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The Crisis of Legitimacy in Trump's America

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Is American power in decline? What is the relationship between the perceived decline of American power and the rise of Trump and authoritarian politics elsewhere?

In the recently published article in *Geoforum*, I address this important puzzle by arguing that American decline pertains not only to the decreasing economic vitality underscored by the concrete detrimental effects generated through neoliberalism as well as the dramatic economic growth of non-Western powers such as China. Rather, decline also constitutes America's decreasing appeal and legitimacy as a dominant actor in the international system. The latter element becomes much more visible particularly because of the Trump presidency's racist, sexist, and blatantly nationalist discourses that have become so normalized in global and national mainstream public spheres. Various structural deficiencies and injustices that are entrenched in the US neoliberal political economy — a governance model that many countries worldwide have adopted in varying scales and extent of localization — have facilitated this decline of American power. The Trump administration

has accelerated neoliberal policies coupled with authoritarian discourses and practices in ways that have substantially undermined the legitimating foundations of American power.

In contrast to many International Relations scholars that highlight either the *material capabilities* or the *legitimizing foundations* of American power, I offer a more holistic conception of American dominance in world politics. Specifically, I refer to the US, as a state, in its projection of both the objective materialist capabilities such as military strength and economic performance and also its intersubjective elements such as legitimacy, moral appeal, and reputation within and beyond its formal territorial borders. In recent decades, the legitimacy of American power rests not only upon its coercive power underwritten by its robust military and security apparatus. Instead, the US exceptionalist narrative — hinged upon human rights, electoral democracy, and free markets— has served as the foundational and broadly appealing justification for its dominant position in global governance.

Yet, the Trump administration's policy rhetoric has undermined US moral exceptionalism through blatant sexist, racist, discriminatory, and exclusionary tirades that have consistently proliferated domestic and international media. This grim picture of the legitimacy of American power emerges amidst the increasing political confidence, military power, and economic growth of non-Western states —especially China, and to some extent Russia, in flagrantly asserting their interests in world politics.

Prior to Trump's anti- democratic discourses, American foreign policy has generally upheld democracy promotion and human rights as important, although, in a lot of cases, those goals have been used in sinister ways to justify disastrous military interventions. While US President Barack Obama campaigned for strong human rights protection, actual policies did not usually match the discourse, as exemplified in the increased number of human casualties killed by drone operations and the continued undermining of privacy rights through the expansion of state surveillance.

Notwithstanding, Obama did not advocate a sort of disdain against human rights concerns in ways that Trump did. Even the Bush administration instrumentally invoked democracy promotion and human rights in the deadly conduct of the 'war on terror'. What made Trump unique, in this regard, is the congruence of his discursive rejection of human rights norms with concrete and detrimental policy actions. Those actions include the following: threatening the staff of the International Criminal Court with travel bans and financial sanctions, pulling out of the UN Human Rights Council, withdrawal from the deliberations of the Global Compact for Migration, cancellation of its membership from UNESCO, and the

elimination of US aid to the UN Reliefs and Works Agency, amongst many others.

So, what is exactly new about Trump in the era of American decline?

First, authoritarian politicians and social movements that explicitly and consistently uphold racist, sexist, and discriminatory political discourses and policy strategies have gained traction both in the public sphere and also in the corridors of power.

Second, American power has consistently failed to uphold the moral principles of material equality and global justice. American foreign policy — through its wide range of aid programs and vigorous public diplomacy initiatives— has championed the role of the state as a guarantor of free markets, property rights, and capital accumulation, which paved the way for other states worldwide to entrench further inequality while emboldening the political power of economic elites. In many global South countries, a robust welfare state tradition did not exist as US global dominance in the era of decolonization did not champion the principles of material justice — to the extent of advocating for equitable material distribution within and across newly formed national constitutional orders. Rather, US power has contented itself with civil and political rights as organizing principles within subservient states, while substantive issues of global governance focused only upon free trade, deregulation, and capital accumulation.

Nonetheless, the Trump presidency represents a new kind of departure in human rights rhetoric in US policy. Donald Trump's political rhetoric reflects profound disdain for peaceful political opposition, competitive electoral processes, and constitutional checks-and-balances within the state. Despite the failures of neoliberalism, Trump's predecessors somehow concealed them through the legitimating discourses of procedural democracy and civil and political rights. Trump, on the other hand, abandoned those legitimization discourses.

*This blog post is based on the article originally published in *Geoforum*:

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