

Trump and The End of Taken For Grantedness: When the Exception Becomes the Rule

– A Think Piece –

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Introduction

The talk presented at Hughes Hall has been written up as a think piece so as to provide some food for thought and stimulate discussion in light of these extraordinary times in politics. When we were all struggling to come to terms with the result on the morning following the US 2016 elections, some observers tried to make sense of what they saw by describing the results as a 'Black Swan Event'. Typically, a black swan event indicates something out of the ordinary, quite sensational which we try to explain with reference to the exception of the rule (i.e. the overwhelming occurrence of white swans for example).

On 28th January this year *Politico* titles: "Trump the Black Swan Candidate"² and noted: "Immune to the *standard laws* of politics, *Trump* has continued to rise in the polls, replacing the *manageable disorder* of a presidential politics with his *chaos*." And on 12 November this year *Politico* titled "The Black Swan President"³. According to them Trump "became the closest thing to a black swan event we've ever seen in American politics: Statistically unlikely, rationalized only in hindsight—and carrying an impact that could be off the known charts." The reference to a black swan event conjures the eventual return to normalcy, following the black swan disruption. Does this mean that despite the Trump election, all else remains 'normal'? Can – and should – we therefore move on and wait for the exceptional event to pass and politics to return back to 'normal'?

In the following comments I suggest that such a return to normalcy, namely, to the politics and everyday life that had been perceived by the public as 'normal' prior to the elections, is not likely. Quite the contrary is probably the case. I argue that we should instead theorise president-elect Donald Trump's rise to the forefront of not only US American but also world politics as a 'critical juncture' in politics. Different from the exceptional quality of a black swan event, a critical juncture indicates a significant and lasting change (Capoccia and Keleman 2007). This argument is developed with reference to three types of narratives which help making sense of what has happened (i.e. explaining the election outcome in light of the distinct interplay of three narratives, and the possibility of the effect of a critical juncture) and understand the ensuing process of meaning making that

² See: *Politico* 28th January 2016 (emphasis added, AW)
<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/donald-trump-2016-black-swan-213571>

³ See: *Politico* 12 November 2016, at:
<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/donald-trump-president-white-house-policy-black-swan-214450>

was triggered by and has since been driven by wide-ranging discursive engagement with the event (i.e. jumping on Trump's bandwagon and engaging the narrative elsewhere through social media and so on).

The following presents the argument and illustrates the point with reference to the narratives which have been at play, if not always visible to the public. And I conclude that the development can be prevented, only if and when we understand the cause of this success. To demonstrate this, the following summarises the main points of the talk in four steps: the *first* presents the issue of the black swan metaphor; the *second* turns to the concept of narrative; the *third* reconstructs the distinct types of narratives that have been at play, and which therefore offer helpful indicators for comprehending the series of events; and the *fourth* shows, why the events are better understood as a critical juncture, and how to stop this development from becoming reality.

Step I: The Black Swan Metaphor

The “Black Swan” event is a “metaphor to describe unexpected, unprecedented, cataclysmic events that overturn established ways of thinking” (Taleb 2007). It has been characterized by three details namely the unexpected “outlier” event, the unusual in its “extreme impact” and the “post-fact explanatory effort” (see Ibid. Ch. 1).⁴ I argue that, instead of being identified as black swan event, the Trump election needs to be understood as one of series of events indicating that we are at a critical juncture in world politics. While a black swan event is an exception to the rule, it means that following the event, routine will return to settle in. By contrast, a critical juncture leads means that nothing will be quite like it was before, and the move is one towards enduring change. This observation is sustained in view of two Black Swan events referring to a single individual, in a row: remember first, Trump's unexpected nomination by the Republican Party – also considered the Great Old Party – and second, the unexpected election by the American people (if not the majority of the votes, but the majority of the pledged electors). Effectively, this means that what was considered as ‘normal’ and was therefore taken-for-granted yesterday may not be valid today.

⁴ Notably, “Donald Trump's transition team is getting a helping hand from the Obama administration on national security matters. The administration is giving the president-elect and a select few of his top advisers sensitive intelligence briefings.” And, in addition, “Trump and his team will take part in *two so-called 'black swan' exercises* that simulate a domestic or national security emergency.”⁴ Notably, both are, once again, meant to be exceptional instances, an interruption of the rule.

But how does this work, given that the definition of ‘normalcy’ as something that has taken time to be constituted through social interaction within a close-knit group or community? According to social scientists, the result is ‘shared social recognition’ that establishes a norm’s ‘appropriateness’ (March and Olson 1989; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). That is, the validation of a norm is ‘habitual’ rather than legal or contested (Wiener 2017a). Due to the perceived normalcy of a norm (or a standard, value or practice) no further discussion required. After all, the very term ‘norm’ refers to the existence of an ‘unwritten rule’ which turns into a social fact.⁵ Surely, then an established custom cannot change or be changed within a day? Assuming that this should be possible, poses a puzzle for norms research. In the following I suggest that this change was in fact possible because of a context in which *two narratives* co-existed. Notably, however, this narrative background has gone largely unnoticed.

II The Concept of Narrative

“(N)arratives are frameworks that allow humans to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation” (Todorov 1977: 44, cited in Miskimmon et al. 2013a: 5). A narrative helps connecting experience through sense making. And, a narrative constructs an environment of normalcy through meaning making. According to narrative theory it is helpful to distinguish among different types of narratives including a ‘first-order’ narrative and a ‘second order narrative’. Accordingly, in the following I “distinguish between (a) first- and second-order narratives and (b) the procedural and structural dimension of narrative” (Wilkens et al. 2016).

As the following will illustrate in more detail, in this particular case the first order narrative – about the ‘forgotten white working class’ was constructed through the Trump campaign and the Sanders Campaign. In turn, the second order narrative – about sustainable liberal community based on liberal values that trump all else – was constructed by the middle-classes and academia. In addition, it is important to notice the distinct interplay between these larger narratives as the background structure against which individual narratives are developed with reference to personal background experience. Thus, the larger normative societal

⁵ Examples of such share norms which have been constituted and only become visible when outside one’s own community – when norms clash are: jay-walking in New York, but not in Berlin; shaking hands vs. kissing cheeks or feet (as distinct forms of greeting); buying rounds in a pub; expecting a contract to be signed vs. accepting the spoken word (UK / AUS – vs. Germany), queuing vs. queue-jumping (consider that in the UK a person who was viewed as a queue-jumper was killed by another person in supermarket) and so on.

structure and the socio-cultural everyday stories are intersected: “story-telling agents do not develop narratives in a social vacuum, but are always already constrained by other agents and structures in a web of plural narratives” (Gadinger et al. 2014). This view follows Anthony Giddens’ putative definition of the socially constructed quality of narratives, noting that “agents are narratively constituted through their individual stories about oneself, yet also through stories that are narrated about agents by others in society” (Wilkens et al. 2016: 7).

Importantly, “the effect of narratives depends on the actor, goals, strategies of legitimation, as well as on the broader societal environment. The latter is perceived as narratively constructed and therefore allowing for certain stories to resonate more or less with a given society”. (Miskimmon et al. 2013b) According to Krebs “structures of meaning and competition over meaning are central to social (including political) life” (Krebs 2015). And drawing on sociology of knowledge in IR Theory since 1990s, Maines holds that “important contributions have focused on what can be called second-order narratives based on insights from double hermeneutics (Jackson 2006; Hofius et al. 2014; Guzzini 2000; Giddens 1984). These emphasize the need to critically inquire patterns of scientific re-production of social reality and the significance of academic knowledge production” due to the role of “sociologists as narrators” (Maines 1993).

It follows that three practices are at work (compare **Table 1**): *first*, human beings as story-telling agents (Wilkens et al. 2016: 6) try to make sense of their own everyday lives; *second*, academics and intellectuals generate second-order narratives to be constitutive for long-lasting ideational and institutional frames; and *third*, a further plurality of narrative processes are constructed in political and societal contexts as first-order narratives (Wilkens et al. 2016: 7).

Table 1: Narratives

	Narrative Type	Agency	Narrative n	Narrative n+1
1	<i>First Order</i>	Public & Media		
2	<i>Second Order</i>	Academics & Intellectuals		
3	<i>Master Narrative</i>	1 + 2		

While they may occur at the same time, sometimes overlapping, sometimes opposing each other, these three types of practices may or may not be consciously interrelated. To ‘see’ them, is therefore a major advantage and a potential game-changer in politics.

III: How Do Narratives Work? Which Narratives Are At Play?

In the US elections (as well as the Brexit referendum in the UK) three narratives are at play. The elections therefore demonstrate a situation when two sets of background experience (Outsider vs. Liberal) clash, and only one of them overlaps with the narrative that individuals construct about themselves (Outsider). The general over-arching theme of these two sets of background experience is distinguishable as the 'Angry Outsider' vs. the 'Pragmatic Liberal' narrative, respectively. Notably, the both the Angry Outsider and the Pragmatic Liberal narrative carry weight beyond the borders of the United States of America. And it is this background that constitutes a reference frame for political decision-making based on referendums which has proven to be a slippery slope at best and politically dangerous at worst, for its leaning towards populist politics. I will return to this point in the following section. For now, the narratives' central focus is summarised as follows.

Angry Outsider Narrative: As David Runciman rightly notes, to explain why so "many people who reported themselves alarmed by the idea of a Trump presidency also voted for him" it helps understanding the "Clinton camp made a basic error in choosing to target Trump's obvious character flaws as the reason to keep him out of the White House. It's not as if those flaws were hidden." (Runciman 2016: 5). But people voted for Trump, because he carried the narrative of the angry outsider that promised 'change'. And Donald Trump was able to tap into the first order narrative that matched those 'angry white male' voters. Bernie Sanders has equally tapped into the 'angry outsider' narrative when addressing young voters who had felt left out by the 'pragmatic liberal' narrative (presumably, and reportedly of the Hillary Clinton campaign). While coming from almost opposite political positions with regard to the traditional political spectrum, effectively, both Trump and Sanders came out as contesting the leadership of the 'elites' that were in government, or which incidentally had any prior links to governing elites (such as Hillary Clinton). The 'angry outsider' narrative was clearly opposed to the 'pragmatic liberal' narrative.

Pragmatic Liberal Narrative: This narrative focussed on the core constitutional values of Western democracies including those that had been developed through progressive liberal politics over time. The liberal narrative has been built in a gradual and ongoing process, reflected by institutions, and its core values and fundamental norms have been taken for granted. In the domestic context of the United States the liberal pragmatic narrative was considered as reflecting the 'normal' way of everyday life by middle class voters (i.e. including respect of the American constitution and the core liberal values and norms it protects; access to

education; and so on). This narrative is shared by the relatively well to do middle class income groups among both the Democrats and Republican voters in the US, and – importantly – it is also shared by the middle classes elsewhere.⁶

Liberal Community Narrative: In the international environment, a liberal community organised through multilateral treaty regimes with the United Nations (UN) and the related institutional setting at the centre, academics regularly speak of the OECD community or the liberal community of states and so on (for a critical assessment of this discourse compare Wiener and Vetterlein 2013). A central defining element of this liberal community narrative rests on the assumption that fundamental liberal norms (i.e. democracy, human rights and the rule of law) are implemented by various treaty regimes under international law and that these are by and large followed by member states (Koh 1997). Over the past decades, these norms have become taken for granted. An increasing amount of critical warnings (i.e. from IR theory, legal anthropology, post-colonial studies or other critical views) have been widely under-appreciated by the mainstream literature. Calls for a return to a global politics that puts sovereignty first demonstrate contending reactions to the liberal community assumption. Examples of a renewed interest to emphasise this strategy include state behaviour displaying contestation of norms that social constructivists had thought were taken-for-granted, especially in the post-cold war decades. These contestations range from latent to open contestation of fundamental liberal norms such as human rights, the rule of law, and democracy as well as the torture taboo, the non-interventions principle and so on. Notably, the liberal community narrative in the global realm entails a second-order narrative and a master narrative. Both constitute the background against which the Trump win implies a critical juncture. The following illustrates this interplay of narratives. To that end, distinct types of narratives are distinguished first.

Over the past decades the liberal community narrative, known as a second order narrative (i.e. fabricated through academic and intellectual discourse as opposed to the public) on the one hand, and the first order narrative (i.e. fabricated through politics and the media), on the other, have merged into a long lasting ‘master narrative’. This master narrative centres on the firm belief of multilateralism with the UN at the centre, i.e. a Kantian as opposed to a Hobbesian vision of a liberal community of states. In late modern world politics both the scholarly community and the public as presented by the media have become quite comfortable working with the assumption of a liberal community

⁶ NB: We may find that the pollsters worked with the basic assumptions that ‘fit’ the norms of this liberal narrative i.e. in the way they approached voters for data about their respective choice. This remains to be demonstrated based on more detailed empirical follow-up research, however.

of states. The long-time centre of this community has been the United States as the leading liberal power. Equally familiar is the qualification of those members of the liberal community of states whose performance leaves margin for improvement with regard to the fundamental liberal norms upon which this community is founded. Accordingly, those member states which lack in compliance or otherwise deviate from the liberal standard are considered 'rogue states'; and those who have not achieved a stable political government are defined as 'failed states'. They are studied and conceptualised as exception from the - liberal community - rule.

By contrast, the new first order narrative has been constituted through the discourse of politicians that emphasises preference for a politics that puts 'sovereignty first'. A good example is the preference of the BRICS states for the principle of "responsibility *while* protecting" (RwP) as opposed to the liberal community's UN supported principle of "responsibility *to* protect" (R2P). The former stresses that sovereign states act responsibly when protecting human rights vis-à-vis atrocities, in turn the latter emphasises a multilateral policy to enact a shared principle within the UN setting (Stünkel 2012; Welsh 2013; Gholiagha 2014). Notably, however, many of the UN member states were not politically organised according to the modern institutions that had established the authority of European nation-states (Tilly 1975), nor had they been founded on the same principles. Accordingly and importantly, the cultural heritage of the often – not quite correctly – labelled "Global North" on the one hand, and the "Global South" on the other, does not constitute the same liberal community narrative. If often rightly disputed, the latter remain the 'others', and have been called the Global 'rest' in opposition to the Global West (Noesselt 2014).

As postcolonial studies have repeatedly noted, the question whose norms count remains to be redefined (Dussel 2003; Acharya 2004). The current defection of African states from the International Criminal Court; the proposal to change R2P to RwP (led by Brazil, Russia and India); and the contested compliance with the European Union's foundational principles of free movement, democracy and the rule of law on behalf of an increasing number of central and eastern European member states that had joined the European Union following the end of the cold war sustain a return to 'sovereignty' as a Hobbesian meta-norm of international law. The development reveals that two narratives are at play: first the liberal community narrative (as a first order, and a second order narrative), and second the sovereignty first counter-narrative (as a first order narrative). In effect the conjunction of the first and second order narrative has formed a liberal community 'master narrative' ('liberal elites') that now stands increasingly opposed by outsiders ('angry outsiders').

Table 2: Narratives

	Narrative Type	Agency	Narrative 1	Narrative 2
1	<i>First Order</i>	Public & Media	Pragmatic Liberals	Angry Outsiders
2	<i>Second Order</i>	Academics & Intellectuals	Liberal Community	-
3	<i>Master Narrative</i>	1 + 2	Liberal Values	-

Trump's campaign slogan "Make America Great Again" fits seamlessly into the latter narrative. Notably: Even though his own life-style does not reflect a lack of financial means, it does reflect that of a 'rogue' and an 'outsider'. Many of the 'working poor' and/or the 'angry outsiders' were able to related to that based on their own individual experience (individual narrative): Effectively, Trump's campaign jelled with both the individual narrative and the angry outsider narrative (fabricated by himself and Sanders) that was set up against the liberal master narrative the Hillary campaign and the middle classes. Discursively speaking, therefore, Trump's victory did not come as a surprise.

IV: A Critical Juncture and How to Avoid It

A Critical Juncture?

As noted above, given that Trump's first order narrative fell on fertile ground, the election result should be understood as critical juncture, rather than a back swan event. According to Capoccia and Keleman a critical juncture is defined as a "relatively short period(s) of time during which there is a substantially heightened probability that agents' choices will affect the outcome of interest." It is a "dual model of institutional development characterized by relatively long periods of path-dependent institutional stability and reproduction that are punctuated occasionally by brief phases of institutional flux—referred to as critical junctures—during which more dramatic change is possible" (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007: 341). The concept has been developed in the field of comparative political science, especially (new) institutionalism. It defines a break with the expected institutional path, resulting in a change of the established ways of being including principles, norms, institutions, political leadership and then, subsequently, policies and so on. It works out due to an enabling interplay between discourse (the three narratives' highlighted above) on the one hand, and the changing leadership role in all four major Us political institutions: Supreme Court, House, Senate, Government, on the other.

In sum, a critical juncture constitutes “a situation that is qualitatively different from the ‘normal’ historical development of the institutional setting of interest” (Capoccia and Keleman 2007: 348). This implies that, if the election outcome does present a critical juncture, then the choices taken at this time are likely to have a “lasting impact” (Ibid.) While both the ‘black swan event’ and the ‘critical juncture’ are defined as “rare events”, “critical junctures are rare events in the development of an institution” compared to “the normal state of an institution” which is “either one of stability or of constrained, adaptive change.” (Ibid.: 368) The institution in question regarding the Trump win is the US presidency, and relatedly, the process and routine practices of running the US government.

Applying and Developing Discursive Means: “The Pen is a Mighty Sword”⁷

The most important strategy to that end comes in the shape of firm and decisive discursive interventions in order to defend the fundamental rights that matter in order to maintain democratic institutions and practices of governance. Trump’s angry outsiders narrative built on the Sanders campaign, and in opposition to the three liberal narratives (compare **Table 2**). The current challenge for those who were surprised by voters choosing Trump in the US elections, the question is now, whether or not the Trump win leads to a critical juncture. The argument this short think piece sought to make is that, unless stopped in his ways, a critical juncture leading to lasting institutional change is imminent. As **Table 2** indicates, this change is likely to happen, if and when the two empty slots in the ‘Narrative 2’ column are not populated by matching second order and master narratives, respectively. The leading question is therefore whether the ‘angry outsider’ narrative can become a master narrative, and, relatedly, with which means this development might be stopped.

According to Capoccia and Kelemen, the analysis of critical junctures with reference to the concept of narratives requires two things: (1) “Narratives should specify not only the decisions and actions that were taken but also those that were considered and ultimately rejected, thus making explicit the close-call counterfactuals that render the critical juncture “critical.” (2) “Narratives should reconstruct the consequences of the decisions that were taken and (as much as the available data allow) the likely consequences of those that could plausibly have been taken but were not.” (Ibid. 2007: 357)

If we take the narrative as the background structure, a change in the process is likely to be most successful when employing the same – discursive – means.

⁷ This was Jim Tully’s headline for an article on Quentin Skinner’s work (Tully 1983).

Importantly, this power of the 'angry outsider' narrative thrives from multiplication and repetition, therefore quotations and retweets should be carefully considered and sparingly applied. The stronger course of action to take follows positive arguments that defend the values citizens used to take for granted (believing in the liberal narrative) and therefore rarely addressed and actively defended. To prevent the outsider narrative from gaining popular ground in the US and beyond, therefore, it is important to understand that considering fundamental rights as taken for granted may be the beginning of a slippery slope. And to reverse the process, the agents involved in constructing narratives – for example politics and public sphere agents (first order) and academia and intellectuals (second order) are advised to work together in order to support the defence of fundamental rights on a global scale.

The following summarises a few exemplary points which are at the centre of this proposed discursive engagement (for this strategy compare also the very helpful recommendations for 20 steps to stop Trump offered by Timothy Snyder).⁸

First Order Narrative Agents: Politics and Public Discourse

- Name the changes that occur for what they are: 'fascist gestures', 'hate speech', 'white supremacy' and so on.⁹
- Defend your rights while being open to diversity (of stakeholders and meanings).
- Do make sure, however, that the rights discourse offers a sound and plausible enabling narrative, i.e. indicating which rights, how the work, what they mean, and how they are realised.

Second Order Narrative Agents: Academia and Intellectuals

- Recall the origins of universal validity claims of fundamental norms with reference to the diversity of stakeholders and meanings. Incorporate better research on diversity and the accommodation of diversity with regard to universal validity claims of core fundamental rights (such as human rights, democracy, equality and the rule of law). Yet, rights are not a universal given insofar as universal validity claims are always devised against a socio-cultural context.
- Recall the history of treaty making, e.g. the 'Westphalian Order' has long been sustained and re-constituted by liberal theories who never considered that

⁸ Published in *Quartz* 1 December 2016: <http://qz.com/846940/a-yale-history-professors-20-point-guide-to-defending-democracy-under-a-trump-presidency/>

⁹ Compare Jürgen Habermas in *Blätter für deutsche and internationale Politik* (2016), and in English: in *Social Europe* 17 November 2016: For A Democratic Polarisation: How To Pull The Ground From Under Right-Wing Populism, Details: <https://www.socialeurope.eu/2016/11/democratic-polarisation-pull-ground-right-wing-populism/#>

order as 'contested', but who worked with that order as 'given' instead. Identify the environment in which they were generated, and where they are implemented; for example, reconsider reifying 'Westphalian Order' without defining the details; i.e. consider the Treaty of Westphalia 1648 was signed by the involved parties in Münster and Osnabrück, and the implications for territorial boundaries of sovereign states; the independence of decision-making, and the importance of borders (Wilkens et al. 2016). Note the contingency of treaty making (e.g. treaties and treaty enlargements usually include a related conditionality that applies to newcomers, this is likely to feed or reflect the 'angry outsider' narrative)

- Who are legitimate parties to a treaty, and what are their respective rights and possibilities to change a fundamental norm? What are possibilities and constraints for norm-ownership?

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