1941](#). Instead, executive war powers have expanded through the abuse of emergency provisions, sidelining public influence in decisions of war and peace. Numerous presidents have labeled major recent wars like Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan as mistakes, eroding trust in leadership to responsibly conduct war.

The Trump administration now faces the challenge of addressing immigration and undocumented populations. Past policies like Reagan's Amnesty Bill and Obama's executive action for so-called Dreamers caused friction and had far-reaching political consequences. Immigration was a [central issue in the 2024 election](#), with Trump likely to enjoy strong support for a crackdown on undocumented people.

Solutions, however, must go beyond piecemeal fixes or mass deportations, which risk violating human rights and republican ideals. Similarly, less draconian approaches, such as those pursued under Biden, also fail to resolve the core issues of immigration reform and enforcement. Rome offers a cautionary tale: patricians and plebeians showed rare unity in the Late Republic when they united against Gracchus after he [pledged to extend citizenship](#) rights to other populations. The issue demonstrates the need to widen responsibility. The U.S. economy [benefits from labor tied to undocumented populations](#), and the root causes of migration, including [decades of U.S. intervention in Latin America](#), must also be acknowledged.

The U.S. was originally founded as a republican league of states but quickly recognized the need for national unity to ensure defense and economic unity. Over time, the growing centralization of [authority in Washington](#) eroded the balance of this system and led to fears of ever-expanding executive power, particularly over matters of war. This consolidation of power enabled a more assertive and interventionist foreign policy, allowing the federal government to project power globally.

Yet U.S. states retain significant rights, functioning in a federated system with distributed powers that allow states to [experiment with their own agendas](#). The areas in which they can do so include health care reforms, voting rights, and working together to counterbalance federal authority.

American citizens also benefit from strong protections enshrined in the Bill of Rights, which, despite historical flaws in terms of racial and gender equity, established safeguards against government overreach. However, a hesitance to fully leverage these rights remains, partly due to ignorance. Rights intended to benefit all citizens, such as the right to bear arms, or judicially determined issues like access to abortion, frequently evolve [into sources of contention](#), framed as victories for one side rather than universal benefits. This risks turning benefits into partisan battlegrounds, undermining their broader societal purpose. Many rights Americans enjoy were secured not by courts interpreting the Constitution but through legislative action driven by social movements, showing that the true source of rights lies within the collective efforts of citizens and lawmakers.

U.S. presidents have been generally unable to radically alter the nation's political system, though the Jacksonian era proves there are exceptions. Andrew Jackson's presidency (1829-1837), as well as the years immediately before and after, solidified the two-party system, expanded the use of veto power, and centralized executive authority, reshaping the role of the presidency. Jackson, a populist, challenged corrupt elites and the political establishment but also aggravated tensions between the federal and state governments. Democratic participation was broadened, but it was limited to white men, and resulted in officeholders being replaced with people loyal to individuals, with support for the continuity of slavery and the ethnic cleansing of Native Americans.

Concentrating authority away from the executive in a few oversight bodies or enlarged bureaucracy can also backfire, often encouraging corruption rather than transparency. For example, legislative reforms for campaign finance in the 1970s, intended to increase transparency, [inadvertently fueled an increase](#) in lobbying, attack ads, and exploitation of the electoral process. This shift, intended to curb corporate influence, instead deepened it, allowing corporations and interest groups to find new ways to wield power. The Founding Fathers, while focused on preventing tyranny through checks and balances, could not foresee the enormous role that corporate interests would play in shaping political outcomes, creating a system where legal monetary contributions increasingly dictate policy.

The U.S. faces a major struggle in adapting its republican system to the realities of the 21st century. While executive power has been pivotal in addressing monumental issues, such as the abolition of slavery, it also carries a risk of abuse. Efforts to forcefully reform republics from the top down, like those seen in Rome, often impose rigid systems that fail to meet society's evolving needs. On the other hand, an over-reliance on populist people power without the necessary safeguards can lead to impulsive decisions and destabilized governance.

Rejecting populism does not equate to diminishing civic engagement; rather, it calls for more sophisticated participation for constructive political processes. U.S. citizens retain significant power, including the right to gather, protest, and exercise free speech and association. Realizing the full potential of these rights and their responsible use requires a deeper understanding of the political system and a commitment to responsible use. This can be achieved by learning from other countries that cultivate republican values through education and habits from a young age, supported by public funding, and promoting political legitimacy through transparency and participation. Ignoring the need to address the decline in civic culture and public understanding of the system of government will further weaken the foundation of democratic practices.

Reforming the U.S. republic is essential, but institutions like the [Bipartisan Policy Center](#), despite their efforts to bridge divides, have been [criticized for being compromised](#) by corporate interests, which exposes the system's vulnerability to such interference. Over time, bipartisanship has become entrenched as a long-term alignment in support of big-money interests and [an imperialist foreign policy](#), sidelining efforts for systemic change and diverging sharply from the best aspects of the early U.S. vision.

Contrastingly, the current discourse around reform is often filtered through partisan lenses, populism, or authoritarian impulses, with many advocating for quick fixes rather than substantive solutions. Meaningful reform, however, will be a slow and contentious process, and progress will remain elusive without addressing the root causes of major problems and accepting a collective responsibility to solve them.

By John P. Ruehl

Author Bio: John P. Ruehl is an Australian-American journalist living in

Washington, D.C., and a world affairs correspondent for the [Independent Media Institute](#). He is a contributor to several foreign affairs publications, and his book, [Budget Superpower: How Russia Challenges the West With an Economy Smaller Than Texas](#), was published in December 2022.

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Time For Truthful Narratives On Immigration



Sonali Kolhatkar

12.07-2024 ~ The “migrant crisis” was manufactured and is the fault of both Trump and Biden. We need to understand that the U.S. needs immigrants more than immigrants need the U.S.

A quiet panic has broken out within immigrant communities across the United States ahead of Donald Trump’s inauguration on January 20, 2025. [Mixed-status families](#) are expecting to be separated, [DACA recipients](#) foresee their status being revoked, those with [Temporary Protected Status](#) are pessimistic about the program remaining valid, and [asylum seekers](#) fear the worst. Indeed, if Project 2025’s [anti-immigrant agenda](#) is fully enacted, the [horrors of family separation](#) that the nation witnessed in 2018 under Trump’s first term will pale in

comparison to what's coming.

And yet, Trump might claim that this time, he's merely following the public's desires. The prevailing story of the 2024 presidential election is that voters were so fed up with immigration upending their lives that they picked a leader who promised to do something about it. Headlines such as this New York Times piece on Election Day claimed, "[Voters Were Fed Up Over Immigration. They Voted for Trump.](#)" Indeed, [polls](#) showed likely voters ranking immigration as either the top issue, or [second only](#) to the economy.

What has gone unsaid about public discontent over immigration and Trump's coming assault on immigrant rights is that the Biden administration paved the way for it, manufacturing a "migrant crisis" and volleying it right into Trump's hands so he could lob it all the way to the White House. What's needed are not just better policies but a rewriting of the narratives about immigration and immigrants so that vulnerable human beings are no longer political scapegoats every four years.

[Gallup polls show](#) that national anxiety over immigration significantly increased over the four years that Joe Biden was president. The fraction of Americans wanting lower levels of immigration had been slightly decreasing for years, landing at around 30 percent. In 2020 that number began rising, and by 2024, it had jumped to 55 percent.

It's tempting to conclude that this trend is merely a matter of perception, the result of successful propaganda, of Trump's constant drumbeat that Biden opened the floodgates at the border, rolling out the welcome mat for millions of people with no papers. Indeed, far too many people hold [false views](#) of immigrants in the U.S., from assuming they are more prone to committing violent crimes—[not true](#)—to the idea that they are stealing jobs from native-born Americans and longtime residents—[also not true](#). The adoption of such falsehoods is clearly Trump's doing.

However, there are plenty of credible reports across the country, in [small-town America](#) and in [urban centers](#), that demonstrate a real struggle with absorbing tens of thousands of newly resettled people from foreign nations. Such dynamics reinforced the notion that immigration is out of control and gave credence to Trump's lies about immigrants.

What's going unsaid is that migrants from nonwhite nations in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia are being deliberately dumped into towns and cities with no plan for orderly absorption and assimilation—in direct contrast to how well the Biden administration welcomed Ukrainian refugees. A February 2024 [in-depth report](#) by Jerusalem Demsas in the Atlantic is one of the few analyses that explored what happened and why.

“Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine brought a separate influx of displaced people into U.S. cities that quietly assimilated most of them,” explained Demsas. The numbers of Ukrainian refugees and nonwhite immigrants in many towns and cities have been comparable, but the ways in which they were resettled have sometimes been starkly different. Based on interviews with mayors and municipal leaders, Demsas realized there were “two major differences in federal policy” that explained the contrast.

One policy difference was that Ukrainian refugees were allowed to work as soon as they arrived in the U.S., while subsequent waves of migrants were prohibited from working and then demonized for using government aid.

The other difference was that the Biden administration carefully coordinated Ukrainian arrivals with local officials to ensure their proper assimilation. And it chose not to do so with groups arriving from across the Southern border. This meant that those local leaders who could politicize migrants did so by pointing to the chaos their presence seemed to provoke and by adopting policies that deliberately worsened the optics of immigration.

“To call this moment a ‘migrant crisis’ is to let elected federal officials off the hook,” concluded Demsas. If the federal government had treated nonwhite Latin American, Caribbean, African, and Asian migrants the same way it treated Ukrainian refugees, voters would likely not have been as swayed by Trump’s lies as they were.

A similar scenario played out with asylum seekers at the border. Rather than allowing those seeking asylum to make their case in an orderly way, the first Trump administration tried to [break the entire system](#), creating chaos in order to blame asylees. Joe Biden’s administration blithely allowed the restrictions to [remain in place](#), [breaking](#) his campaign promise.

The reality is that the undocumented immigrant population in the U.S. [increased](#)

[by only 800,000 people](#) between 2019 and 2022 and remains below 2007 levels. In a nation of 335 million people, this is less than a quarter of a percent of the population. How can such a tiny fraction of people be the source of so many problems as Trump claims?

Americans are not anti-immigrant. In fact, they are pro-immigration. A new Pew Research [poll](#) released on November 22, 2024, finds that nearly two-thirds of Americans are happy to have undocumented immigrants remain in the nation with legal protections provided certain conditions are met, such as security checks and lawful employment.

The reason it appears as though Americans are anti-immigrant is because they're being told that hordes of people are breaking the rules, sidestepping order, and forcing their way in to cause chaos, commit crimes, and steal jobs. This is both Trump's fault, and Biden's.

Migration is a large-scale phenomenon of vulnerable populations fleeing war, poverty, persecution, climate change, and more. When given accessible procedures to enter another nation legally, migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers will do everything possible to follow the rules. Because, why not? Why would they deliberately jeopardize their own long-term security when given the chance? It turns out, the system has been deliberately broken in order to manufacture a crisis and help gutless politicians claim they are being "tough on immigration."

The U.S. desperately needs immigrant workers. This is true not only in low-wage industries but in such highly skilled fields as medicine where immigrants are disproportionately represented.

For example, the [Migration Policy Institute](#) found that "[w]hile immigrants represent 14 percent of the Illinois population, they make up 37 percent of its physicians and 19 percent of its registered nurses." There is a nationwide shortage of medical workers—physicians, nurses, technicians, and home health aides—a gap that could be filled by skilled new immigrants.

As the U.S.'s elder population continues to live longer, [needing more care](#), and as the national [birth rate falls](#), immigrants have stepped in to [provide care](#) and pay [taxes to fund services](#) they aren't even allowed to access. Indeed, many nations in the Global South are struggling with the "[brain drain](#)" of their most talented

workers leaving to work in the U.S. and other Western nations.

The stories we are telling about immigrants are fueling misplaced panic in the U.S. We cannot rely on Trump to fix what he sought to break. In the coming months and years, the devastation the incoming president will wreak on vulnerable populations will test our collective morality.

What's needed before the next election are truthful narratives about immigrants, including the fact that the migrant crisis has been manufactured and the legal immigration system deliberately broken for political gain, forcing most people into untenable situations.

Most importantly, we need to be clear that our nation needs immigrants just as, if not more than, immigrants need the U.S.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

Author Bio: Sonali Kolhatkar is an award-winning multimedia journalist. She is the founder, host, and executive producer of "[Rising Up With Sonali](#)," a weekly television and radio show that airs on Free Speech TV and Pacifica stations. Her most recent book is [Rising Up: The Power of Narrative in Pursuing Racial Justice](#) (City Lights Books, 2023). She is a writing fellow for the [Economy for All](#) project at the Independent Media Institute and the racial justice and civil liberties editor at [Yes! Magazine](#). She serves as the co-director of the nonprofit solidarity organization the [Afghan Women's Mission](#) and is a co-author of [Bleeding Afghanistan](#). She also sits on the board of directors of [Justice Action Center](#), an immigrant rights organization.

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