GLOBAL 12.06.2020 | Karin Pettersson

American traumas

The US social contract has always been based on white people coming first. This has never been resolved

In 50 years, will the United States still exist? Or will the union have been pulled apart — in a peaceful or, at worst, a violent and bloody process?

This scenario seems entirely possible. That is how weakened the country is and how brutal are its conflicts — although there better words than 'conflicts': oppression, exploitation, discrimination.

When Martin Luther King was murdered, *Esquire* magazine interviewed James Baldwin, who in his writing clearly and painfully described the consequences of racism — for the oppressed as well as the oppressor.

How can we get black people to cool it? the newspaper asked. It is not for us to cool it, Baldwin replied.

The year was 1968. Two months after King's assassination, the Democratic party's presidential candidate, Bobby Kennedy, was killed. That summer, protesters met brutal police violence during the Democrats' convention in Chicago.

It is possible to mirror the present in what happened then. The backdrop to the unrest and uprising in 1968 was also intense political conflict, violence on the streets and death on a mass scale, hitting as unevenly as brutally. In 1968 the proximate cause was the Vietnam war; now it's the virus.

More than 100,000 Americans have died and the class aspects of both those who die and those who lose their livelihood, health insurance and hope for the future are crystal-clear and inexorable. It's the poor and it's black Americans. Add to this the lynching of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. And then a history of police brutality that has always existed but is becoming more visible than ever, thanks to smartphone cameras.

How can anyone be surprised at what is happening now?

Racist rage

The US social contract has always been based on the fact that white people come first. Yes, Barack Obama was elected president twice. But, as the author Ta-Nahesi Coates has noted, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 must largely be understood as a result of the racist rage which ensued.

Trump's victory has made many on the European left re-evaluate 'the nation' and contemporary 'identity politics' — 'white working-class' voters must be won back, it is said, at any price. But the blind spot in this analysis is that Trump's policies have always been based on stoking and inciting racism. In Trump's world, nationalism and racism are evermore part of the same story.

And slavery and racial oppression are America's original sins. They are not history but a continuing experience. They have never been 'resolved' — not with the civil war, not with King and the civil-rights movement, not with Obama. When Trump tweets to undermine postal voting, the goal is to make sure black voters don't exercise their democratic rights. It's just one small example — there are so many.

The judicial system and the police, as well as the housing and labour markets, systematically discriminate against African Americans. The political and economic system has eroded the living conditions of the middle class that still remains, while the American working class lacks basic security and prospects for the future. Poverty, despair and the opioid epidemic have caused average life expectancy to fall in many groups. Add to that the virus, and Trump's catastrophic handling of the crisis.

Billlionaires and plutocrats

The 'American dream' used to work for individuals among certain strata, preferentially the white working and middle class. Today the only real beneficiaries are tech billionaires and other plutocrats. It doesn't work anymore — how could it?

The United States is a democracy: its citizens have rights, on paper. But what matters in the long run is justice; and justice can only be attained through decent material conditions, actual life chances and dignity.

Trump has been mediocre as a politician but as a propagandist he is a great success. Even now, during the worst crisis in the US since the 1930s, he maintains his core support. There is no common public sphere in the US anymore; there are no common truths.

A society steeped in racism affects those exposed to it directly, through violence. But it also corrupts everything and everyone.

'I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose any voters,' Trump has said, and he is right. He understands how the information landscape works today — how anger, hatred and lies are what works best on 'social media'.

But he has done more than that: he has effectively schooled Facebook's boss, Mark Zuckerberg, into being his messenger boy. In private meetings, Zuckerberg hailed Trump for being 'No 1 on Facebook' and Trump has been assisted by Facebook's data analysts to optimise his election campaigns.

Recently, Twitter censored one of Trump's tweets for glorifying violence. Trump responded by threatening to regulate the social networks to make them responsible for what they publish. The threat is not serious — if it became reality it would primarily impede him and the other preachers of hate. As the sociologist and tech scientist Zeynep Tufekci has written, the threat against Twitter should however be seen as a message directed at an audience of one — Zuckerberg.

Empty arguments

Zuckerberg, who is in charge of a much bigger and more important platform, has used empty freedom-of-speech arguments to defend the rights of politicians to lie freely on Facebook. He knows it is Trump who lies most, and that the purpose of his lies is to incite white Americans' fear and racism and to discourage black Americans from voting.

That is how surveillance capitalism and Trumpism overlap and reinforce each other. The pandemic has left 13 million Americans unemployed; during the same period Zuckerberg has increased his wealth by USD 25bn.

The US historian Jill Lepore has said that much of what we call 'polarisation' there is a consequence of people who were not previously part of democracy now claiming their place and their rights — the reaction is a backlash. That backlash is reinforced by a public sphere which foregrounds hatred and reinforces the most destructive inclinations of humankind. Racism and Facebook, in combination, are

what will break the American republic.

In 2016, Trump hesitated when asked if he was prepared to accept Hillary Clinton as the winner. The question is what he will do this autumn, if he loses. What happens if he rejects the election result?

A society steeped in racism affects those exposed to it directly, through violence. But it also corrupts everything and everyone.

But aren't you the ones who are getting hurt the most? *Esquire* asked Baldwin. No, Baldwin replied. We are only the ones who are dying fastest.

This article is a joint publication by Social Europe and IPS-Journal. A Swedish version appeared in Aftonbladet.



Karin Pettersson
Stockholm

Karin Pettersson is director of public policy at Schibsted Media Group and chair of WAN-IFRA Media Freedom Board. She is a 2017 Nieman-Berkman Klein Fellow at Harvard. Formerly she was political editor-in-chief at Aftonbladet, Scandinavia's biggest daily newspaper. She founded Fokus, Sweden's leading news magazine, and worked for the Swedish Social Democratic Party.