

Despite Trump's election, a groundswell for radical change in the US remains

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Last week Professor Randolph Persaud penned a response to Professor [Inderjeet Parmar's](#) op-ed which had argued that this year will be an even better one for politics compared to 2016. Professor Parmar argues that we should have reason to be optimistic going into Trump's presidency; the groundswell for radical change in the US is still very powerful just as the ideology and institutions of the free market have seen their authority diminish in recent years.



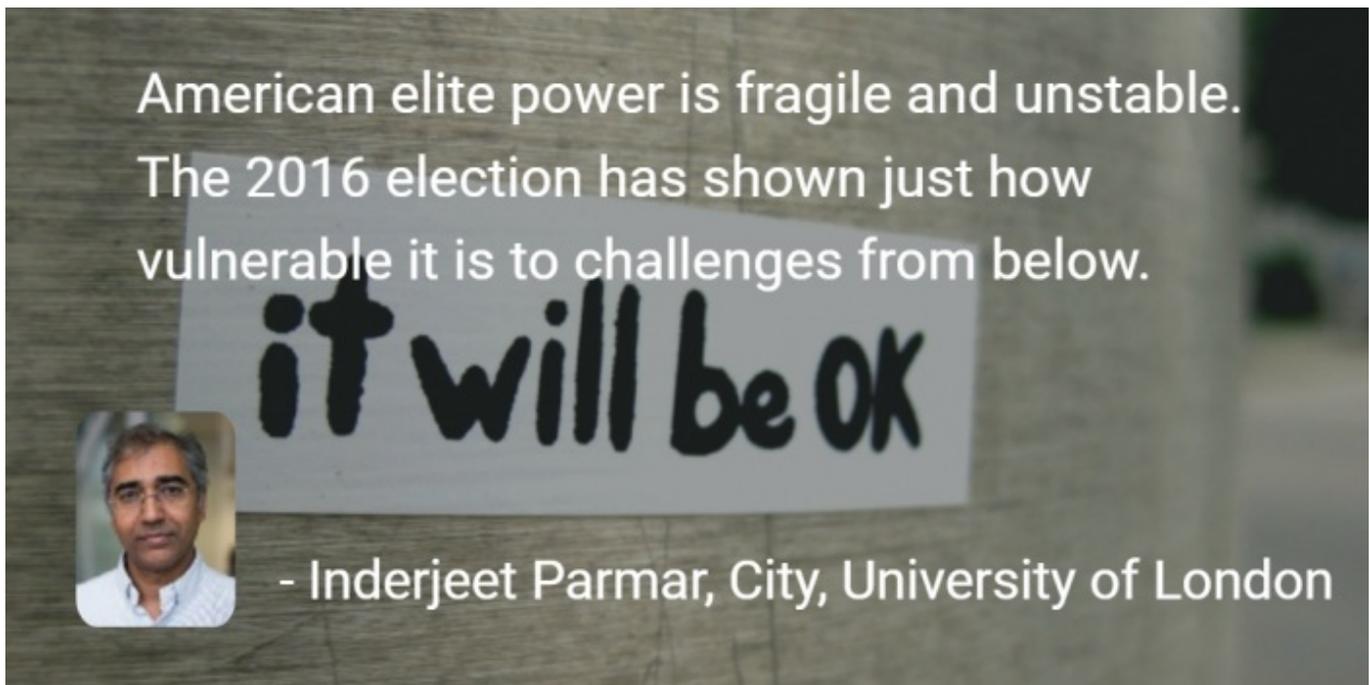
Last week on this blog, Professor Randolph Persaud [responded](#) to my December [op-ed](#) on the 2016 election. I am thankful to him for having the patience and interest to read some of my commentaries and op-eds on the elections and, equally, for engaging with their content in some detail.

Although I have written a few articles here and there on British and US politics before, 2016 represented quite a departure in this respect – with a final tally of 25 between March and December. This was unplanned and was my way of responding to the fascinating and unique character of the election given the breadth of candidates – from Right to Left – and the openness of the political agenda. For the first time, it seemed to me, there was real choice on offer to voters, especially with the socialist candidacy of Senator Bernie Sanders.

Hence, given the number of columns in [The Wire](#) and their cumulative character in analytical and 'documentary' terms, and their attempt to say something that seemed significant to the specific phase of the election-political process and time of year, the initiative threw up unforeseen challenges, requiring attention. It also means readers should probably see the analysis in the round even if each article covers only a partial aspect of its subject. As the author, that is certainly how the process seemed from the inside as there is a necessity to avoid undue repetition from one article to the next.

And that's where I feel that the source of Professor Persaud's challenges lies: I should try in future to be clearer that that is what's happening. Nevertheless, he has raised several key issues which I would like to address:

My motivation in writing the [column](#) was, after reading so many negative and quite frankly depressing summaries of 2016, to say something a bit more upbeat, to highlight the rise of a more progressive politics alongside and intertwined with the rise, and victory, of President-elect Trump. It was meant to encourage readers (myself included), that despite how bleak things look, there is always hope and that resistance is never futile. And that change can come very suddenly – underlying processes can erupt into major movements. I have been reading a collection of Howard Zinn's essays – [On History](#) – and struck by how the 'reactionary' 1950s turned rapidly into the 'radical' 1960s; how the actions of relatively few people in the deep South inspired a massive movement for change.



Writing the column, then, was to highlight some of the other processes at work in 2016 over and above but related to the most obvious trends, not to suggest that Trump's racism and misogyny was no longer an issue or force. As Professor Persaud notes in his article, I had analysed those aspects in previous pieces. Indeed, I noted the importance of protests rejecting Trump's divisive character in the immediate aftermath of the election. Previous columns had also analysed the continuing significance of progressive politics even after Bernie Sanders's defeat in the Democratic primaries. And we shall see what transpires on 20 January 2017 – Inauguration day – itself. The movement against hate crime has received a boost in donors as has the feminist movement.

As you mentioned Ralph Miliband's work, and I know Professor Persaud is a scholar of Gramscian thought as well, I am reminded of the dialectic involved in political/historical development – movement is not in one direction only and there is always more or less open, more or less influential, opposition to the most visible trends. That was a key point in writing the article – to try to glimpse at those things that became clearer in 2016; and that although Trump won, he had to pretend to be a radical to do it. The groundswell for radical change in the US is very powerful still and those organising to resist Trump and develop alternatives should take heart. We have moved a long way from Thatcher's 'there is no alternative' of the 1980s – the 'free market' has shown its true colours and its entire edifice of ideology and institutions, and political alliances, has seen its authority diminish over the past few years. 2016 brought that into focus very powerfully.

American elite power is fragile and unstable. The 2016 election has shown just how vulnerable it is to challenges from below. Trump's victory, while owing much to his, and mainstream Republican, racist and reactionary social views, must not be defined purely as such. It owed a great deal to massive discontent, a large part of it also tapped into by Senator Bernie Sanders, with the ruling class' core idea, institutions and policies. American elites – of which Trump is part – have placed other elites in charge of US government. But that's not what swung the election to Trump.

Overall, I don't disagree with most of Professor Persaud's comments as they reflect aspects of my own thinking as well and I will certainly explore his concept of a new 'racio-civilizational patriotism'. I'm wondering how new this might be as he and I have previously seen racialized discourses as sublimated but powerful in US politics and foreign policy since 1945. What seems to have happened with Trump is that underlying assumptions and coded discourses have been thrust aside in the crudest of ways. But the point is worth further consideration as I develop my work on what appears to be an unravelling of the 'liberal' world order and of US hegemony.

Antonio Gramsci – from a fascist prison cell – noted the importance of maintaining ‘optimism of the will’ when times looked bleak, alongside ‘pessimism of the intellect’. As ever, the balance is always tricky!

Once again, though, many thanks to Professor Persaud for his very thoughtful message and comments. I am certain that this conversation will continue with some vigour as the controversial Trump presidency develops.

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