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THE BIG IDEA

Donald Trump Does Have Ideas—and We'd Better Pay Attention to Them

The post-1989 world order is unraveling. Here are 6 ideas Trump has to replace it.

By JOSHUA MITCHELL | September 15, 2016



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Ideas really don't come along that often. Already in 1840, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that in America, "ideas are a sort of mental dust," that float about us but seldom cohere or hold our attention. For ideas to take hold, they need to be comprehensive and organizing; they need to order people's experience of themselves and of their world. In 20th-century America, there were only a few ideas: the Progressivism of Wilson; Roosevelt's New Deal; the Containment Doctrine of Truman; Johnson's War on Poverty; Reagan's audacious claim that the Cold War could be won; and finally, the post-1989 order rooted in "globalization" and "identity politics," which seems to be unraveling before our eyes.

Yes, Donald Trump is implicated in that unraveling, cavalierly undermining decades worth of social and political certainties with his rapid-fire Twitter account and persona that only the borough of Queens can produce. But so is Bernie Sanders. And so is Brexit. And so are the growing rumblings in Europe, which are all the more dangerous because there is no exit strategy if the European Union proves unsustainable. It is not so much that there are *no* new ideas for us to consider in 2016; it is more that the old ones are being taken apart without a clear understanding of what comes next. 2016 is the year of mental dust, where notions that stand apart from the post-1989 order don't fully cohere. The 2016 election will be the first—but not last—test of whether they can.

If you listen closely to Trump, you'll hear a direct repudiation of the system of globalization and identity politics that has defined the world order since the Cold War. There are, in fact, six specific ideas that he has either blurted out or thinly buried in his rhetoric: (1) borders matter; (2) immigration policy matters; (3) national interests, not so-called universal interests, matter; (4) entrepreneurship matters; (5) decentralization matters; (6) PC speech—without which identity politics is inconceivable—must be repudiated.

These six ideas together point to an end to the unstable experiment with supra- and sub-national sovereignty that many of our elites have guided us toward, siren-like, since 1989. That is what the Trump campaign, ghastly though it may at times be, leads us toward: A future where states matter. A future where people are citizens, working together toward (bourgeois) improvement of their lot. His ideas do not yet fully cohere. They are a bit too much like mental dust that has yet to come together. But they can come together. And Trump is the first American candidate to bring some coherence to them, however raucous his formulations have been.

Most of the commentary about Trump has treated him as if he is a one-off, as someone who has emerged because of the peculiar coincidence of his larger-than-life

self-absorption and the advent of social media platforms that encourage it. When the world becomes a theater for soliloquy and self-aggrandizement, what else are we to expect?

But the Trump-as-one-off argument begins to fall apart when we think about what else happened in politics this year. First of all, Trump is not alone. If he alone had emerged—if there were no Bernie Sanders, no Brexit, no crisis in the EU—it would be justifiable to pay attention only to his peculiarities and to the oddities of the moment. But with these other uprisings occurring this year, it's harder to dismiss Trump as a historical quirk.

Furthermore, if he had been just a one-off, surely the Republican Party would have been able to contain him, even co-opt him for its own purposes. After all, doesn't the party decide? The Republican Party is not a *one*, however, it is a *many*. William F. Buckley Jr. and others invented the cultural conservatism portion of the party in the 1950s, with the turn to the traditionalism of Edmund Burke; the other big portion of the party adheres to the free-market conservatism of Friedrich Hayek. The third leg of the Republican Party stool, added during the Reagan years, includes evangelical Christians and Roman Catholics of the sort who were still unsure of the implications of Vatican II. To Burke and Hayek, then, add the names John Calvin and Aristotle/Thomas Aquinas. Anyone who really reads these figures knows that the tension between them is palpable. For a time, the three GOP factions were able to form an alliance against Communism abroad and against Progressivism at home. But after the Cold War ended, Communism withered and the culture wars were lost, there has been very little to keep the partnership together. And if it hadn't been Trump, sooner or later someone else was going to come along and reveal the Republican Party's inner fault lines. Trump alone might have been the catalyst, but the different factions of the GOP who quickly split over him were more than happy to oblige.

There is another reason why the Republican Party could not contain Trump, a perhaps deeper reason. Michael Oakeshott, an under-read political thinker in the mid-20th century, remarked in his exquisite essay, "Rationalism in Politics," that one of the more pathological notions of our age is that political life can be understood in terms of "principles" that must be applied to circumstances. Politics-as-engineering, if you will. Republicans themselves succumbed to this notion, and members of the rank and file have noticed. Republicans stood for "the principles of the constitution," for "the principles of the free market," etc. The problem with standing for principles is that it allows you to remain unsullied by the political fray, to stand back and wait until yet another presidential election cycle when "our principles" can perhaps be applied. And if we lose, it's OK, because we still have "our principles." What Trump has been able to seize upon is growing dissatisfaction with this endless deferral, the sociological arrangement for which looks like comfortable Inside-the-Beltway Republicans

defending “principles” and rank-and-file Republicans far from Washington-Babylon watching in horror and disgust.

Any number of commentators (and prominent Republican Party members) have said that Trump is an anti-ideas candidate. If we are serious about understanding our political moment, we have to be very clear about what this can mean. It can mean Trump’s administration will involve the-politics-of-will, so to speak; that the only thing that will matter in government will be what Trump demands. Or, it can mean that Trump is not a candidate who believes in “principles” at all. This is probably the more accurate usage. This doesn’t necessarily mean that he is *unprincipled*; it means rather that he doesn’t believe that yet another policy paper based on conservative “principles” is going to save either America or the Republican Party. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville was clear that the spirit of democracy is *not* made possible by great ideas (and certainly not by policy papers), but rather by practical, hands-on experience *with* self-governance. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s mystical musings in his essay, “Experience,” corroborate this. American democracy will not be rejuvenated by yet another policy paper from the Inside-the-Beltway gang. What I am *not* saying here is that Trump has the wisdom of an Oakeshott, a Tocqueville or an Emerson. What I *am* saying is that Trump is that quintessentially American figure, hated by intellectuals on both sides of the aisle and on the other side of the Atlantic, who doesn’t start with a “plan,” but rather gets himself in the thick of things and then moves outward to a *workable* idea—not a “principled” one—that can address the problem at hand, but which goes no further. That’s what American businessmen and women do. (And, if popular culture is a reliable guide to America, it is what Han Solo always does in *Star Wars* movies.) We would do well not to forget that the *only* school of philosophy developed in America has been Pragmatism. This second meaning of being an anti-ideas candidate is consonant with it.

If, as some have said, Trump’s only idea is, “I can solve it,” then we are in real trouble. The difficulty, of course, is that in this new, Trumpean moment when politics is unabashed rhetoric, it is very difficult to discern the direction a Trump administration will take us. Will he be the tyrant some fear, or the pragmatist that is needed?

It’s not unreasonable to think the latter. This is because, against the backdrop of post-1989 ideas, the Trump campaign does indeed have a nascent coherence.

“Globalization” and “identity politics” are a remarkable configuration of ideas, which have sustained America, and much of the rest of the world, since 1989. With a historical eye—dating back to the formal acceptance of the state-system with the treaty of Westphalia in 1648—we see what is so remarkable about this configuration: It presumes that sovereignty rests *not* with the state, but with supra-national organizations—NAFTA, WTO, the U.N., the EU, the IMF, etc.—and with subnational sovereign sites that we name with the term “identity.” So inscribed in our post-1989

vernacular is the idea of “identity” that we can scarcely imagine ourselves without reference to our racial, gender, ethnic, national, religious and/or tribal “identity.” Once, we aspired to be citizens who abided by the rule of law prescribed within a territory; now we have sovereign “identities,” and wander aimlessly in a world without borders, with our gadgets in hand to distract us, and our polemics in mind to repudiate the disbelievers.

What, exactly, is the flaw with this remarkable post-1989 configuration of ideas? When you start thinking in terms of management by global elites at the trans-state level and homeless selves at the substate level that seek, but never really find, comfort in their “identities,” the consequences are significant: Slow growth rates (propped up by debt-financing) and isolated citizens who lose interest in building a world together. Then of course, there's the rampant crony-capitalism that arises when, in the name of eliminating “global risk” and providing various forms of “security,” the collusion between ever-growing state bureaucracies and behemoth global corporations creates a permanent class of winners and losers. Hence, the huge disparities of wealth we see in the world today.

The post-1989 order of things fails to recognize that the state matters, and engaged citizens matter. The state is the largest possible unit of organization that allows for the political liberty and economic improvement of its citizens, in the long term. This arrangement entails competition, risk, success and failure. But it does lead to growth, citizen-involvement, and if not a full measure of happiness, then at least the satisfactions that competence and merit matter.

Trump, then, with his promise of a future in which the integrity of the state matters, and where citizens identify with the state because they have a stake in it rather than with identity-driven subgroups, proposes a satisfying alternative.

This is also why it would be a big mistake to underestimate Trump and the ideas he represents during this election. In the pages of the current issue of *POLITICO Magazine*, one author writes: “The Trump phenomenon is about cultural resentment, anger and most of all Trump. It's primal-scream politics, a middle finger pointed at The Other, a nostalgia for a man-cave America where white dudes didn't have to be so politically correct.”

I have no doubt that right now, somewhere in America (outside the Beltway), there are self-congratulatory men, probably white, huddled together in some smoky man-cave, with “Make America Great Again” placards on their John-Deere-tractor-mowed lawns.

But do not mistake the part for the whole. What is going on is that “globalization-and-identity-politics-speak” is being boldly challenged. Inside the Beltway, along the

Atlantic and Pacific coasts, there is scarcely any evidence of this challenge. There are people in those places who will vote for Trump, but they dare not say it, for fear of ostracism. They think that identity politics has gone too far, or that if it hasn't yet gone too far, there is no principled place where it must stop. They believe that the state can't be our *only* large-scale political unit, but they see that on the post-1989 model, there will, finally, be *no place* for the state. Out beyond this hermetically sealed bicoastal consensus, there are Trump placards everywhere, not because citizens are racists or homophobes or some other vermin that needs to be eradicated, but because there is little evidence in their own lives that this vast post-1989 experiment with “globalization” and identity politics has done them much good.

The opposition to the post-1989 order is not just happening here in America; it is happening nearly everywhere. The Brexit vote stunned only those who believe in their bones that the very arc of history ends with “globalization” and identity politics.

The worry is that this powerful, growing disaffection with the status quo—both within Europe and elsewhere—will devolve into nefarious nationalism based on race, ethnicity or religion. To combat this, we are going to have to find constructive ways to build a new set of ideas around a very old set of ideas about sovereignty—namely, that the state and the citizens inside it matter. If we *don't* find a way to base nationalism on a healthy understanding of what a liberal state is and what it does and expects from citizens to make it work well, dark nationalism, based on blood and religion, will prevail—again.

Nothing lasts forever. Is that not the mantra of the left? Why, then, would the ideas of globalization and identity politics not share the fate of all ideas that have their day then get tossed into the dust-bin of history?

Of course, when new ideas take hold, old institutional arrangements face upheaval or implosion. There is no post-election scenario in which the Republican Party as we knew it prior to Trump remains intact. The Republicans who vote for Hillary Clinton will not be forgotten by those who think Trump is the one chance Republicans have to stop “globalization-and-identity-politics-speak” cold in its tracks. And neither will Inside-the-Beltway Republicans forget those in their party who are about to pull the lever for Trump. One can say that Trump has revealed what can be called The Aristotle Problem in the Republican Party. Almost every cultural conservative with whom I have spoken recently loves Aristotle and hates Trump. That is because on Aristotelian grounds, Trump lacks character, moderation, propriety and magnanimity. He is, as they put it, “unfit to serve.” The sublime paradox is that Republican heirs of Aristotle refuse to vote for Trump, but will vote for Clinton and her politically left-ish ideas that, while very much adopted to the American political landscape, trace their roots to Marx and to

Nietzsche. Amazingly, cultural conservatives who have long blamed Marx and Nietzsche (and German philosophy as a whole) for the decay of the modern world would now rather *not* vote for an American who expressly opposes Marx and Nietzsche's ideas! In the battle between Athens, Berlin and, well, *the borough of Queens*, they prefer Athens first, Berlin second and Queens not at all. The Aristotle Problem shows why these two groups—the #NeverTrumpers and the current Republicans who will vote for Trump—will *never* be reconciled.

There are, then, two developments we are likely to see going forward. First, cultural conservatives will seriously consider a political “Benedict Option,” dropping out of the Republican Party and forming a like-minded Book Group, unconcerned with winning elections and very concerned with maintaining their “principles.” Their fidelity is to Aristotle rather than to winning the battle for the political soul of America. The economic conservatives, meanwhile, will be urged to stay within the party—provided they focus on the problem of increasing the wealth of citizens *within* the state.

The other development, barely talked about, is *very* interesting and already underway, inside the Trump campaign. It involves the effort to convince Americans as a whole that they are not well-served by thinking of themselves as members of different “identity groups” who are owed a debt that—surprise!—Very White Progressives on the left will pay them if they loyally vote for the Democratic Party. The Maginot Line the Democratic Party has drawn purports to include on *its* side, African-Americans, Hispanics, gays, Muslims and women. (Thus, the lack of embarrassment, really, about the “basket of deplorables” reference to Trump supporters.) To its credit, the Democratic Party has made the convincing case, really since the Progressive Era in the early part of the 20th century, that the strong state is needed to rearrange the economy and society, so that citizens may have justice. Those who vote for the Democratic Party today are not just offered government program assistance, they are offered political protections and encouragements for social arrangements of one sort or another that might not otherwise emerge.

But where does this use of political power to rearrange the economy and society end? *Continue* using political power in the service of “identity politics” to reshape the economy and society and eventually both of them will become so enfeebled that they no longer work at all. The result will not be greater liberty for the oppressed, it will be the tyranny of the state over all. Trump *does* have sympathies for a strong state; but correctly or incorrectly, he has managed to convince his supporters that a *more independent* economy and society matters. In such an arrangement, citizens see their first support as the institutions of society (the family, religion, civic associations), their second support as a relatively free market, and their third support as the state, whose real job is to defend the country from foreign threats. Under these arrangements,

citizens do not look *upward* to the state to confirm, fortify and support their “identities.” Rather, they look *outward* to their neighbor, who they must trust to build a world together. Only when the spell of identity politics is broken can this older, properly liberal, understanding take hold. That is why Trump is suggesting to these so-called identity groups that there is an alternative to the post-1989 worldview that Clinton and the Democratic Party are still pushing.

Now that Trump has disrupted the Republican Party beyond repair, the success of the future Republican Party will hang on whether Americans come to see themselves as American citizens before they see themselves as bearers of this or that “identity.” The Very White Progressives who run the Democratic Party have an abiding interest in the latter narrative, because holding on to support of entire identity groups helps them win elections. But I do not think it can be successful much longer, in part because it is predicated on the continual growth of government, which only the debt-financing can support. Our debt-financed binge is over, or it will be soon. The canary in the coal mine—now starting to sing—is the African-American community, which has, as a whole, been betrayed by a Democratic Party that promises through government largesse that its burden shall be eased. Over the past half-century nothing has been further from the truth, especially in high-density inner-city regions. While it receives little media attention, there *are* African-Americans who are dubious about the arrangement by which the Democratic Party expects them to abide. A simultaneously serious and humorous example of this is the long train of videos posted on YouTube by “Diamond and Silk.” To be sure, the current polls show that Trump has abysmal ratings among minorities. If he wins the election, he will have to succeed in convincing them that he offers an alternative to permanent government assistance and identity politics consciousness-raising that, in the end, does them little good; and that through the alternative he offers there is a hope of assimilation into the middle class. A tall order, to be sure.

These observations are not to be confused as a ringing endorsement for a Republican Party that does not yet exist, and perhaps never will exist. But they are warning, of sorts, about impending changes that cannot be laughed off. The Republicans have at least been given a gift, in the disruption caused by Trump. The old alliances within it were held together by a geopolitical fact-on-the-ground that no longer exists: the Cold War. Now long behind us, a new geopolitical moment, where states once again matter, demands new alliances and new ideas. With the defeat of Bernie Sanders in the primaries, Democrats have been denied their gift, and will lumber on, this 2016, with “globalization-and-identity-politics-speak,” hoping to defend the world order that is predicated on it. If Sanders had won, the Democrats would have put down their identity politics narrative and returned to claims about “class” and class consciousness; they would have put down the banner of Nietzsche and taken up the banner of Marx, again.

And that would have been interesting! Alas, here we are, with, on the one hand, tired old post-1989 ideas in the Democratic Party searching for one more chance to prove that they remain vibrant and adequate to the problems at hand; and on the other, seemingly strange, ideas that swirl around us like mental dust waiting to coalesce.