

The Great Pushback: Western Politics and Dynamics of Exclusion

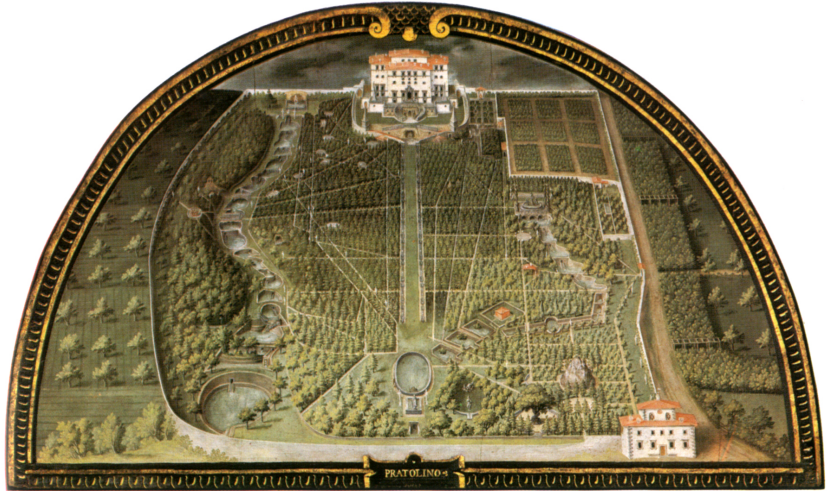
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Eurocrisis in the
Press

By *Roberto Orsi*

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A [recent piece](#) by Henry Radice on this very blog envisages a connection between different phenomena on the two sides of the Atlantic, namely Mr. Cameron's political tactics (or strategy?), which has led to the Brexit referendum, and the ascent of Mr. Trump as the Republican nominee in the upcoming US presidential elections. The connection would rest in the background of a widespread, growing anger in the US and UK public, in a "toxic culture of political irresponsibility" (in the GOP), and in an unclear identification of the EU's role in British politics, as well as of Britain's position within the EU, from the side of many. This bundle of disparate elements is worth exploring.



The author of the present piece, technically an EU (Italian) citizen residing in Japan, has clearly no vote in either US elections or British referenda, and feels obliged to remain as much as possible aloof in relation to those contests, and would certainly not wish to side with any party in the ongoing political debates, which do pertain exclusively to members of the political constituencies concerned. However, expressing an opinion about emerging trends in Western politics appears as somewhat legitimate activity to any Westerner, and such is the aim of this admittedly long piece.

The Brexit Referendum

First, it may be ungenerous to attribute the move towards the Brexit referendum largely to Mr. Cameron's inclination to accept high risks for the purpose of holding on his power position, in this case by means of a referendum on a matter of utter importance for the future of Britain and beyond, as much as in the Scottish referendum case. There is certainly an element of that. However, arguably more than in any major EU country, Britain's political elite circles retain a capability for strategic thought and analysis. Year after year, it becomes increasingly difficult to deny that the EU construction has incurred into serious problems, whose nature, extent, and most plausible outcomes can hardly induce to optimism. The EU itself has changed, fairly dramatically, into something that, quite clearly, a very large number of people in Britain and other countries never wished to see and certainly never voted for. The question of remaining in or leaving the EU appears therefore as a quite plausible one from the viewpoint of the strategic options open to Britain's future. If it is certainly possible to disagree on whether the referendum is the best suited way to deal with the matter, so on the other hand one may find equally admirable that countries exist in which citizens are called upon to express their political will on such fundamental questions, particularly if compared to other European nations, where the EU membership alongside with an ever-growing number of vital political questions are presented to the public as "the only possible" course of action. As almost anything in politics, it is certain that the Brexit referendum has been and will be the subject of speculation and manipulation. That is politics after all. But the referendum per se appears to be the expression, as inadequate as it may be, of a genuine choice which Britain must now confront and is no longer able to infinitely postpone. This can be seen rather easily in the undeniable

polarisation between roughly equal camps which the referendum itself has produced or strengthened, a polarisation running deep into the British political elite as well. Either way, there will be (high) costs and opportunities, which appear practically impossible to forecast, as Britain and the EU, as well as the Britain-EU relation, will dynamically adjust to either result of the referendum.

American Discontents: Trump & Sanders

Coming to US politics, the emergence of a figure such as that of Mr. Trump, as unpalatable as he may be to many, is arguably only the symptom of a vast movement, which, even if Trump may or will fail, will not cease to exist anytime soon. Of particular relevance in this context is, more than Trump alone, the radicalisation shift in the US presidential campaign, embodied in the Trump-Sanders duo. They have several traits in common, chiefly their attempt at intercepting widespread discontent, and at channelling it towards a particular interpretation, which necessarily involves the mobilisation of particular narratives of what the US is, was, is supposed to be, and crucially of who the enemy (enemies) is (are).

The very existence of such discontent, particularly in consideration of its colossal magnitude, comes almost as a surprise. According to a [widespread perception](#), the US has fully recovered from the 2008 financial and economic crisis, unemployment figures are by historical standards quite low, economic expansion continues, even if at slower pace than previous periods. US governmental policies under President Obama are generally assessed as being fairly successful in providing economic stability with some regard for matters of “social justice”, as well as a rational re-positioning of the US international commitments. This transcends the role of President Obama himself, as the US government is a much more complex machinery than often perceived by the broader public, and the President is hardly as powerful as depicted in Hollywood movies. However, President’s Obama trademark optimism, both domestic and in international affairs, appears increasingly isolated.

Where is this discontent coming from? Both Trump and Sanders point to the slow-motion but steady (at least perceived) impoverishment of the [American middle](#) class, the shrinking of economic (and other) opportunities, the overall feeling that the [future](#) is not going to be better than the present or the past, or even the perception by numerous Americans that they have been living for quite some time already in a social and economic environment they never wished to see twenty, or thirty years ago, or more. Trump fundamentally blames this situation on the way the US economy has been “[globalised](#)”, whereby economic opportunities have left the US for other countries, particularly China or Mexico, or has been mostly provided to (irregular) immigrants. Trump’s critical position on globalisation extends to the overall US international political and military posture in the post-Cold War era, which is judged as exceedingly expensive, unfair on the US, exposed to free-riding by the allies, as well as pointlessly adventurist in relation to interventions, especially in the Middle East.

Sanders points instead to the problem of inequality as the direct outcome of an unregulated financialisation of the US economy, a “rigged game” which only works for those already in privileged positions. Ultimately, this has to be blamed on “[greed](#)”, a manifestation of moral decadence.

Interestingly enough, although from different directions, both are pointing to moral decadence, albeit conceptualised in different terms: if Sanders sees it in the lack of empathy, social solidarity, and the absolute precedence that the US society has accorded to profit, Trump sees decadence in the abandonment of patriotic sentiments, and the spread of moral weakness which manifests itself chiefly in the “politically correct”, the flip side of globalisation as it occurred in the Western world.

In both cases, the revival of the American dream is envisaged. Trump seems to promise the re-establishment of a more prosperous US by restoring a previous moral order, rejecting the transformations intervened in the American society of the past few decades. What lies at the centre of Trump’s ascend may be conceptualised as a question of identity politics, or better as a reaction to an excess of identity politics in the past decades, aimed at restructuring the

criteria of membership of the US political community, which has gone too far, has lasted too long, and has started to backfire.

Sanders indicates his way towards the American dream's revival in the pursuing of explicitly Socialist policies which start from the presupposition that previous identity politics initiatives have not gone far and deep enough.

Reshaping Membership: Who is (not) American?

In both cases, identity politics, explicitly or implicitly, refers to patterns of inclusion and exclusion, i.e. to criteria of membership, those which should answer the questions: Who is American? (and therefore: Who is *not* American?), What is this "being American" really about? For Trump, the re-orientation of the US towards what "it used to be" (make America great *again*) means that Americans are those who recognise themselves in the continuity with what the US used to be or better those who *are* that continuity. This has tacit implications, particularly concerning immigration, multiculturalism, religion, and ethnicity more in general, as noticed by many of his [critics](#). However, this may also constitute the nemesis of a certain narrative of "inclusion" (at all costs), the inclusive principle of the "open society" which is not at all inclusive, as it rests on the systematic exclusion of the large masses of those who have now found a voice (again, however problematic and inadequate) in Mr. Trump. At least since the Clinton era (not coincidentally, the presidency which has shaped the "global" and "globalisation" discourse as it prevailed), being American has been conceptualised as "it does not matter who you are, where you are from, as long as economic prosperity is there". Trump's ascent occurs primarily as a response to the faltering of such identity politics model and its Rawlsian underpinnings, as on the one hand prosperity is fading, and on the other a new question is arising: Why should who you are, where you are from, not matter? Maybe it should matter. Paradoxically, much Western conservative thought and the now emergent postcolonial movement converge on this point. And here lies the core of a possible great pushback, and counteroffensive.

Sanders as well, in a completely different fashion, envisages new criteria of membership, or a new hierarchy, where the dream of prosperity is reinstated by new logics of economic redistribution away from neoliberal thinking, a sharing economy, a strong ethic of empathy with the fellow human regardless of anything else. Sanders [commented](#) on Trump defining him as a dangerous man who, while correctly identifying a truly existing and widespread discontent, intends to provide incorrect narratives of the situation and to channel collective anger towards the wrong social categories: not namely against "the rich", those who embody the moral decadence from which the problem originates, but against immigrants, Muslims, or even the Chinese. Sanders' attack on "the rich" appears however problematic on numerous fronts.

From an identity politics perspective, if American is anyone who adheres to the American dream in its "globalised" version, becoming rich, even "having it all", can be deemed to be just the accomplishment of that dream. Rich Americans, one may argue, have done exactly what the overwhelming majority of Americans wish to do. If individual prosperity, up to the possibility of making a real fortune, is not or should no longer be at the core of the "American dream", what can replace it? In other words, what is the point of "being American", otherwise? Redefining the American identity by tackling such questions appears exceedingly difficult, just by considering the resilience of the theological foundations of the American project. After all, the US was born as the New Jerusalem, the promised land "flowing with milk and honey", the land of endless economic expansion. The power of such symbolic order can hardly be displaced by the Socialist imagery, which, although it is now trying to acquire a more explicit theological dimension, as experimented by the current pontiff, remains bound to basic conceptions of politics against which the US was polemically created in the first place (high taxation, heavy-handed regulation, "big government"). Furthermore, the US was born as a space of freedom also in reason of its *physical separation* from the (old) world, whereby such separation is perhaps the single most powerful guarantee of that freedom. The construction of walls should not come as a surprise here.

The Economic Dimension

From an economic perspective, Sanders' position suffers from the old and new problems of Socialism: chiefly, the impossibility of redistributing what is not being produced in the first place, a problem which the old Socialist regimes knew all too well. In comparison to the nineteenth and early to middle twentieth century most of today's Socialists have abandoned the idea of seizing and managing production processes, as they have bitterly discovered that they are unable to run them. Today's Socialism remains therefore programmatically dependent (through taxation and, if necessary, other forms of coercion) on those groups and individuals who can manage production, thus entering a hierarchic relation in which it occupies an inferior position, contradicting the key pillar of the Enlightenment's conception of emancipation, the "exit from one's self-incurred tutelage", to which Socialism wishes, theoretically, to be harking back to. This point has vast consequences, as Socialism has historically failed to produce and reproduce the human and social capital necessary to fulfil its historical mission. As a response to its inability to master economic processes, Socialism has in the meantime focused its narrative on "money" (the unit by which for instance inequality is measured), when actually the translatability of the currency exchanged in financial markets and the banknotes in the pocket of the common citizen into goods and services other than financial assets is quite a different question (unfortunately overlooked by "the QE for the people" sort of ideas), particularly in the current environment, where a massive global monetisation effort has been continuing for the eighth straight year in order to avoid the collapse of the monetary system, and liquidity is generated in immense quantities but carefully kept as much as possible away from non-financial markets, on which it could have devastating impacts. Besides, the fact that "people work" does not tell much about the inherent economic value of the jobs they are performing. Simply looking at the explosion of employment in retail units, one may argue that a large misallocation of human resources has taken place.

Seizing the "money" of the "rich", as illustrated by the examples of the past, will not improve the economic condition of the poor, because that money has economic meaning only as a consequence of its concentration. The real wealth of a society does not reside in money, but in the construction of human and social capital, namely in diffuse knowledge, refinement, and sophistication, as well as in the quality of social relations and cohesion, which can only be achieved through complex cognitive processes of societal learning, and which may require generations and even centuries of work, but can be destroyed in a single generation.

Trump has the advantage of not being compelled to articulate a detailed set of economic policies fitting a given ideological framework, as he capitalises on his personal pragmatism mirroring the great demand for pragmatism certainly arising from his electorate.

The Dangers of Oversimplification

That said, there is certainly a link between financialisation, growth of inequality, disappearance of "real jobs" replaced by lesser forms of employment (which constitutes one of the mechanisms, among others, by which the Western world is destroying its own human and social capital). The way out of this seems to imply a reshaping of the economic system which diminishes the role of financial activities, but this also hints at the necessity of a new international division of labour. The fact itself that the global financial system continues to operate in an emergency mode since 2008 is the best indicator that the world economic arrangement is no longer functioning, and will have to change in one way or the other. The scope and magnitude of such "reform" is however too large and too complex to be operated as an ordered and concerted transition. Far more probable is that, as hinted by Trump, single actors will pursue independent policies (a return to protectionism), facing high risks and paying the necessary costs, with the aim of reconstructing economic systems towards a model where the bulk of the investment-production-consumption cycle will take place domestically, and should be therefore more politically controllable, as opposed to the current globalisation model, which has grown too complex to be controlled by anybody, and has in the meantime become extremely unstable.

Such protectionist move will hardly be a panacea for economic and social woes. Indeed, globalisation and financialisation also occurred because of the problems inherent to past national economic models. Going back to them, will in due course reproduce those problems. The point is here that there may be other reasons, such as saturation, technological barriers, demographic change, environmental limits, wherefore a further and massive expansion of the economic system, be it national or global, is no longer attainable, and in such perspective, any promise of reviving the American dream, from any side it may come, appears exceedingly difficult to keep. This should be inscribed in the [more general problem](#) of the unsustainability of the material content inherent to the still prevalent modernist political-economic ideologies of progress.

To conclude this part on US politics, the meaning of this very polarised presidential election is that of a vast movement which contradicts the optimistic narrative characterising the last few presidencies since the end of the Cold War. A whole set of ideas and policies, some of them much older than the 1990s, is facing a difficult crisis, which they may not be able to surmount.

A Painful Look at (What is Left of) Europe

Such situation presents a basic similarity with the crisis in EU politics. After 1992 the European Union, as well as domestic politics in numerous European countries, was reshaped along “American lines”. This is still the prevalent orientation, cemented in the numerous trans-Atlantic organisations, of those who seek the creation of the “United States of Europe”, and wish to construct a “European identity” based on the so-called “European values”. This view intended and still intends to go beyond Europe as a community of nations and nation states. It might have been articulated as some kind of federalism (as also envisaged for instance by Jürgen Habermas in his 2001 volume *Zeit der Übergänge*) which, considering the historical and cultural complexity of the continent, should have been on the loose side in the spectrum of all possible federal forms. However, the EU has in the meantime moved towards a toxic mix of hyper-centralisation, political unaccountability, a self-referencing worldview enhanced by purely abstract-econometric-legalistic conceptions of political matters, in which prudence has been completely lost, not to mention the inability to handle communication or to restructure its public image.

In the past few years, with a dramatic acceleration after 2014, the European political establishment (in the EU bureaucracy and especially in Germany) appears to have been seized by a veritable *Todestrieb*, a drive towards self-liquidation. Such drive is particularly devious as it is wrapped in Orwellian “progressivist”, “[humanitarian](#)”, and “pacifist” worldviews which have become the established mental categories by which everybody is expected to think, the counterpart of US political correctness, but far more dangerous, especially owing to its strategic implications in the context of Europe’s difficult geopolitical setting. As de-construction has never been capped by reconstruction, the playful character of the Western culture’s great carnival, celebrated in the late 1960s but never followed by its Lent, has turned grotesque.

The well-known mechanism of group-think, whereby self-censorship is applied for the sake of preserving one’s own position in an established group, continuously reinforcing it, has enabled the achievement of a remarkable and historically quite rare intellectual near-homogeneity behind the façade of seemingly opposing pseudo-factions (neoliberals vs. anti-capitalists being the most celebrated). Less noticed are the downsides of this arrangement: first, the inability to move beyond the deadlock of the European half-baked integration, whereof intellectuals are aware, and which in the long term will condemn those positions and the intellectuals themselves to irrelevance or worse (as Confucianist scholars in the turbulent China of a hundred years ago); and furthermore, the hardening against any non-conforming idea, ensuring an ever-growing polarisation against political dissent (so called populism, Euroscepticism and so on), from which the impossibility of dialogue results, leading, in the ideal prolonging of this trajectory, to political violence and (total) war.

Still, one may regard this construction with some degree of admiration: it is an incredibly well-engineered structure. If it were infused with different ideas, it could have as well rivalled with the rise of the greatest empires in world

history. Unfortunately, those ideas are fundamentally suicidal, guaranteeing what anybody can already witness, namely that the more Europe steps on this path, the quicker it disintegrates. Particularly the so called “refugee crisis” has devastated the EU’s political capital, not to mention that of the German ruling class. For vast numbers of fellow Europeans in all EU countries, the self-destructive course of the continent is becoming all too clear. The political establishment of the Visegrád group and other nations of Central Europe and the Baltic is appalled: they have suffered and worked so hard to bring their nations into the common European home, but this is in the process of becoming the tomb of European peoples in the name of the great nothing. Less openly, many in the British establishment have certainly realised that there is something terribly wrong about the European ship and its route.

Trajectories

As in the US, the dominant narrative of EU politics has come under enormous pressure, even if in Europe this is articulated at national level, which has remained the privileged *locus* of politics, although some kind of Europe-wide coordination is incipient. Regardless of the Brexit referendum and its result, in the longer period the fate of the EU construction, barring a spectacular as much as improbable U-turn in practically every aspect, is sealed, but it can easily become tragic, as more and more Europeans will try to escape or stop the continent’s self-liquidation. The more time goes by, the greater the damage inflicted to Europe and to any alternative form of Europeanism; however, tackling the roots of the current predicament may require grave sacrifices and almost epic forms of heroism. This is certainly not Europe’s finest hour, and the coming storm is practically impossible to avoid. On both sides of the Atlantic fundamental intellectual and political structures are crumbling: it is not a coincidence, and it will not go away anytime soon, even if Trump or the Eurosceptics may fail in this round, but it will continue to re-emerge in many different forms, as time is ripe for a change of direction.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog nor of the London School of Economics.

Roberto Orsi is a co-investigator on the Euro Crisis in the Press project. He holds a PhD International Relations and is currently member of the Security Studies Unit at the Policy Alternatives Research Institute (東京大学政策ビジョン研究センター), and lecturer at the Graduate School of Public Policy (GraSPP – 東京大学公共政策大学院) of the University of Tokyo (Japan). His research interests focus on international political theory, history of ideas (particularly modern continental political philosophy and critical theory), political theology (Carl Schmitt). He is also interested in social science epistemology and classical philology. View [all posts by Roberto](#) or visit his [personal website](#).