Give us this day our daily outrage

Political Svengalis, not the public, drive populist pantomimes of democracy, says Angela Wilson

Hate Spin: The Manufacture of Religious Offense and Its Threat to Democracy
By Cherian George
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After almost two years of US election campaign coverage, what have we learned from the great exporters of democracy? We have learned that anger at economic inequality runs deep. We have learned that the imminent demographic shift from a white majority to a majority of minorities threatens some to the point of violence. We have learned that misogyny and racism are acceptable political discourse. We have learned that the art of politics is not compromise, or ethical statesmanship or ideological reasoning. The art of politics is winning. Subtlety and reason have given way to polarisation, to us versus other, to loud, unapologetic, dogged hate. We have learned that spinning hate is good strategy.

Samuel Huntington would have us believe that the world is witnessing a clash of civilisations articulated through obstinate religious disputes. In Hate Spin, Cherian George opts for a slightly less grandiose narrative. Religions, he reasons, are not monolithic divisive doctrines but are multivocal and diverse. The contemporary manifestation of religious coherence and political resolution then must be the outcome of strategic cultural framing. Drawing on works from political sociology, he explains that such a strategy encourages the formation of in-groups through the construction of hostile, threatening out-groups. The threat to democracy is not group-based religious fervour but rather the “political entrepreneurs” who construct and manipulate it.

For George, these midwives of populist hate strategically manu-
those with significant hegemonic power as a type of aggression.

One of the “classic” items in the hate spin repertoire, says George, is the challenging of textbooks in schools. He who controls the textbooks controls the political frame for generations. For example, the Alabama-based group ACT for America claims to be offended by mainstream social studies books whose “multicultural approach” allows for the “infiltration of Islamic falsehoods”. Here, George’s evidence just scratches the surface. In Texas, Don McLeroy, chair of the State Board of Education, spent years convincing textbook publishers to include creationism alongside evolution, a tale recounted in the 2012 documentary The Revisionaries. Both Newt Gingrich and William Bennett, Ronald Reagan’s secretary of education, advocate the rewriting of history textbooks to identify America as a Christian nation, rather than one endorsing religious freedom for all.

George’s thesis makes sense. Expressions of “offendedness” from those in power are notable in contemporary political discourse, even here in the UK. Political strategists now hop between democracies offering election advice, and party elites share “good practice”. Building a constituency, an in-group, is easily accomplished by constructing a threat, an out-group. Spinning this hate is just politics by another means. For George, our ambivalence to this state of affairs is the real worry.

Hate spin corrodes the civic values upon which democracy is built. If we are to turn the tide, journalism itself must share the responsibility. In an era marked by the “Fox News effect” of erroneous commentary parading as fact, and more mainstream news driven by frames of conflict and sensationalism, we must learn to embrace a more ethical form of journalism. Alongside this, George calls upon civil society to better articulate the virtues of democracy and a political mobilisation of the middle ground. Faith-based groups must voice more audibly their commitment to civic inclusivity. What we need, and what we all need to be better at, is an “assertive pluralism” that proudly rearticulates the “multicultural, equality-protecting constitutional order”.

If not, George argues, we are doomed to the continued growth of a “deformed version” of democracy that “elevates the popular will above the rights of the individual”. This is the democratic vote minus democratic values, dazzling the many even as it is “blind to the injustices suffered by the few”. In the past two years, we have watched American democracy contort itself into a deformed version of polarized populism, stripped of its modern virtues of inclusivity, equality and social justice. George’s work demonstrates that this is a problem not just for the US, but one facing all developed democracies. The growing propensity for offence-taking by those with hegemonic power, the intensity of the anger whipped up, and the increasing acceptability of hate should worry us all.

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