

Helping Restore a Strong Truth/Reality-Based Majority in America

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III. The Decades-in-the-Making Enormous U.S. Socio-Economic Class Gap

The Issue: Why did so many middle class whites vote for Trump's extremist nationalist/populist agenda?

Primary Resource: (C) *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* by Edward Luce (2017)

Edward Luce's adult life exactly parallels and mirrors the historic decline of the world's democracies. As a 21-year-old Oxford student "infected with optimism" about the inevitable spread of democracy, he had raced to help tear down the Berlin Wall in 1989. Nearly three decades later, shortly after Trump's election, he was at a conference in Moscow receiving "a crash course in how to see the world very differently." During those years he realized that **"the West's crisis is real, structural and likely to persist...Some of what ails the West is within our power to fix. Doing so means understanding exactly how we got here. It would also require a conscious effort to look at the world from unfamiliar standpoints and admit that the West has no monopoly on truth or virtue."** He puts it bluntly, **"We must cast a skeptical eye on what we have learned never to question. Our sanity may be tested in the process."** (C, pp. 3-7, 16, 9, my emphasis)

(1) Why Did the Bottom Drop Out of Western Economies?--Some Surprising Answers

Luce's first chapter is entitled "Fusion." (*Note: the titles of all the chapters are nuclear metaphors.*) For him, the deepest cause of the present crisis in Western democracies is the dramatic shift in the global economy, especially since the Berlin Wall came down. In 1750 China and India "produced three-quarters of the world's manufactures. On the eve of the First World War their share had dropped to just 7.5 per cent. Economic historians called it the Age of Divergence." This unprecedented world-wide economic separation between the declining East and the rising West was primarily due to Western colonial exploitation. "Modernity was born in the West." (C, pp. 22, 24, my emphasis)

Part of the coming of the postmodern world in the mid-twentieth century was the Great Convergence of the world's economies caused primarily by globalization (*thus Luce's "Fusion"*). It is predicted that by 2050 China's economy "is likely to be twice the size of America's and larger than all the Western economies combined...And by then, India's economy will be roughly the same size as America's. **Whether the Western way of life, and our liberal democratic systems, can survive this dramatic shift of global power is the question of this book.** The answer is not entirely in our hands. But our response so far has been to accelerate the shift." (C, p. 28, my emphasis)

The "Golden Age of Western middle-class growth" was from the late 1940's to the early 1970's. All levels of society grew economically. **From the 1980s to today, inequality has skyrocketed.** The incomes of the global one percent "have jumped by more than two-thirds," while middle class incomes have been flat. "The meritocratic society has given way to a hereditary meritocracy. The children of the rich are...likely to stay rich." Luce also says that the technology explosion has also played a major role in creating today's obscene inequality. It "is often treated as separate force to globalization. In reality they are the same thing....Europe and America's populist right wants to turn the clock back to the days when men were men and the West ruled...[they] have little to say about automation, though it is a far larger threat to people's jobs than trade." (C, pp. 32, 43, 49, 55, 67, my emphasis)

Note: For PDFs of the handouts as they become available as well as the dates for the discussions of them see <http://www.centristfaithandpolitics.com/610-thompson-2017.html>. The presentation and discussion of this handout will be 11/12/17, 12:00-1:00 pm, First United Methodist Church, Boulder, CO.

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The main thing we need to do about extreme globalization, according to Luce, is to develop “a new responsible nationalism,” which sees the basic responsibility of government to be maximizing “the welfare of its citizens, not to pursue some abstract concept of the global good.” He believes our one practical alternative to the growing movements toward autocracy in the West is to abandon “the drive to deep globalization.” This so-called “thin globalization” may be “the last chance for liberal democracy. It may be the only realistic way of salvaging peaceful global order.” (C, pp. 71, 73-74, my emphasis)

(2) Why Has Western Politics Gone Down the Tubes?--It Ain't Just Racism

The title of Luce's second chapter is “Reaction,” referring to the denigration of Western politics caused by the unhealthy response to extreme globalization. Starting in the 1990s a “technocratic mindset has gripped political elites across the Western world” where “the established parties detached themselves from the societies in which they had once been anchored” resulting in many of the middle class becoming economic “left-behinds.” The “American left had slipped into a kind of moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity that has distorted liberalism’s message” according to Mark Lilla who famously “called for an end to identity liberalism.” Millions who voted for Obama in 2012, voted for Trump. “Did they suddenly become deplorable? A better explanation is that many kinds of Americans have long felt alienated from an establishment that has routinely sidelined their economic complaints...racism is not the cause of the rise of Western populism.” **Western populism is “the illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism.”** (C, pp. 88, 91, 96-97, 100, 120, my emphasis)

(3) You Mean We're Not Going to Be The Most Powerful Forever?--Life After Hegemony

The third chapter is entitled “Fallout.” It explores the implications of declining U.S. and Western hegemonic power. Luce raises the specter of what “historians call the Thucydides trap, after the Greek historian who chronicled Sparta’s response to the rise of Athens. How does the established power react to the rise of potential challenger?” Historically, it usually leads to war. Luce worries that this might apply today to America’s established world hegemony and China’s rising challenge. (C, p. 156, my emphasis)

A Russian American author describes how Putin’s right hand man, who calls himself a “political technologist...fashioned the tools Putin uses to divert attention, sow confusion and level the playing field between truth and lies”...an evil genius who “understands that human weakness--the capacity to be diverted and the yearning to be relieved from boredom--are putty in the hands of a technological maestro.”^ Sound familiar? Our “war against truth is now being waged from the White House.” This means “chaos, not China,” is likelier to replace American hegemony. (C, pp. 172-173, 179, my emphasis)

(4) How Can We Help Prevent Our Society's Slide Into a New Dark Age?--You Mean Us?!!

“Half Life” is the title of the fourth chapter. It is about what can be done. Luce says, “most of the West is moving either towards populism or plutocracy...the U.S. is falling into a kind of hybrid pluto-populism... [with Trump operating] a kind of Ku Klux Kardashian, combining hard-right pugilism with the best of postmodern vaudeville.” Luce’s vision is quite different--“protecting society’s weakest from arbitrary misfortune is the ultimate test of our civilizational worth.” Here are just a few of Luce’s ideas for a new social compact: raising the rewards of technical and service jobs to restore human dignity to this work, universal healthcare, humane immigration laws, restoring the link between public benefits and citizenship, reaffirming free speech, a ruthlessly simplified tax system, re-imagining the nature of representative democracy, a Marshall Plan to retrain the middle class, and above all, breaking money’s stranglehold on the legislative process. (C, pp. 195-196, 197-198, my emphasis)

^Other Resources: (C1) *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* by Peter Pomerantsev (2014)