



# GETTING BACK ON KEEL

*By Sean David Hobbs*

*Egypt's first Fulbright specialist from the United States since 2013  
Thomas De Luca critiques the past and the future of national  
exceptionalism, political polarization, and erosion of democratic  
values both at home and abroad*

**A**n prominent American political scientist, Thomas De Luca, 72, published his seminal work *The Two Faces of Political Apathy* in 1995. This was followed by two other influential co-authored books: *Sustainable Democracy: Individuality and the Politics of the Environment* (1996) and *Liars! Cheaters! Evildoers! Demonization and the End of Civil Debate in American Politics* (2005). He has also co-authored a textbook, *The Democratic Debate: American Politics in an Age of Change* (2015). These texts remain key to American political discourse.

For over forty-five years, De Luca has been both an academic and a political activist with progressive leanings. Much of his research and work in politics has centered around supporting public policies in the United States to generate greater political equality and social equity for all lower-income individuals, regardless of race, sex, class, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Since teaching in China on a Fulbright from 1999–2000, De Luca has studied and discussed Chinese politics, society, and democratization, and more recently compared Chinese exceptionalism and American exceptionalism. He has appeared in the U.S. media and often comments on the successful—and unsuccessful—practices of civil and political rights in the United States and abroad.

As the director of the International Studies Program and the Sino-American Seminar on Politics and Law at Fordham University, De Luca has traveled and lectured across the globe. In 2019, he became a Fulbright specialist to Egypt and a guest at the American University in Cairo's School of Global Affairs and Public Policy (GAPP) at the Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR).

*Cairo Review Senior Editor Sean David Hobbs caught up with De Luca in late March 2019.*



**CR:** *What brought you here to Egypt?*

**TDL:** This was an opportunity that presented itself. I had many friends who studied the Middle East. So it is interesting for me to come here and see how people live in this political context and for me to think on how concepts such as democracy travel across cultures. I was told that I am the first Fulbright specialist scholar who has been sent from the United States to Egypt for a number of years so it really is an honor for me to come here.

**CR:** *You lectured at AUC on the two ideas of “American exceptionalism” and “Chinese exceptionalism.” Have you observed an “Egyptian exceptionalism” here?*

**TDL:** Here in Egypt, there is an ancient civilization. When I go now to talk in

China and give lectures on U.S. and Chinese exceptionalisms, I can say now to the Chinese—when they tease me about being American and how we have no history—that I have seen a civilization at least as old as they are. To your question on possible “Egyptian exceptionalism,” if I had more time I would look at Egyptian self-conception and study how Egyptians understand themselves in today’s world in relation to their country’s long history.

**CR:** *How do Americans view their role in the world as “exceptional” and how do the Chinese view their role in the world as “exceptional”?*

**TDL:** The idea that the United States has a unique role to play in the world dates back to well before the founding

△ Thomas De Luca speaking at AUC, Cairo, March 18, 2019.  
*Photograph by Mohamed Fahmy*

of the country in 1776. This idea is part of American culture. This does not mean that all Americans agree or believe in American exceptionalism but it is part of our political culture.

As I learned more about China, I came to understand that some people there had their own idea of Chinese exceptionalism, which under Xi Jinping they trace back both to imperial China, for example Confucius, and also to the contemporary communist party in China.

So one of their exceptional qualities, according to President Xi, is bringing these two traditions together in a way to create this amazing progress China is having and what Xi calls the “China Dream” moving into the future. And all of the various initiatives that the Chinese have undertaken such as the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative and the other goals that the Chinese have can be seen as a reflection of this idea of Chinese exceptionalism.

**CR:** *How important are the concepts of open discourse and civil society in China now?*

**TDL:** China is endlessly fascinating. In terms of changes, I have experienced China in a number of different eras. When I first went there twenty years ago, it was not as developed as it is today. However, even back then, I felt the emergence of discussions and discourses around politics and things like constitutional law and democracy.

And while the need for those concepts has grown in China, I think there are

more constraints than there were before. China is a contradiction because in some ways the country is more open than when I first went. For example, students have many more career choices. Now, for those who make it [graduate from university] there is more freedom, for example, to choose a job or to move to a place for work.

On the other hand, other freedoms, like the freedom of expression—while you can still do it in a sort of quiet way—I think people have to be more careful than they had to be ten years ago. What we are seeing in China is an effort at even greater consolidation of the state’s political power.

**CR:** *What did life show you as you came of age as a young scholar in New York City at a time of great social conflict in LBJ’s America? How did the 60s and New York influence you and your ideas on civil discourse and democracy?*

**TDL:** First off, growing up in Brooklyn was quite a bit different than growing up in Manhattan. The world of intellectual life was something I had to learn. I grew up in a working- and middle-class Jewish and Italian neighborhood. As I look back as somebody who has worked a lot in politics, academic work, and political organizing, I have to remember, when I started, I knew little about any of that. Academia and politics were somewhat foreign to me. I had to learn all of this.

Secondly, when I look back on the 60s, what I see was a time of great optimism, a feeling which I do not think has ever been replicated. And maybe this has something to do with the nature of the Baby Boom

Generation. We had a certain comfort as compared to my father's generation, the Depression Generation. We just thought anything was possible. But then, at the same time, we became aware of certain things. We became aware of racism and civil rights, sexism, and the environment. But in my life the thing that was really transformative was the Vietnam War.

The war was transformative in a way that is hard to explain now. I did not serve in the war but it affected every young man's life and really every family's life in the United States. Just like how I could not understand when my dad told me about the Depression and World War II, it is hard to explain to young people what the Vietnam War was like for me.

In a way the Vietnam War was having your cake and eating it too. On the one hand, we were comfortable at home so there was no real economic suffering caused by the war where I lived; but abroad we were at war and an immense number of people were suffering and dying there, which also affected us at home.

I remember making a speech in a college class, "The Vietnam War, Where Will It End?" and I did not realize how prescient that was because we were just in the middle of it. And it went on and on and on. It was on the TV at night. And a lot of it was awful. So many young men built their lives around going or not going to the war. Bill Clinton found a way not to go. George W. Bush also. Donald Trump too. And so did I. We are all about the same age. It profoundly affected me. This time of there being a paid "volunteer" army is different from that time when there was a draft in the United States.

**CR:** *In 1963, when you started university, were people aware of the Vietnam War? Were they starting to organize and protest it as early as 1963?*

**TDL:** Few were active that early. United States troop levels were still quite low. Some of the radicalized students certainly became active by 1965. Some of the students I went to school with were called "Red-Diaper babies" which was a term that meant they grew up with socialist and communist parents. But for me, I was raised in more of a conservative Italian-American home so my political views were a gradual evolution. I tried applying principles that my parents had taught me at home to the world—for example, not to speak in racist ways—and sometimes I could simply apply what I learned, but sometimes I had to learn to apply them for myself. My parents became somewhat more conservative as time went on with the culture wars and increased polarization. In general, my views were formed applying principles from home, as well as ideas from friends and the academic world I found myself in.

**CR:** *Affirmative action was a policy started in the 60s. What is the result of this policy in the academy and society at large?*

**TDL:** In terms of policy, it did and does appropriately help some people. But one of the problems with affirmative action is that it often doesn't help those most in need. And politically, it contributed to polarization of politics. What we need more of in the United States are class-based policies to help the poor across all demographic categories. While I support affirmative action because of the

history of racism and sexism in America, I continue to have these concerns about it. A class-based approach to the issue of poverty, for example, could be effective in the United States while making it much harder to divide blacks and whites and polarize them against each other.

*CR: You talked about your parents. Why did they get more conservative and did this growing conservative trend in your family reflect a bigger process happening in the United States as a whole?*

**TDL:** My parents got more conservative as the country got more polarized. They were somewhat politically conservative from the start. They felt a lot of what Trump supporters feel [today]. They felt a resentment against liberals who my parents felt were looking down upon them. Both my parents were artists. My dad worked in commercial display art, as did my mother in later years, but he also worked a second job as a jazz drummer on the weekends. So, while he was not a factory worker, and we were economically comfortable, we were far from very wealthy. He worked very hard to raise a family and make our lives better.

*CR: So, the polarization of American society that we see now started in the 60s?*

**TDL:** In a way contemporary social and political polarization started in the 60s but what a lot of people forget is the United States has always had periods of intense polarization. There were people who hated Jefferson and, of course, Lincoln. Think of the rhetoric of Franklin Delano Roosevelt against the “economic royalists” in the 1930s,

while many rich people thought he was a class traitor. Trump would be calling Roosevelt a socialist today. When he was president, Roosevelt used to say of monied interests in the United States, “They hate me and I welcome their hatred.” Also after Roosevelt and the New Deal you had the McCarthy Era [in the early 1950s]. And then you had the start of the modern American Civil Rights Movement, jumpstarted by *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. So yes, the contemporary version of polarization in the United States did seem to start in the 1960s but we have to keep polarization in perspective. The social divisions around issues such as race, economics, and war as we understand them today in the United States go back much further.

*CR: But today we have Trump.*

**TDL:** Of course, the version of polarization that we have now is different. We have never had a president like Donald Trump. But we shouldn’t forget that a lot of presidents used polarization. And one of the worst presidents was Nixon. But even Nixon never polarized quite as overtly as Trump does. Trump really is playing with fire with how he uses divisiveness.

*CR: You wrote the book *The Two Faces of Political Apathy in 1995* which discusses the ebb and flow of political apathy in the United States. It has been nearly twenty-five years since this book came out. Where does political apathy today come from and is it connected to the polarization?*

**TDL:** That book came out of research I did starting in the 1970s in my doctoral

dissertation. The idea around the book was that political scientists in the 1960s and 1970s had been too complacent in their belief that the amount of political participation in the United States was sufficient. For example, U.S. voting rates for many years in presidential elections have been at the 50 percent level or a little above, which is much lower than they are in Europe. The U.S. voting rate has gone up and down over the years but nonetheless it is still overall quite a bit lower than other advanced democracies.

Many political scientists of the time explained that this low voter turnout was due to the general apathy and contentment of non-voting citizens. Both apathy and contentment, so posited the political scientists, went together: people were apathetic because they were content. They would mix up the use of the words “apathy” and “contentment.” I mean, apathy is a negative word. But “contentment” or “satisfaction” are positive terms. So they’d use both ideas almost as if they were the same concept to justify low turnout—it’s okay not to worry about non-voting, they suggested, because non-voters—the apathetics—don’t vote because they are content. This lets the political system off the hook.

But what I thought, and think, is happening—that I wrote about in *The Two Faces of Political Apathy*—is that use of the word “apathy” subtly blames citizens who do not vote. By calling non-voters “apathetic” there is a pernicious argument going on, that we actually blame the victim. A lot of the people who do not vote [in the United States] are racial minorities or people with low incomes and zero or negative wealth.

To understand the two faces of apathy, we need to understand the perspective of people who are in despair about the political system. Many have given up or maybe have been socialized not to care. Are we supposed to believe that the poor don’t vote because they are content? I do not think so. So what is apathy? Well, if a guy like me decides to be lazy and not pay attention to the political system, that can become apathy. It *is* my fault. I should be held responsible. That’s the first face of apathy.

But there are some people who are apathetic in a more profound sense. The system has beaten them down and made them subaltern. They believe that they are being involved in social decisions that are not for them. And so they learn not to care. This is the second face of “political apathy”—but we should not blame these people because undemocratic aspects of the system made them feel this way.

In the middle of these two faces of apathy, there are many people who, while they don’t vote, are not apathetic at all in any sense. They simply have the view that voting serves no purpose for them—the system is rigged against them. They do care, they do understand—but they don’t vote. Why assume they’re “apathetic,” as many political scientists did, simply because they don’t vote? You would only do this if you thought the political system was fully democratic—that there were no good reasons not to participate. In fact, however, many of these people labeled “apathetics” care deeply but they feel the system does not work for them and so they do not participate. They think, why should we vote?

**CR:** *One of the reasons that has been*

*posited as to why Trump won has to do with anger of the working class over the mechanization of their jobs. How much do artificial intelligence, mechanization, and the post-industrial robotization of the economy directly influence political participation?*

**TDL:** This is obviously a problem. I think this is a political and economic time bomb. But remember, wasn't mechanization supposed to free people from work? Well, actually we can. But if we free people from work, we free them from income. That is why some people are putting on the table the Universal Basic Income concept.

But how do we address this problem? How do we make sure everyone has enough money to participate in the economy if the people do not have jobs? What are we going to do when automation frees people from work? Inequality is already widening. And if [the problem] is not addressed, it will heighten polarization. The raw material for demagogic arguments like Trump's will be out there [in the populace] more and more if this issue is not addressed.

**CR:** *Looking ten or twenty years ahead, what is the way to create a more equitable future?*

**TDL:** I think there has to be some way of distributing work and pay more equitably. Also, in the United States there has to be a better social safety net. Somehow that has to come out of the capital accumulation that we have now without diminishing economic initiative and incentive. These are tough questions. We also have to be sure that capital is

put to good use. For example, if we produce stuff and that stuff pollutes the environment, then we have to spend more money on cleaning up the pollution.

So some of this is unproductive and there needs to be a way to make changes to our economic system to put the economy to better use. We also need to find a way to move away from the short-term business success model. In this model short-term profitability is the aim of corporations so as to please stockholders in terms of profitability. This is not necessarily a good use of what corporations are doing from a social or economic perspective.

How we square that circle, I'm not sure. But one way you don't do it is by polarizing debate between people who allegedly believe in free enterprise and people who allegedly believe in socialism. We have got to have a smart discussion about those two concepts. And both these issues are here right now under the surface. Having a good discussion about these differences is hard to do. But we have to have a smart non-polarizing discussion about these views.

**CR:** *Where is the United States going in terms of being a civil society with continued values of democratic representation in the era of Trump?*

**TDL:** I think I can answer that question better in ... a year and a half. On what date?

**CR:** *I think you are referring to the U.S. presidential election on November 3, 2020.*

**TDL:** We are in for a rocky time right

now. Politically times are going to be bitter, polarized, and partisan. It is going to be nasty. Very nasty. If Trump loses, the question is, can the United States get its discourse back on keel?

We have to remember that Trump did not cause the divisiveness that exists in the United States today. That has been going on for years. It has been getting worse. Trump is then a symptom of that polarization. But he [Trump] is a person who is more disrespectful of democratic and civil liberty norms, so he is dangerous for that reason. And Trump has an appeal with his followers that has more of a demagogic quality to it. If Trump wins I think things are potentially dangerous. The Democrats would still likely hold one of the houses of Congress in order to check a second term of a Trump presidency.

But nonetheless, if Trump wins, he

would no longer have the shackle of re-election hanging over him and he would be freer to act. To some degree, from a democratic point of view, Trump is an unstable character. By this I mean, Trump's commitment to norms of democracy and open discourse and appropriate behavior are shaky at best, particularly if these instabilities are exacerbated with hard economic times and increased tensions with foreign countries. So, there are a lot of *ifs*, right? Either way we are in for a rough time. But it will be a rougher time if Trump gets reelected. It will be a more interesting time if he is not reelected because we will see how well the United States can pull its civil society back together in a more constructive way and work to enhance its democracy.



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