**Are Happy Endings Stories That Haven’t Ended Yet?**

**A Political Theory of Disjunctive Democracy**

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In North America, the universal purpose of the state is not yet firmly established … for a real state and a real government only arise when class distinctions are already present, when wealth and poverty are far advanced, and when … a large number of people can no longer satisfy their needs in the way to which they have been accustomed. …

The example of the United States … is frequently cited as an objection to the proposition that it is impossible … for a large state to have a liberal constitution. … But ...North America cannot yet be regarded as a fully developed and mature state, but merely as one which is still in the process of becoming.

G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* [1830], 1975, 168-9.

1. **The Disjunctive Cycle of Twentieth Century Life**

This essay addresses the fissures manifesting themselves in American society. Not very original, you say. Everyone is doing that now. However, my account of disjunction dates to something I published in the venerable Japanese monthly *Chuo-Koron* (Central Debates) in April 1986. In the same month I gave lectures on the topic in the red sofa filled room of the old Fudan University Law School in Shanghai.

The collapse or near collapse –take your pick--of the liberal-democratic consensus did not happen overnight. Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek spoke for many when they declared, "One thing seems certain, the Trump presidency has accelerated a crisis of authority that has been building for decades."[[1]](#footnote-2) There is at least an analytical choice to be made. Is this presidency a black swan event born of improbable contingencies? Or is there an historical model that describes the subterranean fissures in American democracy that led to polarization and disjunction? Novelty or continuity? Much is novel, indeed, unprecedented, so far in Trump 2.0.[[2]](#footnote-3) But let us make the case that disjunction had a history.

When we look back on those decades in which a crisis of authority had apparently been building, we find nearly the opposite story, namely, the remarkable thesis of Francis Fukuyama. In 1989, with victory over Soviet communism, America had brought the world to the "end of history." The struggle over forms of government and over the structure of global order had ended with a declared winner: the unified, stable, prosperous, democratic capitalist nation state exemplified by the United States.[[3]](#footnote-4) Fukuyama’s argument was an imaginative adaptation of Hegel which seemed right for the extraordinary events of 1989. His vision of the future had a good run. Now, however, as Stephen Holmes and Ivan Krastev succinctly put it, “Something deep has shifted in the global political architecture.”[[4]](#footnote-5) If I am right, the tectonic shift depended on fissures that were already there.

My initial argument went under the title *Amerika Sono Shikyoku Tairitsu no Kokei*” **[[5]](#footnote-6)** or **“**The Scene of America’s Four Corners of Conflict.” I might have led with more drama and called it “America, the Scene of a Potential Four Car Wreck,” which is what has in fact happened. Was I too cautious? In the Shanghai audience at the time was Wang Huning then a junior member of the Fudan Law Faculty, and later the Law School Dean. A few years later it almost seemed as if he had carried my “Four Corners” model to a logical conclusion—the four-car wreck—in a 1991 critique of the United States under the title “America Against America” or in another translation “America Opposed to America.” Wang Huning is now the longest serving member of the Chinese Politburo, and evidently China’s chief ideologist.[[6]](#footnote-7)

My argument for fissure did not necessarily imply fracture. Neither did it suggest a resolving reconciliation. The fissures were then less visible but nevertheless created barriers to easy communication among four opposed ideals of American commitment. They made reconciliation difficult. Four lodestars pointed in different directions and to different America’s. They were the consequences of four enveloping, long playing historical events. (1) The twentieth century witnessed the rise of the American Global State and with it the debate whether its inner workings were incongruent with the principles that framed the 18th century constitution. The latter was itself a combination of potentially clashing principles. (2) From the Progressive era on, the role of science in government created a complementary but rival source of governance. The Progressive technocracy, 1900-1960, lodged in universities and research centers, educated the civil service and was in effect if not in name a state like adjunct to democratic government. (3) The 1960s and after witnessed a kind of cultural revolution whose protagonists were innately suspicious of the framework institutions of the state and its science adjunct but, for strategic reasons, allied with one or the other. Succeeding these events in the late 1970s and 1980s, (4) a right leaning counter-reformation emerged to occupy positions once thought abandoned. Although opposed to cultural rivals on the left, they too were suspicious of state and science and had to figure out which framework institutions they could, for strategic reasons, tolerate. By the 1980s American democracy occupied a crossroads with signposts pointing in four directions. This was disjunctive democracy in the making. The Fukuyama thesis showed how the fissures that divided people could be successfully navigated, until of course, they stopped being navigable.

Fukuyama grounded his argument in the best possible case for the liberal democratic consensus. He ignored as noise hypocritical adhesion to it, the elusive differences between self-seeking and principled commitments, and the way in which ideals become corrupt covers for all sorts of other things. This paper makes the same assumptions. However distorted, manipulated, or corrupted the ideals of the four corners of loyalty might have become, this essay assumes there were four sets of values and principles at stake; and that within the limits of their partial incommensurability, they could be mutually communicated across partisan divides. A fragile premise.

Fukuyama had adopted Hegel’s theme of the end of history. I tracked another Hegelian motif (stated in the epigraph). A republican state has not become “fully developed and mature” until it is forced to navigate social fissures. This was the alternative to the story of the sun rising over a happily unified polity in its historically final form. The latter turned out to be a false dawn.

As the character played by Angela Jolie remarks in the remake of the film *Mr. and Mrs. Smith,* “happy endings are stories that haven’t ended yet.”

I.A Framework Institutions

In a science dependent civilization, the Federal government was allied with a para-state of research institutions, but as the McCarthy era demonstrated, they could regard each other as rivals and even enemies.

The principles shoring up federalist government and its science and technology adjunct were in tension. Cultural revolution and counter revolution also established tensions between their respective poles of commitment. Within each political culture one found people drawn to framework institutions. But there were so many anti-institutionalists among them that these cultures already deserved the name “populist.” This was a picture of potential fractures in two framework institutions and in two different political cultures that resulted in four corners of misalignment, each with adherents who maneuvered constantly to attract allies and isolate rivals in the other “corners.” See Figure 1. The partisans of each corner sometimes tried to invent congruence. Sometimes this succeeded as in the years after the fall of the wall.

The rise of a state fit for global hegemony was the final revenge of Alexander Hamilton. The Hamiltonian Federalist party, advocates of centralized government but victims of Jeffersonian democracy, had suddenly come back to life to supervise the economic and international arrangements of the dominant state in the post war world.

The increased capacity of the state ran the risk of obscuring older principles of constitutional restraint. The latter was founded on the separation of powers, checks and balances—the requirement that separated branches cooperate—and the Bill of Rights. The foundational premise was the legitimacy of plural groups in contest with one another. This was mixed government, a legacy of Aristotle, Polybius, and Machiavelli, but it was also the specific doctrine of Montesquieu who proclaimed that “it is necessary from the very nature of things that power should be a check to power.”[[7]](#footnote-8)

A distinctive feature of the 18th century Federal Constitution was the space its doctrine of rival powers opened for an ideal of mutuality among differently situated human beings.[[8]](#footnote-9) Not enough people were included in that space, however. The drama of the constitutional history was the cycle of courts opening (or sometimes blocking) their protections to categories of people outside privileged circles of rights-holders. Here we have the constitutional history of race, gender, religion, and employee-employer relations.

Rightly fearing Hobbes’ unified sovereign, Madison and Hamilton would not have appreciated Hobbes warning about divided powers: “Powers divided mutually destroy each other.”[[9]](#footnote-10) Yet this is what seems nearly to have occurred, a battle for primacy. Separation of powers constitutions are prone to three kinds of transformation or, depending on viewpoint, corruption. They could stand for the primacy of the legislative branch in which case it would presumably assume the form of parliamentary government.[[10]](#footnote-11) It could have stood for the primacy of judicial pronouncement as it seems to have done in both Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* and in the U.S. Supreme Court centered jurisprudence of the last half century.[[11]](#footnote-12) Or it could stand for the exclusivity of Presidential rule, “unitary executive,” so called. The “unitary executive” seems new, but it was a temptation even in the Progressive era. In 1900 Progressive historian Henry Jones Ford declared that *“the greatness of the presidency … was the work of the people breaking though the constitutional form.”*[[12]](#footnote-13)

It would be hard to find a more populist message. If the Trump insurgency does not crash and burn, Ford’s vision of the plebiscitary presidency could easily become its motto. There are rival portraits of democratic legitimacy. Conservative Harvard professor Harvey Mansfield’s *Taming of the Prince* was an erudite warning about the dangers of an empowered executive.[[13]](#footnote-14) Along with other arrangements, taming the presidency required Montesquieu’s celebrated “intermediary bodies,” which were the plural channels through which the commands of the prince had to flow. They both moderated and republicanized the power of monarchy.[[14]](#footnote-15) In the United a States the moderating and democratizing intermediary bodies are courts, congress, federalism, the press, and uniquely, the independence and power of research universities. These intermediary bodies will necessarily become the targets of any “*presidency …. breaking through the constitutional form*.”

We have an overly powerful Hamiltonian presidency, but elsewhere, the forces of Jeffersonian democracy have reclaimed the American polity. Albeit on different issues, both parties cheer states’ rights resistance to Federal initiatives. Even blue state liberals follow Jefferson in fighting off Hamiltonian great projects when they affect their own neighborhoods. Witness how unending litigation and regulatory barriers have defeated fast rail and housing construction. Does this stalemate empower Hamiltonian impulses?

The Progressive adjunct to the Republic was “the organization of specialized knowledge as a political force outside the party and electoral system.” It created a “’para-state’ of think tanks, universities, foundations, professional societies, and lobbying organizations.”[[15]](#footnote-16) The approach of the scientific expert to problem solving was in tension with the very idea of constitutional limits. The widespread accrediting of experts created a new style of governance, altered the prevailing patterns of authority, and established new possibilities for administrative control.[[16]](#footnote-17) For instance, the family as ministered to by legions of family experts became the scene of political struggle.[[17]](#footnote-18)

As the McCarthy era showed, the research university’s spirit of free inquiry could become suspect in the eyes of politicians and resentful majorities. In addition, critics on the left sometimes resisted the allure of the scientist and technocrat in government. The Progressive technocracy believed it was delivering science to a thankful humanity but stumbled over the fact that the delivery systems required overreaching authority, power, and bureaucracy.

For others (including this author) science was an adventure of the human spirit. It promised freedom and truth, not restraint. Its cognitive style, its confidence in inquiry, and its universalistic outlook, encouraged others to act upon wider themes which daily life may have ignored or repressed.[[18]](#footnote-19) The reader will note the moral ambiguities that emerge in this description of “principles” associated with the four contending focal points. These ambiguities point in various directions, malign or benign, rash or moderate, compatible or incongruent with each other. Understood as clusters of values that drew them apart, Federalists and Progressives were necessarily in conflict. Yet they were capable of collaboration. They transformed the framework institutions in post-war America.

I.B Popular and Populist Cultures Then and Now

British observer Margaret Canovan once concluded that the U.S. had always been "the most stridently populist of nations"—no doubt, a strange view on American exceptionalism.[[19]](#footnote-20) Nevertheless, apart from the scare quotes now attached to the term, populism seems more plausibly like the intuitive response to the fact that some democratic values cannot be well represented in framework democratic institutions. This may be the paradox of democratic rule, that equal citizens are ill-suited to the management of democratic institutions.

The tensions involved are abundantly present in Tocqueville’s text. Until recently it might have been difficult to really comprehend one of the central claims of *Democracy in America*, namely that “the legal spirit in the United States … serves as a counterweight to democracy.” The difficulty was that under the terms of the post-war liberal democratic consensus, there should have been no tension between democratic culture and the legal institutions that guaranteed it, and no way to separate the democrat in a culture of equality from his lawyer who defended its institutional prerogatives. They were on the same track and had the same goals. So why did Tocqueville think differently? Why did he pit institutional order against democracy as he did in the following passage:

Men who make a special study of the law take from their work certain habits of order, a taste for forms, a sort of instinctive love of regular sequences in ideas that naturally foster in them a strong opposition to the revolutionary spirit and the unthinking passions of democracy.

Tocqueville may have been ultimately wrong that lawyers represented institutional integrity, but he was clearly far removed from the assumptions of the now much lamented liberal democratic consensus and much closer to the view that the culture of democracy was naturally populist. Of course, he was writing in an era roughly analogous to our own, the era of the Jacksonian ascendency: “The more one reflects on what goes on in the United States,” he wrote, “the more convinced one becomes that the legal profession is the most powerful, if not the only, counterweight to democracy.”[[20]](#footnote-21)

A Chinese scholar recently argued that populist claims demonstrated the inefficacy of Western liberal democracy.[[21]](#footnote-22) A system that advocated equality for all gave citizens the unreasonable expectation that they would actually rule as opposed to lodging the occasional vote or protest. Since framework institutions cannot accommodate them in any practical sense, this arouses populist hostility directed at the elites who did rule. This was a defect in democratic order.

Noting the outrage of 19th century Jackson era partisans who had discovered that America was not as democratic as they had wanted to believe, Judith Shklar was far from sympathetic. The deceived shouted hypocrisy, but they should have known the simple facts. (1) “Consent is not easily won or preserved in any liberal democracy.” (2) “Elections are rituals in form and function.” (3) “The pretension was simple: the people ruled. In fact, they did not, they only played a role in elections.”[[22]](#footnote-23) Pierre Rosanvallon has argued for the permanence of populism in the 21st century.[[23]](#footnote-24) However, populism may have always been a part of the American experiment, at least in the form of people having vaguely anarchist antipathies regarding elite institutions which governed from afar.

Another fissure dividing popular cultures was a more familiar issue: a split between those whose primary loyalties were to already existing communities versus those comfortable with “experiments in living” as J.S. Mill put it in *On Liberty*, which was also, not coincidentally, a paean to individualism against traditional ways of life. These options—communities of collective adhesion or cultures of individual endeavor—pitted people against one another in complex ways, complex because people drifted from one camp to another depending on the issue.

1960’s left populism was arguably animated by a single principle, one uniquely strong in the U.S., the right, and sometimes the duty, of self-expression. This principle is egalitarian in the sense of being anti-hierarchical, for social hierarchies legitimate the self-expression of only the few. The Berkeley Free Speech Movement of 1964 what perhaps the iconic representation of these claims. Expressiveness became a weapon in struggles against hierarchy. Ironically, self-expression evolved, too, and became a market justifying ideology associated with entrepreneurial risk-taking and the breaking of old forms.

Critics thought that advocates of the expressive life had missed something, call it a center of gravity. In the 1980’s, right populists seized on an alternative principle, one grounded in the claims of religion, family, stable community, and legitimating history. Conservatives cried out against what they perceived as the flaunting of family values and the growing exploitation of lower middle-class whites and ethnics in favor of the empowerment of both those with less and those with more privilege than they.[[24]](#footnote-25) The left thought the right was motivated more by racial animosities and profit motive. Even where true, the expressive class ignored the issue of whether there was a communal legacy worth retrieving. This is a perfect example of incommensurable outlooks if, for some, such a legacy was only a nightmare well forgotten, and for others, a dream for them and their descendants.

If, however, in the twentieth century it was standardly (in the U.S.) the left that allied with J. S. Mill politics of self-declaration and a right that allied with inherited community, this is not always how left and right sorted themselves out. There is growing evidence today that the cultural left has renewed its earliest advocacy of community and shaken off the allure of individual self-expression. The former advocacy is in part a lament for an abandoned social democracy that had been taken for granted in the 1960s. For instance, Rawls’ 1971 *Theory of Justice* took for granted that social democracy was to be the form of life that underwrote an expressive society. However, the appeal of self-expression on the so-called postmodern left eventually flowed into advocacy of the “transgressive.” In an even more extraordinary about face, it is the cultural right which now indulges in triumphant forms of self-creation and self-expression.

There are other parallels between the left and the MAGA movement. Trump could present himself as the foe of neo-liberal globalization and at the same time as the peace candidate as opposed to Liz Cheney and the Democrats who were “warmongers.” The allure of counter-cultural transgression moved to the right. It appears in MAGA’s preferring “authenticity” over public civility, tolerating (specifically male heterosexual) sexual disinhibition, thinking of January 6 as carnivalesque celebration, and fearing the deep state, including the old demons of the left, the FBI and CIA..[[25]](#footnote-26)

I.C Alliances Isolate Rivals

The four distinct cultures and models of governance of 20th century life added up to a picture of potential fractures in framework institutions and in the politics of left and right. The four corners of a rectangle illustrate the possibilities for opposition and alliance. See Figures 2 and 3. Example: those who spoke for constitutional limits could swallow their differences with conservative populist cultures in recognition of their having a common adversary in left populist culture and the progressive technocracy.

“Ganging up” is also a strategy. Three of the corners, say the liberal state and Progressive parastate along with left populist culture could mute their differences in a common desire to isolate right populist culture. Any one of the three corners could become a target for two or three of the others. See Figures 2 and 3. In 2025 a different scenario emerged. A split in the science and technocracy community has allied figures like Elon Musk with Trump’s right populist coalition in an assault on the remaining parastate institutions—meaning the research university trained civil service—their left populist allies, and the Federal government itself!

There is no easy alignment of culture and mode of governance. Left populists and progressive technocrats may or may not ally. Those loyal to the older tradition of Federal government are often horrified at the cultural practices they may have encouraged or upon which they must depend. In moments of self-awareness about what they disliked, populists of both kinds strove to purify themselves of the contamination of every kind of framework institution.[[26]](#footnote-27) Living in a world of tension within cultures and systems of governance, each side tried to invent congruence but were always at risk of losing any narrative that might lead to a common good.

Partisan divides were not impermeable. Benjamin Barber’s Rousseau and Arendt flavored *Strong Democracy* was to many readers a model of left populism and an illustration of the frustration small d democrats had with framework liberalism.[[27]](#footnote-28) For him liberalism and democracy were not always aligned. The political crises of that era—growing privatism and public paralysis—were symptoms of misalignment. Did Barber speak only for the cultural left? Not at all. Patrick Deneen, the conservative author of the bestselling *Why Liberalism Failed* (2018), wrote in his acknowledgements that Barber was “my teacher and my valued interlocutor” [[28]](#footnote-29) Like Christopher Lasch or the French geographer Christophe Guilluy or the British author David Goodhart, Barber’s appeal was that of a friend to cultures left or right that felt antagonized by framework liberal institutions.[[29]](#footnote-30)

**II. The Implications of Disjunction—1989-2025**

Caution is the watchword in connecting this analysis to the disjunctive politics of the present moment. The latter were formed by different events, 9/11, the Great Recession of 2008, massive surges in immigration, Brexit, the rise of Trump and Trumpism, the enormous consequences of the ill remembered Covid 19 global pandemic, and the everywhere in the world economic and cultural split between the city and the county which has seemingly damned the parliamentary left to impotence. Other issues included the debates over sexual identity, the me-too movement, trans controversies, the controversy over American history as the narrative of settler colonialism and structural racism, the unintended consequences of globalization and international trade, post-truth social media distortions of communication, the forever wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the war in Ukraine, the reversal of the 1912-1970 increase of economic equality which has now turned into Gilded Age inequality. And one other astonishing thing. After 1989, the West became a model for Russia. Today in some circles of opinion, Russia has become a model for the United States.

Have the existential stakes gotten sharper, too? Hard to tell. The stakes could hardly have been larger in the earlier twentieth century era of war and revolution. Americans may have been materially more comfortable after 1945, but their polity was wracked with discontent. Civil Rights and Vietnam are names that indicate why.

What about the possibility of reconciliation? It depends on whether conflicting interests can be harmonized. This was the political ideal of the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment. Happy it is, Montesquieu proclaimed, when “men are in a situation in which though their *passions* inspire them with the thought of being wicked, they have an *interest*not to be."[[30]](#footnote-31) If by contrast, our interests are not harmonizable, people retreat to a world of power politics where interests are zero-sum. Regimes of interest and compromise become antique relics replaced by regimes of intense passion driven by anger, indignation, resentment, humiliation, fear of others’ contempt and fear of their capacity to deceive. Such emotions demand public representation. Electoral victories require the ability to speak the vocabulary of passions. It leads to a politics of revenge. Once the healthy if muted impulse of working-class folks worried about whether they could fully trust elites, populism has become “populism,” another name for the Enlightenment gone into reverse.

II A. Fractured Frameworks

In the cycle of establishing events 1900-1980, there was a disjunction between the principles that governed the liberal democratic state and those which grounded the Progressive technocracy. In *The Policy State*, Orren and Skowronek offer a perfect example of how something like this impasse continues to haunt the prospects of liberal democracy. The latter is eaten away from the inside by what they call simply “policy.” Policies are another name for a rationality that does not hesitate to propose “solutions” that maneuver around constitutional norms and limits. The crisis of authority “is the priority of policy itself” which acts as a solvent eroding the barriers once represented in rights and in constitutional structures.

Rights once overrode other considerations. Eventually “policy” allowed other considerations to weaken rights. Similarly, constitutions were once structures that established barriers. Increasingly they became merely strategic opportunities for the policy maker to figure out a way to work around the apparent rules or precedents. Courts now match the efforts of the work-around-it policy maker.[[31]](#footnote-32)

For a friendlier view of the pragmatic policy making rationality, I turn to an unlikely source, the political theorist Judith Shklar. In a youthful article—a path she did not ultimately pursue—Shklar exhibited Orren and Skowronek’s claim in reverse. Constitutional commitment—or for her “legalism”—was not always desirable. Orren and Skowronek decried “policy” that undermined legalism and the ethos of the law. She showed why “policy”—she called it “realism”—was sometimes a plausible option. For her, three distinct types of thinkers—romantic existentialists, domestic legal realists, and international relations realists—shared “one thing in common, a revolt against legalism … a rejection of the notion that stable rules of conduct are ‘there’ and that they are binding on all whom they are addressed in all circumstances.” This was in effect a realist defense of norm corroding policy makers. Far from worrying that denying rules were “there” would undermine security of expectations, the realist claimed that security of expectations was the wrong aim. The goal instead was “social experimentation.”[[32]](#footnote-33) The rule of law is a worthy ethos but one that excluded other goals by hardening into myth. Reforms require bypassing the myth.

Are rights then bargaining chips in a game of poker? The shoes that once fitted the progress minded left fit equally well the Trumpian right.

II.B. How Once Healthy Populist Cultures Bring Ruin to Governments

“The sciences and the arts owe their birth to our vices.” J.-J. Rousseau [[33]](#footnote-34)

Antipathy to institutions turned into distemper. Populism became a hardened and bitter world view, not tempered by the expectation of accommodation to the institutions that aroused its suspicions. The romance of revolution has gone over to right populists. The Left evolved, too. It was less given to expressiveness than to curtailing expressiveness if it triggered trauma or assaults on identities. Freedom of speech became a right populist issue. Nevertheless, the right in government turns out to be just as committed to the suppression of speech. From M. L. King to Black Lives Matter, race and identity were still in focus for the left. This concern sometimes conflicted with bread-and-butter issues of social class as the Democratic Party coped with the idea that it had become a vehicle that served not only minority interests but those of the well-educated and relatively well off. If populist democratic habits were always inclined to suspicion about framework institutions, that suspicion curdled into rage, much of it directed against the ascendent education and wealth coalition in the Democratic Party.

For populists today, direct democracy –the referendum that resulted in Brexit-- was genuine democracy. The appeal of direct democracy replaced “intermediary bodies” such as the British Parliament which after all could have made the decision about Brexit in the absence of any referendum. Populists did not always make a fetish of the leader. Today the leader seems to represent the emotional life of his constituents, who assume that they are “the people.”. Rousseau’s direct democracy which spontaneously expressed the will of the people replaced the forms of representation Montesquieu found in “intermediary bodies.” For Rousseau, anything less than a *foundationa*l moment of direct democracy was how their enemies cheated and dispossessed them. Any government or actual administration, however necessary, was also a platform for the betrayal of the little guy. The people should always have confidence in themselves: “the general will is always right.” Yet this confidence was immediately undermined by disabling doubt—the suspicion that the public “is often tricked.”[[34]](#footnote-35) The idea that the 2020 US election was “rigged” is a contemporary echo of Rousseau’s concerns.

There are alternative readings of Rousseau. Istvan Hont makes a good case for Rousseau as a rationalist follower of Hobbes and “a good student of Montesquieu.”[[35]](#footnote-36) There can be little doubt, however, about Rousseau’s rage against elites. Shklar was aware of it but dismissed its significance. Half a century later, it is less easy to dismiss.

It would not have been difficult to show that Rousseau was the father of populism. Is it not all there? All virtue is in the potential people, although the actual people is too dull to be trusted. The authoritarian streak, the hatred of the city, the sense of a conspiracy against the people, the distrust of complexity, social or intellectual, the military-patriotic stance, the nostalgia and the disgust at present corruption, the call to return to the people as an act of self-purification and devotion.[[36]](#footnote-37)

II.C Democratic Framework Survives If It Solves the Three Body Problem

The four corned model offers a template of conflicting loyalties. It is a key to understanding the structural tension between and within polity and culture. The model also accommodates the economy. The latter has a semi-autonomous status but is still affected by each of the four corners in distinctive ways.

The central state in conjunction with business and labor elites created the political compromises which were required for economic expansion. The technocracy's technical and organizational innovations provided the fuel of capitalist expansion: The workplace was the contested terrain in which the imperatives of technique and governance confront the habits of popular political cultures. Prosperity might have encouraged an individualist expressive culture which seems naturally allied with the mobility and plastic combinatorial possibilities of commercial society. Economic distress, on the other hand, might have encouraged a reconsideration of the price of jettisoning older loyalties. Left and right populists were divided on distribution, employment opportunities, welfare, and taxation, though they were still alike in even the best of times regarding a felt antipathy to the institutions which operate seemingly behind their backs.

There are two economic models of disjunction. Interest groups proliferated and formed encrustations which impeded the search for alternative institutional arrangements. The inability of the United States to produce affordable housing and rapid rail is a contemporary example. The other disjunction arose when the economy changed in fundamental ways and regulations did not keep up. As an example of the latter disjunction, we are in the grip of a new global economy characterized by the growth of highly specialized, innovative, knowledge-intensive cities creating a geography that creates an almost impassable barrier between these cities and everywhere else.[[37]](#footnote-38) In the excluded countryside and adjacent smaller cities, we find people who feel left behind: populist tinged, resentful folks who were once on top and now are not. City vs. country is the geography of new winners and losers. Consequently, Hegel’s 1830 prediction looms large:

In North America … a real state and a real government only arise when class distinctions are already present, when wealth and poverty are far advanced, and when … a large number of people can no longer satisfy their needs in the way to which they have been accustomed.[[38]](#footnote-39)

This has created a three-body problem. Although I allude to Cixin Liu’s brilliant sci fi volume *The Three Body Problem*,[[39]](#footnote-40) it is really a question about the metaphorical physics of calculating the gravity pull among three “social” objects. They are (1) a new class of the more highly skilled, college educated and those who aspire to tag along; (2) the old middle class whose once secure manufacturing jobs have disappeared and who now sometimes find themselves or their children joining the “precariat” in unstable not well paid service employment; and (3) the urban and rural poor along with immigrants, at least the immigrants who have not joined the highly-skilled class—and further down perhaps a fourth category, the homeless which one sees everywhere in these cities of tomorrow. Once mitigating the disparity between rich and poor was an aspirational mission for even the moderate left. Today, the highly skilled are often indifferent to the old middle class. In turn, the constituencies of the old middle class, which could make a democratic coalition with the poor, are instead contemptuous of those “beneath” them.

As Thomas Piketty claimed, the political parties of the left have changed.[[40]](#footnote-41) They now bend in the direction of the new winning elites and their poorer large city allies, which is possibly why the older middle classes, in the United States feel left out. This includes–white, rural, non-college educated but in the November election, more blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. On both sides of the fence, one spies self-involved people who are anxious, transactional, and unsympathetic to the claims of others.

. After January 6, 2021, Trump’s fortunes and that of the MAGA movement looked exhausted. His second election in 2024 was a remarkable reversal of political fortune. In the end we may have to retreat to another Hegelian conceit. It was already thought and uttered in 2018 in the first Trump administration: “I think Trump may be one of those figures in history who appears from time to time to mark the end of an era and to force it to give up its old pretenses.”[[41]](#footnote-42) This observer invoked the specter of Hegel’s world historical actor in whom all the turbulent forces of world history were temporarily concentrated. The observer—Henry Kissinger—added that this did not mean that Trump “knows this or that he is considering any great alternative. It could be just an accident.” World historical actors are not harbingers of new order. They only symbolize the failure of an old regime to hang together.

Which pretenses should be abandoned? “I do think what we are seeing,” Peter Orszag explained to Ezra Klein, “is an underlying tectonic plate shift in the global economy in which the U.S. role at the center of everything is under severe stress.” One reason for a tectonic displacement lay in significant changes in the “relative performances” of different national economies. Perhaps in response to anxiety about relative decline, a bigger reason was, Orszag said, because of our “using the tools that we had,”[[42]](#footnote-43) meaning by that what Orren and Skowornek meant by “policy” –the norm and law-free advocacy of anything goes. This was that crisis of authority which, before Trump, worked to dissolve rights and constitutional barriers in both Democratic and Republican administrations.

We sometimes think of liberal democracy (or the constitutional republic or rights-based self-rule) as the inextricable twinning of liberal constraints and democratic energy. Historically that’s not always been the case and may not be the case in the future. If there is not to be a return to the liberal democratic consensus nor a collapse into autocratic patrimonialism, Patrick Deneen and Tongdong Bai exhaust the range of choices. Deneen speaks on behalf of a kind of democracy that is not very liberal (Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*) and Bai advocates for a kind of liberalism that is not very democratic (Tongdong Bai, *Against Political Equality: The Confucian Case*). Deneen’s proposal makes the case that democracy with less liberalism would improve America. Bai makes the case that the absence of democracy in China (except at local levels) is no defect if it can hold onto core liberal principles: and, he argues, Chinese Confucian and legalist traditions are plausible sources for liberal values.

**Stop Here!**

**III. Appendix: The Premises of Disjunctive Democracy**

Two premises require clarification. The first is the assumption that democracies rarely achieve consensus for long, as it is a modus vivendi between conflicting political arrangements. Another question asks whether there is some inherent reason why the values driving democratic political cultures cannot be rendered compatible or at least communicable.

III. A. Incompatibility in Political Arrangements

Since the four corners thesis argues against anything more than fragile consensus, where can we look in the history of Western political thought for support and where for criticism? In the beginning it was Plato versus Aristotle. Plato rehearsed all the ways in which politics depended upon knowledge, upon accurate and even quantifiable knowledge which for Plato was provided by the creation of a “think tank” that included the study of mathematics and the higher reaches of philosophy. Only in this way might “guardians” dissipate the illusions which Athenian citizens had promulgated on their way to their own ruin. These academies might foreshadow politburos but just as aptly they foreshadow modern research universities, which have become nearly an adjunct of the modern democratic state. For those who wish to target technocracy, Plato had offered an early model of the deep state, otherwise identified as the well-educated civil service.

Aristotle did not wholly disavow the claims of the one right way, but he found more space for legitimate differences among polities. While his six-fold typology of governments depended on an ability to distinguish truth from error, true common good polities versus the pathological models, he then turned around in the *Politics* to declare that, realistically, we live in one or the other of two pathological models, oligarchy or democracy. We understood the limits of both ways of life. They both fell short of the common good but Aristotle did not suppose citizens were blinded by this fact. They were not in Plato’s cave. Nor were they in his think tank. Rather than retreating to Plato’s epistemological ideal of the philosopher’s perfect sight, Aristotle made the strong democratic move of praising democratic crowd sourcing. People should prefer a meal cooked by many over one prepared by a master chef.

Machiavelli’s study of the Roman republic revealed the promise for democracy of class conflict, its utility in forcing Roman citizens into those always temporary compromises/ alliances that kept the project of Roman expansion alive. Expansion—republican empire—was the road to survival. However, in his commentary on the brothers Gracchi and their Senate engineered assassinations (*Discourses* I.37), Machiavelli acknowledged that the great project eventually failed.[[43]](#footnote-44) He insisted, however, that republican order would have failed sooner without the enduring divisions between Senate and people that for centuries had never ended in bloodshed. Class conflict gave the Republic a life it otherwise could not have had.

There was always a division between elites who desired to dominate and the people who desired to be left alone. When the people got the upper hand, Machiavelli recognized, they too became pushy. They were after all the firm allies of the expansionist republic. In any event, elite and non-elite corresponded to those unavoidable physiological “humors” that gave people distinctive passions and personalities.

Machiavelli also had a theory about inevitable institutional divisions which meant that unity was rare or fragile:

Although the laws may be changed according to circumstances and events, yet it is seldom or never that the constitution itself is changed, and for this reason the new laws do not suffice; for they are not in harmony with the constitution that has remained intact.[[44]](#footnote-45)

Reforms always had limits. Laws and the framework institutions they modified were inevitably misaligned.

Hobbes looked to the science of natural right. In this respect he sided with Plato, except that his science was not an attempt to discern the telos of human nature. Instead, it explored the various ways particular wills came into enduring conflict in seeking “power after power”. Nevertheless, his whole enterprise and that of the social contract tradition that ensued—for example, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Rawls—was an effort to unify conflicts of values into a single coherent philosophy of the state. Rawls acknowledged, however, in *Political Liberalism* that his earlier Kant flavored *Theory of Justice* had given short shrift to value conflict. The correct understanding was that “a modern democratic society is characterized by … a pluralism of incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines.” Rawls worried how such “deeply opposed doctrines …may live together.” Their likely instability led him to “reasonableness” as the conciliating but fragile thread from which consensus was now suspended.[[45]](#footnote-46)

Despite Hegel’s claim that the mature republic must deal with the contradictions that arose in its midst, Hegel generally looked for ways to transcend value conflict. He recognized abiding conflict in Sophocles *Antigone* and in the Enlightenment conflicts that had led to the French Revolution,[[46]](#footnote-47) but his *Philosophy of Right* was an attempt to cover up the tracks of these conflicts. Is it unreasonable to suspect, however, there might be a latent “Antigone effect” at work in every social arrangement?

In the 1920 “Vocation Lectures,” Max Weber saw a tragic conflict between incommensurable ways of life. “Each person finds and obeys the daemon that holds the threads of his life.”[[47]](#footnote-48) Incommensurability between models for doing science was also the central theme of Thomas Kuhn’s controversial *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.[[48]](#footnote-49) Paradigm conflict was, however, partially concealed in “normal science” where consensus reigned temporarily much as it did in the four corners model which sometimes congealed into fragile consensus.

Jürgen Habermas famously theorized a disjunction between system maintenance and life world but not splits within them.[[49]](#footnote-50) Alasdair Macintyre wrote of a sphere of "democratized moral agency" confronted by "elitist monopolies of managerial and therapeutic expertise."[[50]](#footnote-51) Daniel Bell's disjunctions were specific to the operation of the economy.[[51]](#footnote-52) Nevertheless, his "cultural" contradictions of capitalism” was a model; as was Samuel Beer’s *Britain Against Itself: The Political Contradictions of Collectivism*, especially as the author touched on the topics of technology and romantic populism.[[52]](#footnote-53) The complexity of a four cornered analysis is achieved in John Pocock's reflections:

In *Machiavellian Moment*, I emphasized the strength of the [1] Old Whig and [2] Tory, [3] Commonwealth, and [4] Country reaction against the financial, oligarchic, and imperial regime that came into being after 1688.[[53]](#footnote-54)

George Packer spotted four different “Americas.” They nearly mirrored the fissures of my ancient “four corners.” His list read: free America, smart America, real America, and just America.[[54]](#footnote-55) By my lights, free America should have tracked the role that the Federal state played but instead it referred only to an ideological current, libertarianism. But smart America was identical with my policy making meritocracy that ran the progressive technocracy. Real America was still right populist backlash. Just America tracked the left populist. Each vision of America, Packer argued, was a failure.

Isaiah Berlin came closest to the present argument. He believed that enduring and incommensurable value conflict was a feature of liberal or democratic societies. Value conflict was a sign of a healthy pluralist democracy. “In a private letter of 1968 … [Berlin] referred to ‘the unavoidability of conflicting ends’ as his one genuine discovery.”[[55]](#footnote-56) Nevertheless, one can imagine other outcomes, where the spotting of incommensurable values was something more like what Weber observed in 1920, the prelude to a conflict of fascist, liberal, and communist orders.

III. B Incompatibility in Values

Do secular values find their provenance in religious consciousness?[[56]](#footnote-57) It is an old assumption. Here is a just so story about Christianity that adopts the premise. If the religious consciousness can be characterized as the ever-renewed struggle against "the unbearable lightness of being," to invoke Milan Kundera,[[57]](#footnote-58) then one response is decipherment of cosmic mystery and acceptance of its implications, acknowledging the spiritual significance of family and kin and divine sanction for communities of political, social, or intellectual aspiration. This is the world of Aquinas, where freedom is experienced through wills conforming to social purpose and natural law. Another religious culture followed an alternative strategy of embracing the "unbearable lightness of being." Made in the image of the God of indecipherable grace, we can only acknowledge the authority of our own deeds of self-declaration. The originator of this strategy, Luther (indebted to Augustine) declared "Here I stand, I can do no other."

The secular equivalent is Descartes’ reductionist epistemology: “I think, therefore I am.” This launched the notable careers of autonomy, self-invention, and world fashioning—a worthy undertaking, but not for everyone. Without the ability of a Descartes to reimagine or recreate the world out there, “I am” was only a recipe for solipsism. Descartes was not a solipsist, but his procedure—rebuild the world from the resources of the autonomous self alone –demonstrated the dangers. Individualism was for many an epistemological trap. Moral consequences followed. Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality* was illustrative. Having lost compassion for others in the very activity of engaging with them in “society,” isolated and isolating individuals ended up as monsters of nervous self-regard.[[58]](#footnote-59)

Self-declaration was a path to redemption, but it could devolve into transactional relationships. The spiritual weight of older practices pointed individuals back to community. It was either an inheritance or a promise. Or the inheritance carried a **universal** promise. Catholics and socialists know this well. More often, however, communities were **particular** about their membership. Here one met with unjust or intolerant exclusion. Justly or not, many claims for community ground themselves in a principle of *loyalty*, which is the pull and attraction of the particular. It discovers in various imagined or real projects— nation, province, ethnicity, vocation, religion, or family—a reason for fidelity. Each such project depends for its self-definition on its exclusions. The *nastiness* of such projects is most evident before it becomes normalized when it is in its first stages, when it is an attempt to remold an old community—political party, nation, or society-- into a new form. This is what the forces of Trump world are attempting to enact, initially through barriers --physical and legal—erected against rivals become enemies, former allies, new immigrants, and the old left-populist research university coalition. Who knows which other strategies will be employed.

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2. Some remarkable events have precedents. Universities now have a target on their collective backs. Support for the independence of research institutions and universities and subsequent hostility to that independence and to the political role of science is part of the cycle described below. As for government attacks on both civil society and the Federal bureaucracy, think back to the first 1919 Red Scare under Wilson and post WW II 1950s McCarthyism. In so far as the pantomime with Ukraine President Zelensky in the Oval Office is a first step in a break with NATO Europe and realignment with Russia, there is precedent in the Senate rejecting Wilson’s League of Nations, which was a cutting of ties with Europe that created a pathway to renewed world war. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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8. The mutuality of the differently situated—the pluralist democratic ideal—is among the themes celebrated by Hannah Arendt in her “What is Authority” in Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, Penguin, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part II Ch. 29, Penguin, 2017, p. 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Had the House of Representatives been regularly called upon to choose the President, as it was in 1824, the executive would have been the prime minister, controlled by the legislative branch. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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15. Eldon J. Eisenach, *The Lost Promise of Progressivism*, University Press of Kansas, p. 12; and Stephen Skowronek and Stephen M. Engel, Introduction, Skowronek and Engel, eds., *The Progressives Century*, Yale University Press, 2016, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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