



## Make Democracy Great Again?

South Africa could teach us a thing or two about how to interpret Trump's nostalgia.

*He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past.*

—George Orwell, 1984

Not too long ago, I sat across an inconsolable teenage girl living in a rural town. I struggled to keep my shock from visibly registering as she spoke.

The [former government] controlled crime. They controlled violence, they controlled everything! But now they can't control crime. They can't control pregnancy. Instead of controlling those things, they just introduce gay marriage. They just introduce abortion. Instead of fighting what is there, they add more.

Familiar sentiments after the election of Donald J. Trump, no? Except that this wasn't a white American teenager speaking. It came from a black South African born at the cusp of Apartheid's end.

Distrust of the democratic process is nothing new, but recent world events are certainly bringing the issue to the fore. Democracy, at least as many countries have known it, is persistently plagued by the potential for tyranny of the majority. In this scenario, the belief that equality and fairness are best supported via public opinion is upended, instead allowing widespread fear to drive policies through a wave of uncensored populism. I have been thinking about this ever since Trump victoriously swept through the US Republican primaries, despite the party establishment's varied attempts to dislodge him.

Now, as we look to Trump's presidential inauguration, it appears the connections between memory, democracy, and liberalism are more apparent than ever before. Coasting on a tidal wave of terror and nostalgia, he has captured the hearts of disgruntled, middle-class white Americans far beyond expectations. His supporters scheme to "Make America Great Again" by banning Muslims and constructing a giant wall on the US/Mexican border. Meanwhile, across the pond, a majority of enfranchised Britons recently voted to exit the European Union amid fears of migrants and ethnocentric nationalism that seeks to restore an elusive pure Britishness. What do the rise of Trump and the success of Brexit tell us about democracy as ideology? While our national future may be uncertain, we can learn from the example of South Africa, both in its contrasts and comparisons.

But are we even talking about democracy? Perhaps the word has become a euphemism of sorts for populism these days. Few people distinguish between a democracy (voters directly choose laws) and a republic (voters choose representatives who wield power in the interest of their constituents). Why do we call the US a democracy when it has more than once appointed a president who lost the popular vote, and possesses an electoral college which has stopped operating as a safeguard against tyranny and instead is in thrall to its voters and lobbyists? Decades ago [Gandhi](#) stressed the need to distinguish between democracy and fascism: "Western democracy as it functions today is diluted Nazism or Fascism. At best it is merely a cloak to hide the Nazi and Fascist tendencies of imperialism" (1947).

For the past several years, I have been studying nostalgia for the days of apartheid among black South Africans ([Reed 2016](#)). What have I learned? That recent global waves of resistance to liberalism should not be very surprising. In fact, I expect we will see many more examples across the world in the days and years to come. In South Africa, the social ills accompanying majority-based rule have a lot of people reminiscing about the alleged stability and security under Apartheid. If the most disenfranchised, violated, and targeted demographic of the Afrikaner National Party are unhappy enough with democracy that they recall elements of a racist state fondly, is Trump truly a surprise? Perhaps if it becomes clearer that Trump fans, Brexit voters, and Patriot Act supporters share a willingness to sacrifice freedom for the illusion of security, my own work will be easier to understand in this hemisphere.

*"Make America Great Again" conjures up fantastical portraits of a US that never was: a nation of white families living on suburban cul-de-sacs, nestled in a Garden of Eden paradise before the original sin of Otherness poured in and invaded homes with drugs, atheism, and Jihad.*

To be clear, this nostalgia is rarely for race-based policies like the Pass Laws, which narrowly restricted movement of non-whites, or the Bantu Education Act, which codified unequal education and outlawed native African languages in schools. Rather, these positive memories demonstrate how Apartheid's system of indirect governance in rural areas allowed for an illusion of cultural autonomy. They also illuminate the continued economic oppression perpetrated under the guise of liberalism. South African democracy seems to dogmatically dictate liberal values, such as gay marriage and gender equality, while keeping wealth concentrated in the hands of the very few. Fond memories for life during Apartheid also show how a police state can project an aura of safety and security, in contrast to contemporary South Africa's soaring crime rates.

Crucial to highlight here is the role of *perception* in these narratives: people perceive the present as so awful that a globally hated regime becomes preferable in comparison. At stake is not so much a new reading of the past as a failure of the present ([Boym 2001](#)).

Trump has been savvy enough to capitalize on this link between discontent and nostalgia in the American context. “Make America Great Again” conjures up fantastical portraits of a US that never was: a nation of white families living on suburban cul-de-sacs, nestled in a Garden of Eden paradise before the original sin of Otherness poured in and invaded homes with drugs, atheism, and Jihad. In 2005, Thomas Frank reminded us in [What’s the Matter with Kansas?](#) that we have collectively forgotten our radical, progressive frontier past and replaced it with nostalgia for a false history of conservative middle America. But no matter: nostalgia does not require facts to thrive. Many social conservatives ignore the fact that abortion rates have drastically fallen in recent decades ([Somashekhar 2014](#)) or that heart disease and car accidents are far larger threats to American lives than Muslim terrorists ([Shaver 2015](#)). Just as black South Africans would be the last people to benefit from a return to codified white supremacy, so will Trump supporters be sorely disappointed at policy priorities designed to maintain the capitalist status quo.

Behind nostalgia is the fact that democracy can actually be fairly unnerving. Providing equal rights to all people upends any sense of clear morality ([Brown 1998](#)), suggesting that attention to diversity equals a nation in which a variety of social ills are protected. In South Africa, this means that to some, suspected witches and homosexuals appear to run rampant ([Ashforth 2005](#); [Comaroff and Comaroff 1999](#)), while for others in the US and Britain, lax immigration policies welcome alleged terrorists with open arms and outsource employment at the expense of natural-born citizens.



A village on South Africa’s “Wild Coast,” 2012. Amber R. Reed

Of course, academics have long insisted that diversity is not at the root of crime or economic precarity. But the complex structures that actually drive inequality—a “free” market economy, the privatization of social services, and political corruption, to name a few—are a lot harder to blame. It is easy to point fingers at people with faces, especially when the media grants access to them 24/7. It is much harder to target anger towards a system in which we are all complicit. Bernie Sanders made a valiant attempt to make this structure visible, but Trump’s brand of simplified anger requires less sacrifice and gives seemingly easy solutions—ban brown-skinned immigrants, keep shopping at Walmart.

Popular opinion suggests that democracy is intimately tied to freedom. Freedom, the argument goes, has the best chance to thrive in a society where the needs and wants of most people are honored. What this misses, and what my connections in South Africa already know, is that freedom can feel imprisoning—at least when it is so narrowly defined ([Englund 2006](#)). This is something that feminist anthropologists have long known ([Abu-Lughod 2002](#)). It is also likely of no surprise to scholars of Eastern Europe, where nostalgia for communism reflects deep-seated feelings of precarity ([Angé and Berliner 2014](#)). In light of such mounting moral panics, we see a potential opening for the return of authoritarianism. The success of Brexit and Trump suggest a groundswell of social conservatism on a global scale that threatens democracy by encouraging people to vote indirectly against their own best interests.

The current political moment in the US and Europe needs anthropologists, if for no other reason than their inclusion of the global “periphery” in theorizing. The support of dangerous, bigoted demagogues and racially motivated nationalism is nothing new. Why does the media’s coverage of Trump or Brexit (with the notable exception of *The*

*Daily Show* host Trevor Noah and his brilliant [comparison of Trump to African dictators](#)) ignore the fact that people at the tip of the African continent or in former Soviet countries have been saying these same things for years? Maybe it is because Americans are not interested in these places. Or maybe it is because the dots have yet to be connected. Clearly, the US education system has failed to teach the global history of authoritarianism, because close study of Apartheid South Africa, Nazi Germany, or Soviet Russia would likely temper the desire for a Trump presidency. Personally, I have known for a while that democracy and nostalgia were contemporary bedfellows. But as we approach the upcoming inauguration on January 20th, my fear now is that they may combine forces and usher in a renewed wave of authoritarian rule.

**Amber R. Reed** is a visiting assistant professor at Drexel University in Philadelphia. She has published on issues of youth political education, nostalgia, and non-governmental organizations in South Africa. Her next project looks at issues of race, space, and television in suburban Johannesburg. Feel free to contact her at [arr98@drexel.edu](mailto:arr98@drexel.edu).

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