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## Retribalization At The Tipping Point: Reflections on Trump's 2024 Win

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Given the results of the November election in the U.S., we have all moved into a world doggedly incomprehensible to anyone other than Marshall McLuhan.

Consider: a felon convicted on 34 counts, a sexual predator as established both by a judge's decision and his own boasts; a man who wears his corruption on his sleeve, and who, virtually anywhere else, would already be in prison, was instead just recently elected to the most powerful office in the world. By a decisive majority of U.S. voters.

Polls suggest many of these voters chose Trump while experiencing severe pangs of cognitive dissonance. Trump was more trusted on the economy than his opponent, Kamala Harris, yet it was common knowledge that Trump's oft-promised tariffs would raise the cost of living. Women voted for Trump in surprisingly large numbers, despite the Trump-prompted 2022 Dobbs decision by the Supreme Court, ending protection for abortions by overturning Roe v Wade. A surprising number of voters chose both Trump *and* their state's abortion initiative. How can we explain the decision of so many people to vote for a known scoundrel and scammer, and against their own self-interest?

You can lay out contributing factors like playing cards. The 2024 rightward slide in elections just about everywhere else in the world. Stiff resistance to selecting a woman, particularly a woman of color. That Trumpian stock-in-trade, sheer luck, evidenced, in part, by the man's ability to turn his most awkward ramblings into gold: it may have been an off-color line at a rally that roused platoons of disinterested young men to get out on voting day: Trump grabbed them by their Arnold Palmer wannabes.

The history of presidential contests in America have been, by and large, contests pitting superego against superego. Which candidate would make the more palatable father figure for the nation? George Washington set that original bar. He set it high. Donald Trump chose not follow Washington's model. In a manner unseen since Andrew Jackson's win in 1828, Trump went for a coarse and populist appeal. In his stream-of-bullshit-consciousness, Trump distorts and deceives openly, unconditionally, lying with an unabashed abandon unmatched by any mainstream U.S. politician ever. Trump openly incites hatred and has invoked violence against opponents and critics. Donald Trump has carved his way into power by becoming, openly and shamelessly, America's national id. The deeper question Trump's election raises is: just what has made Americans, in 2024, so susceptible to a politician of Trump's defiantly

brazen corruption and corrosive appeal?

"In many ways Donald Trump is an unserious man," Kamala Harris said in her Acceptance Speech at the Democratic National Convention, adding, "But the consequences of putting Donald Trump back in the White House are extremely serious."

This is the juggernaut issue. Unserious, Harris calls him: could anyone be even *more* unserious? Trump is a slapdash penny-ante snake oil salesman with one proven, lifetime-honed skill: diverting attention from anything serious onto himself, thereby degrading and demeaning any forum he enters. This trivial man is introducing the largest sea change into American society in its history, with shockwaves reaching to the world at large and forestalling the world's response to global warming and realigning nation states in ways that may invite nuclear war. After the 252 years following the United States' founding as a nation of citizens and laws -- an action chosen by colonists breaking from an omnipotent ruler -- American voters have installed as their president a new omnipotent ruler, one who has promised to reframe all laws according to his liking, and who appears to be supported in that effort by the current U.S. Supreme Court. Before the end of Trump's reign, we can probably expect a radical rewrite of the U.S. Constitution.

If the shockwaves that America and the world are soon to experience are so consequential, shouldn't the provoking cause be of a comparable valence?

I believe it is. McLuhan predicted that the upshot of electric media, particularly TV and the computer, would be a return to tribal, group-centered identity, psychic and social organization. He phrased this primary transformation as a shift from the print-entrained eye to the retribalized ear, and announced a return to "acoustic space," in which the ear became more important in relating to the world than the eye. Hearing activates those regions of the brain attuned to others, and to feeling. On several occasions McLuhan remarked that that he regarded his most important contribution to be his announcement of a soon-to-come post-literate, retribalized society.

With the results of the 2024 election, retribalization has crossed a tipping point. It has become the underlying, reigning paradigm governing all things in our society. Retribalization has fully come of age.

Exactly what does "retribalizing" mean? The anthropologist Dorothy Lee once asked a woman in a California tribe to describe how she got her name. The woman began by invoking the stories of distant ancestors and only at Lee's prompting did she fast-forward to her own grandparents. A great winding path of "we" had to be traversed before the woman could arrive at "I." Here -- as much as in the transition of eye to ear -- we see an important lever of our neotribal lives: the consuming emphasis on "we" over "I." Among the Igbo of Nigeria, even into

the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was a punishable crime if one failed to report a private dream to the whole community. In ways large and small, rigorous and slight, in tribal societies, the “we” precedes and overtakes the individualistic “I”.

What is the meaning of Trump’s election? In America, at least, for the Trump voters, America has flipped from its 18th century roots in literacy and the Enlightenment to earlier roots in the bonds of kinship and tribal affinity.

The greatest tragedy in Trump’s election may be that the 21st century’s Great Tilt into full-scale retribalization would simultaneously be a grand backsliding in global trade, global governance, global adaptation to climate change, and, given Trump’s nationalist agenda, sealing off or completely or eviscerating remaining channels for overcoming these fractures. At the very moment the world needs sources of unison, it gets added tribal fracturing, of such a scale that the ongoing breakups could certainly devour whole nations in a thermonuclear, Third World War.

Meantime, what about those of us who voted against Trump? We, the literate, the believers in democracy? How do we challenge and eventually prevail over the MAGA crowd?

Like our Trump-eting opponents, we regard ourselves as patriotically resolute Americans. We all sing the same national anthem. We all honor the same flag. We, like them, claim to be defending America from opponernts who threaten to damage it permanently.

Beyond that, we speak in different tongues. What we call guardrails, they call obstacles to freedom. What we call rule of fair trade and competition they call obtrusive interference of free markets. What we call misinformation, they call news. What we call serious journalism, they call fake news. What we call violence they call justified response to our control of important social levers.

Can such disparate worlds ever be reconciled?

The many of us who quake in disbelief and horror at the scale of Trumpian ambition to remake America are, by and large, a more literate population than the tribe who voted for Trump. We stalwarts for democracy stand in shock at the strangulation of liberal democracy as espoused by most presidents, Democratic and Republican, between Roosevelt’s ascension in 1933 and Reagan’s in 1981. We are aghast to see allegiance to misinformation and Trump worship becoming the most decisive qualifications for those appointed as the highest authorities in the land. Can we ever turn things around again, given an autocrat’s penchant for removing any obstacle to remaining in office as long as he breathes? Is Trump’s ascension in 2024 a pendulum swing that will reverse, with the added torque of all we endure in the coming years -- or is it a permanent derailment of the American experiment?

Can liberal democracy ever be returned to America?

Probably not. At least in the form that we know it. If I read the polls and McLuhan correctly, history has decisively crossed a Rubicon. We live in what is certain to be an institutionally retribalized era. We will not be returning to a literate era. Those of us who prize literacy and democratic solutions to the world's problems must now regard ourselves as a diminished and much-spent force, simply one more tribe, trapped in a caustic ongoing battle with the presently ruling MAGA tribe for the future of this and other nations.

The groundrules we must deal with have shifted. It is not political party followers versus political party and its followers. It is now tribe versus tribe.

What divided preliterate tribes and drove them to wars were very often access to territory and resources. What divides the neonatal tribes of our post-literate world and engages them in ongoing battle are matters of identity and recognition of values. One side, for examples, accents the role of a woman as child bearer and mother, ever subservient to the male. Its attitude toward females is barely a few shades more enlightened than the Taliban's. The other tribe fiercely believes that females deserve bodily autonomy, meaning access to such health services as abortion. This "liberal" tribe also insists that females represent at least 50% of the best talents of a society and this tribe seeks to give all females access to the same resources and opportunities as those afforded to males.

The election of Trump is widely regarded as very bad news for the health of the nation, and the health of our climate and the biosphere, as well as the prospects for democracy around the world. Is the coming of age of retribalization equally bad news? Not if we follow McLuhan's guidance. He had great faith in a life governed by senses that gave primary recognition to acoustic space and a life unafflicted by the objectifying and logic-infused dominance of writing and reading. In a 1955 manifesto, "Five Sovereign Fingers Taxed the Breath," he wrote exultantly:

In surpassing writing, we have regained our WHOLENESS, not on a national or cultural, but cosmic, plane. We have evoked a super-civilized, sub-primitive man.

McLuhan said that history as structured and invented by media is a palindrome, a word or phrase that can be read identically forward and backward. As demonstration I will invoke a sample palindrome term, "TOOT". Literacy spawned by writing and vastly expanded after the printing press becomes the TO. It was literacy, McLuhan has argued persuasively, that prompted individualism and privacy; that embedded the implicit rules of linearity and logic into all matters from schooling to science; that stoked nationalism and national boundaries and

national wars; that created mechanization and the industrial revolution; that begat capitalism; that sparked the rise of modern science and enshrined the ideal of objective truth. Then electric and electronic media emerged, taking the world into a new era, not without literacy, but one that minimizes literacy, an era that returns the world to tribal roots and tribal norms. Electric and electronic media repeat these transitions in reverse, adding the OT to complete the palindrome TOOT. In a retribalized age, it is an unknown question to what extent literacy will survive. Perhaps in some unexpected mode, a new form of literacy will come to flourish.

The best guidebook I have found to the strange new realm of universal retribalization is Andrey Mir's *Digital Future in the Rearview Mirror* (2023). There he deconstructs and reconstructs, in reverse, the Axial Age theory of Karl Jaspers on how the Greeks and other cultures assembled the building blocks of Western civilization. Then he does the same with the Alphabet Effect developed by Robert Logan, accenting what Jaspers missed, the primary role of the alphabet and writing in shaping the 2500 years to follow. Mir's purpose is to flip both explanations into their reverse mode and investigate what it is that we become as a result: according to Mir, a more nuanced version of McLuhan's "super-civilized, sub-primitive man".

Following the thought of McLuhan, what should we expect from retribalization?

Primarily, he says we will cease living out of the left hemisphere of our noggins and move into the right hemisphere. He calls this variously the Post-Literate Age, the Age of Retribalization, and the Intuitive Era. The oppressively loud rule of logic, creator of walls and divisions and subdivisions of all matters, and the wars to conquer and defend those divisions and subdivisions, will, McLuhan proposed, give way to the more implicit rule of the analogic, builder of bridges and exploratory probes. Intuition and the thirst for discovery will become talents so prized they will become essential aspects of schooling.

In a retribalized world, technology will no longer be dominated by the left hemisphere and the rules of logic. Technology will serve our retribalized lives. In the coming Intuitive Age, we will hunt together, much as our distant ancestors hunted together. They relied on individually honed perceptions: one who could track an animal from prints and scat a week old; another who could sniff and locate recent urine of nearby prey; one who could hear extraordinarily well and draw the hunting team to a snapped branch made by an injured panther; another who could shoot a blowgun with unerring aim. In our newly retribalized era, we will also hunt in teams of individuals with a mix of highly fine-tuned individual perceptions. We will become hunters of information. Very likely with AI as our compass, we will hunt for new discoveries.

Finally, we will live and act, as tribal peoples and as all mammals do, out of our feelings. "The royal divorce of thought and feeling" that McLuhan remarks on in his 1973 essay on causality, will resume its marriage. "*Cogito ergo sum*" – *I think therefore I am* -- will give way to "*Sentimus ergo sumus*," *We feel therefore we are*. Indeed, if I were to compress the sources of Trump's win into a t-shirt slogan, I would go with that: *We feel therefore we are* -- MAGA's secret sauce.

Let me conclude with a question that may strike many as odd: What are the upsides of Trump's victory for the world at large? The ever-optimistic McLuhan always found an upside. His oft-repeated adage, "Breakdown equals breakthrough" is of a kind with his wonderful observation, "New means create new goals." Both suggest that we should regard a profound transition like retribalization less with apprehension than with efforts to discern its scent of opportunity.

Recently I processed dozens of passages from McLuhan describing features of our neotribal shift from literacy to post-literacy. I built a chart of the terms and differences he cited. You can regard this as a shorthand descriptor as the distinction between two great ideologically split tribes in and beyond America, today.

## **LITERATE ERA**

Eye dominates all perception  
"I" comes first  
Objective approaches dictate all  
Mechanical  
Analytic  
Fragmentary  
Knowledge is organized and classified  
Detachment is a prime value  
Journalism is trusted  
Rationality: thought precedes feeling  
Truth is objectively constructed  
Logical, sequential thinking  
Efficient cause  
Concept  
Fixed point of view  
Active and aggressive

## **RETRIBALIZED ERA**

Ear dominates all perception  
"We" comes first  
Relationships dictate all  
Organic  
Intuitive  
Inclusive  
Knowledge is mythic  
Involvement is a prime value  
Rumors and gossip are trusted  
Rationality: feeling precedes thought  
Truth is communally constructed  
Analogical, simultaneous thinking  
Formal cause  
Percept  
Exploratory probe  
Receptive and compromising

What new modes of perception are being stirred alive by the neotribal experience? More critically, what new media – most likely infused with or enabled by A.I. -- could allow neotribalists to rouse and bring out the best of their shared feeling and thinking?

If I may suggest one speculative example of a new and neotribal medium, imagine a new kind of scoreboard at stadiums, called a Roarboard. With Project CETI (the Cetacean Translation Institute), AI is being employed to listen to a vast repertoire of the fast-clicking voices of sperm whales to detect patterns that may reveal syntax and vocabulary, some sort of proto-language. What if the same treatment were applied to the cheers of stadium crowds, in conjunction with

the favored team's outcomes on the fields? What if certain kinds of cheers lead to more victories than others? With a Roarboard as its coach, could a home team crowd be coaxed to deliver more articulate and effective cheering?

Or turn to today's most pressing issue of all: the seemingly insurmountable conflict between our two alienated tribes, those supporting Trump and those mortally affronted by his election. Social media and the ideological splintering of TV news channels have been the unquestionable root source of this grand division. Could some yet uninvented new medium bridge and even heal this great rift? If a new, tribally based medium of communication could reconcile our grand and abrasive division, what would be its primary characteristics?

A speculation...

Such a new medium would embed and include all earlier media, especially social media. It would speak to and from tribal voices, initially exchanging messages between a cohesive *us* and an equally cohesive plural *you*. The new medium may or may not make language and writing key components of its messaging. Probably not. So many of our divisions are locked into language that it may be wise to find a post-linguistic way forward. In several passages, McLuhan anticipates post-lingual communication – he muses about technologically enabled telepathy -- and this fantasized new medium may share such a character. But let me present its most essential feature: this new medium can only succeed when both tribalized partners act with a highly attuned degree of sensitivity to one another, in the manner required of two people changing places in a canoe.

Effectively, though such a medium might begin as a pipeline of messages volleyed to and from one tribe to another, its effectiveness would be measured by its role as catalyst in the creation of cohesive messages intimately co-authored by both sides.