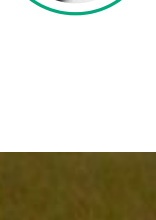




Why America Stayed a Backwards Society (and Collapsed), While the World Grew (and Prospered)

The Unholy Trinity of American Collapse



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You don't have to look very hard — not much further than the oval office, Senate, or Congress, really — to understand that America's a bizarre, weird, gruesome outlier among nations: an exceptionally backward society. A country where just 20% of women make up political office, as opposed to 40–50% in Europe, less even than in Pakistan, a place where 80% of people live paycheck to paycheck and can't muster \$1000 for an emergency, a society where kids are routinely mowed down at school, and told to wear bulletproof backpacks — or put in concentration camps. A uniquely backwards place — that's now collapsing into something even weirder, more grotesque, and more retrograde.

What explains all this? (The way that American intellectuals and pundits tell the story goes like this: American politics became hyperpolarized. And yet this doesn't explain very much at all. Why did that happen? If we are going to reckon with American collapse, we are going to have to understand American history better, more accurately, than merely pointing to short-term surface changes — we are going to have to learn that American collapse is in a way a culmination, not an anomaly. I will make the case, and you can be the judge. Does that sound fair?)

If we think about American's grim, dismal, and alarming state a little more deeply than we are told to, a striking fact emerges almost immediately. The generation born in the 1970s was the first one which *could* ever really try to modernize America, bring it into line with modern notions of democracy, civilization, and prosperity, to make it what people would call a decent, working society. And the problem is that generation has failed at precisely that challenge, in abysmal, ruinous, and catastrophic ways.

Let me explain. Until 1971, America was segregated. Until the mid-70s or so, “intermarriage” was illegal. So America was — as much as you will object vehemently to me using the term — an apartheid state. It is an ugly and shameful word — but it is an accurate one. And we need accuracy, above all, if we are to understand America, and whether it has a chance, at this crucial juncture. Now, while it was the shameful thing of an apartheid state, America had precisely zero chance at ever modernizing — at being anything remotely resembling the kind of prosperous, inclusive democracies that Europeans or Canadians, for example, were building — because by definition, an apartheid state is busy investing much of it's time, energy, and resources, in subjugation and repression and all the foolish ideas and theories to “back it up”. So America had chosen a very, very different route — a route which led it nowhere — and didn't unchoose it until the mid 70s, by which time much of the rich world already had progressed beyond it, investing, for example, in healthcare, education, retirement systems, rewriting constitutions, expanding and elevating freedom and justice and equality for all.

That generation of Americans, then, the one born in the 70s, finally saw the joyous and historic lifting of something very much like an iron curtain. But just because an iron curtain lifts does not mean that the ruins smashed underneath have been rebuilt. The challenge of this generation was to unravel the old and unholy trinity of attitudes that had plagued and blighted America from the day it was born — naked, aggressive, economic self-interest, social superiority, and cultural cruelty. Only in that way could freedom, justice, and equality really be had, grow, endure, and multiply; only in that way could a modern society really be formed, shaped, and molded.

The challenge was threefold. First, to create a more enlightened set of economic attitudes than “I'll never invest a penny in anyone else! — one toxic remnant of racism and bigotry, only in a slightly more polite form: note how the logic remains just the same. Second, to create a more enlightened set of social attitudes, values, than people seeking safety in tribes — to create something more like a place of people who desired to be real equals. Third, to create a more enlightened set of cultural attitudes, norms, than people seeking status in bruising, never-ending superiority with one another, by buying shinier toys and bigger things — to create something more like a culture which cherished and prized freedom, as equals, in a truer way, than as people striving forever to claw everyone else down, and be everyone else's superior.

In other words, the real work of the generation of Americans born in the 70s was undoing the grim and poisonous residue of supremacy, capitalism, and tribalism — through a set of transformative economic, social, and cultural changes, in which people's fundamental attitudes shifted, and they began to hunger for better things than superiority, status, self-preservation, riches — all that had intertwined together to make America the most backwards among all rich societies. In fact, if we are really accurate, brutally accurate, America was becoming one of the most backwards societies in the world by any measure, really (remember how more women are in political office even in Pakistan? How kids aren't mowed down at school even in Chile? How longevity isn't falling anywhere else in the world, really?)

But crucial to this project, perhaps, was the understanding that America was a backwards country — not an exceptionally successful one, but an exceptionally unsuccessful one. Would the leaders and elites of this generation be able to understand all that? Let me ask that another way. Why were these three changes — economic, social, and cultural — not just nice, or desirable, but necessary, urgent, crucial, in the strongest sense: without them, America was likely to collapse?

If Americans didn't leave behind their economic attitude of extreme self-reliance, of naked, aggressive self-interest, then they would never be able to create things like public healthcare, education, financial, retirement, childcare, elderly care, systems — but in the future that this generation faced, all those things had never mattered more to everyone. A society of masters and servants couldn't really go on, for obvious economic reasons — people were chafing at the bit to do better and truer things with their lives. Living standards would never really rise — they would peak, and then begin to fall.

If Americans didn't shed their social attitude of tribal supremacy — whites above everyone! Men above women! — then their democracy would never really develop and mature. It would never be able to write European style rights to the very public goods above, and grow as a democracy — it would forever remain a stunted, decrepit, crippled thing, a sham democracy.

People would go on seeking self-preservation, instead of self-realization, which can only really be had when we lift one another up.

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And if Americans didn't jettison their attitude of cultural cruelty — work harder! Nobody deserves any safety or protection or peace of mind! We are all just commodities in a capitalist machine, and the moment we are no longer profitable, it is right and just for it to dispose of us, like so much human waste — then quite naturally, people would eventually turn towards authoritarianism, perhaps even fascism. Capitalism had no interest in making proles rich — it never has, once in history — only in keeping them at the exact level of minimal, bitter subsistence, where it can exploit them most.

And so the cultural attitude of cruelty, of callousness, of so prevalent in America, would mean that capitalism would inevitably degenerate into forms of social collapse like authoritarianism, as people turned on those below them, to seize by force the glittering possessions and lives that they had been promised — but never given.

So what we would have expected, if Americans didn't make the set of economic, social, and cultural transformations which history demanded of them — that generation of Americans, to put it more precisely — are three things. American living standards would peak, and then fall. Society would come undone as a result — people would grow resentful, hostile, and bitter. And authoritarianism and extremism would rise. Isn't that precisely what we have seen? American incomes flatlined in 1971 — and never rose. And now life expectancy is falling, while suicide and depression rises — and authoritarianism and fascism explode (what else do you call nooses in concentration camps, my friend?)

Let me put all that more simply. If Americans didn't make the social, economic, and cultural transformations that were necessary to make genuine progress — then nothing much would change. The same old tribal, supremacist attitudes which had always defined, pervaded, and molded America would simply continue to march on — and eventually, they would triumph. And isn't that just what we see today, wherever we look? The very same group of Americans which has always desired to live above the rest, above the law, as superiors, not equals, demands just that, all over again? America is still just the backwards place it has always been.

All that tells us what is all too visible today. The generation born around the 1970s was the first one really capable of modernizing America — but it failed, catastrophically, at that task. It produced Kavanaughs. It promoted Trumps. There is not a single thinker or intellectual of global renown within it.

Even the “good ones” — the well-intentioned ones — allowed the same old economic, cultural, and social attitudes which had always blighted America, which had kept it a laggard among nations, an idiot of history, to flourish. They went on debating whether capitalism, supremacy, and tribalism might in fact be wonderful and good things — while societies like Europe and Canada shook their heads, laughed, and built social democracies, in which people aspired not to be superiors, but genuine equals. (It's true to say that's being undone, a little, today — but we are talking progress, not regress.)

This generation of Americans — especially the elites and leaders among them — never challenged America's cursed, blighted history nearly enough. It never asked: “are capitalism, tribalism, and supremacy really good for us? Can we be a society of those things — and democratic, equal, and free, too? Or is there a hard choice that we must make now?” Even Obama, the fabled black President, hardly asked these questions — he merely tried to compromise with them. And today we can see how badly that approach of compromise has failed.

The generation of Americans born in the 70s had a great and mighty challenge before it — to build a truly free democracy, where before had been an ugly and hateful, apartheid state, in which loving a person of another color or religion was often “illegal.” And this very generation, while it might not have ever fully surmounted that challenge — who could? — shrunk from it, instead.

Instead of freedom, it chose the old slave-masters' notion of “liberty”, which is to say, “no government interference.” Instead of justice, it chose the old elite notion of “meritocracy”, which is to say, advantages accrue to the advantaged. And worst of all, instead of equality, teaching people to hunger and desire to be genuine equals, it enshrined and glorified the notion that some people are worthier than others, and we should all devote our lives to the quest for superiority, with more status, bought with more money; won with more power, whatever the price to anyone else — instead of the gentle and graceful surrender to equality.

Those three old fatal attitudes — economic self-interest, social superiority, and cultural cruelty — had never been changed at all. In fact, they had been hardened, shored up, patched right back together. The result is that today America is where it has always been — “debating” whether raping women and abusing children might just be alright, in certain circumstances, so that the same kind of preening, entitled, violent man who has always held power in America can hang onto it, for another generation yet.

America still hasn't learned the great lesson of history. History has always tried to teach this strange and stubborn land the very same thing: if Americans went on forever seeking to be above each other, they wouldn't be capable of standing beside one another — and that would leave them just as backwards as they'd always been. And yet here they are again, bickering over just that, as bitterly and resentfully and angrily as they have ever done, over supremacy, racism, bigotry, the right to be superior but not an equal, a master but not a slave — over tribalism, supremacy, and capitalism? With increasing violence and rancour every single day? Isn't that just today's political, cultural, and social battles, really reveal — that America hasn't really progressed one inch?

In this way, my friends, America is an accursed place. Every nation has its own cross to bear, that much is true. But some of those nations find absolution and grace, by atoning for their sins. America, it seems, because it had a devil's birth, born in blood, bathed in tears, a child raised in the darkness of slaughter and supremacy, knows no way to atone. Perhaps there is no way to atone for America's sins. Maybe they are there to haunt us until we are undone by them. Perhaps America's curse is that of a promised land — to also, therefore, be a backwards place, in which people fight forever, tribe against tribe, man against man, woman against woman, for whom really deserves the sweet and succulent fruit of the garden.

Umair
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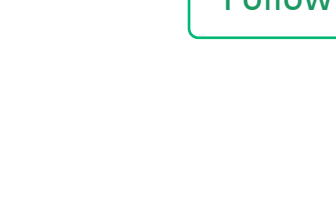
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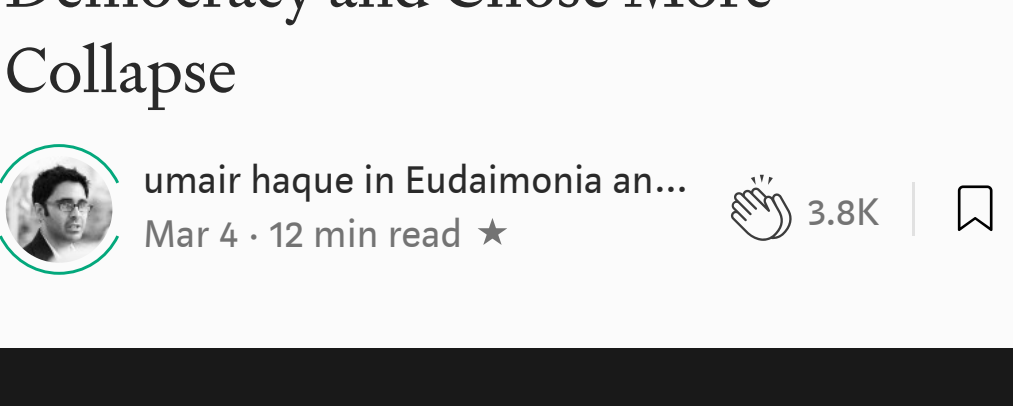
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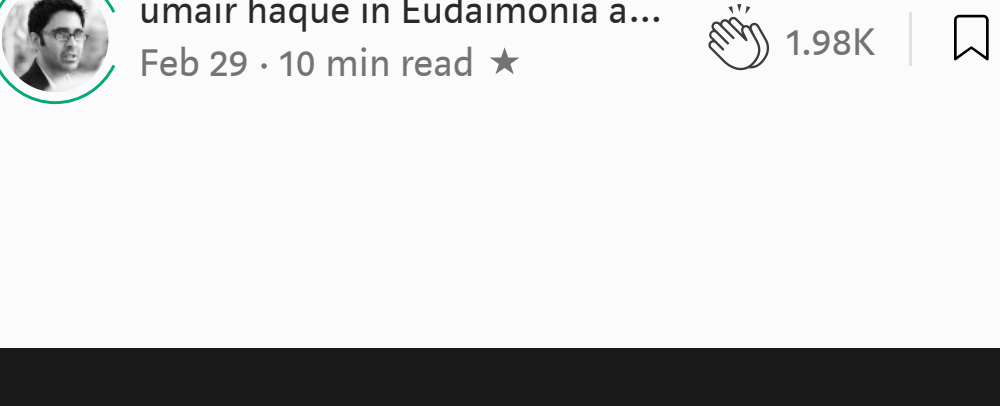


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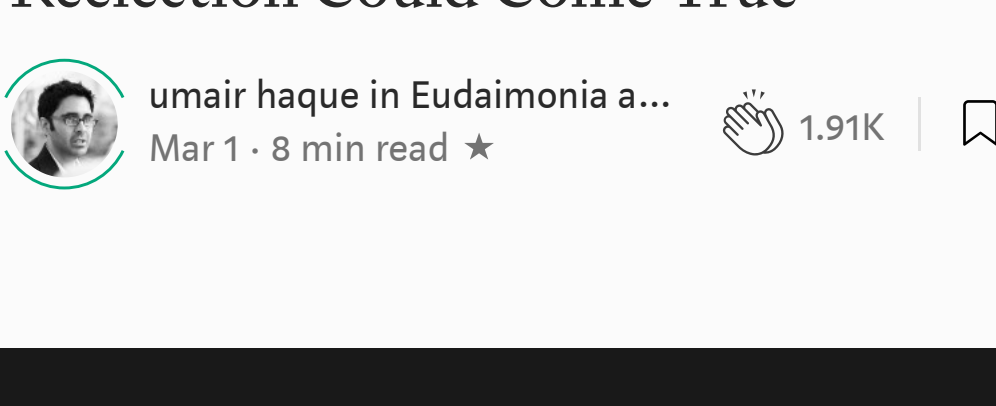


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