

Progress as a Trait of a Nation's Identity – The US Perspective

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I America's Political DNA

Historically, the US has been optimistic and forward-looking. Today, after the four years' descent into "American carnage" there is hope – and an attempt to recover some of the old historical outlook. But fundamentally, the venture will be doomed if it is treated as an American venture alone. The world will need to look elsewhere. The sun is setting, as it always does, in the west.

The idea of progress is at the core of America's political DNA. Alexander Hamilton's Federalist No. 9, when contemplating the possibility of establishing Confederate Republics, argues that his compatriots had reinvented politics. Previous regimes had been destined to instability and failure. But modern innovations could succeed where ancient republics had succumbed to anarchy or tyranny: "The science of politics, however, like most other sciences, has received great improvement." Walt Whitman, the national poet, the equivalent of Shakespeare or Goethe, explained: "America demands a poetry that is bold, modern, and all-surrounding and kosmical, as she is herself. It must in no respect ignore science or the modern, but inspire itself with science and the modern." The greatest twentieth-century American journalist, Walter Lippmann, in 1961 could still write: "The bond of American union has not been piety and reverence for the past but a conviction of purpose and of the destiny it would bring for posterity. America has always been not only a country but a dream. There has always been a general and unquestioned belief that here on this soil there would be demonstrated to mankind the blessings of freedom: as the shackles and servitudes of the past were put away, there would arise a great and glorious society."¹ Lippmann, writing at the beginning of the Kennedy administration, was facing a paradox, of which he was already well aware. As the country moved to global preeminence in the mid-twentieth century, the confidence would endure a generation, until the 1960s: and then a widespread skepticism or revulsion against progress set in.

I grew up (in Britain) with an impression of America shaped by pictures of wide blue skies, space rockets, the Boeing 707, large dams, interstate highways, and convertible cars with cool tail fins. But in my teens the images were completely different: race riots in Newark, napalmed children in Vietnam, gasoline shortages, and the uncanny visage of Richard Nixon at Disney World saying "Well, I am not a crook."

There's no need to be subjective about this though. We can see the move of sentiment in the shifts of the simple vocabulary Americans have used to describe their view of the world. Compare the appearance of the words "progress" and "crisis" in books of different languages (Figs 1-4). Americans have always used the word "progress" more frequently than "crisis," unlike twentieth-century Germans. But from 1967, the use of "progress" fell off swiftly, while "crisis" rose (and "progress" in French or German also indicate increasing disapprobation after 1967, though the French decline started earlier). After 1966, Americans in print started to use the phrase "progress is good" much less frequently.

¹ Walter Lippmann. National Purpose. In: American Principles and Issues: The National Purpose. Oscar Handlin (ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961, p.471.

Google N-Gram Word Frequency in Printed Books 1800-2018



Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer.

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In the 1970s, the situation grew much worse. Vietnam, the gasoline shortages, Watergate, stagflation amounted to a national loss of faith. In a moment of profound introspection, President Jimmy Carter cancelled his Independence Day speech in 1979, and spent ten days in Camp David listening to the American people. He then gave a gloomy speech, known for ever as “crisis of confidence” or “malaise” (Carter did not actually use that word). The crisis was striking “at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation. The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America.”² America lost its innocence, its belief in progress.

There was a pincer movement against optimism in the late twentieth century, born of much deeper trends than the chances of particular personalities and politics. On one side, concern with the limits of growth, revulsion against materialism and consumerism, a rejection of capitalist prosperity. And on the other side, a newly dynamized Christian evangelical stream with a bleak millenarian content and a catastrophist obsession with the end of times – or as they frequently styled it, the rapture. Catastrophism thus had diverse roots, and it was the interplay of dismal visions that generated the

² Carter, Jimmy. Crisis of Confidence. Televised speech, July 15, 1979.

new national mood. The individualism which once projected American optimism has now turned into a self-obsession and selfishness, in which a substantial minority of Americans (around a third) for instance reject the idea of getting vaccinated because they think that they – as individuals – don't need that protection: they don't appear to think of their fellow citizens.

II The Eyes of All People Are upon Us

It is worth tracing the responses to the new American malaise through presidential speeches. Ronald Reagan tried to reimagine or reinvent American purpose, and consistently and systematically used two phrases from John Winthrop's "lay sermon" of 1630, "we shall be as a city upon a hill; the eyes of all people are upon us." These words of early America offered a way of building a new national sentiment – a vision of progress through the eyes of nostalgia. Winthrop, a prosperous Puritan lawyer and merchant, drew the document up as he prepared to lead the victims of English religious persecution to a new life in Massachusetts on the rather fragile ship "Arabella." His words eventually became the foundation stone for a new version of American exceptionalism.

Winthrop had titled his tract "A Model of Charity": the fundamental message was that the rule of Christian love and religiously driven mutual obligation should take precedence above economic considerations when the public wellbeing was at risk. Otherwise the risk was the collapse of hope and public humiliation. "So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world." And finally, "if our hearts shall turn away so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced and worship other Gods, our pleasures, and profits, and serve them, it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it."³ Reagan had originally emphasized the grim warning inherent in the "story and byword," the consequence of dealing falsely with our God, but after 1981 largely dropped that part of the Winthrop message.⁴ In fact, as used by Reagan, and countless other political speakers at festive and commemorative events since the 1980s, the warnings were ignored, and only the triumphalist part of the "city on the hill" (and often with the perhaps inappropriate addition of "shining") was deployed in the rhetoric of America's civil religion.

III Experts and Technocrats

One of the features of the traditional or old American belief in progress was a willingness to trust government to technocrats. The California engineer William H. Smyth coined the word "technocracy" in 1919 to describe "the rule of the people made effective through the agency of their servants, the scientists and engineers." The concern with technocracy as a solution to organizational problems was pushed further during the Second World War. The main focus of that new development was the United States, and the new approach to science and scientific knowledge underpinned the spectacular strength and international dominance of the US economy in the postwar period. The Manhattan Project – which developed the atomic bomb – had a research budget that was larger in 1944 and 1945 than that of the entire Department of Defense. It introduced a new vision of "big science." The Office of Scientific Research and Development of Vannevar Bush laid a basis for public-private cooperation. Bush's 1945 report, "Science, the Endless Frontier," set out a bold vision: "Without scientific progress no amount of achievement in other directions can

³ Rodgers, Daniel T. *As a City on a Hill: The Story of America's Most Famous Lay Sermon*. Princeton University Press, 2018, pp. 307-308.

⁴ Rodgers (p. 243) carefully calculates that in more than 30 references after 1981, Reagan only used the "byword" part twice.

insure our health, prosperity, and security as a nation in the modern world.” The report laid out in a stunning way – that later generated some pushback from practitioners – how “basic research is the pacemaker of technological progress.”⁵ Inventiveness will produce solutions.

But then Vietnam destroyed confidence in military or strategic technocrats, the Global Financial Crisis destroyed faith in economic technocrats, and COVID produced a backlash against science. Epidemiologists, vaccine scientists, public health experts: could they be trusted. The diversity of epidemiological models and their conflicting results prompted popular confusion and uncertainty. One review of the major models concluded: “the language of these papers suggests a degree of certainty that is simply not justified. Even if the parameter values are representative of a wide range of cases within the context of the given model, none of these authors attempts to quantify uncertainty about the validity of their broader modeling choices.”⁶ Uncertainty and complexity – which might be thought to produce a greater demand for science and expertise – instead produced a loss of hope and purpose, and a pervasive skepticism.

It is easy to see why periodic revolts against technocrats and experts take place. These people are making decisions on the basis of prognoses that are problematic and uncertain: those prognoses often are revealed after the passage of time – sometimes even quickly – to be flawed. Putting together micro analyses in a context which also generates a macro vision is an exercise in vulnerability because of the number of simplifying assumptions that are required. In addition, the technocrats have deliberately cut themselves off from the social environment which gave them meaning. Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline in the scientific journal “Astronautics” in 1960 coined a new term, “cyborg”; “I thought it would be good to have a new concept, a concept of persons who can free themselves from the constraints of the environment to the extent that they wished.” That was a cybernetic organism or cyborg.⁷ But it is not human.

The need for techniques to manage complexity generally arises out of a specific challenge – the classic one is military conflict, and it is indeed the great and transformative conflicts of the Civil War that pushed the idea of progress in America most dramatically (see Figures “Google N-Gram Word Frequency in Printed Books 1800-2018”). But technocrats become cyborgs and generate discontent when societies no longer muster the sense of overall purpose that gave the abdication of power its original launching pad.

⁵ <https://www.nsf.gov/od/lpa/nsf50/vbush1945.htm#ch1.3>, [retrieved July 20, 2021]; for the pushback see Stokes, Donald E. *Pasteur’s Quadrant: Basic Science and Technological Innovation*. Washington: Brookings, 1997.

⁶ Avery, Christopher et. al. *Policy Implications of Models of the Spread of Coronavirus: Perspectives and Opportunities for Economists*. In: NBER Working Paper No. 27007, April 2020.

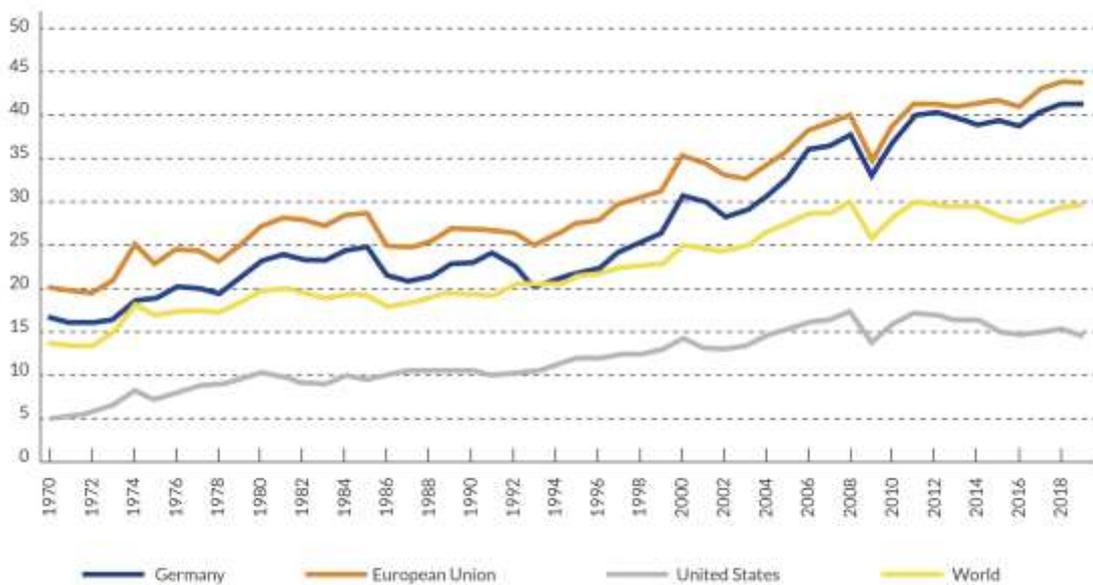
⁷ Gray, Chris Hables (ed.), Steven Mentor and Heidi Figueroa-Sarriera. *The Cyborg Handbook*. London: Routledge, 1995, p. 47; Gerschlager, Caroline (ed.). *Expanding the Economic Concept of Exchange: Deception, Self-Deception and Illusions*. New York: Springer Science + Business Media, 2001, p. 107.

IV Engagement with the World

It would be wrong to believe, as some influential thinkers in China do, that the US is in a terminal decline. It is still a highly innovative and inventive society. But American engagement with the world has been consistently on the retreat for some time, since the 2008 financial crisis. The process of disengagement is visible in politics (since 2000) as well as in economics (largely since 2008). Victoria Nuland, likely to be Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs in the Biden administration, complained how “Washington and its allies had forgotten the statecraft that won the Cold War.” Resignation set in, and “Americans have lost confidence in their own ability to change the game.”⁸

The economic phenomenon of disengagement is most obvious in trade, where since 2008 US trade has been exporting. But going back to the 1970s, the world’s share of trade relative to that of the US was consistently rising (see Figure “Imports of Goods and Services as Share of GDP”).

Imports of Goods and Services as Share of GDP



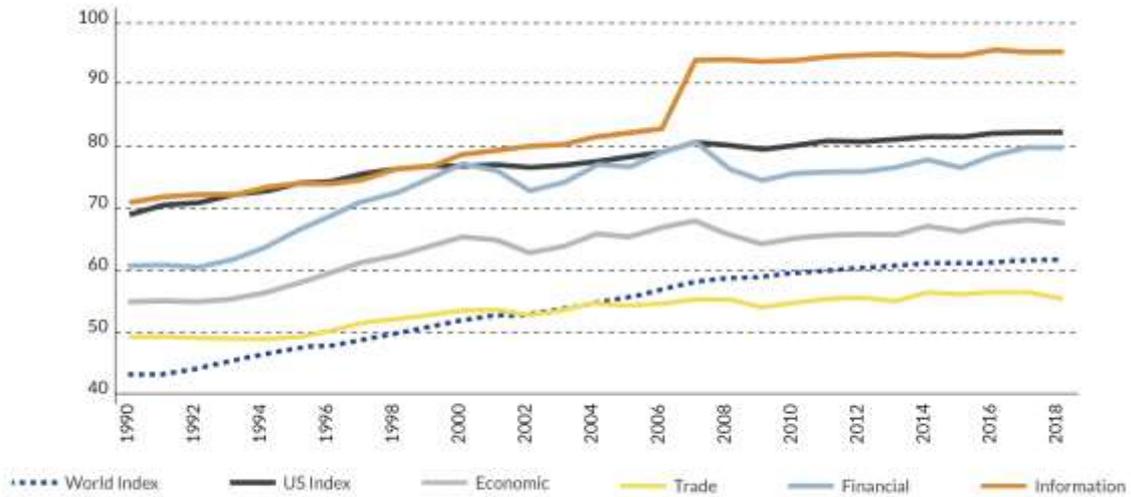
Source: World Bank data.

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We can see the same result in other measures of globalization, including the most wide-ranging of the measures available, the KOF index. Only in information openness has the US substantially globalized in the past twelve years (see Figure “US Globalization”).

⁸ Nuland, Victoria. Pinning down Putin: How a Confident America Should Deal with Russia. In: Foreign Affairs, July/August 2020, p. 93.

US Globalization (KOF Index)

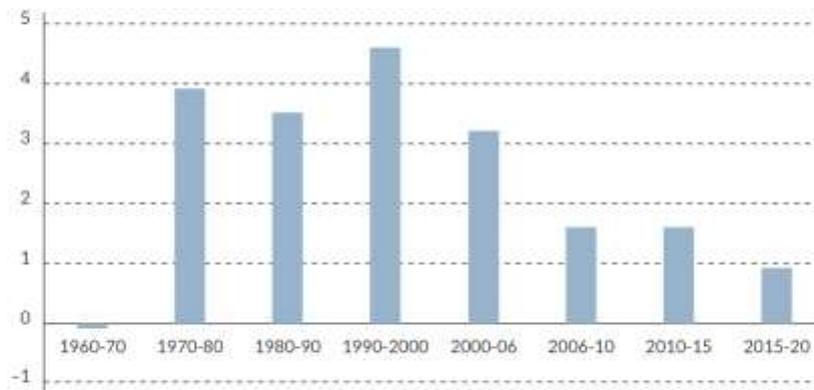


Source: KOF Index
<https://kof.ethz.ch/en/forecasts-and-indicators/indicators/kof-globalisation-index.html>

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In the past, the dynamism of the US relied on immigration: that was the great nineteenth-century model. But the rate of growth of the immigrant population has been falling for several decades (see Figure “Average Annual Growth in US Immigrant Population”).

Average Annual Growth in US Immigrant Population
 In Percent



Source: US Census Bureau.

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The US is becoming less dynamic and open, and also more introspective, obsessed with culture wars, and more concerned with the historic injustices (mostly racial and connected with the legacy of slavery) that always marred the exceptionalist American promise of progress.

Can there be a turning back to the world? One of the perennial American themes is the search for a (secular) redeemer, a hero who will reinterpret, remake and refound the American vision. In 1961, Lippmann explained, “We are now waiting to be shown the way into the future. We are waiting for another innovator in the line of the two Roosevelts and Wilson.”⁹ We are still waiting, and the reception of Biden – the enormous relief after the bleak Trump years – reinvigorates the hope.

The new US administration has indeed announced a firm commitment to revive the principles of multilateralism. On January 25, 2021, five days after his inauguration, President Joseph Biden tweeted, “I spoke today with German Chancellor Merkel, conveying my commitment to multilateralism, the transatlantic alliance, and close coordination with allies on the range of global challenges from COVID-19 and climate change to China and Russia.”¹⁰ The most spectacular U-turn has been on climate policy, and reengagement with the Paris climate agreement.

However, much of the rhetoric, and the apparent policy stance, on China remains unchanged from the Trump era, and some analysts even think of it as a “copy and paste exercise.” For the moment, Biden just says that he needs to have time to rebuild the US economy before he can turn to the trade concerns. Naturally, rebuilding the US economy is not something that can be achieved overnight. Katherine Tai, the US Trade Representative, explained to the National Foreign Trade Council that Biden intended to “implement a worker-centered trade policy. What it means in practice is that US trade policy must benefit regular Americans, communities and workers. And that starts with recognizing that people are not just consumers. They are also workers and wage earners.”¹¹

The trade stance is likely to spill over into climate negotiations, where engagement with China is especially vital. Biden opened the climate summit in April by emphasizing the priority of jobs: “We are here at this summit to discuss how each of us, each country, can set higher climate ambitions that will in turn create good-paying jobs.”¹²

Special envoy John Kerry announced – in an apparent return to American optimism - that “We are the country that went to the moon. We didn’t know how we were going to get there when President Kennedy announced the goal, but we did it.”¹³ The statement indicates the contours of the American approach – to rely on green technologies, hydrogen fuels, batteries, carbon capture – but without much attention to the creation of incentives that will modify behavior. A carbon tax is a political impossibility in the US, because of the way its effects would fall disproportionately on middle America, while sparing the urban coastal elites who do not depend so much on automobiles. The alternative, carbon pricing through ETS – the well-developed system in the EU – has been applied in California, but elsewhere holds little appeal. There is thus still a central mystery on how the US will actually implement very ambitious targets. The central promise on clean energy R&D is to invest \$35 billion over seven years “in the full range of solutions needed to achieve technology breakthroughs that address the climate crisis and position America as the global leader in clean

⁹ Lippmann, p. 472.

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/potus/status/1353879328203943936?lang=en>, [retrieved July 20, 2021].

¹¹ Hayashi, Yuka. Biden Trade Policy to Center on Workers, USTR Nominee Says: Katherine Tai Expects New Administration to Confront China and Enforce U.S.-Mexico-Canada Pact. In: Wall Street Journal, Jan. 12, 2021.

¹² Hook, Leslie, Camilla Hodgson and Christian Shepherd. US Aims to Lead by Example as Countries Pledge Climate Action: Summit Day 1: Biden Says Cutting Emissions Will Boost Jobs and China’s Xi Promises to ‘Phase Down’ Coal. In: Financial Times, April 22, 2021.

¹³ Khan, Mehreen, Leslie Hook, Victor Mallet and Katrina Manson. New US Climate Strategy Opens up Old Faultlines with Europe: Biden’s Environmental Comeback Only Masks Divergent Approaches Between the Two Economic Powerhouses. In: Financial Times, April 23, 2021.

energy technology and clean energy jobs.” \$5 billion a year: that’s really small change. It can’t meet the messianic expectation.

The centrality of the US to everyone else’s discussions of global governance may look to some optimists in Washington as if it will inevitably persist, because the US provides two common goods that everyone still, for the moment, needs: the English language as a common medium of expression, and the American dollar as a common medium of exchange. Will they endure even after the relative decline of America’s share in the world economy, the rise of big new economic powers, the fragility of the international order, and the increased push (even with the new administration) to disengage from the world?

Both language and dollar are now under threat. The past years have seen enormous advances in automatic translation. For a long time, the world was dependent on just a few mechanisms in which computer learning helps to produce better translations. The preeminence of Google, and Google translate, in this domain ensured that for instance the EU needed to develop its own automatic translation service for its internal and external documents. The rapidity of development of AI means that these monopolies are breaking down, and that much superior products to those of Google or Microsoft are now available at low prices. Peoples across the world will be able to communicate without the necessary intermediation of the language of Shakespeare.

And money as a translator of wants and needs? The long preeminence of the dollar is under challenge, but not primarily from other currencies – though both the euro and the renminbi are sometimes presented as claimants to the throne of the dollar. The national era in money was drawing to a close at the same time as a technological revolution gave rise to radically new methods of addressing the problem of a cross-border language or memory. This insight offers a key to understanding financial evolution after the crisis of 2007-8. One consequence is the unbundling of the apparently solid historical link between money and monetary stability and government fiscal management. Experiments to tackle the economic fallout from COVID through large central bank stimulus programs, promised for long time periods, risk a new vulnerability and an oscillation between deflationary and inflationary dangers. It is likely that the world will demand a new monetary revolution.

As money is unbundled into different functions, with new platforms of exchange, where is innovation most likely to occur? One prediction would be that the innovation would occur where states are weak and not trusted, and consequently state promises are not seen as highly credible. In those cases, it is much more attractive, and much more urgent, to unbundle fiscal and monetary action. By such criteria, the revolution is likely to occur fastest in quite poor countries – in Africa, or in former Soviet Republics. The new technical developments offer a new possibility of grasping the opportunity of leapfrogging history, moving from poverty and institutional underdevelopment to institutional complexity and the chance of innovation and prosperity.

Another future scenario looks at already well-developed industrial societies. It is in that environment where society is most divided into communities of interest who do not need to exchange much across groups, and perhaps do not want to associate with groups that have different social or cultural values. In highly modernized and individualized societies, where the promise of social cohesion means less, being able to separate peacefully into different groups may become a way of avoiding clashes and conflict. Currencies will establish communities, bound together by exchanges of information. We will unbundle different aspects of our lives: thus Starbucks cards might be used as an international currency for luxury food products, or Apple music or Spotify plans/memberships for buying or selling sounds. But the new digital eco-systems might be

rebundled in new ways: excessive consumption of coffee or of sugars, for example, might be linked to alerts to medical service providers. And the willingness to use smart currencies might be linked to reduced health and life insurance premia (while correspondingly, an unwillingness would be penalized through higher prices).

The circumstances that led to the long period of dollar hegemony are now changing. COVID is accelerating that development – as in many other areas of life. It is making for more digital globalization, and less actual globalization, less movement of people and of goods. There is more information flowing – this is the ultimate weightless economy or weightless globalization.

The dollar's centrality was prompted by the demand for a deep and liquid safe asset; and that centrality will only disappear when alternative safe assets emerge, backed in some cases by non-state providers. In the past, alternative safe assets dominated – when precious metals were the basis for currency issue. Even in the late twentieth century, nostalgic commentators looked back to that era. The alternative is to think of currency as having a real collateral – in this particular case, information generated by the participants in a wide variety of overlapping communities.

V The Way Forward: The Eyes of All People

In the end, there won't be one language or one currency on the throne. The world will have to solve its problems without the United States, and reinvent multilateralism substantially on its own. There is thus a premium on thinking about the way the world can be coordinated. What sort of institutions will hold this new world together? "Globalists" (a phrase originally popularized by Walter Lippmann) were attacked for trying to institute world government: but that was always a vain and foolish dream. It would fail very quickly in any attempt at social or cultural translation. Instead, there is a need – and the technical possibility – of connecting all kinds of local communities.

There won't be central planning on any world scale. The best hope for getting coordinated action is to think of incentives – and the most powerful incentives are consistently delivered through price mechanisms. Prices create signals, to which behavior responds. If carbon products are to be used less, they need to become more expensive.

People will want to be sure that they are not unfairly being pushed into novel patterns of behavior. This is where price transparency – and information transparency, more generally – is vital.

There were three distinct ways in which multilateral governance institutions had operated in the long era of postwar stability. The first, and probably initially most attractive, but also most uncertain in terms of its legal status, is a judicial or quasi-judicial role in arbitrating disputes between countries. There are always cases that look as if they require arbitration: trade disputes, or – often associated with trade disputes – debates about whether currencies are unfairly valued so as to produce a subsidy for exporters. The new emphasis on sovereignty in the US, the UK, and elsewhere in Europe where "sovereignists" confront "globalists," pushes back against this type of arbitration.

The second style of multilateralism involves institutions acting as sources of private advice to governments on policy consistency and on the interplay between policy in one country and those in the rest of the world: explaining and analyzing feedbacks and spillovers and offering policy alternatives. The essence of this kind of advice is that it is private. It is like speaking with a priest in the confessional. The outcome may be that behavior or policy changes, but the outside world will not really understand the reason or the logic that compels better behavior.

The third is as a public persuader with a public mission. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown liked to use the phrase “ruthless truth-telling” or “speaking truth to power” with regard to the advice of multilateral institutions. There is an increasing recognition of the limits of secret diplomacy and behind-the-scenes advice. Societies cannot be moved unless there is a genuine consensus that they are moving in the right direction. The backlash against globalization is fed by a climate of suspicion: experts, economists, international institutions are not trusted.

The post-crisis world is one in which ever larger and more frequently updated amounts of data are available. In the past, we needed to wait for months or years before we could conclude accurate assessments of the volume of economic activity or of trade. Now real-time data on a much broader set of measurable outcomes is available, and a great deal of effort is devoted to coordinating the prompt release of data. Some of this data is managed by international institutions, but much is held elsewhere, by universities (Johns Hopkins in the case of COVID health data), individuals (as in Raj Chetty’s compilation of consumer data), companies (who keep it as a commercial secret), or governments (who try to suppress it when it is uncomfortable for them). The COVID crisis has shone a harsh light on the way in which health data, and health outcomes, are linked to many aspects of social and economic life. Its aftermath has also led to a politicization of other data – on the incidence of crime, and links between crime and other socio-economic data (income and ethnic identity). IT showed how data could tell us whether remedies or vaccines were effective – or quackeries (remdesivir versus hydroxychloroquine).

Information and its effective dissemination can assure that governments and communities, corporations and individuals, are held accountable: that they see the consequences of their actions, and that others see and react to them. The availability of data assures people that their actions have consequences; or as Winthrop put it in 1630, that the eyes of all people are upon us. This may be the only way we can return to the ideals of the original progressivist vision. Data and the translation of data into prices can provide Whitman’s “bold, modern, and all-surrounding and kosmical” vision: a poetry of observability.

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century struggles over socialism and capitalism were cast as fights over ownership of the means of production. We can now be much more specific about what that production involves, as we know more. The wider dissemination of data will be inherently controversial. Not least because it offers the public, the citizens, an element of control. They can ask: are governments doing well in promoting public goods? Are specific companies with substantial market power hurting and harming, or protecting and promoting the general welfare?

The old conflicts were cast as fights over ownership of the means of production. We can now be much more specific about what means of production means. We need a movement now for the ownership of data – analogous to early nineteenth-century workers’ demands to own their labor. Managing the supply of reliable and real-time information today opens up new possibilities for effective macro-economic global coordination, but also for increased democratic legitimacy. Information is a way of meeting the demand for the real engagement of citizens. More data, more freely available, would offer a basis for more informed political choice and for a new political economy of stability. The struggle of the twenty-first century will be over a new type of property: who controls your data, and how it is combined with that of others. How can data be shared for your benefit without compromising your interests, your individuality, and your concern for privacy? The American dream consisted of an unknown land; the world dream depends on knowing the land of data.

VI Summary

The US has historically been optimistic and forward looking.

The historic vision relied on visibility and transparency: “the eyes of all people are upon us.” The sense of acting in public generated accountability and responsibility.

From the late 1960s and the 1970s, American views of the future became bleaker, indeed frequently catastrophist, and Americans have become skeptical about technocrats: in military affairs, in economics, in health and environmental issues.

Since 2000, the US has disengaged from the world.

The centrality of the US is eroded because of technological challenges to what remains of the American special status: the role of the English language and the American dollar.

The debate about the future and how to manage uncertainty now relates above all to global public goods.

VII Recommendation

American optimism can only be resurrected on a global level, through radical improvements in data management, accessibility and accountability.

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