

# *How to get away with an idea: Trumpism and structural power*

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*You can kill a man, but you cannot kill an idea.*

Sophocles

The Republican Donald Trump is part of a selected group of the United-Statesian presidents who won the Presidency but lost on the popular vote — almost 63 over almost 66 million of Hillary Clinton (FEDERAL..., 2017). Taking office in 2016, he also empowered the nationalist movement that had risen in Europe in the early 2010s and brought to life a new form of populism in Latin America. By the election, Trump had become one of the worst types of weapons in world politics: an idea.

International Relations (IR) theorists have conceptualised power as the “production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate” (BARNETT; DUVALL, 2005, p. 42). This is an embracing concept since social relations can include material and ideational instruments. Barnett and Duvall (2005), therefore, also included the embodiment of Realism’s power concept in their general discussion. They have taught many students that power no longer exclusively requires material resources to work — for example, military power requires armies, weapons, or how economic power requires a robust financial system.

None of these examples is wrong — they are right. Albeit, considering the roots of power as mentioned above, it is reduced, only weakening the analysis of the shape, form, and its operational approaches. Donald Trump is an outstanding example: often read as a neoliberal, the nationalist who promised to build up a wall to prevent “American’s jobs” being taken by Mexican migrants. Interpreted as a narcissist and a distasteful person even before his election (MACADAMS, 2016), Trump had become the conservatives’ outlook: family, God, “America first”. He had turned their icon, their ideal, and not only in the US.

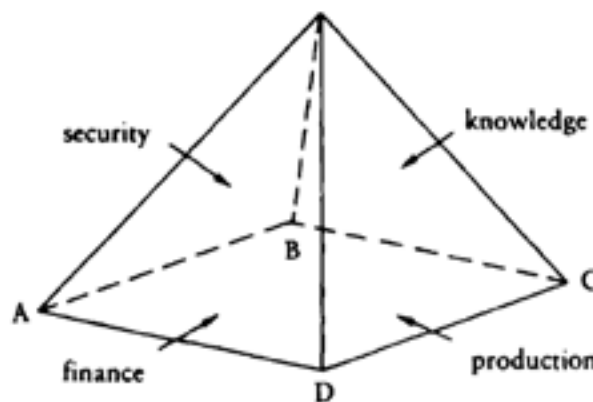
However, with Joe Biden winning over him in the 2020 elections, the idea has seemed to weaken. This analysis aims to correlate “idea” as a source of power and the consequences of Donald Trump in four years as President.

## The idea is power, and that is a period

One of the most famous theorists that examine how “ideas” are related to power is Susan Strange in her book *States and Market* (1988). In her discussion about structural power, she builds a pyramid interconnecting four resources of power that combined would allow a state to master the structural power — defined by her as “(...) the power to decide how things shall be done, the power to shape frameworks within which states relate to each other, relate to people, or relate to corporate enterprises” (STRANGE, 1988, p. 25). These resources are (1) control over security, (2) control over production, (3) control over credit — referenced as finance —, and (4) control of knowledge, a sum of beliefs, ideas, and informational media.

Even if the “idea” is inside the power over knowledge, this framework allows us to understand how this variable works in the final equation.

Figure 2: Pyramid interconnecting the four sources of structural power



Source: STRANGE, 1988, p. 27

As visualised, Strange emphasised the importance of knowledge and ideas already in the late 1980s, even before the 21st Century Internet phenomenon. Nowadays, “ideas” have become more relevant and therefore the pyramid may have changed. Since Realists have claimed the central space in IR since the creation of the discipline, the concept of power has become what the Realism conceptualised it as. But what if, going even further back onto the principle, the main pillar is the “idea”, as pictured by the constructivists?

Security + Production + Finance + Knowledge + Ideas = **structural power**

“Idea” as a sort of power itself has gained its force on the Internet, misleading people who joined the online dimension with no orientation about how to acknowledge what is right, what is wrong, what is real, and what is not. The United States is pictured as an example of the domain over knowledge resources, considering their dominance over famous social media companies – exception in China due to Chinese blocking of the western Internet –, also having the jurisprudence over them (GWYNN, 2019).

Nazi German is an example of how this argument works. Hitler with his idea of the superiority of Aryan race (Germans and Nordics) persuaded an entire nation to kill and to torture, triggering the Holocaust. One argument in the Nuremberg Trials was that they were only following orders – and that was possible only because Hitler fulfilled the German institutions with his idea to legalise one of the horrendous episodes in humanity’s history (SCHMITT, 2001). We can see the force of the Nazi idea in the risen of neo-Nazi groups in Europe (COLBORNE, 2020), even in Brazil, a well-known multiethnic country (MANN, 2020).

Joseph Nye’s soft power concept can be misinterpreted as a way of how idea operates and how it is exercised as a form of power; however, it is necessary to point out two considerations. Yes, Nye’s writings about soft power englobe the spread of ideas, but it is essential to affirm that the central sphere of influence is on values that are going to

change through the spread of the ideas. The second consideration is about the operation of soft power: there are three spheres of influence: political values, cultural values, and foreign policy, with no influence amongst them (NYE, 2004) — a loss to the exercise of “idea” as a power.

However, the main character amongst IR theories that involve ideas is the Constructivism, built with theorists such as Alexander Wendt (1999), which classifies his way of Constructivism as “structural idealism”. Wendt points out how the classic approach and the major debates in IR tend to surpass any other variable other than material resources, maintaining an impressive role of ideas, costumes and culture in IR analysis. In this case, I move away from what Wendt called “material theory” (WENDT, 1999, p. 94), surpassing the analysis of physical resources only — such as institutions, weapons, and governmental agendas.

When arguments based on structural concepts are made, it is necessary to consider such a thing as “idea” as a volatile variable to prevent the downfall to come. And if we quantify these qualitative variables, it is seen that the United States has the most “powerful” structural power in the international system (STRANGE, 1988, p. 28), since the apogee of the “American Dream”, and its strengthening in the post-Cold War. But bringing all these concepts and arguments to contemporaneity, how Donald Trump became an idea and how Trumpism has come to integrate itself into the equation of structural power of the United States?

## **Trumpism: the idea**

Donald Trump rose as a joke amidst the Republicans pre-candidates, but an eccentric bad joke when he was chosen as the Republican candidate to the dispute in 2016 against Hillary Clinton, former Secretary of State of Barack Obama, senator, and First Lady. The common thought about that election was that the Democratic Party would

easily win and rerun the United States. Clinton was the favourite considering her preference amongst the youth, her career as a famous politician, her experience in government as a lawyer and a diplomat.

While Trump was only a businessman playing at the elections, another phenomenon was happening. Meanwhile all the devaluation of his campaign, his work building his electorate showed effect when the results started to come out and he had won states such as Pennsylvania and Florida. Zurcher (2016) analysed some of the reasons why Trump got elected: (1) a great number of white voters – “the white wave”, (2) he treated media not only with disrespect, but in a way his electorate enjoyed it, and (3) Trump was presented as an outsider against the career politicians.

Considering these points, we can now analyse how Trump became an idea. Amongst his electorate, Trump had found the voice that echoed his misogynist, and outright narratives against minorities. His main motto through the entire rally, “Make America Great Again”, was based over the hate against immigrants, refugees, and Muslims, considering the desire of a United States for the real “Americans” – understood as whites (MUKHERJEE, 2018). Scholars, journalists and specialists underestimated the severity, cruelty, and the interrelationship of the factors that contributed to these changes. Trump, with those ideas, gained support from uneducated whites. So, “(...) if Trump had moderated, the uneducated whites may have seen him as just another politician, and they would probably not have voted for Trump in the same numbers (...)” (BEAUMONT, 2016).

Meanwhile, Trump’s work under Facebook has gained enough attention to building a hypothesis that it was the turning point in his favour (LAPOWSKY, 2016). Once on the Internet, forever on the Internet, and Donald Trump took advantage of that, considering the “*Broken Telephone*” phenomenon that occurs with some fake news, probably deconceptualising other ideas etc. It is crucial to notice that his *Twitter Governance* has been also used in other countries – for example, Brazil. Creating these spaces on social media, the communication between the president and his country has

been increased, however, extremely dangerous due to the propensity of fake news and misled information (KEITH, 2016).

Trump has seduced those who don't seem to know how to distinguish the quality of the information received. Populism gained a new known name and a more significant example of social coercion: Donald Trump. As fundamentalists, certain groups have gained voice and started to connect themselves and to lose the fear of exposing their horrible ideas to society. Trump was the name given to these radical ideas that irradiated to different parts of the globe.

## **Conclusion**

Trump is an idea, and ideas are a source of power. But Biden winning the 2020 election is tied directly with his conduct as a president of a country as powerful as the United States is, revealing that the same ideas that Trump has fed four years ago are not the most usable ones in a pandemic context — considering that not wearing a mask is a symbol of freedom and patriotism for most republicans and Trump's supporters induced by Trump himself (DAVIS; LICHTENBERG, 2020).

Since we erased here the concept of traditional sources of power as the foundation of the structural power framework, it is possible to visualise how Trump weakened himself, proving the volatileness of the variable “idea” — since people changing their ideas is common and necessary in a democracy. Swing states showed it as well when some those that went red in 2016 changed to blue in 2020 — such as Pennsylvania, Georgia, Wisconsin, and Michigan (NY TIMES, 2020).

However, even though his weakness has cost his reelection, it is important to stress that even if he is not the President of the United States, he is still a directed symbol of conservatism, populism and an indirect one of racism, sexism, and LGBTQphobia not only in the US but in all the world (EDELMAN, 2019). This status is proven with the

support that Trump has received during his campaign around the globe; people were cheering even if they were not a US citizen, showing to those who wanted to see how far the idea went.

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