

E-ISSN 2014-0843
D.L.: B-8438-2012

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A TIME OF GREAT ROLE REVERSALS

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SEPTEMBER
2015

The European Union can no longer afford to muddle through with broken institutions, flouted laws and a failing border police. As with the prolonged Greek debt crisis, the fiasco in Hungary sums up the European leadership problem in a microcosm. There is neither coherence, nor predictability let alone urgency. The institutions move at a snail's pace until leaders are forced into flamboyant gestures and no lasting solution is ever reached. In recent years, media and politicians have behaved as if Europe was confronted with "swarms" of illegal immigrants. Recently and reluctantly they have come to accept that what the continent faces is a wave of refugees. The reality is that this is the first mass trans-regional flight of people since the end of the Second World War.

Two decades ago, European leaders were slow to grasp the lethal consequences of the disintegration of former Yugoslavia, despite the proximity of the killing fields. After 2011 they were equally slow to grasp the consequences the Arab revolts as they cheered on the region's apparent move towards democracy. Fragile states are finding it harder to contain the recrudescence of identity politics that has been triggered by globalisation. In Europe but even more in the Middle East people are more conscious of their political, religious and ethnic identity, more assertive in their rights versus their neighbours. Having failed to draw the right conclusions from Iraq – deemed to be an American mistake, they underestimated the risk of certain countries disintegrating. They walked away from Libya as soon as they had removed its tyrant. The growing chaos there played a role in their reluctance to intervene in Syria.

The movement of population on an unprecedented global scale is challenging our political culture which is tactically generous but strategically cold-hearted. The structure of modern news and the power of social media may give to one single photo the power to galvanise a continent yet many Europeans see asylum seekers as bogus and scamming the tax-payer. The political discourse in France and the United Kingdom has been debased by cheap slogans and the sad conviction of mainstream politicians that sounding *tough* about border control is an essential part of electability. Even sons and daughters of economic refugees, such as the French prime minister Manuel Valls and the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo cannot avoid falling into the trap.

It may be that the moment of truth has come to the EU inadvertently. The accident theory of history seems to be at play. The role reversals – two great nations, Germany and the United States, are going through – would have been hard to predict. Since the start of Syria's civil war, the US has taken in 1434 refugees while deporting more Mexican immigrants than that every day. Germany meanwhile will process 800,000 people, admittedly not all Syrian. The picture of German crowds welcoming thousands of refugees at Munich station will change forever the world's perception of Germany and its chancellor who has been a tower of moral decency. This stands in stark contrast to the 1990s when Germans were very hostile to refugees from the Balkans. Solid economic growth and the willingness of the protestant and catholic churches to debate the great issues of the day have contributed to this change of heart.

Contrast Angela Merkel's behaviour with David Cameron's pusillanimity which will lose him precious good will as he seeks to renegotiate the UK's EU membership ahead of a referendum. His stance will alienate many countries in the Middle East. Does he fail to appreciate that asking Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, which have taken 4m refugees, to keep their borders open while Britain keeps its frontiers shut smacks of double standards? Is he too scared to disentangle the different aspects of the immigration debate and make a clear case on the need to provide asylum to people fleeing persecution – all the more when many of them come from countries where Britain was party to misguided policies whose consequences it does not wish to acknowledge?

Contrast the damage his narrow stance is having on his reputation internationally to what is happening to Angela Merkel. From being demonised as the tormentor of the long-suffering Greeks the German chancellor has grasped that the EU needs some other – moral, *raison d'être* than the martinet of fiscal rectitude, if it is to survive. A common economic market and fine tuning business cycles are fine and dandy but without moral backbone, the European project will die.

With the United Nations' humanitarian agencies on the verge of bankruptcy, the challenge to Europe is growing. The Middle East will explode across our TV screens for years to come. The Dublin III regulation which requires all asylum seekers to be fingerprinted and sent back to their first country of arrival in the EU is de facto suspended. The Schengen agreement is falling apart. Frontex is powerless. The confusion in EU thinking is mirrored in that of the words media and politicians use: migrant or refugee, the distinctions are no longer relevant.

Keeping all the refugees in Europe might not be a sensible solution. Building humanitarian hubs in the Middle East, notably Tunisia and Jordan would help relieve the pressure. But these must be properly funded. Why is Europe not engaging more with the Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia – after all many of these countries are filthy rich and been engaged in supporting various factions in Libya and Syria with weapons. The money they use to support hard line Islamists might be better suited for other purposes. Could the EU and America not make that point more bluntly rather than continue selling expensive military hardware as France is doing to Saudi Arabia and Egypt?

Europe's failure to measure up to the human disaster at its gates has hugely increased the costs of the crisis: the political costs as it failed to rethink its foreign policy both *vis a vis* Russia and southern rim Mediterranean countries; the human costs as carefully constructed policies governing the movement of Europeans and foreigners buckle under the strain; the financial costs as the wrong answers were given in the wake of the 2008 banking crisis and the Greek debacle. But, more than anything else, European leaders must stop living in fear of being outflanked by xenophobes as is so patently the case with François Hollande and David Cameron.

The dream of a happy *mare nostrum*, so beloved of those who built the Barcelona Process now a thing of the past. What is needed is bold thinking. For too long European leaders limited their engagement with the Middle East and North Africa to autocratic rulers who offered stability. This engagement was built on a false premise. The events of 9/11 turned the Mediterranean into a bed of nails for which the only useful instrument was deemed to be a hammer and a fight to the finish against terrorism. As their lives are ruined by fanatics and despots, those fleeing Syria defy the logic of a conflict of civilisation. They seek with desperate energy the comparative peace and security of Europe. The EU and Europeans will have to engage with Arab people and stop fantasizing about clashes of civilisation.