

Editorial

Western Things Fall Apart?

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The BREXIT vote (a setback for the European project at least, and at worst a possible disaster), the rise of right-nationalist parties in Europe, and the by-now dreary tale of political dysfunction in the US, point to a troubling future for the West as a political-economic grouping and for the post-World War II institutions and structure it created. Much as the West rejoiced with the collapse of the USSR, markedly in the dangerously naïve liberal triumphalism that followed, as heralding the end of an era, now it appears that an era of liberal international relations among the Western bloc may be in peril.

Some of this may be due to external events and pressures: the trials of two long, expensive, inconclusive and difficult wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, both of which (but especially Iraq) have contributed significantly to regional instability compounded by the political and intellectual crisis in Islam; the surge in refugees from the Middle East in particularly into Europe, feeding into the rising xenophobia there; the rise of a nationalist Russia; the economic rise especially of China but also India, and the opening of global markets. But part of it is also a matter of internal politics, especially the development of a populist reaction to existing political formulas and to policy elites by those who see

themselves threatened – economically, politically, and in identity and cultural terms – by current trends.

In the US, this is exemplified in the left-populism of the Sanders campaign and in the right-populism of the Trump campaign: both step outside the bounds of the respective political parties they are nominally associated with. Both may reflect economic unease, though the left-populists are less identified with the identity-cultural fears, while the right-populists have bought into these latter fully. While the Democrats are surely not free of sin, the right-populists are particularly a revolt against the Republicans – yet in a peculiar vicious circle way. Republican strategy and practices, going back to the Southern Strategy, have long fed the fears, frustrations and anger of people worried that they were being “left behind” by changes. But these same people voted – in essence – to support the Republican/conservative-favoured economic policies of freer and less-regulated markets, freely-moving capital, etc. that in turn contributed to their economic pressures and which helped to produce the Great Recession. Having created and ridden this tiger so successfully for so long, the Republicans and those who heretofore have called themselves “Conservatives” have now lost control of it, and may be devoured by the child of their thoughts and actions over the past few decades.

In the case of Europe, BREXIT speaks in part to a continuing strong British ambivalence to the European Union and its predecessors, to a certain degree of nostalgia about Britain’s imperial and global past, and to its tradition of Parliamentary supremacy. It also speaks, however, to themes found elsewhere in the European Union and linked as well to a surge in rightist-nationalist parties in Europe in general: again, cultural-identity fears and economic pressures. Part of this is connected to the current refugee crisis, part to globalization pressures exacerbated by the resort to austerity responses by EU states compounding the debt crisis in Europe, but part also may flow from a pattern of EU overreach and under-capacity. The late Ernst Haas pointed out a pattern of “engrenage” – the insidious pressure of sector linkage – as a strategy for expanding the scope of European institutions. Thus, for example, the removal of tariff barriers would expose other obstacles to freer trade, and also other policy areas requiring a degree of co-ordination if the European project was to succeed, often through the generation of a crisis; failure to resolve the crisis through expanding the scope of European activity and capacity would lead to “encapsulation,” at least in the issue area affected. In the case of

the EU, the combination of the limited character of the Eurozone as a common currency versus the fiscal interests, concerns and practices of individual states, compounded by the austerity enforced on the PIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain) in the Eurozone crisis has been a significant factor. This time, however, resistance may lead to encapsulation – or worse – rather than forward movement.

The way forward for the West, dominated by the way events will unfold in the United States and in Europe, is not clear. Nor is it clear how the current order might possibly be salvaged, at least to a degree. Perhaps it is time to rethink the pattern of European Union institutions and policies. Perhaps it is time to address some deep institutional problems in the American electoral system to resolve the dysfunction, the disconnect between voters and the political system, and the hyper-partisanship and polarization so apparent now. Perhaps it is also time to reassess the Reagan-Thatcher neoliberal economic approach and – as the IMF now seems to be doing to at least some degree – to reassess the role of fiscal policy and the free movement of capital in national and international economics.

From a Security and Strategic Studies perspective, and an International Relations theory perspective, other implications also flow. Internal/external and foreign policy/systemic divisions – two solitudes often relied upon to simplify and structure thinking in these disciplines – clearly are incapable of addressing the profound and strong linkages and forces acting across levels. So, too, the economic, the political, the military and the international institutional realms are strongly connected. Realists such as John Mearsheimer once suggested, if memory serves, that the collapse of the USSR would itself threaten European unity, perhaps also NATO, as a crucial external threat was removed. Perhaps this is an important factor now in play; if so, will a new, Putinesque Russia serve such a unifying function, or will Putin be able to exacerbate division to achieve a long-term goal of Soviet policy, inhibiting European union? But many of the challenges now faced by the Western post-World War II and post-Cold War liberal order seem to have arisen from other sources (e.g. refugee flows), and from self-inflicted wounds that can only be appreciated by stepping outside the bounds of a narrow realism, or perhaps even the slightly broader scope of neo-classical realism. It would be a supreme irony if Mearsheimer's outcome – for the EU and for the West – was due in

large part to factors more readily appreciated, for example, by a resort to the “complex interdependence” of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye.