

the FEDERALIST

Relax. Brexit Won't Cause International Order To Collapse

To resist the homogenizing influence of globalization and supranational organizations is not itself an anti-liberal act.

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July 1, 2016

In 1989, the political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously declared the end of history. As the end of the Cold War approached, the liberal international order appeared to have won the debate about how societies should be governed. In Fukuyama's words: "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."

Today, just two decades later, commentators are tripping over each other to proclaim the collapse of the liberal world order in the wake of the British vote to withdraw from the European Union. To many it appears we have now reached the end of the end of history, implying we are headed toward something far worse.

Recent developments, however, though certainly sobering, do not represent either the collapse of the liberal world order or a harbinger of worse things to come. The doom and gloom crowd makes three mistakes in their assessment.

We Have Only Ourselves to Blame

The first mistake is the insistence on a false nostalgia. The liberal world order was never as monolithic, well entrenched, or evenly distributed throughout the world as many suggest. As Stephen Walt has recently noted, many advocates of the end of history underappreciated the power of nationalism and sectarianism, unleashed in the wake of the Cold War, to provide alternative visions of society and governance.

When Fukuyama wrote "The End of History" only 41 percent of the world's nations were electoral democracies. Today the figure is around 60 percent. Globalization of the economy has likewise grown consistently since the end of history began. The World Trade Organization reports that between 1980 and 2011 exports from developing economies have increased to 47 percent of the world market, while world trade has grown twice as fast as world production. Resistance to globalization and democracy, even violent resistance, certainly exists. Nonetheless,

from these two critical vantage points it takes considerable imagination to believe that the world order is collapsing.

The second mistake the doomsayers make is to ignore the self-inflicted nature of many of the wounds now making the news. On the domestic front, elites in Western nations appear to have gotten too far out in front of their publics. In the United States, much like in Britain, a majority of the public is questioning the current strategy of engagement (especially military) with the rest of world. For those struggling to make ends meet, in particular, the benefits of globalization and nation-building abroad are cold comfort.

Without greater efforts to ensure economic policies benefit all of their citizens, Western politicians should not be surprised when they lose referendums and elections. But to be clear, the current upheaval has nothing to do with the collapse of the liberal world order and a great deal to do with entitled political elites forgetting that not everyone has been benefitting from it.

In foreign policy, the events of September 11 and Islamist-inspired terrorism, the Arab uprisings, and surging Russian and Chinese assertiveness may all reflect powerful anti-liberal forces in some respects, but they also reflect the unintended consequences of American and European foreign policy. After the Cold War, extended Western military intervention in the Gulf and support for oppressive governments helped both to spur jihadist groups like al-Qaeda and later the Islamic State and to give rise to the Arab Spring, leading eventually to the current refugee crisis evoked so powerfully during the Brexit debate. Meanwhile NATO expansion and Obama's "pivot" to Asia have provoked predictable Russian and Chinese reactions. None of these self-inflicted wounds were inevitable, nor does their explanation require a theory of collapsing world order.

Finally, there seems to be a conflation of the potential collapse of the European Union with the collapse of the liberal world order. On one level the EU represents the ultimate liberal dream: a supranational organization able to spread peace, democracy, prosperity, and human rights. But for many the EU represents the opposite of liberal ideals. It replaces local rule with distant bureaucrats. It threatens the ability of individuals and communities to determine their own unique economic, social, and cultural answers to modern problems.

To resist the homogenizing influence of globalization and supranational organizations is not itself an anti-liberal act. At the end of the day, the EU is just one of many possible mechanisms for nations to work together. The liberal world order survived the coming and going of the Soviet Union and the Cold War. It will survive the coming and going of the European Union.

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