

Inquiring Minds topic – 16 November 2018

Roger Palms, Moderator

How Trumpism Will Outlast Trump

Thought Starters:

1. **Is this simply some type of deep-state fear mongering?**
2. **Did the November 6 midterm election negate or build on what is taught here?**
3. **Was John Boehner correct in saying that the Republican Party no longer exists? Is it now the Trump Party?**
4. **Are we on the cusp of a new and different political age? Will we have a right-wing workers' party?**

On Sept. 27, the mayors of 43 cities—Democrats and Republicans—gathered in a Hilton hotel in Columbia, S.C., for a weekend-long session devoted to things politicians and policymakers say they care about but do very little to fix: infrastructure, homelessness and economic renewal. One of the speakers was a 36-year-old “policy entrepreneur” named John Lettieri, a co-founder of the Economic Innovation Group.

Created in 2013, the group has become a major player in what could be the next phase of the Trump revolution—one that reaches beyond the President in ways that might change the country for decades after he’s left office.

It begins with the story Lettieri tells about the two parties at war in so many ways but alike in the mistakes they keep repeating, especially when it comes to the economy. Consider, he says, the seductive but misleading attraction of employment data. On Oct. 5 the Labor Department reported the economy had added 134,000 new jobs in September and the unemployment rate had plunged to 3.7%, the lowest since 1969. That sounds like good news. But for many jobs there’s a shortage of qualified candidates, which hints at something else—the steady degrading of skills and the country’s failure to adjust to the demands of new technology and overseas competition.

Lettieri is a key figure in a band of intellectuals working to support Trump’s movement long after he leaves power. Too few in number to form a movement, they’re also young and as yet not well known, though some wield surprising influence. One reason is they have big ideas. Another is that they have taken a key lesson of Trump’s rise—the rhetoric of economic populism—and are trying to turn the President’s impulses into a constructive, long-term effort to reform the

American economy. They count among them economists, law-school grads, magazine editors and former Tea Party activists.

These insurgents are starting to find a warm welcome from a rising class of party voices, including Senators Tom Cotton, Ben Sasse and Tim Scott. They point as well to 34-year-old Representative Mike Gallagher from Green Bay, Wis., who was elected in the Trump wave and promptly joined the leadership of the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus.

They've already pushed through a child tax credit that gives money back to American families. They even slipped in new economic-opportunity zones to promote investment in distressed areas into the much derided 2017 tax bill. All these wonky-sounding ideas cut across traditional party lines—and some members of the group even say they're willing to work with Democrats when it comes to things like infrastructure. They have even more ambitious plans to revamp conservative ideas into a new and more humane American right. If they succeed, it may mean the end of the Reagan economic consensus.

These intellectuals are committed to a new economic nationalism looking past Trump to assert a fundamental truth: whatever you think of him, Donald Trump has shown a major failing in the way America's political parties have been serving their constituents. The future of Trump's revolution may depend on whether this young group can help fix the economy.

More than a decade after the subprime-mortgage crisis, which triggered the Great Recession, many of those hit worst are still struggling. "National numbers are less indicative of local realities than at any time in our history," says Lettieri. The trouble is coming in places where elites tend not to look. Lettieri points to ignored "distressed" regions in the South and Appalachia. America's deepening divide begins in overlooked sources of injury and grief. Look away from the coasts, away from the enclaves of wealth, and observe the absence of the labor market "churn" that acts, he says, "as a kind of shock absorber in times of economic trauma."

"Is the American Dream alive or dead?" asks Lettieri. "My response: What ZIP code are we talking about? That's what says the most about whether you have a shot at the American Dream. It's a lottery of birth." For years, he adds, the problem was "just not being addressed by institutional-establishment Washington in either party."

Some in the new cohort are devout Trumpists, some are skeptics, and a few are card-carrying Never Trumpers. All might be termed post-Trumpists, starting from the premise that the forces Trump loosed are here to stay—though not all of them, they hope. Some of the ugliest features are already fading. We haven't heard the last of "alt-right" bigotry, but Trump's nativism, his attacks on allied countries and his confusion on trade don't distract post-Trumpists.

What these millennial conservatives emphasize is the distilled lessons of the 2016 election. Primarily: globalization really has led to a system rigged against blue-collar workers as they watch factories close and jobs shipped overseas. "Trump's message resonates because it should resonate," says Lettieri.

David Azerrad, a 40-year-old Montrealer with a Ph.D. in politics who teaches at American University, is heartily pro-Trump. “Trump is a lightning rod,” Azerrad says. “He arouses such strong passions, and there’s so much about him people don’t like that it makes it hard to look beyond him to get to the truth, both to the ideas he has—and he does have ideas—and also to the currents he’s tapped into.” Most agree with Azerrad’s prediction about Trumpism. “I don’t think there’s going to be a return to normal once he leaves.” And what are Trump’s ideas? “A combination of nationalism and populism” or “right-wing nationalist populism,” says Azerrad, well aware they’re loaded terms.

The larger question about the post-Trump right is whether they will take their ideas all the way. Are they seriously looking to take the best of Trump and rebuild the party into a right-wing “workers’ party” whose core principle is economic populism? If they are, this places them directly at odds with decades of GOP doctrine—and against their party’s current leadership and donor base.

Oren Cass, author of *The Once and Future Worker*, sees Trump as a “cultural marker” and allows that “the problems he put on the table were constructive.” Cass’s book, timed for publication the week after the midterms, could either be the battle orders for a second Trump term or a to-do list for a successor stamped in the same mold. There is no mistaking the Trump-inflected themes of nationalism, populism and criticism of free trade. Cass now wants “to combat the unfair trade practices of nations like China,” which threaten “to reduce opportunities for workers, lower the trajectory of their productivity and diminish the nation’s real prosperity.” He also goes after globalization. Currently “we free employers from the constraints of using the existing domestic workforce,” he writes, “offering them instead an option of using much cheaper foreign workers overseas or bringing the cheaper workers here.” Sanders and Bannon would agree.

Cass’s pro-worker policy includes wage subsidies, a standard conservative alternative to raising the minimum wage. Under one proposal the subsidy would act differently, by diverting tax giveaways enjoyed now by the wealthy—for instance, slashing further the mortgage-interest deduction—and sending that money down the economic stream, supplementing the paychecks of families while also reinforcing their work ethic. What’s striking in Cass’s argument is its unapologetic Robin Hoodism. He dispenses with homilies about morally educating the poor and instead vows to target the rich, “taking tax revenue drawn from higher earners and inserting it directly into the paychecks of lower earners.”

In this is the hint—one the millennials don’t dispute—that Democrats might be easier to work with than die-hards in the GOP. “Chuck Schumer was ready to deal with President Trump”—on infrastructure, for one issue. There were policy and personality differences, but had the sides been serious they could have found common ground. Under a more disciplined, transactional president, it could happen. Imagine the heir to Trump who “finds the four or five most popular things the other side is for and tries to couple them with bipartisan compromises,” one senior Hill staffer told me.

These young conservatives are direct: “The tax bill, the main achievement, was totally plutocratic,” says one. And all agree on the explanation. As one Hill staffer put it, “Trump has been rolled by [Mitch] McConnell and [Paul] Ryan for two years.”

But then the point isn’t Trump himself. It’s translating Trumpism into an enduring movement. “Yes, policy is lagging behind the argument,” says Cass. “But I would go further and say the argument is lagging behind the rhetoric.”

The nearest thing to a prophet of the new movement is Michael Lind, who in the peak Reagan years was one of the right’s most promising young thinkers. But in the 1990s, Lind broke away, mystified that conservatives had let themselves become front men for the GOP, blindly plunging into the moat of supply-side economics. Reaganism created the new Gilded Age, and it is what led ultimately to the revolt under Trump of the Republican base in 2016. Trump’s GOP could implode too. Back then Lind saw a new path in his book *Up from Conservatism* (published in 1996), which proposed “an inclusive, one-nation conservatism,” but free of both bigotry and meanspiritedness.

“A one-nation conservatism in America would not be a vehicle for white resentment,” he wrote. “Even as they repealed affirmative action and racial labeling as offensive to the ideal of a common citizenship, conservatives with a one-nation philosophy would propose new, race-neutral measures by which the government together with business and communities would seek to help the disproportionately nonwhite poor.” And they would be economically liberal.

Lind argued, “Tomorrow’s one-nation conservatives would not oppose every measure to strengthen the rights of workers or to increase wages and benefits for ordinary Americans as ‘socialism’ or as ‘crippling regulation’ which will ‘destroy jobs.’” It is a vision of what might now be called humane Trumpism—or Trumpism with a human face.

But to get there, the millennial conservatives will need to persuade the base. The trick will be remaking the Republican Party into the right-tilting workers’ party of their dreams without collapsing into a new edition of the culture wars.

To get there they will have to overcome not just the entrenched interests atop the GOP but also Trump’s own brand of chaos and confusion. They’ll have to get beyond the darker protests of the nativist, racist “alt right” that Trump has emboldened. “This is a generational challenge,” says one Capitol Hill millennial. They have one distinct advantage: they are young enough to see it through.

- Sam Tanenhaus. *This appears in the October 22, 2018 issue of TIME*