

The American Elections and Beyond

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The next few years will be tumultuous ones in the United States. The dependency of foreign policy on domestic policy is unlikely to diminish. Whether in the rivalry with China or the predominance of Israeli interests in Middle East policy, for example, it is hard to imagine Biden taking a big step backward. Many Europeans want to believe that a victory by Obama's former vice president will signal a return to the good old days of transatlantic consultation and multilateralism. In appearance, perhaps. But only in appearance, for the continents started drifting apart with the emergence of the post-Soviet world, i.e. more or less at the beginning of the new century. This drift is explained by objective factors, mainly the rise of China and the decline of Russia. The personality of successive presidents can only speed up or slow down the trend. This detail, however, is not an insignificant one. To reach his domestic policy ends, Trump has unflinchingly flouted all the conventions of foreign policy. Copycats have followed his lead, including Boris Johnson in Great Britain. From the perspective of the world's stability as a whole, scorn for international law and institutions is worse than a crime. It is an offence against the world, and therefore also, it seems to me, against the United States. From this point of view, anyone other than Trump could perhaps soothe the wounds but not change the course of things. That is why some people on this side of the Atlantic hope the billionaire is re-elected. In their view, only such a jolt could bolster the Europeans' tentative movement towards sovereignty.

For my part, I reject such speculations. First, because Europeans are merely observers of the American political scene. They have no means to influence it. Second, and above all, in the name of realism: whatever happens, a minimum of Euro-American understanding is necessary if Western countries, and those of all continents to which they are linked by history and geography, are to flexibly face the challenge of the rise of illiberal powers. There is also the challenge of political Islamism, which is incompatible with Western values, and *a fortiori* the persistent threat of Islamist terrorism. This necessary Euro-American understanding

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presupposes, however, that the United States, with or without Trump, should stop treating Europeans as adversaries by brutally imposing its own choices on them, in particular through sanctions. That said, it must be acknowledged that a second Trump term would hardly look different from the first one. If he prevails, the European Union would have no choice but to seek ways of escaping from Uncle Sam's clutches without falling into those of China. The trickiest point is that at this stage there is nothing to suggest that a newly democratic America would not also seek to impose its will on Europeans, albeit in a slightly more gentle way.

To round out these pre-electoral comments, let us take a further step back with a more sociological look at today's world. In the first place, the rejection of any notion of authority in general can be observed. The collapse of traditional forms of Christianity in the Western world, stunningly quick on the scale of history, is especially spectacular in this regard. This is globally true of Catholicism but also of Protestantism, with evangelical churches benefitting the most. The last point is striking in the United States, where what is left of Protestant culture, so important to the identity of the world's leading power, has been transfigured into communitarian sects as unrealistic and intolerant as they are cut off from their roots. By analogy, how can a parallel not be drawn with communist ideology, that travesty of Christianity where God was replaced by "the people" and the Church by the Party? In Eastern Europe, the Orthodox churches are still holding their own. In the near future, it is perhaps in the United States that the loss of identity will be most striking, despite attempts to hide it. Ultimately, doesn't the Trump phenomenon reflect the anxiety of that half of the population that genuinely fears that American values are disappearing? The fear of losing identity is not only seen in the United States. It has been visible in France for a long time. In fact, outside of Orthodoxy in Russia, if there is a monotheistic faith that for a half-century has ceaselessly bolstered its positions, both religious and political, it is Islam. And, since decolonization in the broad sense of the term, political Islam has had a tendency to degenerate into the worst forms of obscurantism.

After, or rather alongside religion, I would mention social media and the libertarian aura that still surrounds them. It has taken a long time to recognize that whole segments of public opinion throughout the world are influenced by a steady drumbeat of messages or unverified

“news”. The issues facing contemporary societies are extremely complex. And ethical judgements about them are never easy to make. They can only be addressed by looking at every side; no perfect synthesis is possible. When there is no longer any recognized authority, manipulators and cynics have a free hand to spread “alternative facts” and justify their crimes. Technology is a formidable tool at their disposal. As time goes by, the need for Internet legislation will undoubtedly become increasingly felt. But before a new legal system emerges, how many tragedies will have unfolded and what effects will they have had?

For the record, let us mention without comment the explosive rise of inequality during the time of “happy globalization”, the over-exploitation of nature and the increasingly tangible manifestations of climate change. These facts alone would suffice to explain the return of quasi-revolutionary forms of socialism (or their appearance, in the case of the United States), which are a far cry from social democracy.

Lastly, there is the interminable COVID-19 crisis. It forces us to reconsider global governance in terms of health just when the trend—exacerbated by the pandemic—is towards de-globalization and the weakening of multilateralism. This weakening is aggravated by the suspicion, at least in Western opinion, that governments are too incompetent to carry out coherent and effective public policies.

In conclusion, I would add that authoritarian or totalitarian regimes are not immune to revolutions, partly for the same reasons. No country nowadays can be completely impervious to the gaze of others. The seemingly strongest regimes can be swept away in the blink of an eye. Imbalance is a global phenomenon. The best that can be expected from the next president of the United States is a little more wisdom. Wisdom and firmness are not mutually exclusive. That would already be a big step forward for the international system as a whole.

See you after the 3rd of November.