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## THE WORLD IN TRANSIT: GOING BEYOND MYOPIC VISIONS

**Abstract:** The world has entered new Axial time. 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 complexity of a “plurilateral” world we are stepping in? What kind of political architecture will be needed to support the nascent new multi- or rather “pluripolarity”? How can we sync governance with inevitable digitalisation of politics? How can we enable the 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” from it. No actor of a historical process can bury his head in the sand of the comfortable present, indulging in “counter-clock wise revolt”. The future will come for everyone, but not everyone will hold an equal place in it.

**Key words:** *transformation of society, transition, digitalisation of politics*

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

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

And indeed, when you read today a newspaper you get the impression that the nationalist challenges against the globalist model have moved to centre of the political discourse, winning supporters in the United States, the United Kingdom,

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as well as many other places in Europe and rising in strength all over the globe. The rise of nationalism looks as the decisive character of the day putting globalism on the defensive.

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

Short article is not a proper place 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 that nations is something "natural and primordial", while globalisation was "imposed" on the world by Friedrich Hayek and other liberal economists of Mont Pelerin Society following the end of the 2 World war, in reality globalisation as an objective process, according to the majority of historians, dates back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It was then when thanks to the Great geographical discoveries, the human history became global and human societies have started to exchange 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.

Nations in their turn according to modern theories is the product of mainly 17–18<sup>th</sup> century and their creation was rooted largely exactly in the process of globalisation and was to certain extent a social construct rather than a natural phenomenon as brilliantly demonstrated by Benedict Andersson in his 1983 classical book "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" of 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 of de-globalisation. On the contrary, the brexitiers wishing to leave EU were seeking in fact more globalisation, more free market, more de-regulation than EU provided. One of the Brexit major drivers were British based hedge funds that wanted to get rid of EU limitations and regulations that 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 Silicon Valley CEOs have so 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 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.

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

No matter what particular political leaders say and anti-immigration proponents take 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.

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 not the electoral success of one party or another, were not 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 the fundamental values on which the democratic system was built upon.

Therefore, the name of the threat is populism, rather than nationalism it camouflages in, and consequentially this is not globalism that is the victim but pluralism of modern political culture routed in the Enlightenment ideas of liberalism, that 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 the other’s, thus, turning pluralism into the basis of the democratic system.

As Jan-Werner Müller rightly argues in his recent ground-breaking 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’s worth noting that today the nature of populism has changed because today populism shapes its constituencies rather than represents them. As a result, it aggregates values and phobias sometimes making very strange “bedfellows”. Timothy Garton Ash has 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 saying “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 formerly localised threats are no longer locally containable but are now potentially dangerous to global security and stability.

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

At this turning point, the skidding mechanisms of democracy along with the growing assertiveness of the 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, and without regard for the 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’s worth recalling 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 even despite the contradictions and mistrust between these countries, the external threat can unite them. If this happens the world will be lucky if conflicts are contained in cyber space and propagandistic media battles. Therefore, it is disturbing that a new “authoritarian international” is already increasingly succeeding in defining the international political discourse.

In fact, illiberal democracy is the price the world pays for years of undemocratic liberalism, practiced after the end of the cold war, when democracy has mutated into a decoration, instrument of neoliberal economic optimisation.

In fact, neoliberalism has been poisoning liberal values.

According to the Freedom House 2016 marked the 11<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of decline in global freedom, that 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. It also reported a negative trend in a further four 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 press freedom and the pluralism of civil society.

'Post-democracy' has become a standard term of the 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 if super — icon, "free elections", have become circuses of marketing and management, from spectacles of fund-raising to spectacles of targeted voter "mobilisation"

Recent Pew research 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.

Even in the US the correlation is staggering 40% — 46% — 7%

The popular explanations 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.

But some of these phenomena are regional or local, whereas the rise of authoritarianism and of 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 it is happening not because of globalisation but because of neoliberal economic system. 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 in the banking crisis of 2008.

A feeling of growing disempowerment has led to political cynicism and a disconnection of the general public from 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.

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

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

Just recall your latest local newspaper stories. The majority of them are dedicated to global abstracts: human life has become obscured by discourse focused

on security, geopolitics and national interest when authored by hard-line realists, or deliberations about democratisation, globalisation and humanitarian interventions by intransigent liberals. And if they speak about individual we hear mostly about “monstrous Harvey Weinstein”, but when was the last time you have read about the families from the low-income communities? It’s only natural that they shout 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’s about people, their life and...(!) dignity.

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

And only this truly transformative agenda, reflective of the challenges and growing complexities of the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 can’t hide “behind the wall” from it. No actor of a historical process can bury his head in the sand of the comforting resentment, indulging in “counter-clock wise 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.