

Cornel West: Goodbye, American neoliberalism. A new era is here

This article was originally published Nov 17, 2016 in [The Guardian](#).



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The neoliberal era in the United States ended with a neofascist bang. The political triumph of Donald Trump shattered the establishments in the Democratic and Republican parties – both wedded to the rule of Big Money and to the reign of meretricious politicians.

The Bush and Clinton dynasties were destroyed by the media-saturated lure of the pseudo-populist billionaire with narcissist sensibilities and ugly, fascist proclivities. The monumental election of Trump was a desperate and xenophobic cry of human hearts for a way out from under the devastation of a disintegrating neoliberal order – a nostalgic return to an imaginary past of greatness.

White working- and middle-class fellow citizens – out of anger and anguish – rejected the economic neglect of neoliberal policies and the self-righteous arrogance of elites. Yet these same citizens also supported a candidate who appeared to blame their social misery on minorities, and who alienated Mexican immigrants, Muslims, black people, Jews, gay people, women and China in the process.

This lethal fusion of economic insecurity and cultural scapegoating brought neoliberalism to its knees. In short, the abysmal failure of the Democratic party to speak to the arrested mobility and escalating poverty of working people unleashed a hate-filled populism and protectionism that threaten to tear apart the fragile fiber of what is left of US democracy. And since the most explosive fault lines in present-day America are first and foremost racial, then gender, homophobic, ethnic and religious, we gird ourselves for a frightening future.

What is to be done? First we must try to tell the truth and a condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak. For 40 years, neoliberals lived in a world of denial and indifference to the suffering of poor and working people and obsessed with the spectacle of success. Second we must bear witness to justice. We must ground our truth-telling in a willingness to suffer and sacrifice as we resist domination. Third we must remember courageous exemplars like Martin Luther King Jr, who provide moral and spiritual inspiration as we build multiracial alliances to combat poverty and xenophobia, Wall Street crimes and war crimes, global warming and police abuse - and to protect precious rights and liberties.

The age of Obama was the last gasp of neoliberalism. Despite some progressive words and symbolic gestures, Obama chose to ignore Wall Street crimes, reject bailouts for homeowners, oversee growing inequality and facilitate war crimes like US drones killing innocent civilians abroad.

Rightwing attacks on Obama - and Trump-inspired racist hatred of him - have made it nearly impossible to hear the progressive critiques of Obama. The president has been reluctant to target black suffering - be it in overcrowded prisons, decrepit schools or declining workplaces. Yet, despite that, we get celebrations of the neoliberal status quo couched in racial symbolism and personal legacy. Meanwhile, poor and working class citizens of all colors have continued to suffer in relative silence.

In this sense, Trump's election was enabled by the neoliberal policies of the Clintons and Obama that overlooked the plight of our most vulnerable citizens. The progressive populism of Bernie Sanders nearly toppled the establishment of the Democratic party but Clinton and Obama came to the rescue to preserve the status quo. And I do believe Sanders would have beat Trump to avert this neofascist outcome!

In this bleak moment, we must inspire each other driven by a democratic soulcraft of integrity, courage, empathy and a mature sense of history - even as it seems our democracy is slipping away.

We must not turn away from the forgotten people of US foreign policy - such as Palestinians under Israeli occupation, Yemen's civilians killed by US-sponsored Saudi troops or Africans subject to expanding US military presence.

As one whose great family and people survived and thrived through slavery, Jim Crow and lynching, Trump's neofascist rhetoric and predictable authoritarian reign is just another ugly moment that calls forth the best of who we are and what we can do.

For us in these times, to even have hope is too abstract, too detached, too spectatorial. Instead we must be a hope, a participant and a force for good as we face this catastrophe.