Overcoming Being Overwhelmed in the Trump Era

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by Navyug Gill
O
cover the past several months, I have noticed a
growing sense among undergraduate students of
being overwhelmed by mainstream electoral politics.
From the long, vitriolic primary campaigns, to the scandal-
plagued lead-up to the vote, the disbelief after November
8th, the confusion during the transition period, and the
ongoing turbulence since the inauguration, it seems their
sensibilities and expectations have been under repeated
assault. What started out for many as a joke and then an
embarrassment turned into a circus and then a threat, and
then, finally, a disturbing reality.

At the same time, students have been inundated with
various commentaries that seek to give coherence to all that
has happened during the election cycle and its aftermath.
Dozens of articles appear almost every day dissecting one
or another aspect of Trump's victory and what it means for
different groups of people, the country as a whole and the
wider world. The attempt to ban Muslims from several
countries, the push to end subsidized private healthcare and
the renewed targeting of undocumented migrants are only the
most recent measures compounding their sense of
uncertainty and anxiety.

One way to overcome this feeling of being overwhelmed
is by teaching the current conjuncture in a broader historical
context yet with a sharper analytical focus. At William
Paterson University, a mid-sized public institution located in
northern New Jersey, my students come from mostly
working-class families with a remarkable degree of ethnic
and religious diversity. In my introductory Modern Global
History course, I have adopted a three-pronged strategy to
encourage them to think through the Trump presidency
without succumbing to the pitfalls of exaggeration,
confabulation and exceptionality.

At the outset, I emphasize the need to attend to the
specificity of Trump. It is critical to avoid generalization and
hyperbole, no matter how cathartic. Students ought to
understand Trump not as a crazed tycoon or a ridiculous
imbecile, or even an ominous fascist-in-the-making.
Instead, I ask them to choose appropriate adjectives: he is
erratic and opportunistic, no doubt, but plainly right-wing,
with regressive positions on a host of fiscal, social and
environmental issues. Just as we would not accept students
characterizing, say, Southern slave-owners, Napoleon or
East India Company officers as "crazy," "stupid" or "evil," we
should prevent Trump from being merely ridiculed in our
classrooms. Only when we lack faith in the acuity of our
analysis do we resort to caricature.

Beyond the careful use of language, I ask students to
divide the Trump presidency into two categories. On the one
hand, we identify as rhetoric the content of all of the
statements he and his spokespersons have made over the
past year. This entails overt expressions of racism,
xenophobia, sexism and war-mongering, as well as
convoluted claims about American greatness amid an ever-
growing assortment of falsehoods. On the other hand, we
list as policy all of his actionable positions, the concrete
decisions he has already implemented or seeks to do so. This
includes building a wall along the Mexican border, reducing
taxes on the wealthy, restricting immigration and refugee
resettlement, and eliminating a range of government
programs, subsidies and regulations. Perhaps less
conventionally, it also encompasses plans to increase
infrastructure spending, cancelling "free" trade agreements
and withdrawing from the NATO military alliance.

In reality, of course, there is no simple separation
between rhetoric and policy. The two are inextricable, and
serve to inform and justify each other. Calling Mexicans
"rapists" underpins the building of the wall, just as defunding
Planned Parenthood exemplifies a routine degradation of
women. The reason for the artificial divide, however, is to
courage students to focus on the material effects of policy
rather than be distracted by the bombast of rhetoric. Too
often the aspects of Trump's presidency that garner the
most attention -- and thereby generate the most
impassioned responses -- are his ignorant and offensive
utterances. Yet outrage over his call to kill the families of
suspected militants can quickly descend into outrage over
his angry tweets about "Saturday Night Live" or the
supposed size of the crowd at his inauguration. While issues
of tone and temperament are important, they cannot
overshadow confronting the tangible consequences of
exercising presidential power.

In order to comparatively analyze Trump's policy
positions, I next ask students to map out the current political
spectrum in the United States. We start by drawing a
horizontal line, with the left-end identified by students as
Liberal and the right-end as Conservative. Leaving party
affiliations aside, I ask how one would determine if a person
was a liberal or a conservative? Usually, they answer with
issues such as abortion access, gun control, same-sex
marriage, the death penalty and military spending. Less
frequently, students mention taxation rates, environmental
protections and raising the minimum wage. I then ask them
to locate certain politicians along the spectrum. We plot the
position of George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Ronald Regan,
George W. Bush and Jimmy Carter, before moving on to
Hilary Clinton, Ted Cruz, Barack Obama, Chris Christie and
Bernie Sanders.

And then I ask them to place Trump along this
spectrum. The mention of his name usually elicits hoots,
with calls for placing him at the extreme right-end, or even
off the line altogether. I remind them that they constructed
this spectrum on their own, without any limitations, and
therefore no one can be outside of its bounds. But why, I
probe, do we think Trump is the furthest, most extreme type
of conservative? We then go through each of the issues in
the criterion, identifying his position and contrasting it to
Clinton, Cruz and Sanders. Quite strikingly, students realize
the need to adjust the location of these figures along the
spectrum. It turns out Trump is not an arch-conservative,
that Obama is far from the most leftward, and that Clinton
ends up in the middle on many issues. From corporate
bailouts to trade deals and criminal justice reform, the initial
distance between these politicians shrinks considerably. By
focusing on Trump’s actual policies instead of his rhetoric, students are better able to evaluate the meaning of his presidency.

At this point, I shift gears to discuss a different kind of political spectrum, that of nineteenth century Europe. We construct the same horizontal line, but now locate various groups of Reactionaries, Liberals and Radicals from right to left. I again ask how one would identify the political orientation of a person in this era? Based on previous discussions of assigned readings, students know the key issue at that time was what was to be done about the growing inequalities generated by industrial capitalism. For reactionaries, inequality was either natural or divine, while liberals believed it to be unfortunate but unavoidable. Only radicals sought to abolish it, even as different factions disagreed on how best to accomplish this task and what society would look like in the future. More importantly, the radical desire to transcend capitalism is what brought reactionaries and liberals closer together, united in a common fear of revolution to broadly defend the status quo.

Juxtaposing the political spectrum of twenty-first century America with nineteenth century Europe brings to the fore a few key observations. First, students realize the bulk of seemingly polarized Liberal-Conservative politics in the United States today largely falls within a rather narrow realm of Liberal politics from two centuries earlier in Europe. What appears at opposite ends of the current political spectrum was, in another context, merely what different groups of liberals disagreed on among themselves. Students also recognize that the issues that animate politics today are mostly social and cultural -- from abortion to gun control and same-sex marriage -- with far less attention paid to worker rights, universal healthcare and public ownership of industries. In an earlier period, however, the problem of economic inequality was paramount. This is what generated the sharpest divide between various political orientations, and from which the majority of other divisions followed. Finally, this exercise reveals to students a much larger, more open world of politics than what they presently imagine. The narrowness of the current spectrum, and the limited scope of disagreement within it, points to the need to extend the boundaries of contestation, to more fundamentally question the parameters of political life in the United States.

A final point to the comparison is to collapse the space of historical difference. I tell my students that in most of the world today, the political spectrum is akin to nineteenth century Europe rather than contemporary America. That is, most countries have a much more diverse terrain of politics, with a far larger number of parties contesting a vastly broader range of issues. Throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as Europe, there are an assortment of right-wing nationalists and fiscal and religious conservatives along with left-wing social-democrats and militant communists and anarchists among different strands of liberals, all using parliamentary and extra-parliamentary means to further their respective agendas. While each of these groups has a specific position on various social and cultural issues, they usually do not confine themselves to debating within that sphere alone. Instead, they struggle more capa-ciously to define the kind of society they want to live in and the way it should be achieved.

At the end of this exercise, students begin to see Trump and the country he leads in a different light. No longer is he simply a fool or villain, but a representative of a kind of politics that requires patient, detailed analysis to understand. At the same time, the current political binary ceases to appear natural and inevitable as compared to earlier and elsewhere in the world. Perhaps most importantly, students are able to overcome the sense of being overwhelmed by opening up possibilities to imagine and engage in a new kind of politics for today, and tomorrow.