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Land of the Fearful: Authoritarianism in the Age of the Internet

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Introduction

Throughout history ideas have periodically inundated the world. The Renaissance and the so-called Age of Reason fundamentally altered Europe, which, in time spilled over to the rest of the world. Ideas, creative and destructive, large and small -- from fashion to political ideology -- have transformed the course of human history. Similar to ocean waves, these waves of ideas are formed as a result of prevailing socioeconomic conditions, reach their peak, subsequently subside and take a different form to emerge once again. Political theorist David Rapoport, for instance, has argued that starting with around 1880s different ideologies have spawned four mega waves of terrorism of which, at least the first three, lasted roughly four decades each [1]. Born out of newfound yearnings for national identity, the first wave of international terrorism began with 'anarchism" that spread immense fear through Europe and North America. Anarchism, as an ideology, lost it strength over time and, after the end of WWI, a new wave of national movements proliferated the colonized world. This wave ended after having achieved the movement's goal around 1950s, when most of the former colonies gained independence. The continuation of Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement, along with the active encouragement of the Soviet Union, saw the birth of the New Left movement, which the non-Communist governments fought with extreme ferocity. Finally, starting around the 1990's began revolts based on religious fundamentalism, which included the Sikh movement in India, Christian Identity movement in the US, and of course, the Islamic Fundamentalism. This is the current fourth wave of international terrorism.

Today the world is witnessing the rise of authoritarian leaders in many parts of the world, promoting paranoia, mistrust, and xenophobia. In this essay, I would argue that the current spread of authoritarianism in the world is the result of unleashing of forces that have deepened anxiety fed by changes in the economic structures, cultural and demographic transformations, and a general sense of insecurity from the news of terrorism and senseless violence from far and near. These fears, in turn, are being amplified by the exponential increase in the rate of penetration of the Internet, which has allowed people not only to receive information at an instant, but also the ability to cherry pick those which match their presuppositions, predilections, and prejudices. As a result, a number of political leaders all around the world have been able to capitalize on the fear and insecurity and come to power through electoral processes [2,3].

Fear and Selected Information: The Perfect Storm

Fear is perhaps the most primal of our motivations. A creature that does not know fear is similar to the one that does not feel pain. Soon, both would be extinct taking undue risks. Nature has imbibed every rational being the ability to anticipate danger and act to avert it. Given our proclivity for being risk averse, perhaps imprinted biologically by evolutionary psychology, we react adversely to a perceived threat, real or imaginary, especially when

articulated by political entrepreneurs or "leaders [4]." Our sense of insecurity arises, not only for our own persons, but also for the entire community in which we claim our membership, is inculcated by the leaders, whom the political science literature often call, "political entrepreneurs." As a result, political leaders shape their followers collective identity by defining enemies and allies, "in" and "out" groups, "us" and "them." These are the essential elements of political mobilization [5,6].

The sight of rational human beings being swayed by the words of a "leader" taking part in genocide has mystified scholars since the end of WWII. In order to understand the mindset of ordinary Germans, who would become Hitler's willing executioners [7] led to the famous study by Adorno et al. [8]. Although the authors identified a number of personality traits, they did not link these to external conditions. That was done by Eric Fromm [9] who analyzed Nazi ideology and linked it to the psychology of the German people and their deep yarning for restoring their national pride. From suggests there is a propensity to submit to authoritarian regimes when nations experience a sense of loss ("negative freedom") and submits to the promises of a perceived national savior.

At times of change and uncertainty fear from unanticipated changes become paramount; during these trying times people seek a plain understanding of complex situation in the simplest of terms along with the promise of its elimination by a populist leader. Their quest for the elimination of a shared threat leads to the rise of the demagogues and authoritarian leaders. Thus, Taub states it well:

"Authoritarians are thought to express much deeper fears than the rest of the electorate, to seek the imposition of order where they perceive dangerous change, and to desire a strong leader who will defeat those fears with force. They would thus seek a candidate who promised these things. And the extreme nature of authoritarians' fears, and of their desire to challenge threats with force, would lead them toward a candidate whose temperament was totally unlike any thin usually see in American politics — and whose policies went far beyond the acceptable norms [10]."

As the final decade of the past millennium approached, the world felt a surge of newfound optimism. The Cold War had come to an end with an appropriate symbol of oppression, the Berlin Wall being demolished brick by brick just as the Bastille was exactly 200 years ago. It was widely seen as the ultimate vindication of the ideals of democracy over the tyranny of totalitarianism. As common people from all over the world cheered, an exuberant conservative philosopher Fukuyama boldly declared the "end of history" where there would be no more history of conflict between individual freedom and repressive collectivism [11]. Now, we were all assured that the Western style liberal democracy had finally won.

Alongside the epochal change in the political world, the world of communication technology was going through a radical transformation as the Internet revolution picked up speed. Today, it is hard to imagine a world without connectivity. Yet, it was only on October 24, 1995, the Federal Networking Council (FNC) unanimously passed a resolution defining the term *Internet* [12]. In this world without borders, it was commonly believed that people would finally be able to receive and transmit information unfetter by the intermediaries like governments or commercially motivated news channels. The Internet connectivity blossomed at a rate unparalleled in human history. Currently there are over 3 billion users spread in every corner of the world [13]. Today, more than 40% of the world population is connected by the Internet [14], and is expected to reach 71% by 2019 [15]. It is indeed astonishing to realize that Facebook is only about a decade old and Twitter is about eight. Yet, their role in political mobilization is truly astounding. For instance, careful research has shown the undeniable role of social media in bringing about the so-called "Arab Spring [16]."

The dual developments in the end of Cold War and the spread of global trade, commerce, migration, and free flow of information were widely celebrated as the keys to global peace and prosperity. As columnist Robert Samuelson puts it:

"The general idea was that, as countries traded with each other, their populations would become richer -- in poor countries, middle classes would emerge -- and nations' interests would become intertwined. The threat of major wars would recede, because middle-class societies prefer commerce to conflict. The new world order would have tensions and feuds; but they would be manageable precisely because they occurred in a context of shared interests [17]."

The Authoritarian World

No sooner than the world wildly welcomed the new millennium, we woke up to the horrifying shock of the 9/11 attacks. Since then, the US has been in wars in many parts of the Arab/Islamic world. A broad Civil War has broken out between the Shia and the Sunni. As al-Qaeda has taken bit of a backseat, a far more brutal ISIS has continued on its own war of shock and awe directed at every sensibility of the civilized world.

There seems to be a global rise in the number of countries that are giving disproportionate support to demagogues and authoritarian rulers. In China, Xi Jinping is consolidating power at an increasing rate. Recent election in the Philippines saw the election of Rodrigo Duterte -- a man who freely admits killing people and openly advocates extra judicial killings of drug lords and criminals -- as the President of the country by a huge margin [18]. With the possible exception of India and South Korea, strongmen, coming through "democratic" processes, are ruling nearly the entire Asian region showing little or no adherence to the values of liberal democracy. So are the former Soviet Republics in Central and Eastern Europe. A plurality of Russians is comfortable electing and re-electing Vladimir Putin rotating between Presidency and Prime Minister-ship. People, who risked so much to defect to the West, are electing to be ruled by dictators and former Communist Party bosses. In Israel, the rise of the rightwing Likud Party and its increasingly authoritarian partners are being voted in power. The rule of the authoritarian and demagogic Robert Mugabe goes on unimpeded in Zimbabwe. The rest of the continent, with a few exceptions, has seems to have chosen the same path. In Latin America, populism built by the electoral successes of Hugo Chavez and his successor NicolásMaduroin Venezuela spread in the neighboring Ecuador and Bolivia and also in other

countries [19]. Even in Western Europe, long a bastion of democracy the far right authoritarians are in ascendance. In France, Jean-Marie Le Pen of Front National won in the first round of the Presidential election. We have seen unprecedented gains for the rabidly anti-immigrant, LijstPim Fortuyn party in the Netherlands, formed only three months prior to the elections, becoming the second largest political party in the country. Similar gains have been noted for the People's Party in Switzerland and Denmark, the Austrian Freedom Party, the Swedish Democrats. Drawing data from Parl Gov.data, Pippa Norris has shown that the percentage of votes cast for authoritarian candidates in 34 OECD countries in the past five years has doubled since the 1970s and 80s [20]. Finally, at the time of writing this essay, in the United States we are witnessing an upsurge of authoritarian preferences, culminating into the election of Donald Trump as the presumptive nominee of the Republican Party. I argue that this wave of authoritarian preferences is the result of three broad and interconnected sources of anxiety stemming from economic structural change, demographic and cultural change, and perceived security concerns. I argue that all three of these are interconnected through the perception of losing control. Globalization and increased economic relations have weakened nation states, one of the most potent sources of collective identity. Add to this the daily dose of stories of random atrocities coming from all over the world, which has created an environment of fear and suspicion idea for the growth of authoritarianism.

Economic structural change

Till the19th century the Mercantilist philosophy of selling products abroad for gold and restricting import ran supreme among the policy makers and common people alike. In 1817 David Ricardo shook up the prevailing wisdom by arguing the virtues of comparative advantage. According to his theory, each country should specialize in producing commodities that it can manufacture with the greatest efficiency and then get the maximum benefits by trading these goods freely with others. This law of comparative advantage has been one of the few rules of economics that its practitioners can more or less agree upon. The advent of communication and transportation technologies opened up the floodgates of trade. The World Trade Organization data show that the volume of global trade increased nearly five folds in current dollars between 1993 and 2014 [21]. The data also show that this is an increasing trend. As link to the world trade lifted millions, particularly in China and India, from abject poverty into the middle class and significantly reduced consumer prices in the OECD countries, the richer nations went through a painful restructuring where good paying manufacturing jobs, secured by strong labor unions dried up. These were substituted by low paying service jobs with little or no job security. How the character of this country has changed can be understood when we look at the decennial census records. In 1940, 23 percent of the population was employed in the manufacturing sector. This number dwindled to only about 10 percent in 2010. This disappearance of manufacturing jobs was filled by service sector jobs, which registered an increase from 19 percent to 48 percent during the same period [22]. This change in employment structure affected hard, especially those with lower levels of academic achievements.

Since this trend is paralleled by the economic advantages of those with higher education and select few with entrepreneurial sprits, it deepened income inequality not only among nations but also within nation's leading to the erosion the middle class. Millennia ago, Aristotle, looking for causes of political upheavals identified the middle class as the center pillar that holds up the big tent of a stable society. When the middle class is weakened and the society is divided into two extreme classes, he foresaw crime and revolution [23]. The current data, coming in various forms, clearly demonstrate the steady erosion of the middle class in the United States and elsewhere. Thus, taking a different angle, Sharma, examined the rise of billionaires in the world between the years 2009 and 2014. In every country, the number of these super-wealthy has registered a sharp increase. Among all the countries, however, the US has registered by far the largest increase from 1,011 to1, 826, an eye-popping 80% jump during this 5 years period [24].

Opinion polls, published in Brookings Institute Report further emphasize the feeling of despondence among the poor, working class whites, who see their future in the bleakest possible terms on a scale of 0 – 10 [25,26]. Although not exclusively, these disaffected group of people forms the bedrock of Trump's support base. No wonder, this structural change and the resulting concentration of income is sowing deep economic anxiety among people, clearing the way for protectionist ideologies all over the world.

Demographic and Cultural Anxiety

Migrations of people and culture have shaped humanity at least since the Cro-Magnons showed up at the cave doors of the Neanderthals. There is no recorded history of how the ancients behaved at the sight of the newcomers. However, historically the evidence is not pretty. In the US, anti-immigrant sentiments gave birth to virulent anti-immigrant parties, such as the "Know Nothing" party. Today, as the world becomes more densely populated, each conflict sends untold thousands of asylum seekers across the border. Add to this, the steady stream of economic refugees who flood the large cities of the world from the impoverished parts of the world seeking financial security for themselves and their families. Thus, migration is changing the demographic and cultural landscape of the world at an ever-increasing rate. In the 1950s census, 89.8 percent of the US population was classified as "whites." In 2010, this number had reduced to 72.4 percent. This pace of demographic shift is projected to accelerate in the coming decades and, by 2050, the whites are likely to lose their majority status. Similarly, in France in the year 2000, 84.9% of the population was born of both French parents; by 2010 the percentage of this cohort had reduced to 80.1% [27]. This pattern is evident in nearly every single Western nation [28].

The sight of mass suffering creates a heart-wrenching dilemma in countries all over the world. As a result, natural human empathy battles with the fear of not only welcoming strangers in our midst but also the prospect of losing our own

national and cultural identities. As some strive to open the doors to the refugees others proclaim to keep them firmly shut. Research in social psychology is unequivocal in demonstrating the anxiety people feel about the actual or imaginary prospect of losing their dominant majority status even in a laboratory setup [29]. This fear of the outsiders, however, does not get distributed randomly throughout the population. Those who are protected by their wealth, education, and specialized skills feel secured enough tend to cast a benign eye to the newcomers. In contrast, among those who already feel vulnerable see them as sources of potential competition. Many political leaders exploit this deep-seated anxiety and use it effectively to gain power.

Security Anxiety

Finally, the world is being roiled by news of random violence coming from nearly every corner of the earth. Terrorism has been around as long as we have organized society. The Jewish historian of antiquity narrates the story of the Sicarii who would assassinate isolated Roman soldiers or the Jewish Priests of the temple in Jerusalem who had collaborated with the occupying forces [30]. Yet, for the most part these attacks -- from the Sicarii to the assassination of Arch Duke Ferdinand of Austria – took place out of sight of most people. Today, every attack is carried out in the most sensational way, and is played over and over on our television and computer screens [31]. Since terrorism, by definition is a mixture of violence with theater [32], where the perpetrators play for the most macabre, adds to our sense of shared insecurity like nothing before. Furthermore, because acts of violence takes place in the most unexpected places rather than in far away battlefields, it creates stress in general public. In the laboratory if mice get a mild (yet unpleasant) electric shock if they go to one particular corner, they learn to avoid it and show normal behavioral pattern. However, if they receive shocks at random intervals and at random places, becoming confused and disoriented, they start exhibiting behavior typical of being under extreme stress. Current neurological research is establishing connection between reports of terrorism and stress that we all feel [33]. There are reasons to believe that the constant news of violence from beheadings to sexual enslavement of young girls replicate the stressful condition, where we seek quick remedies from it and seek it out among those who promise simple, decisive actions against the offenders [34].

Specifically, the new digital age and 24-hour news cycle create a condition where fear can feed on itself. These two achievements of modern science have created a greater opportunity for people to become self-radicalized.

A recent in-depth RAND Europe report studied the process of radicalization through the Internet of 17 individuals who took part in terrorist activities [35]. By studying this report and a number of others, we can came to the following conclusions:

The Internet creates more opportunities to become radicalized by allowing people to establish virtual network of like-minded people regardless of geographical distances [36]. In these virtual communities, participants develop theirown echo chambers, complete with social hierarchy, nodal points, where some of them accumulate social capital to become leaders within the community [37]. The central message of some of thesevirtual communities is that their religion, culture, or ethnicity is facing an existential threat, the only solution of which is to rise up in violent retribution against the "enemy." The spread of these messages help fuel the fire of hatred for violent groups, spanning the entire spectrum from religious fanatics to right wing extremists.

On the other side of the dynamic interaction are the forces that build up within the target societies as a result of terrorist attacks or the threats there of. These force prompt nations to overreact to the actual threat, thereby creating conditions, which perpetuate the cycle of violence. After all, as Schmid and de Graaf, in their seminal study pointed out that in the final analysis, terrorism is but a means of communication; through their brazen acts of propaganda by deed, a dissident group not only sends a message to its client community but also directs a clear signal to the target communities about its destructive intentions [38]. Since the publication of Schmid and de Graaf, a growing number of studies have examined the interpretation of terrorism as communication [39-42]. However, with the exception of a few [43,44], most of these studies concentrate on the first half of the communication: terrorist group's impact on the community it claims to represent. In a later study, Nacos, Bloch-Elkon, and Shapiro examined more carefully the impact of terrorism on the target nation's reaction [45]. In their empirical work, they show that it is not the volume of media coverage that generate public concern about terrorism, rather it is the pronouncements of the political leaders that make the general public fearful. The political leaders, by their overstated rhetoric help promote a "culture of hysteria [46]." This exaggerated fear causes many to seek simple and "common sense" solutions promoted by the demagogues. These so-called solutions, however, are often inimical to the democratic principles and processes. Frustrated, the lands of the fearful turn toward authoritarian leaders.

Quo Vadis, World? The Future direction

To sum up, the broad global trends are adding stress to our lives, deepening a loss of national sovereignty, personal control over our destiny, and an overall sense of confusion and insecurity. These trends are being reinforced by our proclivity for avoiding looking for fuller answers to the complex problems, but seeking out simple solutions within the silos of like-minded individuals. This creation of echo chambers is reinforcing our prejudices and creating a sharply divided world filled with paranoia, xenophobia, and intolerance. These conditions make it rife for the rise of demagogues and tyrants who can provide simple answers that can easily mobilize people, just like they did in the post WWI Europe.

We are beginning to understand the complex dynamics that propel the world toward conflict and political disaster. The rise of Donald Trump has stumped the pundits and the pedestrians alike, where the traditional ideological imperatives of conservatism were tossed aside like worn out clothes. Trump, in his march toward a decisive victory, drew support from the so-called "country club" Republicans, the religious "value voters" and the "small government" Libertarian-leaning voting blocks. A number of recent studies showed that the

common factor uniting these diverse groups was a palpable fear of the "others." For instance, an exit poll showed during the South Carolina primary that 47% of the Trump voters supported his call of deporting 11 million undocumented immigrants [47]. Trump also overwhelmingly won among those supported his call for banning Muslims from entering the country. A New York Times article thus concluded:

"A new set of public opinion survey results asking atypical but timely questions has shed some light on the Trump coalition. The results suggest how Mr. Trump has upended the contemporary divide in the party and built a significant part of his coalition of voters on people who are responsive to religious, social and racial intolerance."

A number of other polls have confirmed the more intolerant attitude toward minorities among the Trump voters [48]. Given the fact that none of the broad forces, that are giving rise to anxiety in the world is likely to subside anytime soon, the wave of authoritarianism is likely continue on. As a result, we can anticipate that the world is entering an era of intolerance and mutual suspicion [49]. The natural outcome of this is the rise of hyper nationalism that transcends the boundaries of traditional ideologies [50].

No force, however strong, remains unchallenged. Similar to the Newtonian third law of motion, it creates a countervailing force. This is the Hegelian dialectical process by which the world evolves. There are forces globally that are lining up against authoritarianism, which include push backs from those who are opposed to descent into darkness. Regardless of counter-ideologies, it is important to remember that while the rise of intolerance and xenophobia is deplorable, the factors that are giving rise to these sentiments are based on reality. Thanks to the sharp turns in global political scenes, we are witnessing a dialog on income inequality, job opportunities and structural realignments, finding solutions of which can lead to a more peaceful world. If that happens, the rise of authoritarianism will be remembered as a cry for help and not a call for destruction of democratic values.

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