

PICKING UP THE PIECES

Tom Givón

La Plata county and Colorado aside, the 2016 national election has delivered unpleasant news to the Democratic party. But the weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth on national TV, as well as the outpour of genuine grief and despair I have witnessed in person, may be as premature as they are counter-productive. Premature because the sky is not yet falling. Counter-productive because this unceremonious drubbing may yet turn out to be an overdue learning experience.

The fascist moment in Europe of the 1920s-1930s coincided with an unprecedented social and economic dislocation following the double whammy of WW-I and the Depression. But unlike Europe at the dawn of Fascism, our country is still blessed with the Roosevelt-Johnson safety net that cushions us against extreme social disruption, as well as deep institutional inertia. The boiling bile of Donald Trump's core constituency is real enough, but the raging multitude are neither starving nor homeless nor, strictly speaking, poor.

As Alexis de Tocqueville observed, as an election nears, "intrigues become more active, agitation more lively and more widespread. The entire nation falls into a feverish state." But, once the election has passed, "everything becomes calm, and the river, one moment overflowed, returns peacefully to its bed."

Non-coercive egalitarian governance has been the evolved inheritance of our species for over 7 million years, and the hallmark of our ancestral hunting-and-gathering Society of Intimates. Its operating calculus is disarmingly simple: "You cooperate only with those you trust; and you trust only those who are your everyday face-to-face intimates, who share your knowledge, beliefs and mores, and who--like it or not--look like you". Glorifying cultural diversity, above and beyond plain tolerance and universal human decency and justice, is a guarantee for social incoherence. More so in a nation of immigrants.

The record of democracy in the complex, large-scale Societies of Strangers of the past 10,000 years--city-states, nation-states or empires--has been spotty at best. The initial 100 years of Athenian democracy (505-403BC) excluded 95% of the populace (slaves, women, non-natives, the poor), seesawing wildly between democracy, oligarchy and demagoguery. The same was true of the 70-odd years of nominal democracy in pre-Caesar Rome. Similar exclusions characterized most of our own political history prior to 1964.

As in Athens and Rome, our democratic experiment has been largely dependent on an educated, informed, rational, engaged electorate, who speak the same language and subscribes to the same cultural norms. Just as Athens and Rome, we are prone to periodic bouts of fear, rage and confusion whipped up by unscrupulous demagogues.

Both our social and physical coping strategies are founded on profound misunderstandings. First, our obsessive faith in diversity ignores the evolved Human-Nature constraints on social cooperation. And second, our addiction to rampant development flies in the face of the bio-physical constraints on a viable planet.

What the last election amplified, in spades, is the final unraveling of the old Roosevelt coalition between educated urban professionals and the working class. The cultural incoherence of this old alliance had been glaring enough: Educated urbanites and working folks seldom live in the same neighborhood, nor do they speak the same language, nor read the same books, nor watch the same news, nor worship in the same temple.

But what replaced the old Democratic coalition is even less coherent--a grab-bag of business globalists, educated middle class, and the 'ethnics'--most of them either working class or the rock-bottom poor. The discarded white working class was ceded to the tender mercies of the cut-my-taxes, trickle-down, rapacious rich.

The past fifty years of rising preoccupation with diversity and the politics of identity and race have proven disastrous to the Democratic party. As it kept sliding slowly toward paternalism and pandering, it let divisive race-defined benefits displace common human and class interests. This drift has left much of the party's ethnic clientele forever dependent on remedial programs that don't tackle its recalcitrant real issues--the vicious cycle of poverty, the suffocating housing and educational segregation, disrupted families, drugs and crime.

The most striking electoral success-story in La Plata County has gone largely unheralded--the 2-to-1 rejection of a new-airport tax. This lavishly-funded boondoggle was supported by a media-rich alliance of the Durango big-business lobby and select denizens of the educated elite. Remarkably, the winning vote resurrected, almost to the tee, the old Roosevelt coalition--the urban middle class and urban-rural working folks--including the ethnics.

In our mercifully-over national election, the battered white working class was highjacked by an impious, tax-shirking, draft-dodging, fraudulent billionaire who least reflected their cultural values. But the fraud was aided and abetted by the cultural insularity of much of the Democratic left. If we are ever to pick up the pieces, we need to remind ourselves that a viable democracy can only thrive if it upholds the delicate balance between individual freedom and communal empathy; that community also entails commonality; and that what binds us together as struggling human beings must take precedence over what divides us into insular tribes.