

John Owen talk on the upcoming U.S. election

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- American politics continues to provide drama to the rest of the world...!
 - o Last week we supplied yet another novel plot twist: to have a convicted felon former President who is also slight frontrunner to be our next President!
 - o Ironic, since things are stable in a sense: an evenly divided (50-50) country with the same presidential candidates as in 2020. And apart from the 2008 election of Obama, the popular vote since 2000 has been very close – not far off of 50-50.
 - o In a sense, 50-50 votes can be self-reproducing, in that each side can justifiably think that it can just keep doing what it's been doing and win next time. It takes a decisive defeat for a party to go into a crisis and make a serious change. And that's just not happening to either party. So we get the same thing, cycle after cycle.
 - o This 50-50 equilibrium does not exist because Americans have similar preferences and the two parties are equally competitive at capturing their votes. Rather, preferences themselves are bimodal – two peaks – the American public is highly *polarized*. That means uncertainty not only over who will be the next President, but over large questions of policy, including toward Europe's defense and its economy – and even whether America's long-standing constitutional democracy will endure, which also is a matter of deep concern to Europeans.
 - o Because U.S. presidents are elected by an Electoral College, we look to individual states when we want the best prediction of who will win. And here, insofar as recent polls are to be trusted, Donald Trump is leading in enough swing states that he appears more likely to win than Joe Biden. The Biden people evince confidence that they will be able to use the large sums of money they have raised to turn the tide – by reminding Americans of the traumas of the Trump years – but most political pundits right now believe Trump is likely to win. The guilty verdict of last week may change that, but will probably not; everyone has “priced in” this contingency already; some Trump supporters may be even more determined to elect him now.
 - o Of course, some events could change that – health in particular.
- When I was last here in Estoril, a European participant asked me how, in a country of 320 million, we got stuck with these two old men, neither of whom is popular in the US – or,

more precisely, each of whom is loathed by about half of the country. I can't answer that question with great confidence, but I can talk a bit about American polarization, that is, the unhealthy dialectic between liberalism and populism that is both cause and consequence of our situation.

- Democrats and Republicans routinely tell opinion surveyors that they believe the other party is undemocratic and dangerous; disturbing numbers fear violence this autumn, and those fears have gone up with last week's conviction of Trump in New York.
 - o As I'll elaborate, I think there is plenty of blame to go around – but it's worth noting that only one side has used violence to try to overturn a legally constituted national election result, and thereby to violate the constitution – that is the right-populist side. I mean January 6, 2021. And that's important: the left, if we want to call it that – or the center and the left – hasn't posed that kind of constitutional crisis. And Trump's language about vengeance and plans to have a more docile cabinet and to repopulate the bureaucracy bode ill...
 - o How did we get here, then? To this deep, wide, and seemingly invincible polarization?
- A large part of the problem, I think, is the evolution of liberalism itself, the political philosophy on which the US is grounded, into a form today that alienates millions of Americans. We can call it "*open liberalism*." And it's really the third historical stage of liberalism.
- So let me talk for my remaining time about liberalism, what it is, how it has evolved in theory and practice.
 - o Much, but not all, of what I say will apply, I think, to most other mature democratic societies, including Portugal and other European countries
- Liberalism is a political theory that holds up the freedom of the individual as the highest political good
 - o (as opposed to other goods, such as security, state power, the good of the working class, following divine law, etc.)
 - o Kant put it in terms of autonomy or self-legislation – consent to laws under which you live – there are other ways to formulate individual freedom
 - o But this is abstract: Who counts as an individual? And what are the conditions necessary to freedom? Do those change over time? A society must come to some consensus about these matters to have a social philosophy that coheres at all.
 - o Over the centuries, liberals have filled in these abstractions by asking: What is the chief threat to individual freedom at this time? And, what is the remedy?

- And over the centuries, America has tried *three answers* – one answer would work for many decades, then start to fail, so another answer would be tried till it failed.
- First stage: Classical liberalism.
 - 18th century, or even back to Locke in 17th century: Chief threat to individual freedom is the despotic state, a marriage of throne and altar – which heavily restricted life chances of the great majority — despotic state established monopolies, restricted religious belief and practice, suppressed new ideas, etc.
 - Remedy: reduce state power – free individuals (then understood as adult males who owned property) to determine own life course, allow them to compete in a market economy, let them choose own religion, challenge rulers, contest power
 - The economic side was free markets or capitalism – laissez-faire, state’s role was enforcing contracts, safeguarding currency, punishing crime.
 - The cultural side was the individual man, householder – in the American case, moving west to start a new life, farm your own land, etc.
- Second stage: Welfare liberalism.
 - Emerged in late 19th century, became dominant in US in 1930s.
 - By then, classical liberalism seemed unable to solve problems of the day – including to secure liberty for majority of individuals.
 - Chief threat to individual freedom, new thinkers said, was no longer despotic state – that had been tamed – but unfettered capital – which kept wages low, prohibited collective bargaining, allowed boom-bust cycle of capitalism that left majority unfree. Put another way, new liberals in early 20th century concluded that liberalism needed rethinking because it couldn’t handle modern industrial society with its working class.
 - Remedy: empower the state to regulate the economy – don’t end capitalism but tame it – worker’s rights, wealth redistribution – the Keynesian welfare state.
- Third stage: Open liberalism.
 - Welfare liberalism had some good decades – but became tired by 1960s culturally, and economic program ran out of ideas in 1970s – high inflation & high unemployment
 - By this time, the question “what is the chief barrier to individual freedom” started drawing a different answer: traditional norms, institutions, boundaries.
 - Open liberalism is a fusion of the economic ‘neoliberalism’ that emerged in the 1970s – deregulation, slowing growth of government, less redistribution of wealth – with the cultural and social liberalism that emerged in the 1960s – create yourself – expressive individualism.

- These economic and cultural strands had different origins – one associated with the left, the other with the right – but it turns out that market efficiency and individual emancipation go together well – as Mark Lilla has written, “The cultural and Reagan revolutions have proved to be complementary, not contradictory, events.”
- Open liberalism has to its credit many important achievements – rejuvenation of economic growth in the 1980s and 1990s – and, on the international scale, the economic rise of much of the global South, including China, owed something to the economic and cultural openness of the West. Open liberalism won the Cold War.
- But now, with the 21st century nearly a quarter over, it is evident that both the economics and the culture of open liberalism alienate millions of Americans. These are mostly rural and small-town and exurban people, older, more religious, more male
 - De-industrialization has devastated people, families, entire communities – despair, drug addiction
 - And the cultural elimination of traditional norms, institutions, boundaries turns out to be well suited to urban and suburban life, but not to small-town and rural – where, as we know from most or all societies, tradition, religion are sustaining things – weaken them, and society does fall apart – and people will resent it, turn against cities and their cosmopolitan culture
- This cocktail of maladies has made millions ripe for populist politicians and political programs – and there is never a shortage of opportunists to take advantage of it. Most of them lack the talent to build or sustain a mass movement, but a few, as we know, have that talent
 - And because nearly everyone identifies *open liberalism* with *liberalism*, full stop, groups that are opposed to open liberalism are treated as anti-liberal and in fact many of them are self-designated anti-liberals. Meaning, they are starting to reject the institutions and mores of liberal democracy itself in favor of some bad alternatives.
- And this is how polarization works: this right-populism has pulled some of the center toward itself and has repelled much of the center, so that the Democratic Party is farther left than it has been in many years – particularly on cultural questions
 - And any suggestion of compromise, even tactical, on either side is shut down as a betrayal

- Thus it is hard to sustain any movement toward depolarization – to bring substantial numbers of people back to the center.
- So this destructive dialectic of open liberalism and the reaction thereto – is some of what is driving the ongoing political travails in the US and what is setting us up for another traumatic election and aftermath.
- How to depolarize American society and politics is a topic for another time.... But it must involve a fourth stage of liberalism that can earn the loyalty of a large majority of Americans.
- Meanwhile, we must get through the election this autumn.

I'm also happy to discuss the implications of the election for Europe, particularly NATO.