

Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

November 2020

“Troubling What We Think We Know”



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We all have ideas about the way the world is, how it was, and the way it should be. These ideas moor us to our worlds in ways that keep us oriented with a sense of confidence in our everyday lives. Let us use the events surrounding the US presidential election over the past few days and weeks; as US citizens living in Canada these events have sorely tested our understanding of the United States.

With all of the debate surrounding election procedures, political personalities, and policies related to running a country, what has been most striking and unsettling for us is that in this moment our sense of “what the United States is” or who the citizens are has been tipped over. Our cherished beliefs about US citizens as being welcoming and inclusive of others, cooperative with others to build solutions regarding issues of the day, and upholding democratic traditions and institutions have had to face the cold hard fact that approximately half of the United States citizenry have a very different view and experience of the country of our origin than we do.

Our point here is not a tribal one that tries to make a case that our views are right and others are wrong. This is where a lot of public discourse has been centered and becomes polarized and frozen. Rather, we are saying that “what we thought we knew” about the common values of the people of our home country is now under “further review” (to use a sports metaphor). This is a “wake-up call” for us. Gary Mason of *The Globe and Mail* states: “What this election showed above all else is that the U.S. is not the place many thought it was. Maybe this is the year America comes face to face with itself” (2020, p. A15).

Our ideas/knowledge about the world are borne out of years of living and experiencing, learning and growing, observing and thinking and since everyone’s life trajectories have so many variations it is easy to see how our world means many different things to different people. When we run into others who have organized their thinking about their world and their place in it in ways that differ from ours (or maybe even contradict ours), the stage may be set for defensive digging in and perhaps even counterattacking—this way of relating is usually corrosive and counterproductive—a sort of discursive sinkhole. Political seasons in our countries are fertile grounds for this. But this is the precise moment when we can change course from fighting, being stuck in dichotomies, and alienating those who are different from us to taking stock of our own thinking and commitments.

How often do we ask others *how they came to know* what they know before we offer our own thoughts? This question goes beyond the specific elements of “what” we know. How often do we take a clear-eyed look at what ideas and beliefs we have incorporated into our lives? Is it possible we are standing up for ideas that have lost their utility and merit? Does our understanding of our world map onto what is happening around us? Do our ideas and positions live up to our expectations of them?

To be fair, close scrutiny could also reaffirm the value of these ideas for us—we may recommit to them upon close review. But can we leave space to wonder if we are “right”? As social constructionist thinkers, we appreciate a multiverse of perspectives and how they might be played out. When our cherished ideas are questioned, do we have the strength to see how our ideas could be seen through others’ eyes? Engaging in such scrutiny could feel like putting ourselves on the line.

This political moment in America is forcing us to reconsider what we have taken for granted. As social constructionists we hold a stance based upon our ethics of relating to others. We hope that that stance is created through listening, considering, reclaiming, and revising through conversations with others, whether that conversation is in the form of reading, talking, watching a performance, hearing a song, or viewing artwork. So it seems that we need to simultaneously claim, articulate, and live from our stance as we listen to others’ and their ideas of difference because rejection of viewpoints that vary from our own can hurt us and those around us. In a previous Taos Brief Encounters essay (“Holding Tensions,” 2017), Dan wrote, “Looking at the ways in which tension can be a friend or a muse invites us to embrace difference as not only desirable, but also generative in our lives”—as raw material to review in order to live better lives so we do not “live in our own echo chamber.”

So we urge you to summon the courage to really listen to ideas that are at variance with your own and be prepared to hold your positions gently. We are offering a workshop in February 2021 where we engage in “troubling” other ideas we think we know. Consider joining us.

For information see: <https://www.taosinstitute.net/education/taos-online-workshops-courses/in-praise-of-troubling-what-we-think-we-know-2021>.

References

- Mason, G. (2020, November 6). What U.S. media got wrong: Their own country. *The Globe and Mail*.
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-what-the-american-media-got-wrong-their-own-country/>
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