THE TRUMPIAN MOMENT

Long before the outbreak of the 2020 global Covid-19 pandemic, among the most disturbing international trends that has characterised our contemporary society is the increasing social division and political polarization that have emerged within the last decade or so. A strong case can be made that this development owes much to the climate created in the wake of the American response to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 - that "you're either with us or against us", a development that I would argue also set the stage for the troubling presidency of Donald Trump. One suspects that social media also continues to play a significant part, however; particularly, of course, in the "echo chambers" they tend to produce, and in the ease with which people can widely share information. But also in the way social media foreground the politics of individuals we know or have known in the past. In social media contexts I have witnessed people with whom I went both to elementary and secondary school, as well as older peers of mine from other social environments including academia, spreading misinformation or expressing their ongoing enthusiasm for Trump (even Canadians!), and this at a time when the former reality TV star has been losing widespread support with the approach of the end of his first term. I've experienced many an online quarrel with such people, the ramifications of which often appear to be "defriending" either online or offline.

Marshall McLuhan (1967) was already observing the emergence of this developing social tension in the 1960s. "Inevitably", he writes, "as our electronic technology has extended not simply our bodies but also our nervous systems, we have become more deeply involved in other lives as portions of our own 'unconscious'" (40). He relates this phenomenon elsewhere to his image of the global village, describing how, as people get closer together in this way, "they get more and more savage, impatient with each other....tolerance is tested in those narrow circumstances very much". To this he adds, "The global village is a place of very arduous interfaces and very abrasive situations" (McLuhan 2003: 265). These existential circumstances beg a number of questions, most urgently perhaps: Will it be possible to build reconciliation and constructive relationships between today's polarised factions? And if such relations can be restored, how might this be done without employing the usual remedies through forms of collective violence? (see Rose 2010).

Prior to probing these questions, it might be interesting and helpful first to enquire into the possible origins of ideological polarity. Among the most important sources to do this is Frank Sulloway's 1997 book *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives*. Highly media ecological in its perspective, despite very little direct overlap with the scholars associated with our intellectual tradition, Sulloway records that birth order and the dynamics of the nuclear family appear to be the most salient of all parameters involved in the formation of ideological perspective. In a nutshell, while providing explanations for exceptions that we see to the general rule, as in the case of Donald Trump, he suggests that firstborns tend to be more conservative, a trait that was socially reinforced for generations through the institution of primogeniture, while laterborns tend to become more radical in outlook. He offers a variety of historical examples of social and scientific revolutions, along with the ideological positions that prominent individuals took in relation to these events, and among them he includes the Protestant Reformation, the Darwinian revolution, and various historical political trends, among which is the French Revolution. In short, Sulloway makes a strong case that the movement of history is in great measure a form of sibling rivalry, a concept that of course provides the foundation for a great number of foundational human mythologies.

I wish to focus for most of this probe, however, on a couple of other notable observations with regards to ideological polarity. One of these is the American personality theorist Silvan Tomkins' (1995a) clarification of the role of emotion in ideological perspective, to which he makes reference with his differentiation between *ideological postures* and *ideo-affective postures*. Tomkins identifies the latter as loosely organised feelings and ideas about feelings: We are attracted to or resonate with ideas or ideologies if they appear to validate or verify our own ideo-affective posture. Tomkins identifies two basic positions that exist in polarity on a continuum, and which he contends can be discerned both in antiquity and modernity. These are the postures of humanism and normativism, which tend to correspond to our ideas of left versus right wing ideologies. But we should also note that people can and do experience "ideoaffective resonance" to both normative and humanistic perspectives on any given topic.

Ideo-affective postures acquire shape through our experience of the socialisation of affect, and contrasts in socialisation are reflected in differences in general tolerance or intolerance of most of the primary affects -- enjoyment, excitement, surprise, anger, fear, contempt, shame, and distress. These in turn, Tomkins adds, "determine how positively or how negatively a human being learns to feel about himself and about other human beings. Such learning will also determine his general posture towards the entire ideological domain" (168). As I write, Mary Trump, a clinical psychologist, has just published a book about her uncle, and claims that Trump's father "destroyed" him through his interference in his "ability to develop and experience the entire spectrum of human emotion", limiting his access to his own feelings and "rendering many of them unacceptable". This corresponds overall to the *normative* socialisation of affect, as does Trump's father's reported ongoing "humiliation" of Mary Trump's father, the President's late elder brother of seven years (Trump is a "functional firstborn" in Sulloway's terms).

"The recalcitrance of affects to social and cultural control", according to Tomkins (1995b) "is no more nor less real than their shaping by powerful cultural, historical, and social forces" (56-7), however. And while, like Sulloway, Tomkins emphasises how early experience and particularly parenting influences this development, he attends little to the ways in which communications media help to mould our habits and configure our sensibilities, along with the roles they play in our ongoing socialisation. In contrast, many media scholars, beginning with McLuhan, enquire into the possible homological relationship between ideo-affective polarity and the dominant means of communication. Of course, the physical and symbolic forms of media are central concepts of media ecological analysis, and we commonly talk about the content biases, as well as the intellectual and emotional biases of various media forms. When introducing this concept to outsiders, it might also be useful to think in terms of the *ideo-affective structures* of communications media, and how our socialisation to such technological forms may favour particular ideo-affective postures. We could say, for instance, that non-fiction print tends to be heavier on the ideational while lighter on the affective content, whereas orality and electronic forms, on the whole, tend to be heavier on the affective component and frequently lighter on the ideational (see Rose 2011), though much more substantial content is becoming available every year. McLuhan of course argues that the aural sensory biases of electronic communication forms returned us to the kind of ear dominance that typified an "oral" culture, cultural conditions that Walter Ong later describes as "secondary orality". In this relation, McLuhan (1960) poses the provocative question, and one to which we shall now direct our attention: "is the man of the ear a conservative, and the man of the eye a liberal"?

We are all likely familiar with Postman's analysis of American television, and his proposition that television had become the dominant form of communication in contemporary culture; likewise his argument that the medium is typically incapable of presenting what he terms serious or mature public discourse, since *entertainment* is the "supra-ideology" of all content it

presents. His analysis also makes the case that the conditions of American society have become increasingly ripe for the emergence of a kind of totalitarianism, which leads us back to consideration of the Trumpian moment. Especially given that many people fear that the President will refuse to accept the results of the upcoming election should he lose.

Jeet Heer (2017) appropriately refers to Trump as the first truly television president. Actively using the medium prior to his presidential bid in his show *The Apprentice* to shape how a significant number of Americans came to think of him, the medium reportedly remains his primary means for understanding how Americans think. Apparently watching five hours of television a day on average, particularly the typically belligerent *Fox,* Trump's relationship to television is reflected in his mockery of the low ratings of shows that criticize him, and in his fan-like "shout-outs" to his favourite TV programs. Significantly, Duncan (2016) reports that demographic data on TV viewership illustrate that roughly 60 percent of Trump supporters preferred to receive their news from television instead of reading it online or in print (and *Pew Research* reports that Republicans in general continue to put trust in *Fox* more than any other news source). Compare this with 55 percent of Democrats and 73 percent of Bernie Sanders supporters who express preference for reading about political candidates online or in a newspaper. Tony Schwartz (not that one!), Trump's ghost-writer for *The Art of the Deal* observed that books were never visible in Trump's office or apartment whenever they met. Meanwhile, the President told Megyn Kelly in 2016 when asked to name the last book he had read, "I read passages, I read areas, chapters, I don't have the time", also telling the *Washington Post* that year, "I never have. I'm always busy doing a lot". Accordingly, McLuhan's quip from over half a century ago that "the future of the book is the blurb" echoes resoundingly in Trump's tweets.

Somewhat in contrast to McLuhan, Paul Douglas and Mitch Hescox (2016) assert, "Being open to data, facts and science doesn't make you liberal. It makes you literate". When one encounters a highly literate anti-Trump conservative like David Frum (who also promotes socialised medicine in the United States); or the founding editor of *American Interest*, Adam Garfinkle (2020), writing in *National Affairs* about "The Erosion of Deep Literacy" in reference to the findings of literacy scholar Maryanne Wolf, it is not difficult to see Douglas and Hescox's point. Garfinkle notes that people like Trump, who do not have what Wolf calls the "cognitive patience" necessary for deep reading or for using the deep-reading skills they may have once learned, are also unable to slow down sufficiently to focus quality attention on complex problems, and thereby not able to think about these problems effectively. Of course television viewing by all reports is declining among young people, and, of this, Garfinkle observes, "the new digital technology is democratizing written language and variously expanding the range of people who use and learn from it". Yet studies have emerged finding that participants who read on paper as opposed to on a screen perform better in comprehension, concentration, recall, and absorption. "Populism of the illiberal nationalist kind", Garfinkle nevertheless concludes, "is what happens in a mass-electoral democracy when a decisive percentage of mobilized voters drops below a deep-literacy standard".

Television was a powerful catalyst for creating our post-literate culture, but, as Garfinkle recommends, it is now being supplanted by digital culture. In this way, Trump is a pivotal figure in his enthusiastic use of social media, specifically Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Not unlike television, social media produces a "peek-a-boo" world, and it is, similarly, endlessly distracting since the platforms are engineered to be so. But as Kalev Leetaru (2019) also observes, what has become enormously important too in the new communication age is *information literacy*. "Beneath the spread of all 'fake news,' misinformation, disinformation, digital falsehoods and foreign influence lies society's failure to teach its citizenry information literacy: how to think critically about the deluge of information that confronts them in our modern digital age". Many

studies have demonstrated that the younger generation tends to be better fortified to defend themselves in this regard than are older ones, but Leetaru aptly notes as well that technology companies, rather than emphasising an upgrade to our information literacy, have directed their efforts towards finding technological solutions, employing legions of fact-checkers and other technical methods to confront the problem.

It is interesting, therefore, that Mary Trump also observes that her uncle has a "long-undiagnosed learning disability that for decades interfered with his ability to process information". This seems corroborated by Heer, who notes that the President "has trouble digesting briefing books, so his aides now use 'big pictures' and 'killer graphics' to hold his attention". Like the rising so-called right-wing anti-intellectualism in the United States that he represents ("where being well read and well educated is not to be admired—or even something to aspire to—but rather bestows the black mark of elitism"), Trump also has no respect for scientific expertise. He and the so-called "political right" in general have successfully continued to spin climate change science in recent years, but his efforts have not yet allowed him to achieve the same with the medical sciences and medical expertise: largely in light of the mounting millions of infections and excess of 164,000 American deaths related to Covid 19, an historical event that the President initially labelled "a Democratic hoax". Should he in the coming months succeed in overcoming the authority of medical science, I would conjecture that the future promises to be rather ugly.

Important battles of this nature have already begun within the psychiatric profession. Bandy X. Lee, forensic psychiatrist at the Yale School of Medicine, president of the World Mental Health Coalition, and former research fellow at the National Institute of Mental Health, edited a book called *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 37 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President* (2019). Lee and her collaborators recieved harsh criticism from the American Psychiatric Association for making their pronouncements without personally examining the president. "But we're not speaking about the president's personal mental health", responded Lee. "We're speaking about the effects of his mental pathology and behavior on the public. So we are responding to our public health responsibility, not speaking as the president's personal physician". Like Mary Trump, Lee posits that Trump suffers from psychosis, "a severe condition of mental impairment when you lose touch with reality". Moreover, she argues that although his impeachment proceeded on rational, legal, and political considerations, it simply *presumed* the President's psychological health, or his "mental capacity to consider facts, to think rationally and logically based on reality". In her discussion of why Trump's mental health is of public concern, Lee also refers to the spread of what she terms "shared psychosis"; that is, "when a highly compromised person is exposed to other people who would be otherwise healthy. But because of the close contact, healthy people take on the symptoms of the person who is compromised". In this case, Lee warns against a type of mimetic contagion of Trump's psychotic influence.

In contrast, Heer identifies Trump as being post-literate and post-ideological, insofar at least, as he does not adhere to coherent principles. But Heer likewise agrees that "he doesn't seem capable of grasping what constitutes coherent thought itself". For Heer, the only way that we can resist post-literacy is through our acts of will that involve things like limiting one's media consumption, and immersing oneself "in thoughtful, extended text". Garfinkle adds that though more Americans than ever before are now graduating from four-year colleges, "the distribution of study away from the humanities and social sciences, suggest that a concomitant rise in deep literacy has gone unrealized as the degree factories churn". Especially prone to being "addicted to distraction", moreover, are those "who have never inculcated the discipline that comes with a serious education". That is, by and large of course, the discipline necessary to practise deep reading.

As McLuhan (1964) posits, however, "In the electric age, we wear all mankind as our skin". This reminds us that Trump's devotees are not likely to go away any time soon, and so we will have to coexist. But should our political processes continue to be driven more by emotion than by thought, it is sure to lead to further conflict and even violence rather than to reconciliation. There's of course a theological tinge, to McLuhan's statement not unlike Postman's (1992) invocation of the necessity for us to become "loving freedom fighters". But McLuhan and Postman are simply restating an ancient truth that it is incumbent upon us all to live up to. Presumably, this remains the only route for achieving sustained social harmony, and it is what places the modern world securely on the path of apocalypse.

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