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Summer Discontents — and More to Come?

By PAUL KENNEDY

As I write, on a sunny Saturday morn shortly before Midsummer's Day, the profusion of colors and scents from dozens of roses and other plants in my garden arouse my senses, the birds fill the air with song and a butterfly flits from bloom to bloom. The long, lazy summer is upon us. Did not the English poet Robert Browning capture this serenity with his words, "God's in His Heaven; all's right with the world"?

But the problem with this serene portrait is precisely that all is not right with the world. Indeed, large parts of our planet seem as troubled as could be, and others appear close to disaster.

In sharp contrast to those bucolic scenes outside my windows, there also lie within the house my usual reading menu: newspapers, magazines and reports from think tanks and strategic-studies institutes. All this constitutes a heavy brunch indeed, and not just because of the sheer amount of reading material, but also — and especially — because of the gravity of the contents.

Which of these stories will still be headline news in a few years' time? Which will be entering the history books? Brazilian upheavals that, if imitated, could alter the economic priorities of the entire Latin American region? The political struggle for Turkey's mind and soul — and Egypt's? The end of Pakistan as a viable, functioning state? Growing authoritarianism in Moscow, and defensive xenophobia in Beijing? The further fraying of the European project, and the turn to populist, chauvinistic movements? And, watching all this, an increasingly dysfunctional American government, with a public too deeply concerned about their own problems to pay much attention (apart from brief responses to human disasters) to the world abroad?

Is it any surprise that managers at the World Bank, I.M.F. and U.N. secretary general's office are privately very scared, whatever their public statements may say? What might be their most profound worry? My guess is that it could be the following: While all of these discontents definitely have their own local causes, perhaps something bigger is at work that makes our troubles more common in nature.

Inside so many nations, citizens sense that the pace of economic change — always inequitable in its distribution of benefits — has become much more uneven. And as the gap between haves and have-nots widens everywhere, dissatisfaction grows, political parties splinter, and secessionist groups raise their heads.

It does not matter that a country's G.D.P. is growing nicely if there is serious maldistribution of the benefits — witness the unrest across Brazil. Even the mere perception of an unjust economic order and a corrupt elite may be enough to fan the flames.

In many places, youth unemployment and street agitation can easily intertwine with longstanding ethnic and religious prejudices. Across the Middle East in particular, as religious and secularist parties tussle, the thin crust of civilization is cracking badly.

This, of course, is not the first time that widespread discontent against the “unfair” economic and political order has arisen. The 1960s witnessed such worldwide unrest, often with more radical agendas for change and calls for revolution. And in October 1930, *The Economist* was wringing its hands at the extent to which “our economics and our politics are perpetually falling out of gear with one another” thus producing “a series of jolts and jars and smashes in the social life of humanity.”

Perhaps the only difference nowadays is that the pace of disruptive technological and economic change is much faster, and that the size of populations affected is so much greater. The ballyhoo about the increasing number of billionaires needs to be set alongside the vast increases in the numbers of the economically desperate and displaced.

If this gloomy thinking is more or less true, then the recent U.N. report “World Population Prospects” should give us all cause for thought. Its new forecast for total world population by 2050 raises previous estimates by 300 million people, which reflects “increasing fertility rates in populous countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa,” according to *The Economist*.

Conceding that long-term forecasts are tricky, the report points to world population growing from 7.2 billion today to 9.6 billion by 2050. Of the “advanced” economies, only the United States, because of its higher fertility and immigration rates, will remain among the 10 most populous countries. Traditional powers Russia, Japan, Germany and Britain will all have been relegated to the second or third decentiles, relatively prosperous perhaps but in the demographic dustbin of history. Other, chiefly Asian and African nations will be bursting at the seams, their megacities co-existing with great rural poverty.

Some political structures will appear absurd: Russia, Britain and France, three of the current, permanent, veto-bearing members of the U.N. Security Council, will have a combined population less than that of Indonesia.

Yet all such absurdities pale beside the really important implication of the World Population Prospects report — that the vast majority of these additional members to the human race will be born into a grinding, resentful poverty that is supposed to exist cheek-by-jowl with the luxurious new hotel resorts, Himalayan “base camps” and exclusive yacht facilities being constructed all over “exotic” spots in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

We cannot in good conscience — actually, whatever our conscience is — exist in a world in which the rich forever get richer, and billions of poor people languish, assuming that they will not protest their fate. Already, as the old farmer’s saying goes, the worms are turning. What will the world look like should 4 billion people ever turn against the current systems? Now is the time to think about such matters. Even among the bird song.

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