

## **Preface: “Us Versus Them” - The Return of Populist Rhetoric on the Stage of World Politics**

*Prefacio: «Nosotros versus ellos»: El regreso de la retórica populista al escenario de la política global*

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Things that happen in the United States also tend to become virulent after a while in the Old World. The topic of the query for identity that is prevalent in all parts of the Occident is no exception. In the US, the debate about the fabric of the country which is perceived to be steadfast in the Anglo-Saxon tradition revolves around migration from the Hispanic world. Books have been written about this topic for nearly twenty years now, the shift in identity from a Protestant nation, as some authors would argue, into a more diverse, certainly more Catholic, society. As in previous moments in US history, for instance when the Italians and Irish came to the shores of the New World and at the time when the first ever presidential candidate of the Catholic faith, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, ran for office, the public debated fiercely whether someone who obeys a foreign power, namely the Pope and the Vatican, could truly be an American. Even in the recent masterpiece movie “Manchester by the Sea” that takes places in contemporary America, the two main characters, who are brothers, speak about religion on a car ride while one points out to the other “Remember, Catholics are no Christians”. At the same time, the Catholics from Central and South America are the ones who are keeping the US birthrate stable, thereby making the United States the only country in the Western World with an increasing rather than shrinking population. Donald J. Trump’s election as president of the country did not come out of nowhere. He harnessed the resentment that has been flourishing in wide parts of the country that were not keen on accepting changes to the ethnographic and denominational map of the country. Mr Trump won largely on a rhetoric that degraded Mexicans and Latinos in general and on the promise to keep them out with a “huge” wall at the Southern border of the United States.

The debate in Europe is very similar to what we have been seeing in the land of the free for quite some time now. European societies are slowly coming to recognise that the world around them is changing. What the Latinos represent to the reluctant part of US-Americans is what Muslims are to Europeans. They are seen as disloyal to the achievements of democracy and liberal societies. Public debates in Europe circle around these questions: Can democracy and Islam go together? Does Islam belong to Europe? All sorts of measures are thought through and undertaken to keep Muslims out of the Christian West. And do not forget the fences and walls that had been erected prior to the refugee crisis of 2015 where one country after another took strong measures to barricade their borders. On both sides of the Atlantic, the belligerent past is invigorated: the Mexican-American War as much as the Ottoman and Arab expansion wars, attacking Europe. The course of the past is portrayed as a foreshadowing of the future. As Noam Chomsky argues, Europe is still more tribal than the United States and therefore even less equipped to work out the challenges ahead. As a matter of fact, Europe is more homogeneous than the US, because it is still mostly shaped according to the results of the various religious wars that devastated the continent over the course of time: the Italians are Catholic, Swedes are Protestant. Germany, as a consequence of the Thirty Year War, is still and largely the only country divided down the middle into Catholics and Protestants.

A tribal entity depends very much on loyalty! In European terms, social welfare is a contribution to the tribal state if you will. According to this view, if the person in need looks like you, you ought to be more inclined to help that person out of his or her misery. Just the opposite occurs in the United States: Europe as a whole is astonished about the fierce and rigorous debate about health care. And you can hear people in the US who would need and profit from health care the most arguing religiously about why they would never pay a single dime for anyone else. The European model of solidarity is largely absent. Solidarity that comes with the tribe you are part of and which defines your believing, behaving and belonging. No wonder that the European quest for identity is linked to nation and religion, the two strongest sets of believing, behaving and belonging that exist. US-Americans do not have this, they make up for it with the Constitutionalism that invigorates the national identity through an umbrella under which all the different communities can prosper and pursue their own ideals of happiness. This Constitutionalism is also gaining increasing ground in Europe, led by the shining example of the United States of America. The identities of European countries however are much more entrenched with the Christian heritage and come, almost automatically, with a specific denominational affiliation. Even though Church and State are clearly separated all over the Western World, the institutional framework in the US is mostly

designed to keep religion out, most of what we know today as US-American dedication to religion — "In God we trust", "One Nation under God" — was implemented half a century ago in order to combat communism, the godless ideology that could best be countered in the eyes of politicians back then by highlighting the Christian religion. Until recently, European societies had state churches that defined the quasi monolithic design of the public discourse by their sheer existence (as well as their interventions).

That is why the achievements of the European Union must not be underestimated. Just before the Brexit referendum, Leave proponents would claim that the European nations could work together even outside a European framework since they share the same religion and have a lot in common culturally. Really? As a matter of fact, the 70 years of the European Union are the first and only years, the longest period of peace and prosperity in Europe. Before that and despite the fact that we were all Christians and basically related through the network of aristocratic marriages, hell broke loose countless times. It is, undoubtedly, the European Union's achievement that we live in this era of peace, Pax Europaea. How so? The European Union is designed to overcome religion and nation as the parameters of conviviality and cornerstones that define believing, behaving and belonging. The European Union is a project that has explicitly encouraged differences in language or in custom. All languages are recognised, many of them as official languages of the EU. That does not make the endeavour the most efficient one in the eyes of a consulting company, but Europe is not a company and a citizen is not a consumer! By accepting diversity, Europe has become more like the US, which is open to identity references such as "German-American", "Italian-American", "Irish-American" and so on. But it transcended tribal solidarity in a pan-European solidarity. Today, through Schengen and the blessing of being allowed to work wherever you find a job in the Union, Spaniards pay into the social (solidarity) systems of Germany and Germans into the Spanish one. The tribe has become European, we do not recognise ourselves as foreigners in the way our ancestors would have just three or four generations ago.

The new populists dislike this development. By outcasting the Muslim migrant, the Muslim minority, they direct their disdain toward a scapegoat. The rhetoric of the Brexit-supporters or the Trump camp is "We want our country back" and "Make America great again". It invigorates a return to inward looking and isolationism. England was never not sovereign while a member of the EU, and the US has never been undermined by foreign or domestic forces. The message of the revisionist new populists is to revert to the world as it used to be before nationalist elites could control the masses according to their will without being entangled in international institutions and being answerable to the same courts. That is the real goal of Brexit and

the Trump-rhetoric: to withdraw from a multilateral arena. As has been the recipe in the past, they do it by highlighting their own exceptionalism and superiority over others. "Us versus them" is back in politics. And while it seemingly "only" attacks those outside, the Latinos and the Muslims for instance, it does first and foremost the most incriminating damage to the societies themselves: look at the polarisation in England and the United States! That proves the point: before you expel the first Muslim refugee or illegal immigrant from Latin America, you have to streamline your own society, polarise it and silence your opponents. In nondemocratic societies such as Russia, you see how it is done. In the democracies of the West, you first need to create silos and echo chambers that prevent the different groups of society from hearing from and about each other: the media does this job. Theatre and cinema and the academy do it. All these groups are massively attacked, their protagonists degraded, their funding reduced. A liberal democracy is one that has not only one narrative but many. And while you may have one that you as a person follow and believe in, you are aware of the fact that there are others. You may not agree with them, but the exposure to a variety of interpretations of the one reality makes societies considerate, tolerant and innovative. It also exposes them to self-doubt and self-criticism, assessments not everybody is happy about and can deal with. The uncertainties that have arisen in the world of globalisation and digitalisation may have unsettled people who would not necessarily have fallen for right wing populism and extremism. Governments and civil societies alike have to make sure that the change our societies undergo are reflected widely and inclusively.

This is why the fear of the other has re-entered the stage in so many countries that we may have thought would be prone to its rhetoric and false appeal. Ethnology-Nationalism and religious exclusiveness have proven wrong so often over the course of history that one may wonder how the bad track record they carry around does not convince everybody. As the populists have already been working on destroying the fabric of the liberal world order, in Europe and the United States, it is now time to break the silos they created and advocate pluralist and inclusive societies.

## About the author

**Alexander Görlach** is a linguist and theologian who works on narratives of identity, politics and religion, and liberal democracy, as well as secularism, pluralism and cosmopolitanism. He is an adviser to the F. D. Roosevelt Foundation's at Harvard University College, where he also served in the "In Defense of Democracy Program" of the foundation at Ad-

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