

Grooming the globe: denying fairness, complexity and humanity

Written by Julianne Schultz, Founding Editor of Griffith REVIEW; Professor, Griffith Centre for Creative Arts Research, Griffith University



Donald Trump may not have been the 1%'s preferred candidate, but he embodied its message. Reuters/Joshua Roberts

This piece is republished with permission from [Perils of Populism](#), the 57th edition of Griffith Review. Articles are a little longer than most published on The Conversation, presenting an in-depth analysis of the rise of populism across the world.

“I know it makes you sick to think of that word fairness,” Arthur C. Brooks, president of the American Enterprise Institute, told the Conservative Political Action Conference in March 2013. But he went on to tell the heads of Washington’s most influential right-wing think-tanks, who were still shocked by Barack Obama’s continuing appeal, that Americans “universally believe it’s right to help the vulnerable”.

He continued:

If you want to win, start fighting for people! Lead with vulnerable people. Lead with fairness ... telling stories matters. By telling stories we can soften people.

New Yorker investigative journalist Jane Mayer paraphrased Brooks’ message in her magisterial book [Dark Money](#). If the 1% wanted to win control of America, they needed to rebrand themselves as champions of the other 99%.

Donald Trump may not have been the 1%'s preferred candidate – his ego, ignorance and lack of discipline were well known – but he embodied the message. [In the words](#) of the Hannah Arendt scholar Roger Berkowitz, Trump:

Grooming the globe: denying fairness, complexity and humanity

Written by Julianne Schultz, Founding Editor of Griffith REVIEW; Professor, Griffith Centre for Creative Arts Research, Griffith University

... appeals to the need for constant distraction, destruction and entertainment.

It is tempting to think that this appeal, and its authoritarian consequences, is innate – a default setting of human societies across history and geography. But the swift counter-reaction to Trump at home, and subsequent elections in Europe, challenge this presumption.

Nonetheless, there is a [long list](#) of authoritarian leaders across the globe ready to deride the rule of law, circumvent checks and balances, undermine institutions, cultivate ignorance and encourage fear.

As Mayer painstakingly demonstrates, making self-interest seem normal and a commitment to fairness an elite aberration has been a long-term project.

Upending this commitment – expressed most simply in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's [four freedoms](#) (of speech and religion, from want and fear) that were ultimately embodied in national and global institutions created at the end of the second world war – is not something that has happened by chance. It has been the result of a deliberate, well-funded, long-term strategy that has touched us all, whether we are aware of it or not.

As Mayer writes:

During the 1970s, a handful of the nation's wealthiest corporate captains felt overtaxed and over-regulated and decided to fight back. Disenchanted with the direction of modern America, they launched an ambitious, privately financed war of ideas to radically change the country. They didn't want to merely win elections; they wanted to change how Americans thought.

These well-lubricated ideas quickly spread through the world due to American global dominance.

Grooming the globe: denying fairness, complexity and humanity

Written by Julianne Schultz, Founding Editor of Griffith REVIEW; Professor, Griffith Centre for Creative Arts Research, Griffith University

It didn't take long before institutions were accused of failing, experts gained the prefix "so-called", and "elites" ceased to be the mega rich or those born with silver spoons, but were redefined as educated people who questioned the self-interest orthodoxy.

The globe was being groomed for a profoundly different settlement than the one that grew out of the conflagration of war, one that ignored complexity, challenged the rule of law, bred oligarchs, and undermined fairness.

Further reading: [*The restorationist impulse: why we hanker for the old ways*](#)

Understanding populism's rise

Millions of words have been written in an attempt to make sense of the recent global political disruptions that are conveniently grouped under the banner of "populism".

Although newspaper sales are at their lowest since 1945, the hunger for news, information and analysis, and the expectation that it can be found, remains. Explanations are sought in personal experience, in nostalgia, or by slicing and dicing the data from opinion polls and voting patterns.

Professor Pippa Norris of Harvard University [calculates that](#) the populist vote (both left and right) in Europe has doubled since the 1960s to reach double digits.

Pauline Hanson's One Nation has demonstrated with remarkable effectiveness a broader global trend: the ability of a relatively small voting bloc to catalyse a response from political parties that do not share their same extreme values.

Old class-based accounts are no longer sufficient to explain political behaviour, as was sharply

Grooming the globe: denying fairness, complexity and humanity

Written by Julianne Schultz, Founding Editor of Griffith REVIEW; Professor, Griffith Centre for Creative Arts Research, Griffith University

demonstrated in the recent UK and French elections. The emerging consensus among political scientists is that cultural factors provide a better predictor of electoral behaviour – particularly education, age, gender, religiosity and attitudes to diversity.

These values can find expression on the left and the right. But they tend to appeal mostly to an older cohort who feel they have lost power and influence, whose worlds have been [upended by economic and social change](#). But, to put it crudely, their days are numbered.

The “war of ideas” has encouraged mistrust of experts and cynicism about institutions, undermined faith in a shared humanity irrespective of ethnicity or religion, and discouraged questioning of the neoliberal economic orthodoxy.

Meanwhile, the quiet post-materialist revolution that started in the 1970s has produced generations of people who are more open-minded, tolerant, trusting and accepting of diversity. The numbers suggest they are on the ascendancy.

Further reading: [*Discontents: identity, politics and institutions in a time of populism*](#)

Education and populism

It is not really surprising that education – rather than income, gender or class – is the strongest marker of populist appeal.

This is not simply because you learn stuff at school, college or university, but because education provides the tools for dealing with complexity, for weighing and evaluating arguments, for seeking and testing information, learning from history and those who went before.

Grooming the globe: denying fairness, complexity and humanity

Written by Julianne Schultz, Founding Editor of Griffith REVIEW; Professor, Griffith Centre for Creative Arts Research, Griffith University

It also embodies a social contract, valuing expertise, teasing out right and wrong, tolerating difference and learning respect.

The populist public sphere is a degraded, distracted place where might is right and simplicity and “common sense” the answer to complex, multifaceted questions; where little is learnt from history, and respect is in short supply.

Yale professor and Holocaust scholar Timothy Snyder in [On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the 20th Century](#) provides a wise compendium of caution and a few handy rules:

- defend institutions;
- remember professional ethics;
- believe in truth; and
- do not pre-emptively obey but be calm, patriotic and courageous.

In the “war of ideas” over the past few decades, incalculable amounts of money have been spent to undermine these hard-won values and undermine both institutions and checks and balances that, while not perfect, have produced unprecedented opportunities.

As those who turn up in large numbers to reclaim public spaces after terrorist attacks show, and

Grooming the globe: denying fairness, complexity and humanity

Written by Julianne Schultz, Founding Editor of Griffith REVIEW; Professor, Griffith Centre for Creative Arts Research, Griffith University

those who demonstrate to demand equality illustrate, the appeal of authoritarianism is not necessarily innate, but is always ready to be challenged.

You can read other essays from Griffith Review's latest edition [here](#).

Julianne Schultz receives funding from the Australia Council for Griffith Review. She works for Griffith Review, published by Griffith Uni in partnership with Text Publishing. She is a member of the editorial board of The Conversation.

Authors: Julianne Schultz, Founding Editor of Griffith REVIEW; Professor, Griffith Centre for Creative Arts Research, Griffith University

Read more <http://theconversation.com/grooming-the-globe-denying-fairness-complexity-and-humanity-81900>