



RONEN ZVULUN/REUTERS

# 'The Great Dismissal'

## How we got to be in a post-truth era

President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem on May 23, 2017.

**DO YOU** ever wonder why Donald Trump can tell so many blatant lies – and be issued so many criminal indictments – and his believers, who represent nearly 50% (or more) of Republicans and about 30% of the American people, accept his falsehoods as truth? Or can you imagine that about 25% of the citizens of Israel actually believe all of Benjamin Netanyahu's lies and media spins without hesitation or much deep reflection?

How is it that “populism” has become so rampant in so many countries these days with leaders destroying democracies and yet claiming, falsely (and they undoubtedly know that it is false), that they are protecting and ensuring democracy in their countries? What has happened to our culture, making it so very difficult for many people these days to discern what is truth and what is an out-and-out lie?

If you want to know the answer to these questions, you should read *The Great Dismissal* by Henry Sussman, a retired professor of critical theory and comparative literature from Yale, author of several books, and lately, au-

thor of a new play about the life of German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin. This profound book will help you understand how our modes of thinking and understanding the world have changed dramatically within just a few short years.

What does Sussman mean by “the great dismissal”?

*My favorite moniker for the new configuration we all contend with is “The Great Dismissal.” It might also be, I suppose (after Freud or Nietzsche) “The Great Denial”; or possibly, “The Great Withdrawal”, or with even less pizzazz, “The Great Repudiation.” Surely what is at stake here is a strident beligerent recurrence of US (and perhaps even more widespread) anti-intellectualism at the base. It is not merely that scientific research, social-scientific monitoring and theoretical speculation have been driven aground (or “held askance”). The current actuality for which “The Great Dismissal” is a blazing caption is the one in which sustained intellectual labor has even lost the meager ground on*

*the agenda of US public deliberation it held under prior administrations. The activities of research, evidence and language-based speculation, and critique have been repudiated, in and for themselves. They have been dismissed by the powers that be, on a unprecedented, totalistic scale.*

Sussman is both a scholar and a public intellectual. In this fascinating book, which is written in the style of a diary, covering the years 2015-2022, he brings to bear his knowledge of philosophy, comparative literature, critical theory, and other academic disciplines with his careful scrutiny of contemporary journalism. In so doing, this book is a *tour de force*, enlightening the reader in all manner of theory and publicism about the contemporary anti-intellectual crisis we are facing in Western society today.

Sussman does this particularly well in his diary entry of Thanksgiving 2021. In this comprehensive chapter, he shares with his readers his insights from his intensive reading of four important books which he feels help us come



to a serious understanding of the current deep malaise of US culture. The four books are Jane Mayer's *Dark Money*; Adam Serwer's *The Cruelty Is the Point*; Tobi Smith's *Foxocracy*; and Shoshanah Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. According to Sussman:

*Each (of these books) configure a rich and enlightening tapestry, precisely in fashioning themselves out of the intricate patterns of power, economic exploitation, and deep-seated historical traditions of xenophobia and racism serving as the founding pretexts of the current constellation. Each one of these power (or honor) claims comes grounded in its own enabling rhetoric of tropes and metaphors.*

To give some examples:

- According to Jane Mayer, a strong political resolve, if not fanaticism, on the part of a small, ultra-conservative cadre of oligarchs is very powerful. They fund major institutes and think tanks, which lead to major transformations in electoral procedures and outcomes. This “dark money” has caused an entire culture of shared understandings regarding political debate and procedure to be abandoned by large parts of the American public.

- Adam Serwer pointed out the extreme cruelty of much of American political culture these days. His book was particularly shocking, since he pointed out that the American political landscape is littered with broken promises, especially those which have to do with human rights and universal suffrage since the Civil War. American society has a very bad track record in this area. The rules which were written in America's Declaration of Independence were such that all men were created equal; but this was not to be the case, since racism persisted after the Civil War and continues to this day.

- The cruelty of American politics greatly increased under the Trump administration (2016-2020). This was expressed on a daily basis by his verbal vitriol, by his constant firing of senior staff, by his misogyny, and by his very demeanor of a dictator. And it goes on to this very day, as he is a candidate for the nomination of the extreme-right Republican party for the presidency, as crazy as that sounds.

This book is particularly timely in light of the many indictments of criminal behavior of the former American president (and the

current Israeli prime minister. More on this below). The Orange Man is a symptom of the demise of American culture, in which facts don't matter; lies are regularly sold as “truth”; environmental science (and the ensuing disasters) are continually denied and underfunded by the extreme right-wing politicians, medical science—especially the use of vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic—was radically rejected by the former president himself and millions of his followers; and conspiracy theories are constantly spread on Fox News and right-wing social media sites.

Indeed, all these rejections of reason, research, and rigorous science underlie the culture of American populism, which encourage millions of Americans to want to see the former president return to the White House, irrespective of the dangerous destruction of democracy that he would foster. He does not believe in “justice”; rather, there are only conspiracies and “witch hunts.” He dismisses all of his indictments as if there were no judicial system in America!

Perhaps Trump's worst moral failure (among very many) took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. In one of his diary entries, from December of 2020, Sussman captures this eloquently:

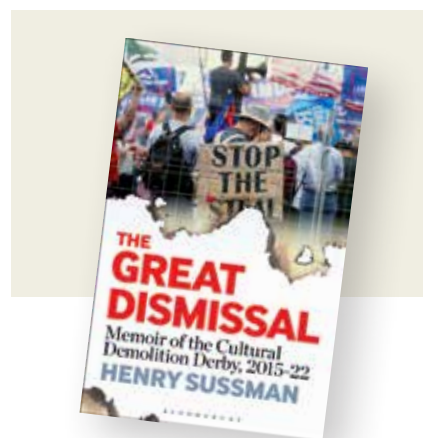
*The malignant presidency of Donald Trump seems moribund, but also vigorously alive. Trumpism, after all, is a narrative of death and resurrection, in which bankruptcy becomes The Art of the Comeback and American carnage becomes American renaissance. Life after death is Trump's governing trope... We have, after all, already witnessed the Good Friday and Easter Sunday of Donald Trump. In a gross parody of the Christian narrative, Trump presented his contraction of Covid-19 not as a consequence to his own narcissistic recklessness, but as a Jesus-like self-sacrifice – he caught the disease on behalf of the people.... This fable seems to have worked for his supporters, electrifying them with evidence of their leader's indefatigability. The deaths of 230,000 victims of Covid-19 by election day did not prompt a turn against a president who presided over them.*

Yet, I must point out that this book is not another book about Trump. It is more about “Trumpism,” or the culture that he has created, with the help of so many enablers and funders.

For those of us who live in Israel, this cultural demise that this book describes is extremely relevant. Our current prime minister has adopted much of Trump's method and madness: There is no longer any “truth,” only lies and media spin on a daily and hourly basis. The judicial system is the one that is corrupt, not the PM, who has been indicted by the system on major counts of corruption. The attorneys-general and their professional staffs of lawyers are all wrong – their indictments are nothing short of a “witch hunt” (same language as Trump). He is trying to save Israeli democracy, when he knows that he and his extreme-right wing coalition partners are attempting to destroy it.

All of this is a result of “the great dismissal” – the rejection of research and reasonableness, the repudiation of serious deliberation and systematic thinking, the hatred of the intellectual elites, the rejection of the very notion of “justice” or “truth,” the constant lying and spinning of the news by so many politicians, led by the prime minister.

Sussman's fascinating and accessible book is a useful guide for understanding what has happened to contemporary culture in recent history. While at times it is overly philosophical, it is essentially the work of a serious public intellectual who is deeply disturbed by what has happened to our culture. He is worried, as am I, about what the future will bring if we keep going down this road. ■



**The Great Dismissal: Memoir of the Cultural Demolition Derby, 2015-22**

Henry Sussman

Bloomsbury Academic, 2023

304 pages, \$24.45