

PERSPECTIVE

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Observing Disintegration

I have vivid memories of my last day at the office. It was March 2020, and I was in a briefing at the UN's regional headquarters in Bangkok, learning about the escalating pandemic. We were getting updates on our circumstances when I received a worrisome email.

I had taught my weekly lecture in the social enterprise programme in Thammasat University's School of Global Studies a couple of days before the meeting. A student who took part in that class had volunteered at a fun run a few days earlier. After attending the class, they learned that someone who had taken part in the race later tested positive for the virus. The student informed the school and an administrator from the school emailed me about the potential exposure.

Alarms went off in my head as I read the email. I leaned over to my lead and whispered the news. I then left the briefing, quickly packed up my things, and exited the world of office work stage right.

Fifteen months later, the world — and life — feels very different. I lived through the Donald Trump era

— as an ardent non-supporter — on the opposite side of the world. In another time, such distance might have greatly lessened my connection to the tumult, but the ever-on nature of social media affords us the possibility of staying connected with the people, places or ideas of our choosing. It also gives us unfettered access to whatever wreckage piles up on the information superhighway.

It was under these circumstances that I experienced the pandemic. I was physically here in Bangkok, while mentally shifting back and forth across the planet. It was a virtual tennis match of my attention.

In Bangkok, I saw a sense of shared responsibility. People wore masks as a matter of course. It was a collectivist enterprise. I wore my mask to help protect others, and the community largely did the same in return. It was not a matter of conflict used to divide communities to the detriment of all. It was a minor inconvenience that helped minimise danger and suffering in a difficult time. We were fellow travellers enduring a rough patch in the road together.



Thai sense of shared responsibility

According to a YouGov survey conducted between 30 March and 27 April 2020, Thais are most likely to wear face masks in public and use hand sanitiser among the six ASEAN members surveyed. Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha was fined 6,000 baht last year for not wearing a face mask during a meeting at his office.

Photo: Sakchai Lalit / AP Images

Back in the US, things seemed very different. I have not visited during the pandemic, so my perception is based on fragments. News reports. Stories from social media. Conversations with family. The mind fills in the gaps. It was an incomplete picture, but what I saw was worrisome.

ANGER. DISTRUST. DIVISION.

The divisions between us were highlighted by the pandemic, but they were decades in the making. The roots of our struggles may be seen in the neoliberal era ushered in by Ronald Reagan's presidency. His 'Reaganomics' programme promised and largely delivered on major cuts to things like regulations, taxes and growth in government spending.¹

Economist John Kenneth Galbraith wrote about one major shift in the approach to governing during that time. As he put it, Reagan focused his policies on "an intensely satisfied voting majority, comfortable with its personal situation." Galbraith saw this as a radical departure from the circumstances faced by prior governments which had had to deal with a large number of people, who "were far from content with their economic and social position." Prior to Reagan, governments had to put forth promises of better lives. But in his time, politicians stopped wooing people to the polls and many discontented Americans gave up on voting.²

Alongside the economic changes, the Reagan years had other tectonic shifts. One of those occurred when he vetoed a bill that would have made the Fairness Doctrine, then a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rule, into law. His FCC appointees later revoked the rule that had held broadcasters responsible for giving time to contrasting viewpoints around controversial issues since 1949.

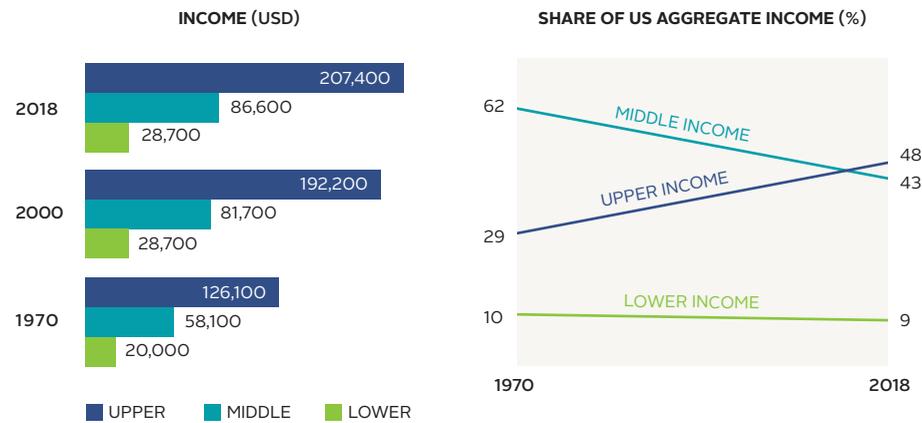
Reagan's other blow had come a few years earlier with the firing of the air traffic controllers in 1981. That move set unions on a path of decreasing power and relevance. They might seem unrelated, but together they paved the way for the unbalanced news ecosystem we are now beholden to and the accelerated decline in union membership, which coincided with the increasing share of income to the top 10% of earners in America. Inequality has continually grown since then.³

1. William A. Niskanen, "Reaganomics," *Library of Economics and Liberty*, <https://www.econlib.org/library/Enc1/Reaganomics.html>.

2. John Kenneth Galbraith, "THE PRICE OF COMFORT: The Reagan-Bush faith in laissez-faire and in the wisdom of the market has cracked America's economic foundations." *LA Times*, Jan. 6, 1991, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-01-06-op-10830-story.html>.

3. Elliot C. Rothenberg, "What can you do when they spew lies: revisiting the Fairness Doctrine," *MinnPost*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.minnpost.com/community-voices/2020/05/what-can-you-do-when-they-spew-lies-revisiting-the-fairness-doctrine/>; Camille Caldera, "Fact check: Fairness Doctrine only applied to broadcast licenses, not cable TV like Fox News," *USA Today*, November 28, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/11/28/fact-check-fairness-doctrine-applied-broadcast-licenses-not-cable/6439197002/>; Planet Money, "When Reagan Broke the Unions," *NPR*, December 18, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/788002965>.

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME, IN 2018 USD, AND SHARE OF US AGGREGATE HOUSEHOLD INCOME, BY INCOME TIER (1970-2018)⁴



The gaps in income between upper-income and middle- and lower-income households are rising, and the share held by middle-income households is falling.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of the Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements (IPUMS). "Most Americans Say There is Too Much Economic Inequality in the US, but Fewer Than Half Call It a Top Priority"

Harder times for the bulk of the population were paired with unbalanced news offerings that fuelled beliefs based on falsehoods. People who were reasonably unhappy with their deteriorating circumstances were unreasonably led to blame others who were not at fault. The bonds of civil society slowly frayed. As political scientist Lilliana Mason put it, "There is a breakdown in trust and a breakdown in a shared, common reality." In the context of the pandemic these circumstances have made public health decisions fraught. Reports of angry customers arguing with employees in stores and restaurants have become common. And 15 states are either considering or have already passed "measures to drastically undermine the authority of public health agencies to save lives".⁵

While I'm deeply saddened to see such things occurring in the US, I'm happy to report that I haven't seen anything of the sort here in Thailand. Yes, there are challenges here, like anywhere else. But I have not seen people trying to turn public health into a question of tribal affiliation. I'm thankful for that. Throughout the pandemic, when I have had to go into the city I have seen people with masks on and businesses with sanitiser and thermometers at the door. When I walk the two kilometres to my local market, people smile at the somewhat out of place foreigner wandering by. No one ever bothers me and I have never seen anything approaching a threatening look.

4. Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Ruth Igielnik and Rakesh Kochhar, "Trends in income and wealth inequality," *Pew Research*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/>.

5. Sabrina Tavernise, "An Arms Race in America: Gun Buying Spiked During the Pandemic. It's Still Up." *New York Times*, May 29, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/29/us/gun-purchases-ownership-pandemic.html>; "Proposed Limits on Public Health Authority," *National Association of County and City Health Officials*, May 2021, <https://www.naccho.org/uploads/downloadable-resources/Proposed-Limits-on-Public-Health-Authority-Dangerous-for-Public-Health-FINAL-5.24.21pm.pdf>.

In the latter part of last year, when transmission was nearly nonexistent, I made a few short trips to the beach in Hua Hin with my family. On those trips, we saw a number of closed businesses – how could there not be that in a country so dependent on tourism? But while many people are struggling through these circumstances, what I have not seen is that frustration translated into anger at outsiders. I wish I could say the same for back home.

My "East meets West" tale is of a cautionary nature. I've watched rampant and growing inequality become a poison pill for civil society. Policies that rewarded a small slice of the American people set us on the path to populism. And a media ecosystem un beholden to truth compounded the challenges long before social media kicked them into hyperdrive.

We have now arrived at a moment where the future of the nation is in question. As the failed January insurrection shrinks in the rear view, the party it supported is openly preparing to pervert the system as much as necessary to claim victory regardless of future electoral outcomes.

Many years ago, I watched a friend deal with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. I had a hard time identifying with what he was going through because I had no relevant frame of reference. I do not know what tomorrow will bring, but in recent years, I feel like I have gained perspective on his experience. ∞

Elena the essential worker, voter and American
A 24 feet statue "Elena the Essential Worker" was erected at a One Fair Wage and the Poor People's Campaign rally in Washington DC in support of the introduction of the Raise the Wage Act, which includes a USD15 minimum wage for tipped workers, in President Biden's American Rescue Plan.

Photo: Leigh Vogel / UPI / Alamy

