

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO AMERICA? A reflection on America's cultural changes

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PREFACE

I am writing these notes in the immediate aftermath of the 2024 presidential elections which saw the surprising net victory of the Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump, in an attempt to answer a question addressed to me by one of my old-time friends living in Italy, *"What is happening to America?"*. My immediate answer was: "America has changed, it is not what you think it is, or it was". Spending the past 36 years of my life in the Bronx, NY, after leaving my native country with my wife and our three young children aged from 8 to 13 years old, I saw for myself how much my adoptive country has changed in the last three or so decades. My neighborhood, the Bronx, now looks quite different from what it was on September 6, 1988, when we relocated here. The skyline of New York looks almost unrecognizable, since the fall of the World Trade Center back on September 11, 2001.

These visible changes are easy to identify by physical observation, but others are more difficult to detect, such as the cultural transformations that America has gone through, as part of the post-modern era. Yet, they can explain, among others, the surprising recent upturns that America has lately gone through, such as the assault on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, the crowd shouting *"Defund the Police"* following the killing of a black man by the police, the destruction of several of the historical national monuments by a ferocious crowd and, finally, the recent unexpected electoral results of November 2024.

The intent of this essay is to delve into the cultural changes that America has gone through in the era of post modernity and into some of their impacts on society. For this purpose, I will employ a multidisciplinary methodological approach, especially inspired by socio-philosophical and theological sources, in addition to my personal experience gained in the course of living for more than three decades in the US.

INTRODUCTION

How is it possible that America, considered the founder and the cradle of modern democracy, as envisioned by the founding fathers, has chosen for a second time as president, a man already convicted of a felony and still under pending indictments, and considered by many as a *tyrant, a woman hater, a neo-Nazi*? The former first lady Michelle Obama, during her speech pronounced in Kalamazoo, MI, one of the so-called "swing states", labeled Trump a *convicted felon, a scam lord, a predator*¹. Even the same elected Vice-president Vance back in October 2016 before becoming one of his most enthusiastic followers, labeled Trump as an *idiot*.

In spite of his criminal indictments and of several influential Republicans, including the well-known actor and former Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger who endorsed Kamala Harris for president, crossing the party line, Donald Trump has won beyond any optimistic projections, even unthinkably gaining considerable numbers of votes among minority groups, who have historically been faithful to the Democratic Party.

History shows that these kinds of questions are not new to humankind. Back in the V Century BC, the founder of critical history, Thucydides, embarked on an account of the Peloponnesian wars, motivated by a question of this kind: *How is it possible that Athens, the cradle and champion of democracy has engaged in such savage imperialistic wars* which, by the way, started its decadence to the point that soon after the end of the war, it condemned to death the wisest of its sons, Socrates?

If there *"is nothing new under the sun"*², emulating a biblical sentence pronounced thousands of years ago but still intact in its eschatological vision, it is also true that we need to be able to read the signs of the present times which may explain the social behavior of our contemporaries. I believe that the

surprising outcome of the 2024 American elections can be a good occasion to reflect on the cultural changes of our post-modern society, in a way that may provide an explanation, over and beyond any contingencies, to the above-mentioned questions.

BASIC FACTS³

The Republican candidate Donald Trump won the 2024 presidential elections securing 312 electoral votes against the 226 of his opponent Kamala Harris, a margin larger than anyone had expected. Trump also won the popular vote, differently from what happened in his previous presidential victory over Hillary Clinton in 2016. Trump won in all the seven, so-called swing states, including the ones captured by President Biden in 2020: Georgia, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Wisconsin, Michigan, Arizona, and Nevada. More surprisingly, Trump made gains even among minority groups such as Black men and Latinos. Particularly, Latino voters swung toward Trump by 25 percentage points. Latino men shifted their vote in favor of Trump by a record of 54% against 36%, compared with the previous elections of 2020. Also, it is significant that Trump gained support from young Black men: 3 in 10 Black men under the age of 45 went for Trump, roughly doubling the number he secured in 2020. Furthermore, Trump made gains also among women, in spite of his reputation of being a misogynist or even worse a rapist, as women supported Kamala Harris in smaller numbers than her Democratic predecessors. While Hillary Clinton won women by 13 points in 2016 and Joe Biden by 15 in 2020, Kamala won women's votes only by 10 points, unexpectedly underperforming any forecast. As for the young people aged 18-30, Trump made significant gains among them, winning 56% of their vote, compared to 41% in 2020. As per the Catholic vote, Trump won the national vote by a 15-point margin: 56% to 41%. The shift represents a 10-point swing in his

favor as compared with the 2020 election results. The Republican victory came to a total completion by securing a majority both in the US Senate and in the House of Representatives, paving the way for possible institutional reforms, as envisioned by Trump.

Lastly, it is imperative to consider why a vast portion of eligible voters did not exercise their right to vote. Historically, Americans have been notorious absentees from the voting booth, averaging 50% of eligible voters, creating a silent enigmatic majority for too long ignored by the public square. Nevertheless, starting with the tight, electorally-inflamed campaigns of the last decade and the improvements introduced in the bureaucratic electoral system, there had lately been a growth in attendance at the polls. The highest recorded attendance happened in the elections of 2020 with a percentage of effective voters that reached 65%. However, this is not an only American phenomenon, as it denotes a disaffection and mistrust of the present political systems around the world, especially in the Western democratic societies, a worrisome sign for the future of democracy.

REACTIONS

The net result in favor of Trump caught both of the opponent parties by surprise. For the Republicans, there was double reason to celebrate for their victory and for its greater than expected size. As to the reactions of the Democrats, as the poll results were being disclosed, they passed from a sort of troubledness to disbelief and consternation. Almost all of their projections were not fulfilled.⁴ After an embarrassing silence, the Democrat leaders started to speak out: while Kamala Harris compulsorily conceded the defeat, Nancy Pelosi, notably one of the most authoritative voices of the party, attributed the loss to President Biden, allegedly guilty for not having stepped down from the presidential campaign sooner than he actually did. Proponents of the Democratic Party had already raised serious doubts about Biden's fitness to engage in a new presidential mandate, given his age and his growing senility. Biden was later forced to step down from the presidential campaign by the establishment of his own party, contradicting what he had publicly declared a few days before his

renunciation that he was very willing and fit to run for a new presidential campaign. That humiliating treatment did not go unnoticed by some observers such as the influential television host and political commentator, Trevor Noah, who did not hesitate to broadcast: "*We treated President Biden like a S#T..*", a statement that was followed by a huge applause.⁵

Others attributed the defeat of Harris to the cultural prejudices historically typical of the American society, particularly *racism and sexism*. Here we are again, when Americans had the real chance to elect as their president a colored minority woman, at the last moment they dropped her in favor of a reputed "*rapist and racist*", a white man. However, these serious historically repeated criticisms do not explain why so many minorities, and particularly the Latino men but also not a few of young voters including Blacks, preferred Trump rather than their own ethnic and gender candidate. Have these people lost their mind and started to self-harm? Or are there some other valid, overlooked, reasons for their radical shift? These and similar questions have convinced a certain number of the Democratic representatives to call for self-criticism, in a similar way to that of the Republican Party in the aftermath of the election victory of Barak Obama back in 2012, when they called a convention known as the Party autopsy.

While the consciousness of the need for change is to be viewed in a positive way, there is the necessity that this kind of autopsy has to be done beyond the immediate electoral interest, in order not to run the risk of being characterized by superficial conclusions. It is my strong opinion that what has happened to America in these recent years, not dissimilarly but distinctly from other similar societies, can find an explanation in critically observing the cultural transformation of our Western society since the aftermath of WWII. To facilitate this analysis, I would reformulate the question that I have often heard "*how*" is it that America has chosen such a person to represent them for the second time into a: "*why*"? these surprising transformations have occurred, in an attempt to explore structural long term causes, rather than contingent features, even if the latter is

not to be undervalued, such as the loss of purchasing power caused by the recent high inflation rate and the issue of illegal immigration, factors that certainly have influenced the results of the present and of past elections.

CULTURAL CHANGES

Traditional Values in Crisis

As to the cultural changes that have occurred in recent times, it is pretty evident that American society is not any longer characterized by the once established Judeo-Christian tradition based on a trilogy principle: God, family, and country. As per the first aspect, even though America still appears more religiously oriented than its traditional European Christian counterparts, there is no doubt that the fear of the Lord has lost its appeal. Even though the self-declared atheists still appear to be a minority, the majority of the population believe and function as de facto atheists or agnostics, avoiding and/or ignoring the existence of God. Recent surveys⁶ have revealed that many Americans self define as spiritual but not religious, reflecting the primacy of individuality typical of a highly consumeristic society, translated into: *I believe just what I think it is right and/or works for me; or, I have my god; religious institutions don't represent or interest me.*

Let us not forget that the founding fathers who conceived the American nation under God mostly reflected the Enlightenment idea of the divinity known as Deism, according to which God is recognized as the creator but not as a providential actor in history. In this sense they were more inspired by the Roman Republic which practiced the cult of the gods as a *civil religion*. Typical in this respect is the interpretation of the American sociologist Robert Bellah, who has claimed that religion in America is essentially civil religion.⁷ In other words, the founding fathers appealed to religion as a necessary moral precaution against the misuse of liberty, conscious that in a democratic society, freedom is not immune from deteriorating into a loose license and/or into a manipulation of power by a corrupt majority. It is meaningful the answer attributed to a celebrated American founding father, Benjamin Franklin: "*responding to Elizabeth Willing Powell's question: 'Well, Doctor, what have we got, a*

As per the family, the disintegration of the traditional family typical up to the fifties and early sixties, composed of a man and a woman with their biological children, is an evident fact. Actually, this kind of family has disappeared entirely in many places in the country. This is also my personal experience working for more than fifteen years in a poor neighborhood of the Bronx as a social worker. In that span of time among my family clients I could only count fewer than ten cases which could fit in the traditional category!

Emerging New Patterns

"I don't recognize my country any longer", I heard a respected, well-cultured old lady tell me, living in what was once considered an upper middle-class neighborhood in Manhattan, NY, and which is now inhabited by gay couples and a growing Spanish-speaking population. This statement may just appear a

America is not new to the experience of a pluralistic society; for a long time its growth has experienced continuing

confrontations between cultures, being often labeled as a “*melting pot*”, yet these took place under the dominance of a cohesive and solid middle class that largely shared the heritage of Judeo-Christian values that had assured stability under prosperity. Now the situation seems changed, since the dominant shared culture does not exist any longer and people, starting with the younger generations, follow the trends of the present moment, characterized by continuing changes. Other factors have



also contributed to arriving at this unstable situation as defined by the well-respected sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in his work, *Liquid modernity*¹¹, a concept also commented on by Pope Francis in his last Encyclical *Dilexit Nos* (-He-Loved Us).¹²

In this context of instability, caused by continuing rapid changes and the contemporaneous loss of traditional religious values, a prevailing culture has emerged, characterized by an *indifferent existentialism*, only subjugated by “*the omnipresent technocratic paradigm*”, as quoted by Pope Francis¹³. A new kind of practical agnosticism has evolved in society, where the question of the existence of God is nonexistent.¹⁴ The enormous progress made by modern technology has contributed to creating unlimited confidence in the capacity of the technological paradigm to solve all the problems of human existence. While recognizing that issues still remain unsolved, there is nevertheless confidence that technology can unravel them, as for example the emerging ideology of Transhumanism tends to believe. In this context it seems that post-modern man places trust only, as noted by Del Noce¹⁵, in technology, in progress, not understood as the advent of justice, but only as a fact linked to the immediate present.

The exclusive trust in technological progress, conceived as technocratic scientism, has contributed to erasing the idea of God in large sections of post-war society, already behaving in an atheist-agnostic way, yet still anchored to pseudo-Christian values, transforming the natural religiosity of the past into a *natural irreligion of the present*. While in the past the idea of the divine was so natural that it was widely unquestioned, today it has become natural to exclude a priori that idea and even less the intervention of God in history. In this current context, it no longer makes sense to question the existence of a transcendent being.

The denial of the transcendental, accompanied by an exclusive trust in technological progress has contributed, among other things, to the growth of a relativistic mentality, typical of our time, as noted by Pope Francis in his Encyclical “*Laudato Si*” (*Praised be*)

A deviant anthropocentrism gives rise to a deviant lifestyle. When

*human beings place themselves at the center, they end up giving absolute priority to their contingent interests, and everything else becomes relative. Therefore, it should not be surprising that, together with the omnipresence of the technocratic paradigm and the adoration of limitless human power, this relativism develops in subjects in which everything becomes irrelevant if it does not serve their immediate interests.*¹⁶

The growth of relativism is particularly worrisome as, on one hand, it tends to deconstruct the previous foundations of society and, alternatively, promotes the already widespread forms of individualism, partisanship and tribalism. They, in their turn, are evolving into forms of populism and totalitarianism in obvious contradiction to relativistic principles, as wisely observed by Benedict XVI by the expression: “*the dictatorship of relativism*”¹⁷.

It should not be a surprise if, within such a cultural context, new intolerant ideologies surge and grow. Among them we can include: gender theory, extreme feminism, or *third wave feminism*, and extreme anti-racism, or *Woke racism*, also known as *Third way anti-racism*¹⁸. These and similar ideologies differ from the American Civil rights movements of the ‘60s and ‘70s which were substantially aiming at giving access to the mainstream for the minority groups by removing the de facto restrictions imposed by a discriminatory white majority. The famous motto “*I have a dream*” of Rev. Martin Luther King, was not meant to eliminate the existing establishment, but rather to reform it in order to expand full access to the already existing rights and standard of living, typical of the white middle class of that time, to all.

Differently from the civil rights movements, the new postmodern collectives, which have embraced the above-mentioned and similar ideologies, tend to think and act in a dogmatic and intolerant way to the point that those who disagree with them, or are even just indifferent to them, are considered *women haters*, *violent racists*, *pedophiles*, *white supremacists* and so on. It is interesting in this regard that John McWhorter, being himself a black man, writes in his work, *Woke Racism*: “Why are black people so upset about one

white cop killing a black man when black men are at much more danger of being killed by one another?”¹⁹ Significantly, the populist movement *Black Lives Matter* – BLM – and the protest which sprang up after the killing of the black man, George Floyd, by a white police officer, epitomized the slogan: *Defund the Police*. The civil rights movements of the past did not ask for the elimination of the police, essential in any society and especially in America where the homicide rate overshadows the equivalent statistic of any similar country, but the present protest movements have promoted it, not rarely backed by violent manifestations. Similarly to the post-Soviet Union era that saw the crowds pulling down the statues and symbols of the old regime, we have seen here in this country, the new social justice seekers pulling down statues that represent the historical establishment of the American past.

Woke Racism, according to McWhorter, has created a new religion that considers so-called *white privilege* a new original sin, a kind of reverse racism itself, as it judges you for what you are rather than what you do. If you are white, “you are a racist, and if you say you aren’t, it just proves that you are”²⁰. Similarly, Extreme feminism tends to consider you as a woman-hater if you do not support “reproductiverights” in the way they define it, or a rapist just because you are male. Likewise, Gender theory considers you transphobic if you do not acquiesce to their point of view, and that you have committed a hate crime just by mentioning your opinion, with the consequence of the suppression of freedom of speech and of religion. Parents cannot oppose or even say that they do not agree with the hypersexual education programs active in many public schools that even some religious institutions have adopted in a submissive conformity to the post-modernist secular credo.

To ordinary people, independent from their race, gender, ethnicity and credo, these extreme attitudes are unrealistic, unfair, and dangerous. No wonder that Democrats, who have supported those alleged rights, have lost many voters among the male electorate, and also among women and minorities, in favor of their conservative opponent, Donald Trump.

Decline or Transition of the American Dream

The emphasis in this article on the cultural trends that have occurred in this country is not meant to exclude the relevant influence on the voters' choice of economic reasons. The American working class has felt abandoned especially by its traditional political ally, the Democratic Party. Instead of backing the *politically correct* culture and *creating unrealistic expectations for undocumented or illegal immigrants*, the Democratic party should have paid more attention to the semi-forgotten Americans faced to confront high inflation and the housing crisis with diminished purchase power, all of which making it very difficult for the children and grandchildren of the baby boomers to buy their own home, a typical symbol of the American dream. Even worse, rural America has felt abandoned, left to live with reduced public services, such as essential medical assistance, because of the lack of profitability of the medical private insurers when operating in areas of low-density population. Paradoxically, these people have seen in Trump – a millionaire, a macho, a so-called rapist – the one who, nevertheless, has paid attention to their impaired conditions and has promised to *Make America Great Again* of which the acronym, *MAGA*, has become a symbol of resurgence.

These factors merit serious considerations that cannot be developed in this short essay but are indicative enough not to view the recent electoral results as an incomprehensible event. It suffices to say that the majority of Americans do not want to abolish the Police department or to be submissive to the far-left Wing positions of the Democratic Party on race, gender, and abortion on demand. Relying on old-style categorizations, like sexism and racism, are insufficient to understand and explain the present political reactions of the average American. New factors have intervened and complicated the picture. Relying on past standards does not help us in understanding the post-modern, multifaceted society as it presents itself nowadays in America. Most politicians and their advisers did not pay enough attention to the cultural changes that the country has lately gone through.



NOTES

1. Cf. The Guardian (Oct 27,2024). "Michelle Obama blasts Trump for 'gross incompetence' at Harris's Michigan rally.
2. Ecclesiastes, 1:9
3. Cf. NBC Exit polls, <https://www.nbc-news.com/politics/2024-elections/exit-polls>, (accessed Nov.29/2024)
4. Lydia Polgreen and Tressie McMillan Cottom (Nov. 7, 2024)." Democrats Had a Theory of the Election. They Were Wrong. ", in Opinion, NY Times, (accessed Nov. 29,2024).
5. Cf. Trevor Noah, "We treated President Biden like a S#T, Bi"https://www.instagram.com/ch_razi_gorsi/reel/D-CuN4QDOS39/, (accessed Nov. 25,2024).
6. Cf. Pew Research Center, "Spirituality Among Americans: 7 in 10 U.S. adults describe themselves as spiritual in some way, including 22% who are spiritual but not religious", (accessed Nov. 29,2024).
7. Cf. Robert Bellah (1967). "Civil Religion in America" in Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.
8. Cf. The Constitutional Convention: A Day-by-Day Account for September 17, 1787: "A Republic, If You Can Keep It", Independence National Historical Park, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/constitutionalconvention-september17.htm> ,(accessed Nov 29,2024).
9. Cf. Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, (Translated by Henry

- Reeve, Esq.), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/815/815-h/815-h.htm> (accessed Nov. 29,2024). See also: Jonathan Haidt, "Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid: It's not just a phase", The Atlantic, May 2022 issue.
10. Emile Durkheim (1960) *The Division of Labor in Society*, <https://ia601408.us.archive.org/14/items/in.ernet.dli.2015.233884/2015.233884.The-Division.pdf> (accessed Nov. 30,2024).(- Original title: *De la Division du Travail social*, Presse Universitaire de France, Paris 1893).
 11. Cf. Zygmunt Bauman (2000). *Liquid Modernity*, Polity, Malden, MA.
 12. Cf. Pope Francis (Oct. 24,2024). *Dilexit Nos*, N. 9-10, Vatican Press, Rome.
 13. Pope Francis (May 24,2015). *Laudato Si*, N.122, Vatican Press, Rome, https://vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html (last accessed 29.12.24)
 14. Cf. Augusto Del Noce (1964). *Il Problema dell'Ateismo*, Il Mulino, Roma.
 15. Idem
 16. Cf. *Laudato Si*, Op. Cit.
 17. Cf. Cardinal Ratzinger (2005). *Missa Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*, Rome.
 18. Cf. John McWhorter (2021), *Woke Racism: how a new religion has betrayed Black America*, Penguin Random House LLC
 19. Ibidem, p.25
 20. Ibidem, p. 31