

Europe's Brown Tide

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A brown tide is sweeping across Europe as major Western countries, such as Sweden and Italy overtake more recent democracies like Hungary and Poland on the far-right. Let's not quibble about semantics and whether labels such as populist, fascist, ultra, extreme etc. are appropriate. And let's not pretend this is no big deal, or not very different from what came before. These are major countries with specific pasts that make these outcomes all the more shocking. It breaks taboos that other countries might copy, such as Spain or the Netherlands, where hard-right parties have already had a taste of power sharing. And most of all, it once more demonstrates the huge problem that Europe has with coming to terms with immigration.

Which brings us, as ever, back to Brexit. Not that the bumbling, ideologically-challenged opportunist throwbacks in the United Kingdom's Conservative and Unionist Party can be compared to crypto-ex-neo-fascists such as Italy's Giorgia Meloni, or the Sweden Democrats. The British political system is still such that the ideological heirs of Oswald Mosley are unlikely to find a structural place in Parliament. Yet, the Leave campaign at the time heavily drew on some of the same ingredients in the witches' cauldron that is making much of politics worldwide so toxic these last few decades; anti-immigration sentiment and populism. Vote Leave didn't exactly invent these topics as much as that it ran with it, from Nigel Farage's poster of Syrian refugees to Boris's big Brexit lie on the side of a bus. Appealing to xenophobia combined with dissimulation and planting and promulgating elaborate fake narratives might not spell fascism, but has too much in common with it.

In the UK at least the Truss-Kwarteng disaster has ripped the mask off the true face of Brexit and the people don't like what they see, for now. Significantly, this has mostly economic reasons, with the pound cratering and the whole financial world and its mother recoiling in horror from the first real 'Brexit budget'. It's the economy, stupid, remains as true as ever. The poor and downtrodden masses can be shovelled wholesale into the mouth of a volcano as long as they come from somewhere else. It won't make much of a dent in the polls. But when the great British pocketbook is affected, the electorate will howl with indignation. And rightly so, don't get me wrong. Any citizenry worth its salt should rise up against the kind of capitalism red in tooth and claw that is behind the whole Brexit project, thought up by toffs, robber barons and market manipulators. It's all just a bit late, isn't it? And a mite hypocritical. Any affront to human rights and decency, especially concerning migrants, is alright as long as we're not personally affected. But what makes the mass of the people, whether lower or middle income, think that they'll be treated any better by the uncaring Dalek overlords that they've freely elected to rule over them?

What we're seeing worldwide is not so much a repeat of the turn to fascism almost exactly a century ago, it's the triumph of the let's say Thatcherite and Reaganite project to undermine solidarity and deny the existence of society beyond the narrow bounds that they set for it. That, combined with the rise of the new strongman model, based on the relative successes of behemoths such as China and until recently Russia. In times of uncertainty, people crave strong leadership, which in some but not all cases seems to be lacking on the centre and left of the political spectre in many countries. In Europe that's not true for France, for example, or Spain. And in Germany a possibly WWII-induced caution has for now kept the radical right somewhat at bay. But Italy shares that history and has now chosen to disregard it. And that is significant, a clarion call to fascists, neo and otherwise, everywhere, as many have already exultantly said themselves. As in the 1920s and 30s, Italy could be an aspiring tin-pot dictator's inspiration.

The hard-right turn this time around is very different from the one a century ago. Most glaringly, the economic situation, while dire for many, is nowhere near as disastrous as it was then. Yes, in too many countries foodbanks have (re)appeared, homelessness is on the rise and the cost of living is becoming unsustainable for many. But it cannot (yet) be compared to the crises of the 1930s. Even so, a rapidly changing economic landscape, increased inequality and uncertainty, the gig economy and its habit of keeping workers in a state of perennial precariousness, the partial or wholesale demolition of social safety nets, the increasing lack of balance in power between employees and employers etc. etc. all contribute to a widespread feeling of frustration, distrust and anger. Just to take the latter, it must be very clear by now that the organised labour and other employees have been made relatively impotent in their dealings with employers. This has had disastrous consequences also for businesses: Even with raging labour shortages, they didn't significantly improve wages and conditions. Now, sharply reduced spending power is expected to drive profits into recession next year. Even if this is only a very partial and simplified representation of what's going on, it's still one of the mechanisms at work.

The hard right, while feeding off popular economic angst, has always been a project of captains of industry and a threatened social upper crust. It finds it opportune to wrap itself in a common folk cloak but is doing the bidding of hyper-capitalism. As such, it's not surprising that some more centrist right-wing parties close their eyes to it, or even seek to instrumentalise their more radical ideological cousins, in the process normalising them. Worse, by chipping away at solidarity and hollowing out the welfare state and the role of government, the regular right has often paved the way for the hard right. It's the result of almost a half century of politics in which the so-called mainstream right has sought to claim the label radical that until then had been the preserve of the left. Both in Europe and the US we're just starting to see what radical really means to the right.