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The Trump Syndrome in Brazil and Elsewhere



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The far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro wins the Brazilian presidential election run-off securing 55% of the votes polled. The leftist Haddad secured only 45% of the votes. Though 45% is not less significant of a number, it is interesting to note that the narrative adopted by Trump is prevailing elsewhere. [BBC](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56888888) recently reported on the gaining momentum of far-right political parties in Europe including Italy, Germany, Austria, Sweden, France, Hungary, Slovenia, Poland among others.

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I should not hesitate in admitting that the title of this post though ‘catchy’ is rather ‘misleading’ in the sense that it allocates importance to an individual who exhibits the symptoms of an ailing democratic setup that is plagued by systemic disease. What disease are we talking about? Look around and observe. If you have been reading the most established names in the field of economics or finance, you will notice declining or at least slowing down world economy with increasing socio-economic inequality, soaring unemployment rate and diminishing investments. [IMF](#), [CNBC](#), [the Economist](#), [Financial Post](#), [Business Insider](#), [World Inequality Database](#), [World Bank](#), [Bloomberg](#) and others report the concern. It is extremely important to highlight that poverty, inequality et al. are not, in themselves, the problem or the disease our society is inflicted with; in fact, they are symptoms of the disease. The disease, on the other hand, is the system itself that we have not only created but also been continuously maintaining in different shapes through policy and law making. The way our system and its institutions have been designed reflects that the status quo will be maintained, in all circumstances, with no real and substantial improvements unless confronted with substantial overhaul because the underlying notions that govern everything always remain the same. This explains why the reforms never end up yielding sufficient improvements; at times, no improvement at all or even worsening of the situation. Noam Chomsky, in [Global Policy Journal](#), shared:

Trumpism is one of many manifestations of the effects of the neoliberal policies of the past generation. These have led to extreme concentration of wealth along with stagnation for the majority. There have been repeated crashes of the deregulated financial institutions, each worse than the last. Bursting bubbles have been followed by huge public bailouts for the perpetrators while the victims have been abandoned. Globalization has been designed to set working people throughout the world in competition with one another while private capital is lavished with benefits. Democratic institutions have eroded. As already mentioned, all of this has led to anger, bitterness, often desperation.

Again, the way our system is structured is the result of politics but the values on which it is based are the result of priorities of those who are in-charge- the governing elite. A [study conducted by Prof. Martin Gilens](#) of Princeton and Prof. Benjamin Page of Northwestern brings forth that it is only the economic elite and organized groups representing businesses that control policy making and other interests are discarded in this regard. Going further, the policies shape our economic system. Therefore, only interests of a few get institutionalized and reflected in policy-making that basically is nothing but the contours guiding the system; rather the system itself. This observation finds support in the work of

the late C.W. Mills, Professor of Sociology at Columbia University, who, in his book The Power Elite, highlighted that the ordinary citizen has no substantial role in society and is subject to the control of “power elite” that occupy dominant position in the dominant institutional framework dealing with military, corporate and political elements across the globe. Prof. Nicola Phillips of King’s College London, in her paper ‘Power and inequality in the global political economy’, talks about how system works only for those that it is made to work for by installing in place unequal opportunities for concentration of wealth and power, manipulating economic, social and political inequalities to serve the aforementioned purpose. She also explains how people suffer at the hands of distributional dynamics of globalization. The fact is reflected in the statistics and reasoning afforded by Oxfam International reports of 2016, 2017 and 2018 demonstrating the consequences of this lopsided design and operation of the system.

So, when the things are not going good, people lose hope and losing hope is worse than not having any material resources. The public harbors anguish against the establishment and desire to disrupt the status quo, ushering in a change. Exploiting this anguish is where the political opportunity lies. Chalking out an alternative to the existing system requires a very patient, well-informed and inclusive approach which becomes difficult in the circumstances as people are fuming with anger due to non-delivery of promises made in the last elections. Therefore, in manifesting this desire to bring a change, the change as such becomes necessity and the direction of it assumes secondary importance. Because of negative sentiment towards the establishment, public often resort to the political candidate mirroring the same negative sentiments towards the establishment. Also, merely reflecting the same negative sentiments is not enough, one has to give reasoning for the existing circumstances that goes beyond fault finding with the political party in power. In this situation, engaging in institutional analysis of the whole situation becomes a cumbersome task because of two reasons: one, people, as mentioned before, just want change and don’t have patience to engage in any extensive exercise involving intellectual deliberation; and two, understanding something that the general public has never been exposed to becomes almost impossible. Noam Chomsky, in his Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media, highlighted that people, in general, spend all day working hard in order to make ends meet and to fulfil their system-induced aspirations and when they come home, there is almost no energy or zeal left to engage in institutional analysis of the society or system they are a part of; instead, according to Chomsky, people look forward to entertainment on mass media getting further conditioned and having no time

and opportunity to think. In addition to this, Chomsky, in his [lecture](#), has articulated limitations of education system in making people conformists, obedient, indoctrinated, and not being able to think too much. In these conditions, it becomes almost impossible to educate the public as to how they have been led into this situation of despair.

One more thing becomes crucial for the far-right candidates to do in this context and that is to divide people by articulating that one segment of people are a cause of the misery of another segment of people. Mostly, these segments are divided on the basis of identity that can be rooted in different notions like that of color, wealth, race, religion, domicile et al. This step is crucial in the agenda of far-right candidates because it afford public a physical object that they can make a scapegoat of. It takes the attention off the system itself and makes the recipient of whatever the system has to offer fight with each other blaming each other for the fallacies that should attributed only to the systemic structuring. In this whole process, those who designed the system or use it to serve their own interests escape easily. In closing, it is important for the society to not focus on individuals like Trump or Bolsonaro because it limits the public discourse in terms of its scope and effectiveness. Rather, the discussion should shift to the systemic attributes that have led to people like these come to power in order to continue the status quo but under a different mask.

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