I believe I see the outlines of a theory that describes America's current political agony in terms of trends that go back over a half century. I'm going to show it to you here.

1/56

There are others on Twitter, whose work I follow and honor, who are doing related work. I hope that my work will be seen as integrative and not competitive. Here is a partial list.
@anelsona @sarahkendzior @JYSexton @leashless @Peter_Turchin

2/56

You will not see answers here, but new connections that raise new questions and new possibilities. This approach makes the work harder because it requires reaching across disciplines, and will therefore require new forms of collaboration.

3/56

Where it specifically differs is in its approach to finding and using common patterns from disciplines that are normally disconnected. You will see this in the way I use the "meme" concept to tie historical trends together, and in the "stress+trigger" pattern.

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In addition to systems thinking, the required skills probably include social psychology, individual psychology, history, economics, political science, and perhaps others.

5/56

This approach is producing a model of politics unlike any I've seen elsewhere, because it relies on agent-based models of change and cause-effect pipelines to tie together pieces from different disciplines that have little history of working together.

6/56

I can't do it all and I've convinced myself that it would be a mistake to wait until the part I can do is more complete. Rather, I'm going to show what I have and look for uptake.

7/56

Here is an overview from 30,000 feet. I've previously collected many citations but I'm minimizing them here to maintain focus.
* * *

Two trends began after World War 2 that combined to change American culture and put us where we are.

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1. There was a giant sigh of relief after the privations of the Depression and WW2 that led to a burst of consumerism, as exemplified by this 1955 Cadillac.

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The Human Potential Movement followed in the 1960's. Its descendants joined with consumerism into a trend of ever-more-radical individualism.

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You see the full expression of this trend today in the dominance in public language of terms like "individual rights" and "personal freedom" to the exclusion of "empathy" and "collective responsibility", which are what got us through World War 2.

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I call this individualism meme "I'm Alright, Jack". Here is part of its Wikipedia entry:

"I'm alright, Jack" is a British expression used to describe those who act only in their own best interests even if assistance to others would necessitate minimal effort on their behalf.

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"I limped down the aisle and asked a fellow to move along one seat so I could sit down, but he refused: 'I'm alright Jack'. So I hit him with my crutch, your Honour."
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I%27m_alright,_Jack

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2. The decade of the 1970's delivered a sequence of economic disruptions that transferred major sources of political power from labor to capital and created a monoculture of corporate profit as the sole measure of success.

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We already understand that monoculture and fragility are traveling companions.
https://twitter.com/conways_law/status/1250080351390744576

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This one-dimensional success-is-profit metric might have been first justified publicly in the Friedman Doctrine in 1970.
https://www.nytimes.com/1970/09/13/archives/a-friedman-doctrine-the-social-responsibility-of-business-is-to.html

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The Friedman Doctrine meme mated with I'm Alright, Jack and their offspring invaded the culture, crowding out the more communal value system that got us through the War.

We see this in the conflation in public dialog of measures of "the economy" and stock market indices.

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Establishment of a corporate-profit monoculture was followed and reinforced by the Nixon Shock in 1971, which decoupled the Dollar exchange rate and enabled global outsourcing by multinational corporations.

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Then came the 1973 Oil Crisis, which created the "energy independence" meme; that synergized with a new and powerful

Deregulation meme. We see this now in the intensity surrounding fracking, pipeline, and drilling issues.

19/56

The collective meme for the hegemony of this group of market-focused doctrines is often called "Neoliberalism". Its poster children were Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.
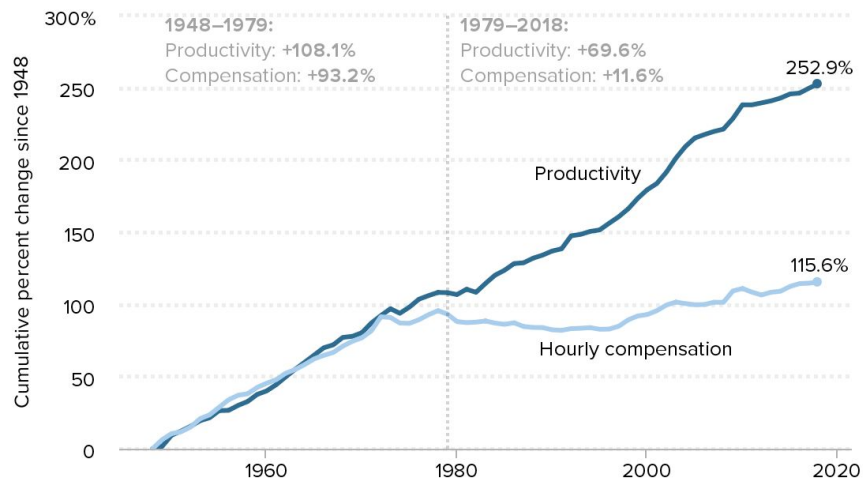https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot

20/56

Concurrently in the mid-1970's you see a noticeable shift of the financial benefits of ever-increasing productivity from Labor to Capital.

The gap between productivity and a typical worker's compensation has increased dramatically since 1979

Productivity growth and hourly compensation growth, 1948–2018

Notes: Data are for compensation (wages and benefits) of production/nonsupervisory workers in the private sector and net productivity of the total economy. "Net productivity" is the growth of output of goods and services less depreciation per hour worked.

Source: EPI analysis of unpublished Total Economy Productivity data from Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Labor Productivity and Costs program, wage data from the BLS Current Employment Statistics, BLS Employment Cost Trends, BLS Consumer Price Index, and Bureau of Economic Analysis National Income and Product Accounts

Updated from Figure A in *Raising America's Pay: Why It's Our Central Economic Policy Challenge* (Bivens et al. 2014)

Economic Policy Institute

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(There is dispute among economists around the magnitude of the separation between these two curves, based on the definition of inflation used in income. That doesn't change the reality of a discrete separation.)

22/56

The reduction of labor's input into production was accompanied by the related shift of decision-making control. Labor lost its primary source of power, the work stoppage, which led to the decline of the Labor Movement.

23/56

"The number of major work stoppages fell by 97% from 381 in 1970 to 187 in 1980 to only 11 in 2010….
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labor_history_of_the_United_States

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"The accumulating weaknesses were exposed when President Ronald Reagan—a former union president—broke the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) strike in 1981, dealing a major blow to unions."
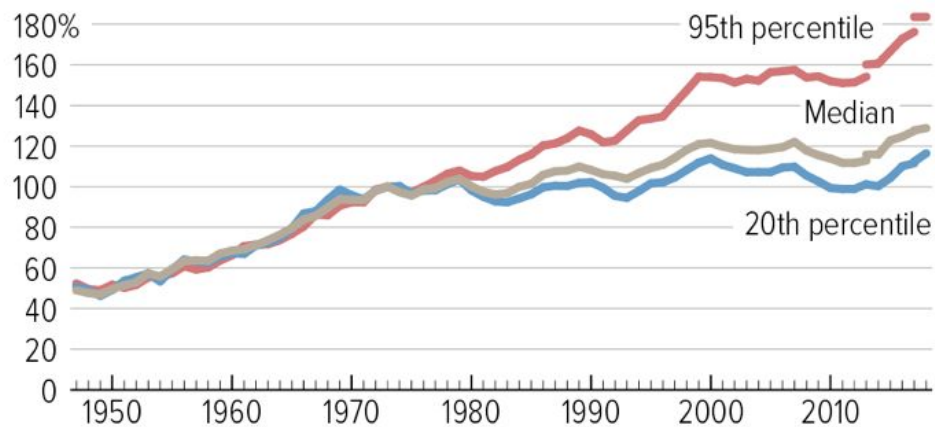
25/56

At the same time there began a growing trend of income inequality that persists to today.

An important research question will be finding and mapping the positive feedback loop that is driving this trend.

Income Gains Widely Shared in Early Postwar Decades — But Not Since Then

Real family income between 1947 and 2018, as a percentage of 1973 level

Note: Breaks indicate implementation of a redesigned questionnaire (2013) and an updated data processing system (2017).

Source: CBPP calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau Data

CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES | CBPP.ORG

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The sovereignty of the corporation and its profit led to the destruction of once-prosperous industrial regions in the US. PBS Frontline shows how it happened to Dayton, Ohio.
https://www.pbs.org/video/left-behind-america-tkmile/

27/56

Today the capture of American politics by the union of I'm Alright, Jack and Neoliberalism is exemplified by the 2010 Citizens United decision and the growing role of the Heritage Foundation as an aggregator of dark money in politics.
(See @SenWhitehouse.)

28/56

But this combination of trends is not the sole cause of today's political polarization. To explain I'll be using a model of destabilization well understood in biology and psychotherapy. I call it the "stress+trigger" pattern:

  underlying stress + trigger $\rightarrow$ destabilization.

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A brief descent into control engineering to explain the motivation. Most control models assume an operating region in which near-linearity can be assumed, and an operating point somewhere in the region that is safely away from its edges, outside which nonlinearity can occur.

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Stress moves the operating point toward an edge of the operating region, enabling a trigger to push it over the edge into nonlinearity, i.e., destabilization.

31/56

This model has a major presence in other fields: immunity in biology, and a key concept in psychotherapy called "window of tolerance". As a class they imply a *design pattern*, which I am adopting here.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Software_design_pattern#History

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Why do I use "meme" so much? Because memes are working identifiers that affinity groups like political parties use, not always consciously, as labels for concerted action. I write about this elsewhere using terms such as "prevailing narrative".
https://twitter.com/conways_law/status/1318633920993296386

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I'm using memes as the organizing principles of the trends I've identified. But memes are not defined by stories; memes go deeper.

How is it that the story can change but the behavior of the movement persists, as the Republican Party demonstrated between 2016 and 2020?

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The answer: *personal identity*, meaning the network of one's personal attachments, is a deeper motivator for personal action than logical reasoning. Thus,

→ memes are shorthand identifiers for their underlying invariants: nearly stable networks of personal attachments.

35/56

This is a radical notion, that political movements are normally driven not by narratives but by networks of interpersonal attachments. What does psychology say about that?

36/56

If you look up "attachment theory" you see that it's almost exclusively about relationships formed in childhood. There is a small body of theory about adult-adult romantic relationships, but nothing I can find about non-romantic adult-adult attachment.

37/56

I have found research that seeks to explain adult-adult political attachment through two means: personality type and powerful shared experience.

38/56

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1. Personality type.

   a. Research on authoritarian personalities. Bob Altemeyer is an authority on this topic, and has written about it with @JohnWDean. https://twitter.com/conways_law/status/1321480793429057537.

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   b. Research using the "Big Five" personality traits.
"…the Big Five model can be an immensely useful tool in predicting voters' behavior."
(@chrisinsilico in "Mindf*ck", p. 34)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Five_personality_traits

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2. Powerful shared experience. Team-building consultants understand this. JFK understood it when he announced the Apollo program. "We choose to go to the Moon in this decade..., not because [it is] easy, but because [it is] hard…"
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollo_program

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(You will see below that other forces soon began to unravel the national unity the 1969 Moon landing inspired. Additionally, I suspect that, ironically, it was technology driven by Apollo such as microcircuits that drove automation, further reducing labor's political power.)

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Ballot grouping in the November 2020 Presidential election vote count (necessitated by large-scale voting by mail) gave us a natural experiment that demonstrated the power of shared experience in voting patterns.

43/56

Several key states, in particular Pennsylvania, were flipped from Republican to Democratic days after election day because a large portion of urban (i.e., minority) votes in largely rural states were counted days later.

44/56

Political scientists typically attribute this minority clumping to ethnic affiliation but note the Cuban community in Miami-Dade as an exception. In my view, it is the different Cuban-American experience that demonstrates the primary importance of shared experience.
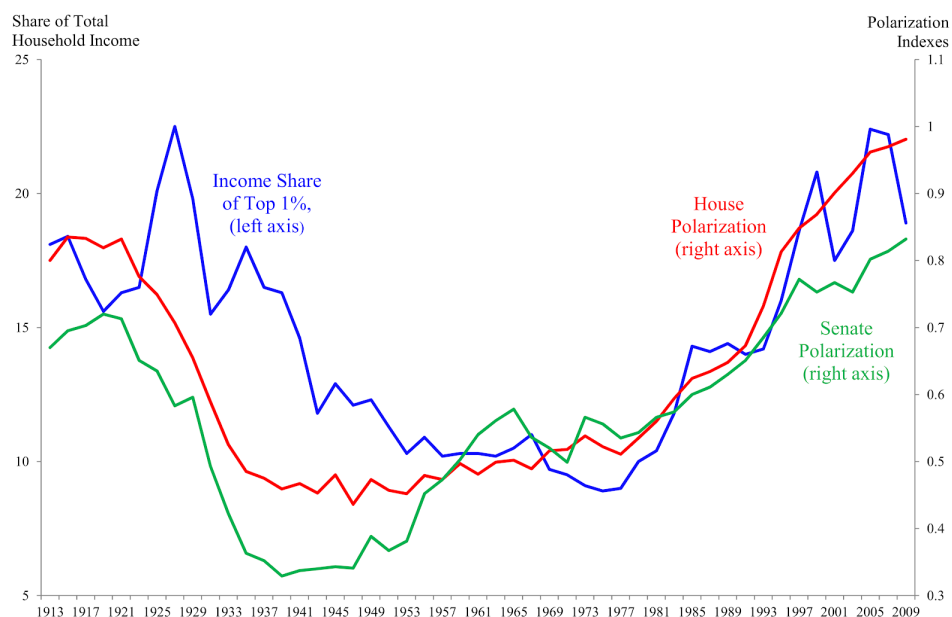
45/56

Here is the argument of this essay based on the stress+trigger pattern:

The financial inequality data show increasing stress on a segment of the US population beginning in the 1970's. This pattern has been called the "hollowing out of the middle class".

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In this figure the Dallas Fed correlates one measure of income inequality, shown in blue, with political polarization. You see what begins to happen in the 1970's.

https://www.dallasfed.org/~/media/documents/research/papers/2014/wp1408.pdf

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Over the period of the last 40+ years the growing income and asset inequality that began in the 1970's created an increasing underlying stress level in a portion of the US population.

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An important research question whose answer is generally taken for granted (except by Dean and Altemeyer; see above) is the extent to which this affected population coincides with the core, unshakable "Trump base".

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Our social immune system was generally able to suppress widespread destabilization from this stress until the arrival of a trigger--targeted suggestion to susceptible individuals on social media--that presented a novel threat for which no immune response existed.

50/56

The first concerted use of the stress+trigger pattern to destabilize society's immune response was applied to the Brexit referendum and the US 2016 Presidential election, as Christopher Wylie (@chrisinsilico) documents in "Mindf*ck".

51/56

Wylie describes the synthesis of personality theory and data analytics Cambridge Analytica used to characterize, and find on Facebook, a population susceptible to influence by targeted advertising. This was the efficient construction of an effective trigger.

52/56

Wylie has also asserted that identity, that is, relationship, is a more basic driver of action than logic. (This reference to fashion is not spurious. Flags and MAGA hats are, in this sense, fashion statements.) https://twitter.com/conways_law/status/1322291213492518912

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I believe that, acting alone, the underlying economic stress or social media might not have been sufficient to destabilize our politics.

It's the interaction of two separate threads of action via the stress+trigger pattern that makes this a multi-part, multi-discipline argument.

54/56

This multidisciplinary view also opens up a new road to hope. At vastly distant scales of aggregation, there can be a useful application of the stress+trigger pattern between politics and psychotherapy, in which the window of tolerance concept is key.

55/56

As Cambridge Analytica has demonstrated for perverse purposes, the same set of understandings might be useful for healing. See, for example, http://melconway.com/Home/pdf/vaccine.pdf.

The application of such an approach will require a multidisciplinary, system-aware collaboration.

I invite feedback; DMs are open.

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