The roots of our problems

Critiques of both modern economics and modern progressivism are two a penny. The ones made here are not unusual. There is also nothing new in the idea that society has ignored "left behind" areas and people. Here is what is more important: the problems of the Consensus have roots in the earlier period of the Great Disruption.

Left behind places have seen social failure, not just economic failure. US areas affected by Chinese imports experienced lower wages and higher unemployment. But they also saw lower rates of marriage and more unwed mothers; and increased male mortality from drug and alcohol poisoning. The decline in marriage can be explained by the idea that unemployed and low-waged men are less attractive spouses. But the size of the decline would have been much smaller in the world of the 1960s, when marriage was nearly a universal irrespective of income.[297]

The human cost of the US opioid problem is vividly detailed in Sam Quinones' *Dreamland*. Again, it is hard to imagine this happening without the previous growth in drug consumption starting in the 1960s; places had been exposed to global trade before, without suffering such problems. Indeed, overall drug deaths closely fit a simple exponential growth curve, from 1979 to the present day. The "China shock", then, was like a cold winter which lowered people's resistance to illness, but which only became serious in the context of an ongoing epidemic. Similar arguments can be made for other problems of left behind areas, like worklessness and disability benefit uptake. In all these cases, the economic effects of globalization merely exacerbated a problem that had got much worse over a long period.[298]

Immigration likewise has links to Western social failures. Policy-makers have justified it by reference to an ageing population structure, caused by decreasing birth rates. In effect migration has been used as a substitute for fixing, or even acknowledging, our own social problems. There is another aspect to the demand for immigrant labour: employers regularly prefer immigrants to natives because of they perceive them as having

better "soft skills" – that is, the skills of competence and cooperation. Sociologists have noted this in the context of Black-immigrant competition in the US, but it seems also to apply to native whites. Here are some pithy quotes from employers interviewed by one US researcher: "most of the white people don't want to work"; "whites have some work ethic problems"; "the white worker is a whining piece of shit". In Europe, a Norwegian fish processor was equally scathing about natives: "I guess they don't like to get fish goo in their hair styling." Perhaps employers are just reciting their preconceptions. But they might also be speaking from experience. Again on this dimension, immigration has been a quick-fix substitute for setting our own houses in order. Although international immigrants are, almost by definition, highly-motivated and adaptable people, it was not inevitable that ordinary natives should have come to be seen as the opposite. The causes of that failure lie in our own history.[299]

The wave of populism in politics was unleashed by the latest communications revolution, but it is also the result of the long-term decline in trust, which started in the 1960s and has now home to roost. Donald Trump himself is in some ways a product of the 1970s and the post-Watergate mistrust of state institutions: he promotes the idea that the "deep state" is out to get him. 1980s Reaganism was an alliance between neoliberal intellectuals and distrustful populists, with Reagan acting as an appealing, electable figurehead. The Republican party repeated the trick with George W. Bush in the 2000s. Trump discarded the intellectual side of the movement, and showed the figurehead could get elected on his own. In the 1980s, distrust was channelled into small-government libertarianism. Trump took it in a different direction: if all government is a swindle, then why not elect the biggest conman, and hope he will be on your side? The underlying mistrust which drove the movement was partly a rational response to the cultural crisis of the Disruption – and partly a symptom of it.[300]

The end of the Consensus

By the end of this era, elite ideas had a credibility problem. They did not speak to real social needs. The left wing increasingly appeared contemptuous of the people whose interests it claimed to represent. The right wing's libertarianism had lost its fire, degenerating into a series of sell-outs to special interests.

The society was fragmented into competing groups with little shared ideological base. Powerful new technologies allowed information-sharing and communication faster than ever before, scaling from individual families and localities, up to the billions. These potentially allowed new forms of cooperation, but they also threw a spanner into the workings of democratic politics.

The teaching and enforcement institutions of the Hothouse barely existed any longer. Hothouse ideas and norms continued to be passed down within families and elsewhere, but they were not being explicitly developed or articulated to meet the needs of the twenty-first century. At the same time, consumer capitalism continued to create unprecedentedly powerful threats to competence. Many of these overlapped with the very communications technologies which should enable cooperation. Meanwhile, people had woken up to social problems previously hidden under the cloak of economic prosperity.

These trends culminated in 2016 with the vote in Britain for Brexit, and the election in the US of Donald Trump. Both of these events were broadly nationalist revolts from below. Donald Trump promised to put America first in foreign policy and to prevent illegal immigration. The Brexit vote was driven by concerns over sovereignty, mistrust of a remote bureaucracy in Brussels, and a desire to retain national control over immigration. These votes were revolts against both the economists, who said you'd never had it so good, and the politically correct "liberal elite" who told you what to think.

On the night of the 2016 US presidential election, Hillary Clinton's victory prepa-

rations included a large glass ceiling. If she won, the ceiling would be shattered. This was classic Consensus-era symbolism. It tied together the themes of feminism and opportunity. It said: "I am going to succeed, and if you are a woman, I will represent you: I will succeed on your behalf." The narrative turned out to be less persuasive than the Democrats expected. Eras have no neat endpoints, but that night, with its shocked politicos and its unshattered ceiling, makes a good full stop.[301]