

Enter the post-global era

AMONG the very many social and historical forces, economic exchange, collaboration and war, yes war, have been catalytic in shaping the world for centuries. These forces were forced, in a sense, into something of a portmanteau concept since about the 1970s, when we began to refer to them, collectively, as a collective process of globalisation.

When the Cold War ended in stages after 1989 and when liberal capitalism was said to have triumphed, the 1990s became known as the decade of globalisation.

The stand-out definition of globalisation became associated, almost exclusively, with finance and economics. The reference was to economies, or markets, that had become functionally integrated into a global whole.

Goods and services, and money, became increasingly footloose. We spoke of “global brands”.

With some justification “brands” like Coca Cola, Toyota or Apple were said to have lost their national moorings. Globalisation was, now, driven almost exclusively by corpora-

tions and was assumed to be a natural order of things.

Most economists, from Marxists to liberal free traders, drew on their canonical texts to explain the inevitability, the natural tendency, of capitalist enterprises to “nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere”. Indeed, governments around the world went out of their way to open their societies to investment and the flow of goods and services, and thereby ceded aspects of state sovereignty to global institutions.

Very briefly, the global whole, or the globalised world, was propped up, as it were, by institutions of global governance. Most prominent among these are the United Nations, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the global trade regime which was formalised as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1995.

More and more the institutions, especially the WTO, gained power sufficient to affect the domestic policies of sovereign states.

Something else was happening across this period of globalisation. People began to feel

uncertain about the future.

Some of us, those of who worked in the political economy drawing on the work of sociologists and anthropologists, took note of increased precarity. We noted how populations began to succumb to the pressures of failing social and economic

networks, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, dislocation and death.

Very many people felt that the world was running away with them – so to speak.

Given the almost anonymity of global capitalism’s competition and what we began to refer to as a “race to the bottom” (government deregulation and the lowering of corporate tax as the primary means of attracting investment) states began to lose credibility with domestic constituencies. Internal sovereignty, the legal basis for making domestic laws based on domestic social con-

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ditions, began to be eroded.

Where markets were expected to be the final arbiter and distributor of benefits and opportunities, the state was rolled back. Because “markets” were said to be anonymous and beyond the reach of policy, more people turned inward, in a process that we described as local-

isation.

Part of this localisation resulted in people finding safety, rightfully or wrongfully, in ethnic, racial, religious or nationalist identities.

And so we have the rise of extreme religious movements (like Islamic State, or Al Shabab), nationalist tendencies (like Brexit), anti-immigration politics (what the president-elect of the US, Donald Trump, seems to be driving), xenophobia and national pride (like UKIP in Britain), the anti-migrant Alternative for Germany party (AfD), and South Africa’s own racial exclusivity

and puritan movements which are now calling for “delinking” Africa from the world and a return to some state of natural pre-colonial utopia.

All of this is given significant impetus by the current crisis in the global political economy, that has led a generation of Europeans, for decades the most prosperous and stable continent, to poverty and, themselves, precarity. Globalisation, as we have come to know it, may be coming to an abrupt end.

We may well have reached a point where the human idealistic, even utopian, dream of a world without borders, where people can move about and associate freely and become truly cosmopolitan is out of our reach. This was, arguably, the basis for even thinking about a global whole.

Indeed, the development

and modernisation promoted through neo-liberal capitalist orthodoxy projected to us dreams of progress and of prosperity. Early in the 21st century we are

faced, instead, with increasing precarity, and are vulnerable to forces that are, at once, distant and alien, like markets, and inter-personal, like racial, ethnic or religious squabbles.

And war? Well, there’s no telling, is there?

The US, Russia and China are singing war songs in three-part harmony. The wars in Western Asia seem without

end.

Their ends, themselves, seem to have been lost along the path as we are slouching towards William Butler Yates’s Bethlehem.

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