**The far-right utopia**

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There is something that ties together nationalist leaders the world over: from US President Donald Trump to the new Italian interior minister, Matteo Salvini, from India’s PM Narendra Modi to Hungary’s PM Viktor Orban. Yes, they all share a penchant for authoritarian government and a general contempt of liberal democracy. And yes, they are on the whole xenophobes who scapegoat minorities to justify political failure. But there is something far more disturbing than that: What if they were the only visionaries around?

Let’s take a step back. Few expressions have more effectively captured the hubris of a historical epoch than Francis Fukuyama’s famous 1989 essay on ‘the end of history’. For three decades that expression seemed to hold true.

The world was on a slow course to convergence, a contradictory, bumpy path, but one whose direction appeared clear. However long it would take for Chinese peasants to transform into a middle class and demand democratic reform and however long it would take to reshape the Middle East, the endgame was just one: neoliberal capitalism and liberal democracy for all.

That conviction cracked under the weight of its own pretences. Extreme levels of inequality exposed the neoliberal promise of prosperity for all as a sham.

The liberated financial system added instability to injustice, triggering accelerated crises around the world and a near-miss global implosion in 2008. Western foreign policy, under the pretence of exporting democracy, was exporting war and extremism. And the developing countries that actually developed – China, above all – did so in total disregard of the neoliberal recipes of the IMF.

That world is now dead in the water. But for too long, mainstream politicians formerly known as ‘the establishment’ – have been trying to keep it alive and well past its due date.

Take former US President Barack Obama. A few days after his first election in 2008, the magazine Newsweek wrote candidly that his task would be “to lead the conceptual counterrevolution against an idea that has dominated the globe since the end of the cold war, but is now in the final stages of flaming out: free-market absolutism”.

Obama came to power shortly after the financial bubble burst, on the back of an extraordinary wave of public participation. Many expected he would seize the opportunity and break with a system in crisis.

But he chose the old path. He appointed Tim Geithner and Larry Summers to the Department of the Treasury, the same individuals who, during the Clinton administration, had enthusiastically removed the last obstacles holding back the financial sector. This was no moral drama of penitence and redemption, but the reproduction of the same financial privileges that had brought the world to the edge of the abyss in the first place.

And so while centre-left and centre-right parties alike kept on demanding adherence to neoliberal precepts, despite growing economic misery; while their hollow voices kept on ringing an increasingly unconvincing cry of “there is no alternative”, despite widespread protest, some begged to differ.

These included many of today’s ‘populist’ leaders who offer a mix of authoritarian rule and exclusionary politics repackaged as a vision for a brave new world: walls in place of globalisation, muscular diplomacy in place of multilateralism, “my country first” in place of free trade and protectionist or even social-nationalist measures to tame neoliberalism.

And so, after years in which voting seemed to have become an impotent choice between identical products, for many it was finally right-wing populism that restored weight to the electoral ballot.

This article has been excerpted from: ‘The far-right has a utopia. What’s ours?’

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