



By Chief Black Hawk



“If democracy is someday to regain control of capitalism, it must start by recognising that the concrete institutions in which democracy and capitalism are embodied need to be reinvented again and again.” (Piketty 2014: 570).

During the run-up to the US elections in November, a number of my African colleagues and friends told me that Trump would win the presidency. Several even opined that something good would come out of it in the end. Experience has taught me to treat such counterintuitive observations with a degree of cautious respect. But this particular appraisal was a tricky proposition.

Trump ran more on outrage with the *status quo*, homespun economic nationalism, and anti-Hillary sentiment than workable policies for reversing the domestic malaise framing his rude political rhetoric. The Tea Party crowd flocked to Trump’s campaign, presenting Trump with the kind of political stage suited to his unconventional and often reptilian behaviour. The national media feasted on Trump’s antics and divisive positions, but the condescending coverage of the campaign of a candidate who started out as an outlier also camouflaged the more clinical aspects of his strategy to defeat Hillary Clinton.

The poll numbers and sophisticated data analyses dismissed the likelihood of a Trump victory. But then the same electorate who twice elected Obama by sizeable majorities propelled his polar opposite into the White House.

For the many millions of Americans and others around the world distressed by the Trump campaign, the implications of his electoral-college victory was like waking up to a collective nightmare. Most of

my friends, family and colleagues were stunned. Anger and agitation quickly replaced the shock. Obama's bleak reaction, "Well, it's not the Apocalypse," offered little comfort.

This added up to a lot to think about as I made my way back to the US for the first time since 2004, arriving in the country two days after Trump's inauguration. I was told to expect massive changes. My destination was Salt Lake City, the capital of Utah, socially the most conservative of the red states of the American West.

Exposure to racist theology like that of the Church of Latter Day Saints was a primary motivator for the black power salute at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico. Tommy Smith won the 200 metres in world record time followed by John Carlos in third place. The medallists mounted the podium barefoot, to symbolise the poverty of their African-American community, and raised black-gloved fists in defiance during the raising of the American flag. The protest triggered an explosion of institutional indignation and recriminations portraying Smith and Carlos as Nazis and traitors

For decades, many Americans considered the Mormon-dominated state to be a quasi-theocratic no-go zone with a unique past that set Utah apart from other ultra-conservative Western states like Wyoming, Idaho, Montana, and the Dakotas.

During my two previous trips I had found a large and variegated landscape of rangeland, desert, and mountains, with a large inland sea thrown in to boot. I found many similarities between Utah and Marsabit and the Lake Turkana region, including its traditional spatial and social separation from the rest of the country.

Mormons fleeing religious persecution in the East settled in Utah at a time when almost everyone else was heading to California. The Territory of Utah was officially recognised in 1851. It was the only Western state to allow slavery, and attempted to secede from the Union shortly afterwards. Washington was compelled to send in the army. Brigham Young, who had succeeded the religion's founder, Joseph Smith, capitulated, but with the promise that the government would grant the Mormons autonomy to live according to their religion. The Church of Latter Day Saints has dominated the state's economy and government ever since.

The Book of Mormon stated that the indigenous peoples the white settlers found in their new home originally came from the Middle East, but had divided into two antagonistic groups. The "Lamanites" were idolaters revealed to have extinguished a population of "Nephrite" Hebrews who had migrated to the New World several hundred years before the coming of Christ. Mormon scripture saw dark skin as a curse from God for wickedness, but otherwise taught that peoples of colour who converted and abandoned their culture would become white over time.

Exposure to this racist theology was a primary motivator for the black power salute at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico. Tommy Smith won the 200 metres in world record time followed by John Carlos in third place. The medallists mounted the podium barefoot, to symbolise the poverty of their African-American community, and raised black-gloved fists in defiance during the raising of the American flag. The protest triggered an explosion of institutional indignation and recriminations portraying Smith and Carlos as Nazis and traitors. The firestorm also curtailed the running career of the Australian silver medallist who in solidarity wore the same human rights badge pinned to the Americans' jerseys.

It was a radicalising moment: I compiled a comprehensive report of the protest and the conditions leading up to it for a high school project. The racism of the church of Latter Day Saints added to my

impressions of the state based on the gruesome fate of the Westward-bound Donner party caravan and the numerous massacres of the local Amerindian communities during the early days of the territory. Many of us growing up at that time saw Utah as the American equivalent of Albania or North Korea.

The Civil Rights movement had already done most of the heavy lifting. This in turn provided a platform for the anti-war movement. Before long, what began as a political movement for peace and racial inclusion coalesced into a much broader social upheaval

Utah has evolved during the intervening decades. The US government has resettled refugees of diverse backgrounds in the state. Salt Lake City's industry-friendly environment also attracted the tech companies relocating from California, bringing the formerly isolated state into the American mainstream over the past two decades. Readily available jobs, a reasonable cost of living, and a network of Kenyan friends and family already established in the former no-go zone attracted several of my kids to Salt Lake City.

The growing cultural diversity has not altered the state's bedrock conservatism. Mitt Romney and George Bush Jr still received a phenomenal 72 per cent of Utah's vote in 2012 and 2008. Although Donald Trump's tally did not reach these heights in 2016, the sum of these factors designated this most red of states an appropriate re-entry point for my tour of Trump's America.

Steve Bannon, the Breitbart News executive who became one of the key architects of the Trump campaign, declared that if you want to change politics you have to change culture first. There was the angst on the surface and uncertainty lurking underneath, but was the Republican clean sweep of White House, the Senate, and House of representatives really a marker of far-reaching culture change?

THE COUNTERCULTURAL ROOTS OF THE TRUMP PRESIDENCY

Bannon clearly arrived at his change-the-culture thesis by observing the counterculture that emerged while my generation came of age, a phenomenon that reshaped American society and politics along the way.

The post-World War II period was an era of unprecedented prosperity, middle-class growth and technological progress for the USA. Politics was something that our parents followed as it came around in four-year cycles. America was a truly great place to grow up, as long as you could keep the fear of nuclear Armageddon, and other industrial-scale threats, at a safe distance.

For the young Americans growing up in customisable bubbles coloured by the scientific advances underpinning the futuristic orientation of American society, that was harder to do as the 1960s wore on. The raised fists in Mexico City — along with other radicalising events like the Vietnam war, the violent suppression of the Yippie protests at the Chicago Democratic Convention, and the river in Cleveland that actually caught fire and burnt for 17 days — confirmed my own doubts about how wonderful everything was or was supposed to be.

The Civil Rights movement had already done most of the heavy lifting. This in turn provided a platform for the anti-war movement. Before long, what began as a political movement for peace and racial inclusion coalesced into a much broader social upheaval. The country entered a state of agitation sustained by an expanding range of worthy causes from the conditions of migrant farm workers to rampant industrial pollution. Much of the conflict was generational, and reflected a polarising explosion of new memes, pheromones, and mind-altering visions.

As the awakening and the activism of the Vietnam era ran its course, American conservatives felt increasingly isolated. Not only had their values been shunted aside, the country's conservative hard core saw the reforms and new liberalism as a direct threat to the sources of their wealth. Conservative partisans like Steve Bannon may have missed the party, but they were taking notes

The sentiment at the time was that only a far-reaching cultural reorientation could triumph against the entrenched political order and the military-industrial complex controlling it. The mix of hot politics and cool culture was always more about challenging the conventional assumptions underpinning American exceptionalism than the political revolution advocated by the far-left fringe.

Waves of new music, innovative lifestyles, radical role models, and more mundane concerns like promoting healthy dietary choices rocked the national *status quo*. People started searching for alternatives to the mindless consumption of the planet's limited resources. Tabs, buttons, and mushrooms opened up new internal vistas that encouraged interest in ancient cultures and their spiritual religious traditions. We probed the mystical symbols adorning the dollar bill and investigated the esoteric philosophies guiding the new nation's founding fathers.

The combination of protests, new cultural orientations, and developments in the war zones of Southeast Asia shifted public opinion. Withdrawal from Vietnam accompanied progress on other fronts from race relations to female liberation. New legislation addressed discrimination based on colour, creed, and gender, reined in the CIA, and created the Environmental Protection Agency to control serial polluters.

The ship had been righted, the course of the nation redirected, and use of the term "politically correct" offered backhanded acknowledgement of the nation's cultural makeover in politics. In the end, many of the political attitudes engendered by the counterculture followed long hair, frayed jeans, and recreational marijuana use into mainstream America.

The changes, affected over a relatively short period, had made America even more exceptional in our eyes. But some observers disagreed. The eminent anthropologist Marvin Harris opined that the main impact of the counterculture was selling a lot of records. Iconoclastic musician Frank Zappa said that rock music's potential revolutionary impact had been felt mostly in the textile industry. Cultural revolution did little to change the nation's political structures and economy.

As the awakening and the activism of the Vietnam era ran its course, American conservatives felt increasingly isolated. Their champion, the embattled president Nixon, resigned office in disgrace. Not only had their values been shunted aside, the country's conservative hard core saw the reforms and new liberalism as a direct threat to the sources of their wealth. They were still wealthy, but had become dinosaurs inhabiting a political landscape dominated by progressive ideas and proponents of activist government. Conservative partisans like Steve Bannon may have missed the party, but they were taking notes.

IT'S NOT REALLY ABOUT TRUMP

The Koch brothers are ferociously independent heirs to one of the largest private corporations in the United States. Like the Bush family and their cronies, their father, Fred Koch, built up his fortune during the 1930s, training Bolshevik engineers and selling his advanced oil refining technology and refineries to Stalin and Hitler's Germany. His children's nanny was a Hitler sympathiser, and after the war Fred Koch became a strong supporter of the rabidly anti-Communist John Birch Society to assuage his guilt over aiding the USSR. He transferred his extreme libertarian values to his sons,

and after his death in 1967, Charles and David Koch bought out their two more liberal minded siblings.

In *Dark Money*, a book first released in 2016, Jane Mayer tells the story of how the Koch Brothers assembled a network of 400 über-wealthy industrialists. Mayer's documentation of their activities reads like a virtual symphony of corporate crime in the form of fraud, tax avoidance, violations of workplace safety and employee welfare, foreign bribery, and environmental violations

Under the brothers, Koch Industries became the country's second wealthiest private corporation, and they parlayed their financial muscle into the single most influential political machine in the country. Their first venture, David Koch's run for the presidency on the Libertarian Party ticket in 1980, failed miserably. Plan B was based on a totally different approach. It began with annual summits attended by a handpicked list of like-minded individuals opposed to most forms of government regulation and taxation.

In *Dark Money*, a book first released in 2016, Jane Mayer tells the story of how the Koch Brothers assembled a network of 400 über-wealthy industrialists who leveraged their money and influence to penetrate the American political system for their personal financial benefit. The brothers are the sixth and seventh wealthiest Americans and their combined wealth makes them number one. Most of those they recruited belong to the top .01% of the country's wealthiest billionaires and are known as the "invisible rich" because they operate private companies that shield them from public scrutiny and government rules for fiscal disclosure.

Mayer's documentation of their activities reads like a virtual symphony of corporate crime in the form of fraud, tax avoidance, violations of workplace safety and employee welfare, foreign bribery, and environmental violations. Over several decades, this network, or the *Kochtopus* as it was dubbed by one analyst, spent billions of dollars funnelled through tax-free foundations and charities exempted from public oversight to promote their objectives.

The Koch summits provided the institutional foundation and financial support for a long-term strategy based on three overlapping components: The reformulation of libertarian ideology in terms of ideas and concepts enabling its propagation within mainstream society; the creation of institutions for translating this free-market ideology into policy positions and legislation; and building political vehicles on the ground for placing politicians aligned with their ideas and policies into public office.

Most of the Koch-networked and -funded institutions and political action committees, like Americans for Prosperity, flew underneath the radar. At the same time, an array of media personalities, talk show hosts, and academic celebrities duplicated the role that rock musicians, intellectuals and artists, political activists, and outspoken athletes like Mohammed Ali played in energising the masses several decades before. They elevated the role of divisive social issues like abortion rights in the political arena, fuelling the culture wars that influenced otherwise politically moderate citizens.

The Koch network funded think tanks based in respected universities to reinforce their anti-government ideology and critiques of public spending. Covertly funded political action committees were used to gain control of executive offices and legislative bodies. Over a period of 40 years, the Koch Brothers and their clique of archconservative supporters patiently cultivated a right-wing movement, often with more power to block and obstruct than to legislate their own agenda.

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But despite the inroads and influence generated by their free-flowing money, the Koch network still lacked a nation-wide vehicle for mobilising grassroots supporters.

ENTER BARACK OBAMA, PURSUED BY MAD HATTERS

Help came from an unexpected source.

The election of Barrack Obama in 2008 triggered the formation of the anti-government Tea Party movement. Its emergence enabled the Koch network to dedicate their annual summit in 2009 to organise an all-out assault on the Democrats during the 2010 mid-term elections. Tea Party candidates defeated Democrat and mainstream Republican incumbents as the GOP regained control of the House and Senate. The trend continued in 2012, even though Obama retained the White House with a 5.5 million-vote margin of victory.

Despite their growing clout within the federal and state governments, the Koch-Tea Party coalition could not field a viable presidential candidate of their own creation, as demonstrated by the succession of inchoate candidates like Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, Rick Santorum, Ben Carson, Michelle Bachmann, and the pizza king Herman Cain.

The problem was about to repeat itself in 2016, until along came the Donald. Trump blitzed the field, reducing both establishment candidates like Jeb Bush and Tea Party aspirants to props in his carnival-style campaign. He proceeded to tweet himself into the White House, portraying himself as a new and independent force in American politics.

That he was. "I even did without a guitar and piano," he quipped, a jibe referring to the star power Hillary Clinton trundled out at the end of her self-satisfied campaign.

Actually, the Trump team had something much better. Cambridge Analytica is a company dedicated to "the use of data to change behaviour," or in the case of the 2016 election, using emotional manipulation based on psychological profiling to induce people to vote against their own socioeconomic interest. [Electoral analysts](#) confirm that CA helped sway the vote in key swing states like Florida, North Carolina, and Michigan, but their advanced analytics arguably required the distortionary prism cultivated by the alt-right players like Breitbart News and Steve Bannon to be effective.

THE REAL HOMELAND INSECURITY

It is easy to denigrate Trump the person. But Trump the politician scored some important points on my political scorecard. I had witnessed the beginning of the decline overtaking rural areas in the American South, and now even communities and people in America's heartland who did everything by the book to adapt to the industrial decline still couldn't [win](#). The economic nationalism agenda clearly spoke to their concerns, even if it was short on viable solutions.

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A Trump versus Bernie Sanders contest focusing debate on the overlapping issues at the core of both candidates' campaigns would have been much better for the country and the eventual winner. That did not happen thanks to the Democratic National Committee's pro-Hillary machinations. Instead, we got a noisy post-truth spectacle that made one candidate look like a sleazy demagogue while the other came across as an opportunistic mannikin compromised by special interests.

The country emerged from the polls more polarised than ever, and the acrimony of the aftermath offered little hope for improvement. The fact that Trump was not part of the Kochtopus and the Koch brothers did not support his campaign offered some hope: Maybe the guy would revert to the former Democrat who was cool with Dennis Rodman on *The Celebrity Apprentice*. But then again, Vice President Michael Pence was a Koch-funded poodle; Trump promptly loaded his Cabinet with Koch partisans like Betsy DeVoss and Ben Carson.

It was not easy to see where my friend's "something good will come out this" would come from with these people in charge.

A few days after I arrived in Utah, Trump announced his Muslim travel ban. A wave of spontaneous protests erupted as airport authorities detained several hundred arrivals from abroad including a former Middle Eastern head of state. The mainstream media went into overdrive and anti-Trump posts proliferated on social media, many of them creative, incisive, and entertaining. This and the breaking news about Russia drove a former State Department official to lament that the US has become a "Banana Republic."

Although a federal judge declared the ban unconstitutional on the first working day following the executive order, a Utah-based friend from Lamu, spooked by the ban, still felt it necessary to travel back to Kenya to escort his wife, who had just received her long-awaited US visa, past airport immigration and security. More significantly, three days later, the LDS church issued a statement opposing the ban.

I argued that the election was the best thing that happened for progressive forces in decades. It woke people up, and saved the world from a hawkish and dissembling Hillary. At least the decades of drift culminating in the aristocratic takeover of party and state by the Clinton dynasty were over

This was unexpected news, as was a University of Utah study that reported most Muslim immigrants found the state more welcoming and adjusting to the US easier in Utah's family oriented and no-alcohol Mormon culture. I also discovered that the religion's founder and prophet, Joseph Smith, was actually an abolitionist, and that the Utah territory granted women the right to vote in 1870, 50 years before the federal government legislated universal suffrage by passing the 19th Amendment (Congress responded by disenfranchising Utah women with the [Edmunds-Tucker Act](#), which was designed to weaken the Mormons politically and punish them for polygamy).

Red America is not as monolithic as it may appear in media political narratives. I spent Super Bowl Sunday in Salt Lake City with a houseful of Mexican relatives. More of them were more upset with the New England Patriot's last minute Trump-style victory than worried about Trump's wall.

I visited blue America. We convened a large family gathering in Los Angeles, and spent time with

friends in San Francisco. There were a lot of Teslas and other electric cars, and a few self-driving vehicles on the freeways, their passengers contently working on phones and tablets.

THE COMING SECESSION OF HOTEL CALIFORNIA?

California is the high-tech future. But it is also the land of a new long-tail market peasantry. Internet-savvy entrepreneurs were surviving by reselling appliances and other recycled items. Cooperatives in the form of Internet-based groups were pooling their knowledge to utilise the online economy.

I have in-laws in LA who subsist by swapping coupons and minimising household costs through scientific shopping for bargains and stocking their freezer with food reduced for clearance.

Despite their struggle to keep body and soul intact, every month they host poetry readings and other cultural events in their home that are attended by dozens of friends and associates more concerned with the fate of the country than their own declining incomes.

The two coasts had emerged as the centre of anti-Trump activism, and some of the protests, like the student protests in Berkeley that forced the administration to cancel an appearance by the Breitbart editor, Milo Yiannopoulos, crossed the line, violating basic constitutional and democratic principles. When I mentioned the retrogressive nature of some of these developments, my friends in California ranted about the new regime and talked about secession in terms that recalled my conversations with the Mombasa Republican Council's leadership.

I responded by arguing that the election was the best thing that happened for progressive forces in decades. It woke people up, and saved the world from a hawkish and dissembling Hillary. Contributions to the American Civil Liberties Union were spiking; at least the decades of drift culminating in the aristocratic takeover of party and state by the Clinton dynasty were over.

Other developments of the past several months painted a much more nuanced picture of the state of the nation. San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick revisited the spirit of the Mexico Olympic protest by refusing to stand for the national anthem. In pro-Trump Louisiana, the city of New Orleans took down the statue of Robert E. Lee — the state's last remaining symbol of the Confederacy. John McCain penned an incisive op-ed in the *New York Times* underscoring the importance of human rights in foreign policy as an extension of domestic American values. Bob Dylan, the first poet of the counterculture, became a Nobel laureate.

The United States is a highly dualistic nation held together by a strong political centre. The nation's political trajectory has consistently zigzagged between right and left of centre over the course of my lifetime. The transition from Obama to Trump was consistent with this dialectic

After the election, the website for the largest Tea Party PAC crowed that it took the anti-war movement 25 years to elect one of their own to the White House while they had done the same over the course of two electoral cycles. In reality, the success rate of Tea Party candidates peaked in 2012. Now minority politicians with names like Chokwe Lumumba and Khalid Kamau were winning seats in local government. Unheralded candidates recently won by-elections for seats in New Hampshire and New Jersey districts that had never elected a Democrat.

In his book [What's Wrong With Kansas](#), Thomas Frank describes how conservatives used religion and the culture wars to flip the formerly progressive state into a Republican stronghold. A decade

later, the economy is tanking, while the state's model education system deteriorates due to the spending cuts instituted by the Koch-supported Governor. Back in another flyover state, there are helped wanted signs everywhere and the Utah economy is booming. The difference is not accidental.

After I returned to Kenya, Bloomberg News published an article entitled [How Utah is Keeping the American Dream Alive](#). The writer begins by confessing, "There's no getting around it: For a girl raised on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, Salt Lake City is a very weird place." She then proceeds to detail how the state government is collaborating with Latter Day Saints agencies to provide social protection for the poor while providing job training addressing local demand for skilled and semi-skilled labour. The formula is generating Scandinavian levels of social mobility in a state with a small but committed civil service and the country's lowest per capita expenditure on education.

FACING AN UNEXCEPTIONAL FUTURE?

In 2017, I found a country not so different from the one I left on the brink of electing Barack Obama. Communication was efficient and uncomplicated; people were without exception polite, helpful, and friendly. The malls were filled with new versions of the usual stuff, and if you shopped smart most of it was much cheaper than it would cost in Kenya. Smoking reefer was *laissez faire* or just legal. The junk food was healthier, and the country was awash with innovative ideas and creative content. East Africa has changed so much more during the interim. But appearances can be deceptive.

Truth will make a comeback, and there is a world of well-informed and innovative solutions out there to get things going. Once again, it's looking like my African friends got it right

The United States is a highly dualistic nation held together by a strong political centre. The nation's political trajectory has consistently zigzagged between right and left of centre over the course of my lifetime. This makes for a lot of contradictions, but also for a more purple Republic over the long run. The transition from Obama to Trump was consistent with this dialectic, which is also a source of American democracy's distinctive pattern of continuous change and incremental reform. President Trump is the latest exhibit in this tradition, but there are caveats.

The problem is not that Trump's diagnoses of the nation's problems were not on target. His vision for making America Great Again, in contrast, is informed by nostalgia, special interests, and backward-looking solutions. Trump's proposed budget and tax cuts will injure the less educated and economically insecure voters who flocked to his rallies. The jobs at the Carrier factory Trump "saved" from being outsourced to Mexico are to be automated. Many elements of the economic nationalism he showcased on the stump are already in remission, and he is retreating from the foreign policy positions he used to whip up the crowds. He turned the government's Middle East foreign policy over to the Saudis in exchange for a large order of weapons.

The future of the middle class is uncertain. The accelerating pace of machine learning and artificial intelligence may bring about the economic singularity within a generation. The country I grew up in was about exploration, problem solving, and optimising potential as we moved forward. Now I sense that for many Americans, the future is as murky as the Great Salt Lake on a cloudy winter day.

EVIL WINNERS WHO INVESTED IN PSEUDO-CHARITIES

The Koch Brothers and their friends tried to manufacture a new political culture based on libertarian values, but are really perpetuating the same financial industrial royalty presidents from Jefferson to

Eisenhower warned us about. The likes of Bill Gates and Warren Buffet are following the tradition of other American philanthropists guided by *noblesse oblige*; the super wealthy populating the alt-right are evil winners who invested in pseudo-charities dedicated to advancing their own narrow interests.

Things were humming along until an outsider crashed the party.

Now the Trump presidency is unravelling in the face of problems largely of his own making. Our institutions are engaged, and my only hope is Trump & Co stay in office long enough to take down the whole prevaricating, alternative fact, toxic waste emitting and hate-mongering circus. We have seen worse, and I don't begrudge the sincere citizens who played their trump card on the Donald having their day in the sun. But now it's time to sort out the unprecedented [crisis of inequality](#) facing capitalism everywhere. Truth will make a comeback, and there is a world of well-informed and [innovative solutions](#) out there to get things going.

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