

# Digital Engagement In A Post-Factual World: Silos, Echo-Chambers And Lies



*What is communication?*

What constitutes communication has always been historically contingent. It is never easy to pin down and designate 'what is communication is' and 'what it is not'. But it is obvious that communication has taken many forms and evolved: from cave art to town criers, from street theatre to newspapers and television, and finally to digital engagement. One may argue that none of the aforementioned has influenced the world as much as digital engagement, making information available at your fingertips, changing the power dynamics for communicators, and transforming the way people can be influenced and their attitudes shaped. Here we try to explore issues of how digital engagement will thrive in a cynical, nationalist, populist world and raise the pertinent question: Does digital engagement encourage better decision-making, or merely reinforce prejudice?

*The impact of Brexit and the USA presidential election*

Two major events that gave "post truth" a linguistic footing were Brexit and the election of USA President Donald Trump. They showed that the world has indeed changed, and exposed the fact that people are making decisions based on emotions and beliefs. So, in the new world we live in, is evidence less important than beliefs? In the UK referendum on the EU, the #leave campaign claimed falsely that leaving the EU would mean that [£350 million could be given to the National Health Service \(NHS\)](#). After Brexit, thousands of people signed online petitions to have the result of the referendum reviewed. Gillian Tett, author of 'The Silo Effect' wrote, "[The Brexit vote was decided on the basis of emotion – and the Remain camp failed to give voters a really positive vision of Europe.](#)"

*The impact of digital engagement on decision-making*

Digital engagement was meant to make information more accessible to more people. But it has also made it possible for anyone to publish anything they want without having to provide evidence. As a result people find it hard to tell the

difference between truth and lies. Fake news propagated on Facebook about the Pope supporting Trump and Trump's tweets changing the direction of media coverage, makes one wonder whether digital engagement is encouraging propaganda and disinformation? Or whether people are making decisions based on emotions and do not care much about the facts?

In an interview with the Financial Times in June 2016 Adair Turner former Head of the Financial Services Agency (FSA) said, "I was once a confident optimist and rationalist. I also used to believe that everybody could be persuaded by rational argument. I've increasingly realised that people need mythologies, people need nationalisms and people need religions."

### *Power to the powerless?*

Digital engagement was thought to level the playing field and give power to the powerless (as in Arab Spring). It was believed to be a way to re-engage voters, in particular young people, with politics, giving a voice to the voiceless. Instead, it has given the powerful another weapon to acquire even more power. It favours those who shout loudest, responsible for the growth of 'populism' and government by Twitter. Today, anyone with a smartphone can voice an opinion, create an opinion train and broadcast beliefs. Communication becomes a political process when this happens, as opinion formation and counter-commonsensical visions gain popularity and contribute to undermining democracy. Perhaps this may have inspired [the OECD, which has recently called on schools to teach young people how to identify fake news.](#)

### *Better decision-making?*

Perceptions of the power and value of social media to facilitate learning and participative engagement have shifted significantly since the events of 2016. It was thought that digital engagement would bring people together by making it easier for multiple-stakeholders to connect and participate in open dialogue. There was an expectation that better conversations would inevitably lead to better decision-making, building sharing knowledge and skills. However, social media is driving people further apart by creating silos and echo chambers that lead to people living in 'thought bubbles', and views becoming polarised. This is because people tend to follow people 'like them'; people with the same values and beliefs, the same positions, need and interests. Facebook and social feeds have clever algorithms to continually feed us with monotonies that reinforce our biased beliefs.

We live in a post-factual world where people are allegedly tired of experts, and the headlines are dominated by fake-news. Liberal beliefs and values prior to 2016 have been trampled on and consigned to the waste bin. It's as if the whole world has realised - like Voltaire's *Candide* - that all is not for the best in the best possible of worlds. But we cannot deny that we are living in interesting times. Maybe not the best of times, but it surely can't get more interesting (or frustrating?) than this.

### *Fostering sustainable learning ecosystems*

In the wake of the Arab Spring, Brexit, the Italian Referendum, and the election of Donald Trump as President of the USA, it's time to question received wisdoms and assumptions about the power of digital engagement to unite and empower citizens and communities, and to foster sustainable learning ecosystems. The internet cannot be understood unless we also dwell upon surveillance societies, state actions, political performances, digital divides or class divides. Networked societies have interesting channels that transcend some of the barriers that came into being as a part of modern state orders. At the same time a language of democracy and egalitarian dialogic is yet to be structured for the networks that seem to be in place. Here we have to bring in an array of actors, platforms, sciences, and even performances. The states that work against democratic public in the form of elitisms, social and educational habitus that in effect become less communicative in action because of their exclusionary nature: science that often gets reduced to techniques and technologies that are system conservative and performances that pitch 'us' against 'them' (among many other varieties); all need to be addressed with renewed pedagogic commitment.

### *Five standards for digital engagement*

Digital engagement began as a medium to bring people together by making it easier for multiple-stakeholders to connect and participate in open dialogue. The power of social media to enhance citizen engagement, give the voiceless a voice, strengthen democracy, and foster learning ecosystems has been greatly exaggerated. Perhaps it is time to introspect and reflect on what constitutes proper communication and what does not. Perhaps it is opportune time to come up with some guidelines for digital engagement. Society has always used values, rules and standards to regulate unwanted or harmful behaviour, so why did we not come up with the same for digital engagement? We have taken the nerve to come up with *five standards* for sustainable digital engagement.

### *Safety*

Digital engagement must ensure safety and security and have greater controls on use (or abuse) of person information. Now, we know this is easier said than done. Sadly, it is the reversal of security for individual privacies and is now becoming a reality that digital engagement is being used as a surveillance method. Social media sites have responsibility for protecting the identity and rights of their members, and their right to air views against the dominating orders.

### *Trustworthy*

Online instructors and moderators must be trained to ask questions and encourage debate. Contributions and content from users should be welcomed. Where sites or programmes are inspired by a particular set of beliefs, values, funding or allegiances, these should be openly declared. Forums should seek to build trusting networks, not simply tell people what to do.

### *Truthful*

Automatic checks on fake news being propagated in social media and some means to stop such news spreading are needed. Wouldn't it be great if Facebook and Twitter had a technical algorithm which automatically checks the posts against facts or in certain dailies, such as Reuters and tags the news items as "fake"? This will silence users and prevent further spreading of such news.

### *Fairness*

Algorithms must be fair. News feeds only using algorithms that provide a monotone need to change. They must allow for alternative points of views to be fed to people, so that they make informed decisions.

### *Humanness*

"Online giants tend to view humans as audiovisual animals - a pair of eyes and a pair of ears connected to 10 fingers, a screen and a credit card", [said Yuval Noah Harari](#). Social media has to move up from just marketing and making money, to a higher level of giving a voice to the voiceless, making positive impacts in the world, growing communities to improve the world? Let us bring "humanness" into social media, which means being authentic, transparent and real. Instead of posting selfies and junk news, let us promote human interaction and kindness.

Bringing humanity and human values into digital engagement is a collective responsibility, and we are all in it as much as the online giants. Hopefully we can

be the generation that made technology and humanity converge into a space where post-truth, siloes, echo chambers and lies dissolve away to make way for an ideological movement that will benefit the whole world.

*Let's make digital engagement great again!*

About the authors:

*Edward Kellow* ~ I am a highly creative, energetic and outcome focused trainer, facilitator and coach, specialising in leadership, communications, strategy development, and training design and delivery. In the past year I have worked with leaders, change-makers, and policy implementers in industry (from ceramics to scallop fishing, glass, cement, chemicals and refineries), urbanism, international governance and CSR. I have over twenty years of experience in learning and development, ten of which working internationally at senior level. From 2006-2012, I was Head of Learning and Leadership at LEAD International, where I co-ordinated and supported teams of international trainers designing and delivering global leadership programmes for up to 150 participants in Africa, Asia, Europe, North and South America and China.

In 2012, I designed a course on Sustainable Cities for Rio+20 that won the international public vote for the best learning event. I have also delivered leadership programmes and workshops for many intergovernmental, business and third sector organisations around the world.

A former intelligence officer, I have sold shirts at Harrods, supported HIV/AIDS volunteers in East London, and set up an innovative greetings card business, Twisted Yarns. I studied French and Russian, spent a year in Paris, and have a track record of delivering programmes and workshops in English, French and Russian. A graduate member of the CIPD, I have postgraduate qualifications in both training and coaching.

See: <http://edwardkellow.blogspot.nl/>

*Mathew A. Varghese* ~ Themes of General Research/ Pedagogic Interest: Development as an Idea (particularly in the sub-continent), Spatial Geography and Spatiality, Unintentional Designs in the Anthropocene; Co-Species Evolution; Subjectivities in the Making: Forms of Labour and Gender, Emerging Human Ecologies, Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Challenges in Social

Sciences.Independent Researcher.Member, of the Oslo based Extreme Anthropology Research Network [<http://www.extreme-anthropology.com/team>] and the Editorial Board of the Journal of Extreme Anthropolog

See: <https://uib.academia.edu/MathewAVarghese>

*Deepa Pullanikkatil* ~ An Environmental Management professional with an engineering background, *Deepa Pullanikkatil* has fifteen years of work experience in developing countries of Malawi, Lesotho, India and Swaziland and travelled to 18 countries for presenting papers and/or on work related visits. She worked at “Leadership for Environment And Development (LEAD) Southern and Eastern Africa” based in Malawi from 2010-2014 before moving to Swaziland where she is currently based. She has a B Tech degree in Civil Engineering (India), Post Graduate Diploma in Management (India), Masters in Environmental Management (University of Free State, South Africa) and a PhD in Environmental Science from North West University, South Africa. Her interest areas include climate change adaptation, ecosystems services studies and water resources management. She has undertaken consultancy work for UNDP, UNEP, Governments of Malawi and Swaziland, GIZ and SADC. Currently Deepa is undertaking a Post Doctoral Fellowship at Rhodes University researching on ecosystem services and poverty alleviation.

Besides environmental science, her other passion is undertaking non-profit work and helping bring abundance to needy communities. She has been involved in charitable causes in India ([www.manifesthumanity.org](http://www.manifesthumanity.org)) and is embarking on poverty reduction and environmental protection in Malawi in Lake Chilwa Basin through her non-profit organization ABUNDANCE ([www.abundanceworldwide.weebly.com](http://www.abundanceworldwide.weebly.com)). Deepa is granddaughter of award winning Malayalam writer Tatapuram Sukumaran, who has influenced her deeply.

See: <http://www.deepapullanikkatil.com/>

---

# Harrie Timmerman ~ (Nog steeds) Tegendraads



Aangezien de eerste druk van mijn boek *Tegendraads* (Rozenberg Publishers, 2007, 978 90 5170 853 0) is uitverkocht, heb ik dankbaar gebruik gemaakt van de mogelijkheid om dit boek als e-book te herdrukken. De reden daarvoor is dat politie en justitie, hoewel er de laatste jaren meerdere gerechtelijke dwalingen

aan het licht zijn gekomen, niet willen toegeven dat zij fouten maken. Laat staan dat zij daarvan willen leren teneinde nieuwe blunders te voorkomen. Waardoor ze nog steeds levens van onschuldige mensen ruïneren.

Aangezien er in de afgelopen tien jaar in de beschreven zaken wel nieuwe ontwikkelingen zijn geweest, zal aan de desbetreffende hoofdstukken nieuwe tekst worden toegevoegd. In de oorspronkelijke tekst zijn ook type- en taalfouten verbeterd.

Het eerste hoofdstuk, getiteld *Over de auteur*, is geschreven door mede-auteur Willem de Haan. Vandaar dat hierin over mij in de derde persoon wordt geschreven en citaten van mij worden aangehaald.

Zowel in de nieuwe als oude tekst heeft Bart FM Droog bij de e-bookversie de rol vervuld van redacteur. Dankzij hem is de tekst (nog) duidelijker geworden, waarvoor mijn hartelijke dank.

Lees hier *(Nog steeds) tegendraads van Harrie Timmerman*, het ruim 300 pagina's tellende boek van Harrie Timmerman, in de Verplichte kost-reeks van de NPE, als gratis downloadbaar pdf-document.

Er is inmiddels ook een webversie-verschenen, waarin enkele tv-documentaires en radio- en tv-interviews met Timmerman zijn opgenomen. Zie:

<http://www.bartfmdroog.com/droog/cct/timmerman/>

## **TED ~ Rutger Bregman ~ Poverty Isn't A Lack Of Character; It's A Lack Of Cash**

“Ideas can and do change the world,” says historian Rutger Bregman, sharing his case for a provocative one: guaranteed basic income. Learn more about the idea’s 500-year history and a forgotten modern experiment where it actually worked — and imagine how much energy and talent we would unleash if we got rid of poverty once and for all.

---

## **Caught Between Scylla And Charybdis: The Effects Of Greece's Loss Of Sovereignty**





Photo: occupy.com

For the last several months, Greece's international creditors - the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) - had been at a [standoff over debt relief](#), budget targets and various reforms, including taxes and pensions, thereby delaying the completion of a long overdue bailout review that should have been done in October 2016. The standoff added extra pressures to an economy that has been in recession for eight straight years, and even revived fears of a "Grexit" as bank runs had returned in full steam. In the meantime, the Syriza-led government of Alexis Tsipras was playing the role of a mere observer in a tug-of-war between two institutions that are in full control of the country's finances, and merely trying to accommodate the demands of both sides.

Since the start of the current financial and economic crisis in Greece, which goes back to 2008 (although the actual outbreak of the debt crisis occurs in early 2010), the country's GDP has shrunk by about 26 percent. Unemployment jumped to as high as 28 percent in 2013, and has now stabilized at 23 percent, but more than 42 percent of the population has "[dropped below the poverty threshold of 2005.](#)"

This harsh reality is the price the country is paying for its fiscal derailment as a member of a currency union (the euro) and the imposition of three consecutive bailout programs by the EU and the IMF. These bailouts have been accompanied by draconian measures of fiscal consolidation (austerity) and a [radical neoliberal agenda](#) which includes sharp cuts in wages, salaries and pensions, liberalization of the labor market and blanket privatization.

From the beginning, the bailout plans were never intended to rescue the Greek economy, but rather to avoid a financial meltdown on the continent, as several European banks had recklessly loaned to the public sector since Greece adopted the euro in 2001. Indeed, virtually all of the funds that have been provided to Greece since 2010 have gone towards the repayment of international loans - first to the European banks, and then to the country's official creditors - [rather than towards the economy.](#)

But let's return to the present: the standoff between EU and IMF over the "best way" to deal with Greece's current financial and economic catastrophe, which finally came to an end a couple of weeks ago, with the Greek government

agreeing to a new round of austerity measures which amount, essentially, to a fourth memorandum.

### *Spreading False Hopes About Recovery and Vague Promises About Debt Relief*

Having grossly miscalculated the impact of the fiscal policies it proposed on the Greek economy, the IMF has been extremely reluctant to join in the third bailout program (agreed to and signed by the pseudo-leftist Syriza government of Alexis Tsipras), sensing that Greece will never be able to repay its loans. The country is essentially bankrupt, and the prospects for a return to the private credit markets any time soon are not very promising, as there are no signs of recovery on the horizon. At some point, small rates of growth will inevitably be registered solely because of the economy having hit rock bottom, but this is not the case at present.

Still, illusions of a recovery have been the hallmark of both the Syriza government and of the conservative government that preceded it. But this should not be surprising. Spreading false hopes to the citizens of a bankrupt nation that has lost its sovereignty is the last refuge of political scoundrels, of governments and their officials who have opted to become lackeys of the international elite rather than lead their people to resistance and to the overthrow of financial regimes imposing debt bondage.

Indeed, for the last few months, senior-level officials in the Syriza government, such as Minister of Economy and Development Dimitri B. Papadimitriou, were propounding that growth had made a comeback and that the crisis was over before the official statistics for the fourth quarter of 2016 were finally released in early March 2017. However, [those figures](#) showed the Greek economy had contracted again by 1.2 percent.

The IMF, in spite of its gross miscalculations of the prospects for the Greek economy, regards Greece's 326 billion euro debt (about 180 percent of the GDP) to be simply unsustainable, which is an unquestionable conclusion reached by most independent economists. Greece's debt is surely unsustainable — unless the economy receives some kind of an external boost and begins to record annual rates of growth resembling those of China. But this scenario is unlikely. The Greek economy suffers from gross inefficiencies (oligopolistic structures, lack of industry, massive tax evasion, slow productivity), while the public sector is

notoriously backward and inept, since all governing parties have been using it as a vehicle to provide jobs for their friends, relatives and acolytes. The Greek political establishment is simply incompetent in initiating structural changes of the sort that can have useful and effective spin-off effects on the economy and the country's [political culture](#).

However, Greece's European partners, and Germany in particular, are vehemently opposed to any debt relief, arguing that the debt is sustainable and that if the current government in Athens manages to achieve consecutive budget surpluses, a return to private credit markets would be virtually guaranteed.

Germany's opposition to the idea of a Greek debt write-off is mainly of a political nature, because such a decision would be hard to sell to German voters who, for years now, have been accustomed to their media's treatment of Greece as a nation of lazy people who lived beyond their means — an image of Greeks that has also been sanctioned by many of Germany's political leaders. Hence, the primary reason for the standoff between the EU and the IMF over the completion of the second review for the third bailout program. The IMF, on the other hand, does not wish to see its reputation further tarnished because of the dismal failure of the Greek bailout programs. But its insistence on a deal that includes a plan for debt relief for Greece in order to participate in the third bailout program is also accompanied by demands for more and deeper structural reforms, including further cuts in pensions and more austerity measures.

However, the IMF's participation in the Greek bailout program is of absolute necessity for Germany and the EU in general, as it lends credibility to the conversion of Greece into a neoliberal laboratory. The current pseudo-leftist [Syriza government](#) has not only been unable to stop this selling of the nation's public wealth and patrimony, but has been actually promoting it wholeheartedly to ensure that the country remains in the hard core of the euro.

The IMF also had strong reservations about the budget surplus targets demanded from Greece, which was yet another contesting point with the EU authorities supervising the Greek bailout program. However, Syriza put to rest those doubts in April when Greece posted a [budget surplus for 2016](#) that was the highest in 21 years and far exceeded the target set by the EU. Greek statistics have been notoriously unreliable over the years, but Brussels has confirmed Greece's primary surplus budget at 4.2 percent for 2016, a development that will surely

bring the IMF one step closer to joining the plan, even though Greece's debt levels increased in 2016 over those posted in 2015.

The "bloody" primary surplus budget was secured via more suffocating tax policies and by the Greek state simply not paying its bills for months.

This is the decision Syriza made in order to help bring to an end the standoff between the EU and the IMF, so the second review of the third bailout program can be eventually completed, thereby leading to the release of funds so Athens can cover its debt obligations to its official creditors (primarily the IMF) in July. The Greek government's payment obligations in July are in excess of 7 billion euros.

In addition, Syriza seems to believe that the attainment of a primary surplus budget eight times higher than the original target will open up the path for a debt write-off, although one fails to see the reasoning behind this line of thinking. If anything, the attainment of such high primary budget surpluses could be taken to indicate that the country's fiscal condition has improved dramatically, although nothing could be further from the truth, and social conditions continue to deteriorate with each passing year. In fact, while the standoff between EU authorities and the IMF is over, there are still no signs that Germany is ready and willing to go along with the IMF's call for a deal on Greece's debt. It is simply naïve on the part of the Syriza government to think that it can count on either the EU or the IMF for compassion or understanding to the country's economic woes.

Still, given Germany's insistence in the participation of the IMF in the Greek bailout program, an agreement of sorts about some type of debt restructuring for the beleaguered Greek economy between EU authorities and the IMF cannot be ruled out. If there is a deal about Greece's debt, it will most likely involve some form of a debt restructuring plan, pushing the repayment of debts to the infinite future. However, even a small portion of a debt write-off won't solve the country's economic problems, nor will it let Greece off the neoliberal hook.

As long as Greece remains in the Eurozone, the debt drama will not go away. The country has lost complete control of its financial sovereignty, and will therefore remain a debt colony for at least several more decades to come. Moreover, under the bailout agreements, major public assets (airports, harbors, undeveloped land and infrastructure) have passed into private hands. The Syriza government has

already agreed to sell major portions of the Public Power Corporation, the oil refinery Hellenic Petroleum, and the gas distributor DEPA, which means the state will have even less of a role in the management of the economy in the years ahead.

This dramatic development should not be taken as an indication that an exit from the euro is the easy solution out, especially at this point in the game, when the country carries an enormous external debt load. An exit from the euro would have been a more effective strategy in the early stages of the crisis, but it is also equally clear that Greece cannot afford to remain a member of a currency union. This may seem as an utterly pessimistic diagnosis, but Greece is really caught between Scylla and Charybdis.

### *Loss of Sovereignty and National Malaise*

The recent standoff between EU and IMF — with the Greek government, as already indicated, being caught in the middle and incapable of having any real saying over the matter— reveals in the most profound sense the country's loss of sovereignty. Yet the extent to which the nation's political establishment is able or willing to draw the proper lessons from the loss of sovereignty and seek viable strategies for the future of Greece remains a very shaky proposition. Indeed, it has been more than clear since the outbreak of the crisis that the political and financial elite of Greece will do anything to keep the country in the euro's grip, and the conversion of Syriza into a neoliberal social democratic party has significantly weakened grassroots opposition to the euro masters and to the neoliberal conversion of Greece. Had a conservative government in Athens tried to implement the countless neoliberal reform measures that the Syriza government has managed to enact in the course of the last two or so years, the country's major cities would have been converted into daily battlegrounds.

The sad reality about Greece today is that while Syriza's opportunism has been exposed for all to see, the political party next to assume power will be yet another enforcer of the EU/IMF neoliberal agenda, with no vision for an end to the crisis.

As things stand, the loss of sovereignty means nothing to Greece's mainstream political establishment, which today expands from the traditional right to the left. Under these conditions, only a renewed radical left can provide hope for mass resistance to the current destruction of Greece. Otherwise, reactionary forces,

such as the [neo-Nazi party of Golden Dawn](#), will become increasingly identified in the eyes of the poor and the unemployed in Greece as the only solution left.

Having said that, it is beyond naïve for anyone to continue to perceive Syriza as a political party of the radical left. Since coming to power, Syriza signed a third bailout and has just agreed to a fourth memorandum with the country's official creditors, while pushing even harder the EU/IMF neoliberal agenda than the preceding governing parties, thereby ensuring the completion of the transition of Greece to a German protectorate and an EU debt colony. With the fourth memorandum, the Syriza government of Alexis Tsipras has given its full consent to the introduction of more austerity measures, which include an additional cut of 18 percent in pensions and further liberalization measures. In total, the demand for more "blood and tears" by Greece's creditors translate to an additional squeeze of over 4 billion euros from Greek citizens.

The sellout of Syriza is a consequence of Greece's loss of sovereignty, but only to the extent that Tsipras's party was willing to make a 180-degree turn and convert itself into an obedient server of the euro masters. The case of Greece, with Syriza in power, is a political case study that should provide much food for thought to all radical movements, organizations and parties envisioning and working towards a better future. The specific case tells us a great deal about economic globalization and European integration, party politics and ideology, democracy, financialization and national sovereignty.

But the most important lesson of all is that a party of the "left" that refuses to live up to its expectations as a force of radical social change will end up not only betraying the trust of voters, but in the process, will itself become a reinforcing mechanism of domination and exploitation that it questioned and challenged from the sidelines.

[Copyright, Truthout.](#)

---

# Resistance In The Age Of Trumpism: An Interview With Gerald Epstein



*Gerald Epstein is Professor of Economics and a founding Co-Director of the Political Economy Research Institute (PERI) at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.*

With Donald Trump in power, US society is likely to witness in the next four years a regression of social progress and environmental damage unlike anything the country has seen in the course of its modern history. In this context, progressives have their hands full and only massive resistance may halt the march to the precipice. But any effective strategy of resistance requires linking theory and praxis. It is imperative that we understand the dynamics in US society that brought Trump to power. It is imperative that we also understand what Trump actually represents and whether Trumpism is here to stay. Then we can think of the most effective ways to challenge the sort of political gestalt in Trump's miasma.

In this exclusive interview, radical political economist Gerald Epstein addresses these issues and offers his insights on how we can resist Trumpism. Gerald Epstein is professor of economics and co-director of the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and author of

scores of books and articles on the political economy of contemporary capitalism.

*C.J. Polychroniou: The rise of Donald Trump to power took a lot of people by surprise, although there were strong indications for a long time now that the conditions in the United States were ripe for the emergence of an authoritarian leader. Still, the actual reasons for the rise of a fake populist in power remain rather puzzling, so I'd like to start by asking for your views on what led to Trump's stunning victory.*

*Gerald Epstein: As you say, conditions of working people have been deteriorating in the US for many decades now, creating fertile ground for leaders outside the political establishment to offer anti-elitist explanations and offer apparent solutions for people desperate for them. This helps to explain both the Bernie [Sanders] and the Trump phenomena. But when you add on top of these the deep racist, sexist and xenophobic undercurrents that have always been present in American society and which are low-hanging fruit just waiting to be picked and utilized by a demagogue, you have Donald Trump.... In short, the Democratic Party's embrace of neoliberalism, which continued with Hillary Clinton, is a big part of the story. Still, one should not forget the devastating roles that the Republican Party played in the last eight years as they gained more and more power — not just in Congress, but also in state and local governments in many parts of the country. They were able to do this by exploiting Democratic failures, but also by a money-fueled long-term strategy by extreme right-wing capitalists, such as the Koch brothers and others. Without this massive financial input and a long-term strategy, this victory would not have occurred. More specifically, their electoral strategy in the last four to eight years ... was to incapacitate the government from helping poor and working-class people, while enriching the powerful and the elite — and then blame the Democrats for the fall out. Sam Brownback, governor of Kansas, and Scott Brown, governor of Wisconsin, as well as the Republican Party in Congress in Washington, DC, pursued this seemingly kamikaze approach to governing. Amazingly, it succeeded. It shoved poor and working people more and more into the dirt as cuts were made to public investments, benefits, living standards. But rather than blaming the Republicans, many of these Americans voted against the Democrat — Hillary Clinton.*

This means that only a very weak party (the Democrats), a very weak candidate (Hillary Clinton) and a huge amount of luck — the rise of Trump, [former] FBI Director James Comey's last-minute attack on Clinton and an Electoral College



system that delivered the presidency to Trump despite losing the vote by 3 million votes — could have ultimately ended in Trump's victory. But the fact that he would have gotten so close even without these intervening factors underlines the deep rot in the system, including the Democratic Party's neoliberalism and the role of massive amounts of right-wing money combined with a long-term, revolutionary political strategy.

But to see the real underlying causes of Trumpism, we have to dig a bit deeper. All of the above is taking place in a context of a 30- to 40-year transformation of the US's place in the global economy — a transformation that would have required an economic policy directed toward managing it for the working classes and the poor, rather than for finance and the elite, which is what happened as I described earlier. The relative decline of the US as a site of production, the rise first of Japan, China, India and other countries in the developing world, and the intermittent competition with Europe and other countries meant that the economic institutions that the US relied on in the early post-World War II era could no longer deliver the goods to both working-class Americans and the capitalists. The Democrats and Republicans both went with the capitalists and a neoliberal faith in markets, rather than engaging in the reshaping of US institutions to thrive in a more competitive global environment. The mixture of financialization and subsidized support for US multinational corporations, and all kinds of free rides for elites, ultimately brought us to the age of Trumpism.

*Is Trump another Ronald Reagan when it comes to economic matters, or does he represent a new version of neoliberalism?*

Neither.

Of course, one can find elements in Trump's economic policies from Reagan's policies; and there are initiatives that draw on the neoliberal playbook. But there are important aspects of Trump's economic policies that are quite different from both of those, and it is important to be clear on these distinctions so that we can accurately identify the likely origins and impacts of these policies.

Before elaborating on these points, however, it is important to draw a few distinctions that often get muddled in discussions like these. The first is among Trump, Trumpism and Trumponomics. Trump is the person, the personality, the politician: the narcissistic, ignorant demagogue that the world has become obsessed with. Trumpism is the movement that Trump is leading. It is a

movement that, from Trump's perspective, is designed to keep him in power and enhance his power over time. It is made up of far-right white supremacists, neoconservative saber rattlers, neoliberal opportunists, fossil-fuel pushers, and people who are angry and desperate for change. Then there is the Republican Party core, which is made up of libertarians, neoliberals, neoconservatives and socially-moderate free marketers. Trumponomics is the set of economic policies that comes out of this rather inchoate and clearly unstable mixture of characters vying for power; a noxious mix that has not yet solidified into a coherent program. It reflects a manifestation of the relative power of these various forces with a heavy dose of accidental emergence from this very chaotic political process.

Trumponomics consists of a mixture of the following components:

*1. Reactionary Keynesianism:* Huge increases in military spending (sometimes called "military Keynesianism") combined with massive tax cuts for the wealthy that will tilt the productive structure in the US more toward wasteful and dangerous military spending, while at the same time dramatically worsening an already degenerate unequal distribution of income and wealth. Reagan, too, implemented aspects of these policies. Some Trump economic officials are even trying to offer Reaganomics "supply-side" rationales for this policy, including the claim that the tax cuts will pay for themselves because of induced rapid economic growth, but few people take such claims seriously since they have been thoroughly debunked in practice, including during the Reagan era.

*2. Neoliberal Deregulation Frenzy:* The thrust of administrative policy thus far in the realm of economic policy has been to signal a frenzy of deregulatory actions: from finance (the intent to roll back Dodd-Frank regulations), the choosing of a cabinet made up primarily of secretaries whose goal is to [weaken] or even dismantle the departments they head; the rule to cut two regulations for every new one enacted; and the war on the environment and attempts to fight climate change. This fit of climate change [absurdity] is one of such ferocity that it demands its own category.

*3. Kleptocracy or Crony Capitalism:* The US political system has always had a heavy dose of kleptocracy and crony capitalism associated with it, but, under the Trump administration, this appears to be poised to reach a whole new level. The ways in which policies are shaped because of the quite specific material interests of the Trump family and their inner circle may well become a central axis of understanding Trumponomics.

*4. Schacht Therapy:* In my recent article for Challenge

Magazine, "[Trumponomics: Should We Just Say 'No?'](#)," I argued that one of the most dangerous aspects of Trumponomics is the proposing of policies that *appear* similar to those that the left has proposed for many years — managed trade, infrastructure investment, more family-friendly policies — but in fact are likely to mostly solidify Trumpism's political power and reactionary policies, such as those that redistribute income and wealth to the rich, violate human rights and endanger the planet. The reference is to Hjalmar Schacht, Adolf Hitler's economy minister from 1934 to 1937 (and president of the Reichsbank), who implemented protectionist trade policies, massive infrastructure programs, such as the building of the autobahn, and creative banking and finance initiatives. These policies had the dual impact of generating employment and economic growth and cementing the political power of an authoritarian and murderous regime. In Trump's case, these policies have the potential to split the left, draw support to Trumpism from the working class and the left, and ultimately enhance the power of [a] highly dangerous and destructive movement and regime. This danger becomes all the more apparent when we note the fifth component of Trumponomics.

*5. Fossil Fuel Protection/Planet Destruction:* [The] final component is so powerful that it merits its own category: the evident Trump administration government-wide support that the Republicans are providing for the fossil fuel industry. The massive fossil fuel promotion scheme established by the Koch brothers is well known, partly thanks to the brilliant reporting of Jane Mayer and others. The Trump administration's and congressional Republican support for fossil fuels amounts to a kind of industrial policy for the fossil fuels industry and the planting a of a doomsday time bomb for the planet.

Trumponomics is a time-varying mixture of these approaches, not easily categorized as Reaganomics or even a new kind of "neoliberalism."

*Any surprises on how the Trump administration has ruled during the first 100 days?*

I have been somewhat surprised at the incompetency of the Trump administration, exhibited in its inability to piece together this economic patchwork by managing the Republican majority in Congress. One might have expected Trump to lead with the left dividing policies on trade and infrastructure, but he has done relatively little on that. It is not surprising, though, that he has led with massive tax cuts for the rich and massive increases in military expenditures, or the promotion of vile, xenophobic policies. All that was expected.

*Many on the left regard Trump as something of a neo-fascist, although it is clear that there is no coherent ideology behind his views, and worry that the US is sliding towards totalitarianism, even though Trump has already been dealt with humiliating blows over his immigration stance (specifically the Muslim ban) and in his effort to repeal the Affordable Care Act. Do you find this kind of analysis helpful in the effort to understand the phenomenon of Trumpism, and for progressives and radicals to develop effective strategies for countering Trumpism?*

Trump is clearly no neo-fascist since he does not have a well-defined ideology, and is mostly concerned with accumulating power, wealth and adulation. But Trumpism has a heavy dose of neo-fascist tendencies within it, and Trump seems happy to cavort with these tendencies if they will support his goals. Hence, I believe that Trumpism is proto-fascist in the sense that it is on a path toward fascism and authoritarianism; that doesn't necessarily mean it will get there. As I said earlier, there are many tendencies within Trumpism and in the Republican Party, and the balance of power among these will vary over time. However, I do think these neo-fascist tendencies which make Trumpism proto-fascist are extremely dangerous and important to keep in mind when thinking about the whole corpus of Trumponomics and what it means. It means that we should not analyze policies on a case-by-case basis, but rather see them as a part of a power play to enhance the power of Trumpism with its dangerous fascist currents. This should lead to a greater wariness and need for a more coherent political economy analysis to understand the power implications of supporting or opposing particular aspects of Trumponomics, for example opposition to NAFTA or infrastructure spending. It should also make us aware that, when Trump's economics policies fail, he is likely to turn toward "scapegoatism" — a standard authoritarian tactic — and blame immigrants, leftists and others for his failures. Coming from someone with severe authoritarian tendencies, this kind of scapegoatism is quite dangerous.

*How should progressives and radicals stand up to Trump's economic policies and overt militarism and provide in turn a viable vision for the future of American society?*

They should do what many are now doing: protest, resist and out the destructive policies of the Trump regime. And they should develop alternative policies and political strategies at the state and local levels to regain the policy initiative and

the political power. There are many effective actions happening in many parts of the country, from the movement for single-payer health care in California and elsewhere; the “Fight for \$15” to raise minimum wages; proposals for progressive tax reform; the multifaceted fight against climate change, including fights against pipeline construction. There are multiple positive initiatives, and some of these are tied to fielding political candidates at all levels. Progressive economists can help by doing analyses for these movements to identify the best proposals, fight against misinformation coming from the other side, and develop economic analyses that can improve plans and be used in campaigns to support them.

There is a lot of work to be done.

[Copyright, Truthout.](#)

---

# **Fatima Suleman ~ Affordability And Equitable Access To (Bio)Therapeutics For Public Health**



Prof. Fatima Suleman

On 16 May Prof. Fatima Suleman gave her inaugural lecture as the new Professor

to the Prince Claus Chair in Development and Equity at Utrecht University, entitled: *Affordability and equitable access to (bio)therapeutics for public health*. Prof. Suleman works at the University of Kwazulu Natal in South Africa and connects the theme of development and equity with accessibility of medicine, pharmacy and health economics. Read the highly interesting text of the [inaugural lecture](#) or [watch the video](#) of the livestream!