

REASON

February 17, 2025

Craig Calhoun: We need to take seriously how broken liberal democracies were before Trump

“Liberals in the US are making the mistake right now of thinking that this is a question of standing up and saving what we have. I think it is necessary to say: It is broken. And then ask ourselves where do we go from here. What do we build? How do we make something new?”

Interview by Janus Elmstrøm Lauritsen

Craig Calhoun (b. 1952) is a sociologist and professor at Arizona State University. He is the former director of the London School of Economics, has edited more than 20 books, published more than 150 articles and book chapters, and has written nine books, including co-authoring Does Capitalism Have a Future (Oxford University Press, 2013) and Degenerations of Democracy (Harvard University Press, 2022).

REASON: In 2022, you published the book Degenerations of Democracy with Charles Taylor and Dilip Gaonkar. One of your theoretical points is that democracy is not something you either have or don't have, but a goal or ideal you either move toward or away from. In 2022, your analysis was that we were moving away. What was it that you saw then, and in what direction have we moved since?

CALHOUN: We weren't worried enough when we wrote the book. We were more optimistic about the resilience of the American system. That said, what's happening right now is completely consistent with the analysis we did in Degenerations of Democracy. We just didn't anticipate how quickly it would happen. And we didn't anticipate the willingness to completely disregard the rule of law and ordinary democratic norms.

The idea of ‘degeneration’ of democracy is that from within democracies, there are elements that are working less well. They can lose their power and their connection to each other. And that’s what we saw happening. We saw extreme polarization. To have democracy requires that you have a people, a *demos*, that are at least connected to such an extent that they feel like one people. We saw a trend towards “the winner takes all” and a “winning is everything” attitude, which has become much more extreme in recent years. You no longer say: We have common problems but different perspectives on how to approach them. Today you say: My opponent is my enemy, he is evil. Vote for me, I am the good one. These are the kinds of boundaries you draw. And that makes it difficult to cooperate after an election. At the same time, you have transformed your voters and supporters into enemy groups that see each other as people who want to destroy the country.

There are other dimensions. One of them is that the electoral mechanisms have started to function less well. It is about money in politics, media manipulation, etc. These were also dimensions of democratic degeneration that we focused on in the book. And that brought us to the point we wanted to make, which is that democracy is about what you might call republicanism. That is: the institutions of the republic, including the principles of the residual state, a government that abides by the Constitution, and an element of concern for the common good. All of these principles were already under threat in 2022. Now they are in even more radical danger.

The current administration largely does not articulate about what it is for, only about what it is against. There is a destruction of basic republican institutions: Instead of just changing who is in power, there is a deliberate destruction of the institutions that should work.

On the one hand, Trump was democratically elected. He was elected by a majority of voters. But at the same time, what he is doing right now is not entirely what he says he would do. And that involves people like Elon Musk, who are not elected. He is not allowing Congress to do its job. So far, court orders have been ignored. It is not just a breakdown of democracy, but a breakdown of the republican principles upon which American democracy rests. The rule of law is not an idea that is intrinsic to democracy as such. Just as minority protection is not. They are republican ideas that have become associated with democracy. So when we use words like liberal democracy or constitutional democracy, what we mean is a democracy that includes a respect for the rights of citizens, a respect for minorities, a respect for the diversity of people in a country—not just a tyranny of the majority.

So what is degenerating is more specifically the form of democracy we have been used to, which is democracy that includes a great deal more than what happens in an election?

To be precise: These are laws and institutional structures that protect minorities and ensure stability. There are many potential problems with democracy, but two are special. One is the potential destabilization of everything. Democracies can be extremely volatile and change their minds very quickly, and citizens do not always see all the consequences of the policies they support. The second problem is minority protection, which can be religious or ethnic minorities, but also simply political minorities – people with different political views. Democracy will never be the will of everyone. Not everyone will agree. It is the will of the majority. And that majority can dominate over minorities, and if it is not counteracted by laws that we are all obliged to, it risks destroying democracy.

We often talk – at least in Denmark and Europe – about Trump as the great threat to democracy. He is the one who destabilizes institutions and breaks the rules. You say that there are some preconditions that have made the situation in which Trump can come to power possible: polarization, lack of mutual understanding of who ‘the people’ include, etc. How much of the degeneration of democracy is attributable to Trump, and how much is antecedent to Trump?

Much of this is a condition for Trump. Trump is a symptom, not the cause. He is not particularly ideological. He is a performer. He is, in the long run, a charismatic leader in the eyes of his followers, and he reacts to specific situations. But even if he is not particularly ideological himself, he is shaped by the ideas that are prevalent among his advisors, namely the people associated with what is called the 2025 project. These represent a radical break with what was traditional Republican politics. It is a very state-centric approach, very focused on enemies. Trump is enabling them to come to fruition because he has a political effectiveness that the people at the Heritage Foundation don't have.

The conditions for Trump are a polarized population, the extent of people's sense of being cheated. And it's a population that has a sense of loss: that their country has been taken from them.

These are ideas that were already articulated by Patrick Buchanan, who was the Republican presidential nominee in 1992. So they've been here for a long time, although they've become more extreme now. Trump's great achievement is to connect this right-wing thinking with the broad-based discontent of the American working class. The very existence of that sense of loss, and the resentment against the so-called elites, were conditions for Trump—it's not something he created.

So those feelings, those feelings of loss, that polarization are a symptom of an existing defect in democracy?

Yes. We need to take seriously how broken liberal democracies were before Trump. During the “thirty golden years” after World War II, a whole series of new institutions were established. It's not just welfare state institutions but also new

media institutions, universities, etc. There was a sense that everything had a common purpose. Not everything was perfect, but overall there was a sense that you had a common purpose. It was connected to an economic boom in the aftermath of the world war, and it was connected to reduced inequality. In those thirty years, inequality fell and cohesion increased. From the 1970s, that changed. Inequality rose, there were recurring crises – both economic and political, both domestic and international. There was a sense of anxiety and fear, but also of resentment. Inequality created two different kinds of elites, one of which was particularly resented: The first elite was the billionaires, and people on the left asked: Why isn't the working class angry with the billionaires? Maybe they were sometimes, but the important thing was that the billionaires were not children of the system. They could present themselves as heroic individuals who had created great businesses. Resentment focused instead on the other elite, the well-educated. And here it seemed that the system itself produced the inequality. In that way, it seemed more unattainable to the workers. The well-educated elite were not just someone who worked hard and created great business successes. They were seen as privileged people who got better educations and looked down on the workers.

From here, democracy began to degenerate. In the 50 years that have passed since then, the problems have grown steadily, and Trump is just a symptom of that.

To what extent is this unique to the US?

It's not just the US. It's also true in most of Europe. There are very similar right-wing movements in most European countries that want to take back their country, that want to do away with what they perceive as a dominance of the left-wing elite, that want to restore masculinity in a society that is perceived as too feminine. The difference is not all of these reasons – they are very similar. The difference is that in the US you have the opportunity to connect the resentment with great power politics. Trump can say: I want Greenland, the Panama Canal, Canada – I want to expand the territory. The right wing in Europe is not focused on territorial expansion. They used to be: the Nazis and the fascists had that goal. But that's not the case today. Even the AfD doesn't say they want to invade Austria. They say: We want Germany back. That remains within a traditional nationalist idea. In the US, on the other hand, it can be connected to something more imperial.

But you see the same division of cities and country, the cosmopolitan versus the local. It is partly class, partly education and culture. That is why I use the word 'elite'. It is a resentment directed at elites who think they know better.

To stay briefly with the US: Now we have the billionaires who have entered into a kind of marriage with the Trump administration. How worried should we be about the alliance between Trump and the tech billionaires?

I have no prediction about how long the alliance between Trump and Musk will last. These are two very large egos that could quickly fall apart. But the marriage between money and power that they represent is something we should be very worried about. Musk is a very special figure, but there are also less visible people, such as Peter Thiel and others, who have made a lot of money and who are convinced that they have made the money because they are smart and smarter than other people and therefore should not be bound by regulation and legislation. Trump makes this exemption from restrictions possible. He says: Musk wants to decide for himself whether there are any conflicts of interest. We don't need courts and institutions to decide that kind of thing. That's totalitarianism. And a lot of these people see the government itself as a kind of business. And if they run a business that they own, they can fire people, they can do whatever they want, nothing should get in the way. That's how they want to make the government more efficient.

And it may be true that the government is not terribly efficient. But that's why you could say that the government is not the same as a business. There's a reason why there are institutional ties to a government.

How much power do you think the Trump administration will have to undermine democratic institutions?

That's exactly what Trump is doing. And it's not like he might do it next year. He's doing it right now. He, Musk, and others are actively destroying institutions right now. To take one example: Musk and his group of young people now have control over extremely sensitive information about bank accounts and identities. What is happening right now goes far beyond the usual level of surveillance. They are attacking law enforcement – the FBI and the CIA – just as they are attacking education, universities, healthcare. They have already done great damage that – even if they stopped now – would take years to repair, if it is possible to repair at all.

Liberals in the United States are making the mistake right now of thinking that this is a question of standing up and saving what we have. I think it is necessary to say: It is broken. And then ask ourselves where do we go from here. What do we build? How do we make something new? We cannot just go back to the system that is already broken.

Finally, let us turn to the future. You say that it is not about preserving and restoring existing institutions, but about establishing new ones. Where do you find hope for that renewal?

Here I see more hope in Europe. I think there will be a reaction against what Trump is doing. Because it will be extremely destabilizing, and people do not like destabilization. They depend on stability. Stability is crucial when planning your children's education, your own retirement. The problem is that people who call

themselves conservatives have de facto become neoliberal destroyers of institutions. If there is a reaction, it will probably bring back a form of conservatism. In Europe, it has often been Christian Democrats and Social Democrats. Europe has stronger state institutions in many areas. That can be an advantage. On the other hand, Europe has been left out of the geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States.

I think when we look at Europe, the new building of institutions will be largely national. And the project of building a pan-European solidarity will take a back seat. What is needed is to restore solidarity, to reduce inequality, to increase the sense of connectedness among the population. All of this will be easiest to create at the national level. Here, the crucial thing is not to leave the question of national cohesion to the right alone. But I am convinced that it is the question of social cohesion and solidarity that is the absolutely central question.

The Trump administration is doing the opposite of that, isn't it? Can you imagine that Trump could become a kind of shock that gives rise to a counter-movement?

I think it can go both ways. Trump could be the shock that wakes up Europeans – or Americans or Canadians – and makes them work on rebuilding solidarity. But it could also be the shock that makes the many who vote for the far right say: Hey, we are not marginalized, we are at the center, we have a powerful friend, we can take power. It can go both ways.

It is interesting that you say that it will happen at the national level in Europe. Because as I sense it, the political trend in Europe right now is that the war in Ukraine and the international geopolitical situation will lead to a stronger and more integrated EU, that the EU is the only way we can enter the international competition. But you are saying the opposite?

If the European elites try first and foremost to strengthen the EU institutions, we will see national revolts: Europe will have many versions of Hungary – which it already has! So the answer to the AfD is not to build a stronger Europe. It is to build a more solidary Germany. Of course a Germany in Europe, but in a Europe of nations that cooperate. If the elites try to build a strong Europe with the aim of making it strong like the US or China, that will provoke a reaction. Not because the EU is not a good thing. But the EU has been constructed in a way that has been alienating to many Europeans. Ordinary people consider themselves Danish, Swedish, German citizens. Even if they are happy to be able to move freely across borders, they will not say that they are European citizens. And that is important.

We saw this already 25 years ago, when the elites said they wanted to move faster with European integration, but the people said no. The elites' thoughts were not representative of the people. The elites are not in line with public opinion on that

issue. They almost only talk to each other. Therefore, they easily overestimate the popularity of their own thinking.

The responsibility for the current political crisis does not lie with Trump, Musk and the others. It lies with the centrist political class that has dominated for the last 50 years, which has made a marriage between neoliberal capitalism and democracy, and which has produced a system that is now being challenged, which has such deep internal contradictions that it is difficult for people to defend it against the attack it is being subjected to.

Most of the political establishment has been part of the marriage of democracy and capitalism and a system of elite rule. People can see that. So what do they do? Do they want a neo-Nazi regime? Or a new socialist movement? That people will be frustrated is clear. Whether they will develop effective social movements and programs in response to the frustration, and whether they will be good or bad, is far less clear.