Can the international stage still unite the human race?

Challenges
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THE EDITORIALIST - DENIS KESSLER

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, we have witnessed a universal movement of global fragmentation. At that time, entire sections of our planet were not integrated within the global economy – there was the USSR, but there were also China, Vietnam, India, and so on. To paraphrase Braudel, countries have joined the world economy, in some cases brutally and in others progressively. For some countries, this has happened after long negotiations and subject to certain conditions, while for others the transition has been more rapid. At the same time, we have seen the emergence of regional organisations marked by a desire to unite the destinies, or at least the economies, of their component countries. This is true of Europe, the North American continent with Alena, the South American continent with Mercosur, and Asia with APEC and ASEAN.

The idea underpinning the last thirty years was that the movement to standardize the world would continue for technological reasons (the omnipresent network), for economic reasons (mutual trade benefits) and for financial reasons (optimal resource allocation). This historic globalization movement has been more or less supported by various governments, regardless of their political colours, by international institutions such as the IMF, the OECD, the WTO and the European Commission, and by political forums such as the G7, the G8 and the G20. We have long thought that this movement was irrepressible and irreversible. It had to continue, and the international movements of people, capital, goods, services and technology would grow stronger, with something for everyone and everyone working within the system. The process of convergence was under way, between countries, between major world regions, at all levels and in an increasing number of fields. Countries were going to abandon their sovereignty, whether they wanted to or not, so that common rules could be laid down for everyone, applied by everyone, and followed by everyone. In this slightly demiurgical dream, the world economy would eventually be subjected to universal laws, regulated by supranational bodies ensuring peace and economic prosperity.
The wake up call is difficult and painful. The crisis that has been underway since 2007 is calling into question this trend towards regulated globalization, and global regulation. Everywhere, *urbi et orbi*, we are seeing reactions opposed to this trend. We knew it would happen: after four years of crisis, we are seeing the shoots of protectionism, populism and patriotism rise and flourish. This is not surprising when you consider that many politicians have demonized Europeanization and globalization, which are easy scapegoats for national problems. History shows that, systematically after years of difficulty, the same flowers grow in the same compost. Populism is already deep-rooted, and, as can be seen through the analysis of recent elections around the world, protectionism is latent and should become patent, while patriotism – bad patriotism that is – is beginning to flap like flags in a strong wind. Renationalisation is already underway, in speeches and then progressively in practice. This movement, once it has been launched, can only spur itself on, with everyone using the behaviour of others to justify their own dubious actions.

When the crisis should have pushed all the problems of the world economy to the fore, and paved the way towards coordination, harmonization and unification, here and there we are seeing affirmations of sovereignty, the search for national solutions, and criticism of international options. The time for scapegoats has well and truly arrived, and globalization, as well as everything that comes with it, is fully exposed to trial by public opinion. We know that, historically, national reflexes have accentuated crises – as in the 1930s – and that such reflexes have often degenerated. There is a fine line between good patriotism and bad patriotism. We know that national selfishness and isolationism are dangerous in the long run, if not suicidal.

The regional alliances are at the centre of this struggle between the forces of accretion and disintegration, which, on the one hand are pushing them to consolidate, and on the other are threatening to sweep them away. The Eurozone is at the crossroads between the risk of a breakup and projects to strengthen the political and budgetary union. From an economic, social and political point of view, the ends of crises are more difficult to manage than the beginnings. The mixture of exasperation and hopelessness, of revolt and resignation, is often incendiary and sometimes even explodes. Without a precise vision of the exit from the crisis, without the leadership to implement the appropriate measures, without the ability to train in order to avoid a widespread attitude of ‘every man for himself’, we are going to enter a long period of global re-fragmentation that will progressively deprive us of the benefits and advantages we have drawn from openness, exchange and peace.