

The Global Shift from Promising Pluralism to an Exclusionary Nationalism

Ideas, Policies and Power Relations at the Global Level

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Abstract

Victory of liberal USA over Communist USSR, following the end of the Cold War, fostered a plurality of human identities and associations. That seemed to herald the realization of a promising new age of rational-democratic pluralism, either within the framework of the nation-state or transcending it. However, the march of pluralism not only stalled but also reversed into exclusionary right-wing nationalism. This shift is attributed to global structural changes that drive ideational trends.

The post-Cold War global order crowned liberal pluralism; however, 9/11 and the discourse of the 'War on Terror' reinvigorated existing undercurrents of religious-civilizational discourse. The global financial crisis of 2008, coupled with relative changes in global economic relations, enhanced the perceived civilizational appeal of emerging economies at the expense of liberalism. Finally, the relative decline and disengagement of the USA disrupted the institutionalized liberal structure, paving the way for exclusionary right-wing nationalism.

The victory of liberal USA over the communist USSR following the Cold War set the stage for a liberal-pluralist trend worldwide. Liberalism's drive rendered ideological class politics irrelevant, pacified ethnic resurgence, and managed religious politics, though the latter continued to simmer beneath the surface. Consequently, democratic movements, civil society activism, and transnational affiliations gained momentum. That seemed to herald the realization of a promising new era of rational-democratic pluralism, either within the framework of the nation-state or transcending it. However, the march of pluralism not only

stalled but also reversed into phenomena characterized by polarization, the exclusion of minorities and immigrants, distrust of established institutions and norms, trends of centralization, declining impartiality of state institutions, and irredentism. The central feature of this phenomenon is the negation of the concept of coexistence among multiple perspectives and identities, replaced by the notion of exclusive territorial claims for the majority group to revive its 'past glory'.

Prior to the reversal of the trend, several key changes in the nature of superpower engagement and global power relations occurred. These changes contributed to the articulation and propagation of right-wing conservative ideas. Thus, ideational trends have been contextualized through shifts in global power dynamics and the ensuing policies of the superpower (USA) at critical junctures: the victory of liberal USA following the Cold War, the events of 9/11 and the discourse of the 'Global War on Terror,' the global financial crisis and shifts in global economic relations, the relative decline and disengagement of the USA, and Trump's electoral victory.

Post-Cold-War World Order and Liberal-Pluralism

Immediately after the end of the Cold War, the Third Democratic Wave and the 'End of History' thesis presented a bright prospect for a liberal-democratic world, albeit with caution regarding the danger of a 'Clash of Civilizations.' The post-Cold War order—anchored in U.S. hegemony—was characterized by the principles of a free liberal market economy, a multilateral approach to international politics, and global liberal values. The liberalization of trade and economies was promoted worldwide through global financial flows, accompanied by Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). Multilateralism was reinforced through collective security—such as in the First Gulf War—and international regimes. While, liberal-democratic values were promoted through human rights initiatives and democratic

conditionalities attached to aid programs and trade agreements. However, the victory of the liberal-democratic USA over the communist USSR itself projected the West, particularly the USA, as a model to be emulated.

Liberalism's victory left little space for ideological rivalry and class politics. The end of global ideological rivalries, after the Cold War, not only promoted democratic values and a liberal market economy but also sharpened conflicts between rival ethnic identities—after all, nation-states are based on claims of distinct identities. In contrast to ethnic conflicts, a discourse of an overarching, distinct religious-civilizational identity also gained momentum, spurred during the first Afghan War and further facilitated by electronic media from the late 1970s into the 1980s.

Thus, changes in global power relations posed a serious challenge for left-leaning socialist parties, particularly those from developing countries with controlled or mixed economies. On the one hand, claims of exclusive civilizational identity were challenging the inclusive and pluralist features of these parties; on the other hand, Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) were depriving these parties of their substantive support base among the working classes. In fact, the adjustment to the new global order damaged class politics. Though the grand narrative diminished the relevance of class politics—and pacified the resurgence of ethnic conflicts—the religious-civilizational discourse did not wane. However, liberalism, as the sole grand narrative, opened new avenues for human rational affiliations both within and beyond the nation-state. Thus, the liberal order toned down the exclusive version of religious-civilizational identity for the time being.

Soon after the consolidation of U.S. hegemony, the advent of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) facilitated the global spread of liberal-democratic values. The widespread and rapid flow of capital, goods, and ideas—facilitated by new

technologies across national boundaries—apparently weakened the state’s grip on financial flows and its monopoly over national identity. Consequently, scholars began debating the possibility of multiple non-state identities and associations, as well as the prospects for a universal cosmopolitan identity. This apparent loss of control by the state and ruling elite over ideas, identities, and discourse generated optimism among critical thinkers about the emergence of a new rational-democratic public sphere facilitated by ICTs. Driven by the missionary zeal of the liberal order, critical thinkers envisioned the emancipation of humanity from narrow, ‘authoritarian’ national control. So, democracy, transnational engagement, and civic participation became more pronounced features until the early years of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

For instance, in 2001, large public gatherings in Manila, Philippines, coordinated through social media, forced legislators to reverse their decision to cover up the corruption of then-President Joseph Estrada. Similarly, Spain's Prime Minister, José María Aznar, was ousted from office in 2004. Pakistan’s Lawyers’ Movement against the military dictator in 2007 facilitated his removal from power. In Moldova, the Communist Party could not stay in power after rigged elections in 2009 due to protests coordinated through social media.¹ Social media, as a tactical tool of public discourse, also played a role in the Arab Spring uprisings against autocratic regimes in the Middle East in 2011.² Even in authoritarian China, by the end of 2009, 384 million Chinese had internet access, 233 million owned personal cell phones, and there were 3.23 million websites.³ Sixty percent of netizens reported using the internet to monitor government activities and express their opinions. Thus, under the liberal order, aided by new media, Chinese netizens were also influencing public agendas and shaping political preferences.⁴ As a result, 55% of countries worldwide achieved democratic governance in 2010—the highest in history. By 2012, the number of electoral democracies worldwide peaked at 97, and liberal democracies grew to 42.⁵

In contrast to narrow nationalism, transnationalism was also on the rise during that period. The *Social Science Abstracts Database* revealed that the term *transnational* or *transnationalism* was hardly used in the late 1980s, but its usage as a keyword in social sciences increased nearly 1,300-fold by the early 2000s. Two-thirds of this usage occurred between 1998 and 2003.⁶ This rise in the term's usage correlated with the growing role of supranational bodies. In 2003, ASEAN declared itself a community, while the EU achieved its largest expansion in 2004. Similarly, the South American Summits held in 2000, 2002, and 2004 aimed to establish a South American Community, and the African Union (AU) was launched to foster greater cooperation and integration among African states.

Parallel to the upward trend of transnationalism, a downward shift toward non-state civic engagement was also evident during this period. Data shows a steady increase in civic engagement, peaking in the early years of the second decade of the twenty-first century.⁷ Thus, this phase was characterized by prevailing feelings of inclusion and the coexistence of multiple national, transnational, and sub-national identities.

9/11, the Discourse of ‘Global War on Terror’, and Underlying Rise of Exclusionary Sentiments

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent “war on terror” dented the promise of pluralism, particularly in terms of human rights conditions, though liberal discourse maintained surface-level dominance for about a decade. The events of 9/11 triggered an upsurge in patriotism and religiosity in the United States. While patriotic and religious sentiments might have been short-lived, one trend—anti-Islam sentiments—continued to grow, albeit in a polarized manner, throughout the post-9/11 years. For instance, in May 2002, 23% of Democrats and 32% of Republicans believed Islam to be a comparatively

violent religion, but by August 2021, this view was shared by 32% of Democrats and an overwhelming 72% of Republicans.⁸

Amid this momentary surge in patriotism and religiosity, the “war on terror” discourse mainstreamed the process of “othering.” While the “other” category was ostensibly directed at terrorists, the yardstick for categorization extended to a “particular way of life.” This framing was evident in the *National Security Strategy of the United States*, which described terrorism as an “evil” threatening “our freedoms and our way of life.”⁹

Thus, a distinct way of life, as a benchmark of “civility,” became the fault line for prejudices. Political and economic causes of terrorist incidents were reduced to cultural and civilizational differences. Furthermore, President Bush portrayed the United States, under his administration, as playing the role of God’s agent in a struggle between divine forces of good and evil.¹⁰ Thus, the “war on terror” discourse presented a worldview of an intrinsic clash between the “civilized world” and “uncivilized barbarism.”

The media in general and right-wing outlets in particular, amplified the stigmatization of the “other,” extending it to the entire Muslim community and political dissidents under the guise of patriotism. A news reporter noted, “a fear in every newsroom in America... the fear of being stuck with some label, unpatriotic or otherwise.”¹¹ A study found that individuals with greater exposure to daily news were more prejudiced towards Arabs than those with limited news exposure.¹² In the wake of 9/11, implicit discrimination against Muslims rose to over 80%, while overt discrimination increased to above 75%.¹³ Similarly, Islamic communities in 15 EU member countries faced increased hostility following September 11.¹⁴ In Britain too, Muslims encountered heightened levels of Islamophobia.¹⁵ The patriotic wave and the “war on terror” discourse marked the beginning of the mainstreaming of fringe exclusionary narratives on a global scale, leaving little space for dissent.

The influence of the discourse of the "Global War on Terrorism" (GWOT) was not confined to the Western world. It enabled many states, particularly emerging ones, to justify the excessive use of force against resistance movements under the pretext of combating 'war on terror'. Additionally, the excessive use of force became justified for 'territorial consolidation', citing the risk of fragile states becoming breeding grounds for terrorism. The discourse propagated by the media and endorsed by governments in these countries also heightened prejudices within majority communities against minority groups, particularly Muslims.

In the context of the Uighurs' resistance against mainstream China, one scholar observed, "The Chinese state sees in the GWOT a much older conflict between civilization and barbarism or savages." He further elaborated on the post-September 11 situation, stating, "They (Uighur Muslims) are portrayed as irrational and anti-modern—traits that essentially become characterized as a part of their religion—and they must be defeated in the interests of progress."¹⁶ Similarly, in Russia, President Vladimir Putin adopted the ideational framework of the GWOT. He labelled Chechnya's separatist movement as terrorism and equated Russia's military operations against the Chechens with the United States' war in Afghanistan.¹⁷ Putin described terrorism—framed against the backdrop of the Chechen resistance movement—as "a brazen challenge to the whole humanity, at least to civilized humanity."¹⁸ He further asserted that the West and Russia faced a common enemy whose actions "can be compared to what the Nazis did."¹⁹

In India too, the Muslim minority faced discrimination and violence. The initial manifestation of this hatred was the 2002 Gujarat Muslim massacre. One scholar described it as "state-sponsored violence during the riots [that] assisted in the construction of Hindutva majoritarian nationalism."²⁰ Another scholar observed, "Muslim men are viewed as instinctively fanatic terrorists rooted in Islam as a violent religion."²¹ The right-wing Bhartiya

Janta Party (BJP) exploited the situation in its favour, as “the BJP constructed a ‘civic zeitgeist’ by mobilizing along recurring themes of a Muslim ‘threat’ to the Hindu majority, creating a narrative to further Hindu insecurity”.²²

Religiosity also increased in Turkey around the time of 9/11. Shortly after the terrorist attacks and the subsequent war on terror, the Justice and Development Party (AK Party), an Islamist party, came to power in 2002. Scholars also noted the rise of neo-nationalism in Europe, though it appeared embryonic at that time.²³

Despite the underlying rise of exclusionary sentiments, liberal manifestations remained prevalent globally. In China, while the notion of Han racial superiority over other ethnic groups was gradually taking root, the state continued to project a narrative of a “harmonious society” and the “peaceful rise” of China. Similarly, despite the rise of xenophobia against the Russian Muslim population, President Vladimir Putin maintained a state-centric inclusive nationalism. In India, the Congress Party upheld the image of a pluralistic nation. Turkey, too, retained a liberal and pro-EU stance until the early signs of U.S. disengagement following the global financial crisis.

The Global Financial Crisis, Changes in Global Economic Power Relations and the Beginning of the Relative Decline of the Liberal Order

Parallel to the underlying wave of exclusionary civilizational ideas was a gradual shift in global economic power relations. This shift accelerated as post-Cold War technological advancements and capital flows began benefiting developing countries, particularly those with large populations offering abundant cheap labour and a growing consumer base. Consequently, the share of developing and transitional economies in global output increased significantly. In terms of market exchange rates, their share rose from 23% to 33%, while in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP), it grew from 40% to 50% over nine years (2000–

2009).²⁴ According to IMF estimates, during a similar period (2000–2011), the G7's share in the global economy declined from 72% to 53% (measured at market exchange rates). By 2015, the contribution of advanced economies (G7) to global growth was 31.5%, compared to 36.3% from seven emerging economies: China, India, Brazil, Russia, Indonesia, Turkey, and South Africa. Among these emerging economies, China became a leading growth hub. Its per capita productivity relative to the United States increased from 6% in 1980 to 22% in 2008.²⁵

The global financial crisis of 2008 marked a shift in global power relations. Unlike the traditional Western economic powers, non-Western emerging economies demonstrated resilience, positioning themselves as alternative centres of economic power. Reflecting on these changes, the President of the World Bank remarked on April 2010:

If 1989 saw the end of the ‘Second World’ with Communism’s demise, then 2009 saw the end of what was known as the ‘Third World.’ We are now in a new, fast-evolving multipolar world economy—in which some developing countries are emerging as economic powers; others are moving towards becoming additional poles of growth; and some are struggling to attain their potential within this new system.²⁶

French President Nicolas Sarkozy also acknowledged that “The G20 foreshadows the planetary governance of the twenty-first century.” Similarly, Stewart Patrick of the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations described the G20 as “the most significant advance in multilateral policy coordination since the end of the Cold War.”²⁷

The economic success of emerging economies increased their civilizational appeal after the global financial crisis. Although these rising powers operated within a liberal framework, they were perceived by many leaders—in states facing economic duress after the global financial crisis—as prototypes of historically stable, monolithic civilizations, offering a

contrasting path to liberal norms, particularly for new democracies, such as Hungary, which had previously shared a past with these so-called ‘stable civilizations’.

The Decline and Disengagement of the Liberal Hegemon, the USA, and the Rise of Exclusionary Right-wing Nationalism

Relative changes in global economic relations, coupled with the USA's fatigue from prolonged military engagements in Afghanistan and the Middle East, affected the capability of the US to assert itself both externally and internally. The retreat of the liberal hegemon, the USA, resulted in the disruption of stable social patterns and norms. This disruption particularly undermined the credibility of mainstream liberal media, which was already struggling due to the advent of social media. Therefore, institutionalization based on the liberal-pluralist thesis began losing its relevance, leading to psycho-emotional reactions. Consequently, the appeal of discourses offering simplistic explanations, quick solutions, and emotional stimulation—outside the institutionalized liberal framework—increased. In a nutshell, a vacuum in global power relations set the stage for emotional responses characterized by populism, affective polarization, and conspiracy theories.

The ineffective pluralist liberal order, faced with rising but vague expectations, ushered in a period of widespread global instability and discontent. This discontent was vaguely directed against the system, lacking a clear agenda. For example, the Tea Party movement in the USA initially drew upon ideas from various, often contradictory, ideological strands.²⁸ Similarly, in many parts of the world, ideologically opposed forces—liberal civil society and right-wing nationalist groups—became part of anti-corruption movements targeting liberal dispensations.

Since, within the framework of the post-Cold War liberal world order, class-based narratives had become outmoded and civil society—intrinsically tied to liberalism—lacked the

emotional resonance to address feelings of discontent and emptiness, religious-civilizational discourse emerged as the only available alternative to capitalize on widespread discontent. Thus, the once-fringe right-wing ideas of populism, religiosity and exclusion became a mainstream narrative globally by channelling prevailing anger toward minorities and immigrants while simultaneously offering egoistic massaging to the majority through promises of reviving "past glory" via economic protectionism, expansion of territorial influence, and the suppression of "others." Thus the outcome was (an exclusionary) right-wing nationalism based on majority-centric religious-civilizational discourse. This form of nationalism is rooted in the exclusivity of territory for the majority community, presumed to share a common ancestry and religious-spiritual ethos, rather than being grounded in civic principles of justice, equality, and diversity. Thus, the disruption of the liberal-rational structure stirred emotional sentiments that manifested as populism, while exclusionary nationalism exploited these conditions to its advantage in the absence of potent challenging narratives.

Western established democracies in general, and the USA in particular, did not succumb to rising alternate grand narratives—such as the wave of socialism in the late 1950s and 1960s—during earlier periods of relative decline because such narratives were associated with rival centres of power. However, the discourse of this exclusionary version of nationalism is globally diffused and lacks direct identification with any specific power centre. Consequently, during the recent rise of China and the relative decline of the USA, voters in the West were more susceptible to the growing appeal of exclusionary right-wing nationalism. This paved the way for Donald Trump---a populist who promised a revival of "past glory" by changing the system perceived to favour immigrants and minorities---to become the U.S. president. His election normalized the practice of exclusion on a global scale.

The global shift from a liberal pluralist discourse to an exclusionary civilizational narrative led to a deterioration in human rights conditions and a rise in incidents of hatred. For instance, Europe witnessed a significant increase in discrimination and hate crimes.²⁹ The situation was even worse in India, as reported by human rights organizations. Hate crimes in England and Wales doubled between 2013 and 2018, reflecting a significant increase over the five-year period.³⁰ The USA also experienced a substantial rise in hatred.³¹ Similarly, a particular form of democratic backsliding emerged, characterized by polarization, the exclusion of minorities, distrust in established institutions and norms, and the consequent rise of authoritarian leaders. This was accompanied by trends of centralization—at the expense of the principle of separation of powers—and the declining impartiality of state institutions. Additionally, this shift contributed to increased aggression in regional peripheries.

The narrative emphasizes the uniqueness and exclusivity of a civilization, often characterized by an assumed glorious past when its people wielded influence over an expanded territory. However, this civilization is now perceived as being under threat or having suffered humiliation in the past at the hands of external "others." In the current context of global chaos, right-wing nationalist regional leaders—drawing on the perceived relevance of exclusionary discourse—believe that the time has come to revive this glorious past and reclaim the "original" territorial influence. This exclusionary nationalist discourse promotes a monolithic concept of civilization that prioritizes "past glory" within a claimed expanded territory rather than engaging in global clashes with other civilizations. Consequently, the restoration of "original boundaries" within specific regions, driven by nationalistic and militaristic security policies, has become a driving force behind contemporary irredentism.

Whether religious-civilizational discourse and related exclusionary version of nationalism will persist or liberalism will regain its pre-eminence depends on power relations at the global level. For instance, the rise of the Soviet Union and the relative decline of the USA during the

late 1950s and 1960s led to the popularity of socialist discourse, which caused rapid shifts in the political systems of developing states. However, the USA's relatively better economic performance compared to the USSR, coupled with an assertive rollback policy, facilitated its recovery on the global stage and resulted in a liberal-democratic global wave. Similarly, soon after the end of the Cold War, the breakdown of associations between national elites in many multi-ethnic states and global ideological blocs loosened the ruling elite's grip over various ethnic groups, thereby sharpening previously pacified ethnic divisions. Consequently, many multi-ethnic states experienced ethnic conflicts and bloody civil wars during the 1990s. The consolidation of a unipolar world order, however, ended the chaos and established liberal pluralism as the only global grand narrative. Currently, in this state of flux where expectations are unstable, liberalism remains one of the alternatives. While it remains vibrant in many societies, in others it seeks to adjust to the populist religious-civilizational discourse to maintain its relevance. This trend may continue until the global power structure consolidates in one form or another.

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