



# The Forum for Cities in Transition

an initiative of the Moakley Chair of Peace and Reconciliation  
McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies  
University of Massachusetts Boston

## FCT Remarks/ conference 24/11.20

The FCT was founded 11 years ago at the University of Massachusetts Boston. I am happy to see that some of the attendees at that founding conference are with us today, including Dragan & Aari Jobari, both of whom were awarded the Chancellor's medal by my university, the highest award the university can give. I'm also happy to see that we are joined by Steve Martineau, Director of Friends Forever, who will make a presentation later in the program, & Dietrich Bilger from Rotary International, who will also make a presentation.

The FCT is now in an active partnership with the International Communities Organization, & before we kick off today's proceedings I'd like to complement & profusely thank Kübra & her team, & ICO Sec General James Holmes, for the really outstanding job they've done in putting this virtual conference together – the breath of participation is a tribute to their work - we have representation from Nigeria, Northern Ireland, Israel, Kosovo, Lebanon, Iraq, Italy, UK, USA – across several time zones.

I've reviewed your projects & they are all exciting, innovative & involve cross community support, which is a key requirement for support on the funding scale.

The FCT was founded on the principle that one divided society was in the best position to help another & while much changed in the world since, I believe the principle still holds, although the context in which we examine we apply it has changed.

Implicit in that post conflict reconciliation formula is the belief that a form of representative democracy, what's called consociational government, where power is shared among once warring parties, is the best form of government to reconcile differences & create the conditions for collective responsibility & co-operation. Also, implicit was the belief that the United States was global upholder of democratic ideals.

I regret to say that I believe the United States can no longer claim to be a beacon of democracy. I regret to say, too, that it seems the United States itself has now joined the ranks of divided societies with an extraordinary degree of polarization between its tribes, the hard base of perhaps 40 million of the 73 million who voted for Trump & the 80 million



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who opposed him, that matches or surpasses the extent of the communal cleavages in your own countries. Of that 73 million upwards of 40 million believe the election was stolen despite over 301 law suits being thrown out of court & several recounts.

The presidency of Joe Biden will not heal these frictions. While it will redress some of the more harmful impacts of decisions of the Trump Adm on the rules based international order & bring common decency to the office, the flaws in the American system of governance are deeply structural. It was designed as a system of governance to meet the conditions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, incapable of reforming itself now to meet the urgent necessities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century because of Congressional gridlock.

If the Republican Party retains control of the Senate – which will not be determined until Jan 2021 - it can effectively block a Biden administration from passing any legislation - & huge legislation is demanded to resuscitate the economy, distribute an anti Covid 19 vaccine, redress issues of racial justice, addressing the demands of Black Lives Matter- a movement highly threatening to lots of white folk.

As the country becomes more diverse- by the 2040s whites will no longer be a majority, in fact, in some states like California whites will be a minority, huge swaths of the population feel their way of life as they know it, their definition of the American dream is under existential threat.

Declining belief in the efficacy of democracy, however is not simply something the United States is experiencing.

In recent times it is foundering in many countries, replaced by illiberal democracies – where there are elections but power stays in the same hands, one party controls the judiciary, the legislature & the executive – like Hungary & Poland, & to an increasing extent Netanyahu's Israel, a kind of soft authoritarianism, or Turkey, a hard authoritarianism.

The promise of democracy, especially in the West, is that every generation would, as a whole, live better than its predecessor, have more security, more freedom, live in a better environment, have a higher standard of living, more leisure time, etc. The future is a better version of the present. This is the promise of democracy & democracy is failing to deliver on



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its promise. In the United States, almost half the people born in 1985 are doing worse than their parents did at this point in their lives.

People have lost faith in their governance & civil institutions. Across much of the developed world there is disillusionment with democracy, a growing undercurrent of discontentment that questions democracy's efficacy. Populism is sweeping many countries; authoritarian is gaining a foothold in others. In the United States & Europe a recent study found that over half of respondents lack faith in democracy.

Increasing economic inequality between richer countries & poorer ones & within all countries is one reason for feeding the spread of populism & eroding democratic values. Astonishingly, 26 of the world's richest people own as much as the 50 percent of the world's population. Across all sectors of the global community inequality is increasing exponentially. No world order can indefinitely sustain that level of inequity. Increasing inequity leads to the rise of authoritarian social movements.

There is a famous adage that democracy is the best form of government in the absence of anything better. But it is wearing thin. Democracy emerged to meet the needs of emerging industrialization. It is advocated as the best vehicle for the expression of our aspirations rather than as a system that is inherently appropriate to a certain period in human history, just as feudalism was inherently appropriate to its time.

There is no such thing as ordained permanency about governance: systems emerge to fit the social order that prevails, rather than the social order being molded to fit the form of governance.

Covid-19, rather than being a great equalizer, has reinforced and entrenched further inequalities. According to the World Bank, because of national lockdowns, up to 100 million people will fall back into extreme poverty this year, half the newly destitute will be in South



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**Asia.** The economy of Sub Sahara Africa, which had grown every year for the last 25 will shrink in 2020, the number of people facing hunger will double to 265 million.<sup>i</sup> “

The post pandemic world will be less globalized, as supply chains are shortened or brought home, more digitized, more automated, & less equal.<sup>ii</sup>

Democracy itself is bending under the weight of the virus. A report from Freedom House, based on a survey of 192 countries concludes: “The COVID-19 pandemic has fueled a crisis for democracy. . . . Since the coronavirus outbreak began, the condition of democracy and human rights has grown worse in 80 countries. The problem is particularly acute in struggling democracies and highly repressive states—in other words, settings that already had weak safeguards against abuse of power are suffering the most.”<sup>iii</sup>

Democracy is also being severely eroded & devalued by the proliferation of social media platforms.

Just as the advent of the printing press made possible the translation of the Bible into English & its dissemination across society, leading ultimately to the Reformation as one of the singular most important agents of change in the West & the democratization of public discourse, , the post internet advances in social media , driven by algorithms, created by Artificial Intelligence, have transformed how we communicate with each other, how we receive & respond to information.

Twitter feeds & the like link millions of users instantaneously, retweets millions more; for a younger generation Instagram has taken the place of Facebook, although Facebook retains its power as an organizing tool, postings in chat rooms facilitating almost immediate mass gatherings, the phenomenon of leaderless revolutions in the social arena..

But social media are structured to rewire minds that make reasoned discourse an anathema. Social media is addictive. Algorithms capture & maximize the attention of online users.



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The dopamine feeds these algorithms induce & continue to refine- without human intervention - reinforce points of view, filter out whatever might contradict or convey an alternative reality, rubbish fact, “expert” opinion & contextualization, elicit intense emotional attachment to the version of reality that confirm us in the rectitude & authenticity of our own beliefs, disparage the beliefs of others, emasculate complexity & nuance; falsehood asphyxiates fact- based analysis; the nature of facts themselves is queried, amplifying misinformation; platforms wallow in cesspools of conspiracies, provoking anger & outrage & driving users to return or stay with their preferred platforms for another fix of self- affirming news.

In the future, algorithms will enhance their capacity, programing themselves to maximise use; “bots, & “trolling” to maximise shovelling extreme ideas into the mainstream, amplifying the drive to create divisiveness & delivering with greater greater efficiency.

So, in your discussions today you might ask yourselves:

- a) Whether the US can continue to play the role it once did on the global stage in the face of its internal convulsive conditions of mass polarization
- b) Why has democracy in the West done such a poor job at controlling the spread of the coronavirus?
- c) If it is deficient at this level in facilitating behavior change, how much more deficient might it be in coming decades dealing with the crisis of global warming, which will require massive changes in the way we live & work if we have any chance of bringing it under controls before it spirals out on to levels that will doom civilization as we know it.
- d) Social media built on algorithms are profit making machines for the likes of Facebook, Google, Apple & much of Big Tech. How do we contain it?
- e) If we don't, will the continuous torrents of hate & venom & virulence slowly undermine society as we know it?
- f) What is the appeal of authoritarianism in these strange, uncertain, anxiety laden times
- g) How do apply our insights on these matters to our own societies.

Thank you



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**And Director of Forum for Cities in Transition Global Limited, the registered NGO in the UK**

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<sup>i</sup> “The Pandemic Is Plunging Millions Back into Extreme Poverty,” *Economist*, September 20, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/09/26/the-pandemic-is-plunging-millions-back-into-extreme-poverty>.

<sup>ii</sup> “The Peril and the Promise,” *Economist* October 8, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/10/08/the-peril-and-the-promise>.

<sup>iii</sup> Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, “Democracy under Lockdown,” Freedom House, October 2020,

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/democracy-under-lockdown>.