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THE GLOBAL

Are liberals and populists just searching for a new master?

A book excerpt and interview with Slavoj Zizek , author of “Like a Thief in Broad Daylight”

OPEN FUTURE by N.B

The rise of populism, nativism and nationalism in recent years has challenged perceptions of what ordinary people want from politicians. Some see the anti-establishment trend as a rejection of centralised power. Others suggest the real hunger is for a moral authority that appears to be lacking in today’s capitalism.

Among the latter group is Slavoj Zizek, a Marxist philosopher at the University of Ljubljana. He criticises the appeal of political correctness, questions the ability of markets to survive without state intervention and excoriates what he sees as the ulterior motives behind fair-trade coffee.

His latest book, “Like a Thief in Broad Daylight”, explores the changing nature of social progress in what he calls an “era of post-humanity”. Mr Zizek responded to five questions as part of The Economist’s Open Future initiative. His replies are followed by an excerpt from the book.

* * *

What do you mean by “the era of post-humanity”? What characterises it?

Slavoj Zizek: It is not primarily the automatisisation and robotisation of the production process but much more the expanding role of science, machines and digital media in social control and regulation. The detailed registration of all our acts and habits enables the digital machine to know ourselves, even our psyche, better than we know ourselves. In this way, social control no longer needs to be exerted in the old “totalitarian” mode, through open domination—we are already manipulated and regulated when we act freely, just following our needs and desires.

But there is another feature which justifies the term “post-humanity”: the prospect of the direct link between our brain and the digital network. When this happens, we lose the basic distance which makes us human, the distance between external reality and our inner life where we can “think what we want.” With my thoughts, I can directly intervene in reality—but the machine also directly knows what I think.

In the last years of his life, Stephen Hawking experimented with a technology to communicate with the world—his brain was connected to a computer, so that his thoughts could choose words and form sentences, which were then relayed to a voice synthesizer to be spoken aloud.

Fredric Jameson noted that, today, it is much more easy to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. This sarcastic insight is today becoming reality: it looks that, in some new form, capitalism will effectively survive the end, not of the world, but of humanity.

Brexit and the rise of populist politicians seem to show that voters want to be protected from the harder edges of globalisation. So, back to Jameson's thought, is it still easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of the free-market consensus associated with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan?

Mr Zizek: As with fascism, I think that populism is simply a new way to imagine capitalism without its harder edges; a capitalism without its socially disruptive effects. Populism is one of today's two opiums of the people: one is the people, and the other is opium itself. Chemistry (in its scientific version) is becoming part of us: large aspects of our lives are characterised by the management of our emotions by drugs, from everyday use of sleeping pills and antidepressants to hard narcotics. We are not just controlled by impenetrable social powers, our very emotions are "outsourced" to chemical stimulation. What remains of the passionate public engagement in the West is mostly the populist hatred, and this brings us to the other second opium of the people, the people itself, the fuzzy populist dream destined to obfuscate our own antagonisms.

In 1968, Jacques Lacan told student protesters in Paris that "what you aspire to as revolutionaries is a new master. You will get one." Does the appeal of populists and so-called strong-men reflect a desire for authority that liberal democracy can't provide?

Mr Zizek: Yes, but in a way different from the one that Lacan had in mind in his pessimist reading of the 1968 turmoil. For Lacan, the consequence of 1968 was the decline of the old (directly authoritarian) figure of the master and the rise of a new master figure, than of the expert—what Lacan baptised the "university discourse." Just think about how today economic measures are justified—not as an expression of political will and positive social vision but as a consequence of neutral knowledge: it has to be done, this is how markets work.

Just recall how the experts in Brussels acted in negotiations with Greece's Syriza government during the euro crisis in 2014: no debate, this has to be done. I think that today's populism reacts to the fact that experts are not really masters, that their expertise doesn't work—again, just remember how the 2008 financial meltdown caught the experts unprepared. Against the background of this fiasco, the traditional authoritarian master is making a comeback, even if it is a clown. Whatever Trump is, he is not an expert.

Do you want a new master?

Mr Zizek: Surprisingly, YES, I do want it. But what kind of master? We usually see a master as someone who exerts domination, but there is another, more authentic, sense of a master. A true master is not an agent of discipline and prohibition, his message is not "You cannot!", nor "You have to...!", but a releasing "You can!"—what? Do the impossible, ie, what appears impossible within the coordinates of the existing constellation. And today, this means

something very precise: you can think beyond capitalism and liberal democracy as the ultimate framework of our lives.

A master is a vanishing mediator who gives you back to yourself, who delivers you to the abyss of your freedom. When we listen to a true leader, we discover what we want (or, rather, what we “always-already” wanted without knowing it). A master is needed because we cannot accede to our freedom directly—for to gain this access, we have to be pushed from outside, since our “natural state” is one of inert hedonism; of what Alain Badiou called the “human animal.”

The underlying paradox here is that the more we live as “free individuals with no master,” the more we are effectively non-free, caught within the existing frame of possibilities. We have to be pushed or disturbed into freedom by a master.

You have argued for the "occupation" of the digital grid, but how can ordinary people hold big tech firms to account if only a tiny fraction of us are capable of comprehending an algorithm?

Mr Zizek: True, we—the majority—don’t understand the details of algorithms, but we can easily understand how we are controlled by the digital grid. Moreover, I don’t think the experts themselves fully understand how the digital grid really works, plus those who exploit their knowledge also do not know the technical details.

Do you think that when Steve Bannon mobilised Cambridge Analytica, he understood the algorithmic details of its work? Or take ecology: to grasp global warming and the ozone hole, you need science which most of us don’t understand, but we nonetheless can fight against the prospect of ecological catastrophe.

There are risks of manipulation here, of course, but we have to accept them. We have to abandon the naïve faith in the spontaneous wisdom of everyday people as a guideline of our acts. That’s the paradox of our era: our most ordinary daily lives are regulated by scientific knowledge, and the dangers of this (often invisible) regulation can be fought only by a different knowledge, not by New Age wisdoms and common sense.

In a hotel in Skopje, Macedonia, where I recently stayed, my companion inquired if smoking is permitted in our room, and the answer she got from the receptionist was unique: “Of course not, it is prohibited by the law. But you have ashtrays in the room, so this is not a problem.” The contradiction (between prohibition and permission) was openly assumed and thereby cancelled, treated as in-existent, i.e., the message was: “It’s prohibited, and here it is how you do it.” When we entered the room, a further surprise awaited us: an ashtray with the sign of the prohibition to smoke...

Maybe, this incident provides the best metaphor for our ideological predicament today. I remember a similar incident from my military service 40 years ago. One morning, the first class

was on international military law, then among other rules, the officer mentioned that it is prohibited to shoot at parachuters while they are still in the air, i.e., before they touch ground. In a happy coincidence, our next class was about rifle shooting, and the same officer taught us how to target a parachuter in the air (how, while aiming at it, one should take into account the velocity of his decent and the direction and strength of the wind, etc.). When one of the soldiers asked the officer about the contradiction between this lesson and what we learned just an hour before (the prohibition to shoot at parachuters), the officer just snapped back with a cynical laughter: “How can you be so stupid? Don’t you understand how life works?” What goes on today is that a dissonance is openly admitted and for that reason treated as irrelevant, like our example of the ashtray with the sign of prohibition of smoking. Recall the debates on torture – was the stance of the US authorities not something like: “Torture is prohibited, and here is how you do a water-boarding.”?

The paradox is thus that today, there is in some way less deception than in a more traditional functioning of ideology: nobody is really deceived. One has to avoid a crucial misunderstanding here: it is not that prior to our time we took the rules and prohibitions seriously while today we openly violate them. What changed are the rules which regulate appearances, i.e., what can appear in public space. Let’s compare the sexual lives of two US presidents, Kennedy and Trump. As we know now, Kennedy had numerous affairs, but the press and TV ignored all this, while Trump’s every (old and new) step is followed by the media – not to mention that Trump also speaks publicly in an obscene way that we cannot even imagine Kennedy doing it. The gap that separates the dignified public space from its obscene underside is now more and more transposed into public space, with ambiguous consequences: inconsistencies and violations of public rules and openly accepted or at least ignored, but, simultaneously, we are all becoming openly aware of these inconsistencies.

Excerpted from “Like a Thief in Broad Daylight: Power in the Era of Post-Humanity”.

“Becoming” By Michelle Obama – Mainstream Lying, Genocide Ignoring & Holocaust Ignoring

Dr Gideon Polya

“Becoming” by Michelle Obama is an inspiring, feel-good story of how a working class African-American woman became a Harvard graduate, corporate lawyer, perfect mother and thence First Lady of the US. However “Becoming” has numerous extraordinary absences e.g. the Harvard Law School years, Black felony laws, the Israel Lobby, 130,000 US veteran suicides and 30 million preventable US deaths since 9-11, pro-Apartheid America, who killed Osama, and egregious US violation of 12 countries under Obama.

“Becoming “ by Michele Obama [1] is well written but it has also been very well edited to the point of massive lying by omission, genocide ignoring and holocaust ignoring. Michelle Obama comes across as a strong, smart, family- and community-oriented caring person, a hard worker, a good wife, a pragmatic idealist and an excellent mother. Her book will no doubt be an inspiration for both Black and White American children, girls, women, mothers, husbands and families. It is a feel-good, rags to riches story that attempts to validate American capitalism and the American Dream – no matter who you are and from where you come, work hard, keep your nose clean, and you too can rise to the top of the pile. The only catches are the societal realities and the statistics – thus it took 240 years after American Independence in 1776 for an African –American man to become President of the United States (POTUS) and for an African – American woman to become First Lady of the United States (FLOTUS).

And of course this didn’t happen, on top of ability and hard work, simply by serendipity, accident and good fortune. The real story of how and why the neoliberal, One Percenter American Establishment chose Barack Obama to be president will very likely never be told, notwithstanding the authoritative insider pretensions of “Becoming”.

Indeed in the stuff of legend, “Becoming” has it that crucially Barack Obama asked his 8 year old elder daughter Malia in mid-2015 for her opinion on whether he should run for president: “To this day, Malia and I still crack up about the fact that she’d been eight years old when Barack, clearly feeling some sense of responsibility, posed the question one night when he was tucking her into bed. “How would you feel if Daddy ran for president?” “Sure, Daddy!” she replied, pecking him on the cheek. His decision to run would alter nearly everything about her life after that, but how was she to know? She’d just rolled over then and drifted off to sleep’ (page 255 [1]).

Indeed, in relation to family approval for Obama running for president, Michelle Obama further states: “Barack and I talked the idea through, not once, but many times, right up to and through our Christmas trip to visit Toot in Hawaii. Some of our conversations were angry and tearful, some of them earnest and positive. It was an extension of a dialogue we’d been having over seventeen years already. Who were we? What mattered to us? What could we do? In the end,

it boiled down to this: I said yes because I believed that Barack could be a great president... I said yes because I loved him and had faith in what he could do. I said yes, though I was at the same time harboring a painful thought, one I wasn't ready to share: I supported him in campaigning, but I also felt certain he couldn't make it... Barack was a black man in America, after all. I didn't really think he could win" (page 226 [1]). In similar vein she commented: "And so I gave my approval to his first run for office [for the Illinois Senate] (page 183 [1]).

The first half of "Becoming" was a terrific and inspiring account of the childhood, family, education and friends of an African American woman from the impoverished South Side of Chicago. One has nothing but admiration for Michelle Obama the child and young woman, for her wonderful parents and grandparents, her music teacher Aunt Robbie (in whose house they lived), her brother Craig, her school teachers and mentors. A crucial event was Michelle Obama's mother responding to Michelle's complaints about a hopeless teacher by getting her school to shift Michelle to a better class with a competent teacher. A further key event was going to a good high school as a teenager.

However "Becoming" makes clear the economic disparities between the largely and increasingly African-American South Side of Chicago and the rest of Chicago, the real obstacles to advancement for African Americans, and the escalating gang violence in the South Side that is tragically exemplified towards the end of the book by the shooting killing of 15 year old school girl, Hadiya Pendleton, shortly after she had attended the second inauguration of Barack Obama as a band member (pages 380-382 [1]). (A professional person very dear to me had to attend an interview at the University of Chicago but as a non-American he was not aware of the deadly violence in the immediately adjacent South Side and innocently booked a room at a conveniently located South Side hotel. However the hotel would only take cash but gave him an armed escort to a nearby automatic teller machine. Throughout the night he heard the sound of gunfire).

The "political" second half of "Becoming" is an interesting "behind the scenes" account that presents Michelle Obama as a very good mother (very protective of her daughters Malia and Sasha in the bizarre but necessary presidential and political security environment), as an honest campaigner (upset by variously false and unfair denigration of her husband and even of herself by partisan commentators), and as a community-oriented person who used her position as First Lady to advance several key causes (better nutrition and exercise for American children, child ambition, child education, and better back-up for the veterans and their families).

However while "Becoming" is a feel good and inspiring account, it must be criticized for resolutely sticking to the Mainstream American narrative involving massive lying by omission, genocide ignoring, holocaust ignoring and the ignoring of a veritable Herd of Elephants in the Room. Neocon American- and Zionist Imperialist (NAZI)- subverted US Mainstream media and US- and Zionist-subverted Western Mainstream media in general have a dominant culture of censorship, self-censorship, lying by commission and massive lying by omission. Of course lying

by omission is far, far worse than repugnant lying by commission because the latter at least permits public refutation and public discussion [2-5].

Extremely pertinent here are the words of Margaret Atwood (Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, environmental activist and author) on the unacceptability of silence (2009): “Powerlessness and silence go together. We...should use our privileged positions not as a shelter from the world’s reality, but as a platform from which to speak. A voice is a gift. It should be cherished and used” [6].

Barbara Kingsolver (American novelist, essayist and poet) in her great novel “The Lacuna” (lacuna meaning hiatus, blank, missing part, gap, cavity, or empty space) has Russian Communist revolutionary and theorist Leon Trotsky (Lev) and his assistant Van having the following discussion about media (2009): ““But newspapers have a duty to truth”, Van said. Lev [Trotsky] clicked his tongue. “They tell the truth only as the exception. Zola [French novelist of “J’accuse” fame] wrote that the mendacity of the press could be divided into two groups: the yellow press lies every day without hesitating. But others, like the Times, speak the truth on all inconsequential occasions, so they can deceive the public with the requisite authority when it becomes necessary.” Van got up from his chair to gather the cast-off newspapers. Lev took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “I don’t mean to offend the journalists; they aren’t any different from other people. They’re merely the megaphones of other people” ... [Trotsky observes to his assistant Shepherd] “Soli, let me tell you. The most important thing about a person is always the thing you don’t know”” [7].

The numerous gaping absences, holes or lacunae in Michelle Obama’s “Becoming” narrative are succinctly set out below.

(1). The missing Harvard Law School Years, 1981-1984.

Michelle Obama got her first degree from Princeton University and deals at great length with her connections with Princeton – starting with her brother Craig’s Princeton basketball scholarship – in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, encompassing pages 59-91. However this is in stark contrast to the almost nothing that Michelle Obama has to say about her 3 years at the prestigious Harvard Law School: “I was bound for law school – Harvard Law School, as it turned out – the affirmation was overwhelming. I was applauded just for getting in, even if the truth was I’d somehow squeaked in off the wait list. But I was in. People looked at me as if I’d made my mark on the world. This may be the fundamental problem with caring a lot about what others think: It can put you on the established path – the my-isn’t-that-impressive path – and keep you there for a long time. Maybe it stops you from swerving, from ever even considering a swerve, because what you risk losing in terms of other people’s high regard can feel too costly. Maybe you spend three years in Massachusetts, studying constitutional law and discussing the relative merits of exclusionary vertical agreements in antitrust cases. For some, this might be truly interesting, but for you it is not. Maybe during those three years you make friends you’ll love and respect forever, people who seem genuinely called to the bloodless intricacies of the

law, but you yourself are not called. Your passion stays low, yet under no circumstances will you underperform. You live, as you always have, by the code of effort/result, and with it you keep achieving until you think you know the answers to all the questions – including the most important one. Am I good enough? Yes, in fact I am. What happens next is the rewards get real . You reach for the next rung of the ladder , and this time it's a job with a salary in the Chicago offices of a high-end law firm called Sidley & Austin... [much later] Next to your name [on a mentoring list] is another name, that of some hotshot law student [Barack Obama] who's busy climbing his own ladder. Like you he's black and from Harvard" (pages 91-93 [1]).

The book's missing Harvard Law School Years of 1981-1984 [1, 8] overlaps with a similar "lacuna" in Barack Obama's interrupted academic training between graduating from Columbia in 1983 and commencing law at Harvard Law School in 1988 [9, 10]. Wikipedia: "He graduated with a BA degree in 1983 and worked for about a year at the [CIA-linked] Business International Corporation, where he was a financial researcher and writer, then as a project coordinator for the New York Public Interest Research Group on the City College of New York campus for three months in 1985... Two years after graduating from Columbia, Obama was back in Chicago when he was hired as director of the Developing Communities Project, a church-based community organization originally comprising eight Catholic parishes in Roseland, West Pullman, and Riverdale on Chicago's South Side. He worked there as a community organizer from June 1985 to May 1988" [9]. Wikipedia informs that "Business International Corporation (BI) was a publishing and advisory firm dedicated to assisting American companies in operating abroad. It was founded in 1953. It organized conferences, and worked with major corporations. It had ties to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)" [11]. In his book "Dreams from My Father" Obama makes scant reference to Columbia, Harvard, and British atrocities in Kenya, and no mention at all of his stint in 1983-1984 with the CIA-linked Business International Corporation.

(2) American Apartheid – wealth-based racial Segregation and Felony Laws disenfranchising African Americans.

Michelle Obama qualitatively describes the outrageous inequities of opportunity, employment, housing, income and wealth applying to African Americans (notably to her parents, grandparents and other relatives) and recounts how Barack Obama was active in Black voter registration in Chicago via Project VOTE! (page 180 [1]). However what is missing is quantitation of these inequities. Thus she describes but does not quantitate the enormous implicit wealth differential (housing is the biggest wealth asset, African American wealth is about 5 times lower than that of Whites, a \$75,040 average home value for Black Americans versus \$217,150 for Whites (2013) and \$154,285 average household assets for Black Americans versus \$783,224 for Whites (2013) [12-14]).

Indeed the Black-White discrepancy in America has been locked in for 50 years with (i) 2 times higher unemployment rate for African Americans than for Whites since 1963 (in the range from 1.8 times higher to 2.7 times higher) [14], (ii) 11.6% average unemployment rate for African

Americans (1963-2012) (5.1% for Whites, 6.7% American average during recessions) , (iii) \$55,000 – \$32,000 = \$23,000 White-Black household income gap (2010) versus \$49,000 – \$28,000 = \$21,000 (1972), (iv) 6-fold White/Black wealth disparity in the period 1983-2010, (v) 42%/11% Black/White “below poverty line” (1966) to 23%/7% (2000) and to 28%/10% (2011), and (vi) 45% of African Americans children living in areas of concentrated poverty (poverty rate 30% or greater) versus 12% for White, 21% for Asian and Pacific Islander, 35% for Hispanic and 39% for American Indian children [12-14].

“Becoming” describes the demographic shift in the South Side of Chicago (and in schools) as White and some wealthier Black families fled to nicer, richer and safer suburbs, but the words “Segregation”, “Apartheid” and “Educational Apartheid” are not used. Thus in 2009/2010, 74.1% / 38.1% of African Americans children were in in Segregated (50-100% non-white)/ Intensely segregated (90-100% non-white) schools versus 76.6% / 64.3% in 1968/1969 [12-14]. Notwithstanding the great move to school desegregation in the 1960s due to John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, African American children today are subject to huge Educational Apartheid [15, 16]. Adam Sanchez: “One would think that the first Black president of the United States might shift course against the privatization of public education and toward desegregation and equity in our public schools” [15, 16].

“Becoming” observes that Barack Obama benefited in his various election campaigns from Black voter registration, but what is missing from Michelle Obama’s narrative is what Dr Michelle Alexander has described as “the New Jim Crow” in America based on differential wealth and disenfranchising Felony Laws. Thus 5-6 million Americans have been disenfranchised because of felony convictions and more than a million of these disenfranchised Americans are black. Felony convictions restrict 13 percent of the country’s black male population from voting. Other restrictions may prevent African Americans from voting [17-19]. Dr Michelle Alexander (author of “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness” [18], and former director of the Racial Justice Project of the ACLU in Northern California): “If you take into account prisoners, a large majority of African American men in some urban areas have been labeled felons for life. (In the Chicago area, the figure is nearly 80 percent.) These men are part of a growing undercaste—not class, caste—permanently relegated by law to a second-class status. They can be denied the right to vote, automatically excluded from juries, and legally discriminated against in employment, housing, access to education, and public benefits, much as their grandparents and great-grandparents were during the Jim Crow era.” [19].

African Americans and Hispanic Americans have about half their “fair share” of representatives in Congress and 5-6 times less Congressional representation than Jewish Americans. Thus the ethnic mix of the United States (2010 data) is as follows: Whites (72.4%), non-Hispanic White (63.7%), Hispanic (16.4%) , White Hispanic (8.7%) , African American (12.6%) , Asian American (4.6%), Jewish (1.7% to 2.6%), and Native American (0.9%). In 2012, the American Jewish population was estimated at between 5.5-8 million, depending on the

definition of the term, with this constituting between 1.7% to 2.6% of the total US population [20]. Of the 113th Congress (100 Senators and 435 Representatives) there were 12 Jewish Americans in the Senate (12.0%; 11 Democrats, 1 Independent) and 22 in the House of Representatives (5.1%; 1 Republican, 21 Democrats) or 6.4% overall [21, 22]. However, during the 113th Congress (commencing in 2013), the Congressional Black Caucus had 1 Senator, 41 voting Representatives i.e. 7.9% of total [23]. Thus African Americans have about half their “fair share” of representatives in Congress and roughly the same representation in Congress as Jewish Americans while having a 5-fold greater population [12].

(3) No mention of Israel, Apartheid Israel, Zionism, Palestine, the Palestinian Genocide or the hugely disproportionate Jewish make-up of the Obama retinue.

Through hard work and ability (the latter possibly selected for by a millennium of persecution and pogroms in Europe) Jewish Americans (about 2% of the US population) are disproportionately represented in US government and business. Thus in 2013 Jews represented 6.4% of the US Congress (12.0% of the Senate and 5.1% of members of the House of Representatives) [12, 21, 22]. While numerous anti-racist Jewish intellectuals are resolutely critical of the ongoing Palestinian Genocide [24-28], Western Mainstream Media variously censor or white-wash the nuclear terrorist, genocidally racist, and grossly human rights-abusing conduct of Apartheid Israel. A part explanation for this huge moral discrepancy is that the American 60% of the world’s 30 biggest media companies have a disproportionately high Jewish Board membership. Jews and females represent 2% and 51%, respectively, of the US population but average 33% and 19%, respectively, of Board members of the top 18 US media companies [29]. 48% of U.S. billionaires are Jewish [30], there are 10 Jews in the Forbes list of the top 50 billionaires [31], and in 2013 the World’s 165 Jewish billionaires were worth a combined \$812 billion [32].

Now America has always been a very flawed Democracy that has transmuted into a Kleptocracy, Plutocracy, Murdochocracy, Lobbyocracy, Corporatocracy and Dollarocracy – all terms, apart from Democracy, totally absent from the Index of Barack Obama’s “The Audacity of Hope” [33] – in which Big Money purchases people, politicians, parties, policies, public perception of reality, judicial perception of reality, votes, more power and more personal wealth. The One Percenters who control 50% of the wealth of the world are disproportionately powerful politically. Numerous anti-racist Jewish activists, academics, and American humanitarians resolutely oppose the crimes of nuclear terrorist, genocidally racist, democracy-by-genocide Apartheid Israel and its ongoing Palestinian Genocide and Palestinian Holocaust (2.2 million Palestinians killed by from violence, 0.1 million, or by imposed deprivation, 2.1 million, since the British invasion of Palestine in WW1) [27, 34]. However Lobbyocracy America, US Mainstream media and indeed Western Mainstream media are dominated by immensely rich Neocon American and Zionist Imperialists (NAZIs) . As with “Becoming”, US and Western Mainstream media largely ignore the horrendous genocidal crimes of Apartheid Israel in its ongoing Palestinian Genocide and Palestinian Holocaust [34].

Astonishingly, given the high proportion of Jewish aides (and most likely fervently pro-Zionist) aides in the Obama Chicago and Washington retinue, “Becoming” only mentions the term “Jews” once in relation to comments by his political opponents in Chicago: “From the start of the campaign [Chicago Democrat primaries for Congress], Barack’s opponents and their supporters had been propagating unseemly ideas meant to gin up fear and mistrust among African-American voters, suggesting that Barack was part of an agenda cooked up by the white residents of Hyde Park – read, white Jews – to foist their preferred candidate on the South Side . “Barack is viewed in part to be the white man in blackface in our community,” Donne Trotter told the Chicago Reader. Speaking to the same publication, Bobby Rush said, “He went to Harvard and became an educated fool. We’re not impressed with these folks with these eastern elite degrees.” He’s not one of us, in other words. Barack wasn’t a real black man , like them – someone who spoke like that , looked like that, and read that many books could never be... In March, Barack lost the Democratic primary in what ended up being a resounding victory for Bobby Rush” (pages 197-198 [1]. (Elsewhere in the book Michelle Obama recounts a fellow school child asking her why she didn’t talk like them).

While “Jews” gets one disputational mention in “Becoming” and “bar mitzvah” gets 1 mention, there is zero (0) mention in “Becoming” of anti-racist Jews, Apartheid Israel, Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), Gaza Concentration Camp, Genocide, Holocaust, Israel, Israeli Apartheid, Jerusalem [Al Quds], Jew, Jewish, Jewish Holocaust, Netanyahu, Palestine, Palestinian, Palestinian Genocide, Palestinian Holocaust, Passover, Seder, pro-Apartheid, Zionism or Zionist.

Yet Jewish American writer Jodi Kantor in the New York Times describes an annual Passover Seder held in the White House by the Obama’s with their children and Jewish staff (2010): “In the Old Family Dining Room, under sparkling chandeliers and portraits of former first ladies, the mostly Jewish and African-American guests will recite prayers and retell the biblical story of slavery and liberation, ending with the traditional declaration “Next year in Jerusalem.” (Never mind the current chill in the administration’s relationship with Israel.) Aides like David Axelrod [Jewish] and Valerie Jarrett [African-American] will attend, but so will assistants like 24-year-old Herbie Ziskend [Jewish] . White House chefs will prepare Jewish participants’ family recipes, even rendering chicken fat — better known as schmaltz — for just the right matzo ball flavor. If last year is any guide, Malia and Sasha Obama will take on the duties of Jewish children, asking four questions about the night’s purpose — along with a few of their own — and scrambling to find matzo hidden in the gleaming antique furniture” [35].

Jewish American writer Donald Harrison comments on the Jewishness of the Obama Administration (2018): “As a Jew, I empathize with the feeling that Mrs. Obama enunciates, that to members of a minority group, it feels as if one must do twice as much to go half as far. As I read her classifying people into categories of black (friendly) and white (possibly hostile), I realized that through my Jewish eyes, the world often takes on a similar dichotomous appearance. There are Jews (understanding, understandable) and non-Jews, be they Christian,

Muslim, or some other religion (all possibly anti-Semitic). I read the “Becoming Me” chapter warily, especially when I learned that one of her earliest exposures to politics was through her girlfriend Santita Jackson, whose father was the Rev. Jesse Jackson, who unfortunately will long be remembered by Jews for describing New York City as “Hymietown,” notwithstanding anything else that may commend him. Add to that name, in the “Becoming Us,” section, that of her and Barack Obama’s minister, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, pastor of Trinity Church, whose outbursts against white people and Jews were so well reported that they overshadowed anything good that he may have done. However, I learned from this memoir that the Obamas also had a wide network of Jewish friends, advisers, and, in the “Becoming More” section, a considerable group of Jewish aides during their White House years. These Jews were not simply tokens; they were trusted friends and advisers, people who meant a lot to the Obamas. Reading about such people, peppered throughout the book, I found myself relaxing. If these people, whose names and roles I shall enumerate, found their way into the Obamas’ hearts, then clearly the Obamas, far beyond any ceremonial Chanukah greeting, had felt real friendship for Jews, even if, as we all know, his feud with Israel’s Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu was epic (and not mentioned in the book” [36].

Here is a short list based on references in “Becoming” [1] of the Jewish retinue and Jewish key associates of Barack Obama (BO) and Michelle Obama (MO) (with some White House Seder attendees also included [35]):

David Axelrod (Chief Strategist for BO’s presidential campaigns and Obama Senior Advisor);

David Brooks (influential conservative Jewish journalist with the New York Times, considered the Obama White House’s favourite columnist e.g. for “Run, Barack, Run” (page 223 [1]));

Arun Chaudhary (has a half Indian and half Jewish family, BO videographer);

Neil Cohen (husband of Susan Sher who was MO’s chief of staff);

Rahm Emanuel (son of an Irgun Zionist terrorist, member of the US House of Representatives from Chicago between 2003 and 2009, Obama White House Chief of Staff from 2009 to 2010, thence Mayor of Chicago);

Sarah Hurwitz (senior speechwriter for BO and author of “Here All Along: A Reintroduction to Judaism”);

Valerie Jarrett (deputy chief of staff for MO; senior adviser to the Obamas; her great grandfather was Jewish);

Sam Kass (BO’s Senior Policy Advisor for Nutrition Policy, Executive Director for MO’s Let’s Move! campaign, an Assistant Chef for the Obamas in the White House)

Vanessa Kirsch (social entrepreneur and founder of Public Allies that employed MO in Chicago);

Michael Kors (fashion designer patronized by MO);

Eric Lesser, (former BO baggage handler and organizer of the annual White House Seder, thence assistant to David Axelrod);

Susan Sher (MO's chief of staff);

Molly Stern (edited "Becoming");

Art Sussman (in-house legal cousin for University of Chicago, employed MO's mother, helped MO get a job at the University of Chicago);

Diane von Furstenberg (Jewish Belgian fashion designer patronized by MO);

Melissa Winter (MO deputy chief of staff, former aide of rabid Zionist Senator Joe Lieberman);

Patricia Winter (the mother of Melissa Winter, and gave matzo ball instructions to White House chefs);

Herbie Ziskend (former White House advisor and one of the founders of the Obama White House Passover Seder).

Very roughly, of people named as Obama connections in the "political" latter half of "Becoming", about one third are Jewish, about one third African Americans, and one third non-Jewish White, Asian or Hispanic Americans.

We will consider the Jewish Zionist Lobby below in the section entitled "Pro-Apartheid US", noting that there is a large body of decent, anti-racist Jews (including anti-racist Jewish Americans) who speak out about the horrendous crimes of Apartheid Israel and its ongoing Palestinian genocide [24-28].

(4) 7,000 US war dead, 130,000 US veteran suicides, and 30 million preventable US deaths since 9-11 (3,000 killed).

Michelle Obama initiated 4 good causes during her time as FLOTUS, namely "Let's Move" (an anti-obesity message of good nutrition and exercise, especially for children), "Reach Higher" (promoting ambition for school children), "Let Girls Learn" (promoting female education) and "Joining Forces" (promoting better support for veterans and their families).

However missing from "Becoming" were the appalling statistics relating to 1.7 million preventable American deaths annually from "lifestyle choices" and "political choices", the breakdown (with some overlaps) including (as of 2015): (1) smoking-related (440,000), (2) adverse hospital events (440,000), (3) obesity-related causes (300,000), (4) air pollution e.g. from coal burning, vehicle exhaust, or carbon burning in general (200,000), (5) alcohol-related (75,000), (6) lack of medical insurance (45,000), (7) drug-related deaths, this including 21,000 US opiate drug-related deaths annually from US restoration and protection of the Taliban-destroyed Afghan opium industry (38,000), (8) motor vehicle accidents (33,000), (9) gun-related deaths (31,000), (10) suicides, with 7,000 being US veterans (30,000), (11) avoidable

under-5 year old US infant deaths (21,000), (12) homicide (15,000), (13) deaths from jihadi attack in the US (4) [37-44]

Michelle Obama laudably promoted a healthy diet and exercise to combat American obesity in her “Let’s move” activism, but there was no mention in “Becoming” of the 0.3 million American obesity-related deaths per year x 17.75 years = 5.3 million Americans who have died from obesity since 9-11 (3,000 deaths).

Similarly, Michelle Obama laudably promoted child education through “Reach Higher” and “Let Girls Learn” but there was no mention in “Becoming” of the horrendous existential realities of 15 million avoidable deaths from deprivation each year on Spaceship Earth with Neocon American and Zionist Imperialist (NAZI)-dominated America in charge of the flight deck (266 million such deaths in this Global Avoidable Mortality Holocaust since 9-11) [45]. Nor was there any mention of how a fundamentalist , state terrorist and non-state terrorism-supporting America has trashed secular governance, modernity, democracy, women’s rights and children’s rights in the Muslim world [46] , this being associated with an ongoing Muslim Genocide and Muslim Holocaust in which 32 million Muslims have died from violence, 5 million, or from imposed deprivation, 27 million, in 20 countries invaded by the US Alliance since the US Government’s 9-11 false flag atrocity [47-51].

Michelle Obama laudably promoted better care for veterans , their spouses and families through “Joining Forces” but there was no mention of the circa 7,000 veteran conflict zone deaths in the War on Terror [52], nor of the 20 veteran suicides each day since the 1960s [54], this corresponding to 7,300 veteran suicides per year and 130,000 veteran suicides since the US Government’s 9-11 false flag atrocity (3,000 deaths) [37-44]. There was no mention of the 72 countries invaded by the US since 1776 (52 since WW2) [55] nor of the \$6 trillion long-term accrual cost of the War on Terror [56, 57] – this huge fiscal perversion has involved committing \$6 trillion to killing over 30 million Muslims abroad at the cost of 7,000 US military deaths in conflict zones, 130,000 US veteran suicides, and the preventable deaths of 30 million Americans at home from “lifestyle” or “political” choices .

(5) Pro-Apartheid America.

Michelle Obama and Barack Obama visited anti-Apartheid hero Nelson Mandela in South Africa (pages 367- 369 [1]) but there is no explicit mention in “Becoming” of “Apartheid America” per se. Indeed the message of the first Black POTUS and FLOTUS is denial of the continuing appalling reality of an Apartheid America based not on discriminatory laws but on the harsh realities of wealth inequity in a ruthless neoliberal society.

Nelson Mandela and many of his anti-Apartheid associates have condemned Israeli Apartheid as just as bad and indeed worse than South African Apartheid. Thus Nelson Mandela in an address at the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People (4 December, 1997): “The UN took a strong stand against apartheid; and over the years, an international consensus

was built, which helped to bring an end to this iniquitous system. But we know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians” [58]. Anti-racist Jewish anti-Apartheid hero Ronnie Kasrils on Apartheid Israel and Apartheid South Africa: “ The [Israeli] occupation reminds me of the darkest days of apartheid, but we never saw tanks and planes firing at a civilian population. It’s a monstrosity I’d never seen before. The wall you built, the checkpoints and the roads for Jews only – it turns the stomach, even for someone who grew up under apartheid. It’s a hundred times worse” [59].

Yet in “Becoming” there is no mention of Israel, Apartheid Israel, Israeli Apartheid, Zionism, Palestine, Palestinian human rights, or the Palestinian Genocide and Palestinian Holocaust (2.2 million Palestinian deaths from violence, 0.1 million, or from imposed deprivation, 2.1 million, since the British invasion of Palestine in WW1 [27, 34].

The Sharpeville Massacre in 1960 involved the killing of 69 Africans and the World responded with Boycotts and Sanctions that eventually brought down Apartheid in 1993 [60]. By way of comparison, the Israeli Gaza Massacre in 2008-2009 involved 1,400 Palestinians killed and 5,300 Palestinians wounded, as compared to 13 Israelis killed and 518 Israelis wounded [61]. The 2014 Gaza Massacre involved 2,256 Palestinians killed, and 17,125 Palestinians wounded, as compared to 85 Israelis killed and 2,629 Israelis wounded [62]. According to Wikipedia, the 2018-2019 Great March of Return involved 183 Palestinians killed and 9,204 Palestinians wounded, as compared to 1 Israeli killed and 11 Israelis wounded [63], but Al Jazeera estimates 266 Palestinians killed and 30,398 wounded [64]. Notwithstanding Zionist-driven Western hysteria, Palestinian rocket attacks on Apartheid Israel killed 32 Israelis in the period 2004-2014 [65]. Gaza has been devastated with massive destruction of homes and infrastructure to the point that in 2018 the UN reported that it is now “unliveable” [66].

There are now 7 million Palestinian refugees, and of 14 million Palestinians (half of them children, three quarters women and children) about 50% are forbidden to even step foot in their own country on pain of death, only 1.9 million Palestinian Israelis are permitted to vote for the government ruling all of the former Mandated Palestine, and 5 million Palestinians have zero human rights [67] as Occupied Palestinians in West Bank ghettos (3 million) or in the blockaded and bombed Gaza Concentration Camp (2.0 million). However the “lucky” Israeli Palestinians are Third Class citizens subject to over 60 Nazi-style, race-based laws [68, 69]. The land of Palestine has now been 90% ethnically cleansed [27, 70-73].

While Indigenous Palestinians represent 50% of Apartheid Israeli subjects, nearly three quarters of them cannot vote for the government ruling them – egregious Apartheid that is declared by the UN to be a crime against Humanity [74]. Personal disclaimer – I am an anti-racist Jewish Australian humanitarian and was happily married for 52 years to a non-Indigenous Black Australian resident and thence citizen. We were, of course, utterly opposed to racism and to Apartheid in particular for obvious humanitarian reasons but also for personal reasons – if we had lived in Apartheid South Africa we would have been prosecuted for miscegeny and jailed.

When we worked in the US in the late 1960s we would have been persecuted in the Deep South of Apartheid America.

The Obamas must have been aware of Israeli Apartheid and the gross violation of Palestinian human rights but political pragmatism (and indeed political survival) demanded that they go along with the fervently pro-Zionist narrative of Neocon American and Zionist Imperialist (NAZI)-subverted America. For Obama the fanatical demands of the ferocious Israel Lobby wore thin when he was publicly humiliated by Apartheid Israeli PM Netanyahu when this serial war criminal addressed Congress and received 29 standing ovations (not mentioned in “Becoming” as noted by Jewish American journalist Donald Harrison [36]).

The public humiliation of Obama by the Israel Lobby and Apartheid Israeli PM Netanyahu is described in detail by anti-racist Jewish American Peter Beinart, a self-styled “liberal Zionist” (oxymoronic because Zionism is genocidal racism) and of Sephardic Jewish South African origin, writing in his book “The Crisis of Zionism” [75, 76]. He describes how Obama was influenced by the liberal Jewish tradition that was heavily involved in Black civil rights and desegregation (see Chapter 5, “The Jewish President” [75]) but when he made noises about civil rights for Palestinians he was bullied, humiliated and whipped back into the racist Zionist fold by the powerful ADL (Anti-Defamation League) and AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) and their overwhelmingly supportive Congressional lackeys. Serial war criminal and genocidal racist Israeli PM, Netanyahu, in a speech attacking the president of the United States (Obama) received 29 standing ovations (see Chapter 7, “The Clash” and Chapter 8, “The Humbling” [75]). Obama found some courage in one of his last acts by refusing to veto and merely abstaining from UN Security Council Resolution 2334 that otherwise unanimously condemned the gross Apartheid Israeli violations of International Law in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (Trump America and US lackey Australia opposed Resolution 2334) [77-79].

Michelle Obama utterly ignored Apartheid Israel and the ongoing Palestinian Genocide in “Becoming”, this astonishing omission thereby adding greater weight to the perception of the Zionist tail wagging the American dog since Apartheid Israeli acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1967 [80-85]. Senator J. William Fulbright, Chairman of U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (1973): “Israel controls the U.S. Senate. [...] The great majority of the Senate of the U.S. – somewhere around 80 percent – are completely in support of Israel; anything Israel wants Israel gets” [80].

The mendacity of Zionist-subverted Mainstream media hides the deadly realities that the per capita GDP for Occupied Palestinians is a dire \$3,000 as compared to \$40,000 for the Israeli Occupiers [86], that Israelis kill ten times more Israelis in Apartheid Israel than do terrorists [87], and that 2.2 million Palestinians have died from violence, 0.1 million, or from imposed deprivation, 2.1 million, since the British invasion of Palestine in WW1 as compared to 4,000 invading Zionists dying at the hands of Indigenous Palestinians since 1920 [88, 89]. Princeton and Harvard graduate and First Lady of the US for 8 years, Michelle Obama somehow didn’t notice.

(6) Who killed Osama bin Laden?

The mendacious and serial war criminal Bush Administration – that according to the US Center for Public Integrity told 935 lies about Iraq between 9-11 and the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003 [90] – claimed that the 9-11 atrocity (3,000 killed) was executed by Al Qaeda led by Osama bin Laden i.e. men in caves were responsible for this massive atrocity. Pertinently, Al Qaeda was backed by the US against Russia and Serbia; the FBI had Osama bin Laden on its most wanted list but not for 9-11; none of the 19 Bush-asserted 9-11 perpetrators were from Iraq or Afghanistan (the first Muslim countries war criminally invaded by the US after 9-11); and numerous science, architecture, engineering, aviation, military and intelligence experts conclude that the US Government was responsible for 9-11, with some cogently arguing for a key involvement of Apartheid Israel and Saudi Arabia in the atrocity [51, 52].

Neocon American and Zionist Imperialist (NAZI)-subverted Mainstream media throughout the world rapidly fell into line with the lying Bush “official version” of 9-11, brooking no dissent from the version offered by this mendacious war criminal – indeed a UK BBC TV journalist in New York with an intact World Trade Center (WTC) building 7 (WTC7) behind her, reported the demolition of WTC7 (not hit by planes and suffering only minor fires) 15 minutes before it actually happened [51]. Even President Donald Trump and former Vice President Al Gore hold blame US intelligence failures for 9-11, with Al Gore stating : “These affirmative and repeated refusals to listen to clear warnings constitute behavior that goes beyond simple negligence. At a minimum, it represents a reckless disregard for the safety of the American people” [51].

Michelle Obama’s “Becoming” scrupulously and absurdly avoids commentary on world affairs but makes an exception in relation to Apartheid South Africa (pages 367- 369 [1]) and the Barack Obama-asserted extrajudicial killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011: “I knew it was coming... seven thousand miles from the White House and under cover of darkness, an elite team of U.S. Navy SEALs had stormed a mysterious compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, looking for Osama bin Laden... Barack was coming out of our bedroom... “We got him,” he said. “And no one got hurt.”. We hugged. Osama bin Laden had been killed . No American lives had been lost. Barack had taken an enormous risk – one that could have cost him his presidency – and it had all gone okay. The news was already travelling across the world... I’m not sure anyone’s death is reason to celebrate, ever. But what America got that night was a moment of release, a chance to feel its own resilience” (pages 363-364 [1]).

However leading figures with expert inside knowledge dispute the Bush-Obama narrative parroted by US Mainstream media and thence by Michelle Obama. Thus former US-installed Afghan President Hamid Karzai (10 September 2015): “[Al-Qaeda] is for me a myth [...] For us, they don’t exist. I don’t know if al-Qaeda existed and I don’t know if they exist. I have not seen them and I’ve not had any report about them, any report that would indicate that al-Qaeda is operating in Afghanistan.... [re the Bush version of 9-11] That is what I have heard from our Western friends. That’s what the Western media says. There is no doubt that an operation, a terrorist operation was conducted in New York and in Washington... I neither believe nor

disbelieve something that I don't know about. I can tell you that Afghanistan was as much a victim of terrorism as was America, as were the people who were killed in the September 11th terrorist attacks" [51].

Seymour Hersh (famed American Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist who exposed the Mylai Massacre) on the Obama-asserted killing of Osama bin Laden: "Do you think Obama's been judged by any rational standards? Has Guantanamo closed? Is a war over? Is anyone paying any attention to Iraq? Is he seriously talking about going into Syria? We are not doing so well in the 80 wars we are in right now, what the hell does he want to go into another one for. What's going on [with journalists]?... Like killing people, how does [Obama] get away with the drone programme, why aren't we doing more? How does he justify it? What's the intelligence? Why don't we find out how good or bad this policy is? Why do newspapers constantly cite the two or three groups that monitor drone killings. Why don't we do our own work?" and re the Obama-asserted killing of Osama bin Laden: "Nothing's been done about that story, it's one big lie, not one word of it is true" [51].

Dr Paul Craig Roberts (an economist, academic, former editor and columnist for the Wall Street Journal and Business Week, nationally syndicated columnist for Creators Syndicate, and author of numerous books, he served as an Assistant Secretary of the Treasury in the Reagan Administration, earning fame as the "Father of Reaganomics): "Americans live in a rigged system in which propaganda determines the public's awareness and consciousness. Americans, or most of them, live in the Matrix... Washington's phony wars based on lies and phony economy based on rigged statistics"[91].

Dr Paul Craig Roberts re the Obama-asserted killing of Osama bin Laden: "I do not believe Hersh's story for three reasons. One reason is that bin Laden was suffering from disease that no one can survive for a decade. His death was widely reported in 2001. One reason is that even Hersh's "true" account of "what really happened" is contradicted by eye witnesses and the initial Pakistani TV interviews of eye witnesses. One reason is that Hersh's story is too convoluted for an assassination raid, a routine event. He exposes lies within lies, indecision within decision, payoffs within payoffs, and reports such a huge number of people with advance knowledge of the raid that it cannot possibly have been kept a secret. I could add a fourth reason—the US government's lack of credibility. Washington lies about everything. For example: Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, Assad's use of chemical weapons, Iranian nukes, Russian invasion of Ukraine. If, as Hersh reports, lies comprise 99% of Washington's tale of the raid in Abbottabad, why believe that 1% of the story is true and that bin Laden was killed. It is difficult to have murder without a body. The only evidence that bin Laden was killed is the government's claim. In my opinion, Washington's disinformation agencies have finally managed to deceive Seymour Hersh with a concocted "inside story" that saves Washington's claim of having murdered bin Laden by proving that the US government is an extraordinary liar and violator of law. Hersh's story does prove that the US government is a liar, but it does not prove that a SEAL team murdered Osama bin Laden" [92].

On 2 November 2007 Pakistan PM Benazir Bhutto (2-time PM of Pakistan in 1988-1990 and 1993-1996 and leader of the Pakistan People Party in 1982-2007) was interviewed by Sir David Frost at Al Jazeera shortly before her murder on 27 December 2007. In this interview she said: “And he had also dealings with Omar Sheik, the man who murdered Osama Bin Laden.” The same interview was published on the BBC website, but that key sentence was removed [93].

Washington lies about everything [92]. Who should we believe, President Hamid Karzai, Pulitzer Prize-winning Seymour Hersh, famed Dr Paul Craig Roberts, 2-time Pakistan PM Benazir Bhutto ... or Michelle and Barack Obama?

(7). Egregious US Alliance violation of 20 countries under Peace Nobel Laureate Barack Obama.

For all that he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Obama has an appalling record of violence against numerous countries as outlined below.

(1) Afghanistan. Obama continued the Afghan Genocide and Afghan Holocaust in Occupied Afghanistan (started by his predecessor, serial war criminal George Bush) in which Afghan deaths from violence or deprivation total 7.2 million [48, 50]. The most fundamental human right is the right to life. While legitimately criticized for the one party state, the death penalty, censorship, urban air pollution and harsh treatment of dissidents, China has been hugely successful in radically reducing infant mortality and maternal mortality in Tibet and in China as a whole. In stark contrast, the war criminal US Alliance occupation of neighbouring Afghanistan continues to be associated with an under-1 infant mortality and maternal mortality incidence that is 7 times higher and 4-12 times higher, respectively, than that in Tibet [45, 94, 95] – evidence of gross violation by the rich US Alliance countries of Article 2 of the UN Genocide Convention [96] and of Articles 55 and 56 of the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War that unequivocally demand that an Occupier must supply its conquered Subjects with life-sustaining food and medical requisites “to the fullest extent of the means available to it” [97]. The GDP per capita is \$60,000 (US), \$58,000 (Australia), and \$40,000 (UK) as compared to \$9,000 (China) and \$600 (Occupied Afghanistan) [98]. Obama and the other leaders of the US Alliance need to be taken to the International Criminal Court over passive mass murder in Occupied Afghanistan and Occupied Iraq.

Also utterly ignored by Neocon American and Zionist Imperialist (NAZI)-perverted and subverted Western Mainstream media are the 1.2 million people who have died world-wide since 9-11 due to US Alliance restoration of the Taliban-destroyed Afghan opium industry from 6% of world market share in 2001 to 93% in 2007, the breakdown (as of 2015) including 280,000 Americans, 256,000 Indonesians, 68,000 Iranians, 25,000 British, 14,000 Canadians, 10,000 Germans, 5,000 Australians (7.2 million Afghan deaths from violence, 1.4 million, or imposed deprivation, 5.6 million, 2001-2015) [48, 50].

(2) Egypt. Apartheid Israel, Afghanistan and Egypt are the biggest recipients of US military aid and this continued under Obama after the 2013 military coup that removed Egypt’s first ever

democratically elected president ever, Mohamed Morsi, who died in prison in 2019 [99] (Egyptian deaths from deprivation 1.3 million, 2012-2019)..

(3) Honduras. The US has a longstanding and appalling record of interfering in Latin American countries through subversion, coups or invasions, with Honduras serving as a base for such deadly operations [45]. Under Obama the US-backed military removed the democratically-elected government of Honduras in 2009 with consequent gross human rights abuses (Honduran deaths from deprivation 40,000, 2009-2019).

(4) Iran. Sanctions against Iran by the US and its US Alliance lackeys date back to the Carter Administration response to the Iranian Revolution that overthrew the US-emplaced Shah regime in 1979 and the subsequent US hostage crisis. Agreement with Obama America and other US Alliance powers for the Iran Nuclear Deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) resulted in substantial lifting of sanctions in 2015. However Trump abrogated this treaty in 2018, has re-imposed sanctions, increased sanctions and threatened “obliteration” of parts of Iran [100, 101]. While Obama deserves credit for the Iran Nuclear Deal, he must wear the egregious racism tag of imposing deadly sanctions against non-nuclear weapons Iran (that has no nuclear weapons, has not invaded any other country for centuries, wants a nuclear weapons-free Middle East, and does not occupy the territory of any other country) while lavishing scores of billions of dollars of military aid on a nuclear terrorist Apartheid Israel (that has up to 400 nuclear weapons, has invaded 13 countries and occupies the territory of 3 other countries, namely Syria, Lebanon and Palestine) [45, 102] (Iranian avoidable deaths from deprivation averaged 74,000 per year and totalled 1.3 million in the 21st century)..

(5) Iraq. US forces left Iraq in 2011 under Obama, leaving a devastated country and a bitter Sunni versus Shia divide that gave rise to IS in Iraq, thence in Syria and thence around the world. US Alliance countries (notably Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Apartheid Israel, the US, the UK, and France) variously supported jihadis (and hence IS) in their war against the Assad regime in Syria (4.6 million Iraqi deaths from violence, 1.7 million, or deprivation, 2.9 million, and 6 million refugees in 1990-2011) [48, 49].

(6) Libya. The France, UK and US (FUKUS) Coalition invaded Libya with UNSC sanction in 2011, effected regime change, and devastated what was formerly a secular state and the richest country in Africa (0.2 million Libyans killed through violence, 0.1 million, or deprivation, 0.1 million, and 1 million refugees) [48].

(7) Pakistan. Despite unanimous opposition from the National Assembly of Pakistan, the US since 2004 and under Obama has hit targets in Pakistan with drone-fired bombs targeted via the Australia-US joint electronic spying base at Pine Gap in Central Australia (6,000 Pakistanis killed with 1,000 being civilians [103] and 11.4 million avoidable deaths from deprivation, 2004-2019).

(8) Palestine. For all his disingenuous talk of a “2-state solution” in Palestine (now impossible because of the ethnic cleansing of 90% of Palestine by the genocidally racist Zionists of Apartheid Israel), Obama finished his second term as president by granting \$38 billion in military aid over the next decade to nuclear terrorist, racist Zionist–run, genocidally racist, democracy-by-genocide Apartheid Israel [104]. Obama is a major player in the American Holocaust in which there have been 30 million untimely American deaths since 9-11 that are inescapably linked to the \$40 trillion long-term accrual cost of Apartheid Israel to Americans [40]. Just as those supporting Nazi Germany can be reasonably considered to be “pro-Nazi” and those supporting Apartheid South Africa were considered to be “pro-Apartheid” , so those supporting Apartheid Israel can reasonably be condemned as “pro-Apartheid” and hence utterly beyond the pale for decent humans.

(9) Philippines. By 2009 the US had 600 military plus CIA operatives involved in counterterrorism in the southern Philippines [105] (827,000 avoidable deaths from deprivation, 2015-2019).

(10) Somalia. The US invaded Somalia in 1992 and the US Alliance occupation of a starving Somalia continues, variously involving the US, Ethiopia, and Kenya, with US lackey Australia involved in waters offshore (2.2 million Somali deaths from violence, 0.4 million, or from deprivation, 1.8 million, in 1992-2011) [48].

(11) Syria. US Alliance countries (notably Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Apartheid Israel, the US, the UK, and France) variously supported jihadis (and hence variously IS) in their war against the secular Assad regime in Syria. Under Obama the US invaded Syria without permission from the Syrian Government (1.0 million Syrian deaths from violence, 0.5 million, or from deprivation, 0.5 million, in 2012-2019 and 11 million refugees).

(12) Yemen. Since 2015 the US has been involved with drone strikes, weapons and advisers together with other US Alliance partners in the Saudi-imposed Yemeni Genocide in starving Yemen (70,000 killed, 225,000 deaths from deprivation in 2015-2019, 3 million refugees) [106].

The above is a partial list because the US Government subverts every country on earth including the US. The US has invaded about 72 countries (52 since WW2) [55], and has about 800 military bases in more than 70 countries and territories [107]. John Pilger: “Should the CIA stooge Guaidó and his white supremacists grab power, it will be the 68th overthrow of a sovereign government by the United States, most of them democracies” [108]. 15 million people die avoidably from deprivation each year on Spaceship Earth with the US in charge of the flight deck [45], and 120 million died thus during the 8 years of the Obama presidency. Obama has continued the War on Terror with sanctions, invasions and illegal drone strikes on 7 countries (Libya, starving Somalia, starving Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan). It is estimated that 32 million Muslims have perished from violence, 5 million, or from deprivation, 27 million, in 20 countries invaded by the US Alliance since the US Government’s 9-11 false flag atrocity in 2001 [47, 51].

It is hardly surprising that Michelle Obama should have ignored these horrendous atrocities of Nobel Peace Laureate Barack Obama in her feel-good biography “Becoming”.

Final comments.

“Becoming” by Michelle Obama is an inspiring, feel-good story of how an African American woman from the impoverished South Side of Chicago graduated from Princeton and Harvard, worked in a top law firm and thence in different roles in community leadership and the University of Chicago Medical School, and then as a splendid mother of 2 daughters helped her African American husband Barack Obama to achieve 8 years as president of the United States.

Barack Obama was stymied by a hostile congress but managed some action on climate change and nuclear proliferation (the existential threats facing Humanity [102]). He also managed a limited recognition of Palestinian human rights (by abstaining from UNSC Resolution 2334), and saved the lives of scores of thousands of Americans through Obamacare (45,000 Americans die annually from lack of medical insurance [37]). Unfortunately these limited achievements of Barack Obama are all being wantonly undone by his crude, ignorant, stupid, mendacious and bullying successor, Donald Trump [37].

Michelle Obama’s feel-good “Becoming” is remarkable for its niceness and the paucity of personal criticisms. Thus she very briefly refers to a really bad teacher, a boy who punched her at school, a girl who bullied her, incorrect detractors in politics (e.g. Chicago politicians Donna Trotter and Bobby Rush and various media critics such as pro-Iraq War Christopher Hitchens). However the only people she criticizes at length are journalists who quoted her unfairly and questioned her love of America (pages 262-269 [1]) and the misogynist reactionary Donald Trump (pages 407-419 [1]). The evidently very well edited “Becoming” is a book that (absences aside) could be read with pleasure and utility by people from the Democratic Left to the Republican Far Right (excepting Donald Trump) – it is a triumph of endless, feel good niceness and smart, market-informed editing. A wasted opportunity for courageous truth telling.

Famed anti-racist Jewish American writer I.F. Stone (Isidor Feinstein Stone, an outstanding US journalist, publisher of the newsletter “I. F. Stone’s Weekly” and author of numerous books, including “The Hidden History of the Korean War, 1950-1951”), told journalism students: “Among all the things I’m going to tell you today about being a journalist, all you have to remember is two words: governments lie” [109, 110].

More specifically, in relation to American mendacity, Gore Vidal (a great American writer) stated in an interview with Melvyn Bragg (2008): “Unlike most Americans who lie all the time, I hate lying... This is a country of hoax. P.T. Barnum is the god of this republic, which is no longer a republic alas. It is an oligarchy and a rather vicious one” [111].

The extent of that neoconservative American Establishment deception has been cogently described by Professor Noam Chomsky (linguistics at 85-Nobel-Laureate MIT) and Professor Edward Herman (finance, University of Pennsylvania) (1988): “In sum, the mass media of the

United States are effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function by reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, and self-censorship , and without any significant overt coercion. This propaganda system has become even more efficient in recent decades with the rise of the national television networks, greater mass-media concentration, right-wing pressures on public radio and television, and the growth in scope and sophistication of public relations and news management” [112].

The most important things in history are often those that are not stated, the absences, holes or lacunae. Michelle Obama’s feel-good autobiography “Becoming” has many extraordinary, Elephant in the Room absences that reflect the One Percenter-dominated Mainstream American media culture of lying by omission, genocide ignoring and holocaust ignoring that profoundly deceives ordinary Americans, including Michelle Obama, and indeed most of the West. However “Becoming” can nevertheless serve the interests of Humanity if decent folk tell everyone they can about its shocking absences.

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How the BJP is able to win over the voter's mind

Sugata Srinivasaraju | ET

There is already a voluminous heap of analyses and commentary on the general election results. It may not be pragmatic to look back anymore, but to look ahead. In fact, the new Lok Sabha has already been constituted and members have taken oath.

However, provocative slogans that rented Parliament during the oath-taking ceremony, with a clear intent to stalk some opposition members, reminded one of something that lies buried at the bottom of all the heap of reasoning that has characterised poll results - the dogged cultural politics of the BJP. This merits a visitation and constant re-visitation. If this is not accorded primacy there is no going forward for opposition parties like the Congress, which are staring at a horizon that does not promise the blip of comet light.

The term "narrative" often crops up in political talk. The vanquished concede that the victor had a "strong narrative", but they seldom go deeper to ask what really were the elements in the victor's story. How did those elements orchestrate into a single, impactful recital? Was this story an epic, oral construction over the decades, or was it a make-believe bedtime yarn that fulfilled the exigency of a night? None of these questions gets serious attention because no other party in India is as persistent with cultural politics as the BJP. The absence of a well laid out cultural strategy has defined almost all opposition parties today. They understand identity to an extent, but do not think through cultural aspects. They have so far reacted to the unravelling epic of the BJP, with the exigency of a bedtime yarn.

Assume an ordinary BJP worker and a regular Congress worker are locked up in a room. What if they are told that they will be let out only if they list three things they strongly believe in? The likely responses are not difficult to imagine. The BJP worker, with the breathlessness of rote learning, will say, a Ram temple should be built in what is Ram janmabhoomi; special status to Kashmir be scrapped and, therefore, Article 370 of the Constitution abrogated; finally, s/he will insist on a uniform civil code. S/he will have more on offer, but these may be on top of the agenda. Whether right or wrong, inclusive or exclusive, mvirulent or benign, all of his/her demands have a cultural ring to them. On the other hand, the hemming and hawing Congress worker may have some difficulty in articulating his or her position. He/she may get into a circular twist of power dreams, believing in becoming a corporator, or an MLA, or an MP, depending on his/her station in life at the time.

Therefore, it is between culture and power. Everybody seeks power but the BJP creates a cultural reasoning to seek power. This makes a great impression on the voters' mind. While one is supposedly seeking it for the nation, filigreed in collective imagination, the other is seeking it for the self. This was the cultural contrast the BJP worked on between Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi. The naamdar and kaamdar jibes arose with a strategic intent to create such contrast. The Congress was dragged into this culture war they did not know how to fight because they never applied themselves in that direction. Everything they raised, however big, Rafale or NYAY, got dissolved in this cultural logic.

Senior leaders of the Congress may have spoken of an "idea of India" that is plural, diverse and tolerant as a cultural counter, but that is tame, and in the realm of abstraction. Ordinary party workers could not draw from it to answer their BJP counterpart in their immediate surroundings, say, in a park or a drawing room. If by some quirk of luck, they did draw from this abstraction they would sound like delivering a lecture, while the BJP person would be speaking a dream.

In a recent issue of the Economist (May 11, 2019), the column "Charlemagne" looked at the politics of suburbia in Europe and said: "Culture wars have taken hold of European politics and eclipsed the old left-versus-right distinction." The nationalism of the suburbs of Europe has clashed with pro-European internationalism. What is being fought in India are culture wars too, but have never been characterised that way. The Congress placed an implicit trust in a default electoral cycle that would deliver power on its doorstep. Hence, they did not address the cultural questions with the seriousness they deserved.

Cultural Cell Called RSS

Most parties spend crores on data scientists, pollsters, technologists, spin masters as well as event and image managers, but do not spend resources, time or energy to get their cultural thinking and positioning right. None of these parties would ever think of commissioning a report that helps understand the cultural journeys they need to undertake. The biggest yield of such a report could be the narrative they need to build, sustain and accord it the sublimity it deserves. This, obviously, is a long-term project, hence, the poll-management industry may not be interested. They work on short-term goals and instantaneous ideas with an exclusive focus on creating a big splash for a specific duration. First of all, none of these parties would have a cultural cell. Even if they did, it would be the most unglamorous assignment for an office-bearer. For the BJP, there is a permanent cultural cell called the RSS, which is its reverential core.

During this poll, and the previous one in 2014, Modi, BJP and the RSS had a definitive cultural strategy in place. From it they created a compelling story of majoritarian victimhood and told it in a million ways. This is not something they had created for the polls, but had patiently told, retold, illustrated and annotated over the decades. The RSS was always the custodian of these stories. For the polls, they were only sharpening it for a new historical setting. From time to

time, to keep the story fresh and renew its purpose, they created fresh cultural memories around old themes. Those fresh memories were called beef-eating, cow protection, urban naxals, sedition, citizenship bill, love jihad, triple talaq, Indo-Pak tension, Godse, Savarkar, Patel statue etc.

One Nation, One Language, One Religion

They also deployed technology intelligently to amplify the story. Important to note, technology came only after the story, technology itself was not the story. And since the story had the makings of a blockbuster it did well wherever it was placed. It developed a life of its own from one mouth to another, from one social media account to another, one conversation to another. What the opposition parties and leaders did was to vigorously react to these stories. While they assumed they were countering it, they were only arguing about the progression of this story line, its implications and the climax it would reach. This meant, they were actively participating in the story the BJP had created and controlled. The reaction they were putting out became one of the many retellings of the story. They were unwittingly enmeshed in an oral epic that was being woven. All through the polls the BJP ensured there was only one story being told. This resonated with the Sangh's idea of one nation, one language, one religion, and also, one election.

How the opposition and the Congress actually contributed to the retelling of BJP's story became obvious on many occasions. Sample this one, from the many by Mamata Banerjee, walking blind into a cultural trap. In a debate on the word "Ramdhanu", which means rainbow in Bangla, she apparently said it would be ideal to replace the word "Ram" with "Rango" (colour) and make it "Rangodhanu". Rainbow in Bangla has a poetic expression as Ram's bow. Instead of celebrating its metaphoric joy, she meddled with a deeply embedded cultural idea. The logic behind this contraption she was creating for herself was obvious. She thought Muslims may not like to say "Ramdhanu". India's former ambassador to UNESCO, Chiranjiv Singh, who mentioned this to me, asked: "Will Mamata now replace the word in Tagore's poem, Nirjharer Swapnabhanga (Awakening of the Waterfall), too?" The lines in the poem read: "Kesh elayia, phul kudaiya,/Ramdhanu-aanka pakha udayiya..."

Similar was Rahul Gandhi's project to visit temples during the state and general elections. The BJP was happy to keep the debate and hashtags flowing around it, because it told people the story they had created in a more live and illustrative manner. Since it had an everyday cultural connect, its sales power was that much more powerful. To the one god, Ram, that the BJP served up to bolster their one nation-one religion story, Rahul could have thought of a countervailing idea with thousands of plebian and proletariat gods that came under the Hindu umbrella. There was so much to pick from diverse Indian knowledge traditions to checkmate the BJP, but that needed a consistent cultural strategy. It needed a much deeper response than just entering a temple, or offering a shallow binary of love and hate. Unfortunately, the Congress and other opposition parties have allowed the BJP to appropriate an entire intellectual tradition without any resistance. Now, its recovery is a Himalayan task. We see

leaders like Mamata attempting something shallow by countering the “Jai Shri Ram” slogan with “Jai Kali Maa”. It is not likely to work if it is a clever trick, to serve the exigency of the times. There has to be something more original, something stronger in faith that meanders its own path even in the national versus subnational plot.

The Lingayat religion issue that the Siddaramaiah government created during the Karnataka assembly polls in 2018, was also marred by cultural unthinking. Instead of drawing from the great cultural heritage of the Lingayat community and their vachana tradition, they made it a bureaucratic, legislative and pride issue. If cultural heritage had to be foregrounded, it needed considerable time, not the few months before polls. The five years they had were sufficient, but they never applied themselves.

There are innumerable instances across states that can be picked to demonstrate that the Congress did not culturally apply itself, nor, for that matter, did the other opposition parties. There were certain simple measures they could have tried, like simultaneously broadcasting Rahul Gandhi’s press conferences (they were quite a few) in all Schedule Eight languages. They, after all, had Pradesh Congress Committees in each of the linguistic regions. That would have at least demonstrated their commitment for cultural/linguistic diversity against the BJP’s Hindi/Sanskrit obsession. Rahul looked so good in Malayalam when he got a passionate translator in Jyothi Vijayakumar. She did what an anglicised Shashi Tharoor could never do for him. Was it difficult for the Congress to create such alibis in each of the Indian languages? They never thought of it, for sure. Their claim to diversity was never actively illustrated. It was as dry as a corporate mission statement.

The Congress constantly grumbled about most of the mainstream media having kow-towed to the interests of the BJP, but never said that the mainstream media is dominated by upper caste, upper class people who have become the saffron party’s fellow travellers. To intervene on this would have qualified as cultural politics. The Congress chose to live in an ideological ecosystem created by, and for, the BJP. While the BJP did majoritarian politics, media chased majoritarian readership/viewership or constructed false equivalences.

It is not that the Congress never had cultural thinking. In fact, all that Mahatma Gandhi did was cultural politics. He made the freedom movement a cultural movement. He built an ideal for the nation through cultural gestures, like holding prayer meetings, popularising Vaishnava jana to or Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram, defining Ram Rajya, spinning the charkha or encouraging linguistic states. For that matter, his ideas of civil disobedience, satyagraha, trusteeship and making salt were all cultural ideas. He envisioned the Congress as a cultural institution; paradoxically the RSS was born to counter the Congress’s diverse cultural weave. Gandhi could blend two distinct streams with refined clarity — the Sanatana Hindu essence and the European Enlightenment values.

Post-1947, for a new nation in a daze of freedom and the pain of Partition, Jawaharlal Nehru emphasised more on scientific temper and institution-building, however, this was on a bedrock

of cultural understanding. But with Nehru gone, and Indira Gandhi in command, it became a pure pursuit of power. It is perhaps time for the Congress to go back to its basics. What it needs is a cultural cell that sees, hears and thinks. Its vision of governance should include cultural diplomacy besides economic and geostrategic diplomacy. Indira understood this component well. Soft power cannot be outsourced to Bollywood or misunderstood as software.

Interestingly, all these years, we dismissed the Sangh Parivar as speaking abstract, ritualistic, anachronistic mumbo jumbo. But, over the decades, when the Congress gave up its cultural thinking, the Sangh with great perseverance built up signs and symbols, Sanskritised whole populations and appropriated ideological opposites. Ironically now, the liberal messaging of the "idea of India" sounds rootless and abstract without concrete co-relationships or attachments.

Congress's Ideological Crisis

Vidya Bhushan Rawat | Countercurrents.org

Congress leader Pawan Khera says that 'liberals' abused the Congress party the most and at the same point of time, 'expect' it do the miracle. I don't claim to be one such person and nor am I in the category of the brahmanical liberals who wish to see things from their own 'chashma' but at the same point of time, I do not suffer for a death wish for any party, be it Congress or Samajwadi Party or BSP or even RJD.

But there are serious questions in all these parties and that is that they were unable to take the RSS propaganda head on. Most of these parties left their own ideologies. The question of 'acceptance' of young leaders is very much valid. Narendra Modi too found it difficult to get accepted when leaders in their 90s were there and that is the biggest challenge in Indian political system that leaders who should have retired gracefully or should have served the people without taking the job of governance structure, do not wish to do so and want to be part and parcel of the power. Modi's acceptance came as a three time chief minister as well as plus sixty in age but Rahul, Akhilesh and Tejasvi have inherited things from their families and hence when they are weak, the issue of their leadership would emerge.

Congress leaders are asking that why should party respond to issues when the entire country is in a different mode. He said, what can you say about Pragya Thakur's victory. Does it mean that 'Bhopal support Nathuram Godse and not Gandhi.

Congress people are living in a denial mode. When Bhopal elected Pragya Thakur, it clearly indicated their choices and ofcourse, none like Gandhi particularly those who hail from Sangh Parivar's background. Even the Congress people don't understand him. Why do you blame people. People don't vote on your past. People vote on your performance.

Modi brought Congress's past which was troublesome too. Congress can not get away with it. The right thing is that you admit that there were mistakes and the new congress was different. The communalisation of Congress started post 1980s with active flirtation towards Hindutva by Mrs Indira Gandhi, followed by Rajiv Gandhi. Congress has run away from Nehru's model. It never embraced Baba Saheb Ambedkar. If it had done so honestly, I can say, it would have won the heart and minds of the people in India. While BJP, who we all call party of the Savarnas, actually, made deep inroads among the Dalits, OBCs and Adivasis by giving new leaders a chance, Congress and other parties were either savarnas or a few of their own castes. RJD, SP, RLD could not go beyond that.

The fact is Congress's old guard refuses to change. The original brahmanical party of India failed to understand that India is changing and that people will not clap on the family. There is nothing wrong for Rahul to be leader and he attempted. Ofcourse, he behaved as a leader who

has the rigidity of sticking on one issue and inability to be flexible in terms of issues. Congress's record on the issues raised by BJP is poor. On communal front, it never took strong action against the Hindu communalists and now they have become more powerful. Secondly, it was the party, who unleashed the disaster of disinvestment to India and third, the party failed to win over the Muslims and Dalits as it took them for granted.

India is entering in new phase. You will not win merely by negative voting but you will have to show your vision. Some of the 'liberals' are suggesting that Manish Tiwari or Shashi Tharoor become leader of the party. Yes, these savarna liberals cant go beyond their narrow caste minds and then look for rootless leaders. The fact is both of these leaders are not at all leaders even if they win elections and are purely brahmanical, more suited for BJP but yes, if Congress want to feel that it has space for being B team of BJP, it can do. If Congress want to grow, it must allow the state leaders to emerge from diverse groups. It must be voice of the ideals of Constitution and develop National Alliance. Rebuild the party. Build cultural narrative and admit your faults and mistakes. Only entertain those who have deep faith in your ideology and define what exactly is a Congress person and what do you expect from them.

We need strong opposition who can speak up for people's issues and protect their rights. Congress should start working along with other parties and prepare for assembly elections. Develop long term alliances and build the party in the form of social coalition. There is still big space. The party need to take a lead but dont impose on us the discredited leaders. Focus on those who are ideological clear and have connect with masses. Be careful from those tongue twisters who the Lutyen manipulator want as leaders of the party. They will only bring disaster. The party must reflect the diversity of India and its faith in secular liberal values and constitution of India. Unfortunately, the likes of Kamalnath and Gehlot cant do so, nor is it possible by Jitin Prasada or others. Congress need to do deep soul searching and right now Gandhis need to be at the helm of affairs and nurture new young leadership. Democratise the party and build confidence of the worker which is not possible in the absence of a strong ideological narrative.

India: the WhatsApp election

FT.com

Sanjukta Pandey quit her job as a hair and make-up stylist in March to devote herself to Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's re-election campaign on social media.

Ms Pandey, a feisty 32-year-old wearing huge hoop earrings, neon pink lipstick and a tattoo of Mr Modi's name on her left forearm, now spends her waking hours spreading his election message on WhatsApp and other social media apps. "I'm online almost 24/7. I don't go to sleep; we want Mr Modi to come back," she says. "You won't see anyone getting inked with Rahul Gandhi's name."

India's ruling Bharatiya Janata party is using WhatsApp to wage one of the world's most sophisticated digital political campaigns, carried out by a vast army of volunteers like Ms Pandey, who are devoted to Mr Modi's brand of Hindu nationalism.

As internet access surges in India with the proliferation of smartphones and cheap data, more than 300m Indians are now on WhatsApp, making the country by far its biggest market.

Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg says putting resources into building new privacy tools will mean it will take 'longer to ship new products' © AFP

While campaigns used to be conducted on TV and at large rallies, WhatsApp has become the central battleground of India's election, which began on April 11 and will conclude on May 19.

The Indian contest follows a divisive election in Brazil, where far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro swept into power in October — helped in part by a wave of toxic rumours and misinformation, much of it spread over WhatsApp.

Now India is becoming the latest test case of the capacity of the messaging app, whose millions of small groups of encrypted users are often beyond the purview of electoral authorities or independent fact-checkers, to potentially shape the election in the world's largest democracy.

For every supporter who says the app has helped bring together families and friends with a cheap communication tool, there are as many critics who fear it has become an impossible to monitor conduit for fake news.

"WhatsApp is the echo chamber of all unmitigated lies, fakes and crap in India, it's a toxic cesspool," says Palanivel Thiagarajan, an elected official and head of the IT department of DMK, a regional party in the state of Tamil Nadu who is running against the BJP. "If it were up to me I would say just cut it, there are hundreds of substitutes."

The messaging app, which has 1.5bn users globally, has risen to popularity particularly outside the US in countries where its parent company Facebook is hoping to grow new revenue streams.

India's ruling Bharatiya Janata party is using WhatsApp to wage one of the world's most sophisticated digital political campaigns on behalf of Narendra Modi © AFP

Claire Wardle, a research fellow at Harvard University and co-founder of First Draft, a non-profit group addressing misinformation on social media, says WhatsApp took off with the explosion of smartphone users in countries such as Brazil, Nigeria and India, where it has become "a primary source of information".

"These questions about its role in the spread of misinformation are not just to do with elections," she says. "It's about WhatsApp's role in societies, full stop."

In recent years, it has been Facebook itself which has attracted most of the criticism around the spread of false news and electoral manipulation. The report by special counsel Robert Mueller outlined the extensive efforts by Russian actors to manipulate the 2016 US presidential election using Facebook. It also came under fire when it emerged Myanmar's military was using the social network to incite violence against the Muslim Rohingya minority in the country.

But it is WhatsApp, which Facebook bought for \$22bn in 2014, which has become the communications platform of choice not just in India and Brazil, but also across swathes of Europe including Spain and the UK. Mark Zuckerberg, the Facebook founder, has said WhatsApp's intimate form of communication is the future of the Facebook group.

"In the last year or so we have seen a move from Facebook news feed to more private channels, including WhatsApp and Messenger, particularly in places like Brazil," says Ms Wardle.

Its encryption system means that in contrast with Facebook or Twitter, WhatsApp conversations are impenetrable even to the company itself, say executives. But that has made it more vulnerable to misuse, especially in elections, say critics, who argue it has become a platform for spreading campaign-related misinformation.

India is becoming the latest test case of the capacity of WhatsApp, whose millions of small groups of encrypted users are often beyond the purview of electoral authorities © Bloomberg
This risk came to a head in Brazil last year, in what became known as the first "WhatsApp election". With 120m WhatsApp users in a country of over 211m, the platform was flooded ahead of the October vote with false rumours, doctored photographs and audio hoaxes — much of which helped Mr Bolsonaro. Researchers studying 100,000 images circulating in 347 groups found that only 8 per cent were "fully truthful".

"Misinformation was huge in Brazil. It was an election plagued with fake news that left behind a country split in half by hatred," says Fabrício Benevenuto at the Federal University of Minas Gerais and a researcher on the impact of the social media network. "The political discussion ended up being reduced to a meme."

In India, the BJP has been the most active of the main parties in trying to use WhatsApp to win votes. "I've been trying to reach every household via at least WhatsApp," says Punit Agarwal, the BJP's social media co-ordinator for the Delhi area.

Mr Agarwal says the party has 74,000 volunteers tasked with spreading its message over WhatsApp. "There was a limited audience last time," he says. "This time we have a vast audience."

WhatsApp has become the platform of choice for politicians because of its massive reach that goes beyond a party's loyal voter base, but also because of the lack of gatekeepers. Messages forwarded through the system have no context about where they originate, but benefit from the trust of coming from a contact.

Mr Agarwal denies that the BJP is spreading polarising content, but public WhatsApp data collected by analysts and anecdotal evidence show that Indians are being flooded with propaganda memes, much of it anti-Muslim and critical of the opposition Congress party. "WhatsApp groups are considered the most dangerous," says SY Quraishi, India's former election commissioner. "The disastrous potential of this media is very strong; you've seen how rumours floating [around] can cause havoc."

Because of the extensive political participation on WhatsApp in India, the company said it began to plan its election strategy early. "We know political parties are using WhatsApp to organise, and we decided to do a test run [to monitor it] during the Karnataka election," says Carl Woog, WhatsApp's head of communications, referring to regional elections last May.

At the time, WhatsApp discovered that one of the political parties, which it declines to name, had created a large number of groups using the party's name all at the same time, and was adding several people to them in an obvious effort to spread propaganda in contravention of WhatsApp rules. "We had a pretty good sense of what was going on and we banned those groups," he says, adding that this was the first time the company had observed this viral group behaviour.

Kiran Garimella, a researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who is studying misinformation in India, analysed more than 5m WhatsApp messages posted in 5,000 public groups over the past five months, covering roughly 1m people.

"We have observed that it is specifically focused on image-based, subtle misinformation," says Mr Garimella, giving an example of doctored screenshots from a reputable news channel.

The top shared images accused Congress leader Rahul Gandhi of being a "fake Hindu" and invented a link to Vijay Mallya, India's fugitive billionaire businessman. A recurring favourite message shows Mr Gandhi praying at a mosque, insinuating that he is a Muslim to deter Hindu voters.

Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro swept into power in October — helped in part by a wave of toxic rumours and misinformation, much of it spread over WhatsApp © Reuters
Similar to the Brazilian campaign, academics say WhatsApp is being used by parties to polarise citizens by playing on communal tensions.

“I’m a member of over 100 WhatsApp groups run formally or informally by BJP supporters,” says Soma Basu, a fellow at the Reuters Institute of Journalism and an Indian journalist. “I’m analysing 75,000 messages I’ve received in this time, many of which are very disturbing and violent, such as a video of a youth being beheaded in the name of religion.”

Religious propaganda is not just a WhatsApp problem and is spreading through Facebook, Twitter, Indian social media app ShareChat and other platforms but, “WhatsApp carries the credibility of the sender, it’s more private and personal, so a lot of things that can’t be said on Twitter or Facebook can easily be said on WhatsApp”, she says.

The study of WhatsApp political groups in Brazil revealed an elaborate “pyramid” structure of how misinformation spreads on the platform, cascading from regional and local activists to individual citizens and their friends. In India, the structure of WhatsApp political groups is also layered and complex.

The BJP’s social media department targets undecided voters with tailored messages, customised according to voting history, class and caste, says a former data analyst for the party, Shivam Shankar Singh. The messages almost never came from official BJP channels, but WhatsApp groups organise outside the party.

Both main parties spread fake news but the “BJP sends messages with communal and religious fundamentalist messages which Congress doesn’t. [Congress] share a lot of fake statistics, but they clearly don’t have a sound strategy,” Ms Basu adds.

Despite its huge presence in India, WhatsApp only hired its first employee in the country last year. But since then, the app has struggled to contain a torrent of false news in India — from rumours about child kidnappings to fake footage of terrorist attacks and dead bodies — that has contributed to bouts of mob violence and unrest. WhatsApp says it bans roughly 400,000 accounts in India every month.

In response to legal threats from the Indian government starting last July, which demanded that it make changes to how it operates in order to improve accountability, WhatsApp appointed a grievance officer to deal with complaints from users and hired its first-ever India head, Abhijit Bose, in March.

The biggest challenge is that, unlike Facebook, WhatsApp cannot identify the source of a message without breaking its encryption system. Instead, it has worked to make sharing more difficult, including limiting the number of recipients of a forwarded message, reducing group sizes and allowing users to decline group invitations. Other product changes being tested include a fact-checking service for images received through the app, although it would not be rolled out in time for the election, Mr Woog says.

These measures to limit virality have had limited impact, according to independent academics. “We see many instances where the same message was sent on multiple groups, over 20 groups within a 10-second window, that means there is a person or software sending the messages,” says Mr Garimella.

Pre-election propaganda claimed Congress leader Rahul Gandhi was a 'fake Hindu' © Reuters WhatsApp says it has also spent about \$10m in India to run a public education campaign around the dangers of misinformation on traditional media such as television, radio and newspapers. “I think I would say without hyperbole it’s probably the largest public education campaign about misinformation ever undertaken,” says Mr Woog.

The company is working with third-party organisations such as Boom Live, one of India’s independent WhatsApp fact-checkers, and AltNews, as well as the non-profit group Proto, on official fact-checking services for the duration of the election.

The efforts mirror those by non-profit First Draft during the Brazilian election, where a consortium of journalists fact-checked more than 65,000 tips and messages received from users via a dedicated WhatsApp number.

“Most of the stuff we are busting or verifying owes its origin to WhatsApp. There is fake news on Facebook too, but the numbers are small compared with WhatsApp. We get hundreds of reports each day,” says Govindraj Ethiraj, founder of BoomLive. Facebook has recently removed hundreds of “inauthentic” pages.

THE POLITICAL

Energy, Economic Growth, and Ecological Crisis

Erald Kolasi | MR

Can economic growth continue forever? This relatively simple question has posed some intellectual headaches for modern capitalism. In the *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx argued that capital cannot tolerate any limits, by which he meant that the drive for growth and the search for new markets are both necessary for the political and economic survival of capitalism.¹ Viewed in this light, the implications of the question present something of an existential challenge to the current order. Capitalism cannot acknowledge any natural limits to economic growth, for that would mean acknowledging its ultimate demise. To keep up the pretense that capitalism represents a quasi-eternal and invincible system, most political leaders and economists who support the current order have begun reciting a series of elaborate narratives about the relationship between human economies and the natural world.

These narratives all revolve around the central idea that we can decouple economic growth from the material needs of human civilization. Until the late twentieth century, economists generally understood that more economic growth required the use of more energy and materials. But as the postwar compromises between labor and capital began collapsing in the 1970s and '80s, economic theories started to shift in emphasis and direction. Inspired by neoclassical theories, a new generation of economists began to argue that economic growth could continue without the consumption of additional resources from the environment.² They claimed that we could reach this economic nirvana by doing more with less, investing in clean energy, and developing energy-efficient technologies. In short, they were arguing for nothing less than the long-term sustainability of capitalism, ignoring all the science and evidence piling up along the way.

At a basic level, pundits and economists generally define decoupling as a process in which the size of the economy expands while resource impacts, usually either carbon emissions or primary energy consumption, decline.³ More specifically, relative decoupling occurs when resource impacts are rising at a slower rate than economic growth. Absolute decoupling occurs when resource impacts are declining in absolute terms, even as the economy keeps expanding.⁴ Macroeconomic theories supportive of capitalism measure economic size and activity by calculating the gross domestic product (GDP), which stands for the annual market value of goods and services produced in an economy by adding together gross private investment, consumer spending, government spending, and the trade balance. It should be noted that, although widely accepted by governments and most economists around the world,

there are some fundamental scientific problems with using this measure as an accurate barometer of aggregate economic activity.⁵

Divergence between growth in carbon emissions and economic growth, and between economic growth and primary energy consumption, are often conflated in both public and academic discourse about the issue of decoupling, creating all sorts of confusions.⁶ Some economists have also looked at how aggregate demand relates to the consumption of raw materials. Other ideas and concepts related to decoupling regularly circulate in the literature, reflecting the general ambiguity surrounding the issue.

This article aims to synthesize and understand these disparate ideas and to offer a comprehensive overview of the relationships between energy, economic growth, and social development. On a practical level, this debate has become fluid and chaotic because wealth and power are at stake. Intellectually, however, many of the arguments amplify confusion by resorting to inaccurate theories and misleading phrases. People often equate the concept of energy consumption with the term energy use, suggesting that they are unaware of important distinctions in how energy accounting works, or even what energy actually means. Many economists think about concepts like energy and efficiency in vastly different ways than physicists, creating ample opportunity for interdisciplinary confusion. This web of definitions and conceptions cries out for some attempt at clarification. Here I explore the nature of the relationship between energy and economic growth, highlighting areas where it makes sense to talk about decoupling while also emphasizing some of the fundamental limits and problems of invoking the concept in relation to economics.

The Critical Role of Energetic Conversions

Energy consumption is a complex topic that touches on many different issues about the nature of civilization. When most governments and organizations talk about energy consumption, they are typically referring to a metric called primary energy consumption, which represents the direct use of energy sources without any prior conversions or transformations.⁷ Primary consumption includes burning coal at a power plant and distilling crude oil at a refinery. Primary forms of energy are not useful on their own, so they are converted and transformed into secondary forms of energy. For example, we burn coal so we can turn the resulting steam energy into electricity, and we distill crude oil so we can produce gasoline. Coal and crude oil are primary forms of energy while electricity and gasoline are considered secondary forms. The secondary sources can also be converted into other tasks and end uses, collectively known as tertiary sources. However, it must be emphasized that all primary energy sources are themselves the result of earlier conversions and transformations in nature, so they are not so primary after all. For example, the hydrocarbons of the dead plants and animals that make up petroleum are a secondary product of photosynthesis, which requires solar energy and water molecules. This fact hints at an important challenge for the usual methods of energy accounting: the concept of a primary form of energy is theoretically suspect.

There are two common methods of measuring primary energy: the partial-substitution method and the physical-energy content method.⁸ Let me explain them with some examples. When a power plant burns through coal, the primary energy simply equals the energy of the coal that goes up in flames. In the case of fossil fuels then, things are pretty easy: just record the amount of stuff that we burn and call that primary energy. But the situation is more complicated for renewable energy sources, such as wind, solar, and hydropower, because nothing was burning while these energy sources generated electricity. Enter the two methods above. In the physical-energy content method, we simply count the electrical energy produced by these sources as primary energy, even though electricity obviously qualifies as a converted form of energy. This is the method used by the International Energy Agency to measure energy consumption for renewables. In the partial-substitution method, we pretend that the produced electricity came from a hypothetical thermal power plant, and then we assume some efficiency for this plant. For example, if the plant has an efficiency of 20 percent, then we would multiply the electricity generated by a factor of five. In this case, the primary energy required to produce that electricity is five times larger. The company British Petroleum has adopted this partial-substitution method in its popular global energy reports.⁹ The main reason why these differences matter is because they can lead to diverging estimates of energy consumption, especially for nations that rely heavily on renewables.

We can always argue and wonder about which method is more correct, but this line of thinking entirely misses the central theme of the conversation. In reality, beyond the world of statistical accounting, only energetic conversions truly matter. The electrical energy produced by renewables came from dynamical flows in nature, such as sunlight hitting the earth and rivers roaring through dams. The concentration of fossil fuels at their points of processing and refinement required energetic conversions from machines and human labor, which first extracted these fuels and then transported them to a particular location. All of this happened before anything was burned and recorded on some logs and charts. Thinking in terms of primary energy consumption obscures the energetic flows and conversions that make all economic activities possible. It also establishes ample opportunities for confusion and misguided results in public discourse. When economists and media outlets show plots of GDP growth diverging from energy consumption, they are actually showing GDP growth diverging from primary energy consumption.¹⁰ They then assume that this alone somehow proves that economic growth has become detached from energy use.

This assumption is highly misleading. To understand why, it helps to review the significance of energy in a broader context beyond economics. We can generally define energy as constrained states of motion that can be exchanged among different physical systems. It can come in many different forms, such as chemical, thermal, kinetic, and potential, to name just a few. The following arguments do not even depend on any particular definition of energy; they just depend on the basic fact that certain forms of energy can be converted into other forms. For

example, chemical energy can be transformed into mechanical energy, which is what happens when our car engines burn through fuel and convert the resulting heat energy into the mechanical motion of the wheels. Heat and mechanical energy can also be transformed into electrical energy, like when power plants burn through coal and use the resulting steam energy to drive a generator that produces electricity. Focusing exclusively on primary energy consumption completely ignores and marginalizes these energetic conversions, which should be the central elements of the story.

All conceivable economic transactions, from the exchange of money to the production of commodities, require energetic conversions from various sources. Energy is embedded in all human actions. It does not simply stop counting after we burn through natural resources at some power plant. The flow of energy through the various parts of civilization facilitates all possible human actions, such as driving to the grocery store, surfing the web, playing video games, watching television shows, and reading romance novels at the beach. In this fundamental sense, economic activities cannot be decoupled from energy use, for that would be like asking economics to step completely outside the laws of physics—a clear absurdity. But this clear absurdity is exactly what certain economic theories imply can actually happen: they artificially detach capital and labor from energetic constraints and effectively sever any and all links between physics and economics.¹¹ Many economists use primary energy consumption as a crutch for how energy impacts economic processes, and in so doing they make it seem like our lives are unfolding in some entirely separate realm from energetic constraints. Instead of focusing exclusively on primary consumption, we should emphasize the importance of what I call aggregate flow, defined as the total sum of all the energy converted through our economic activities. In other words, aggregate flow focuses on the energetic flows and transformations that make civilization possible. A related quantity of interest is the aggregate flow rate, or AFR, which measures the aggregate flow per unit of time. In general, richer societies have a higher AFR than poorer societies. This means that they can produce and circulate larger amounts of real surplus wealth, in the form of use values. However, an enormous portion of this wealth also takes the form of social, economic, and ecological waste.

In addition to the critical role of conversions, we must emphasize the related importance of energy quality. Not all primary sources of energy are made equal. Some are more efficient than others. Some yield more mechanical work. Others produce more electricity. For example, producing one kilowatt hour of electricity in 2017 required, on average, 7,812 British thermal units (BTUs) of natural gas and 10,465 BTUs of coal.¹² By this measure, natural gas is roughly 25 percent more efficient than coal at generating the same quantity of electricity. The energy thinker Vaclav Smil identified the power density of an energy source as an important feature for the economic growth and development of civilization.¹³ He defined power density as the energy flux per unit area that could be released in the conversion process of an energy source. Smil has argued that fossil fuels are uniquely important for capitalism because they have higher power densities than other energy sources, such as wind and solar. Larger power densities help

generate more production, leading to higher profits by extension. Other measures of energy quality are conceivable, but the basic point is that natural energy sources can have very different uses and attributes. The only way to understand these differences is by looking at the conversions and transformations that follow primary consumption. Failing to take this critical but routinely ignored step makes it seem like all energy sources should be treated equally, as if they all have the same capacities in the process of economic production and consumption.

The Central Flaws in the Neoclassical Theory of Growth

The intellectual foundations of the decoupling narrative derive from neoclassical economic theory, the prevailing paradigm of explanation among orthodox economists that support capitalism. Neoclassical theory is generally plagued by unrealistic assumptions about society, numerous mathematical inconsistencies, and has no predictive power at all.¹⁴ In this piece, however, we focus on the cardinal sin of this intellectual train wreck: its rejection of physics and its ignorance of the natural order. In the 1950s, the economist Robert Solow developed one of the first major models to describe how economic growth happens.¹⁵ In these versions of neoclassical theory, the production inputs of capital and labor combine to produce outputs, or finished goods, that are traded in the economy. Growth in capital leads to more output, but depreciation in capital assets also drags down a portion of that output. The economy eventually reaches a stationary state where growth and depreciation balance each other out and there is no more growth. In order to produce continuous growth, neoclassical theory argues that the economy needs a steady stream of technological progress, defined as a gain in total productivity. This gain implies that productive output can increase while productive inputs are held constant. Solow came up with a mathematical scheme for detecting the impact of this technological growth on changes in GDP. Although his work earned widespread acclaim from other neoclassical thinkers, much of it was based on dubious mathematical results that did not actually validate his claims.¹⁶

In extensions of Solow's original theory, the productive inputs have typically included capital, labor, and technology. Energy is sometimes subsumed under the three traditional inputs, or it may be treated as a separate input in and of itself. Critically, the production inputs are viewed as largely independent from one another, meaning that they can be substituted as necessary in order to maintain or to boost the maximum level of production. If societies are running short on natural resources, neoclassical theory argues that these shortages can be overcome through technological innovation, efficiency gains, or other forms of substitution. Indeed, neoclassical economists tend to assume that the long-run sustainability of capitalism is materially possible and all we need to do is figure out the social and institutional arrangements that can ensure that sustainability.¹⁷ Solow entertained the idea that the natural world does not provide limits to economic growth on the following grounds: "If it is very easy to substitute other factors for natural resources, then there is in principle no 'problem.' The world can, in effect, get along without natural resources, so exhaustion is just an event, not a catastrophe."¹⁸ Although his model also showed that competition would eventually result in the exhaustion of natural

resources, his statement nicely describes the general attitude that many economists hold about the inevitability of growth under capitalism.

For a highly simplified toy model of what this all means, consider your local pizza store. According to neoclassical theory, the pizza store can maintain or boost current levels of pizza production in the face of any shortfall. A shortage of workers can be overcome by adding more ovens. A shortage of cheese can be overcome through technical improvements that yield more efficient methods of making cheese. A shortage of electricity can be overcome by increasing labor productivity, perhaps by training the workers to make the pizzas faster under the new time constraints. Everything can be replaced. Everything can be substituted, seemingly without end. The ideas and principles just described represent fundamental assumptions in neoclassical economics and they are often used to explain the relationship between energy consumption and economic growth. If there were no hard limits to substitution, then it would be possible for our economies to keep growing even in an ecosphere with declining quantities of natural resources and with highly chaotic, nonlinear ecological consequences that result from the enormous energy losses of capitalist societies. In other words, better technologies and higher efficiencies would always be available to boost production, regardless of any depletions or instabilities in the wider natural world caused by those productivity gains.

To chip away at this elaborate fantasy, it helps to begin with some basic physics. The most fundamental limits to substitution come from thermodynamics, the branch of physics that studies quantities like heat, work, and energy. Thermodynamic limits impose constraints on the maximum efficiency of energy flows through technological systems.¹⁹ Car engines, power plants, and photovoltaic cells are all limited in their capacities to convert one type of energy into another. Technological progress cannot overcome these limits; no car engine can ever be more efficient than an engine running on the Carnot cycle.²⁰ In an earlier article for this magazine, I defined the aggregate efficiency of an economic system as the fraction of all primary energy consumption that produces mechanical work and electricity.²¹ I argued that aggregate efficiencies are highly inertial over time because improving them substantially requires enormous investments that would disrupt the reigning economic order.

Once a society has settled into a particular energy structure, changing it much further becomes a daunting task because of elite classes and groups that rely heavily on that structure for their wealth and influence. We can look to the recent experience of Germany for a prominent case study. In 2000, the German government launched its ambitious *Energiewende*, a comprehensive plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by shifting energy production towards renewable sources, such as wind and solar.²² For a time, the program made some notable achievements. Compared to 1990, greenhouse gas emissions had declined 28 percent by 2017. That same year, renewables reached a 13 percent share of primary energy consumption. Although these numbers are impressive, progress has recently come to a standstill. It has become increasingly clear that Germany will not reach the climate targets that it set for 2020.

And once we dig into the numbers a bit deeper, even those that look impressive come with huge caveats. For example, the large reduction of carbon emissions since 1990 can be largely attributed to the collapse of heavy industry in East Germany after reunification.²³ Over the past eight years, greenhouse gas emissions from Germany have hardly changed. The variabilities associated with wind and solar power have opened up problems related to electricity storage. Prices fluctuate dramatically depending on weather conditions. To compensate for these and other issues, Germany began sabotaging its energy program by constructing a series of new coal power plants when the coal industry pressured Chancellor Angela Merkel's government to relax its policies. The German example offers an important lesson: the necessary substitution of fossil fuels with renewables will never come fast enough under the market logic of capitalism.

Another major limit to substitution comes from the ecological instabilities associated with excessive levels of economic growth. These instabilities can combine to pump and amplify existing natural phenomena. The amplifier effect works as follows. Economies absorb energy from the natural world and then exploit that energy for cycles of production and consumption. For highly energy-intensive economies, these cycles necessarily yield extensive levels of waste and dissipation, or energy losses that are dumped back out to the environment. These energy losses are not "useless" from the standpoint of physics or ecology. Under the right circumstances, they can power the formation of other natural dynamical systems, including everything from viruses and bacteria to wildfires and hurricanes.²⁴ These highly chaotic effects associated with energy-intensive economies are largely ignored and dismissed by neoclassical theory, even though they have often played a central role in the evolution of human history.²⁵ As a highly dissipative system, capitalism regularly produces very powerful amplifier effects. Collectively, these amplifiers are now creating what Marx called a "metabolic rift" between nature and society, which means that the ecological basis of civilization is steadily eroding under profit-seeking and energy-intensive development that does not care about replacing what it extracts.²⁶ The natural world has major tipping points that we should not cross, but indefinite economic growth through substitution virtually guarantees that some of those critical thresholds will be breached, threatening the broader ecosphere that supports human civilization.²⁷

Consider another problem. Substitution can occur quite frequently on small and restricted scales of economic activity. A pizza store can always substitute certain ingredients for others. A homeowner can substitute heating fuel for insulation. A company can replace older light bulbs for more efficient lighting in its offices. And even some countries can substitute various forms of wealth for others, at least temporarily. The Pacific island nation of Nauru provides a classic example that highlights the central themes of the debate. In the twentieth century, Nauru possessed vast deposits of phosphate, which is highly prized as an agricultural fertilizer. These deposits were extensively mined, depleted, and then traded in global markets, allowing Nauru to reach a sky-high standard of living by 1990.²⁸ Nauru converted a portion of its earnings from

the phosphate trade into a public trust fund, which invested in manufactured capital through financial markets. However, its impressive standard of living collapsed sharply after the phosphate vanished, along with most of the money in the trust fund.²⁹ Nauru offers a cautionary tale for the world as a whole. If global civilization runs out of natural resources, we cannot replace them by investing in commodities through financial markets. People cannot eat money. Substitution in the long run may be possible at the microlevel of economic activity, but long-term macrolevel substitution is downright wishful thinking.

We can better understand the limits to substitution on a global, macroscopic level by considering a specific example: a global economy meeting its electricity needs through the consumption of solar power. There are fundamental limits to the amount of solar energy absorbed by solar panels that can be converted into useful electrical energy. Most commercial photovoltaics convert less than 30 percent of the solar energy they absorb into electricity; the remaining energy balance is lost as heat and infrared radiation.³⁰ The theoretical efficiency limits for the most advanced photovoltaic designs are just under 90 percent, a number that not even the latest laboratory experiments have come close to matching.³¹ But suppose neoclassical theory is right about its eternal commitment to technological progress and that eventually we do manage to produce photovoltaics that are 90 percent efficient at converting solar energy. Once all theoretical efficiency limits are actually realized, boosting electricity production even further would require the construction of new solar panels, which takes up more land. As the earth has a finite surface area, indefinite growth would not be possible even with the proliferation of renewables. This argument underscores the central point that renewable technologies are important, but they cannot solve the global ecological crisis under the economic regime of capitalism, which is completely reliant on the false promise of eternal growth in production and consumption. Substituting fossil fuels for renewables while pushing for more growth would still lead to the total ruin of global civilization in a few centuries.

Economists love to pretend that technological innovation can yield greater “qualitative growth” without any corresponding “quantitative growth.”³² On the basis of improving knowledge and technological growth, they believe that the monetary value of stuff can keep increasing even as the quantity of stuff itself remains stable. But what they fail to grasp is that technological innovations do not happen magically—they also require energetic conversions. Changes to the production cycle are dependent on the stock of electrical, chemical, and mechanical energy available for research and training. A coder sitting in front of a computer writing a new program needs energy to think and type. The computer itself needs electricity to continue operating. No possible improvement can be made to computer programs without a continuous stream of energetic conversions. Expansions in productivity require energy flows, meaning that all forms of technological change are intertwined with the energetic transformations that facilitate human existence.

Technological changes are physically embedded in greater knowledge among people and the development of more productive assets, both of which need energy and material flows to continue operating. Thermodynamic limits also constrain the extent to which these flows can be reduced while sustaining labor and capital. In short, technological changes themselves are subject to hard physical limits, along with the qualitative growth that can be derived from them. Power plants provide one of the most well-known examples of the limits to technological growth. They have been hovering near their peak efficiency ratings for decades and getting them to go much further has proven to be extremely difficult.³³ The failure of breeder reactors for nuclear power plants highlights another prominent technological bust, and plenty of other exotic technologies, like fusion reactors, will inevitably end up in the same category. The bloated profit margins of capitalism depend critically on the energy-intensive basis of its entire existence. Take away that basis and there is no more capitalism.

How Energy and Growth Relate to Emissions

All economic activities, as we have seen, require energy. To better understand what this means, we examine the relationships between energy, growth, and emissions more concretely by looking at the economy of the United States. In recent decades, U.S. economic growth has continued, albeit at a declining rate, even though per-capita primary energy consumption has gone down.³⁴ In addition, costs associated with primary energy consumption increasingly represent a declining share of U.S. aggregate demand. From these observations, many economists and pundits have concluded that energy use and economic growth have decoupled from one another.³⁵ But even a quick analysis of the underlying energy shifts in the U.S. economy reveals the falsehood of this narrative. An economy that starts using natural resources with higher energy efficiencies and larger power densities can experience growth even as primary energy consumption declines. Understanding this process would be difficult, perhaps even impossible, if we only looked at primary consumption, which totally ignores conversions. But once we consider that burning a smaller quantity of natural gas, for example, can still yield more electricity than burning a larger amount of coal, then the significance of conversions becomes immediately apparent. Resources with larger power densities can convert more useful energy for economic activities, some of which constitute the basic elements measured by GDP. Economists like David Stern and Robert Kaufmann, among others, have clearly shown that growth in U.S. energy consumption is tightly coupled with growth in aggregate demand once differences in energy quality are factored into the analysis.³⁶

The energy crisis of the 1970s motivated the United States to reduce per-capita oil consumption and to focus on efficiency gains by using other natural resources. These efforts resulted in a trajectory of increased natural-gas consumption, which is much cleaner and more efficient as an energy source than coal. Both the switch to natural gas and the increasing proliferation of renewables helped substantially reduce carbon emissions. After peaking in 2005, greenhouse gas emissions in the United States had fallen 14 percent by 2016.³⁷ But the declines gradually stalled and emissions in 2018 actually increased by more than 3 percent, the

largest rise in 8 years.³⁸ A hyperactive transportation sector, always critical to economic growth, was the leading culprit behind the latest surge. Recent U.S. experience further reinforces the notion that large-scale reductions in emissions are virtually impossible under an economic system that prioritizes growth above anything else. The unlimited pressure to increase consumption and production can lead to rising emissions even in the context of macrolevel efficiency gains and technological innovations.

For the world as a whole, a strong positive relationship exists between primary energy consumption and economic growth, and numerous studies on various countries and regions indicate that this relationship is fundamentally causal.³⁹ Over the last few decades, the rate of global economic growth has started to slow down, mirroring the declining rate of growth in global energy consumption. Some major economies, like those of Japan and the European Union, have already entered periods of stagnation associated with very low growth rates and aging populations. Because these economies are currently dominated by corrupt financial sectors, they are generating uneven growth patterns that mostly enrich wealthy capitalists. By contrast, ordinary people are increasingly drowning in debt so they can finance the cycles and crises of capitalism.⁴⁰ Economic progress for the vast majority of society has come to a screeching halt.⁴¹ The global economy may continue to grow at modest rates for the rest of this century, but the signs are already evident that our potential for future growth is limited and constrained by what kinds of energy sources we can collect from the natural world, as well as by the economic irrationalities of today's financialized capitalism.

Capitalism is running out of steam, but not quickly enough to substantially reduce aggregate emissions. Global carbon emissions over the last century have closely followed changes in primary energy consumption. At the start of the decade, optimism about global warming was high. Greenhouse gas emissions flatlined for several years and the upper echelons of the global economy started to believe that economic growth could actually be decoupled from harmful emissions. In 2016, the International Energy Agency triumphantly declared: "Decoupling of global emissions and economic growth confirmed."⁴² What a difference two years can make. In 2017, greenhouse gas emissions worldwide saw a sharp spike.⁴³ Against a backdrop of increasingly alarming scientific reports about the dangers of global warming, emissions rose again for 2018, at a faster pace than the previous year.⁴⁴ Even some advanced economies that had supposedly decoupled growth from pollution witnessed higher carbon emissions in 2018. Detaching emissions from economic growth has turned out to be a vastly more complicated problem than global elites originally believed.

A persistent albatross on this issue is the way that most elites talk about carbon emissions. When governments and organizations measure greenhouse gas emissions, they often do so at the point of manufacture and production. If a U.S. company sets up a factory in India to produce commodities that are then sold to U.S. consumers, the emissions coming from that factory are credited to India, not the United States. This basic process of what is referred to as

geographic substitution, where corporations from the capitalist core transfer ecologically destructive manufacturing to developing nations with large pools of cheap labor, has been an important source of the observed divergence between carbon emissions and economic growth in the Western world.⁴⁵ In other words, measuring emissions from the point of consumption hardly reveals any decoupling at all. In any case, multinational corporations can only keep shifting production around so much before they run out of places to go. There are limits to geographic substitution as well.

Besides comparing aggregate demand to emissions, another approach for understanding the material foundations of economic growth focuses on the flow of raw materials on their way to the final point of consumption. In a landmark 2012 paper, a group of Australian researchers analyzed the aggregate raw materials exchanged among countries through international trade and introduced the concept of the material footprint, defined as the global allocation of used raw material extraction to the final demand of an economy. They concluded that “with every 10 percent increase in gross domestic product, the average national [material footprint] increases by 6 percent.”⁴⁶ In their view, “achievements in decoupling in advanced economies are smaller than reported or even nonexistent.” They also estimated that roughly 40 percent of all global raw materials are extracted to facilitate the export of goods and services to other nations, which indicates that reducing the international flows of global capital could be a critical strategy in addressing our intensifying ecological crisis.

For another perspective on why claims about decoupling are premature, consider the following fact: life expectancy in the United States has declined for three consecutive years, the first such sustained decline in a century.⁴⁷ The U.S. economy grew in every one of those years. But the press did not blare the sirens declaring that life expectancy has decoupled from economic growth. Such an admission would raise an unthinkable prospect for the reigning plutocracy: that the lives of common people might actually be getting worse while some billionaires become even richer by selling the rest of us more stuff that does not actually improve our lives. However, when two or three years of mixed and uncertain data suggest that the rise in harmful global emissions has slowed down, the story gets blown out of proportion and becomes a masterful causal narrative about how capitalism can be ecologically sustainable. The collapse of the decoupling delusion offers an important lesson—we should resist the temptation to make grand conclusions about the world when we notice marginal trends over just a few years.

The Accelerating Crisis and the Social Dimension

The early phases of the ecological crisis have already arrived. In 2017, Puerto Rico was struck and heavily damaged by a powerful hurricane lurking over unusually warm waters. That same year, a historic drought in Argentina crippled agricultural exports and triggered a massive recession, which eventually coupled with a currency crisis and forced the country to borrow billions from the International Monetary Fund for the second time in less than two decades.⁴⁸ Severe and unusual droughts in Central America are also disrupting agricultural production and

playing a major role in convincing hundreds of thousands of migrants to head north.⁴⁹ Major droughts and water shortages in Afghanistan have fueled widespread resentment against the central government in Kabul and have incited tensions between the country and its neighbors.⁵⁰ These and thousands of other simultaneous developments are only the opening lines in a multiact play that human civilization will nervously witness and experience over the next few centuries.

Ecological and other left-wing economists have long criticized the dangerous fantasies of neoclassical thinkers. But there is evidence that some elites are also beginning to change their minds on the issue. In 2016, the International Resource Panel concluded that the global consumption of materials since 2000 had grown at a faster rate than global GDP, adding that “global material efficiency, for the first time in a century, has started to decline.”⁵¹ In 2017, the chief economist of Norway’s Equinor, Eric Waerness, wrote that decoupling economic growth from energy consumption “might be impossible.”⁵² In 2018, a major report from the International Panel on Climate Change stated that preventing catastrophic levels of global warming would require “rapid, far-reaching, and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society.”⁵³ Antonio Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations, told a climate conference in early December 2018 that “we are in deep trouble with climate change.”⁵⁴ Optimism has finally given way to realism, even if many of these individuals and organizations fail to notice the next required step: a full-blown social, political, and economic confrontation against capitalism.

An analysis of class and society remains critical to understanding the horizon of crisis spearheaded by capitalism. In large part, the ecological crisis is a product of very rich people using and consuming vast amounts of energy. Any proposed solutions to our current existential ills must thoroughly address the class differences responsible for creating them in the first place. Specifically, we must ensure that the transition to an ecological order ends up helping the poor and the working classes while hurting the capitalists, who are mostly responsible for global warming and the planet’s other ecological disasters. Western plutocracies have rolled out various market-based taxing and pricing schemes designed to reduce the consumption of fossil fuels, but have been largely oblivious to the fact that these proposals would hurt the livelihood of common people. The proper way to shield the masses during this transition is to establish stronger social control over the production and distribution cycles around fossil fuels and then to impose temporary price controls at the point of consumption. The capitalists lose out on their profits, as they should after having trashed our ecosphere, and the masses do not have to face any sudden sticker shocks.

Under modern capitalism, the class structure of our societies can be broadly divided into three categories: employees, managers, and capitalists. We define capitalists as individuals who earn such large incomes from their assets and companies that they can avoid wage work altogether, if they so choose. In the context of the United States, a rough approximation of a (small)

capitalist would be anyone with a net worth greater than \$10 million in liquid financial assets—which is not to deny the issue of scale here, with some capitalists having incomes of more than \$100 million a year. Of course, plenty of capitalists do engage in wage work, such as CEOs of large multinational corporations. But the point is that, for the lucky capitalists, work is not a necessity; they could maintain their current standard of living without a formal salary. They could easily retire to the Bahamas next week and just live off the income flowing from their assets, such as stocks, equities, real-estate properties, and any companies they may own. However, this option is not available for the vast majority of people in society. Managers and employees both need salaries to survive and to purchase the commodities that enrich the capitalists. In addition, most workers increasingly live a life of debt servitude, in which they owe capitalists lots of money for going to school, buying a home, and using a credit card, among other things. The financial control that capital has over the rest of society also makes it very difficult for workers to demand higher wages and better living conditions. The result is a plutocracy in which a small group of rich people have completely hijacked the political process and thumbed their noses at any demands for democratic change.⁵⁵

Despite these challenges, the social and ecological imperatives for a new direction are growing rapidly every year. A democratic, ecological, and socialist civilization would substantially limit the commodification of natural resources while also linking the fate of the richest to that of the poorest. It would guarantee these six universals to all people: food, jobs, housing, health care, child care, and education. It would restrict and constrain the accretion of wealth. It could do so by imposing wealth taxes on capital and by socializing large parts of the economy, allowing a limited and tightly regulated market to survive. Capitalists all over the world are hoarding vast amounts of financial wealth, which they refuse to invest in the real economy because of low growth rates that offer few opportunities for excessive profits. Governments should seize the vast majority of this wealth and invest it in the improvement of social services, the rebuilding of infrastructure, and the delivery of affordable health care. To substantially reduce and permanently control income disparities, society could mandate that the highest salary in any company or organization be restricted to no more than ten times the lowest salary.

By providing greater resources to the masses, a democratic society would also rescue our families from an escalating list of crises. Capitalism has torn apart the social fabric and crippled modern families by treating workers like cogs in the corporate machinery. More and more families are stressed, depressed, and increasingly feeling alienated from a ruling class that no longer seems to care. An economic system that works for common people would empower families, strengthen relationships, and help kids grow into responsible adults. Part of helping families means that society should also invest in rural communities that have been destroyed as jobs and assets flow to wealthy cities. These public investments should include the creation of well-paying jobs, the construction of new clinics and hospitals for easier access to medical services, the delivery of regular cash payments to low-income households, the installation of fiber-optic cables for faster Internet, and infrastructure spending on roads, schools, and homes.

Only by providing a critical balance of economic and political concessions to rural areas can we prevent the urban plutocracies from dictating terms to the rest of society. An ecological society would strive to make the allocation of resources between cities and the countryside far more equitable than the one-sided relationship that currently predominates under capitalism.

Our political and business leaders, indoctrinated by capitalist propaganda throughout their lives, have come to believe that economic growth is like a magical elixir capable of curing all evils. For most people in the modern world, it does not seem like an alternative to economic growth, as currently calculated under capitalism, is even conceivable. But imagining and realizing these important alternatives may be the only way to spare human civilization from a looming disaster. Instead of organizing our societies and economies around the principle of growth, we should organize them around the principle of sustainable human development, which requires the metabolic stability of the wider ecosphere. By tightly constraining the levels of production and consumption around some dynamic equilibrium and emphasizing qualitative human-social relations, as opposed to the cash nexus, we can avoid the periodic bubbles and crises of capitalism while also prolonging the duration of human civilization. And by distributing more wealth and resources to workers and common people, we can build a fair society untroubled by recurring spasms of political and economic instability. The social and the ecological are inseparable, and together they represent the intensifying political battleground of this millennium. Future generations will judge us harshly if we fail to seize this exceptional moment in history. The impending convergence of crises, from the economic to the ecological, demands nothing less than a new vision for our social order.

THE MEDIA

How India's Media Landscape Changed Over Five Years

Sevanti Ninan | The India Forum

The five-year period of 2014-2019 has seen such an explosion of media creation and media use in India that the answer to the question, who is the media, has become, literally, everybody. The Indian public sphere is increasingly mediated not just by conventional media—TV, print, online, and radio in the hands of a few—but by technology in the hands of millions of users seeking information, pushing disinformation and instant gratification.

Many developments converged towards this end: the explosion of internet connectivity and cheap smartphones in small town and rural India, leading to growing numbers online and on social media. With 500 million Indians on the Internet by the end of 2018 (a growth of 65% over 2016), the acquisition of WhatsApp by Facebook in February 2014 and its accelerated growth in India thereafter has meant that the messaging app now has over 200 million users in India. There are over 30 million Twitter accounts and close to 294 million on Facebook. The 65% growth is partly explained by the launch of Reliance Jio in September 2016, the 4G telecom service of Reliance Industries which was free for six months. The story on Economic Times in 2018 of how the mobile phone was shaping up as the BJP's most important election weapon, reported that Jio's inaugural offer racked up 100 million subscribers in 170 days. Subsequently other telecom operators dropped tariffs in order to compete, helping to deepen Internet penetration.

Access to media tools—a cheap smartphone with a camera, an online app on which you can edit your video — has become a marker of changing demography.

Between WhatsApp, Twitter and the Chinese short video creation platform TikTok, video-sharing of the good, bad and ugly has quickly become a national pastime. Access to media tools—a cheap smartphone with a camera, an online app on which you can edit your video — has become a marker of changing demography. The coming together of the communications revolution and the neo-middle class.

This has also led to the evolving of a strange Indian psyche where, if a coaching centre catches fire, passers-by now stop and shoot a video. When people lynch or rape they also shoot a video to record it.

And on a completely different plane, the victory of Narendra Modi witnesses a blossoming of videos on TikTok of ordinary young people celebrating his success. Eager young men and women thrusting their faces at the camera and saying “Baki sab bakwas hai Modi sabse khas hai.”(Modi is the best, the rest are rubbish). Celebrating themselves, as much as him. But even before his victory, TikTok was used to circulate dialogues, speeches and sound bites from Modi on smartphones.

The widespread emergence of multiple media platforms including social media is redefining the role of the media in politics and government, and the relationship between the two. Given Narendra Modi’s earlier history with the news media as chief minister, particularly with some elements of the English media following the 2002 riots, his prime ministership created a new template for media-government relations.

In the five years of the Modi-I regime, party and government operated on a simple formula: delegitimise existing media and create your own channels of communication with the voter and citizen.

De-legitimising mainstream media

Narendra Modi was elected in May 2014. In June Scroll.in reported that the Prime Minister had asked both senior bureaucrats and cabinet colleagues to refrain from speaking with journalists. When surveyed on whether the government had really clammed up, journalists covering government said cabinet notes and cabinet meeting agendas were no longer available, nor were inter-ministerial exchanges coming out.

The decision to shut down the Planning Commission and replace it with the NITI Aayog became known only when the Prime Minister announced it on Independence Day, though the decision was cleared by the cabinet two days before. Clearly there was neither a briefing nor a leak before that.

By August 2014 it became clear that only official media would accompany the Prime Minister on his trips abroad, breaking from past practice.

For the BJP, then, it has been a glorious five years of experimenting with different kinds of media management. Aided by a strong leader who, quite simply, changed the rules of media engagement.

The Indian Prime Minister became the forerunner of a US president who demonstrated the same preference in communication: Twitter over press interactions. Long before Donald Trump came along, Narendra Modi took to using his Twitter handle, with more than 11 million

followers, to convey day-to-day developments. Including big ones, such as the announcement that Barack Obama would be the chief guest on Republic Day. His tweets then became a source of news for the Delhi press. When ministers wanted to communicate, they too tweeted. Some every day.

Was Narendra Modi seeking to deny mainstream media its accountability role by refusing to engage with it, and making it amply clear to ministers that they need not do so either?

In September 2014 The Editors Guild of India issued a statement which said,

...By delaying the establishment of a media interface in the Prime Minister's Office, in restricting access to ministers and bureaucrats in offices and in reducing the flow of information at home and abroad, the government in its early days seems to be on a path that runs counter to the norms of democratic discourse and accountability.

Such statements cut little ice with the government of the day

Prime minister Modi also started a monthly radio programme, "Mann Ki Baat" on All India Radio, and the programme quickly began to drive stories in the press and on television.

The notion that the government needs mainstream media was made to stand on its head. It was the other way around. With major media houses given to holding sponsored events every year as a source of revenue, they needed the prime minister and ministers to speak at their events.

For the BJP, then, it has been a glorious five years of experimenting with different kinds of media management. Aided by a strong leader who, quite simply, changed the rules of media engagement. No press conferences, no "interviews" except to handpicked journalists, and those usually with pre-screened questions and (often) only written answers. He sidestepped critics and his government coopted entire media houses. The fallout has been increasing self-censorship on the one hand and pro-active defence of the government on the other.

The notion that the government needs mainstream media was made to stand on its head. It was the other way around. With major media houses given to holding sponsored events every year as a source of revenue, they needed the Prime Minister and ministers to speak at their events. If you displeased the government, participation was withdrawn.

The Times Group learnt that the hard way in March 2017. The Prime Minister, his ministers and bureaucrats, and Chandrababu Naidu (whose state was an official partner of the summit) all pulled out of the ET global summit at the last minute. There was much speculation as to the

reasons, including government displeasure with the Economic Times' coverage of the Samajwadi Party leadership in the run-up to the UP elections.

A few months later that year the Times Group played ball when the BJP President filed his papers for the Rajya Sabha nomination. Stories in the Ahmedabad edition of the Times of India on his assets, as well as on Smriti Irani's educational qualifications, were taken down from the website hours after publication. The DNA newspaper published by Zee Media also took down their story.

A more drastic instance of the government leaning on a major newspaper came when the editor of the Hindustan Times resigned, in September 2017, just 14 months after joining the paper. The Hindustan Times had been running a "Hate Tracker" since July, which it described as "a national database on crimes in the name of religion, caste, race". After the editor's exit it was taken down.

Published news items disappeared from websites. TV channels dropped interviews or stories done by their correspondents.

Here too there was an annual event at stake. Speaking at the Hindustan Times Leadership Summit in November that year, the prime minister spoke about the many changes his government was bringing in the lives of ordinary people. And he wanted to know why the media was so negative. The postscript to the whole episode came in May 2019 when the former editor in question, Bobby Ghosh, suggested in a tweet that his resignation had not been so voluntary after all, and that government pressure was involved.

Increased self-censorship

Over these five years, more than any time in the past, media houses in India (TV, print and online) discovered the virtues of self-censorship. Published news items disappeared from websites. TV channels dropped interviews or stories done by their correspondents. NDTV was exposed as a channel that had practised internal censorship during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime as well. The entertainment channel Star Plus decided not to air a comedy act that mimicked Prime Minister Modi.

The resignation of the ABP anchor Punya Prasun Bajpai, according to a piece by him in The Wire.in, followed explicit instructions from the proprietor (presumably Arup Sarkar though Bajpai did not name him) to not mention Prime Minister Modi in his show "Masterstroke" or to even carry any pictures of him. Bajpai referred to one edition of the show which reported on farmers being forced to part with their land for an Adani power project.

Since May 2014 when this government came to power, the 404 error page on media websites is showing up rather more frequently than before.

Giving a new spin to self-censorship, several prominent news outlets took down their published articles on the post-demonetisation bank deposits in an Ahmedabad-based bank in which BJP President Amit Shah was a director. The IANS news agency, which broke the story, however said that it was based on information obtained through the Right to Information (RTI) Act and they would not be retracting the story.

When the global media watchdog Reporters Without Borders put out an index of press freedom report which said that journalists were less free under the Modi government due to threats from Hindutva nationalists, the Times of India and The Economic Times were among those who later took down the report. The election of Amit Shah as BJP president in 2014 had also seen voluntary takedowns. The Mumbai daily DNA first published a piece on his past record titled "A new low in Indian politics" and then removed it. And Quartz reported on July 16, 2014, that after Shah's election, CNN IBN's bulletin at night as well as the graphics on air were edited to remove references to the criminal charges faced by him.

Since May 2014 when this government came to power, the 404 error page on media websites is showing up rather more frequently than before. At the end of May this year Caravan published a list of ten news reports that were retracted during Narendra Modi's first term as prime minister.

However it is not only the ruling establishment that media owners are anxious to protect. There is some assiduous self-censorship on behalf of corporate India too. When the Sheena Bora murder case transfixed the country in the latter half of 2015, the multi-faceted coverage of the couple who had owned INX media was careful not to touch upon their earlier links with the Reliance group.

The de-legitimisation of mainstream media has been achieved by communicating directly with citizens and voters, by leaning on private sector media outlets in ways that lead to increasing self-censorship, and by giving interviews to only those journalists with whom the prime minister is comfortable.

The year 2017 kicked off with the Indian Express publishing in January its investigation into the Sahara-Birla papers, showing how the Income Tax Settlement Commission acted with alacrity in granting Sahara India immunity from prosecution on the basis of just three hearings.

Those named in these papers as recipients of payoffs included Shivraj Singh Chouhan, the chief minister of Madhya Pradesh; Raman Singh, the chief minister of Chhattisgarh; Narendra Modi when he was Gujarat chief minister; Shaina NC, the treasurer for the BJP in Maharashtra; and

Sheila Dikshit, the former chief minister of Delhi. A total of over 100 politicians were mentioned between the two sets of papers. Blame the defamatory implications of reporting on all this for the fact that the response of the rest of the media was remarkably circumspect.

July 2017 saw the saga of the Economic and Political Weekly editor Paranjoy Guha Thakurta quitting his job after the Board of the Sameeksha Trust, which publishes the journal, asked for the takedown of a published investigation relating to Adani Power. More self-censorship. The company had sent a legal notice to EPW. Did any other publication try to see if this investigation had any merit and do a follow-up? No.

State governments also intimidate journalists successfully. In December 2015, Chennai saw unprecedented floods and the story had reporters converging there from media outlets across the country. Reporters from outside Tamil Nadu covering the floods discovered the self-censorship that prevails in the state. Officials wouldn't answer questions at press conferences, they read out statements invoking Amma (chief minister J. Jayalalithaa) every now and then. Journalists said their papers would have defamation cases filed against them if they were critical of the state government.

This prime minister more than his predecessors is on record questioning media credibility, and accusing the media of being oppositional.

The de-legitimisation of mainstream media has been achieved by communicating directly with citizens and voters, by leaning on private sector media outlets in ways that lead to increasing self-censorship, and by giving interviews to only those journalists with whom the prime minister is comfortable. While not addressing a single press conference during his tenure, in the final weeks before the elections he gave several interviews, at least one of which was shown up to be pre-scripted.

This prime minister more than his predecessors is on record questioning media credibility, and accusing the media of being oppositional. In his pre-election interview this year to the Indian Express, he articulated succinctly why he thinks the institution is not credible:

Uncomfortable questions must be asked. It is my belief that criticism must happen, not allegations. Like you must ask some questions to us (government) for the sake of democracy, similar probing questions should be asked to others also for democracy. Isn't it? This is my quarrel. It was a remote-control government for 10 years. How many press conferences did you ask for from those holding the remote control? An illegal institution was created which could overrule the PM. Did you ask them about democracy? Questions like what you are asking me?

Murder, attacks, trolling, co-option, fake news

De-legitimation is also achieved by threats and violence. Gauri Lankesh was murdered in September 2017 for being a critic of right wing extremism, an unprecedented act of silencing, the chilling effect of which still endures. Scroll.in correspondent Malini Subramaniam's house was attacked in Jagdalpur in 2016, a petrol bomb was hurled at the house of Patricia Mukhim, the Shillong Times editor, last year.

The ultimate de-legitimation of the media as an institution however comes from co-option by the ruling establishment.

This period has seen trolling and attacking of media personalities seen as oppositional by the ruling party. In May 2019 NDTV ran an entire programme on the vicious attacks and death threats received by the chief editor of NDTV India, Ravish Kumar, over a long period. Women journalists who are seen as independent or have done exposes on the ruling party or the government during these five year have faced vicious trolling.

The ultimate de-legitimation of the media as an institution however comes from co-option by the ruling establishment. During the first tenure of the NDA government led by the BJP this has been particularly true of television, with a host of channels—Zee News, India TV, Republic TV, Times Now, among others—turning openly partisan. There are enough examples of this on YouTube to prove the point.

Times Now's anchors are almost comical in the high dudgeon they display in studios night after night in response to criticism of the government by the political opposition or by studio guests. Invite someone to speak and then berate her or him vociferously. And it is the channel's former anchor Arnab Goswami, who tested the winnability of an anti-liberal editorial stance during his stint with the Times Group and went on to found a commercially successful news channel, Republic TV, that redefined news to be structured around real or manufactured controversies, one for each day's prime time show. This channel also uses its shows to heckle other journalists for criticizing Narendra Modi and his government.

Finally fake news videos about journalists are painstaking constructed and circulated, presumably by the BJP's IT cell army, using archival footage from channels such as NDTV. The one on Tiranga TV's Barkha Dutt, for instance, goes to some trouble to pull out footage related to all the controversies associated with Dutt's coverage, going back to the Kargil war and the Pandit exodus in Kashmir, to try and establish her anti-national record over decades.

All of this energetic media management is unprecedented.

The BJP creates its own media

Enormous energy has gone into creating media to suit the party's purpose. First in order to win the 2014 election, then re-election in 2019, and in-between a number of state elections. Also in order to shape the media narrative for the NDA government.

Election-time amplification of Modi's image and message has led to different experiments in 2014 and 2019. Narendra Modi's projection using 3D Hologram Technology was first experimented with in Ahmedabad in 2012 and deployed in 2014 for his Bharat Vijay rallies across the country. Accompanied by the creation of an online army to promote the candidate and party.

The 2019 campaign was powered by an indefatigable media machine described in this Time Magazine report on how Whatsapp was fuelling fake news ahead of the elections.

There has been single-minded messaging, using mobile phones and social media, helping to reshape the relationship between media and the practice of politics.

There was also the more audacious experiment with NaMo TV launched on 31st March 2019, just days before the polling schedule got under way. It was a YouTube channel which simply telecast repeats of Modi's rallies and speeches 24x7, was carried on DTH platforms and defied the regulation that cable and satellite platforms could only carry licensed channels. Complaints to the Election Commission from other parties got nowhere, and NaMo TV promoted Modi through every phase of polling, cocking a snook at the Model Code of Conduct of the Election Commission, which could not decide whether it was a violation or not.

Meanwhile the Tata Sky CEO told NDTV it was a special services channel. And that they were getting the feed from the Bharatiya Janata Party. (If this is true, no rule was broken)

There has been single-minded messaging, using mobile phones and social media, helping to reshape the relationship between media and the practice of politics. Amit Malviya, head of the BJP's IT Cell, was predicting in an interview to the Economic Times in August 2018 that the upcoming elections would be fought on the mobile phone. He said they would be "WhatsApp elections".

The Karnataka elections in 2018 were a trial run, the Economic Times article noted, with BJP party workers and social media volunteers creating anywhere between 23,000 and 25,000 WhatsApp groups for their outreach. What the outreach sent out was carefully crafted propaganda videos discrediting the Opposition, as also messaging that would mobilise the vote. All of this masterminded by an IT cell begun in 2012 which has the twin goals of image building and image destruction.

Its functioning is described here and here. Its top 150 paid social media influencers -- hired by PR companies according to an insider --photographed with the prime minister at various times, included trolls. And constitute the ruling party's Twitter army. Some of the influencers run Facebook pages which manufacture fake news, as the two video links above describe.

Media investigations done in the course of this election came up with evidence on how some of the WhatsApp groups created Islamophobia, and how a women's rights NGO was turned into a secret BJP propaganda machine. At one place the article on Islamophobia links to Amit Shah in Kota in Rajasthan telling the social media volunteers of his party that they have the capacity to change the atmosphere of the 2019 election.

The rise of independent alternative media

The same five-year period which has seen the changes described above has also seen a significant rise in independent media, most of it online, several offering specialized content.

The rise in fake news has led to the advent of fake news busters. This five-year period has seen the birth and growth of a fact checking industry, triggered primarily by the advent of WhatsApp. SMHoaxSlayer started out as a Facebook page in August 2015, seeking to verify social media hoaxes related to religion, politics and scams. BOOM launched its fake news busting and fact checking initiative in November 2016, and has a WhatsApp helpline. AltNews launched in February 2017.

There is enough fake news being generated to keep them all busy. On the day election results were announced, 23 May 2019, Nieman Lab pulled together information from various sources to put out a newsletter on fake news in the Indian elections. One assertion made was that more than a quarter of the content shared by the BJP and a fifth of the content shared by the Indian National Congress was junk news. This came from Oxford's Project on Computational Propaganda which sampled and studied WhatsApp groups for visual content shared.

[T]he new online independent media publications remain small ventures that enrich the public sphere but lack the share of voice of the mainstream.

The niche media landscape has also been enriched by several other sites. The Ken came up in Bangalore as a digital, subscription-driven business news offering, as did the data journalism venture IndiaSpend. Mongabay India focuses on conservation and environmental science news.

Region-specific news sites have blossomed. The News Minute, a digital news platform which has a specific focus on the five southern states, began publishing in 2014, and Dool News, headquartered in Kozhikode in Kerala, is a Malayalam digital news site that covers politics and

societal issues. Azhimukham is another Malayalam news portal. Then there is Samachara.com in Karnataka, which classifies itself as an independent digital news media.

Many of these have benefitted from a new trend of corporate philanthropy funding independent media. That has enabled individual journalists from the mainstream to break away and set up their own journalism ventures. The Wire.in, The Print and the East Mojo, headquartered in Gauhati, come in this category.

Along with several others begun earlier, such as Newsclick, Scroll.in, Huffpost India, and NewsLaundry as well as The Caravan, which does long-form narrative journalism, they constitute a dogged counter to co-option, self-censorship, fake news and much else. But the new online independent media publications remain small ventures that enrich the public sphere but lack the share of voice of the mainstream.

Given the altered landscape, where should the pushback to the BJP's media management juggernaut come from?

The first recognition has to be of a newly empowered citizenry that is generating its own media. Beyond targeting them with aggressive tweets during the election, political parties and citizenry have to strategise their communication for the mobile phone connected generation of all economic strata. Schools and colleges need to offer more media literacy.

Civil society and the more thoughtful sections of English and regional media need to lend more heft to efforts to counter fake news. Do we have the laws to deal with this phenomenon? If courts cases are being filed by individuals under horrific attack what becomes of them? Do they get support from the legal community and their media compatriots?

More people need to simply recognize the much enlarged landscape that the media has become.