



The World in Transit: Going Beyond Myopic Visions

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Abstract

The world has entered the new Axial Age. Numerous transformations are taking place in the models of social, economic, and political activity, in projections of power and authority. The political landscape and its relevant “content structures” (democracy and liberalism, right and left, globalisation and nationalism etc.) are acquiring new systemic qualities. If we want to avoid fighting with the ghosts of the past, it is necessary not only to take into account these transformations but examine them from within. To see the complexity of things, to understand the transformation of the world in transit, we need to get rid of myopic, linear interpretations of seemingly familiar but morphing notions like “globalism and nationalism”. Who can manage the complexity of the “plurilateral” world we are stepping into? What kind of political architecture will be needed to support the nascent multi- or rather “pluripolarity”? How can we synchronise governance with inevitable digitalisation of politics? How can we enable decision-making mechanisms at the global level? These questions need to be answered. Nobody will miss the train to “a bright tomorrow”. Historical time flows for everyone—you cannot hide “behind the wall” to avoid it. No actor of a historical process can bury his head in the sand of the comfortable present, indulging in “counter-clockwise revolt”. The future will come for everyone, but not everyone will hold an equal place in it.

The most troublesome concepts are the ones we take for granted. This is not because they are familiar but because they are embedded in our way of thinking. They roll off our tongues without our even attempting to think what they really mean. We take them axiomatically as established truths.

One of these concepts is the idea that nationalism is the antonym of globalism.

And indeed, when you read a newspaper today, you get the impression that the nationalist challenges confronting the globalist model have moved to the centre of political discourse, winning supporters in the United States, the United Kingdom, as well as many other places in Europe, and rising in strength all over the globe. The rise of nationalism looks like the decisive character of the day, placing globalism on the defensive side.

The so-called anti-globalisation wave has become one of the most popular themes in panel discussions, articles, television programmes and the like. Do not take it too seriously. Globalisation cannot be stopped.

A short article will not suffice for dealing with such complex issues, but to begin with, globalisation is a much older phenomenon than the notion of nations. Contrary

to widespread misperception by Friedrich Hayek and other liberal economists of Mont Pelerin Society following the end of World War II, that a nation is something “natural and primordial”, while globalisation is “imposed” on the world, globalisation is an objective process, according to a majority of historians, which dates back to the 15th century. It was then that, thanks to some great geographical discoveries, human history became global and human societies started exchanging goods, ideas, diseases and people within a single global network. After that the rapid improvements in communications and transportation have steadily tightened these links, integrating the entire world into a single network of exchange.

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Nations in their turn, according to modern theories, are the product of mainly 17th and 18th centuries. Their creation was largely rooted in the process of globalisation and was to a certain extent a social construct rather than a natural phenomenon, as brilliantly put forth by Benedict Anderson in his 1983 classic *Imagined Communities*.

What is labelled today as the “nationalist wave” is reflective of dissatisfaction with domestic affairs rather than a conscious disengagement with the rest of the world. While public sentiment regarding changing national identity or political and economic power is very real, de-globalisation is highly unlikely.

Look at Brexit that is used as a “canonical argument” supporting the crisis of globalisation. If we look a little deeper than media laments we will see that this process can hardly serve as a proof for de-globalisation. On the contrary, the brexitiers wishing to leave EU were in fact seeking more globalisation, more free market, more deregulation than the EU provided. One of the major drivers of Brexit were British based hedge funds that wanted to get rid of EU limitations and regulations which complicated their global aspirations.

Next, demographic shifts suggest multiculturalism is refining our present and future. In the US, for instance, demographers are predicting a “minority majority” in the next 40 years. The fact that Silicon Valley CEOs have vocally opposed the Trump administration’s “Muslim ban” demonstrates that aside from being unethical, xenophobia is actually bad for business.

In fact, terms like “domestic” and “foreign” have become increasingly obscure, and for good reason: during the last few decades, transnational corporations have increasingly constructed global value chains in which the “head firm” outsources production through intricate global networks that it establishes and controls.

“American” cars, for instance, often contain less than half of locally produced parts while “Japanese” cars are often comprised mainly of US parts and assembled in Kentucky or Ohio.

No matter what political leaders say and how often anti-immigration proponents go to the streets to demand, interdependence is growing. The volumes of goods, services and capital

crossing borders continue to increase, and so do the numbers of people working outside their home countries.

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As Or Rosenboim points out in *Foreign Affairs*, “Globalism, in this post-war definition, meant an awareness of the political implications of the interconnected globe. The recognition of the world’s “oneness” did not mean that political or cultural homogeneity was inevitable or desirable. Very few globalists argued for the abolishing of existing states or the banning of patriotic ideologies. Rather, the most influential globalist thinkers measured the desirability of balancing unity and diversity, according to their understanding of how best to create a stable, prosperous, and peaceful world order.”

So why then did the entire world hold its breath due to what appeared to be routine votational process (Brexit, Trump, Putin, Erdogan, the Netherlands, France, Venezuela, Filipinas, Austria, Germany, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Catalonia etc.)?

The answer is simple: what was at stake was neither the electoral success of one party or another, nor globalism versus nationalism battles but the victory or defeat of democratic values. The fear of catastrophe, which was palpable in the case of all these elections, demonstrates the consensus collapse in the area of fundamental values on which the democratic system is built.

Therefore, the name of the threat is populism, not nationalism that it camouflages in, and consequentially it is not globalism that is the victim but pluralism of modern political culture rooted in the Enlightenment ideas of liberalism which stands basically for respect for freedom as the highest human value.

This value has generated the relevant norm of behaviour—respect not only your own freedom, but also others’, thus turning pluralism into the basis for a true democratic system.

As Jan-Werner Müller rightly argues in his recent groundbreaking book *What Is Populism?*, populism is inimical to pluralism. Its target is pluralist, liberal democracy, with those vital constitutional and social checks and balances that prevent any “tyranny of the majority” from prevailing over individual human rights, safeguards for minorities, independent courts, a strong civil society, and independent, diverse media.

It is worth noting that the nature of populism has changed because today, populism shapes its constituencies rather than representing them. As a result, it aggregates values and phobias sometimes making very strange “bedfellows”. Timothy Garton Ash brilliantly exemplified these issues in his recent lecture “Does European populism exist?” at the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University.

In 1997 Fareed Zakaria concluded his prophetic article “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy” that largely predicted the modern political process’ fall into the archaism trap by pointing out that “Woodrow Wilson took America into the twentieth century with a challenge to make the world safe for democracy. As we approach the next century, our task is to make democracy safe for the world.”

Indeed, we have entered the disruptive world of risk societies when globalisation and the progress of digital technology are altering power structures and reshaping individuals, organisations, states and societies.

With the acceleration of globalisation, the risks to the international system have grown to the extent that former localised threats are no longer locally containable but are now potentially dangerous to global security and stability.

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At the beginning of the century, threats such as ethnic conflicts, infectious diseases, and terrorism as well as a new generation of global challenges including climate change, energy security, food and water scarcity, international migration flows and new technologies are increasingly taking the centre stage.

A new world is emerging, in which a multitude of actors (not necessarily state ones) are competing with each other through hybrid wars, economic sanctions, virtual deterrence, cyber and information wars.

On the other hand, world politics is increasingly defined by countries’ internal problems, and not their direct competition. Or, rather, external competition is a consequence of internal disruption, when growing contradictions become increasingly difficult to untangle, as exemplified by the Russian intervention in Ukraine.

At this turning point, the skidding mechanisms of democracy along with the growing assertiveness of autocratic regimes point to a danger that the international order of the past quarter century—rooted at least nominally in the principles of liberalism and multilateralism—will give way to a world in which individual “strongmen” and authoritarian regimes pursue their own narrow interests without meaningful constraints, without regard for global peace, freedom, prosperity and sustainability.

Unfortunately, incompetent foreign policy of the current US administration exacerbates these dangers because it not only provides these regimes’ internal legitimisation but also stimulates their consolidation as a distinct “interest group” in international relations.

In particular, it is worth recalling Zbigniew Brzezinski's important warning to avoid developing political pressure simultaneously on three neighbouring countries—Russia, China and Iran. Such pressure can lead to a new continental union of autocracies, because despite the contradictions and mistrust between these countries, the external threat can unite them. The world will be lucky if conflicts are contained in cyberspace and propagandistic media battles. Therefore, it is disturbing that a new “authoritarian international” is already increasingly succeeding in defining international political discourse.

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In fact, neoliberalism has been poisoning liberal values. According to *Freedom House*, 2016 marked the 11th consecutive year of decline in global freedom which demonstrates that we deal with a dangerous trend rather than an accidental phenomenon.

Furthermore, two of the 15 countries which saw the greatest fall in the level of freedom last year are EU countries: Hungary and Poland. There was reportedly a negative trend in four other member states. In the case of Hungary, and increasingly also in Poland, this is not just a ‘blip on the road to democracy’, but a systemic action to dismantle the pillars of the rule of law, judicial independence, attempts to curtail freedom of the press and the pluralism of civil society.

‘Post-democracy’ has become a standard term in contemporary political theory and some intellectuals like Wendy Brown claim that today democracy has become a ‘gloss of legitimacy for its inversion’ insofar as ‘even democracy’s most important super icon—“free elections”—has become circuses of marketing and management, from spectacles of fundraising to spectacles of targeted voter “mobilisation”’.

A recent study by the *Pew Research Center* demonstrates that the support for democracy is dwindling across the world. Globally only 23% still believe in democratic values, while 47% are less committed and 13% prefer non-democratic options. Based on the factors considered above, even in the US, the correlation is a staggering 40%-46%-7%.

The popular reasons for this “growing vulnerability of liberal democracy” are: economic strains, rising social inequality, political squabble, the effects of globalization, migration and moral and cultural decadence.

While some of these phenomena are regional or local, the rise of authoritarianism and populism is global, affecting both non-Western and Western countries.

Clearly, many are unhappy with the current state of affairs all over the world. But the neoliberal economic system, and not globalisation, is the culprit. The neoliberal rhetoric was all about prosperity “trickling down” from above. But it never worked that way. Those workers and their children, now languishing in impoverished rust-belt cities, received another blow during the banking crisis of 2008.

A feeling of growing disempowerment has led to political cynicism and a disconnect between the general public and the body of politics. Rates of public participation and

confidence in institutions and traditional parties have plummeted. With popular anger on the rise, populism has made a spectacular (re)entry on the political scene.

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What disquiets the electorate is perhaps not the adverse effects of globalisation, palmed off to them by populist leaders, but their position in host countries and particularly inequality, which is not uniquely economic.

In the deindustrialised rust-belts, with their jobs gone, people lose not only income and social security, but meaning, dignity and social involvement. They are frustrated by inequality of opportunities, inequality of respect, inequality of attention.

Just recall your latest local newspaper stories. A majority of them are dedicated to global abstractions: human life has become obscured by discourse focused on security, geopolitics and national interest when authored by hardline realists, or deliberations about democratisation, globalisation and humanitarian interventions by intransigent liberals. And if they speak about individuals, we hear mostly about the “monstrous Harvey Weinstein”, but when was the last time you read about the families from low-income communities? It is only natural that they shout out to those in power: we exist, notice us, pay attention!

We should not forget that politics is always local and democracy is not about who shines on TV screens. It is about people, their life and...(!) dignity.

The main issue today is not the future of globalism but who can manage the complexity of a “plurilateral” world we are stepping into. What kind of political architecture will be needed to support the nascent multi- or rather “pluri-polarity”? How can we sync democracy with the inevitable digitalisation of politics? How can we enable democratic decision-making mechanisms at the global level?

And only this truly transformative agenda, reflective of the challenges and growing complexities of the 21st century, has the potential to “trump” populists’ strongest card, to be the only alternative to the bankrupt neoliberal mainstream.

These questions need to be answered. Nobody will miss the train to “a bright tomorrow”. Historical time flows for everyone—you cannot hide “behind the wall” to avoid it. No actor of a historical process can bury his head in the sand of the comforting resentment, indulging in “counter-clockwise revolts”. Globalisation is here to stay, and the economic logic of openness will supersede any political aberrations but at what price? The future will come for everyone, but not everyone will hold an equal place in it. History always punishes those who are late.

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