Much has been written about how the rise of populism is unsettling the status quo in the West. The term is used to describe how an increasing number of Western citizens appear to be rejecting the liberal norms that, to date, have guided the West’s vision of how societies and the world should be run. But less has been said on how this liberalism was promoted around the world by Western countries with very mixed results, and as part of a self-serving agenda to maintain a Western-designed and led world order.

This reversal has the global majority watching events in the West with bemusement and trepidation. So far, the kind of populism seen in America and Europe remains limited to the West. There are populist leaders in Asia—India’s Narendra Modi and the Philippines’ Rodrigo Duterte come to mind—but their popularity does not stem from a reaction to or rejection of global trends and events.

Looking from Asia allows for a different perspective on the raging debate about globalisation and populism. Asian societies have been helped a great deal by globalisation, but have also for a long period experienced significant negative impacts and borne tremendous costs. These benefits and costs are also distributed unequally, with the majority still suffering from many of the social and environmental costs of rapid development and Westernisation which accompanied globalisation. The Asian experience of globalisation, with its wide ranging successes and failures, should not have made the populist reaction in the West a surprise.

The West, which has been the main proponent of using unfettered globalisation—open markets, free trade, limited government and the free movement of people—as the way to build a better world, now seems to be rejecting its own “rules-based world,” even as latecomers from Asia and Africa are embracing it with gusto. Understandably, the new converts are puzzled by the West’s U-turn.

In the West a prevailing post-war liberal ideology fused with a political narrative has provided cover for more covert goals under the guise of globalisation. And its unravelling is proving to be embarrassing to liberal elites and may perhaps explain some of the outrage of commentators to the actions of the West’s rising populist politicians.

There is still a deeply-held belief in the West—though maybe diminishing amongst some in America and Europe—that it is superior and that it needs to play a leading role in making the world a “better place”: a world in its own image but without wanting to share power. The events of 2016 should push the rest of the world to instead confront reality, and adjust accordingly.

Despite all the progress of our modern era, the creeping disintegration of the existing global order—far from perfect, but the best we have now—reflects two trends. First is the long overdue rejection of the fallacies and lies—and thus broken promises—that have accompanied so many of the arguments about the inevitability and supposed benefits of modernity, especially as they have been presented through the lens of the Western historical experience over the last hundred years. Second is the manifestation of how societies around the world are increasingly unable to cope with the “assault of modernity”, often aided and abetted by the great strides in technological innovation.

What is interesting is that, up to now, a rejection of modernity has typically only been expressed by discontents in the non-Western world (and thus written off). Now, this discontent is expressed in the West, and they are no longer a minority. This may be a silver lining as the neoliberal narrative of the 20th
Century starts to unravel. There is a growing global rejection of the economic and political theories that support the idea that globalisation is the only route to modernity and a better world. This “populist” revolt has only come as a surprise to Western elites because they have for too long denied the tragic consequence of their blinkered approach to progress and modernity.

There are numerous examples of this assault of modernity that should provide a wake-up call. We could start with the continued adherence to Western ideas about how modern societies should work and how to create prosperity, not to mention the relentless push for greater integration and interconnectivity with little regard for wider unintended consequences. This has, in turn, turned into a number of sacred political beliefs, such as unfettered individual freedoms, rights and unbridled consumption to sustain economic growth. The consequences of this fixation are clear for everyone to see: the financial crisis, climate change, ever-growing pollution in cities worldwide, and rising geopolitical tensions.

Another aspect of this assault of modernity and the associated pursuit of Westernisation at all costs can be seen in the way cultures and traditions are being eroded. Why is this a threat? This erosion is feared and resented by many from societies with strong enduring traditions, yet who are fraught with insecurity and have a sense of humiliation. This is a pain and fear that is neither understood nor fully appreciated by leading Western commentators. How could they?

Under all the data and arguments about how global connectivity and the unstoppable spread of technology will make the world a better place, some great tensions are brewing. Some of that can be seen in the devastation of those cultures that have succumbed and the resistance of people against Westernisation and alien ideas about what it means to be modern. Perhaps the most abhorrent form of this resistance is found in phenomenon like ISIS.

So, as the debate around growing populism in the world intensifies, we should also question the motives of commentators who try to explain it away in dismissive terms. “Globalisation”, in some general sense, is not on trial here. Globalisation has been in place since the first sack of salt was traded, since spices from the East were taken to the West, since silk from China was discovered by the rest of the world, and since slaves were used to build the New World.

We do not live in a new era of populism. Instead, we live in an era of gross inequality hardwired into a version of globalisation captive to the interests of a few at the expense of the vast majority. This is what has given rise to populism. And this perpetual and worsening inequality is the antithesis of the liberal commitment to build a modern and globalised economy for all.


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