

**POLITICS AND POPULISM IN  
EXTRAORDINARY TIMES: NOTES  
FROM AMERICA AND FRANCE**

*John Morgan*

The University of Auckland

[john.morgan@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:john.morgan@auckland.ac.nz)

It is a cliché, but it nevertheless true that we are living in extraordinary times. The decade following the global financial crisis of 2008 has triggered one political shock after another. The bank bail-outs, the Eurozone crisis, and the turn to austerity have been followed by what has been variously termed ‘the populist explosion’, new populism’, or ‘national populism’.<sup>1</sup> Viewed from the vantage point of New Zealand, this can seem strange. As Simon Reid-Henry comments in his monumental history of the West from 1971 to 2017, MBIE reported in 2015 that two-thirds of the population saw immigration as good for the economy. New Zealand ‘was the exception’ though: ‘most countries were witnessing the resurgence of a more populist strand to politics’.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the greatest jolts (for many commentators) were the Brexit referendum of June 2016 which was quickly followed by the election of the Republican candidate, Donald Trump as US President.

For a while, it looked as though ‘liberal democracy’ was under threat, (and it may still be). Ever the one to try to name the *zeitgeist*, the influential commentator Francis Fukuyama – who, in 1989 said that the collapse of the Soviet empire ushered in the ‘end of history’ – penned an article in the *Financial Times* in which he argued that

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy*. London: Penguin, 2018; John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How The Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*. New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016; Marco Revelli, *The New Populism: Democracy Stares Into The Abyss*. London: Verso, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Reid-Henry, *Empire of Democracy: The Remaking of the West since the Cold War, 1971-2017*. London: John Murray, 2019.

‘the electoral defeat of Hillary Clinton marks a watershed not just for American politics, but for the entire world order’. He went on to suggest that social class, defined today by one’s level of education, ‘appears to have become the single most important social fracture’ in many countries. Many commentators agree, pointing to the way in which Trump seemed to appeal to many white working-class voters who defined themselves against the ‘liberal’ classes who lined up to offer support for Clinton. This same focus on the ‘left behind’ was apparent in the UK (see Cris Shore’s commentary on Brexit in this issue).

Whilst it is tempting to see these as examples of US and British ‘exceptionalism’ – the consequences of a particular virulent strain of neoliberalism – it is premature to see other European nation-states as resistant to the forces driving the new populism. Most obviously, of course, there is the Orban premiership in Hungary, and, perhaps less expected, the rise of the Alliance for Germany, as Europe’s largest and most successful economy attempts to come to terms with the post-crisis landscape.<sup>3</sup> Simply stating these facts is of little help in attempting to make sense of these complex political and cultural developments. There are so many twists and turns. How, for example, does one offer an account of a phenomena such as Brexit? This literature is varied, disputed and susceptible to revision as events

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<sup>3</sup> See Oliver Nachtwey, *Germany’s Hidden Crisis: Social Decline in the Heart of Europe*. London: Verso, 2018; also Adam Tooze, “Which is worse?” *London Review of Books*. 41, no. 14 (2019).

on the ground change.<sup>4</sup> There are analytical challenges involved. How do we know that our accounts are ‘real’? Or our explanations ‘reliable’?

In the rest of this article, I offer some ‘field notes’ from the United States and France, as part of a wider project of making sense of the geography of the post-crisis West. First, I sample some of the popular accounts that seek to explain the rise and popularity of Donald Trump in the United States which are part a larger narrative concerned with what might be called ‘the unmaking of America’. Then, turning to Europe, I consider the fears that surrounded the French Presidential Election of November 2017 which offered voters a stark choice: between the economically and socially liberal Macron or the populist figure of Marine Le Pen. Coming little more than a year after the shock of Brexit, this was widely seen as a test-case of how far populism had gained a foothold in European politics. On this occasion, the tides of populism were held back.

### **The Unmaking of America**

For many commentators, the election in November 2016 of Donald Trump as US president represented a seminal moment in that nation’s history. His increasingly outrageous and outlandish statements, frequently disseminated through a series of tweets, seen only to add fuel to the fire of nationalist populism. However, despite the shock of

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<sup>4</sup> I speak as someone who does their best to keep up with Brexit. As I write, the University of Auckland holds 210 items with the term ‘Brexit’. This is before you count all the various ‘grey’ literature and the press coverage.

Trump's election, he had not come out of nowhere. His platform was of the "little man" reinvented the modern times-as was his slogan "America first", and illustrated the fact that political events often are the outcomes of much wider economic and cultural processes. In this regard it is useful to read George Packer's fascinating book *The Unwinding*, published three years earlier, which documents what its author sees as the end of the American dream.<sup>5</sup> *The Unwinding* is based on a series of portraits of individuals located at different positions in the social structure. It captures the decline of old industries and the growth of new centres of power. It highlights both structure and agency, there are invisible forces, but there is also luck and chance. Packer reminds us that the unwinding is nothing new tends to happen every generation or two. Take this slowly but inexorably and suddenly and realise that "we're not in Kansas anymore". Thus,

"If you were born around 1960 or afterword, you have spent your adult life in the vertigo of that unwinding. You watched structures that had been in place before your birth collapse like pillars of salt across the vast visible landscape farms of the Carolina Piedmont, the factories of the Mahoning Valley, Florida subdivisions, California schools. And other things, harder to see but no less vital in supporting the order of everyday life, changed beyond recognition-ways and means in Washington caucus

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<sup>5</sup> George Packer, *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013.

rooms, taboos on New York trading desks, manners and morals everywhere.”<sup>6</sup>

Packer’s genius is to produce a text that reads as a popular sociology of US society, and might be read alongside Robert Wuthnow’s *American Mythos*, a book which seeks to document the enduring myths around immigration, fairness, and belonging that shape the American nation.<sup>7</sup>

Whilst Packer and Wuthnow’s accounts pre-date Trump, J.D. Vance’s (2016) *Hillbilly Elogy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* was published at just the right time, and zooms in on one part of Packer’s unwinding.<sup>8</sup>

The blurb on the back cover tells us that *Hillbilly Elogy* is ‘a passionate and personal analysis of a culture in crisis- that of poor, white Americans’. Given this, it is not surprising that, in the run up to the US elections, the book was offered up as providing insights into the reasons for Trump’s popularity. *The Economist* reviewer stated that ‘You will not read a more important book about America this year’, and the *Financial Times* considered that Vance ‘holds up a painfully honest mirror to America that holds no succour for left or right’.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *American Mythos: Why Our Best Efforts to be a Better Nation Fall Short*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elogy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. New York: Harper Collins, 2016.

The story is of Vance's own social and geographical mobility: his grandparents left Jackson ('a small town of about six thousand in the heart of southeastern Kentucky's coal country') in the late 1940, along with many others taking the Route 23 – the 'hillbilly highway' celebrated by Dwight Yoakam in his song, 'Reading, Writing, Route 23' – north to Ohio to work in the burgeoning factories of the 'Rust Belt' and a better and more prosperous way of life. Vance's family settled in Middletown, Ohio. If you had to sum up Vance's account of this process in one pithy aphorism it would be something like, 'you can take the man out of Kentucky but you can't take Kentucky out of the man'. Much of the first two-thirds of the book consists of a vivid portrait of what it felt like to grow up in a chaotic family environment where there was genuine love, but little stability and a taken for granted assumption that the normal run of marital and family strife would be resolved through rows that would often turn violent. Vance's mother struggled with addiction and the attendant financial stresses that it entails, and he is strongest in conveying the sense of lack of control over events that children feel. If there is a 'saviour' in the book, it is Vance's grandmother – Mamaw – who, despite (or because of) her 'country ways' provides stability and a place to run to when it all gets too much.

Vance escapes by joining the Marine Corp which, to risk a cliché, makes a man out of him. He returns home with growing confidence that he can control his own destiny, and after a four year spell in Iraq, goes back to school, eventually graduating from Yale Law School.

He has never looked back: when he left home for Yale, he had a sense that this time he was leaving for good.

Like most people who gain social mobility, Vance attributes his success to his own hard work and a little bit of luck. And it's here that *Hillbilly Elegy* disappoints. So long as the book is a memoir of a family in crisis it is perfectly engaging and well-written. However, when the book extrapolates Vance's own experiences and extends them to a whole 'culture' in effect ('poor, white Americans') it is on less secure ground. As Vance gains some distance from this 'culture', he begins to develop 'lay sociological theory' to explain what he sees, and what he sees is a culture that lapses into lazy alcohol and drug use, overspends on things it does not need, in the process taking on debt, and blames other people, and the government for its predicament. It is telling then that Vance cites approvingly two seminal studies of the 1980s – William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* and Charles Murray's *Losing Ground* – books which served to revive ideas about the existence of a 'culture of poverty' among black and poor communities.

In the end, Vance's view of culture is not complex enough: it is based on a simple division between those who seek to work hard and escape, and those who seem to wallow in the drama of messy lives. With his conservative message, Vance has gained a certain notoriety on the paid speaker scene in the United States. *Hillbilly Elegy* has even spawned a counter volume-*Appalachian Reckoning*-which is a collection of writings that contest the deficit model of culture



purportedly offered in Vance's account.<sup>9</sup> This reveals the complex politics of representation surrounding places and communities in times of change.

And in this respect it is useful to turn as a final example to Arlie Hochschild's (2016) *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*.<sup>10</sup> Hochschild's academic credentials are beyond question: she has focused on the emotional aspects of what it means to inhabit spaces of late American capitalism. *Strangers in their Own Land* is an account of what happened when Hochschild set out to understand why it was that those who lived in the poorest areas of the United States were also those most inclined to support the American right and deliver Trump to the White House. She was conscious of the "empathy gap" that existed between herself-a liberal academic- and those who inhabit the "red states".

In order to close this gap Hochschild spent five years living in the deep South, getting to know people and trying to understand the 'deep story' that they tell about their lives. This deep story turned out to be that people did literally feel strangers in their own land; the psychic landscape that they had grown up in and had been taught was the 'real' America had, for them, changed beyond recognition. They had

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<sup>9</sup> Anthony Harkins and Meredith McCarroll (eds.), *Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds to Hillbilly Elegy*. Morgantown WV: West Virginia University Press, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Arlie Russel Hochschild, *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: The New Press, 2016.

been part of the great unwinding that Packer documented. Hochschild came away with more understanding of what the empathy gap is all about, and her book communicates this brilliantly, although what is less clear is what we can do with that understanding once we have it.

### **France: Holding Back the Tides of Populism?**

The 2018 French Presidential election allowed those who aspire to be on the ‘right side of history’ to breathe a sigh of relief. Faced with the choice between Emmanuel Macron and his ‘En Marche’ party and the National Front’s Marine Le Pen, French voters opted for Macron. The vote, hot on the heels of the Netherlands’ refusal of the populist choice, raised hopes that the populist tide was turning following the shocks of Brexit in the UK and Trump in the United States. Of course, this might all turn out to be wishful thinking: the ongoing protests of the *gilet jaunes* on a range of Macron’s policies raise questions about the capacity of his government to restrain the forces of populism. This can be seen if we examine some of the ways in which the French election was framed.

The first frame was the argument that the Presidential contest reflected a stark choice between two models of globalisation. This was how the *Financial Times* covered the election. Macron represented openness, technology and optimism about France’s central role in the European project, Le Pen stood for the opposites. The FT reminded readers that France is Europe’s third largest economy, its population enjoys higher standards of living and well-being than most Europeans, and by dint of it well-educated and skilled

workforce, has the highest rates of labour productivity in Europe. As such, France would be well-placed to benefit from a renewed round of economic growth in Europe. A variant of this argument (which has been found in the longer editorials and in a briefing on French politics in *The Economist*) is that the pro-globalisation and anti-globalisation analysis is correct, but that this is related to the heightened recognition that the gains and losses are unevenly distributed.

A second frame held that French politics is in the process of a dramatic shift in which the old categories of left and right have been rendered less important and that new categories are emerging. This election thus mark the end of the Fifth Republic, the political settlement that was established in 1958.<sup>11</sup> The most obvious evidence for this is the fact that the ‘traditional’ parties that have dominated the political scene for the past half century were ousted in the first round of the contest. This divide is both social and geographical, reflected in the unexpected success of a geography book – *The Twilight of the Elites* - by Christophe Guilluy which explores the chasm between the ‘liberal France’ of the big cities, linked into the high-tech networks of the European hub – London-Paris-Berlin, and the ‘peripheral France’ ‘where Uber, bike-share schemes and co-working spaces are nowhere to be found’.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Ben Clift, “The Fifth Republic at Fifty: The Changing Face of French Politics and Political Economy, *Modern and Contemporary France* 16, no. 4 (2008): 383-398.

<sup>12</sup> Christophe Guilluy, *Twilight of the Elites: Prosperity, Periphery and the Future of France*. London: Yale University Press, 2019. For a critical review, see Emile

It was in ‘peripheral France’ that the National Front found its main support, reflecting the third frame that shaped the Presidential contest. This drew upon long-standing tropes of French nationalism between ‘le pays reel’ and ‘le pays legal’, where ‘reel’ was equated with the ‘real France’: a rural France of church clocks, traditions and native people rooted in their ancestral soil, and “legal” meant imposed by legislation, and rejected as artificial.

### **A Game-Changing Election?**

Until 2012, French Presidential elections had been conducted with little reference to the question of Europe. This reflected what Chris Reynolds calls a ‘permissive consensus’ in which it was a given that France should take its place at the heart of the European project.<sup>13</sup> Members of the French political class were united on this, and the apex was the signing of the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992. Even though this belief in Europe was not shared by many of the electorate, candidates studiously avoided drawing attention to this. The consensus held even after the gap between the political elites and the people was dramatically revealed in the 2005 referendum in which the French people rejected the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon.

However, the global financial crisis of 2008 ensured that Europe would from now on feature in Presidential elections. This was

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Chabal, “Book Review,” *Modern and Contemporary France* 27, no. 4 (2019): 525-526.

<sup>13</sup> Chris Reynolds, “Presidential Elections and Europe: The 2012 Game-Changer,” *Modern and Contemporary France* 25 no. 2 (2017): 117-134.

because President Sarkozy sought to make capital of his own role in working with Germany's Angela Merkel to save the European project – leading to the charge of 'Merkozy'. The fact that one of the candidates in 2012 had placed all his eggs in the Europe basket ensured that other candidates sought to oppose that narrative. There was also the real question of whether European integration was a positive thing for the French. In the aftermath of a financial crisis that originated in the US, the idea that the EU could provide a shield against the vicissitudes of globalisation was very difficult to argue. The result was a breakdown in the rhetoric of unanimity, as very different versions of European integration began to emerge. The era of permissive consensus (when it was assumed that all agreed) has been replaced by an era of 'constraining dissensus' (when politicians sought to keep Europe off the agenda), but that too has broken down, and the question of Europe will be central to future electoral contests.

### **The End of the Affair?**

And this holds for all European countries. Whilst we are used to thinking about each European nation-state having its own trajectory and sets of challenges, it is now – in view of the new populism - more useful to understand the common issues that they all face. Chris Bickerton (2016) notes that by the mid-1970s it was assumed that European integration had run its course.<sup>14</sup> However, in the 1980s the project enjoyed a revival. The downturn of the global economy meant

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<sup>14</sup> Chris Bickerton, *The European Union: A Citizen's Guide*. London: Penguin, 2016.

that national governments found it difficult to resolve their domestic economic issues, and inflation and unemployment were running high. European co-operation appeared to offer a solution - growth could only be rebooted through the integration and expansion of markets. The left saw the possibility of the building of a social Europe.

The main impact of the Maastricht Treaty was economic, especially the idea of European Monetary Union. This required currency convergence and that all countries adopted tough policies on spending and budget deficits. It was a way of managing the new economic conditions and reducing expenditures.

Though there were concerns about loss of sovereignty and the democratic deficit, and the free movement of labour raised questions of national identity, these could be contained as long as the economy was growing. However, post-2008, the contradictions of the growth model have become apparent. The contraction of European economies and the slow road to recovery, coupled with the imposition of austerity, have led to the questioning of legitimacy. In 2018, the French people were faced with a stark choice – turn their back on the 60 year long relationship with Europe, or throw in their lot with the one candidate who is openly committed to making a go of it. Seen in that light, the result is not surprising, but where Europe is headed is still far from clear.

## **Conclusion**

The political geography of the post-crisis West is unfolding rapidly and in unpredictable ways. Events move fast; as I write, President Trump is fending off attempts at impeachment, and the newly appointed UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson is making a last ditch attempt to secure a 'deal' to allow a Halloween Brexit. New Zealand can sometimes seem far removed from the drama, but the aftershocks are real and require careful analysis.

**John Morgan** is Professor of Education and Head of the School of Critical Studies of Education at the University of Auckland. Prior to that, he taught geography in schools, which explains his interest in changing patterns of political geography.