

(2025 February 14) The Path to American Authoritarianism - Levitsky and Way (Foreign Affairs)
plus Max Herman commentary

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/path-american-authoritarianism-trump>

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Date: Wed, 12 Feb 2025 16:19:41 +0000

From: Max Herman <maxnmherman@hotmail.com>

To: "nettime-l@lists.nettime.org" <nettime-l@lists.nettime.org>

Subject: <nettime> Make Your Pen Mighty Again: network civil society
and US culture during the shift to competitive authoritarianism

Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have a good article in the latest Foreign Affairs.

The argument is pretty balanced and reasoned. It suggests that the former conservative party of the USA, after having been hijacked by a kleptocratic demagogue and now fully assimilated to a radical regressive agenda, is headed toward (and well along the way to) not Mussolini or Stalin but Modi, Erdogan, and Orban.

"...authoritarianism does not require the destruction of the constitutional order. What lies ahead is not fascist or single-party dictatorship but competitive authoritarianism? a system in which parties compete in elections but the incumbent's abuse of power tilts the playing field against the opposition. Most autocracies that have emerged since the end of the Cold War fall into this category."

They also explain well how the Constitution "all by itself" can't prevent this. If a large enough party (the formerly conservative one) is backed by enough money there is no way for "normal" constitutional democracy to win on the basis of the rules plain and simple; by definition, when these transitions occur it is because those with the power to change the rules, and move the goalposts, have decided to do so or already have done, by fait accompli changed and moved them to where they can win say half the elections with only a third or a quarter or less of the votes. The Federalist Paper No. 85's closing paragraph predicted it already in 1788, before the Union and before the Constitution: "the military despotism of a victorious demagogue."

The key question, before everyone bounces up from table with a mouth full of bread and cheese to say they mean to stand no blasted nonsense, is not this diagnosis. Many prefer others. The key point for the purposes of this email thread is what the article recommends: to "stay in the game." Choose resistance, dissent, persistent defiance, with dedication to successful reality-based alternatives plus a sincere responsibility for pragmatic real-world results, and do so to the absolute best of one's ability, while working well with others, starting yesterday.

Many people are despondent as we type today. They want to curl up and go back to sleep, drop out of all voting, all dissent, all writing, all participation in anything because all has been lost, and blame the world, or history, or the heavens. This is a sign your brain has been beaten up by the autocratic psychological goon squad. It's what they want you to do: cower. Think twice

before you embrace it.

Put another way: even if it were worse than it is -- even if it got far worse -- would you have the right to cop out? Think of what earlier generations had to put up with: Selma, Walesa, Mandela. They put it on the line, sometimes, if they had to, if someone had to. You get a free pass to do and risk nothing? Why? Because you can do so comfortably? Because you are fed up, or because you told us so, maybe even cried wolf and no one listened? That's even less of an excuse, because it isn't about you and your comfort, your moods and wishes, your sensitivities and preferences. You are obligated to help because you can, obligated to help on behalf of the many who cannot help themselves, and in recompense to all who strove and struggled in the past to achieve the good things you are so demoralized about losing last November. It's not about you.

How not to drop out? Keep doing your best. Also straightforward, I won't go into it. But plain and simple, look at Abraham Lincoln's Cooper Union Address: "Neither let us be slandered from our duty by false accusations against us, nor frightened from it by menaces of destruction to the Government nor of dungeons to ourselves. LET US HAVE FAITH THAT RIGHT MAKES MIGHT, AND IN THAT FAITH, LET US, TO THE END, DARE TO DO OUR DUTY AS WE UNDERSTAND IT." (All caps are from the internet, and happy birthday.)

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Maybe you didn't want to have to oppose an aggressive autocratizing movement this year. Like me, maybe you hoped they'd not be voted in. But they were, and we do. And you have to oppose it not just by yourself, like a superhero with a cape and dashing boots, able to fix it all in one day on your own and lonesome. You have to work with a governing coalition of great and durable strength, depth, breadth, and diversity. You have to regroup lightning fast or will be looking at a retreat and rout you never dreamed of. Going adolescent rogue will hardly suffice when it comes to saving the republic.

But how? They have taken over all the agencies. Well, the Levitsky-Way article says clearly: civil society must stand up. Stop dreaming that the Constitution, a piece of paper with ink on it, will fix it all for you. It's going to be a tough decade, so learn to write with the pen they can't take away, or can't yet. Type. Photograph. Converse. Express. Make video. Have you forgotten so completely what improvisation even is? Find a bucket of cold water and dunk your head in it if you have to and snap out of it. Ask an old person about the old days.

Write about what? Well, the article says that too. It's not rocket science. You're tired, you say? Take a nap then, but when you wake up get to work. You don't know how? Improvise. Experiment. Collaborate. Innovate. Imitate. Emulate. Share and uplike on social media -- the new smoking -- even though their robots are watching, or preferably in a real place like a classroom or cafe. How can we expect the people of China or anywhere to rise up online if we won't even lift a finger for our most sacred ideals? Lincoln didn't say, "we don't have to do anything because Right always makes Might." Rather, he said, right can sometimes make might, and can sometimes defeat might makes right, but it always requires work and bravery, so be

brave and get to work. You have to believe it can happen before it can happen; call that faith if you want or just call it math, or quantum, or common sense. That's where the psychological sludge of Prosopographia, ancient greek for "face writing," weighs you down. I'm sorry if you are down, but I can't go there with you because there are responsibilities to keep.

I'm not saying there isn't a lot to do; there is. The USA could take this klepto-demagogue interregnum as a wake-up call and revive itself and its civic virtue, or we could bottom out soggy as a wet paper bag into examples like those in the article. It's not written in stone, what happens the rest of this year; just look at "Fluke" by Brian Klaas and contingent evolution. Don't underestimate yourself and others, especially not before you even try, because you don't know what you are capable of doing but haven't done yet.

Imagine a people that saw such a blatant, ignorant, ignominious takeover attempt by narcissistic tycoons and repelled it by means of virtuous cooperative principled culture. Thought-experiment up a use case that passes the stress test, like in the John Lennon song, or some other song, or a poem, legend, or myth. Utopia is impossible, and we cannot undo the past, but we can choose greater peace and justice over runaway violence and hate, schizmo-genetically like the indigenous critique and Graeber said, and go from there. We can heal humanity and restore the planet, gradually but genuinely, starting with poverty and climate infrastructure, and all the better, perhaps even spectacularly well, if we can sell peaceful reform to China and sidestep the Thucydides trap by choosing right in the 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy. Xi and P will laugh well if we go in for autocracy ourselves for real, but their thoughtocracy cannot escape the modernization experience and enlightenment common sense if we stick with it. Convincing Xi to redefine his own Thought in the light of true experience, Jingyan, is the heavy lift, but many lifts in history have been heavy yet still got lifted.

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Here is a simple list of 11 to-do's:

1. Call it what it is: klepto-demagogue, radical regressive, competitive authoritarianism, Urbanization, rank abandonment of constitutional democracy, liquidation of all Judeo-Christian and classical Greco-Roman ethics in pursuit of pure Caesarist retrench out of fear and lack of imagination. Be direct. It's OK. Progressives in the USA have had to confront oligarchs and megacorps in the past with their demagogues and apparatus of despair, and did so reasonably well, allied with moderates of course indispensably, once the terrible harm to the common good was recognized so there's no need to reinvent the wheel. Strong language does not however obviate the need to compromise and cooperate on practical real world alternatives.
2. Don't flail: Let go of your fantasy of a Bernie revolution, as Bernie himself admonishes you must. If progressives, moderates, and conservatives of conscience cannot pool their efforts, at least for a while, the radical regressive party of klepto-demagogues will win in a walk every time. Figure out how to unify; make it work. Hang together, or surely hang separately. Stick together even after a loss, if you harbor any hope at all of a future win or draw. Again, do you have a

right to curl up or throw a tantrum and stop trying or caring? Blame and abscond? No, you don't, any more than you ever had permission to do nothing at all for the greater good. Avoid, like the plague, all non-starters including the abolition of private property, the abolition of all religions (not even just the ones you dislike), and the abolition of all government. Learn hybrid, like market economics with moral sentiments and good governance and safety nets; respect for all cultures and faiths i.e

. de pace fidei; and constitutional democracy (that thing you say you're trying to defend) as the modern improvement on divine-right monarchy. Account for your own inner massive contradictions, and even your deleterious personal habits if you have any, because like it or not you and I are both part of the problem.

3. Call out Machiavelli: the roots of this problem go deep, all the way back to the earliest beginnings of the modern idea which in Europe's historical flow (still in motion) has two main streams. One is Machiavelli, might makes right, Il Principe, the ends justify the means. The other is Dante, right makes might, separation of church and state, development through progress, education, cooperation, vertical movement up and out of Plato's cave into reality's natural light (i.e. from the ninth circle of hell up to the very tip-top singularity, radius-wise), harmony with the biosphere, and all other common good Principia. If you want to refuse to believe in anything at all except Machiavelli you are embracing defeat without even a struggle. Find a way to right makes might you can work with, even if it is just De Pace Fidei, Gaia theory, the golden rule, or plain old compassion and the Prisoner's Dilemma. Find it now, right now, by end of day, at least a placeholder, lest the tragedy of the commons become total.

4. Access Leonardo: all reformers, all champions of right making might, have faced Envy (i.e. Apelles' Calumny, once copied by Botticelli) from those who want might makes right. Sometimes -- well actually, always -- the forces of Envy wield secret police and all manner of harrassments against Virtue. Discretion has been used, including during and even before the first modern inquisition launched in Europe around 1516. Leonardo kept his information system of visual plus verbal network engineering, in defense of Esperienza, experience and experiment, all the arts and all the sciences, secret just enough, maternally if you will, that it could dodge the future's bonfire while remaining decipherable by the likes of us. At least look into it: what if he left us a back door, an easter egg, a failsafe even the Church can finally support and every tourist is familiar with? Wouldn't you have done the same, back then, if you could? Also network with Ken Burns, whose film on the American

Revolution is due out in nine months. Read Hamilton on experience, experientia, as the foundation of both modern arts and sciences and constitutional democracy; link the Federalist No. 85 to Hume on experience, and Hume to Francis and Roger Bacon in re experientia, what Cervantes called "experientia, the mother of all sciences." The European tradition since ancient Greece has based truth and beauty, knowledge and justice, that is, all civilized good, on three main pillars: Reason (ratio, logic); Tradition (or authority, i.e. custom, convention, inertia, and institution); and Experience (which means lived actuality and experimentation as a method, history and science, all of the arts including tech and all forms of conscious process a priori or a posteriori undergone or undergoable). Experience is moreover, precisely and rigorously, what the klepto-demagogue and Machiavelli aim to instrumentalize, monetize, and dominate through

surveillance algorithm technology; it is also that which Dante and Leonardo (Europe-wise) sought to reform, advance, and sustainably improve using all the sciences and all the arts. The word needs true focus, Esperienza as such both real and ideal, past present and future, same as that which the word denotes: ce n'est pas et c'est une pipe; es y no es una pipa. Not coincidentally the Machiavellians, who cannot prevail without myriad machines, use AI-GPT to coopt and colonize first and foremost the EXPERIENCE of the humans they seek to oppress; if you let them that's on you. You gotta fight even intellectually and internally to be free. It is no coincidence or surprise that the worst Machiavellian politicians and the most Machiavellian techbros are cheek and jowl in the USA's current misguided authoritarian shift attempt. Gates owns a Leonardo; he might want to help save democracy. Certainly the smiling portrait of Esperienza can help you see, sense, and speak about this all while staying calm.

5. Clear your clutter: What goes through your head when you are deep in funk that nothing can be done? I.D. that what and get it out. Ask a friend to help. Unblock. You may need to rid yourself of Machiavellian theory and its many prolific descendants, most especially Foucault, Lenin, and everything post-Enlightenment: they were all traps. Even if you wrote your dissertation on them or published a book heaven forbid. The whole "there is no truth, there is no right and wrong, there is no nature, there is no progress, might makes right and everything is constructed only" line of cacophonous euphony will shut you down before you even start by denying every reality basis. If you struggle, start from scratch with partials: "there is some truth; there is some right and wrong; there is some nature; there is some progress; right can sometimes make might; construction is not all there is; and all these facts matter." If you don't like the old-fashioned caricatures of constitutional democracy advertised by the authorities, evolve and refine them as hybrids responsibly, but junk them totalistically at everyone's peril.

6. Get and give help: Collaborate collaborate collaborate, redundify, and magnify: that is what networks do, but only if you do the network right. Your job, that is. Abhor Nozick's "experience machine" and help others abhor it too. This seems impossible until you try it and get the hang of it, then it's very natural and intuitive like play. 'Tis a gift to be simple.

7. Embrace reality but imagine progress: things are bad, but if you give up completely you guarantee they'll stay that way at best and almost certainly get worse. The future is not locked in, so progress can happen; even serious progress of the kind you have always wanted to see. If it's your place to just bag sand till you keel over, well start bagging. Think of those who cannot act with the freedom and efficacy you enjoy, and consider your responsibility to them, despite whatever your own likes and dislikes might prefer. Befriend serendipity as well as your share of the chores.

8. Question the master of puppets: these techno-autocrats are incompetent idiots on almost every level. Only through your own unchecked fear, panic, and self-disfranchisement can they prevail. Their so-called plans are 99% baloney, lies, and graft. They have no real plan for peace with China, nor the green transition, nor sustainability in any sense; they are mostly clowns. Scary, bad, incompetent, ignorant, uneducated clowns as described in book 7 of Plato's Politeia.

Consider them the doofuses that they are. Outclass them; do not adulate nor overestimate their putative wizardry.

9. Get it on: think you're nimble? Were you ever? Read Calvino's Six Memos on Cavalcanti's leap over the tombstones to outrun his local goon squad and make your own copy. Improvise. Use your words. Keep on keeping on and stay frosty, be active, go not easily into that good night. Articulate unified dissent; defend Enlightenment values of the rule of law and systems of rights. Be a part of the solution, even just in a small ordinary way if nothing big and extraordinary presents itself, or until it does. Engage.

10. Don't take the bait: the autocratizers will use ample brutality for both direct effect and for spectacle. It's on the way soon, probably as soon as winter's over and people get outside. Don't take the bait. They will try to make it look like the traitorous opposition "started it" and their citizen freedom fighters only acted in self-defense. Don't start it, or even look like you want to. Be smart, like Selma. Avoid the mayhem nights of George Floyd's protests and emulate the peaceful protest days. Authoritarian psych ops will tell you that you can't win unless you freak out, go berserk, and tilt at windmills. Don't indulge yourself, and don't indulge your friends if you care about the result. This isn't a rave or a video game. You have to practice self-control, or you will be exploited by Il Principe's AI-GPT.

11. Be responsible: or if you can't be responsible, start to become more so. This crisis is not about protest as an end in itself; the opposition can't just tear down anything and everything. They must build and maintain a viable alternative governing coalition, which will at least short term and probably longer require the heresy of compromise. This is not a vice or failing; it's called "unified opposition" and "mutual self-defense." Don't make the perfect the enemy of the good enough. Don't self-indulge even if you're desperate to. Coalitionize accountably. If you refuse to make alliances, the course of events will have no other option but to favor the authoritarians.

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All best of luck to you I send, and see my interview with @KenBurns for more details. Take good care of yourself and keep your wellness up with good sleep, diet, friends, and exercise, because you and all of us will need it. Mistakes at first are fine, as is being awkward, so be kind; just take note and try again and soon your skills will improve.

FedPaper and Hamilton deets, the first edition of 1788, are at ExperienceDemocracy2024.org/experience-democracy-is, or just use ctrl+F to scan the Federalist Papers Nos. 1 and 85 for keyword "experience." A huge lot of great Leonardo/Esperienza content, much of it by real scholars and experts not me, is at Leonardo.info/is-everyone-a-leonardo (scroll down for Ken Burns interview). I wrote a giant PDF too that is free, and has a bibliography with roughly accurate citations. Check also the Novum Organum, Book 1, section 97 (XCVII), or the Opus Majus of 1267, Book VI, De Scientia Experimentalis; Il Principe XV, the Paradiso I & II, or the "Leonardo da Vinci" and "Conclusion" essays from Pater's super-timely The Renaissance of 1873. Check too maybe Benjamin's essay

"Experience" and his planned "Critique of Pure Experience," erfahrung and erlebniz in his vernacular contrasting Kant, or even Plato's Politeia Book 7. Gutenberg plus ctrl+F equals your friend.

Basically most if not all pre-computer, honest investigations of experience, experientia, experienciac, esperienza, or Jingyan, or patisamvedeti, and all decent studies of present-moment awareness from any cultural tradition, will be helpful, but beware of Il Principes bearing experience machines! :)

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The article by Levitsky and Way concludes, both dire and optimistic:

"HOLD THE LINE"

"America is on the cusp of competitive authoritarianism. The Drumpf administration has already begun to weaponize state institutions and deploy them against opponents. The Constitution alone cannot save U.S. democracy. Even the best-designed constitutions have ambiguities and gaps that can be exploited for antidemocratic ends. After all, the same constitutional order that undergirds America's contemporary liberal democracy permitted nearly a century of authoritarianism in the Jim Crow South, the mass internment of Japanese Americans, and McCarthyism. In 2025, the United States is governed nationally by a party with greater will and power to exploit constitutional and legal ambiguities for authoritarian ends than at any time in the past two centuries.

"Drumpf will be vulnerable. The administration's limited public support and inevitable mistakes will create opportunities for democratic forces?in Congress, in courtrooms, and at the ballot box.

"But the opposition can win only if it stays in the game. Opposition under competitive authoritarianism can be grueling. Worn down by harassment and threats, many of Drumpf's critics will be tempted to retreat to the sidelines. Such a retreat would be perilous. When fear, exhaustion, or resignation crowds out citizens' commitment to democracy, emergent authoritarianism begins to take root."

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