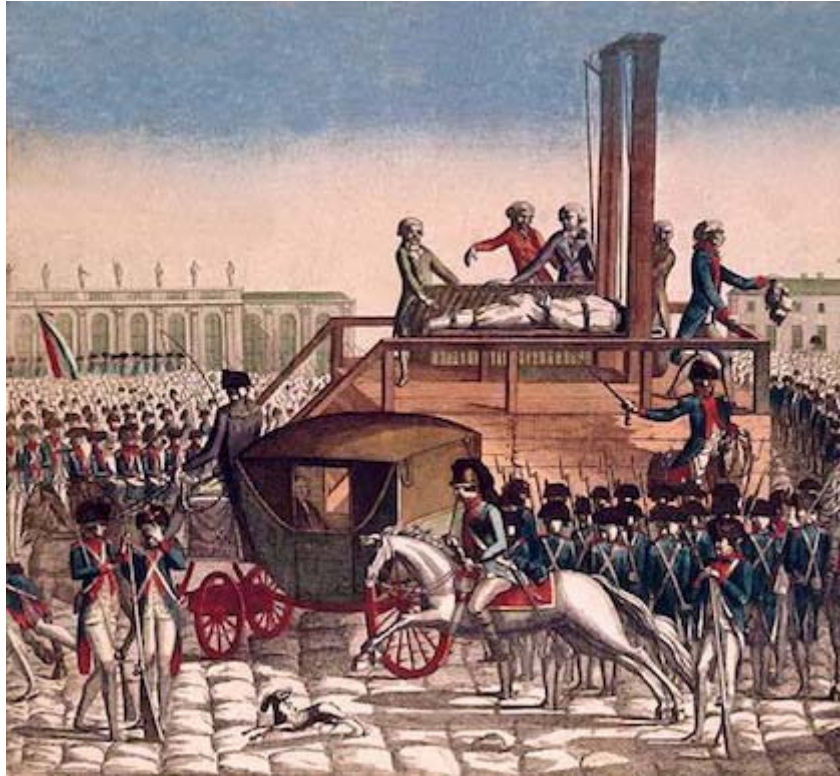


The new political antagonism

Globalisation and nationalism have displaced the party conflicts of the 20th century

by Colin Crouch / March 8, 2017



An illustration of the decapitation of Louis XVI. Can today's political battles be traced to the ancien régime and the Enlightenment? ©Réunion des Musées Nationaux

Behind the intense conflict between globalisation and the new stirring of nationalism across much of the world stands that old, 18th century struggle between the values of the ancien régime and those of the Enlightenment. Donald Trump, Islamic State, Vladimir Putin, the Leave campaigners, Marine Le Pen and others do not all like each other, but they all have problems with globalisation—problems that go far beyond the economy.

Some of their concerns are widely shared. From being the process that simply seemed to be bringing us both cheaper imports and new export opportunities, globalisation has become a term of abuse. Although resistance to it comes from all parts of the political spectrum, its best organised opponents come from the political right. This makes sense, because the vehicle of much of the protest is nationalism, the most straightforward antagonist of globalisation and one which is historically associated with the right. On the

other hand, globalisation was mainly the project of neoliberalism, which for several decades has been the dominant ideology of the right.

The gradual rise of globalisation

To understand this puzzle we need to grasp the complexity and history of globalisation. There was a major move to globalising trade in the late 19th century, but it was highly controlled by the western European empires, Great Britain in particular but also France, the Netherlands, Portugal and others. Being imperial, it was military as well as commercial, eventually including “the scramble for Africa,” and it became one of the causes of the First World War. The inter-war years saw a retreat from international trade and the rise of militarised nationalism, which was a principal cause of the Second World War.

That war over, international trade started again, but with the European colonial empires gradually disintegrating. Their control over the process was replaced by the global dominance of the United States. The division of most of the world into the blocs of the Cold War limited the extent of this next wave of globalisation, as two of the blocs, those dominated by the USSR and China, stayed outside the international market economy. In the US-dominated part of the world, trade barriers were very gradually relaxed in successive GATT rounds; and within the countries of European Economic Community (later the European Union) cross-national economic integration went further.

There were no reasons for inhabitants of western countries to fear growing international trade as a challenge to their feeling that their nation states remained sovereign, because their interests dominated the whole process. The most basic aspect of sovereignty—the power to wage war autonomously—had in reality been fundamentally compromised by the arrival of nuclear weapons, but this was not experienced as a problem except by a few who held on nostalgically to the old visions of empire. The European imperial powers gradually abandoned their futile little wars to prevent colonial independence, and, albeit beneath the terrifying anxiety of possible nuclear war, many parts of the world and Europe in particular became more peaceful than for many years.

There was one exception to the ease with which globalisation was accepted: growing immigration into several western economies brought episodes of xenophobia and violence, and more widespread discrimination and social rejection of immigrants. This

happened both in countries where immigrants came mainly from former colonies, as in the UK, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, or those in which they came as guest workers (as they were initially thought to be) in Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

The US continued its far longer tradition of immigration from across the world—with a similarly familiar story of accompanying conflict and discrimination. Gradually governments and civil society developed ways of countering these tensions and of teaching populations to accept the incomers, whose labour was needed by economies in full expansion but with low birth rates and full employment. Tensions did not disappear, but political and economic elites, still remembering what the encouragement of racial antagonism had caused in Germany in the 1930s, mainly resisted temptations to exploit them.

The extension of world trade and agreements to reduce tariffs and other barriers moved to a new level in a third wave of globalisation. This was the general push for both domestic and international deregulation, as neoliberal economic ideas achieved dominance under the leadership of the US and its faithful ally the UK. The World Trade Organisation (WTO) worked for these goals at global level. By the 1980s, mass production in the steel, shipbuilding and several metalworking and electronics industries of Europe and North America had become uncompetitive in the face of lower-cost competition from Japan.

Then Japan was replaced by South Korea. There was growing unemployment in many old industrial areas, though in the EU this was alleviated by structural funds to help regeneration. Manufacturing in the affected sectors moved into more specialised, high value-added products, employing far fewer people. Employment in services sectors, especially public services, grew at the same time, but not reproducing the communities of the industrial age.

These processes were massively reinforced from various different sources in the 1990s, which together amount to a fourth wave. With the particular enthusiasm of the UK, the EU began to construct the European Single Market, which established standards for unrestrained trade across a variety of goods, services, financial flows, and the free movement of labour, with a supranational court, the European Court of Justice, to govern its implementation. At about the same time, the collapse of the Soviet empire enabled the countries of central Europe to enter the market economy and eventually the EU.

China, while formally maintaining its position as a state-socialist economy, also entered the market economy, joining the WTO in 2001. The Multi-Fibre Arrangement, established in 1974 to protect European and other wealthy economies from cheap clothing and textile imports from developing countries, especially in Asia, was gradually coming to an end. (It finally closed in 2004.) Also during the 1990s the US and UK pioneered a major deregulation of the global financial system, funding major expansions of economic activity across the world, but encouraging the irresponsible financial practices that by 2008 had brought much of the world to a massive financial crisis.

Globalisation was now in full spate, and in many respects followed the classic expectations of economists that there will be mutual gains from an expansion of free trade. Low-valued-added activities declined in the rich countries, to be replaced by both higher-value-added ones and activities in services that could not easily be replaced by imports, such as health, education, restaurants and retail trading. Many poor countries, particularly China and the Indian subcontinent, increased their national incomes by trade in those activities that had become uncompetitive in the west, and as a result developed a large middle class that could afford to buy more expensive goods from Europe, Japan and the US.

But there have been important casualties along the way. Workers in China's rapidly developing manufacturing cities have suffered from harsh labour regimes and a heavily polluted atmosphere. European and American workers in old industrial regions have seen the industries in which they took pride decline, and if new jobs have come to their areas they have been in non-prestigious services, and mostly taken up by women.

More fundamentally perhaps, globalisation was no longer controlled by the US and its European and Japanese allies, but had become an autonomous process, with the rich world losing its former power to stop any trade that it was finding inconvenient. When the Anglo-American financial crisis arrived in 2008, it reinforced underlying anxieties that the world might be running out of the west's control.

Meanwhile, increased trade brought strengthening relations of all kinds across much of the world. People learned more about other countries, travelled to them, adopted some of their customs, eating habits, social attitudes and cultures. These flows were often multi-directional, but many people in poorer countries wanted to know more about richer ones, and some started to migrate to them. Within the EU

single market this was particularly easy, leading to major flows from central to western European countries; but it happened to the US too.

Ethnic tensions that had been the dark side of the first post-war wave of globalisation returned, adding to the sense of loss of control. For some people in the wealthy world, mainly older ones and those living in areas not involved in the rapidly developed global post-industrial economy, life was feeling insecure, and the nation states to which they looked to protect them from the outside world were losing their capacity to do so.

The impact of radical Islam

One can tell this story as the accumulation of an ongoing logic of economic globalisation, especially under neoliberal impetus. But a different factor intervenes: deterioration in relations between the western world, particularly the US, and many states and social groups in the Middle East and, more generally, the Islamic world.

While this includes elements of resentment against what is seen as a western economic imposition, it has other major causes: internal reasons for violent conflicts and civil wars, as well as the military involvement of the US, UK and occasionally France in those conflicts. To consider all those causes is beyond the scope of this article. We simply need to note that this set of problems has exacerbated existing tensions around globalisation in the strictly economic sense and has superseded them in increasing the sense of growing helplessness spreading across some parts of the population of Europe and the US.

The issue takes two separate forms: a major increase in the numbers of people seeking refuge in our peaceful countries from violence and war; and the growth of acts of terrorism against western cities and transport systems by very small numbers of young Muslims who have come to see us as their mortal enemies.

Separate though they may be, they come together to confront some westerners with the image of masses of people from a different culture coming into their societies—among whom there may well be terrorists. If, as the Leave campaign successfully managed, refugees and asylum seekers can be presented as part of the same phenomenon as immigrants from central Europe within the single market, the link between globalisation and the crisis over Islam can, however dishonestly, be presented as the same thing.

All the xenophobic movements that are spreading across Europe make heavy use of the Islamic issue, and it is doubtful whether economic globalisation alone could have made the resurgence of nationalism as strong as it is. Xenophobic movements are stronger in the wealthiest countries that have gained most from globalisation—the Nordic states, the UK, France, Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland—than in those in southern Europe.

In Germany, Alternative für Deutschland acquired traction among the public only when it added Islamophobia to its previously rather technical campaign against the euro. Governments in Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, countries that have benefited enormously from their membership of the EU, turned up their nationalist rhetoric when asked to help Greece and Italy bear the burden of the refugee crisis. In the US, Donald Trump makes use of anxieties about Muslim and Mexican immigrants in a general clamour to seal the country's borders against both persons and goods.

At a deeper level, a cultural rather than an economic one, conflict between the west and Islam is related to globalisation in a viciously spiralling way. Globalisation brings us into much greater contact with other cultures. We can experience this as enriching and engage in cultural fusion. But it can also be unsettling, even offensive. Some people in the Islamic world have reacted in the latter way against what they seem as the hegemonic imposition on them of western values, including those around sexual behaviour, especially when they also see western planes bombing cities in their part of the world.

Some people in the west are then similarly offended by the symbols of rejection of our values that Islamic people adopt. How else can one explain the hysteria produced by a few Muslim women wearing headscarves? And how does one explain that it is increasingly well-educated young Muslim women who are adopting the hijab, other than as an oppositional cultural statement? Such processes exacerbate each other and feed a desire among some people to separate themselves from marks of strangeness and insecurity, and to retreat behind what seem to be the safe barriers of their familiar culture.

The return of 18th century conflicts

And so globalisation and a reviving nationalism are becoming today's main political antagonists, displacing the familiar party conflicts we inherited from the 20th century. To understand what is happening, we need to dig deeper

still, and turn back to the 18th century and its conflicts between the ancien régime and the Enlightenment.

Very crudely, the Enlightenment, as represented in particular by Immanuel Kant, stood for the growth of rationalism and of a universalism that implied a kind of equality, however narrowly and variously this was originally conceived. The ancien régime, conservatism, stood for tradition, unchallenged religious belief, hierarchies and inequalities that were sanctified by time. Expressed from a conservative point of view, Enlightenment values were cold, accessible only to the educated; those of the ancien régime were made gentle and easily accessible through their familiarity.

Over the centuries, at least in Europe and those parts of the world that acquired its culture, the Enlightenment view came to dominate, through the triumph of science, the market economy, and universal citizenship and its associated rights. Indeed, the principal political conflict became one within the Enlightenment bloc, between advocates of, respectively, the market economy and social citizenship. But conservative values have always survived, usually in the background, carried either by religious faiths or just by the settled customs of established communities, supporting and stabilising political identities of left and right alike—a defeated but useful counterpart to Enlightenment values.

Once conservatives embraced science and the market economy, their other values became useful allies for market liberals, whose extreme rationalism has little popular appeal in itself. Although social democracy is a child of the Enlightenment, in practice the universalism of its welfare states has been implicitly limited to the oxymoron of a national universe; and its social supports have been the working-class communities of industrialism. Very few movements or indeed individual persons belong completely in just one of these great historical camps; we find a compromise between them with which we are comfortable. If that balance is seriously disturbed, we become anxious.

When conservative values are severely attacked, by either Enlightenment challenges or by clashes with rival conservatisms, they can become extremely vicious, as they did in various European countries during the 1920s and 1930s. Globalisation can be seen as such an attack: an uncompromising expression of the Enlightenment project in its market-rational form, a move to a world where old established cultural and national boundaries have ever less meaning; where the main transactions are those of the

universal, rational market rather than of familiarity and custom. Trump's US, Brexit, the xenophobic movements of continental Europe, Russia's assertion of its national pride, and Islamic rejection of western values and domination can all be interpreted in these terms.

This apparent "globalisation of nationalisms" does not mean they are part of a united movement; some are deeply hostile to each other, as nationalism implies. They are united by their shared relationship to this fundamental struggle between worldviews. The basic conflict appears in different packages. In the US, Poland, Russia and the Islamic world conservative reaction links rage against economic globalisation with anger over various issues of sexuality and deviance; this is absent from Brexit Britain. The UK also diverges in that its government insists that Brexit means more economic globalisation, not less—provided it does not include immigration.

On the other hand, Prime Minister Theresa May's attack on cosmopolitanism at the Conservative Party conference in October 2016 came from the heart of anti-Enlightenment values. "If you believe you're a citizen of the world," she argued, "you're a citizen of nowhere," listing various hypothetical examples of lack of respect for British people displaced by international firms and individuals with liberal ideas. In other words, shared citizenship and the concern for others can be expressed only towards members of your own nation. Probably unconsciously, she was echoing the attack made by Fyodor Dostoyevsky on Ivan Turgenev and other 19th century Russian liberals who sought a European identity as well as a Russian one. Such people, he argued, could feel only contempt for their own people.

Seeing current conflicts around globalisation as a revival of the epic struggle between the Enlightenment and the ancien régime enables to understand many of their puzzling features. Trump and the Brexit campaigners' triumphant rejection of the concepts of evidence, facts and expertise can be seen as the old hostility to science and reason. Some observers have been confused at the support of the passed-by and downtrodden for extremely rich leaders. But true conservatism does not offer security through redistribution, but through the assertion of values, old certainties and national power by leaders who are deferred to. Advocates of the new conservatism always attach the hated adjective "liberal" to the elites they criticise; they have no objections to elites in general.

Rationalism and universalism are now under attack, mainly through their association with globalisation. The

implications of the new confrontation will be large, as they stir deep emotions. We have seen the expressions of national fervour of the conservative side, but as expressions of feeling in the UK and US are making clear, those who are committed to Enlightenment values have their own kind of passion. When British opponents of Brexit say they feel “bereaved,” they do not mean that they resent paying more for their next Mercedes, but that something in their sense of themselves as a modern person has been wounded.

The issues involved are so deep that they make the future highly unpredictable. What will be the fate of the main governing alliance in many countries, that between neoliberals and conservatives, in principle on opposite sides of the great divide? If conservatives can resist the temptation to take advantage of xenophobic enthusiasm (Germany?), or if neoliberals accept it as the only compromise they make to their market-making strategy (the UK?), such an alliance might still be viable. Where extreme conservative movements are more powerful and demanding, the crisis for the centre-right may be more severe (the Nordic countries, France?)

For social democrats the problem is different. Their particular brand of conservatism was implicit: the unspoken national base of much of their universalism, and the quiet defensiveness of working-class communities. Xenophobic movements are now actively attacking this base, by linking the defence of the welfare state to nationalism and the exclusion of immigrants, and offering various kinds of social conservatism around gender, crime and discipline to compensate for the loss of community values. Meanwhile, the new constituencies of social democracy, among public-service workers and others in the educated sectors of the post-industrial economy (in particular women, and in new coalitions with environmentalist forces) reject departures from Enlightenment values.

Compromises between the Enlightenment and the ancien régime have taken myriad forms, because both are such rich and complex concepts. The outcomes as we reach for new rapprochements between them will be equally diverse—and at present therefore highly unpredictable.

This piece is based on a recent article by Crouch in Die Zeit