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Is the West Disintegrating?

The West will not be able to continue espousing values of liberal democracy if it keeps ignoring poverty, growing domestic inequality and widespread anti-elitist attitudes, Russell Berman and Michael Hüther argue.

The fundamental orientation of our Western social model is rapidly losing its implicit value in way the world has never seen. There are many reasons for this, including right-wing nationalists in western Europe and left-wing populists such as Syriza and Podemos in southern Europe.

Elsewhere, authoritarian shift in parts of eastern Europe, as well as the failure of the Arab spring, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's shift away from Europe and Russian President Vladimir Putin's attack on the post-1990 political order have proven especially fatal.

But the most critical factor is the isolationist development in the United States, as expressed in President Donald Trump's economic nationalism. Together, these factors are coalescing in previously unknown ways.

Anyone who believes that we are merely dealing with political interests, questions of suitable representation, or normal issues surrounding the balance of power, is seriously mistaken.

The explicit rejection of the "trans-Atlantic West" - expressed, for example, by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and European right-wing populists - attempts to place the cooperation among nations at a level based purely on power and interests - one that harkens back to the 19th century.

The same can be said for the implicit rejection of the trans-Atlantic West, such as Mr. Trump's criticism of free trade and globalization, as well as Mr. Erdogan's plans for broad constitutional amendments.

In fact, today's rejection of Western values is a rejection of what has normatively and historically bound us together, beginning in 1776 and cemented 1789: that is, inalienable human rights, the rule of law, the separation of powers, the sovereignty of the people and representative democracy. "Anyone who believes that we are merely dealing with political interests, questions of suitable representation, or normal issues surrounding the balance of power, is seriously mistaken." It is no coincidence that the pressure being exerted on the normative project of the West, both externally and internally, is stronger and more concentrated than ever before.

The situation during the Cold War, seemingly comfortable by comparison, resulted from the clear and negative alternative. After the Cold War was resolved, the world was dominated by the West's naïve self-assurance, recognizable in the unspoken lack of alternatives to its own social model.

The result was a fundamental political carelessness, in two senses. First, to the negative consequences inherent in the Western model. Second, to the existing alternatives, one of which emerged from the capitalist opening of China, which remains a dictatorship of the people, and the other sprung from the "Islamist project".

However, the great opportunity in the current disorder lies in the possibility of reassessing the potential and abilities of the West in a contemporary fashion, and to obtain clear ideas for how to implement necessary change.

First and foremost, we need to ask: Is the West's canon of values even plausible and appropriate anymore? According to eminent German historian Heinrich August Winkler, the answer is a resounding no, as "the subversive power of the ideas of 1776 and 1789 is by no means exhausted," and "the normative project, in light of the universality of human rights," is incomplete. This points towards four massive areas of conflict:

First, there is the leadership crisis, with the West as a target region for migration. What is the importance of the "universality of human rights" in this context? Deep-seated differences in the willingness of developed nations to accept refugees have emerged. At the same time, we have also seen a relative weakness in combating the causes of migration, as well as the failure of diplomacy in Syria.

Shouldn't we consider instead Hannah Arendt's essay about the political self-image of emigres, asylum seekers and displaced people, "We Refugees"? Shouldn't the West take a normatively consistent approach to immigration in light of what has become a refugee movement? Can the West go its own way without elites appropriately addressing social problems? "Second, there is the crisis among the elites, with the resulting consequence that the self-enforcement of values

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typical of the history of the West is being fundamentally weakened. In fact, what we need - as German economist Wilhelm Röpke put it - are "secularized saints," that is, broadly accepted role models. Today we would call this the political-cultural class. However, these "saints" are nowhere to be found in the Western world.

However, the absence of a credible elite goes hand-in-hand with the emphatically anti-elitist attitude of a rapidly spreading populism. Can the West go its own way without elites appropriately addressing social problems?

Third, there is the media crisis. Democracy only functions if there is an intact "public space", to use Hannah Arendt's term. This should promote communication and negotiation in civil society and requires a viable media and fact-based discourse.

In times of fake news, alternative facts and post-factual discourse, we are losing this foundation. Society is disintegrating into communities of prejudice, and common interests can no longer be found. The process is being accelerated by new technology and social networks. The burning question is: How do we secure our public space?

Fourth, there is the crisis of legitimacy in politics. This is due to growing bureaucratization, partisan public relations strategies, and policies that are disconnected from the people. There is also the pressure that comes with administering and integrating larger regions to resist global competition, which is why centers of power are slowly disappearing. This leads to an increase in executive power in the United States and so-called "democracy deficit" in the European Union. Despite global interdependencies, there are strong reasons to revive the subsidiarity approaches.

But what does the crisis in the West mean for the promise of its economic order, the market economy? The globalization of our time gained a new quality with the fall of the Iron Curtain. At the same time, however, the awareness was lost that this globalization, incorporated into the "history of the West," is itself a normative project. Making global economic integration dynamic is only possible with a reliable foundation of Western values. The latter, in turn, can be stabilized by economic success. Viewing the globalized market economy neutrally, particularly in regards to China, can potentially have grave effects on how globalization is communicated in the West.

Free trade and unobstructed capital transactions are essential to increasing prosperity, but they can also have serious consequences in terms of income distribution, especially regionally. Countries with proper infrastructure policies - both material and immaterial - are in better shape to deal with these. The imbalance in historically industrial regions must be addressed with effective strategies.

The impoverishment or underdevelopment of entire regions and countries cannot be part of the reality of a successful West. Long-ignored regional consequences of globalization are interpreted as a loss of control in these areas, with populations feeling exposed to obscure, foreign powers.

In short: the normative project of the West is not dead, contrary to Mr. Lavrov's claims. However, it does need an overhaul. Merely invoking Western and trans-Atlantic values is no longer enough. Neither is invoking the European idea of peace and prosperity. Both, however, remain true.

But they need a practical translation to appear relevant to people's lives. This requires responses to the loss of control created by globalization, the financial crisis and digitization.

The identity crisis in Western societies is currently met with nothing but negative responses of isolation, in terms of either social policy or trade policy. But the point must be to reconnect with the normative basis of the market economy and its foundation in the values of the West. This means reinvigorating a debate, especially within the G20, about regulatory standards - one which is key to both economics and more fundamental political ideals.

Also, through differentiated regional economic policy, the West must effectively address problems related to education, income disparity and infrastructural development in order to realistically justify new prospects for advancement. If this happens, it should be possible to take the West's moral obligations in the world seriously, especially in regards to development and refugee policy.

But this is only possible to approach and sustain if we tackle social problems at home and create credible prospects for social and financial mobility.

Russell Berman is a professor of liberal arts at Stanford University and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. Michael Hüther is the director of the Cologne Institute for Economic Research. You can reach them at: gastautor@handelsblatt.com

Kasten: WHY IT MATTERS

With populism and authoritarianism on the rise in various parts of the world, the West needs to change and its political elites must appropriately address social problems in order to salvage the principles liberal democracy.

*Berman, Russell
Hüther, Michael*

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