

The Unexpected Impact of Prosperity: How the Manipulation of the Consequences of Globalization by the Far-Right Movements Endanger the International Order?

Sylvie Matelly

Abstract: At the Cold War's end, liberal globalization was seen as the “end of history,” bringing peace and prosperity, which didn't happen. By the 1990s, NGOs, civil society, and researchers highlighted winners and losers. Far-right movements exploited this, threatening democracies and global order, without solutions for the marginalized.

Keywords: consequences of globalization; far-right movements; international order.

O impacto inesperado da prosperidade: como a manipulação das consequências da globalização pelos movimentos de extrema-direita coloca em risco a ordem internacional?

Resumo: No fim da Guerra Fria, a globalização liberal foi vista como o “fim da história”, trazendo paz e prosperidade, o que não ocorreu. Nos anos 1990, ONGs, sociedade civil e pesquisadores destacaram vencedores e perdedores. Movimentos de extrema-direita exploraram isso, ameaçando democracias e a ordem global, sem soluções para os marginalizados.

Palavras-chave: consequências da globalização; movimentos de extrema-direita; ordem internacional.

As early as the 1990s, civil society worldwide and numerous non-governmental organizations pointed out globalization's limits. At World Social Forums in Porto Alegre (Brazil) and elsewhere, as well as at meetings of major international organizations such as the WTO's annual conference in Seattle in 1999, the shortcomings of an economic, financial and commercial integration that benefited only a few were denounced. These social movements were supported by the parties of a left that was already scornfully described as radical just a few years after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the communist economic system, which many interpreted as a victory for capitalism through chaos—the end of history, as it were.

Yet these social movements masked an emerging instrumentalization of the consequences of globalization by another political “extreme,” the far-right. Paul Krugman had already described this when he published *Pop Internationalism* in 1996. The author denounced the instrumentalization of economic dynamics for political ends through erroneous or distorted interpretations. And while he admits that free trade is not always the most efficient choice, particularly in situations of imperfect competition or increasing returns, he sidesteps the non-economic consequences of globalization. This omission was subsequently repeated by many analysts (such as Thomas Friedman, who wrote *The World is Flat* in 2005) and criticized by far-right movements, who denounce a “certain” elite that benefits from globalization but does not want to see its flaws and the difficulties of a working class on the verge of impoverishment, the losers of this same globalization, they explain.

An unexpected impact of prosperity, which, instrumentalized by these far-right parties, is endangering not only our democracies today but also the international order established after the Second World War precisely to ensure widespread economic development, accessible to all under fairer conditions than in the past, and in so doing, to avoid wars... This anti-elite and conspiracy rhetoric was at the heart of both Donald Trump's election in the United States and the British people's choice, in the 2016 referendum, to leave the European Union (Brexit). Its trivialization and resonance with a population weakened by globalization have led to the rise of far-right parties in many countries and, in some cases, to their coming to power, as in Italy, Poland, Brazil and Argentina in recent years. Nevertheless, these movements are at least as much a source of danger as of solutions.

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Analysis has undoubtedly developed in recent years. Economists, sociologists and political scientists have tried to understand the phenomenon. How can globalization be among the causes of the rise of far-right parties? How can these movements threaten the international order? This literature sheds light on various possible factors, from economic and social causes to more cultural or even geopolitical explanations. This article aims to summarize these different factors to understand how far-right parties have been able to appropriate them to convince followers and prosper politically. It then explains the extent to which the “recipes” proposed by these parties are not only far from being solutions but also run the risk of amplifying the problems further, leading to a vicious circle of withdrawal and violence that is increasingly profitable for the far-right, but deleterious for international order, economic development and social progress, and peace and stability in the world.

How can globalization be among the causes of the rise of far-right parties? How can these movements threaten the international order? (...) [This article] explains the extent to which the “recipes” proposed by [far-right] parties are not only far from being solutions but also run the risk of amplifying the problems further, leading to a vicious circle of withdrawal and violence that is increasingly profitable for the far-right, but deleterious for international order, economic development and social progress, and peace and stability in the world.

THE UNEXPECTED IMPACT OF PROSPERITY IN A GLOBAL WORLD

In an article published in 2021, economist Dani Rodrik observes: “There is compelling evidence that globalization shocks, often working through culture and identity, have played an important role in driving up support for populist movements, particularly of the right-wing kind.” He explains that, while experts have often pitted economic and cultural causes against the rise of far-right populism, the reality is more complex. As a reminder, Dani Rodrik was one of the first economists in the late 1990s to point out the perverse effects of a globalization process that creates winners and losers and to link economic and political issues through a trilemma that describes the impossibility of combining

economic integration (globalization), national sovereignty and democracy at the same time (Rodrik 1998).

Several examples illustrate the complexity of the consequences of globalization and the links between them and the rise of extreme right-wing parties over the last twenty years, over and above economic factors alone. Poland is a case in point. The country became a full member of the European Union in 2004. Its gross domestic product per capita stood at US\$ 6,684 a year at that time. Twenty years later, it multiplied by 3 to reach US\$ 21,600, in line with most countries that joined the European Union then. However, the economic miracle and overall enrichment of Polish society weighed little against the fears linked to the 2015 migratory crisis, a feeling of loss of sovereignty or the inequalities that persisted between regions in this country. In 2015, a far-right government won the elections.

In more detail, the cultural factor of globalization closely correlates with migratory flows and the instrumentalization of these flows by far-right parties. In an article published in 2011, Lucassen and Lubbers had already noted the endemic racism in American society and the growing stigmatization of the Muslim religion in Europe. For these far-right parties, globalization has amplified migratory flows by removing borders. These arguments are questionable, and the reality of the situation is far from confirming them since migratory flows are more often than not a consequence of war, and borders are still closely guarded throughout the world.

The impact of migratory flows on the rise of cultural nationalism was explained by Eatwell and Goodwin in 2018 (Eatwell & Goodwin 2018). The authors demonstrate how globalization and immigration have intensified xenophobic and identitarian discourses and develop a model where four factors combine to create resentment among parts of the population: (1) the destruction of national culture by large-scale immigration; (2) a scarcity of opportunities due to globalization but also due to slower growth in the post-industrial economy; (3) distrust of institutions by rural and working-class voters, who feel increasingly alienated by the media and liberal, cosmopolitan and urban elites; (4) a decline in political parties and traditional ideologies leading to greater volatility in voters' decisions and party support between elections. In this context, the impression of marginalization, loss of identity and/or opportunities creates a strong resentment against a political class that has failed to protect the weakest, leading to the retreat of traditional parties as described by Eatwell and Goodwin in favor of extremist parties. The dissemination of information and misinformation via networks further reinforces this instrumentalization and perception of this cultural factor, creating resonance chambers for news stories and shocking images, confirmation bias, highly effective instruments for mobilizing crowds and an accessible platform for various conspiracy theories.

Regarding the economic factor, economic liberalization, in this case through the development of trade flows, is also to blame. It has facilitated the relocation and de-industrialization of the most advanced economies, destroying the least qualified jobs and creating mass unemployment among the working classes. And even if this phenomenon is accurate, the solution proposed by the extreme right—withdrawal into oneself and protectionism—is far from optimal. It has to be said that, overall, the most advanced economies have become richer due to globalization. The case of the United States is instructive in this respect. In the decade leading up to the 2008 crisis, and therefore at the moment when China joined the WTO, this country enjoyed unprecedented growth. Even more interestingly, after the 2008 crisis and until the Covid-19 pandemic, it enjoyed the longest uninterrupted growth in its history. The country's annual per capita income rose from US\$ 37,101 in 2001 to US\$ 80,779 (i.e., neutralizing inflation, from US\$ 46,500 to US\$ 60,256), representing an average increase of US\$ 600 per capita per year, excluding inflation, or US\$ 1,900 at current prices—including inflation (IMF 2024). However, this prosperity is rightly widely perceived as unevenly distributed, fostering growing resentment among populations who feel left behind.

The Nobel Prize economist Angus Deaton has highlighted in several of his works what he describes as the despair of the working classes in the U.S. (Deaton & Case 2020). The author observes that deaths by suicide, overdose or alcoholism have been rising steadily in this country for two decades, but, above all, they concern non-educated, non-Hispanic white men far more than the rest of the population. One of his observations is the relative stability, even depreciation, of the incomes of these working classes in a country that has become massively richer. As a result, the massive increase in inequality creates a feeling of injustice, an ideal breeding ground for extreme right-wing and even conspiracy theories. So, we should discuss a social or political factor rather than an economic factor. Dany Rodrik (1998) concludes his article by noting that “international economic integration seems to have produced domestic disintegration in many countries, deepening the divide between the winners and the losers of exposure to global competition.” The insufficient integration of these differentiated and unequal consequences of globalization into national policies (education, health, redistribution policies) further amplifies the echo of this extremist narrative. This argument ties in with macroeconomic indicators and interrogates the link between economic growth strengthened by the opportunities offered by globalization but remains disconnected from the well-being of the population (justice and equality, economic and job security, access to health etc.).

Financial crises, like the one in 2008, are another example. They are almost always the result of excessive risk-taking (speculation) by financial players, bankers,

investors and a wealthy population with savings to invest. Ultimately, however, the working classes will bear the brunt of the economic crisis and its attendant difficulties: deflation, unemployment, recession, inflation, and so on. There are many historical examples of the link between the financial crisis and the rise of the far-right, as Funke et al. (2016) point out in their study of the electoral consequences of financial crises in 20 developed countries since 1870. Doerr et al. (2020) look at the rise of Nazism in Germany in the 1930s, highlighting the role of bank failures in anti-Semitism and support for the Nazi party in that country. The deregulation of financial markets in the 1990s led to their globalization and expansion, unprecedented in economic history. It facilitated risk-taking by those who could invest and profit directly but also created the conditions for the 2008 crisis and its attendant consequences for the working class. In a book published in 2014, Wolfgang Streeck also analyzes the extent to which the 2008 crisis was an artifact of the neoliberal change of capitalism after the oil shocks in the 1970s and accelerated after the end of the Cold War. He explores the ensuing tensions and conflicts between States and governments, voters and capitalist interests, as expressed in inflation, public debt and rising private indebtedness, and the consequences for the evolving relationship between capitalism and democracy, leading to what he describes as “an increasing immunization of the former against the latter.”

For a wide variety of reasons, globalization is creating economic insecurity (Margalit 2011). Whether real or perceived, this insecurity remains a multi-faceted concept, combining factors internal to individual countries with more global ones. On the internal side, we find the negative consequences of globalization already described for part of the population, often the working classes, leading to a fear of impoverishment and downgrading. The global factor is directly linked to the shortcomings of outdated global governance in the face of this global context, the challenges posed by globalization and its consequences (Ikenberry 2018). This governance is proving inadequate, not only because it is unable to meet the many global challenges but also because it has failed to reform itself to adapt to a more diverse, multilateral and fragmented world, where the countries of the North (essentially North America, Europe, Japan, South Korea and Australia) have steadily lost influence to emerging countries and China.

Moreover, these failures in global governance have prevented it from taking over from the weakening of States and national public policies. On the one hand, deregulation or non-compliance with rules by governments or companies has led to damaging distortions of competition. On the other hand, tax competition between countries and, more generally, the mismatch between income flows circulating freely throughout the world and a tax system that remains national not only creates the con-

ditions for massive tax evasion but also reduces the resources available for investment in public policies on health, education and infrastructure. Finally, in the face of global challenges such as climate change, weakened global governance prevents the coordinated response that is needed to produce or protect global commons (Bava 2022).

This insecurity tends to strengthen the far-right, as highlighted by the article published in 2018 by Colantone and Stanig, studying 15 European countries subject to shocks linked to Chinese imports. However, the two aspects of this insecurity are, of course, closely connected and, at the same time, ambiguous. In an article published in 2016, Paul Krugman notes that Chinese imports may have been decisive factors in boosting wages and maintaining a very high employment rate, virtually unheard of in the U.S. economy for 20 years. Growing competition is a source of better prices for consumers and purchasing power, but also of unemployment for workers—the winners and losers of globalization have led to the amplification of inequalities, the feeling of injustice and the fear of downgrading. In the face of this ambiguity, economic security strategies are attempting to define themselves, including the one developed by the EU. How can we protect the employees of companies facing tough global competition while at the same time preserving consumer purchasing power, which is inevitably affected by the limitations of international competition? How can we protect a European market and European companies without risking the closure of foreign markets?

AN INTERNATIONAL ORDER UNDER THREAT: WHAT CONSEQUENCES?

The aftermath of the 2008 crisis has given rise to new protests affiliated with what is often described as radical left-wing movements, such as the “Occupy Wall Street” movement in the USA, a populist left-wing movement against inequality, corporate and financial market greed and the growing influence of money in politics; “Podemos” or “Indignados” in Spain in opposition to austerity policies and unemployment; or “Nuit debout” in France against a labor market reform law, the “El Khomri” law in 2016. That same year, more right-wing populist parties were gaining ground. Donald Trump’s victory followed that of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines in a year that also saw Putin and Erdogan maintain or amplify their authoritarian grip in Russia and Turkey, respectively, and far-right movements make further inroads across Europe (Worth 2017). Also in this year, on June 23, 2016, the British people voted by a majority of 51.89% in favor of leaving the European Union in response to the referendum question *Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?*

However, where left-wing movements are generally opposed to an economic system, capitalism, which they deem to be a source of deleterious social injustice, far-right parties believe that the erosion of borders between countries, the boom in trade, financial and personal flows jeopardize the sovereignty of countries (Biancotti et al. 2017) and the security of individuals, national economies and societies (Salgado & Stavrakakis 2019). They then advocate turning inward to “regain control,” as advocated by Brexit supporters in the UK (Abreu & Öner 2020). Even if their diagnosis is dogmatic and instrumentalized, it rides on the experiences or feelings of some of the population regarding the real consequences of globalization. However, their proposed solutions and policies are fraught with immediate and longer-term dangers.

The British example is an interesting illustration of the impasse and dangers of these “recipes.” Indeed, Britain was probably the first country to experiment with some form of de-globalization. Belonging to the European single market is seen by far-right European parties as one of the most successful forms of globalization and its consequences since it guarantees the freedom of movement of goods, services, capital, and workers through common standards and rules. Eight years after the referendum and almost four years after the country’s effective exit from the European Union, the country is far from having “regained control,” as evidenced by the ousting of Prime Minister Liz Truss in autumn 2022 after she presented a budget deemed expensive and therefore dangerous by the financial markets. It also suffers from economic woes: investment remains lower than before the referendum, real growth is significantly lower than potential growth, and the additional regulatory constraints generated by the end of free movement in a single European market lead to additional costs estimated at 20% for certain sectors and significant delays (time needed to cross the border re-established by the Brexit, new national formalities to be complied with etc.). Social issues and poverty also remain high, partly linked to higher inflation than elsewhere in Europe, and they amplify community tensions, as was the case at the beginning of August 2024 (Kirka 2024).

The four years of the Trump administration in the U.S., from 2016 to 2020, are instructive examples of the limits of these policies and the dangers this worldview poses to international relations and global governance. Indeed, one of the consequences of this period was, within the United States, stricter control of immigration. In addition to human tragedies, this led to severe labor shortages in specific sectors of the economy and in certain regions that were highly dependent on foreign workers. A recent study published in May 2024 by the National Bureau of Economic Research underlined that this impact goes beyond the agricultural sector since immigrant populations are over-represented in the new technologies

and start-up sectors: “In 2022, the four most valuable private, venture-backed U.S. companies (...) had immigrant founders (Chodavadia et al. 2024, 3).”

Moreover, the refusal to recognize the results of the 2020 elections still weakens the institutions of American democracy today. On a more global level, the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of 2015, the Iran nuclear deal or the Paris climate agreement, the blocking of the World Trade Organization or the hardening of relations with China were crucial decisions in destabilizing international relations at the regional or global level.

IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME... PRAGMATISM AND COMPROMISE TO REBUILD A NEW WORLD ORDER

“You can’t fall in love with a single market.” This phrase, often repeated by Jacques Delors when he chaired the European Commission between 1985 and 1995, is also present in the speech he made to the European Parliament on January 17, 1989, when he added: “Europe as a partner demands greater cohesion, a greater sense of responsibility, more initiative. History is knocking at our door. Are we going to pretend that we cannot hear?” At that very moment, the iron curtain separating East and West Europe was already cracking, and the Berlin Wall would fall a few weeks later, presenting the European Union with one of the greatest challenges in its history, that of enlargement. Nevertheless, in the early 1990s, the Single European Act relaunched the project for a single European market. This came into force on January 1, 1993, creating an internal market within which people, goods, services and capital could move freely. A key moment in the construction of Europe, the liberal vision that dominated this period led us to forget the warnings of Jacques Delors: prosperity is not an end in itself, and it is far from the solution to everything. The rise of extreme right-wing movements from this point onwards, and even more so after the 2008 crisis, is directly linked to this refusal or inability to see and hear both the limits of the liberal model and the fears it engenders in a section of the population.

At the end of the 1990s, this protest was being led by a certain left-wing movement throughout the world, including political parties, trade unionists, NGOs, indigenous movements and social movements. They are pushing for reform of a world order deemed unjust and at the service of the capitalist interests of a minority¹. The failure of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) in 1997 is an early illus-

1. From 2001 onwards, their initiators presented the World Social Forums as a social alternative to the World Economic Forum, held annually in Davos since 1971.

tration of these struggles. Negotiated within the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) from 1995 onwards, it aims to synthesize and harmonize pre-existing bilateral agreements in this field. It is intended to facilitate foreign investment by prohibiting discrimination on the basis of investor nationality but also by enabling private companies to take legal action against countries practicing protectionism and national preference. Disclosed by American citizens' movements, this project led to strong protests from supporters of cultural exceptionalism, environmentalists and trade unionists, and was eventually abandoned.

Another example is the plan to tax financial transactions, or the Tobin tax, which led to the creation of the Association for the International Taxation of Financial Transactions and for Citizen Action (ATTAC, in French). Similarly, in December 2001 in Doha, Qatar, the World Trade Organization launched a round of negotiations on trade and development, which has to date come to nothing. These three examples underline the extent to which the diagnosis of the limits of globalization was already made more than 20 years ago and the extent to which the issues remain very similar today.

The reaction of most States today to the rise of the extreme right is anything but oriented toward reflection or even initiatives for a new world order, or at the very least to reform the existing one. Competition and confrontation dominate rather than cooperation. The result is essentially national political responses, an every-man-for-himself attitude mingled with a fairly generalized inward-looking attitude, with a number of limitations. Faced with systemic problems, national responses are patently ineffective: how can we act against greenhouse gas emissions emitted elsewhere, which are inevitably warming our climate? How can we regain financial leeway by reforming taxation in a world of competition? How can we resolve the migration issue by acting on its causes rather than its con-

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sequences? The national level can only attempt to respond to the consequences, and so, like a band-aid on a gaping wound, it can only temporarily mask the effects of the problem without providing a solution. As a result, climate change is worsening and, with it, fears of natural disasters, the ideal breeding ground for populist tendencies. Worse still, the rise of the extreme right often leads to tough, high-profile political choices at the national level, which political leaders deem indispensable if they are to have any chance of victory in elections but which are far from lasting solutions and may even prove counterproductive. This is the case, for example, with purely quantitative and security-based responses to the challenge of migration. Apart from the inhumanity of such responses, they do nothing to stem the flow. And yet, it is estimated that in Europe, for example, reasoned management and an ambitious migration policy serving the general European interest could help to reduce the growth gap between the EU and the United States (the famous “European stall,” the source of numerous recent studies and reports).

The far-right narrative divides and fragments, mirroring the polarization and growing violence of the political situations in most countries where these parties enjoy a certain popularity, directly threatening the stability of democratic institutions as well as a tendency to fragment globalization. Globalization among friends, as proposed by some, is a factor of exclusion for others and is bound to reinforce geopolitical tensions in a dangerous vicious circle. Indeed, isolationism and protectionism are factors of injustice between countries. A protectionist measure taken by the United States against Bangladesh does not carry the same weight or have the same consequences as the opposite. The economic theories of international trade have accurately described this phenomenon concerning trade policies, but we could extend the approach to many other areas—relations of power and strength, as well as economic capabilities, which make the consequences of national policies very unfair.

Indeed, a tariff or subsidy imposed by a major country also modifies world prices. The agricultural policies of the big rich countries in the 1980s and 1990s are perfect examples of this—driving down the price of agricultural products on world markets due to the excess supply they produced. In Europe, the prices paid to European farmers were guaranteed by a common agricultural policy compensating for any differential between this guaranteed price and that offered by world markets. This encouraged European farmers to produce more and more, leading to overproduction, which in turn fed world markets and drove prices down. Europeans tried to stockpile or transform these surpluses or to set up quotas (as in the case of milk quotas), but the cost of this policy was such that it led to reform.

Nevertheless, such a wealthy region was able to afford such a policy, which would be impossible and unthinkable for a less well-endowed country or region—

and this provides some initial pointers for policies adapted to global challenges. Of course, Europe could afford such an agricultural policy, but could a single European State have afforded it? Certainly not, and the same conclusion could be drawn for other regions with regional initiatives—far from an ideal solution (the example of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)—the EU policy for agriculture—is a case in point), but already a less bad solution than national withdrawal.

Another risk linked to the differences in the balance of power and available resources of each country is always illustrated by the question of agriculture and the impact of agricultural policies, including the CAP, on the agriculture of poor countries—these countries are today, as tragically illustrated by the war in Ukraine, terribly vulnerable because they are largely dependent on food imports. This is a fairly recent phenomenon, dating back several decades, and directly linked to the impact of rich countries' agricultural policies on world markets. The downward price spiral described above, coupled with the resulting trade surpluses, stimulated imports to the detriment of local production. This was the main challenge of the agreement signed in Marrakech in 1995, which not only created the World Trade Organization (WTO) but also included agriculture in the issues to be negotiated—as well as the agricultural aspects of the Doha Round of trade and development negotiations within the WTO since 2001.

CONCLUSION

Globalization has played a fundamental role in growth, innovation and employment over the past four decades (Rodrigues 2024). It has lifted millions of people out of poverty, given them access to consumer goods, enabled many countries to finally develop their economies, and, thanks to technological progress, produced innovations that facilitate or save lives. However, the opening up of markets and the competitive pressure it brings, coupled with technological progress, have also contributed to job destruction and the impoverishment of workers in sectors and even entire regions. Far from calming international relations, it has contributed to the rise of geopolitical tensions of various kinds and amplified international migration, rein-

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forcing the feeling of uncertainty and insecurity among populations already made precarious by the opening up of markets. At the same time, global warming has emerged as a common existential threat. Paradoxically, in a globalizing world, all these factors have weakened international governance, threatening world order and fueling extreme and polarized rhetoric, which has further reinforced the threat to world order and the cohesion of countries and peoples.

To combat this phenomenon, we need to find the conditions for a new form of global governance that is inclusive and adapted to the challenges posed. Several experiments are underway. These include, but are not limited to, the OECD's initiative for minimum taxation of large corporations, the Paris Climate Agreement, financial market regulation and European integration, but there is still much to be done in these and other areas, such as migration issues, the regulation of digital technologies and public health. What common actions? What global institutions? What means and mechanisms? How can we restore the legitimacy of these institutions in the face of the rise of the extreme right? The future of a new international order will depend on the ability of the international community, governments, businesses, and civil society to answer these questions and turn the tide against the far-right. ■

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