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# Fake Values (versus the Authentic Values of Social Eurasia)

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## The inflation of values rhetoric

When the President of the United States of America is ruffling feathers all over the world, as he certainly has in recent months, nothing else receives much attention in the mass media. Donald Trump has launched a full-scale trade war against China and seems determined to begin something similar against his political allies in Europe. He has also initiated unprecedented constructive diplomacy towards North Korea and bravely gone ahead with a first major summit meeting with the President of the Russian Federation. Following the latter, he has been castigated across the political spectrum of the USA. Senior figures in his own party have reminded him that there can be no “moral equivalence” with Russia, a country that does not “share our values” (Paul Ryan).

Of course, this is to chide Trump in his own currency. Among those the President judges guilty of infringing American values is the black quarterback Colin Kaepernick, whose transgression was to refuse to stand for the national anthem as a gesture of protest against racial inequality in his country. His kneeling incensed conservative Americans. Racism of a different sort is central to an on-going media storm in Germany. Mesut Özil has been widely recognized as the most creative member of the German national soccer team for almost a decade. In May 2018, together with other players of Turkish descent plying their trade in Britain, Özil was photographed together with the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was visiting London at the time, ahead of the Turkish general elections. The World Cup in Russia was also approaching and Mesut Özil soon felt the full force of the media in his native country, which had been bashing Erdoğan for years. This third generation German Turk, a Muslim, was urged to dissociate himself from the dictator in Ankara and publicly profess German/European values. Mesut Özil is a taciturn personality who does not enjoy interviews and prefers to display his intelligence on the football field. His silence would have been excused and forgotten had he won this year’s World Cup with Germany, as he had in 2014. But in Russia the

whole team underperformed and a scapegoat was needed. Özil's performances on the field had been among the few bright points of a lackluster championship, but evidently his values were a problem. In 2018 you cannot represent Germany as a footballer and be photographed smiling alongside Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Eventually Özil cracked under the pressure. In late July he protested the manifest double standards of the German Football Association, which in his eyes added up to a form of racism, and resigned from the German squad.

Away from the sports field, "European values" have remained prominent in public discourse this summer. For example, they are invoked by the European Commission when criticizing a law recently approved by the Hungarian parliament that criminalizes any form of assistance to "illegal migrants". In the eyes of Brussels, given the lack of definitional clarity as to who is merely a migrant and who is a refugee with a potential claim to asylum, this law infringes a universal human right. That is not how it is perceived by power holders in Budapest. Viktor Orbán is careful, however, to present himself as much more than a parochial Hungarian populist. He too invokes values – not just those of a proud Hungarian nation but of a Christian (sometimes even Judeo-Christian) continent. At the end of an otherwise forgettable meeting with Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin in early July, the leaders of two political parties both ostensibly committed to Christian principles vied for the mantle of the better European. Merkel insisted that being European meant showing a humanitarian conscience to the world. Orbán pointed out that his border fence was providing other European countries with the protection they needed against enemies. Hungarian actions were saving countries such as Germany a lot of money, as well as preserving precious intangible values. The rest of the world was left puzzled by this non-dialogue: which of the two leaders was the more European, and who was the more hypocritical?

## **Values and material realities across Eurasia**

The explicit invocation of values in the cases I have listed above, drawn from the news media of the last few months, is an intensifying feature of contemporary politics. It might be viewed as a debasement of the language, which blinds us to the norms and values that people share across the putative boundaries. This would be correct in the sense that the values we read about routinely in our media tend to be gross distortions of any reality in the world. But if these representations are spurious (or "fake"), values may nonetheless exist in more authentic senses. We should be wary of the lazy assumption that the values of human beings and their communities are basically all the same everywhere. It is the task of social scientists to investigate and explain significant differences in time and space. They may do this at multiple levels. For example, the methodological individualist Max Weber found it helpful to distinguish between the values of different "spheres of life" (Terpe 2018).

The REALEURASIA project engages at this micro level, but it also engages with the role of

values in macro-sociological processes, and with how collective beliefs and values may continue to influence world history today. Like Weber, I am interested in relating beliefs and values to the materialities of political economy. For example, the surfeit of value rhetoric in July 2018 coincided with the signing of a new free trade deal between the European Union and Japan. This agreement received comparatively little attention in the mass media, but in the age of Brexit and Trump it is worth reflecting on the implications of a deal struck between the wealthy extremities of the Eurasian landmass. Unlike other such agreements, the signatories of this one committed themselves to respecting rules, environmental standards, and values.

For some critical observers of neoliberal capitalism, all measures to facilitate the movement of goods and services are suspect because, inevitably, they also promote new inequalities. But if the unequal consequences of free trade are effectively countered by political power holders through effective redistribution, the principled objection fails (Rodrik 2011). How does the configuration look in this particular example? Japan has a centralized state that accomplishes significant regional redistribution and provides all citizens with access to health care and pensions. The European Union has similar aspirations. Yet in recent decades implementation has weakened. Who remembers the "social Europe" agenda of Jacques Delors from a generation ago? True, significant regional redistribution still takes place, but in practice the transfers known euphemistically as coherence funds serve only to bolster the power of politicians such as Viktor Orbán, who seize control of the resources allocated to their states. Besides, the sums redistributed to the weaker states of the EU are often smaller than the value extracted from them by transnational corporations (Piketty 2018). The continuing postsocialist divide between east and west is rivalled by the north versus south chasm of the Eurozone.

The upshot is that what still works reasonably well for the nation-state of Japan does not seem to work well at all for Western Europe. Our judgement of the latest trade agreement between East and West must therefore be reserved. Can the European Union get its act together, to avoid the slide towards the domination of markets? From the larger perspective world history, the deal between Japan and the EU raises the mouth-watering prospect of the entirety of Eurasia (let us forget that other offshore island called Britain for a moment) being united into a free trade zone with a single currency, buttressed by political institutions to guarantee effective redistribution. These are the values that have evolved dialectically over millennia across the landmass. Free trade only makes sense when it is accompanied by effective redistribution. It does not have to entail the free movement of capital. As Karl Polanyi (1944) showed, society falls apart when everything is reduced to the logic of the market. This has been the case ever since the first emergence of "price-forming markets" in the ancient world. But Japan and the EU could pioneer a long-term plan, based on the long-term legacies of Eurasian political societies. Over perhaps half a century, it should be possible to implement schemes to harmonize economies, to unify currencies without liberating capital markets, and

thus to promote social equality across the landmass. We could call this programme “social Eurasia”. It would surely be attractive to many other parts of the world, though not to Trump and his likely successors in the White House.

## Conclusion: Trump’s fake values

The argument of this blogpost is that we should dismiss the side-show in which President Trump is being hounded by both the hawks in his own party and a so-called liberal establishment for being too cosy with Vladimir Putin, a demon of a faraway region called Eurasia. Eurasia is better understood as the whole of Europe and the whole of Asia combined. Trump’s blundering interventionism inside and outside this landmass should help its inhabitants to understand how they differ from him. His populist imagery and claims to be protecting the jobs of blue collar workers in the US are fake. It is evident that Donald Trump’s actual policies are designed to accentuate capitalist wealth polarization and racism on a global scale. In social Eurasia, where universal health-care and old-age pensions have long been the *sine qua non* of inclusive citizenship, the vast majority of people subscribe to very different values. The institutions rooted in those values (“welfare states”) have become vulnerable in the age of neoliberal globalization; but agreements such as the one signed in July 2018 between the EU and Japan just might help to shore up the defences.

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