

After Trump After Brexit and Le Pen: Whither Western Democracy?

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Of the many profoundly unsettling aspects of Donald Trump's decidedly unsettling victory in the recent American election the most disturbing for the EU has to be the continuity that Mr. Trump's victory with European growing populist-conservative movements in Europe, whose significance is deeply underscored by Mr. Trump's success. Indeed, the US election is a powerful demonstration of the thesis that western democratic politics is becoming increasingly homogeneous in its turn to populism as established parties are increasingly perceived as incapable of mastering the crises that have become routine nearly everywhere in the West over the last ten years and longer. In general, populist-conservative movements strongly appeal inter alia to people who feel that they have been left behind by a callous, corrupt Establishment in the modern megalopolises where our financial institutions are at home. Like Ms. Le Pen and the Brexiters, Mr. Trump has taken up the cause of the victims of globalization in the American "Rust Belt" beyond the Pale as it were. A brief glance at the way in which "remain" and "go" voters are distributed on the map of England, shows immediately that "remain" is overwhelmingly a Greater London movement that is to say a glitzy movement associated with the world's largest financial center; whereas "go" is solidly and stodgily provincial. There is a decided parallel to the Red and Blue areas on the American electoral map as Mr. Trump was elected that should be obvious to any knowledgeable observer. Moreover, Marine Le Pen's successful wooing of the masses of former French steel workers who take themselves to be the neglected step-children of France's current prosperity should also not go unnoticed. The name of the game is "Center Against Periphery" but the success of the Brexiters and Mr. Trump's republican mavericks, as well as the impending advances of Marine Le Pen, force the questions upon us: Who is in the center? Who is on the periphery? Recent developments on both sides of the Atlantic press this question upon us in a way that would have been unthinkable not long ago. In Europe we are on the verge of a paradigm change in politics, if not already in the midst of one. The EU, like, say, Austria has the short-term luxury of looking away from the distressing aspects of the coming transition because

its elections will only be taking place in 2019 (Austria's are a year earlier) but that can scarcely count as a consolation. How is the EPP to position itself for these elections? Where will it land in a parliament that it cannot easily dominate? Above all, what kinds of compromise will be possible with a bloc that is principally made up of Euroskeptics? The sooner these questions are seriously mooted, the more likely that the Union can cease to become a victim of its own politics. But that is not inevitable. However much the temporally remote nature of the coming developments may be, it is virtually impossible to deny that they are on the way. Moreover, it is scarcely less clear that the populist-conservatives that are finding their way into positions of power in Europe and the USA hardly have anything like adequate solutions for the kinds of problems that people who have been made redundant after large-scale enterprises like steel manufacturing have been outsourced. Voters are being seduced on both sides of the Atlantic by politicians who tell that we can reclaim the world we have lost when they in fact do not have the foggiest ideas about how to revivify the moribund Rust Belt. After all, we have had the Rust Belt phenomenon with us from a quarter to a half of century now and no cogent strategies have been developed to ameliorate the lot of the masses of former elite laborers who have become utterly *déclassé*. Up till now these downwardly mobile minorities have made loud noises but they have only recently begun to have a dramatic impact upon national politics: Mr. Trump's victory can be interpreted as a sign of them flexing newly-found political muscles with his help. The traditional center cannot sit back in consternation and watch these developments as though they were a perverse form of political "reality TV." The traditional center everywhere has been altogether too complacent in its belief that it could muddle along until something turned up. This was the impression that Hillary Clinton's Democrats made to their own chagrin. All of those people, who lost their houses in the finance crisis, have long been wondering why there were no consequences for the Wall Street fat cats who produced them from the time that Barack Obama came into power. Ms. Clinton seemed to have overlooked that she was the heir to that politics. Not everybody has the luxury of getting used to bad news simply because it doesn't go away. As already mentioned, nobody really has a solution that would bring prosperity back to Rust Belters on both sides of the Atlantic but nobody's cause is really served when mainstream parties choose to look the other way and leave the plight of the Rust Belters to populists who at least seem speak to their concerns in a language that they

understand. With every “crisis” the number of neglected citizens grows and the possibilities for further “inconceivable events” such as Mr. Trump’s electoral romp through the USA grow with it. There are assuredly no simple solutions to hugely complicated problems resulting from modernization and globalization itself but that does not mean that mainstream political parties can stick their heads in the political sand and pretend that those problems do not exist. Most importantly, these problems are more than statistics on a page of economic data; they are a harsh human reality. To ignore them is to fail to reach out to citizens in need and a mockery of politics itself in the eyes of the losers of globalization. It is much too high a price to pay – and there is certainly nothing remotely Christian about it.