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Illiberal Trends in the West

*Seeing the Crisis of the Modern*¹

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Introduction

I wrote these pages in a schematic and concise way, leaving many parts undeveloped and much to the reader’s intuition. I also had to use my rather defective English, for which I beg forgiveness. I hope the text will anyway prove of some interest.

We live in a new world, whose roots sink deep but whose formal beginning can be dated from the 1990s, a decade opened by the crisis of what could be termed the socialist, “minor” Modern.

This minor Modern collapsed because of essential flaws inherent to its social and economic structure (not casually, it politically survived in countries that, like China, were able to timely and resolutely abandon such structure). The major, original version of the Modern, i.e. the Western one, then felt victorious, without realizing that it too was already undermined by as essential flaws that were not, however, economic in nature. In fact, these flaws were the consequences of its economic motor’s very success. It is to these flaws, that I consider the factors underlying the West’s present crisis as well as the causes of liberalism’s present difficulties, that this paper is devoted.

As many a discussion taught me, however, I have first to explain why I chose to speak of “Modern” rather than of Capitalism. After reading the manuscript of *Il futuro contro*, a friend asked how I “could not even mention the term Capitalism in a book dealing with democracy.” I answered that I did it on purpose, because I do not believe

¹ This paper elaborates on the hypotheses I first expounded in “Getting to the roots of illiberal trends,” April 2017, *Reset DOC*, <https://www.resetdoc.org/story/getting-to-the-roots-of-the-illiberal-trends/>, and then in *Il futuro contro. Democrazia, libertà, mondo giusto*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2019.

that Capitalism exists, a belief comforted by the fact that I could satisfactorily write and reason about world's history and trends without resorting to a category that deludes us into thinking that by simply mentioning it we are able to explain what in fact we do not know. He retorted that I had at least to better clarify this belief of mine, and this I am doing in a longish footnote, leaving it up to the reader whether or not to take a detour.²

Chronologically speaking, this *Western Modern* can be *grosso modo* identified with the period extending from the two great 18th century revolutions to 1991. Its distinguishing features are:

- A demographic boom, initially tied to a dramatic drop in infant mortality and thus in an as dramatic increase in the number of young people, which gave life to extremely energetic societies (youth predominated also in the political imagination, as the many Young Italy, Young Turks, Young Indonesians etc. are there to attest). Later on, however, also life expectancy started to increase, and modern societies acquired an important “aged” component, which, however, up to the 1960s, included people between 50 and 65 that today we would not define as old;
- An as rapid increase in education (which had been previously determined by religious affiliations), industrialization and urbanization;
- An apparently never-ending rapid economic growth, fueled also by the demographic boom and by the passage of many of those young people from rural to urban employment;
- The predominance of Europe and the West, where these processes had started, over continents that, like Asia, had been previously the seats of empire as or more powerful than European ones, or that, like Africa or Oceania, were, because of their environment and diseases, extremely sparsely populated (America had been

² I do believe that over the past four-five centuries, starting in the West, a new environment, if not a new socio-economic system, or model, started to develop. It was and is an environment favorable to a freer development of individual passions and interests (those of capitalists, who do exist, included) which encompass those aiming at what different people find worthwhile, profit-making included. This environment was and still is partly regulated by the “market” (that is, by private passions and interests), and partly by law and/or force, primarily that of the State and of proto-states of various forms (organized crime being one of them), but also by customs, power relations (gender-based ones first and foremost), prejudices, and culture. Also thanks to its interconnections with the transition from rural to urban societies, which so powerfully accelerated human history, and to those with the development of science and technology, the emergence of this environment coincided with an extraordinary productivity boom, and with an enormous improvement in human conditions. By virtue of the evident advantages it guaranteed and guarantees to both states and individuals, this environment, or model, is endowed with an very strong power of attraction, but it also generates deep contradictions which are *not* those traditionally associated with Capitalism and which I will discuss in this essay. Here I will just add that to call “Capitalism” such freer possibility to develop and pursue one’s own interests does not help and actually impair “seeing” (and seeing is the supreme virtue). Moreover, it pushes us to explain human history, open and unpredictable by definition, with a philosophy of history and with pseudo-concepts that delude us into believing that we have “understood” and/or “explained” history (including present history), when in fact we have just embraced a powerful and sophisticated plot theory. History, however, is moved by human beings and by their decisions. Deng Xiaoping’s choice to open China at the end of the 1970s, or that of so many women to make far less children than in the past, i.e. the choices that have changed and are changing the world, are precisely such: *choices*, big and public or small and personal, but always producing huge consequences, and *not* plans (or plots) concocted by Capitalism, financiers, Masons, the Vatican, the Elders of Zion, or the devil in his multiform incarnations. It is to define this ensemble of freer human interests, passions and choices, that is the society that emerged in the West and of which we are beginning to glimpse the crisis, that I use the term Modern. Obviously, such Modern had and still has many variants, the most important of which has been until now the social-communist one, that pretended to multiply its benefits by destroying the motor that produced them, replacing liberty and unpredictability with a by definition imitative planning. This is why it proved far less vital than the original model, with whose problems we are today called to come to term.

already conquered). Such predominance was also embodied by powerful European migratory movements fed by the demographic boom;

- The contrasted but overall rapid growth in the right and status of women, and the strengthening of their social, cultural, and eventually also political position;
- An extremely lively ideological production of transformative plans and utopias of various kinds, which pushes one to think that—contrary to what we used to believe—the 19th and 20th centuries, rather than previous ones, have been the real “utopic” centuries;
- A phenomenal state and empire-building wave that started in Europe, migrated to the Americas, returned to Europe and then conquered the world, thoroughly reorganizing it. This wave is still incarnated in hundreds of success stories, but has been embodied also by possibly thousands failed attempts. In almost every case, nationalist, socialist (and even anarchist) plans, and more often than not hybrid forms of these two main streaks, but also religion-inspired visions of various kinds, of which youth-dominated parties and associations were generally the carriers, played a crucial role. Africa is the last station reached by this train, which is possibly approaching its stop, even though flares of state-building are possibly to be expected also in South Asia and in the Middle East;
- The wars, categorical mass violence (that is violence targeting specific linguistic, religious, social etc. groups) and genocides that accompanied this ideologically-led state and empire-building wave.

If in Eastern Europe socialism’s collapse revived both state building and the categorical violence accompanying it in spite of conditions of demographic stagnation and economic difficulties (as the Yugoslav and the still ongoing post-Soviet wars are there to attest), in the Western half of the continent the exhaustion of the above mentioned processes, state and empire building included, is almost completed (even if the two remaining political unions, the United Kingdom and Spain, may reserve major surprises, and the E.U. is of course a state building attempt *in fieri*, which could indeed abort).

Also by virtue of U.S. policies and support, and of the last Western baby boom, the beginning of this exhaustion coincided with what we have rather mythically termed *les Trente glorieuses*, the decades of Western Europe’s economic “miracles” and seemingly continuous improvement, as well as of the last Western delusions of world domination, when neo-colonialism seemed to effectively replace direct control.

This period was rather brusquely terminated by:

- The rapid decline in the fertility rate, evidently tied to the improved conditions and lifestyle the Modern guarantees, and the as rapid aging of Western populations (which the end of conscription might be called to symbolize);
- The end of the internal, or intra-European rural-urban transfer;
- The as rapid proof that decolonization was indeed such. With hindsight wisdom one may claim that the event defining the post-war decades was decolonization, not the cold war, even though the former took place with the boundaries of the latter and was heavily conditioned by it;

- The migration of the demographic-economic motor of Western predominance to other continents, of which Deng's China has provided the most impressive example (even though the one-child policy launched together with the four modernizations will possibly undermine Chinese development much sooner than it would have been the case).

From this perspective, even though the 1990s are the turning point, things started to really change in the 1950s and 1960s, and many of these processes became clearly visible in the 1970s. It is therefore time to reflect upon these trends and the phenomena they let us perceive, which is what I will try to do in the following pages from a European perspective, being well aware that in the U.S., as in Canada, Australia and in the other societies created by European conquests and migrations, things are different and the crisis (still?) less acute, a fact that by and in itself signals the disintegration of the "West" category that I so freely employ because it was then indeed life-endowed.

At least in my opinion, however, the same trends are at work there too, as they will be in a not so distant future in all other continents, albeit in different ways and with different tempos.

1. The New World We Are Living in, its Paradoxes and its Diversity

Over the past two decades, the new world that emerged in the 1990s has been experiencing everywhere what looks like a growing, cumulative and transversal illiberal trend, linked to appeals to the "people," to identities, often to the past, and to demands for closed-door policies and for order.

Faced with such a strong and widespread trend, it is natural to ask which its common denominators are. The first consideration is that this trend does not appear to be in direct conflict with the popular vote and appeals made to the people, which are instead interwoven with it. Many of today's illiberal regimes and movements lay claim to popular and democratic legitimization, and in fact enjoy widespread electoral and popular support. What is opposed, what is experiencing a crisis, is thus not so much "democracy" but the liberal principles that have for so long been at its core in the West.

The second consideration is born out of another paradox: many a recurring explanation ties this illiberal trend to Capitalism, its crises, and the deepening of inequalities that they generate, resulting in all-things-considered reassuring conclusions: Capitalism is bad and in crisis, and it would be sufficient to fight against it, the evil forces defending it and the inequalities it causes, as it was done in the past, to get out of the present quagmires and go back to something similar to *les Trente glorieuses* of the European economic "miracles."

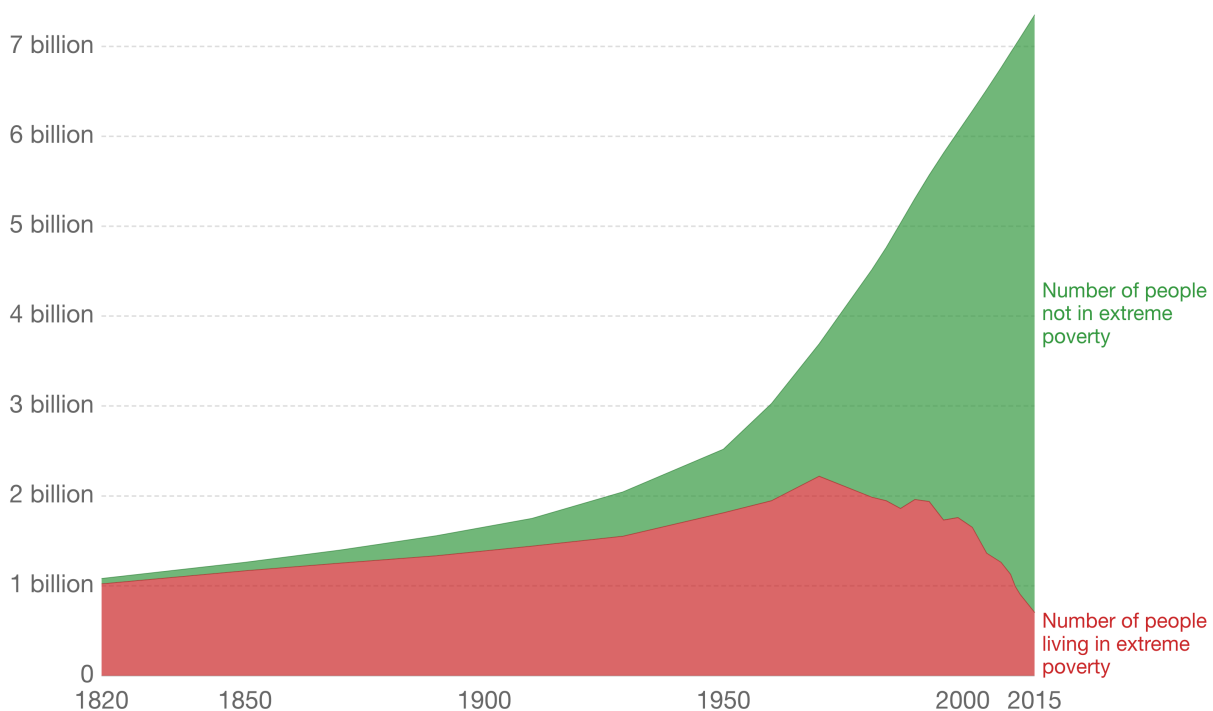
In fact, however, since the 1980s the world (even if not the West) entered into an extraordinary period of growth (and not in a crisis), which lifted billions of people out of extreme poverty and hundreds of million out of poverty and into the middle class, in Asia first and now also in Africa (see Table 1); on a global scale the so-called growth in inequality looks more like a reduction in the uniformity tied to extreme poverty (as Mao's and Deng's Chinas are there to attest); and the meager and far from uniform

variations in the Gini index lead one to question the reality of the growth of traditional inequality also in Western Europe. The situation seems here to have been rather dominated by a reduction in expectations, and by a general sense of loss status and *of anguish for the loss of a "future,"* which after 2008 has become real and lasting impoverishment only in a group of countries, like Italy (countries that have anyway benefited from that extraordinary period of global growth without which they would be today in a much worse situation).

Table 1.

World population living in extreme poverty, 1820-2015

Extreme poverty is defined as living at a consumption (or income) level below 1.90 "international \$" per day. International \$ are adjusted for price differences between countries and for price changes over time (inflation).



Source: World Poverty in absolute numbers - OWID based on World Bank (2016) and Bourguignon and Morrisson (2002)
OurWorldInData.org/extreme-poverty/ • CC BY-SA

As Branko Milanović's famous graph (Table 2.) suggests, we are living through a period marked by an extraordinary growth of non-Western middle-classes, and by an as rapid *relative* decline in the conditions of their much richer Western counterpart, a decline that has become *absolute* only (and up to now only for a time) in the former European socialist countries, and threatens to do so in the countries more seriously affected by the aging of their populations, such as Italy or Japan.

The undeniable growth in the fortunes of global elites has been taking place at rates lower than those of non-Western middle class incomes, and has in fact concerned an extremely tiny part of the population (top 3-4%). Global trends in social media have rendered the conditions and life-styles of these global elites much more visible than they were in the past ("the rich and the famous"), but the abyss in standards of living was probably always there. Rather, old elites (courts, royalties, high nobilities, other

traditional elites, financiers, etc.) were felt to be, and were, much more distant from average people than present-day “stars” of often commoner origins.

Table 2.



Even at a first glance, therefore, strong variations emerge in the social and economic realities underlying what superficially looks like a general “illiberal trend”. If one looks closer, such differences becomes even stronger: what seemed (and is perceived as) a general trend, therefore, actually consists of a varied and complex mix of different currents. The fact that they all point in the same direction, not only apparently but actually fueling one another, is an extremely worrying element for the liberal culture. However, it is counterbalanced by the fault lines and elements of fragility inevitably linked to such complexity.

In particular, it seems possible to distinguish at least five macro-areas with different dynamics and problems, all of them affected, one way or the other, by the West’s undeniable loss of rank, prestige and economic and political as well as diplomatic and military status (even though the power of attraction of Western lifestyles and standards of living remains very strong):

1. The Western major Modern, which must in its turn be subdivided into its Old and New World’s variants, following partially diverging paths (Latin America can be ascribed to the latter, but presents very specific features);
2. The former European minor Modern (the socialist bloc), divided into a central-eastern Europe which is more ethnically compact also because of its terrible 20th century history, and was Sovietized for less than two generations, and an eastern Europe Sovietized for a longer period (the Balkans presenting their own features);
3. A world once directly or indirectly dominated by the West and featuring ancient and/or relatively recent more or less solid states, which has been experiencing extremely rapidly changes, recalling those that affected the West first, but also

significantly different from them, China's modernization being unquestionably the most glaring example of these changes;

4. One entire continent, sub-Saharan Africa, characterized by an extraordinary mix of populations and languages. Here homogeneity is perhaps a chimera even as a unifying discourse, pluralism is perhaps a destiny, and modernization, now fully underway, has set in motion explosive dynamics (see table 12.);
5. Finally, the vast areas in which state consolidation has not succeeded or is experiencing a serious crisis, as in the Middle East or parts of northern Africa and the Horn, generating fears and a strong demand for order that both the images and the refugees fleeing those territories multiply.

As I stated in the introduction, I will deal here only with the crisis of the Western major Modern, and with the illiberal trends tied to it, and *particularly with its original, older European version*, whose crisis I am personally living through. In fact, European dynamics significantly differ from North American ones and are far more worrying. This is proved by the more acute demographic crisis; the comparatively greater loss of both cultural and political centrality; the fragility of European "confederal" institutions compared to American or Canadian federal ones; the significantly greater power of "populist" groups fueled by a more significant social and psychological as well as by an economic "crisis that has been such only in terms of the end of what seemed to be a constant and guaranteed improvements and was instead a relative, and temporary privilege, produced by a variety of factors.

But for a few, mostly Southern-European countries whose booms have been more recent and rapid, and whose crisis had been more sudden, it would be more proper to speak of an economic relative stagnation (growth in fact still goes on albeit at a much reduced pace). This stagnation is strictly correlated to demographic decline as well as to the remarkably fast aging of their population, and is therefore very difficult to reverse. It is, however, certainly amenable to rational governance.

Against this backdrop, even Trump's United States appears to be a much less worrying case, although it is probable that the dynamics sparked by his presidency may have serious, unpleasant consequences. Trump's "populism" won with a minority of votes against a weak candidate. Above all, the United States remain a demographically, scientifically, culturally (in spite of the many "racial" divides –to use a word one can read every day in the *NYTimes*, but that it would be impossible to use in Europe), and economically much more dynamic society than the European Union, as well as less fragmented in cultural term. However, the U.S. will not find it easy to abandon the absolute world primacy it enjoyed in the 20th century, and the repercussions of this "scaling down" will most probably prove at times very unpleasant, also at a cultural-psychological level, as happened in the equally dynamic, yet equally losing ground France of the 19th century.

European trends (Table no. 3) are unmistakable and Italian data (Tables nos. 4-6) are even more striking. Not casually, with her millions of often depressed old people, many of them living alone (1/3 of existing families, approx. 8 million, are mononuclear and mostly made up of one old person), and her relatively few young people navigating a difficult and hostile terrain, Italy is the countries where the populist, illiberal trends have proved strongest.

It's not just Italy, however. All over Western Europe “populist” groups, and ample sectors of the public opinion, long for a return to a better (especially in popular “memory”) past and to a “national” order, and see in this return to the past the solution to their problems.

Table 3.

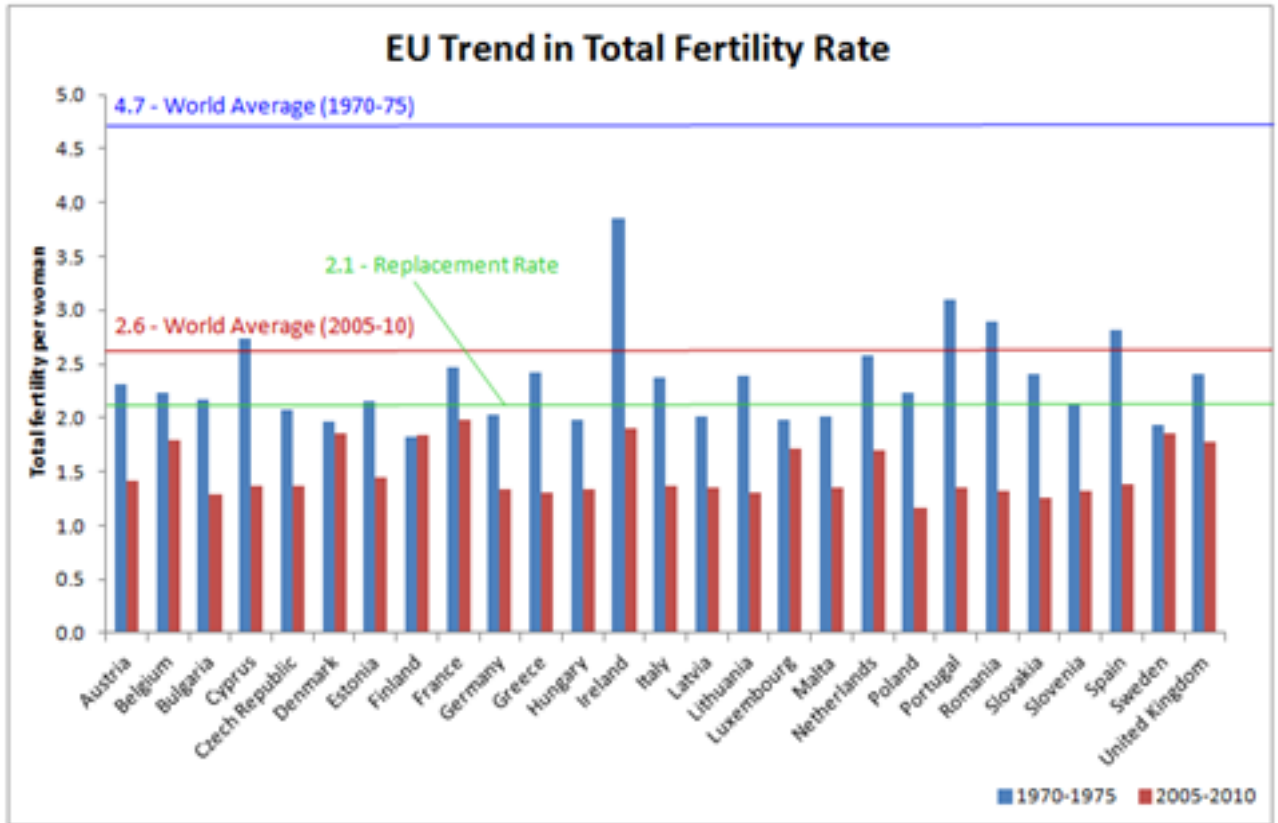
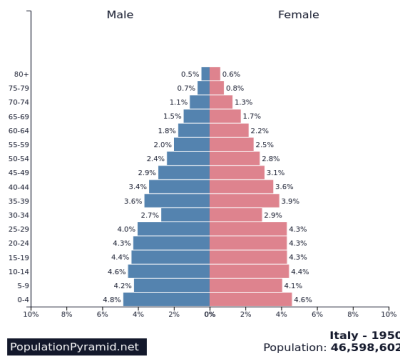


Table 4.

Italy Population Pyramid, 1950



This crisis has already structurally weakened the elite-population relationship and threatens the very existence of liberal and progressive democracy, rather than of

democracy *tout court*. Decades of relative stagnation compared to a world developing at high speed have undermined the authoritativeness of the values associated with the Western high model and the leaderships (the elites) representing them not only in the eyes of the denizens of booming countries. Important segments of the Western populations that originally enjoyed the advantages of that model, and now feel inexplicably and increasingly deprived of the benefits that it once seemed capable of guaranteeing, started to question their leaders first and foremost, but also the value of the model.

Table 5.

Italy Population Pyramid, 2017

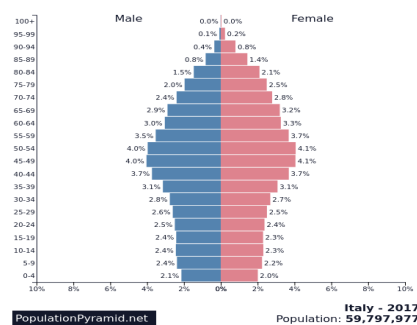
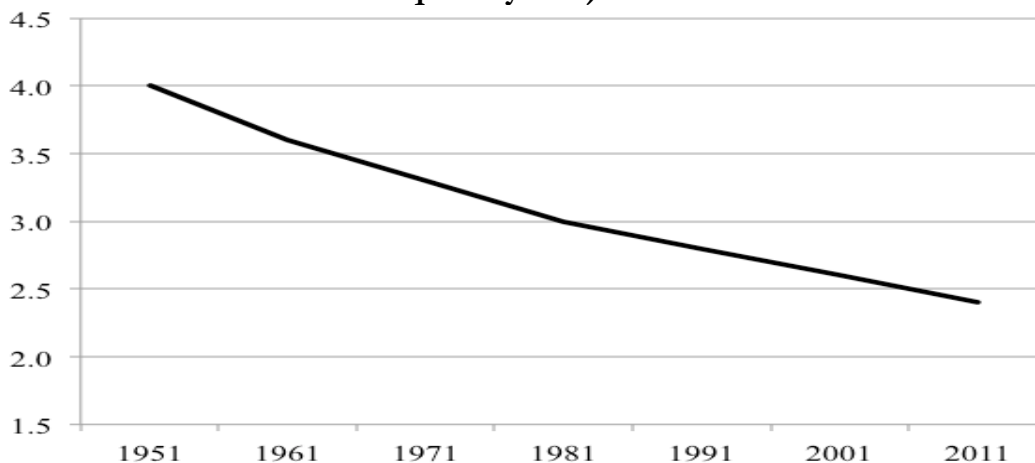


Table 6. Italy, Family Average Size, 1950-2011
(the decline continued in subsequent years)



The Western elites' situation is compounded by yet another factor. Up to 1991 all issues, even the most complex ones, found "simple" and all things considered always at least seemingly "correct" political answers. This was so because mistakes and loss produced by poor choices had little or no consequences since the fruits of development immediately compensated, and hid, their costs. Those answers thus were *really* "simple," legitimizing elites presiding over continuous improvements in spite of their many mistakes.

In these new times, instead, difficult questions require difficult and often unpopular solutions, breaking the link between representatives and those they represent. If they want to act responsibly, elites are often called to make complex choices that harm the immediate interests of the population in order to preserve its long term ones. The “people” thus feel cheated and are therefore cyclically attracted to politicians preaching simple answers that however involve rather quick retribution, and cause yet new disappointment.

2. The Crisis’s Long-Term Mechanisms and Dynamics. Its “Bipolar” Nature in the West³

The outward manifestations of the Western Modern’s crisis are clearly visible in Tables nos. 3-6, as well as in those that follow. The problem is how to interpret them. As I already remarked, the collapse of the minor, socialist variant of the Modern was quickly followed by the crisis the major Western one, which in 1991 seemed triumphant but which was already being undermined by structural weaknesses that were *not economic* in nature, as they were instead in its minor variant, which extinguished itself after two decades of stagnation.

In fact, the rapid and successful expansion of the Western Modern’s inner mechanism to Asia and later to Africa, which is living now through a demographic and economic boom capable of significantly increasing the wellbeing of its populations, proves *ad abundantiam* its strength, as well as its capacity for adaption. In other terms, in the Western case the crisis does not seem to depend on an inability of the “market core” to act as a driving force. On the contrary, after securing unprecedented living standards to Western citizens, markets started to work effectively also in very different conditions. *Rather, the crisis appears to be the consequences of this Modern’s very success.*

Since at least the 1960s, the analyses of the inner limits of this success and to growth have often focused on its consequences for the planet, and the reasons of its long-run instability, and also unsustainability, have been framed in ecological terms.⁴ *However, it seems possible to affirm that the Western system is not viable over the long term and tends to lead to illiberal impulses over the medium term (i.e. our times), also and perhaps especially by virtue of another kind of mechanism.*

This mechanism has become clearly visible over the past few decades, but it was possible to catch a glimpse of it much earlier in the countries in which the Western Modern took shape. Already in 1915, for example, a British political scientist, Sir Alfred Zimmern, observed that *modern states were actually industrialized and largely migratory democracies*, whose populations were destined to be composed of groups of increasingly diversified origin. *The unstated implication was that in a not so long run (from several decades to a couple of centuries since its inception) the Western Modern is unable to reproduce itself and*

³ What follows is mainly (but not solely) the translation of excerpts from *Il future contro*. I am grateful to Reset that supported it.

⁴ These considerations worked as incubators for “conservationist” cultures and movements that it is difficult to classify as conservative or progressive, but have at times represented important elements of the reaction to classical, progressive liberalism, and to its “open” ideals.

to continue to grow if not by absorbing human energy from areas socially organized along different, pre-modern lines that the Modern's own development has set in motion, but where conditions remain difficult and whose better informed and active young inhabitants feel the cultural and powerful call of better conditions.

The Modern's unsustainability is therefore tied to its *inability to fully reproduce within itself the human resources, that is the very energy, indispensable for its own survival and expansion*. The reasons for this demographic retreat, which occurs following a boom caused by the fall in infantile mortality and then by increased life expectancy, are not entirely clear, but data clearly show that the Western Modern sparks it even in the territories that import an adapted version of its mechanism. In any case, *these reasons seem to be somehow linked to the very changes in the direction of ampler freedoms and better social conditions that liberalism cherishes*: an increase in personal expectations, in the latitude for individual decisions and in the opportunities to be seized; a freer family structure; a more open mentality and culture etc. In countries whose development was unexpected and very fast (the “miracles” of post-WWII Europe come to mind), also the individual fear of losing the wellbeing and the freedom often so suddenly achieved did possibly count.

In particular, *it seems possible to argue that in passing from rural/ traditional societies to urban/ modern ones, a contradiction appears between the collective interest to have at least as many children as necessary for reproducing society as it is and the understandable and in any case irrepressible individual interest to live the best possible life*. Peasants had no pensions and knew they had to rely upon their children; urbanites may individually believe—because it is true at an individual level, at least in the short run—that their income will fall if they have children, and that their future will be anyway secured by retirement.

In any case, in the absence of continuous transfusions of human energy from the outside in the form of immigration, the Modern ends up running aground on a demographic decline that replaces young, mobile and dynamic societies with ones that, left to their own devices, are on a rapid way to stagnation, if not to extinction.

At first, these transfusions are relatively easy and relatively unproblematic, since rural areas more or less homogeneous, for instance in terms of language or religion, to the poles of attraction naturally represent their first source. Although it increases social tensions, immigration from such areas generally does not result in acute identity and “cultural” conflicts, capable of bonding with social ones and of escalating them (Central and Eastern Europe as well as other multilingual, mixed territories provide here the relevant exception, because their “alien” vis-à-vis the countryside cities experienced major problems since the very beginning).

As time goes by, however, the deepening of the center's demographic crisis, the depletion of the closest energy depots, and the arrival of the demographic boom in the “peripheries” result in these flows coming from further and further afield. This process has been going on, with ups and downs, since the end of the 19th century, and has again assumed mass proportions over the past 30 or so years. It has been reckoned that in 2015 there were about 250 million migrants and 65 million refugees in the world. In the United States those born abroad amounted in 2017 to about 14% of the population (the same percentage as for the period between 1880 and 1914) compared to 5% in 1970. In Europe figures are historically high with countries such as Italy that over just a few decades reversed their position from centres of emigration to immigration hubs.

Distance being often, even if not always, a synonym of greater linguistic, cultural and religious diversity, these migrations feed the widespread reproduction, under new conditions, of population mixing in terms of language, religion, and culture. We know that besides being generally unavoidable (but certainly amenable to different variants), diversity is the prime source of greater economic, social and cultural wealth. It also causes, however, greater resistance and conflict in areas of destination that—as a consequence of their own success—have expanded from the initial urban centers into regions, states and eventually continental macro-regions, as is the case with Western Europe. Moreover, as students of mixed territories like Central-Eastern Europe know all too well, mixing has been also capable of obstructing the path to liberal-democracy, generating powerful and unpleasant forces that were both “democratic” (that is based on appeals to the “people” and its will) and persecutory as far as the “aliens” are concerned.

3. Today’s Western (and especially European) Predicament

Current long-distance migrations present three particular aggravating factors:

- They take place in decades in which Islamic extremism, its ideology and its customs have been a powerful trigger of fear and mistrust also in sectors of the Western population that consider themselves progressive, but that precisely for this reason feel threatened by religious radicalism and, for instance, by its anti-women ideology;
- The fear and concern caused by rising differences have been increased by the presence, besides “economic” migrants, of displaced people and refugees coming from the areas in which state-building processes have at least temporarily failed. These people are the living symbol of the crises and conflicts Westerners fears, would like to be protected from and desire to see kept at bay. Their presence fuels the need and demands for order and authority, indirectly emphasizing the value of the state and the benefits that come from its presence, its power, and its ability to defend resident populations;
- The rapidly growing role of Africa is already giving and will give an ever increasing role to the “color line,” which in large parts of Europe is relatively new.

The tensions and conflicts diversity creates could be dealt with relatively easily (and still can be) as long as the process of change and economic growth, spurred also by these migrations, supports a general increase in living standards, as it happened during the mass transfer from agriculture to industry and services, and before the full unfolding of the internal demographic crisis.

Over time, however, there is a progressive deterioration – in the sense of the situation becoming more complicated and its management increasingly problematic – which is what the West, and Europe in particular, have been experiencing over the last decades.

This deterioration has occurred at the crossroad of various phenomena, six of which I deem of particular importance.

The first is represented by the already mentioned migration of power and dynamism outside of Europe, with a concomitant, visible and easily perceivable loss of status. Such loss has had a deep impact on the psychology of European elites as well as of its population at large, with an important depressive component. It also feeds aggressive moods in a however small percentage of a youth that feel increasingly “emarginated.”

The second factor is represented by specific, and very acute perception of loss of status felt by the male section of the population (especially but not solely in the West), whose traditional position of predominance has deteriorated in but a few decades. The general background of resentment this generates must not be underestimated, also because it is possibly and paradoxically shared by women who witnessed the collapse of their way of life, and thus the apparent degrading of their own life experience.

The exhaustion of the once seemingly everlasting boom of productivity caused by the rapid transfer of labor from rural to urban employment is the third, crucial factor. Of course, scientific and technological progress still represents an important source of productivity gains, but it is not as secure, stable, and almost automatic as that transfer was.

The fourth factor is the crisis of the Western redistributive state (and of the welfare systems associated to it), a crisis to which the above-mentioned elements powerfully contribute. This redistributive state gave rise to expectations it is no longer able to meet, also through official declarations, such as constitutional norms, that lay at the foundations of its legitimacy.⁵ Its crisis is compounded by the reduced possibility to fully use “Keynesian” tools. Generally, the golden days of deficit spending in the West, associated with low levels of indebtedness and high inflation, have gone, and in many countries public debt has been already pushed to the limit in the effort to counterbalance the new difficulties when they first manifested themselves, starting with the 1970s.

All of the above has been exacerbated by the fifth factor, represented by a sharp aging of the population (see Table no. 7 below), which reaches its peaks in countries like Japan, Italy, Germany, Greece, and Portugal (in other such as Russia, low male life expectancy has a moderating effect) but clearly affects—albeit with different intensity—the whole Western world. *It will, however, most probably affect the whole globe, starting with China, in but a few decades* (see Tables nos. 8-10).

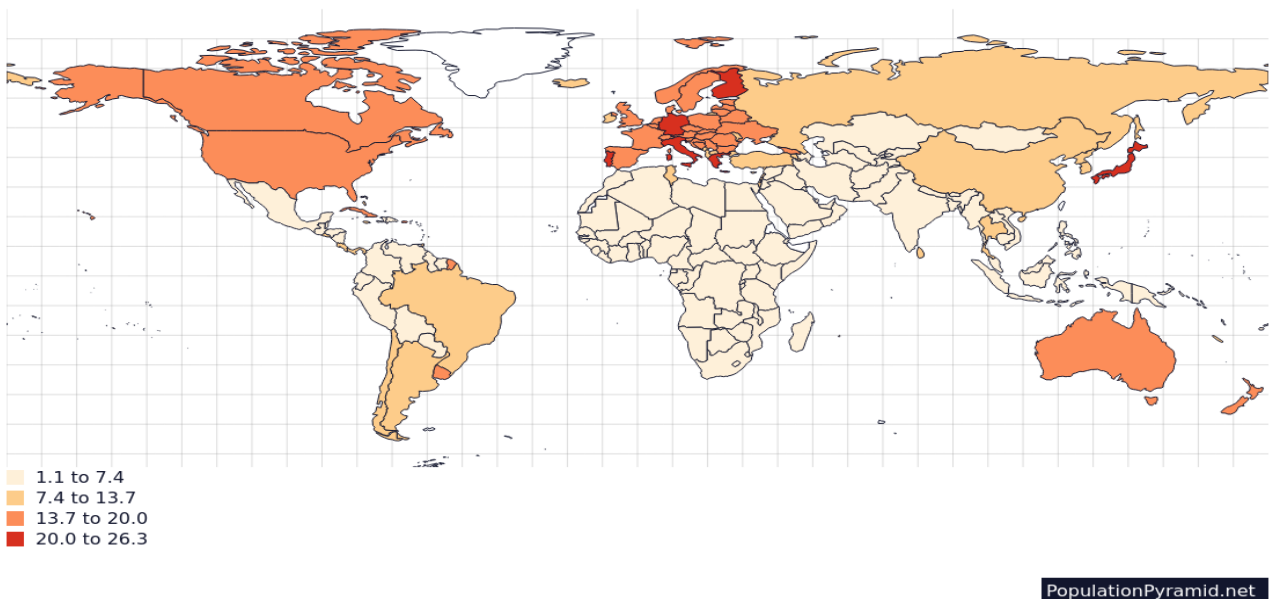
Increasingly large and diverse migrations are thus affecting populations that, at least in Europe, have become much older and more settled. These aging populations are particularly sensitive to change, and especially to changes questioning their education, “memory,” and life styles, the more so if such changes are not compensated by noticeable increases in the standard of living. Its male subsection is particularly hit by the rapid evolution in gender roles (but so is at least a segment of the female one), and the already aged and increasingly lonelier (if today’s older Europeans can often count on their sons and daughters, this is not going to be the case for many of today’s middle aged people) component of these populations feeds a new cultural, political, and above all psychological atmosphere that once young societies simply did not know.

⁵ By the way, the very existence of a powerful welfare state creates additional problems to immigration, since immigrants can be seen as competitors for its diminishing resources. At least from this perspectives, migrations were less problematic *before* welfare systems were built.

Table 7. Population ages 65 and above (% of the total), 2015

2015

Population ages 65 and above (% of total)



More generally, aged and ageing societies are less open to change, and recent decades have been decades of extremely swift and radical changes, which immigrants do somewhere—but far from everywhere—personify. The collapse of religious culture, the new lifestyles, or, more simply, computers, smart phones, and the rapid advance of the “knowledge” needed to navigate modern societies—which of course this knowledge makes much better places to live in for those able to acquire and manage it (as not many old people can do)—are more than enough to trigger worried and negative reactions. In a nutshell, too much change (most of it positive, but not immediately usable) has hit societies that are becoming more and more past-oriented. Illiberal reactions can thus proliferate even in societies, like the Polish one, that barely knows immigration (that however plays a crucial role when present) and have vastly benefited from the changes brought about by recent decades.

The sixth and final factor is *the peculiar type of crisis the new demographic situation recently started to generate within developed countries*, of which I began to be aware while living in Moscow in the 1990s. I propose to call this crisis “bipolar” because it takes on very different aspects in the various areas of which also developed countries are composed. Besides attracting new immigrants from faraway lands, some of these areas, especially big, powerful cities such as New York or Paris, London or Milan, Moscow or Kyiv, continue to attract also the best talents of the by now depleted regions surrounding them and of the countries they are situated in. To stay in Italy, Milan continues to drain the best talents away also from Calabria, Roma, or Piedmont, besides attracting people from afar. Actually their power of attraction vis-à-vis marginally developed areas is increased by the very demographic/human energy depletion of the latter, where active people do not wish to live.

The systematic emigration from Calabria, or other Southern Italian regions, of the best and most active part of their youth was certainly to be listed among the main causes of their continuing trailing the North despite their unquestionable and great progress.⁶ However, up to 20-30 years ago those regions produced enough human energy to keep moving forward. Emigration did not make them feel to be left behind, emarginated, or sacrificed to the interests of the poles of attraction, which actually showed also a benign outlook, fed by money flows and returning people.

Today, the fact that the only child goes away, that the best leave and few remain, that the local tissue becomes necrotic, can and does generate powerful waves of resentment linked to the absence of a future. In 1990s Russia this was particularly evident: the countryside and small towns were increasingly desolate and demographically depleted, but Moscow (and, albeit in much lesser term, other big cities) started to shine with energy, lit up—as it was—by the hyper-concentration of the best human resources of the countries, which moved there in increasing proportions.

Glowing centers are thus increasingly surrounded by darkening peripheries also in within developed countries. And these peripheries are now prone to directly link their own decline to the shining of the former: they feel abandoned, and are indeed left behind much more than “underdeveloped” territories were in the high days of growth and progress. This bipolarity—bright (at least for a while) poles versus necrotizing territories—feeds therefore the growth of the discontent and resentment of the latter, and the desire to go back to a much more lively and better past.⁷

Today’s Western societies, European ones in the first place, are thus a natural breeding ground for illiberal tendencies and for claims about the need to somehow return to the past as well as to previous “identities,” a return which is of course impossible but that—precisely for this reason—can feed frustration. In a period of decreasing expectations and loss of centrality and status, once confident and dominant societies have shown a perhaps natural tendency to react by facing real problems with an instinctive, but deeply wrong answer, that of “me first” (the Salvini’s “Italians first” or Trump’s “America first”), of which it is easy to discern the appeal.

This answer should not, therefore, be judged and addressed from a moral perspective, as one could of course easily do. It should instead be analyzed and understood, explaining why this answer is very wrong also from the point of view of the interests of local inhabitants. Moreover, the fears and insecurity that motivate such reaction must be faced knowing that these societies can indeed *choose* from a range of options that go from Japanese isolationism to the very qualified Canadian openness, options of which it is worth learning the cost and the final outcomes.

⁶ I thank my companion, Gia Caglioti, for pointing out the importance of this phenomenon to me.

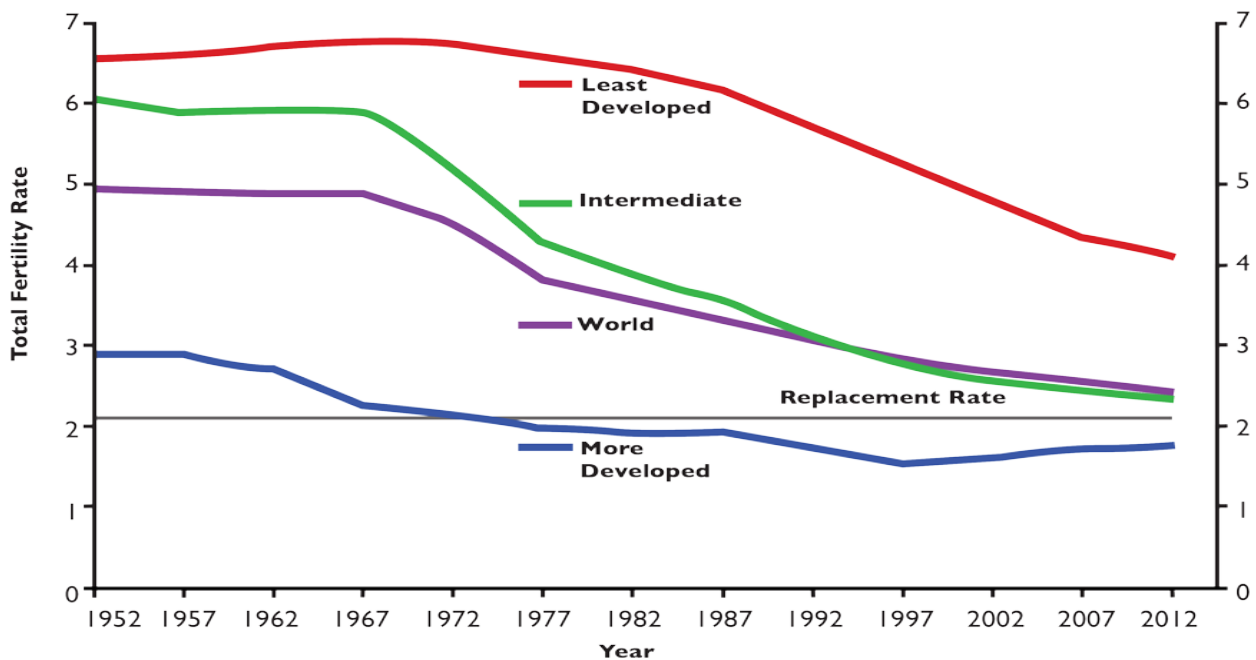
⁷ Ivan Krastev recently made a similar, yet different point, discussing Eastern Europe’s present predicament in “How liberalism became ‘the god that failed’ in eastern Europe,” *The Guardian*, October 24, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/24/western-liberalism-failed-post-communist-eastern-europe?fbclid=IwAR2qbYm8CIPfsRCxVDhUOgBevMqV2MxnqD80sVfTsEUdz_Dl_7B6xxTOQr0.

In other words, welcoming the energy that is now available and doing so in an intelligent manner, hence reducing to a minimum the inevitable tensions and maximizing the great benefits it can bring, is *not* a predetermined outcome. Wrong choices are a real possibility. The risk of feeding conflicts as well as mass, unpalatable reactions to change and diversity is there, as is that of anticipating the entropy inscribed in the code of the Modern, by accelerating its tempo. In this perspective, the apparent vitality of Italian identity populism as well as the fierce determination of Japan's isolationism seem to conceal a powerful death wish. The West's current situation thus requires a great and difficult self-pedagogic effort in rationality, with uncertain results, to contrast a situation that spontaneously produces unpleasant phenomena.

As time goes by, i.e. over the long term, our present predicament will indeed loosen up, but will possibly do it in entropic terms, that is in conditions of a general drop in vitality, as the factors that contribute to current illiberal trends, but also to the viability of mature societies, will meet a similar destiny. For instance, ongoing trends (Tables nos. 8-11) clearly indicate that over a few decades, the number of countries with demographic dynamics capable of sustaining massive migrations will be drastically reduced.

Table 8.

Figure 1: Total Fertility Rates by Level of Development¹



This is so because, due to its already recalled qualities and capabilities to offer a freer and better life, the socio-economic model at the basis of the Modern does not only attract immigrants to its cities. It also spreads in the areas that are now the source of immigration, resulting, over time, in the drying up of these sources. *The great transfer of people and therefore of energy, towards the world's most advanced centres is destined in the future to be seen as the extraordinary, and temporary, privilege it really is.*

As Table 11, below, shows, in only 20 years from now, humankind will *in general* reproduce itself at an almost stable rate and the *extraordinary* “age of growth” started approximately three centuries ago will be more or less over (even though it is of course

possible to imagine events unleashing the mass movement of a however more or less stable human population). The possibility to avail oneself of immigration will then increasingly be the privilege of those who will have, and had in the past, the intelligence and the ability to take advantage of, and open themselves to it in the best possible way.

Table 9.

World Population Pyramid, 1950

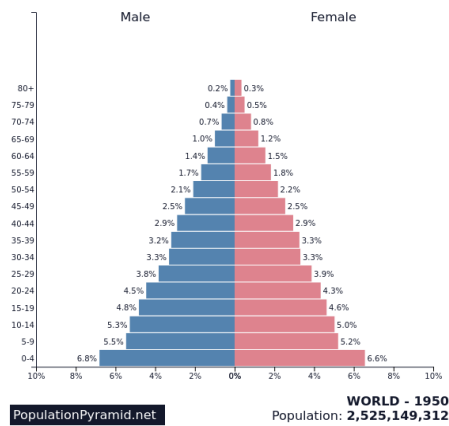


Table 10.

World Population Pyramid, 2019

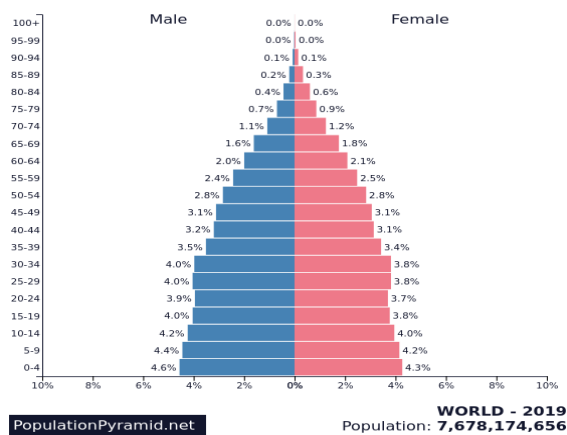
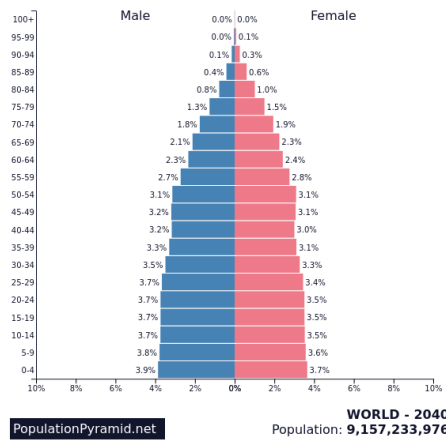


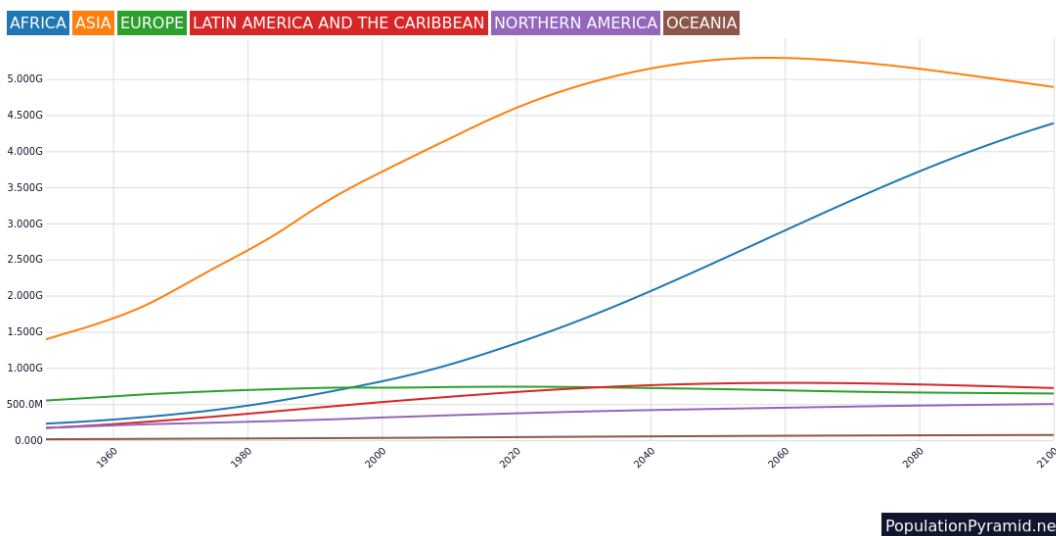
Table 11.

World Population Pyramid, 2040



However, over the medium-term, that is in the times we are currently living in, the West is called upon to address the issue of the encounter between a local ageing population and migrations coming from distant places in conditions of probably growing economic difficulties, “difficulties” that will still and rightly be seen as enormous privileges by perspective immigrants. In fact, Table 12 illustrates a revolution: when I was born, Africa had approximately 50% of Europe’s population. By the time of my “statistical” death, it will have almost four times as many inhabitants, and by the end of the present century as many as nine.

Table 12.
Population projections (1950-2100)



Conclusions

The essence of the Western crisis can be summed in a few words: The Modern is not viable. It was not viable in the short-term in its socialist version, which collapsed over the course of a few decades due to the irrationality of its ideologically-generated socio-economic structure. And, at least in its present form, it is not viable in the long run also in the version one can identify with the Western development model, based on openness and markets, which has been the Modern's most successful variant, one to which we owe an era of amazing development.

This unviability is caused by individual decisions and life styles deriving from the greatly improved conditions of life that the Modern guarantees, and starts to manifest itself in the societies where the Modern was begot and had therefore more time to develop, namely in the West, and particularly in Europe. It seems, however, reasonable to surmise that, as time goes by, it will extend to all the areas and societies where the Modern penetrates.

Among the many negative phenomena (psychological ones included) accompanying the passage from fast developing societies to stagnant ones (if left to their own devices and deprived of a however conflict-ridden migrations), are the evident difficulties of liberal-democracy. In particular, the development of the latter seems to have been somehow premised on an ever-growing betterment in standards of living and on the albeit conflictual fulfillment of ever-growing expectations, which lay at the foundations of the pact between expanding elites and populations. Once this pact proves untenable, it starts to crumble, and democracy seems to move toward demagoguery ("populism"), as it often happened in pre-modern societies.

In this paper I tried to deal with some of the causes and the consequences of these processes, focusing on Western societies. An as crucial question is the existence of factors and forces capable of contrasting these causes and consequences, and of policies that, building upon the former, can help us reverse the present "illiberal trend," or at least to stem it. As to those factors and forces, reason and rationality, in spite of their apparent and from some points of view real weakness, still represent our most powerful ally. So are science and technological progress, and above all the capacity to look at and see reality for what it is. The strong, positive elements of globalization (delocalization and migrations too have their bright sides), that allowed Western society to fend off, up to now, the worst outcomes of their crisis, are also important and must be understood and used as best as possible, taking of course into account also globalization's and change's capacity for disruption. As important is the human, cultural, and material capital accumulated in Western societies, and renewed in their albeit shrinking younger generations, which should be put at the center of attention.

It is not much, but it is not little, especially in the presence of the ability to fuse a keen analysis and awareness of reality, and of its "dark" trends, with such positive elements so as to build a rational and coherent discourse, whose lack is, perhaps, present day liberalism's greater weakness. In order to do so old theories about what constituted a "just world" and on how it was possible to conquer it, or at least a more just one, must be abandoned because the realities that fed them and made them believable simply do not exist anymore. Good ideas, and ideals, must be preserved of course, but also given a

new substance and new aims—derived from an analysis of the crisis of the Modern and the need to stem it—must be set.

To make but two examples, *the whole structure of our states and of public spending*, built over decades of seemingly uninterrupted growth and to address such growth's needs and problems, must be *radically and rationally reconsidered*. And youth and families of all the many kinds modern humans think possible and prefer (let's remember that in some countries the *majority* of infants is already born out of wedlock and that the percentage is growing: in the U.S.A. and Western Europe it recently passed the 40% mark, but in Chile, Iceland or Mexico is fast approaching 70%) must be given a priority they presently do not have.