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PEACE? PROSPERITY? PRINCIPLE? SECURING WHAT PURPOSE?

— Janice Gross Stein

Not for the first time, the West is going through a full-blown identity crisis. All over the developed democratic world, people are asking: “Who are we?” and “What do we stand for?” A fierce controversy about free speech is roiling university campuses from Budapest to Berkeley. An angry politics of exclusion, given voice by populist leaders, is generating renewed discussion of who’s in and who’s out. Evidence is less and less important as charges of racism, bigotry, fake news, and political correctness clog social media.

Leaders no longer agree on where “the West” begins and where it ends. Is the West a function of geography, or is it a core set of values that can be held by anyone living anywhere? If it is a shared set of values, then Delhi can be in the West and Mississippi can be outside of it. And if it is a shared set of values, how do we differentiate what is universal from what is “Western”?

This crisis of identity is amplified by four decades of global capitalism that has created unprecedented growth in many parts of the world, yet has led to deep inequality within democratic developed societies. These growing social and economic inequalities are not compatible with civil democracies. Liberal democracies depend on thriving middle classes to support policies that redistribute income and sustain democratic practices.

The impact of turmoil at home has been exacerbated by an unforgiving world. War without end, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq, has led to deep skepticism about a “Western” vocation to reshape societies that are very different and far away. This skepticism runs so deep because the United States and its allies have expended blood

and treasure, but they have failed to stabilize the societies where they intervened. Turning away has not succeeded either. The “West” ignored the brutal killings in Syria, but could not ignore the refugees who knocked on Europe’s doors as they fled in desperation. A light footprint, a heavy footprint, and no footprint at all – none of it has worked.

Dispirited by failure, the leaders of the developed democracies have mostly retreated. Those who still speak loudly talk of putting their own countries first and of limiting the immigrants who can come in. Leaders in Hungary and Serbia, Britain and the United States speak with this voice. Others quietly make deals to restrict the immigrants who reach their borders, strengthen their security forces, and say very little. Leaders who speak openly for rights, for openness, and for civility are few and far between. Canada is fortunate to have a prime minister who does speak openly for what we have come to think of as liberal democratic values. For the rest, it seems today as if “the West” stands for nothing but enriching and protecting itself.

But this is not the first such moment in the history of the developed democracies. Turmoil at home inevitably spills over into foreign policy, because leaders who cannot forge a consensus at home are unable to speak with authority abroad. Europe went through this kind of turmoil in the 1930s when leaders stood for too little for too long. The United States went through soul-searching in the wake of the Vietnam War and Watergate, when trust in public institutions declined and the foundations of democracy were shaken.

European and American democracies survived and recovered. Leaders forged a new consensus each time — one that was appropriate for the times they

were living in. They created new institutions and found their voice again. Developed democracies thrive not only when they are more equal at home, but also when their leaders can articulate a shared purpose shaped by values that reach across the fault lines of society. They succeed when their leaders have an inclusive vision of who “we” are and the goals that we have in common.

The challenge for the leaders of developed democracies is to find that vision at a time when our societies are divided and our media are fragmented. We are only at the beginning of a technological revolution that will tailor services to ever-smaller communities and change the nature of work. Our economies will become more specialized and our societies more fragmented.

Leaders of developed democratic states must certainly work hard to neutralize new kinds of security threats. Miniaturization is creating new, distributed challenges that will be tough to meet.

The spread of nuclear weapons threatens everyone. Leaders must also prevent the disruption of democratic elections in the digital age.

But they must do more. They need to tell us how democracies can enhance equality and freedom, rights and responsibilities, peace and security, openness and inclusion, and dignity and civility not only for ourselves but for the global society in which we live.

If they do not, they fail us all.

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