

## How The West Was Lost -- Brexit, Widespread Social Discontent and Demagoguery

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Does it matter? Well, for some folks it does. In particular, if you're dis-empowered, lacking a personal sense of agency, and you've watched your world get whittled down bit by bit over the last several decades; the sense of doing something, anything, even the sheer joy of authoring some real wreckage, becomes tasty. And all the more so because of its rarity. It's been so long since you poked a ruling elite joker in the eye, who cares who it is or what comes next, eh? Just do it!

Whatever the motivation, Brexit is a milestone. The direct consequences of the British referendum vote are likely to be substantial, if not profound. But it is the indirect consequences, and the symbolic import, that are most significant. For this is, make no mistake, the first but likely not the last major manifestation of a long-brewing discontent that threatens nothing less than the unraveling of a post-war world order of (mostly) peace and prosperity. ***[Remember the pathological murmurings of the ruling elite's, "New World Order," well now we are ALL able to see the DIS-order they have created!]***

Worse, the looming possible catastrophe has been eminently avoidable. But certain actors had a strong interest in getting what *they* wanted, and damn the human costs. In the end, this is a story of the fruits of unbridled GREED. And all too often, what greed buys is death, chaos and destruction.

The phenomenon we're talking about is sweeping the Western world. All across Europe and North America and beyond there has been an explosion of flailing political rage and stupidity in recent years. Whether it takes the form of the avowed Nazi-sympathizing Golden Dawn in Greece, the less-avowed Nazi-sympathizing National Front in France, slobbering Sarah Palin enthusiasts in America, or agitated Brexit voters in the UK, it is essentially the same phenomena everywhere, driven by the same factors.

Given that this is a cup of tea that has been steeping at least since the 1980s, the current boiling point we're witnessing is in many ways actually less surprising than why it has taken this long to happen.

Some of the factors paving the road to this rash of Neo-Know-Nothingism have been benign if not laudable in their intent. Or, they have been simple products of historical evolution, rolling along with no intentionality, at all. Nobody makes tsunamis or earthquakes (though DARPA has no doubt tried), and nobody has any reason to do so (did I mention DARPA?), but still they happen, and with enormous tectonic consequences. Similarly, at some point in history somebody invents the printing press, or manufactures gunpowder, or sequences DNA, and the world is rocked however little global revolution may have been part of the original intent.

In our time, three such tendencies have conspired with especial consequence to unmoor the foundations of the post-war compact in Western societies: technological revolution, globalization, and civil rights movements. The last of these is certainly the more intentional of the lot. The second is partly the consequence of the first (that is to say, it's a lot easier to globalize when you have the

technology of satellites and oil tankers and the Internet with which to do so). But what they share in common is a slow tsunami-like effect on Western societies. And, especially, on certain demographic cohorts within those societies.

There is much to say about the explosion of technological capability in our time, of course. We could fill entire libraries with just a 'card catalog' (for one indicator of the degree of technological change) of what has been said and needs to be said on this subject. But, for our purposes in exploring the current political meltdown of the West, what matters most are the largely unmitigated human-level economic byproducts of these changes. One can build a robot to make widgets on an assembly line without any other intention than, say, to innovate, or to make money selling a product to manufacturers, or to increase productivity. It doesn't matter so much what motivated these technologies, but it does matter that their near-universal effect is the destruction of working and middle class jobs. It can be argued that this 'creative destruction' process also produces a raft of new employment opportunities, but even if that is true, the dislocations are still massive, not least because 50 year-old blue collar assembly-line workers are not especially good candidates for being retrained to write computer code or design fiber-optics networks.

While those pressures have been crippling workers for decades, perhaps an even more consequential development has been the advent of globalization. This has meant many things, some of them pretty great. If you like eating Thai food, Skyping with your pal in Kathmandu (for free, no less - remember how expensive international (audio only) phone calls were not so long ago?), or economic development opportunities for Koreans, Taiwanese and other formerly impoverished folk, you can't in fairness be a total critic of globalization. Its consequences have been absolutely enormous, and by no means are all of them bad. But, again, to understand why Western politics is now going off the rails, it's crucial to note that some of them are in fact very nasty, especially for certain particularly vulnerable folks. And these mal-effects in the workplace have only exacerbated those of the aforementioned technological change. Indeed, perhaps even more than robots and computers, it is ridiculously cheap labor costs in Mexico - followed by China when Mexico was no longer cheap enough, followed by Vietnam when China was no longer cheap enough - that have massively undercut the position of blue-collar workers in the West, with their (once) decent salaries, health plans, pensions, vacations and sick time. Remarkably, this effect can now increasingly be seen in white collar sectors as well, with First World professional jobs shipping off to India and beyond.

Finally, a series of civil rights movements have transformed the Western world over the last half-century, most visibly in America. It would not be overstating the case to argue that these are among the greatest of achievements in all of human history, right up there with the advent of democracy, the abolition of slavery and the dismantling of colonialism. For the first time ever - in ethos and mostly in legal code, if not always in practice - these societies have embraced the idea that everyone is entitled to the same opportunities, treatment and share of political power, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. As noted above, this is a landmark development in human history, and it's especially great news if you happen to be brown, female or gay.

But what if you're the opposite of all those things? Let's assume that the distribution of power in a society is a zero-sum game, meaning that for Individual A to obtain X amount of additional power, Individual B must lose precisely the same amount (add the two quantities together and you get zero, hence the term). That's an arguably incorrect proposition, and there certainly are non-zero-sum games identifiable in the real world. But I think the assumption is largely true in this case. Thus, if we acknowledge that women and people of color and non-straight people have more power than they did fifty years ago, we must also account for where that power came from in our zero-sum game. And the answer, of course, is from straight white males. And while we might argue that a more inclusive

society benefits all (an example of a non-zero-sum effect), for many folks in this category – especially the less educated and therefore more economically vulnerable ones – the tangible negative effects of yet more competition for scarce resources are far more palpable.

Nor should the psychological add-ons to shrinking wallets be ignored. Let's be real here. Humans are... well, human. If you were the all-powerful king of the hill yesterday, and today you're just another schmo, it's probably gonna sting, even if your income were somehow unchanged. Maybe there will be a few enlightened souls from the former privileged class who never felt comfortable with the evils of inequality even while it benefitted them, and therefore welcome these changes, but these folks will be dwarfed in number by those whose self-esteem has been damaged at least as much as their paycheck. In addition to being poorer, they are going to be angrier and more resentful as well. It may not be pretty, but there's no sense pretending this isn't a part of human nature.

So, to recap the story so far, if you simply look at this constellation of effects over the last half-century – technology, globalization, civil rights – it's proven a very rough go for certain categories of individuals. They're beat-up, beleaguered, broken and buffeted. If you're surprised that they're scared, angry and desperate, you haven't been paying attention to the way the world works and how people are wired.

But here's where the story gets really interesting. To understand why, let's go back to our earlier analogy. Suppose you knew that a tsunami was headed towards your country's shores. Of course, there's nothing you can do to stop it – big damn waves go where they want to go. But there are some things you can do in advance that can make the ensuing tragedy better or worse. You can, for example, evacuate coastal regions. Or, alternatively, you could move the whole population there instead, right in harm's way. You could mobilize medical personnel and relief workers and helicopter crews and get them ready to roll. Or, you could send them all off to another continent to enjoy a three-week paid vacation. You can lay in supplies of food and water to prepare for the coming disaster. Or, you could organize a national potlatch blowout to consume and waste as much as possible before the big water hits.

See where I'm going here? If huge proportions of your society are being clobbered by technological change, globalization and the flooding of the workplace with tens of millions of formerly suppressed workers as new competition for jobs – none of which you can do much about – you nevertheless still have a choice. You can enact policies that make it even harder for those folks. Or you can take steps to at least soften the blows of the inevitable tidal wave.

If you were in fact to do the latter, it might be because you were simply stupid as a society, and prone to bumbling policy choices. But another explanation would point to motivations that are far darker. What if you took these catastrophic steps because of the greed of already wealthy, already powerful individuals who saw opportunities to benefit at the expense of the suffering of hundreds of millions of others? What if, while technology and globalization and new workplace competition were already battering workers, you adopted adverse trade policies on top of that because the one percent got rich while the 99 percent got stiffed? What if you deregulated for the same reason? What if you shifted the tax burden around simply to satisfy the pure greed of the rich? What if you shredded labor movements to transfer wealth away from workers? What if you made education (and thus the opportunity for upward mobility) more expensive, so that the rich could save a few dollars in taxes? What if you privatized societal functions like education and criminal justice, so that only the (elite) few could profit?

If you did these things – and Western societies in varying degrees did them all – you would, of course, make an already bad situation far worse. And that is exactly what has happened. The

tsunami has been hitting, but the hospitals are closed, the drinking water long ago poured out into flower pots, and the helicopters grounded. Why? Because that's better for the one-tenth of one percent at the top of the economic pyramid who are already obscenely wealthy, and screw everyone else.

And now we can understand Trumpism, in the same way we could understand Hitlerism. Desperate people turn to desperate solutions. And Western policy makers have made people desperate by serving the interests of the overclass during already massively stressful times. This greed and treason has been incalculably stupid, even for the perpetrators, in the same way that FDR had to save capitalism from greedy-to-the-point-of-self-destruction capitalists in a prior telling of this same tale. **Their greed is so insatiable they are bringing the house down around their own heads.**

And so there is RAGE, often of the blind, unthinking sort. Like I said, for me, the wonder is not that it's happening, but that it's taken as long as it has. In European and other countries, that delay probably can be explained by relatively robust welfare state programs that substantially cushion the blow. In America, it has a lot to do with the political power of bigotry. The Republican Party has been dining out on the faux enemies of the white male working class for decades now. **Give 'em somebody brown or female or foreign to hate and to blame, and they don't notice while you're picking their pocket.**

The Democrats of the Clinton/Obama era, meanwhile, pretend to give a shit, all the while doing arguably even worse damage to their historical constituent base (i.e., America) than Ronald Reagan ever did. What a racket!

What has all this to do with Brexit? Well, everywhere you turn you see surly bodies politic, fed up with the destruction and deceit. Everywhere you look you see the collapse of centrist, status quo political parties that can no longer offer any remotely realistic solution to what ails people, and that probably can no longer be trusted with power even if they could. And everywhere you see the rise of Trump-like individuals and parties offering even more destructive and - importantly - even more deceitful 'solutions'.

These policy ideas are stupid on their face, even when they are coherent enough that one can figure them out. But desperate people... Britons, for example, are likely to rue the day they shot themselves in the foot and ditched the EU. Indeed, of all people, they should have known this. They turned up their nose at joining the nascent organization in the 1950s, only to spend the next two decades trying get past a petulant Charles de Gaulle and scramble back in, seeing what a mistake they had made. Betcha they're doing the same in 2030, assuming there's an EU then left to return to.

Or take Trump's idiocy (please). Imagine you're a good ol' boy in 'Bama, watching your football games at home on the big HD screen with 7.1 surround sound, nursing your case of Coors and scarfing up pizza and wings, sitting on the sofa underneath your framed Confederacy flag. The Donald has just deported 11 million undocumented workers from America and built his Great Wall. You shout "Hell yes!!" to your TV set and celebrate. And why shouldn't you? Think of the new opportunities open to you. You can now take a shitty job picking grapes, washing dishes or cleaning toilets! And you can pay lots more for everything you buy, including dinner at Cracker Barrel (with its more expensive produce, dishwashers, warehouse workers and so on) and the mowing of your lawn. What a deal?

The good news is that these Trumpian monsters, these mutant PT Barnums, have so far largely remained peripheral to gaining real destructive power or having significant impacts in the world (though arguably they rule Russia, Turkey, Hungary and other not-insignificant countries already).

The bad news is that a swing of two percent of British voters has now changed that. The horse is out of the barn. Where we go from here, of course, is unknown. But history may well record that the significance of this vote is that it marked the day when a replay of that delightful 1930s biopic of homo sapiens – special IMAX 3-D version this time – began rolling.

We've seen that movie before, of course, which makes current developments especially egregious. Do we really want to wreck the world for the short-term benefit of a handful of sociopathic oligarchs? Call me crazy, but I don't. Seems like a pretty crummy deal to me.

Let us hope – and strive – for the world sobering up, and fast. Trump-like figures are inevitable, but they only thrive when times are lousy, mainstream politicians are worthless (or worse, Bill, Hillary, Barack), and ludicrous 'solutions' seem to voters, worth trying, since they just might – you never know! – be better than the stagnant, fetid and RUINOUS status quo.

Yes, as improbable as it may seem, Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson and Donald Trump's policies might just make things better.

Of course, there's also that other thing that could happen...

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<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article44979.htm>

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Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. <http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-2278.html>