Challenges to the Western Liberal Order:
The End of 'the West'?

Michael O'NEILL

The Western liberal order is a compound of ideas and agency, institutions and shared values that sustain the liberal project and shape its politics. A system established by the victorious 'united nations' at the end of the Second World War to ensure sound money, facilitate free trade and other forms of commercial exchange. Complementary to these liberal economic goals was maintenance of global peace by mediating conflicts.[1] The United Nations and its agencies were the principal global interlocutors, assisted by newly created European institutions designed to reconcile former enemies within a liberal and democratic order on the Continent that had long been the principal locus of war and conflict. Rebuilding a devastated Continent restored the national state as the primary agency of government and the fount of political allegiance and legitimacy, but with the statist architecture of the Westphalian system constrained by novel transnational institutions.

Common values sustained by this institutional fabric are the ethical ballast of the liberal international system John Ruggie described as 'embedded liberalism': free trade and open markets, justiciable human rights, the rule of law, civic culture and democratic governance.[2] Arrangements that underpinned a new social contract between free market capitalism and redistributive welfare, and intended to ameliorate the poverty and social injustice that pre-1945 had given rise to extremist politics and total war. The post-war liberal order was the culmination of the West's long march from barbarism to civilization: moral and material progress rooted in the values of the European Enlightenment, the Reformation and latterly the technological and cultural achievements of the democratic and industrial revolutions of the eighteenth century and after. A process of liberal internationalism and social progress aptly described by Karl Polanyi as 'The Great Transformation', and characterized by later writers as the age of 'modernity'.[3] Lately however the idea of inexorable 'progress' central to this liberal narrative has faced serious challenge, although whether this amounts to existential crisis remains to be seen.[4]

The financial crash of 2008 had far-reaching consequences for the Western liberal order, although there were stirrings of social anxiety over what some saw as disconnection between 'remote' elites and the wider public even before this cataclysmic event. The fall-out from Washington's unilateral decision to foreclose on the Bretton

1. J. ZIELONKA, *Europe's new civilizing missions: the EU's normative power discourse*, in: *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 1(2013), pp.35-55.
2. J. RUGGIE, *International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order*, in: *International Organization*, 2(1982), pp.379-415.
3. K. POLANYI, *The Great Transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, (2nd edition with a Foreword by Joseph E. Stiglitz), Beacon Press, Boston, 2002.
4. S. HOLMES, *The Liberal Idea*, in: *The American Prospect*, Fall 1991.

Woods machinery in 1971, followed by the inflationary rise in the spot price of oil in the aftermath of Yom Kippur war in 1974 added to turbulence. All of these events with cultural as much as political consequences for the post-war contract made between the political classes and peoples who had endured the Great Depression and the catharsis of world war. The European institutions contributed to peace and prosperity in Western Europe, the EC/EU as a full partner in the liberal order rather than merely a dependency of Washington. The late Tony Judt, hardly uncritical of the European idea, observed that 'few would have predicted it sixty years before, but the 20th century might yet belong to Europe'. Similarly, Rockwell Schnaebel, former American Ambassador to the EU, proclaimed Europe as the 'the rising power', and Mark Leonard likewise predicted that Europe rather than America would 'run the 21st Century'.[5] Neither prediction remotely realised although hardly regarded as far-fetched at the time. Contemporary commenters are more circumspect about predicting European futures, with globalization often cited as the principal reason for declining public confidence in the Western liberal order, not least the principal instigator of insurgent populist politics that challenges the liberal order and undermines democratic politics.[6] There is widespread disquiet over perceived disconnect between governors and governed, declining trust in elites and loss of faith in the tacit social contract, the 'bargain' made between elites and citizens in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. The Western liberal order still prevails, although much less socially inclusive, and labelled by advocates and critics alike as 'neo-liberalism'.[7] A marked shift away from social liberalism defined by its collective purpose and the commonweal, redistributive politics and policy replaced nowadays by what some describe as 'possessive individualism'.[8]

The idea of 'The West' was always contested, an ambiguous construction and discourse even for its principal social constituencies, notwithstanding broadly shared values about the purposes of politics. The liberal international 'order' is now in question and on several levels: critiqued for lacking economic fairness and social justice, challenged by many who count themselves casualties of predatory corporatism. A transformation one historian describes as the 'neo- liberal train' set running by supply-side reforms associated with the individualization and marketization of the social economy that 'began to (roll) cross Europe in 1989'.[9] The West is still contending with the consequences of these disruptive material changes and cultural shifts, with rising public dismay and even visceral anger directed at political elites, the governing parties of the centre-right and centre-left that adopted neo-liberalism as their model

---

5. R. SCHNABEL, F. ROCCA, *The Next Superpower?: The Rise of Europe and Its Challenge to the United States*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, 2005; M. LEONARD, *Why Europe Will Run the 21st Century*, Public Affairs, New York, 2006.

6. C. HAY, B. ROSAMOND, *Globalization, European integration and the discursive construction of economic imperatives*, in: *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2(2002)**,** pp.147-167**.**

7. For an overview, see T.C. BOAS, J. GANS-MORSE, *Neoliberalism: From New Liberal Philosophy to Anti-Liberal Slogan*, in: *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 2(2009), pp.137–161.

8. G.J. IKENBERRY, *The Liberal International Order and Its Discontents*, in: R. FRIEDMAN et al. (eds), *After Liberalism?*, Palgrave, Houndmills, 2013, at Chapter Five, pp.91-102.

9. P. THER, *Europe Since 1989: A History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2016.

for public policy. Mistrust in liberal politics that has contributed to insurgent politics and a changing political culture. A liberal constitutional order still prevails, based not only in law but also on cultural constraints and personal forbearance instilling habits and conventions of toleration and decency in politics. This civic and civil anchor is now under threat, moderation subverted by visceral politics, what Ruth Ben-Ghiat calls a politics of 'memory' embedded in socially exclusive identities, a zero-sum politics no longer subject to liberal restraint and more amenable to extreme and sometimes to extremist predilections.[10]

Some commentators who celebrated the historic triumph of the liberal order after Communism's collapse now write of 'turbulence' and some even of 'existential' crisis. Francis Fukuyama's famous boast in 1992 that 'liberal democracy remains the only coherent political aspiration', his prediction of nothing less dramatic than the 'end of history' with 'The West' as 'the last man standing' now seems merely hubris. Still 'standing' but on altogether less secure foundations, less confident of either purpose or destiny, confronted by unprecedented challenges from within as much as from without, not least from insurgent politics. Events confirm the incipient if not existential crisis of liberal politics. We focus here on three distinct yet connected issues. Firstly, the Brexit vote in the 2016 British referendum, an event that has far-reaching consequences, not only for EU-UK relations but also for the European idea and institutional architecture, a principal agency of liberal internationalism. The second challenge to the Western liberal order is the emergence of a vulgar and counterfactual politics, evidenced at every level of contemporary discourse and most spectacularly by the phenomenon of *Trumpismo*. An illiberal politics that trades in untruth and hyperbole, uses bombast and wilful manipulation, and falsifies hard evidence for malign purposes. The celebration of 'fake news', 'alternative facts' and scapegoating over measured debate, reasoned argument and evidence-based essential for democratic politics. The third challenge here is the rise of insurgent movements and parties ill disposed towards liberal politics and intent on subverting it. A politics driven by cultural anxiety and anger, directed primarily against what its activists regard as complacent and mendacious liberal elites, and drawing its political energy from visceral intolerance of 'otherness'. The very antithesis of the cultural tolerance and social inclusivism that has defined liberal politics over the duration, with wilful disrespect for 'others', crude vilification and intimidation of opponents by means of cyber-bullying in the electronic public space that is now the principal arena for public engagement, and clear evidence of changing attitudes and conduct in contemporary politics.[11]

These developments raise serious questions about the capacity of the liberal order to respond to and even survive the insurgent challenge. How far are these challenges merely periodic discord that usually accompanies structural shifts, but over time in

---

10. R. BEN-GHIAT, *Donald Trump's Authoritarian Politics of Memory*, in: *The Atlantic*, 22.01.2017.
11. See for instance the illuminating but disheartening account of declining public and elite engagement in liberal politics in P. MAIR, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, Verso, London, 2013.

liberal societies accommodated and eventually resolved? Or are they evidence of imminent crisis, and if so how might, the Western order recover political equilibrium and restore public confidence in a liberal democratic politics?

Brexit and the Challenge to Liberal Internationalism

The Brexit vote in the 2016 referendum is both a signal moment and symptom of declining public confidence in politics.[12] What is Euroscepticism's appeal for many voters in a country where politics and diplomacy has long been well disposed to liberal internationalism? The vote to 'leave' the EU certainly confounds this liberal legacy. A decision that reflects growing disquiet at the grass roots about cultural identity, especially amongst a constituency grown mistrustful, indeed hostile towards what is seen as a remote' liberal elite, the latter a political class whose disconnection from the body politic is expressed as values and policy preferences that many 'ordinary' citizens disparage. For instance, multi-culturalism, international development aid and human rights, European integration and open borders, and free trade rather than protecting jobs and 'stemming the tide' of immigration that depresses the price of labour and places unacceptable burdens on the welfare state. This nativist and insular outlook is changing both the discourse and culture of politics, and over time it has reduced the support base of the mainstream parties of government that represent these liberal preferences.

To what extent is Brexit a symptom of this anti-liberal malaise, or is it merely familiar British exceptionalism, predictable in a country that as Prime Minister Theresa May confirmed has never entirely comfortable with the European project, except as a common market.[13] Or perhaps Brexit is collateral damage resulting from ideological wrangling in the Conservative party, a failed gamble by a lackadaisical Prime Minister David Cameron desperate to save his party from civil war, and a vote he naively assumed he would carry off successfully?[14] There is evidence to support each of these interpretations. For observers however, the referendum is something altogether more insidious than merely failed tactics, but rather conclusive evidence of a fundamental mood-change in British politics. Culture shift but one by no means confined to Britain, indeed working through the sociological fabric of contemporary politics throughout the West. Brexit in this narrative is but one of many instances of grass-roots insurgence against liberal politics by those who feel excluded, see them-

---

12. S. HOBOLT, *The Brexit vote: a divided nation, a divided continent*, in: *Journal of European Public Policy*, 9(2016), pp.1259-1277.

13. PM's Florence Speech: a new era of cooperation between the UK and the EU, September 22 2017, published online at https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-florence-speech-a-new-era-of-cooperation-and-partnership-between-the-uk-and-the-eu.

14. For a detailed account of the politics of Brexit, see T. SHIPMAN, *All Out War: The Full Story of How Brexit Sank Britain's Political Class*, William Collins, London 2017.

selves more 'losers' than beneficiaries of remorseless globalization.[15] A lacuna is clearly opening between governors and governed, elites and people and not only in Britain. Political allegiance and partisanship is no longer determined as it once was primarily by embedded cleavages based on social class, but increasingly by new claims on primordial and communal identity. Insidious change is loosening the affective glue that has held the liberal order together throughout long decades of modernity.[16] Cultural anxieties are reconfiguring a politics previously denominated primarily by the materialist clash of left and right, as a post-material politics of belonging and identity about 'who' we are or at least who we 'think' we are. In short, there are altogether new claims now on political allegiance that reflect this transformation in the sociological base of party politics.[17]

The EU has become a target for those who are experiencing cultural anxieties, and not least in the United Kingdom, with 'Europe' a convenient scapegoat for discomfiting change. The EU has become a particular focus for rising anti-liberal and nativist sentiments. A lightening conductor for those angry about governance directed by supposedly rootless and geographically remote elites who prioritize the interests of corporate business and other special insider interests over those of 'ordinary people' such as organized labour or consumers. The ideological rationale for Single European Market as celebrated by Brussels is classically liberal and internationalist, and primarily favours the interests of global corporatism. As critics see it, the EU deploys free movement (of goods, services, money and people) and an integrated labour market as merely convenient cover for depressing wages and maximising corporate profits, an outcome radical economists describe as a 'race to the bottom'.[18] The idea of European interference in sovereign affairs compounds a deeper sense of historical detachment and cultural distance from 'Europe' amongst the British electorate. The end of Empire and subsequently industrial decline has given rise to a sense of cultural degeneration and latterly of national failure, predisposing many older mostly poorer and less cosmopolitan Britons to be more receptive to the dog-whistle politics of nativism that trades in infantile conspiracy theories about cultural miscegenation, or being ruled by foreigners in Brussels. A situation exploited for what is mostly malign purposes by a xenophobic media that has always wilfully misrepresented the EU. For many who voted 'leave', Brexit is an outward expression of insular and self-regarding nationalism, predictable response to supposed national decline. A familiar narrative that both exalts and exaggerates a 'glorious' past, soon to be 'recovered' as bountiful trade networks and global heft that will, according to its tribunes, restore national self-confidence and bring economic salvation.

---

15. J. CURTICE, *A Question of Culture or Economics? Public Attitudes to the European Union in Britain*, in: *Political Quarterly*, 2(2015), pp.209-218.

16. M. GOODWIN, *Why Britain backed Brexit. The UK in a Changing Europe*, Kings College, University of London, July 2016, available online at http://ukandeu.ac.uk/why-britain-backed-brexit%e2%80%8f.

17. A. BARNETT, *The Lure of Greatness. England's Brexit and America's Trump*, Unbound Books, 2017.

18. See for example T. PIKETTY, A. GOLDHAMMER, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Harvard University Press, Harvard, 2014.

The sociology of Brexit reveals why the decision to quit the EU was made and by whom. Many voters bought into the narrative of cultural exceptionalism, of a future best navigated by recreating the past. A sense of national precocity and self-reliance with widespread appeal in a country that has been a sovereign state with a distinct sense of its national identity since the later Middle Ages.[19] Anxiety over 'identity' has given rise to a sense of cultural loss that the Brexit campaign was able to mobilise for its own purposes. A reactive, indeed a reactionary reflex that sociologist David Goodhart interprets as backlash against the liberal cosmopolitan values and cultural preferences. In effect, a cultural demarcation between nativists and metropolitans that echoes but does not exactly replicate the class divisions that once defined British politics. On one side a mostly younger, socially and geographically mobile and well educated demographic disposed to post-1960s post-material values: multiculturalism, multiple identities, metropolitan values and alternative life styles associated with post-national politics and post-capitalist society. People with broader social horizons and better life chances, more at ease with change, comfortable with 'otherness', convinced about the benefits of free movement and open borders, the capacity to live, love, study, work across borders. People whose sense of personal 'worth' and cultural identity is by no means threatened, indeed enhanced by feeling connected to the wider world beyond the 'merely' national community, and who Goodhart categorizes as the 'people from anywhere'.

The other side of this socio-cultural cleavage are the 'people from somewhere': a socially disadvantaged culturally parochial (mostly) white working class, who live either in rural backwaters or in the materially deprived inner cities and small towns of the English Midlands and the North. Communities where civic pride once flourished, work had been plentiful skilled and relatively well paid, and 'foreigners' rarely encountered. Denizens who in current sociological jargon feel neglected, 'left behind' by the metropolitanism of the capital city and the cosmopolitanism of globalisation.[20] A constituency that feels itself disenfranchised by a liberal elite preaching consensus politics and as such available for mobilisation by Eurosceptic insurgents and populist and nativist movements deploying a narrative of betrayal and grievance. A constituency and a political dynamic by no means confined to the United Kingdom, although the Brexit campaign has been its most spectacular outcome.

Movements trading on material and cultural anxieties are a feature of politics throughout the EU and in America too, where both alt-right and new left populism was a prominent feature of the 2016 presidential campaign.[21] As such, Brexit is no outlier or isolated case, by no means an intermittent outcry from marginalized Britons with an inflated sense of historical exceptionalism. Similar rage is vented against America's liberal elite – the so-called Washington 'swamp' – and for similar reasons

19. S. TILFORD, *The British and their exceptionalism. Insight*, Centre for European Reform, London, May 2017.
20. E. KAUFMANN, *Brexit Voters: NOT the Left Behind*, The Fabian Society, 24.06.2016.
21. E. GLASER, *Elites, right wing populism, and the left*, in: *openDemocracy UK*, November 2016, available online at https://www.opendemocracy.net/uk/eliane-glaser/elites-right-wing-populism-and-left.

by the people Hilary Clinton uncharitably dismissed as 'deplorables'. These new insurgent movements are 'of their time' gaining political momentum and more insidious than merely intermittent political spasm. This is insurgent politics that vents political anger against mainstream parties and liberal politics and notably in Europe at the European institutions in 'remote' Brussels. A preference for cultural affinity over class solidarity or amorphous ideas about internationalism that appeal to ideologues or idealists rather more than to ordinary people are the ontological drivers or incitements to insurgent politics. This is not to say that the political culture of the liberal West by any means has reverted to xenophobia yet neither is the public mood any longer receptive to liberal internationalism. Rather, anxieties over cultural identity, about 'who we are' is reshaping if not yet replacing the 'old' binary politics of materialism over 'who gets what' and 'how much'.[22] A post-material or at least non-materialist politics is on the rise and with it an ideological narrative and political preferences that no longer reflect primary divisions and political attachments based on social class that were formerly the basis for political partisanship, ideological preference and party allegiance during the industrial age.[23]

An insurgent mood is evident throughout the West. Meanwhile, the liberal elite is in turn complacent or dismissive about the insurgent challenge, only latterly acknowledging the problem but thus far without offering any convincing policy let alone ideological response. These sentiments were patent in the 'leave' vote, but Brexit cannot be neatly pigeon holed as nativist reflex or populist twitch. Populist angst at disconnected elites is only part of the explanation. Even mainstream voters who occupy the liberal centre-ground of politics are concerned about exponential loss of sovereignty, too many policy competencies transferred from national government to transnational governance in Brussels. Moreover, the claim by the liberal and mostly governing elite that globalisation requires yet more European integration, has given rise to 'soft' variant of Euroscepticism that appeals even to moderate voters, and is by no means confined to British voters. Brexit then has many causes, is by no means a singular event whose underlying *modus vivendi* is restricted to an offshore island. Explaining its logics is now a thriving academic industry, yet resolving its challenges with a view to restoring public confidence in liberal politics is quite another matter. How might the insurgent mood and mind-set that is driving Brexit be contained and public confidence in the liberal international be restored, or is the situation beyond recovery? What eventual outcome for Brexit will inflict least damage on the EU and its role as a mainstay of a rules-based liberal international order?

The best outcome would surely be a 'soft' Brexit that averts the likely crisis of Britain 'crashing out' of the EU without any arrangements in place for continuing trade relations and other forms of co-operation with erstwhile partners. Yet as things currently stand, the likelihood of such an outcome is declining. A year and more after

---

22. S. BORNSCHIER, *Cleavage Politics and the Populist Right: The New Cultural Conflict in Western Europe*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2010.
23. R. INGLEHART, *The changing structure of political cleavages in Western society*, in: R.J. DALTON, S. FLANAGAN and P.A. BECK (eds), *Electoral change in advanced industrial democracies*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984.

the withdrawal negotiations began, little of substance has been resolved. Periodic diplomatic encounters in Brussels, whilst settling preliminary issues such as Britain's residual 'debts' and the rights of EU citizens residing in post-Brexit Britain have failed to reach agreement on the critical issues, principally the terms of future trading relations. There are divisions in both camps as much as between them, but mostly on the British side and not least in the governing Conservative party, about what sort of Brexit and how best to realise it. The intransigent Eurosceptic wing of the Conservative party remains impervious to compromise, preferring to quit the EU without a trade deal, rather than compromise on what it regards as the fundaments of national sovereignty.

Meanwhile, EU negotiators stand firm, not so much out of malice but determined to drive a hard bargain on the 'divorce' terms in order to deter future secessions. There is little outright malice on the EU side, although a view exists in the Brussels institutions and some Member States too that Brexit is an opportunity to 'punish' what are seen as 'arrogant' Britons for turning their backs on *Europe communautaire*. Others see Brexit as a convenient opportunity to rid the Union of the British albatross, London as perennial naysayer and impediment to future treaty reforms, as it has been in previous IGCs since Maastricht.[24] There is some regret on the EU side over an historic rift seen as further weakening the European liberal order. Certainly, a negotiated outcome will require compromises on both sides. Whether the respective negotiators possess the strategic vision to deliver a damage-limiting outcome remains to be seen. What is apparent so far is reticence on both sides over compromising entrenched 'red lines'. For the British, a 'bespoke' outcome that will recover national sovereignty, deliver on the mandate of the referendum vote to 'take back control' of trade policy, but which necessarily precludes free movement of labour into Britain and avoids continuing jurisdiction of the ECJ. An outcome that Brussels rejects outright and according to its own red lines as merely 'cherry picking' and as such compromising the singularity of a comprehensive single market.

In the negotiations to date, the EU has resisted making any concession that compromise what it regards as the integrity of the 'four freedoms'. Meanwhile the EU's status and role in the international order are attenuated and a consequence of dilatory responses to recent crises. Respect and trust from its own citizens has markedly declined since the global financial and Euro-zone crises, further depleted since 2015 by inept handling of the migration crisis.[25] Growing disaffection is not a consequence of Brexit *per se* rather Brexit is a mirror to public disquiet with liberal politics and the political class who have presided over affairs since the War's end. A salutary lesson to what can happen when liberal elites becomes detached from their political

---

24. J. RANKIN et al, *EU parliament leader: we want Britain out as soon as possible*, in: *The Guardian*, 24.06.2016.
25. See the results of a survey on public attitudes to governance in Europe conducted between 2008-15, Public Integrity and Trust in Europe, European Research Centre for Anti-Corruption and State-Building (ERCAS), Hertie School of Governance, Berlin, 2015.

base.[26] How effectively have the liberal order and its functionaries responded to insidious populist challenge? On the available evidence, not convincingly enough, with failure all round to reassure those anxious about remorseless globalization, and who are mostly underwhelmed by the efforts of governing elites intent on implementing their neo-liberal policy preferences. The one-size fits all (or one size fits none) statist approach to macro-economic management that characterizes Western public policy is nowadays widely disparaged. A style of political management (or rather *mis*-management) that prefers 'top-down' transnational and technocratic governance conducted opaquely in the corporatist and technocratic arena of public-private power, and increasingly beyond the 'hollowed out' national state.

Something will surely have to give between these positions *in extremis* if a workable agreement on British withdrawal is to be negotiated, and indeed if faith in the European idea is to be recovered. With time fast running out, the hunch of many close observers is that 'no deal' is the most likely outcome, and with it negative externalities for all concerned. If an acrimonious rupture does occur over Brexit, Europe will become materially poorer and strategically weakened. The only beneficiary from such estrangement between London and EU27 will be Vladimir Putin's Moscow, or indeed the Trump Administration that sees a strong EU as more enemy than ally or neighbour, both 'superpowers' for the most part preferring Europe to be materially reduced and strategically marginalized in international affairs. Some in Brussels see this as a signal moment and are prepared to abandon the United Kingdom to its fate, to suffer the consequences of what they see as self-inflicted isolationism the sooner to restore a flagging EU project. Yet an outcome that would almost certainly be as harmful to the EU27 as it would be to the United Kingdom. As such a *démarche* that is avoidable but only if the final negotiations are conducted and on both sides with forbearance.

There is mutual advantage from a negotiated outcome that avoids disorderly Brexit. Negotiations between democratic and liberal states are rarely zero sum, certainly not if the parties want to continue to trade, to cohabit in a common space and a region adjacent to the turbulent Eurasia neighbourhood. Add to this the patent threat from terrorism, energy insecurity, climate change and other environmental hazards, as well as demographic imbalance, lagging productivity and declining competitiveness compared with younger more innovative economic rivals, and there is every reason to seek compromise, notwithstanding that the United Kingdom is more *demandeur* than *défenseur* in these negotiations. Whether Brexit has been a wake-up call for conceited European elites however is debateable.

How might the EU respond better to the challenges of Brexit? Some amongst the Brussels elite and not least convinced federalists such as Jean-Claude Juncker and Guy Verhofstadt, prescribe yet 'more' Europe, still 'deeper' integration, even a fully

26. A. NOSKO, *Facing Europe's Crisis of Alienation and Mistrust*, in: *Open Society Foundations*, May 2017, available online at https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/facing-europe-s-crisis-alienation-and-mistrust.

federal Union.[27] There are already plans for the next, and its advocates hope irreversible stage of the European project. Juncker for instance proposes a single EU executive presidency, a larger budget covering more policy domains and managed by an EU Finance Minister. Something akin to a European army or at least a more coordinate defence capability is also under consideration and likewise 'enhanced' decision-making in the Council by extending QMV.[28] Germany's SPD has gone still further, advocating a constitution as the blueprint for a federalized United States of Europe, regardless of an earlier and botched attempt to deliver just such an outcome.[29]

Ideological prescription is one thing practical politics, what can actually be delivered that will work is quite something else. A federal EU may well enhance political careers, possibly improve inter-institutional decision-making, but it is unlikely to close the democracy deficit or to resonate with voters who have increasingly lost trust in a disconnected political class they see as out of touch with their immediate concerns. The current public mood is altogether more cautious than favourable to 'ever closer' integration. Wiser counsels are certainly aware of the shortcomings from putting ideology or at least well-intentioned idealism before practical politics. President Emmanuel Macron, for instance, in his Sorbonne speech (September 2017) proposed a more flexible EU governance with legitimacy ultimately residing with the Member States rather than the remote political centre in Brussels.[30] Might the impasse in Brexit negotiations perhaps inject some much-needed realism into the expectations of the respective parties and ensure a positive-sum post-Brexit Europe that everyone can live with?

The European project and the liberal instincts that gave rise to it are recoverable, but only if common sense and practicable politics prevails over fanciful design. The task of reconfiguring 'Europe' is daunting but this Continent has overcome seemingly impossible challenges before, not least *non pareil* reconstruction that replaced the anarchy of total war with a rules-based liberal order. Classic federal architecture is no solution for remaking EU governance post-Brexit. A better option by far for recovering public trust, restoring confidence in the conduct of European affairs is to rebalance the project through the agency of the national state. To set aside the familiar top-down federalist predilections, replacing them with a design that promises 'better Europe': greater accountability, more transparent decision-making by the limited pooling of sovereignty, drawing on the political capital and utilizes the administrative 'know-how' of functioning historic states. An architecture for governance that

27. *Is a federal Europe possible?* by J. BORREL, former president of the European Parliament, in: *Thinking Federalist*, 22.02.2015.
28. D. BOFFEY, *Juncker says EU will 'move on' from Brexit in state of union speech*, The Guardian, 15.09.2017.
29. T. BUCK, G. CHAZAN, *Martin Schulz calls for United States of Europe*, in: *Financial Times*, 12.12.2007.
30. E. MACRON, *Initiative for Europe*, Sorbonne speech – English version, 26.09.2017, available online at http://international.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2017/09/29/macron-sorbonne-verbatim-europe-18583.html.

puts tried and tested agencies of national governments at the centre of the Union's decisional processes, the nation state as the principal repository of accountable and democratic governance, and no less so the principal and the legitimate conduit between citizens and Brussels technocrats.

National parliaments after all are the most reliable agency for representing and voicing the popular will, notwithstanding declining electoral turnout. A federalist design that lacks a shared political culture, meaningful cultural solidarities, and a common language in which to conduct a conversation and facilitates what is political participation and usually described *demos*, would surely be a recipe for even greater political instability. Federations have a chequered history and have often been volatile arrangements: normatively prescribed by elites as the means for politically managing cultural diversity, but more often than not the cause of capricious politics unless balanced by a degree of primordial attachment and a sense of shared history that is presently lacking in the European Union.

One imaginative scheme for 'balancing' (rather than 'reconciling') national with common interests in EU governance post-Brexit commissioned by the influential Bruegel think-tank proposes flexible decisional procedures as the only effective basis for future European co-operation. The report starts from the premise that a bad Brexit will do more harm than good in Europe, observing that:

> 'in an increasingly volatile world, neither the EU nor the United Kingdom have an interest in a divorce that diminishes their influence as the balance of economic power shifts away from the North-Atlantic world'.

The authors propose 'a new form of collaboration', a continental partnership that would ensure continuing trade in goods, services, with capital mobility and some temporary labour mobility, 'within an intergovernmental frame-work based on common rules to protect the homogeneity of the deeply European integrated market'.[31] Much less a prescription for a hierarchic political design than an altogether looser arrangement of concentric circles, the inner core consisting of a supranational EU and the euro area, and an outer circle of countries involved in a structured intergovernmental partnership. By no means an original construction, indeed one frequently prescribed for a Continent with variable commitment to transnational co-operation purposes. In this case, an architecture consisting of 'concentric circles' that complements the interests of both the UK and the EU: not the 'one size fits all' design of the federalist prospectus, but a more flexible intergovernmental or confederal arrangement that corresponds with the concept of Europe *à la carte* proposed by Macron in his Sorbonne speech. A co-operative design that he thought might even persuade the Eurosceptical British back into the European fold, or at least remain as close partners.

---

31. J. PISANI-FERRY, N. ROTTGEN, A. SAPIR, P. TUCKER, G.B. WOLFF, *Brexit: A proposal for a continental partnership*, Bruegel External Publications, Brussels, 29.08.2016, pp.1 and 11.

2. American Exceptionalism: is Trumpismo the End of Atlanticism?

The election in 2016 of a populist non-politician to the American presidency is further challenge to the Western liberal order. How serious a challenge will depend on how close is the match between campaign bombast and actual policy. After some eighteen months in office, the signals here are mixed, but with sufficient evidence of capricious, even erratic behaviour to cause anxiety to Atlanticists for whom the USA remains the mainstay of shared values and strategic interests that has been the cultural ballast of the very idea of 'The West'. Close relations and common interests that are under challenge now from Washington, if not yet seriously threatened with rupture. One persistent irritant here is Trump's habitual complaint about European 'free-riding', the over-reliance of rich European countries on American taxpayers for funding the Continent's security, closely followed by his objection to what he sees as unwonted trade protectionism that recently prompted him to describe the EU as a 'foe' to US trade. This trenchant criticism came at the 2018 NATO summit in Brussels where Trump's irascible demeanour once again called into question the future of the Alliance, both as a shared cultural and as a security and trade partnership, with NATO and the WTO as its principal agencies.

How potent is the threat to common transatlantic purpose, indeed to the very idea of the West itself and to the liberal values that define it?[32] As with Brexit a case can be made that this is more exceptional occurrence than existential threat. A President like none before him, an outlier of the kind democracy occasionally throws into the mix. On this benign reading, *Trumpismo* is momentary challenge more than serious threat to transatlantic relations. As some commentators see it – and as Max Weber famously observed – the imperative in serious politics is to 'bore the hard boards', confront head on the existential demands of office: not least, to reconcile excessive campaign rhetoric with political realities, to seek accommodation of differences and reach common sense outcomes.[33] This 'normalisation' narrative is familiar in transatlantic discourse, sees tensions as merely occasional discord, more 'rift' than irrevocable 'drift' and for which there are many antecedents.[34] Or is it something deeper, evidence perhaps of cultural dissonance and clashing interests, increasingly fractious if not yet fractured relations?

Atlanticism was always a constructed narrative that aligns quite different and occasionally competing preferences, albeit subsumed under a broadly shared commitment to defend common values. Rooted ontological preferences and the ideological narratives that justify them can and do change, and the sudden end of the Cold War did encourage both sides of the Alliance to undertake strategic review and even cultural reappraisal of what the West actually means. A security arrangement con-

---

32. T. RISSE, *Conclusions*, in: J. ANDERSON, J.G. IKENBERRY, T. RISSE (eds), *The end of the west? Crisis and change in the Atlantic order*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2008, pp.263-290.
33. M. WEBER, *Politics as a Vocation*, Fortress press, Philadelphia, 1965[7].
34. *The Transatlantic Drift Debates*, Proceedings from the American Foreign Policy Council's 2004 Conference on US-European Relations, Lexington Books, Lexington, 2006.

structed on the basis of a common response to geo-political circumstances in post-bellum Europe, albeit one sustained more by the pragmatic imperative for mutual security as much as cultural symmetry, notwithstanding that commitment to shared 'Western values' does feature in the Alliance's ideological *raison d'être*. From the start, the idea of the West has implied cultural adjacency as well as merely *Realpolitik*, but in reality more between patron and clients than as partners. For Europeans, dependence both material and strategic to ensure security against a putative communist threat: for the USA the imperative for a buffer zone, Europe as first line of homeland defence against geo-political threat. Differences and discordance were apparent almost from the start, and though never quite reaching 'crisis' point has made for occasionally problematic relations. Before the demise of Soviet power, and with it the emergence of an entirely reconfigured and multipolar world order caused Washington to accelerate reassessment of strategic priorities.[35]

Transatlantic tensions occurred during the Cold War years, but more *pianissimo* than *fortissimo*. The refusal for instance of European governments to offer diplomatic, let alone provide even token military support for what Washington regarded as containment of international communism in Vietnam. This rebuff was a turning point in Atlantic relations, if not yet critical disjunction. Transatlantic tensions grew more pronounced after 1989. Euphoria over the 'triumph of the West', notwithstanding, mutual agreement to fill the strategic vacuum by underpinning still fragile regional democracy through NATO expansion and EU enlargement merely served to accentuate differences over the pace and direction of these mutual commitments. A notable example was President Bill Clinton's exasperation over Europe's failure to resolve the regional crisis following the collapse of the former Yugoslavia. A diplomatic *débâcle* that eventually obliged Washington to take military action, albeit with British support and under NATO auspices to restore political order in what Washington regarded as entirely a regional responsibility. The critical moment by far was the fall-out over America's unilateral response to the 9/11 attack. After initial expressions of transatlantic solidarity, Washington's relations with leading EU counties rapidly deteriorated, culminating in unprecedented crisis after leading EU states and NATO members including Germany and France refused to endorse military action against Iraq 'identified' by Washington as the principal perpetrator of the attack on the American homeland. Secretary of State for Defence, Donald Rumsfeld confirmed an historic post-war low in transatlantic relations when he made pointed distinction between Europe 'old' and 'new'. The latter consisting mainly of new transition states in East / Central Europe, dependent on America for security and seen as reliable allies: and 'old' Europe, whose complacent leaders had reneged, as Rumsfeld saw it, on their moral and strategic obligations to support generous and dependable American allies.[36]

---

35. R. LATHAM, *The Liberal Moment: Modernity, Security, and the Making of Postwar International Order*, New Directions in World Politics, Columbia University Press, New York 1997.

36. P.H. MERKL, *The Distracted Eagle: The Rift between America and Old Europe*, Routledge, New York, 2005, p.54.

These events confirmed an Alliance facing growing discord: on one side, Europeans asserting greater autonomy from hyper-power America, the latter determined to reassess even its closest relations and to reorder strategic priorities. As such, an historic moment and turning point for the West setting in motion strategic revision well before the present and unruly incumbent's tenure. Present turbulence in transatlantic relations may be more pronounced than usual but fractious relations are merely continuation of a trend established in the post-Cold War years, if a melodrama playing in a higher key. A trend then and not merely contingent occurrence, although Trump has taken the narrative of ingratitude further than any recent predecessor.[37]

Washington's current angst over what Trump sees as blatant protectionism of the European Single Market is another contentious issue for transatlantic relations. A key element of his mission to 'Make America Great Again', and recently elevated into 'tit for tat' trade war with mutual imposition of sanctions. Central to this nativist narrative are assumptions of wilful European ingratitude for American security cover, 'free riding' and 'failure' to pay a 'fair share' of the cumulate costs of regional defence. Although the actual costings cited in this acrimonious exchange are accounted quite differently on either side, the fact is that this issue is now high on the transatlantic agenda. Events that by no means signify the end of strategic partnership, but singly and cumulatively make for problematic relations. Commentators now deliberate over what if anything of substance unites these allies: whether continuing fall-outs are merely the 'narcissism of small differences', minor irritants that occur in any close relations, or whether what was once merely Atlantic 'drift' is becoming unbridgeable 'rift', bringing closer the end of the West.[38]

What does the present fall-out signify for transatlantic relations and is there a reasonable prospect for recovering what James Steinberg calls an 'elective partnership'?[39] The signs are hardly encouraging after a sequence of events that confirm Trump's preference for discordant unilateralism. The principal irritants and barely eighteen months into the incumbent's first term are *inter alia*: American withdrawal from the 2015 Paris climate change accord adopted by international consensus; relocation to Jerusalem of the America's embassy in Israel; rescinding the Iran nuclear accord negotiated in part under EU auspices; unilateral imposition of trade tariffs on the EU and raising barriers to free trade and investment flows.[40] The Europeans have mostly responded to presidential vitriol with polite restraint, rather more in sorrow than anger. Taken at face value Trump's approach to European diplomacy is to say the least more mordant than moderate, reactive more than reflective, instinctual rather than considered. Frequent and mostly spontaneous outbursts in the twitter-sphere or

37. T. VALÁŠEK, *A New Transatlantic Security Bargain*, Carnegie Europe, 23.05.2017, available on-line at http://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/05/23/new-transatlantic-security-bargain-pub.

38. M. O'NEILL, *The Cultural Dynamics of Transatlanticism*, in: L. BUONANNO et al (eds), *The New and Changing Transatlanticism*, Routledge, New York, 2015, pp.60-81.

39. J. STEINBERG, *An elective partnership: Salvaging Transatlantic Relation*, in: *Survival*, 92(2003), pp.113-146.

40. N. ROTHMAN, *The End of Atlanticism*, in: *Commentary*, 17.01.2017, available online at https://www.commentarymagazine.com/foreign-policy/europe/the-end-of-atlanticism-nato/.

off the cuff pronouncements, and usually recanted later after lobbying by the State Department and as such poor substitute for constructive diplomacy. If by any stretch of the term this is 'policy', it hardly coincides with considered deliberations by Washington's professional foreign policy community and indeed seen as conspicuously unhelpful by policy wonks, mostly in the State Department, the Pentagon and the security agencies. While there is undoubted and rising 'threat' to the West, its liberal values and democratic institutions, Trump's preference for 'fortress America' rhetoric and for confrontation over considered diplomacy collides head-on with Europe's continuing strategic preference for a constructive partnership with its powerful ally. To that extent, *Trumpismo* undoubtedly makes for fraught transatlantic relations and threatens the liberal internationalism that has informed strategic thinking and diplomacy on both sides of the Atlantic since 1945. The critical question is how serious a threat and is the situation recoverable?[41]

As for deeper impact, much will depend on the whether the incumbent's propensity for *ad hoc* policy-making can be constrained, his nativist instincts and unilateralist preference curbed by Washington's pragmatic and experienced policy community. Can this insurgent Head of State be brought to a more informed understanding of both the realities and the constraint of public power at the disposal of even the global hyper-power in today's multi-polar world?[42] The present impasse in transatlantic relations is recoverable, but only if Trump curbs his insurgent instincts and assumes the role of leader of the West his predecessors without exception signed up to.[43] The fault for present transatlantic impasse is by no means entirely on the American side. The Europeans too have their own strategic blind spots, even as their leverage on a more powerful ally remains limited. Frequent complaint from Washington, whoever occupies the White House about rich economies and supposedly 'liberal' countries imposing restrictions on free trade, refusing to carry (and pay for) their fair share of the regional and global security burdens are reasonable criticisms, but remediable. Realism and forbearance are required from the European side too. Recent proposals from the European federalists about meeting the urgent security challenge by establishing a distinctively pan-European security agency is both unrealistic and even dangerous, because it threatens the West's security architecture in what is an increasingly dangerous world. A useful complement to Western security in so far as it complements existing cover, but wholly unrealistic and improvident as a freestanding defence agency that might undermine NATO solidarity.[44]

---

41. I. DAALDER, *The End of Atlanticism*, The Brookings Institution, 01.06.2003.
42. D. IGNATIUS, *The real problem with Trump's foreign policy plans? He may not have any*, in: *The Washington Post*, 10.10.2017.
43. For a balanced appraisal of the current prospects for the recovery of transatlantic relations, see M. AALTOLA, B. GAENS (eds), *Managing Unpredictability Transatlantic relations in the Trump era*, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs / The Jane and Aatos Errko Foundation, Helsinki, 2017, and especially the Conclusion at pp.149-155.
44. A. BAKKER, M. DRENT, L. LANDMAN, D. ZANDEE, *A Stronger CSDP: Deepening Defence Cooperation*, Clingendael Report, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, January 2016.

Some commentators doubt whether an independent European security capability is politically prudent, let alone a feasible alternative to America's strategic role in European defence. The EU has made a tentative start on improving its strategic capability. Some 25 EU Member States (with only Denmark, Malta and the United Kingdom abstaining) have agreed closer security co-operation arrangements with a budget for research and procurement of *matériel* under the enhanced co-operation procedure and known as Permanent Security Co-operation (PESCO). However, an arrangement intended to complement and not to compete with NATO.[45] Meanwhile, Washington's singular preference is for the European allies to increase their defence spend, contribute more manpower and *matérial*, undertake more of the heavy lifting in combined NATO operations, and commit to extending the alliance's strategic remit to include 'out of area' operations. These security preferences are by no means inconsistent or conflictual, indeed most EU governments are supportive in principle of this twin-track solution to collective Western security and this is surely the best way forward.

What is apparent from this febrile debate between transatlantic allies is that both sides still have far more in common than divides them. The cement that binds the Atlantic community is the shared realisation of insidious challenges to mutual purpose and common values in the near and far abroad, those founding principles on which the idea of 'The West' was established. Revanchist Russia more than unilateralist America, Moscow's intention to assert its reviving power in a region of the Continent it regards as its own historic space is the primary concern and strategic driver of transatlantic discourse, or it should be. Proxy wars in the Ukraine, renewed tension in the Baltics, interference in democratic elections throughout the West and destabilising public life and free enterprise by baleful misuse of cyberspace threatens the very 'idea' of the West as a safe space for liberal democratic politics, free trade and open markets. Recent transatlantic fall-outs notwithstanding, the imperative for the West is to combat threat by summoning concerted allied purpose in a power play reminiscent of the Cold War. This is an ideological stand-off as much as a strategic confrontation and with a familiar opponent, the West confronting critical challenges to its values, politics and institutions from the same quarter, whatever Moscow's current ideological alter ego.[46] This is a familiar challenge to Western values, and no less so to regional security. This discourse is concentrating minds amongst the professional commentariat in the academy and the policy community on the imperative of maintaining the West as a safe space for liberal values and democratic politics. Accordingly, Brexit and the *Trumpismo* phenomenon are both critical challenges in as much as they both threaten to weaken the West's co-ordinate response to the insurgent challenge.

---

45. J. BARIGAZZI, *Mogherini hails 'historic' EU defense pact. Move is part of Franco-German push to deepen integration after Brexit*, in: *Politico*, 13.11.2017.
46. S.D. KING, *Grave New World: The End of Globalization, the Return of History*, Yale University Press, Yale, 2017, p.246.

Another issue with adverse consequences for public trust in liberal politics is mass migration into the EU space, a consequence of political dislocation and economic turbulence in the near abroad. This has ratchetted cultural anxiety in the receiving countries and it plays to the nativist narrative of insurgent parties whose principal appeal is to cultural identity and defence of 'homeland'. Yet more corroboration of putative threat as populist parties choose to interpret it to voters as 'betrayal' by elites who prefer to indulge moral abstraction such as human rights or multiculturalism than to defend public and national interests. Moreover, traded by these parties as threats to homeland security because these 'uninvited' incomers are predominantly Muslims from war zones in the near abroad, their migration westwards wilfully misconstrued to anxious publics as likely cover for terrorist infiltration. The EU and some of its Member States have struggled to strike a reasonable balance between the legal obligations and moral commitments required of any liberal international actor and respond prudently to hostility from voters, and even from some governments over what many see as 'typically' liberal compassion in the face of putative threat. So far, there has been no workable solution to managing the EU border, with the greatest pressures falling on a small number of states on the Southern Mediterranean rim.

There can be no effective solution to any of the challenges discussed here, unless the EU and its departing Member are prepared to co-operate closely together and with Washington to find feasible solutions to daunting challenges. In the case of Brexit, this means negotiated compromise, avoiding the simplistic 'remedies' of fanciful sovereigntists, whereby 'taking back control' is merely code for disengagement from mainland Europe, nostalgic embrace of 'splendid isolation'.[47] Solution to the present predicament of the West also implies making greater efforts to maintain that degree of transatlantic co-operation that has sustained the Atlantic since the end of the Second World War. Whether these challenges can be accommodated, trade-offs made between competing strategic priorities that currently divide the West will determine the Alliance's future in a mutable global order. The Atlantic 'partnership' has undergone significant changes as to strategic preferences and on both sides since the end of the Cold War. The USA remains, for the time being at least, the only global hyper-power, and as such an indispensable player in defence of Western power and influence.[48] At the same time, American leadership, its role as arsenal, economic engine and diplomatic interlocutor with the wider world is more uncertain now than at any time since 1945.[49] There is nothing new about American hegemony *vis-à-vis* the European allies, but how that leadership is exercised, in whose interest and for what common purposes is key to maintaining enduring and mutually beneficial transatlantic relations in uncertain times as it has been from the outset.

47. P.H.J. DAVIES, *UK security will both gain and suffer from Brexit. The EU will only lose*, available online at http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/11/07/uk-security-will-both-gain-and-suffer-from-brexit-the-eu-will-only-lose/.

48. V. HERMS DRATH, *Toward a New Atlanticism,* American Foreign Policy Interests, in: *The Journal of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy*, 6(2006), pp.425-431.

49. S. BABONES, *American Hegemony Is Here to Stay*, in: *The National Interest*, 11.06.2015, available online at http://nationalinterest.org/feature/american-hegemony-here-stay-13089.

3. Elite Disconnect, Public Discontent and Insurgent Politics

Insurgent parties pursuing a medley of populist, far-right nativist and Eurosceptic preferences is another challenge to the liberal and democratic politics that have defined the West since the wars end.[50] How much of a threat and whether it can be averted is a matter of debate. Public trust in democratic politics is essential for the future stability of the liberal order.[51] Widespread disquiet with remote governance is on the rise, democracy deficits, and dominance of public policy at both the domestic and EU levels by unelected technocrats who resist due accountability and proper scrutiny, amenable to insider lobbying that privileges the interests of the few over the many than as supposed guardians of the wider public interest.

The European Union is a particular focus for such criticism. Successive treaties have installed convoluted governance and for many citizens 'Brussels' represents an impenetrable and incomprehensible technocracy: 'multi-level' governance that lacks meaningful legitimacy, or that much resembles representative democracy.[52] Similar criticism is levelled too at the national state, geographically closer to its citizens than more remote EU institutions, but widely disparaged as a 'hollowed out' administrative space where real power and effective influence are monopolized by special 'insider' interests. These criticisms have mobilized support for populist politics.[53] How then to reduce public perceptions of disconnect between governors and governed is crucial then for restoring confidence in liberal politics.[54]

Disdain for 'remote' governance is by no means the only issue here.[55] Cultural anxiety is likewise a significant driver of insurgent politics, the perception that liberal elites govern according to normative preferences and values that reflect 'otherness' (multiculturalism, open-borders, global markets, human rights observance well dis-

50. T. BALE, S. VAN KESSEL, P. TAGGART, *Thrown around with abandon? Popular understandings of populism as conveyed by the print media: A UK case study*, in: *Acta Politica*, 2(2011), pp. 111–131.

51. K. ARMINGEON, K. GUTHMAN, *Democracy in crisis: The declining support for national democracy in European countries, 2007–2011*, in: *European Journal of Political Research*, 3(2014), pp.423–442; T.W.G. VAN DER MEER, *Political Trust and the 'Crisis of Democracy'*, in: *Politics online*, available online at http://politics.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001 .0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-77.

52. K. KOSKELO, *Europe: Between Technocracy and Democracy*, in: *Harvard Political Review*, 05.11.2012, available online at http://harvardpolitics.com/world/europe-between-technocracy-and -democracy/.

53. D. MARQUAND, *The Decline of the Public: The Hollowing Out of Citizenship*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2004.

54. C. DUSTMANN, B. EICHENGREEN, S. OTTEN, A. SAPIR, G. TABELLINI, G. ZOEGA, *Europe's Trust Deficit: Causes and Remedies*, CEPR's Monitoring International Integration series, August 2017.

55. J.J.A. THOMASSEN, *What's gone wrong with democracy, or with theories explaining why it has?*, in: T. POGUNTKE, S. ROSSTEUTSCHER, R. SCHMITT-BECK, S. ZMERLI (eds), *Citizenship and democracy in an era of crisis*, Routledge, London, 2015.

posed towards asylum and migration) rather than in the 'national' interest.[56] How serious is the challenge from insurgent parties and movements, whether of the populist left or the nativist right, and how should those who conduct the affairs of the liberal order respond? Is this merely temporary disorder, contingent response to material loss following the financial crash, or is it insidious threat to liberal politics?[57] The longitudinal data necessary for addressing what is a quite recent development is mostly lacking. The 2014 European elections marked a signal moment when insurgent (both populist and nativist) parties made breakthrough of sorts, and in a handful of countries even a spectacular showing in the polls. Some commentators had predicted far-reaching electoral turbulence, and in the event some of these parties did perform beyond even their own expectations, but overall results were rather more mixed, with a clear majority of voters continuing in these and in subsequent general elections to support mainstream and pro-EU parties, and by some considerable margin.

More recently, insurgent parties – by no means a singular party type and covering a broad spectrum of ideological preferences, albeit mostly hostile to liberal politics – have made more headway, in some cases polling well even in first order or general elections, where voters customarily resist registering a protest vote and choose what they see as a party of government.[58] That said, the established parties of government for the most part continue to dominate the electoral landscape, notwithstanding more frequent successes by insurgents in national polls. Residual partisan allegiance by voters and respect for the norms, procedures and institutions of liberal democracy has mostly kept this challenge in check, yet there are nevertheless unsettling signs of a growing challenge to liberal politics and parties.[59] Recent general elections everywhere from the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Austria, and even in the traditionally progressive Netherlands and Scandinavia has seen insurgent parties make serious inroads into the support base of mainstream parties, both of centre-right and centre-left. A timely warning of a populism that might well become 'normal' politics, if the established parties ignore anxieties stirring at the grassroots of politics. More concerning still is the presence in the final run-off in the 2017 French presidential election of political ingénues replacing the two traditional parties of government, one representing the nativist far-right the other a populist movement that had never contested a national election centre-left. Perhaps even more so the sudden rise of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland, its success in the German Bundestag elections of 2017

---

56. G. LUCASSEN, M. LUBBERS, *Who fears what? Explaining far-right-wing preference in Europe by distinguishing perceived cultural and economic ethnic threats*, in: *Comparative Political Studies*, 5(2012), pp.547–574.
57. C. MUDDE, *Fighting the system? Populist radical right parties and party system change*, in: *Party Politics*, 2(2014), pp.217-226.
58. M. ROODUIJN, *What unites the voter bases of populist parties? Comparing the electorates of 15 populist parties*, in: *European Political Science Review*, 1(2017), pp.1-18.
59. M. MACMILLAN, *Stability and democracy in Europe will hold fast against populism. Respect for the rule of law will overcome any chance of a return to the Weimar era*, in: *Financial Times*, 21.10.2016.

in a country whose brutal past had seemingly been a reliable cultural deterrent to political extremism.

Evidence of declining support for liberal and centrist politics is patent across the Continent, some of it increasing withdrawal from the public space as outright contempt. Persistently high abstention rates amongst younger and older voters alike, both cohorts that feel socially marginalized and materially neglected, confirms that increasing numbers of voters are unconvinced by the performance, competence and integrity of the usual parties of government. Electoral and other survey data confirms a downward trend in electoral turnout and increasing electoral volatility amongst those who do vote, and well as a significant reduction in political participation and party membership. All of these indirect indices of widespread public disaffection with conventional parties and mainstream politics that for many citizens connotes declining confidence in a liberal politics and institutional order many feel has reneged on its historic post-war social contract with citizens.[60] How should we interpret these shifts? We should certainly avoid hyperbole and exaggeration, whilst resisting complacency. Some commentators highlight headline figures, but ignore the altogether more sinuous context of quotidian politics, drawing conclusions that too often lack balance or overlook the compound behavioural motivations and affective meaning of insurgent politics. Generalizing from random statistics or occasional case studies, selectively interpreting aggregate voting patterns that, while confirming rising volatility in politics and registering the facts of partisan de-alignment, says little about its underlying demographic or sociological significance. There is little in aggregate polling data to suggest that the insurgent mood is merely temporary or that it will soon evaporate. On the contrary, populist parties are making electoral headway across the Continent and beyond.[61] Evidence that confirms established parties are out of touch with their social base. At the same time, this on its own is hardly incontrovertible evidence of a terminal crisis for liberal politics. The overall trajectory of political change is altogether more mixed and nuanced.[62]

One factor that should serve as warning to liberals everywhere is the success of some of these parties in securing a foothold in government. Comparatively few insurgent parties have managed to make the transition into parties of government even as junior coalition partners, but there are some instances where that important breakthrough has occurred. Most notably Austria's APÖ and Italy's Lega, both far-right parties and the Italian populist 5Star Movement, and there are other parties close to doing so even in conspicuously liberal political cultures such as Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, and with an upbeat performance by the Front National in recent national elections in France. Even more disconcerting perhaps for the future of the liberal order and its moderate politics is the extent to which some mainstream centrist

60. R.J. DALTON, *Democratic challenges, democratic choices: The erosion of political support in advanced industrial democracies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004.
61. B. MARGULIES, *Why are so many liberal democracies in Europe struggling?*, in: *Political Insight*, 12.09.2016.
62. S. VAN KESSEL, *Conclusion: Populist Parties and Their Electoral Performance*, in: Idem. (ed.), *Populist Parties in Europe; Agents of Discontent*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015.

parties have responded to insurgent challenge by adopting some populist preferences, and not least Euroscepticism, anti-immigration and neo-nativist identity politics. Some establishment parties of both left and right have incorporated nationalist rhetoric into their electoral offer in an attempt to shore up a declining electoral base against insurgent challenge. A cynical move and a dangerous concession to populist instincts and over time one that might dramatically change the narrative of party politics and further erode the cultural foundations of liberal centrist politics.[63]

A balanced account of the state of contemporary politics should avoid hyperbole and focus on median conclusions. Whether centrist parties can reconnect with their anyway demographically shrinking social base is critical for the future of progressive politics in the West. Mark Lilla who describes himself as a 'disillusioned liberal' criticises centrist liberalism for forsaking those familiar solidarities of class and nation that was its electoral base and once firmly located in the middle ground of Western politics, until social and economic turbulence consequent on deindustrialization, post-materialism and contested identities after the 1960s began to erode those constituencies. Lilla disparages what he sees as liberalism's response to social change and cultural shift, headlong liberal retreat into the narrow byways of fissiparous 'identity' politics. Change that amounts to the evacuation of the public square and with it betrayal of former overarching ideological narratives by mainstream parties who now put esoteric and parochial causes ahead of universal values. Those rooted narratives of collective action and out-reaching 'solidarities' that were the basis of a progressive mass politics at the apogee of the liberal age in the mid-twentieth century. A strategy too that has cut these once great movement-based parties adrift from their foundational ideological constituencies, the social constituencies that were the historic source of their political capital, the base for their claim to compete for and exercise public power. This retreat from inclusive universalism to exclusive identity politics is for Lilla and other 'disillusioned liberals' like him a marker of the declining commonality of purpose and shared values that defined the very idea of the 'West' after 1945.[64]

Of course, identity politics is by no means reactionary politics, but strategically is hardly likely to offer a solid platform for mobilizing a mass politics, and as such unlikely to enable established parties to effectively counter the insurgent mood emerging at the grass roots of politics and trading in visceral anger and all manner of social and cultural grievances. To respond to marginalized communities and disadvantaged minorities, the anxieties of those 'left behind' by remorseless globalisation is, or can be ethical politics, depending on motivation. However, for the most part this is a politics of self-absorption and personal conscience. A fissiparous political culture giving rise to fragmented politics, with all manner of ethical and esoteric causes dissipating political energy, rather than aggregating it as collective action that connects otherwise diverse social constituencies to a 'big' overarching political idea. The only way to deliver progressive social change, recover mass support for the social contract

---

63. A. SYLVAINE-CHASSANY, G. CHAZAN, *European politics: leaders struggle to contain rising populism*, in: *Financial Times*, 13.12.2017.
64. G. EATON, *Mark Lilla: the 'nemesis; of identity liberalism*, in: *New Statesman*, 13.06.2018.

rooted in a generic idea of shared fate and common political purpose that was the progenitor and the fabric and fundament of the post-war social consensus.[65]

The fragmentation of contemporary liberalism has opened a political space for insurgent parties that trade in an altogether more malign politics of cultural identity. Not identity as liberal progressives understand the term, but immanent 'identity' that speaks not to reflexive deliberation, inclusiveness or cultural tolerance but instead to visceral tribalism about 'we' or 'us' and that disparages and is contemptuous of 'other'.[66] Developments that even if they confirm insurgent politics, are no direct let alone an imminent threat to liberal politics but nevertheless confront complacent assumptions about 'politics as usual', and as such clear indication of a loosening of the cultural moorings of liberal democracy.[67]

Afterthoughts

Liberal politics can only survive where civility, forbearance and tolerance prevail. Values that are increasingly disparaged in the discourse and conduct of politics and the liberal democratic order is weaker for it. There is mounting evidence that liberal values are under attack, not least from a strident media and even more so on raucous social media whose most alarming consequence is the coarsening of political discourse. A readily accessible medium for traducing 'experts' that deprecates progressive sensibilities as 'weakness' or 'betrayal' of national purpose, and whose style and delivery disregards nuance, disparages moderation, subverts the classic liberal norms of mutual respect, and is utterly contemptuous of the civility indispensable for liberal and democratic politics. The critical question is whether this insurgent challenge can be answered in these tempestuous times and one whose outcome is far from certain.

Much contemporary political discourse is debased by rancorous disrespect for 'other' and 'difference', politics driven more by hate than tolerance. This is, or should be concerning for those who regard classic liberal virtues – propriety, forbearance, civility and respect – as indispensable for a functioning democratic politics. Contempt for authority whether of government or officialdom, indeed anyone claiming technical proficiency is both widespread and encouraged by populist and nativist insurgents everywhere. Due regard for those who manage public affairs is abated by visceral contempt that debases the observance of rules, procedures and the habitual compromise, without which democratic governance cannot work nor liberal politics endure. The challenge for liberal order is to restore faith in politics as the 'art of the

---

65. M. LILLA, *The End of Identity Liberalism*, in: *New York Times Sunday Review*, 18.11.2016.
66. R. MAHER, *Populism is still a threat to Europe — here's how to contain it*, in: *The Conversation*, 16.06.2017.
67. R.F. INGLEHART, P. NORRIS, *Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash*, Harvard Kennedy School, Faculty Research Working Paper Series, August 2016.

possible', measured deliberation and reasoned debate, the rational imperatives of political moderation and compromise that have characterised liberal politics from the outset.[68]

How serious is the threat to liberal politics and can public confidence be restored in the institutions and procedures of liberal governance? Is presently declining public trust merely temporary aberration, a reaction to economic crisis and perceived neglect by remote elites? Or is growing disconnect between centrist parties and their erstwhile voters serious and serial threat to the balanced and temperate politics that has prevailed in the West throughout the post-war decades? Expedient questions for those who manage public affairs, and while glib prediction of an end to the liberal order is on available evidence far-fetched, there can be no room for complacency about what Peter Mair (see footnote 11) has described as the growing void between governors and governed. Established and mainstream parties remain as the principal interlocutors of the public interest, retaining substantial if declining support at the ballot box and in opinion surveys that measure political attitudes. Yet public approval for these liberal agencies is waning and popular approval for liberal institutions and politics some considerable way short of the levels of support achieved in the early post-War decades.[69]

Declining public trust is not attributable to any particular reason or singular event, rather more a slow puncture rather than spectacular 'blow-out' and as such remedial. That said, amongst many instances of failure by governments facing unprecedented challenge in the post-war era, mistrust of liberal politics and its governing agencies can be traced back directly to monumental incompetence in official responses to the 2008-10 global financial and Eurozone crises. Calamitous failures of political leadership, both at the EU and national levels, propelled Western economies into almost precipitous decline. Economic mismanagement made worse by the neo-liberal policies and ideological preferences of Western governments that imposed harsh austerity on the generality of citizens, including those least able to cope: and with no convincing action by governing elites to justify policy in anything remotely resembling authentic liberal values. Events both contingent and structural halted, indeed subverted the progressive social contract that has underwritten the post-1945 liberal order. Insurgent parties have marketed this to prospective supporters as an unparalleled betrayal of public trust, and a charge difficult to counter in light of the sheer audacity of elected governments converting by default bankers' reckless accumulation of private debt into public mega-debt, and without anything remotely resembling democratic consent or public accountability.

The EU's feeble response to the Eurozone crisis, followed soon after by political paralysis in Brussels and national governments alike in the face of mass migration

---

68. See the discussion of the negative consequences of incivility in political and public discourse in America, in K. LEHMAN SCHLOZMAN, S. VERBA, H.E. BRADY, *The Unheavenly Chorus Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2012.

69. For a longitudinal perspective see R.F. INGLEHART, P. NORRIS, op.cit.

across its Southern border has merely intensified the sense of liberal *malaise*. A crisis for sure, although hardly yet a terminal one, even though these events have wrought considerable damage on public trust in liberal values and institutions. In the process, eroding that commonality of purpose and shared endeavour that has been the cultural anchor of liberal politics since 1945. There is widespread disconnection between the political classes and those whom they govern that contributes to growing cynicism about the values, norms and procedures that have long been the cultural and ideological mainstays of liberal politics.[70] This may not be liberalisms end game but it ought to be a wake-up call, serious enough shock to the fundaments of the Western liberal order and one to be confronted and addressed if the norms, values and policy preferences that have long defined liberal internationalism are to survive these capricious times. Crisis in the liberal order there may well be, but to characterise this as the 'end of the West' is an apocalyptic prospect and surely an exaggerated one. Liberal politics is indeed facing serious challenges on both sides of the Atlantic.

The marked shift in the trajectory of international events reviewed in this paper has obliged the Western liberal order to set aside its claim to be the singular paradigm for structuring global politics or economics. Nevertheless, liberal values and democratic politics continue to appeal, retaining deep-seated cultural resonance for many, indeed most inhabitants of the Atlantic basin. If the liberal international order that is 'The West' is to recover its ethical appeal and practical purpose as a fair and practicable system for distributing private and public goods amongst the alternative and competing paradigms of globalization, those who conduct its affairs must assimilate these rising challenges and make fitting response. Do things differently, rebuild consensus, recover public trust by balancing the interests of private capital, non-accountable technocrats and the wider public interest. In effect, to reinstate the social contract installed after 1945 after the catharsis of world war and that spoke to wearied and defeated peoples: in the process, firmly recovering public trust in liberal values and democratic governance so badly impaired by the reactionary politics and social chaos that inflicted two world wars in barely a generation. The present task for a liberal order and its elites is no less urgent: to recover liberal purpose and build anew that contract between governors and governed, the better to respond to the tumult of present times.

---

70. E. FAWCETT, *Reclaiming liberalism*, available online at https://aeon.co/essays/liberal-ideals-are-not-yet-dead-but-more-relevant-than-ever.