

Parallel Universes

By Theodore Dalrymple

Cosmology is a subject that is far too difficult for me. For example, I find it impossible to understand the idea of the Big Bang, let alone the idea that there might be two or more universes. The nearest I can come to understanding the latter is the commentary I see on the Internet regarding the American election. There, people seem to live in parallel universes, where perceptions seem hardly to be about the same subject matter.



A supporter cries as US Vice President Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris delivers her concession speech at Howard University in Washington, DC, on November 6, 2024. (Photo by CHARLY TRIBALLEAU/AFP via Getty Images)

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le, are two commentaries taken from readers' responses to articles about the election. They seem indicative not just of a difference of opinion—for example, over the correct policy regarding farm subsidies—but a gulf in world outlooks of almost religious intensity. The first implies that a Republican victory would be the end of constitutional rule. The commentator characterises two candidates:

One was a convicted criminal awaiting sentencing in one matter and trial in three others, including inciting a mob to overthrow an election. The other was a prosecutor and a life

long public servant with a distinguished record. Voting for the former was a vote against the founding principles of American democracy. Voting the other way was the only responsible thing an American could do if they believe in it.

The second describes the victory of the Republicans in more or less the same, but opposite, apocalyptic terms:

Looks like a solid rejection of leftists' ideas and a failed coup by the Democrats to install a far left candidate.

On this view, a victory by the Democrats would not have been merely electoral: it would have installed a regime of a completely new kind, alien to and destructive of the Constitution.

This dichotomy of opinion seemed to be universal. No one said, "On the one hand ... but on the other." Of course, people who see the world in dimensional rather than categorical terms generally do not take as quickly to the keyboard as those who conceive of politics as the contest between St. John the Baptist and Mephistopheles. Apart from anything else, their message would be longer and, in times of reduced attention span, would almost certainly remain unread. We like strong emotions, and a Manichean soundbite viewpoint provides them.

Were elections always as socially divisive? The record of electoral politics in all countries teems with mutual insult, gross exaggeration, lying, bad temper, vandalism, mudslinging, and fights, only for everything to return to much as usual shortly afterward: as if the election had, in fact, been more a letting off of steam than an existential conflict, or at least mere shadow boxing.

This last election, however, seemed to have a different quality from the others, almost apocalyptic for both sides, as if the end of the world would come if the other side won. It

divided families that had previously enjoyed good relations; at best, many subjects had to be avoided in order to preserve some kind of domestic or family peace, for opinions come prepackaged and the slightest slip might reveal that the person making it was of the other, evil side.

Mutual incomprehension, with each side holding to alternative facts—by no means an absurd expression in the context of political opinion, in the formation of which preponderant weight may be given to facts not mentioned or acknowledged by the other side, even when they *are* facts—and unable to see how any decent person could have an opinion that differed from his or her own, was the order of the day.

Perhaps what was more important was the staying power as well as the depth of the incomprehension. We are very far from the spirit of W. S. Gilbert's humorous lyric, in which Private Willis sings:

*I often think it's comical
How Nature always does contrive
That every boy and every gal
That's born into the world alive
Is either a little Liberal
Or else a little Conservative!*

Here, politics is conceived of as a game, or at worst, a competitive sport, rather than an existential Manichaean struggle.

When politics is a kind of game or sport, it does not follow that nothing serious can be at stake. In our adversarial legal system, lawyers are, in a sense, playing a game: they do not necessarily believe in the case that they are presenting, but rather are presenting the best case that they can on behalf of their clients. The element of sparring in the law does not mean, however, that nothing serious is at stake. The contest is one within accepted rules, and without acceptance of those

rules, mere anarchy would be loosed upon the world.

The extremity of many people's reaction to the electoral result in America suggests that the hold of the agreed rules of the game on their minds and imagination has loosened. I cannot say how representative they are, but there were videos of people, especially young people, reacting histrionically to the election result, as if they had lost an entire family (though I think that there was something bogus about the emotion expressed). They seemed to have forgotten, or no longer believe, that in a system such as the American, no victory is permanent or cannot be undone or in part reversed later, by means of peaceful change of government. It was as if a pendulum had been replaced by a steel pole set in concrete. They reacted more as if there had been a military coup than an election—though if there had been, they would no doubt have been more circumspect in expressing themselves in the way that they did. They were, in essence, guilty of bad faith.

The talk of a second civil war seems from the outside to be grossly exaggerated. A period of constant but more than usual bitter sniping, legal and rhetorical, is far more likely. But when those who do not like the result of an election talk not of opposition to the government, which is perfectly normal, but of resistance to it, one senses a crisis of legitimacy, which the United States is far from alone in experiencing. Legitimacy is not merely a question of having followed the rules, but of having a belief in the legitimacy of the rules themselves, even, or especially, when you do not like the result when they have been followed.

When both sides of a political divide think of the other not as the champion of differing policies, but as an existential threat to the political system itself, conflict, even if it remains purely in the verbal sphere, is bound to become more acute. There is a resultant overemphasis on what divides rather than a recognition of what unites; demagoguery is both its cause and its consequence.

I hope that this is a passing distemper.

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