

Liberal Elite Still Luring Us Towards the Abyss

We have so little time, but still the old guard wants to block any possible path to salvation, writes Jonathan Cook.

By [JonathanCook](#)

[Jonathan-Cook.net](#)



A group of 30 respected intellectuals, writers and historians has published a manifesto bemoaning the imminent collapse of Europe and its supposed Enlightenment values of liberalism and rationalism. The idea of Europe, they warn, “is falling apart before our eyes,” as Britain prepares for Brexit and “populist and nationalist” parties look poised to make sweeping gains in elections across the continent.

The [short manifesto](#) has been published in the liberal elite’s European house journals, newspapers such as the *Guardian*. “We must now fight for the idea of Europe or perish beneath the waves of populism,” their document reads. Failure means “resentment, hatred and their cortege of sad passions will surround and submerge us.”

Unless the tide can be turned, elections across the European Union will be “the most calamitous that we have ever known: victory for the wreckers; disgrace for those who still believe in the legacy of Erasmus, Dante, Goethe, and Comenius; disdain for intelligence and culture; explosions of xenophobia and antisemitism; disaster.”

The manifesto was penned by Bernard-Henri Levy, the French philosopher and devotee of Alexis de Tocqueville, a theorist

of classical liberalism. Its signatories include novelists Ian McEwan, Milan Kundera and Salman Rushdie; the historian Simon Shama; and Nobel prize laureates Svetlana Alexievitch, Herta Müller, Orhan Pamuk and Elfriede Jelinek.

Though unnamed, their European political heroes appear to be Emmanuel Macron of France, currently trying to crush the popular, anti-austerity protests of the Yellow Vests, and German chancellor Angela Merkel, manning the barricades for the liberal elite against a resurgence of the nationalist right in Germany.

Let us set aside, on this occasion, the strange irony that several of the manifesto's signatories – not least Henri-Levy himself – have a well-known passion for Israel, a state that has always rejected the universal principles ostensibly embodied in liberal ideology and that instead openly espouses the kind of ethnic nationalism that nearly tore Europe apart in two world wars last century.

Instead let us focus on their claim that “populism and nationalism” are on the verge of slaying Europe's liberal democratic tradition and the values held dearest by this distinguished group. Their hope presumably is that their manifesto will serve as a wake-up call before things take an irreversible turn for the worse.

Liberalism's Collapse

In one sense, their diagnosis is correct: Europe and the liberal tradition are coming apart at the seams. But not because, as they strongly imply, European politicians are pandering to the basest instincts of a mindless rabble – the ordinary people they have so little faith in. Rather, it is

because a long experiment in liberalism has finally run its course. Liberalism has patently failed – and failed catastrophically.

These intellectuals are standing, like the rest of us, on a precipice from which we are about to jump or topple. But the abyss has not opened up, as they suppose, because liberalism is being rejected. Rather, the abyss is the inevitable outcome of this shrinking elite's continuing promotion – against all rational evidence – of liberalism as a solution to our current predicament. It is the continuing transformation of a deeply flawed ideology into a religion. It is idol worship of a value system hellbent on destroying us.

Liberalism, like most ideologies, has an upside. Its respect for the individual and his freedoms, its interest in nurturing human creativity, and its promotion of universal values and human rights over tribal attachment have had some positive consequences.

But liberal ideology has been very effective at hiding its dark side – or more accurately, at persuading us that this dark side is the consequence of liberalism's abandonment rather than inherent to the liberal's political project.

The loss of traditional social bonds – tribal, sectarian, geographic – has left people today more lonely, more isolated than was true of any previous human society. We may pay lip service to universal values, but in our atomized communities, we feel adrift, abandoned and angry.

Humanitarian Resource Grabs

The liberal's professed concern for others' welfare and their rights has, in reality, provided cynical cover for a series of ever-more transparent resource grabs. The parading of liberalism's humanitarian credentials has entitled our elites to leave a trail of carnage and wreckage in their wake in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and soon, it seems, in Venezuela. We have killed with our kindness and then stolen our victims' inheritance.

Unfettered individual creativity may have fostered some great – if fetishized – art, as well as rapid mechanical and technological developments. But it has also encouraged unbridled competition in every sphere of life, whether beneficial to humankind or not, and however wasteful of resources.

At its worst, it has unleashed quite literally an arms race, one that – because of a mix of our unconstrained creativity, our godlessness and the economic logic of the military-industrial complex – culminated in the development of nuclear weapons. We have now devised the most complete and horrific ways imaginable to kill each other. We can commit genocide on a global scale.

Meanwhile, the absolute prioritizing of the individual has sanctioned a pathological self-absorption, a selfishness that has provided fertile ground not only for capitalism, materialism and consumerism but for the fusing of all of them into a turbo-charged neoliberalism. That has entitled a tiny elite to amass and squirrel away most of the planet's wealth out of reach of the rest of humanity.

Worst of all, our rampant creativity, our self-regard and our competitiveness have blinded us to all things bigger and smaller than ourselves. We lack an emotional and spiritual connection to our planet, to other animals, to future generations, to the chaotic harmony of our universe. What we cannot understand or control, we ignore or mock.

And so, the liberal impulse has driven us to the brink of extinguishing our species and possibly all life on our planet. Our drive to asset-strip, to hoard resources for personal gain, to plunder nature's riches without respect to the consequences is so overwhelming, so compulsive that the planet will have to find a way to rebalance itself. And if we carry on, that new balance – what we limply term “climate change” – will necessitate that we are stripped from the planet.

Dangerous Arrogance

One can plausibly argue that humans have been on this suicidal path for some time. Competition, creativity, selfishness predate liberalism, after all. But liberalism removed the last restraints, it crushed any opposing sentiment as irrational, as uncivilized, as primitive.

Liberalism isn't the cause of our predicament. It is the nadir of a dangerous arrogance we as a species have been indulging for too long, where the individual's good trumps any collective good, defined in the widest possible sense.

The liberal reveres his small, partial field of knowledge and expertise, eclipsing ancient and future wisdoms, those rooted in natural cycles, the seasons and a wonder at the ineffable and unknowable. The liberal's relentless and

exclusive focus is on “progress,” growth, accumulation.

What is needed to save us is radical change. Not tinkering, not reform, but an entirely new vision that removes the individual and his personal gratification from the center of our social organization.

This is impossible to contemplate for the elites who think more liberalism, not less, is the solution. Anyone departing from their prescriptions, anyone who aspires to be more than a technocrat correcting minor defects in the status quo, is presented as a menace. Despite the modesty of their proposals, Jeremy Corbyn in the U.K. and Bernie Sanders in the U.S. have been reviled by a media, political and intellectual elite heavily invested in blindly pursuing the path to self-destruction.

Status-quo Cheerleaders

As a result, we now have three clear political trends.

The first is the status-quo cheerleaders like the European writers of liberalism’s latest – last? – manifesto. With every utterance they prove how irrelevant they have become, how incapable they are of supplying answers to the question of where we must head next. They adamantly refuse both to look inwards to see where liberalism went wrong and to look outwards to consider how we might extricate ourselves.

Irresponsibly, these guardians of the status quo lump together the second and third trends in the futile hope of preserving their grip on power. Both trends are derided indiscriminately as “populism,” as the politics of envy, the politics of the mob. These two fundamentally opposed,

alternative trends are treated as indistinguishable.

This will not save liberalism, but it will assist in promoting the much worse of the two alternatives.

Those among the elites who understand that liberalism has had its day are exploiting the old ideology of grab-it-for-yourself capitalism while deflecting attention from their greed and the maintenance of their privilege by sowing discord and insinuating dark threats.

The criticisms of the liberal elite made by the ethnic nationalists sound persuasive because they are rooted in truths about liberalism's failure. But as critics, they are disingenuous. They have no solutions apart from their own personal advancement in the existing, failed, self-sabotaging system.

The new authoritarians are reverting to old, trusted models of xenophobic nationalism, scapegoating others to shore up their own power. They are ditching the ostentatious, conscience-salving sensitivities of the liberal so that they can continue plundering with heady abandon. If the ship is going down, then they will be gorging on the buffet till the waters reach the dining-hall ceiling.

Where Hope Can Reside

The third trend is the only place where hope can reside. This trend – what I have previously ascribed to a group I call the “dissenters” – understands that radical new thinking is required. But given that this group is being actively crushed by the old liberal elite and the new authoritarians, it has little public and political space to

explore its ideas, to experiment, to collaborate, as it urgently needs to.

Social media provides a potentially vital platform to begin critiquing the old, failed system, to raise awareness of what has gone wrong, to contemplate and share radical new ideas, and to mobilize. But the liberals and authoritarians understand this as threat to their own privilege and, under a confected hysteria about “fake news,” are rapidly working to snuff out even this small space.

We have so little time, but still the old guard wants to block any possible path to salvation – even as seas filled with plastic start to rise, as insect populations disappear across the globe, and as the planet prepares to cough us out like a lump of infected mucus.

We must not be hoodwinked by these posturing, manifesto-spouting liberals: the philosophers, historians and writers – the public relations wing – of our suicidal status quo. They did not warn us of the beast lying cradled in our midst. They failed to see the danger looming, and their narcissism blinds them still.

We should have no use for the guardians of the old, those who held our hands, who shone a light along a path that has led to the brink of our own extinction. We need to discard them, to close our ears to their siren song.

There are small voices struggling to be heard above the roar of the dying liberal elites and the trumpeting of the new authoritarians. They need to be listened to, to be helped to share and collaborate, to offer us their visions of a different world. One where the individual is no longer king.

Where we learn some modesty and humility – and how to love in our infinitely small corner of the universe.

Jonathan Cook is a freelance journalist based in Nazareth.

He blogs at <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/>.

Wall Street, Banks and Angry Citizens

The post-Great Recession economic “recovery” was largely reserved for participants in financial markets, not the majority working longer hours and multiple jobs, writes Nomi Prins.

Inequality Worsens Around the Planet

By Nomi Prins

TomDispatch.com



As we head into 2019, a major question remains about the state of Main Street, not just in the U.S. but across the planet. If the global economy really is booming, as many politicians claim, why are leaders and their parties around the world continuing to get booted out of office in such a sweeping fashion?

One obvious answer: the post-Great Recession economic “recovery” was largely reserved for the few who could

participate in the rising financial markets of those years, not the majority who continued to work longer hours, sometimes at multiple jobs, to stay afloat. In other words, the good times have left out so many people, like those struggling to keep even a few hundred dollars in their bank accounts to cover an emergency or the 80 percent of U.S. workers who live paycheck to paycheck.

In today's global economy, financial security is increasingly the property of the 1 percent. No surprise, then, that, as a sense of economic instability continued to grow over the past decade, angst turned to anger, a transition that—from the U.S. to the Philippines, Hungary to Brazil, Poland to Mexico—has provoked a plethora of voter upheavals. In the process, a 1930s-style brew of rising nationalism and blaming the “other” – whether that other was an immigrant, a religious group, a country, or the rest of the world—emerged.

This phenomenon offered a series of Trumpian figures, including of course The Donald himself, an opening to ride a wave of “populism” to the heights of the political system. That the backgrounds and records of none of them—whether you're talking about Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Rodrigo Duterte, or Jair Bolsonaro (among others)—reflected the daily concerns of the “common people,” as the classic definition of populism might have it, hardly mattered. Even a billionaire could, it turned out, exploit economic insecurity effectively and use it to rise to ultimate power.

Ironically, as that American master at evoking the fears of apprentices everywhere showed, to assume the highest office in the land was only to begin a process of creating yet more

fear and insecurity. Trump's trade wars, for instance, have typically infused the world with increased anxiety and distrust toward the U.S., even as they thwarted the ability of domestic business leaders and ordinary people to plan for the future. Meanwhile, just under the surface of the reputed good times, the damage to that future only intensified. In other words, the groundwork has already been laid for what could be a frightening transformation, both domestically and globally.

That Old Financial Crisis

To understand how we got here, let's take a step back. Only a decade ago, the world experienced a genuine global financial crisis, a meltdown of the first order. Economic growth ended; shrinking economies threatened to collapse; countless jobs were cut; homes were foreclosed upon and lives wrecked. For regular people, access to credit suddenly disappeared. No wonder fears rose. No wonder for so many a brighter tomorrow ceased to exist.

The details of just why the Great Recession happened have since been glossed over by time and partisan spin. This September, when the 10th anniversary of the collapse of the global financial services firm Lehman Brothers came around, major business news channels considered whether the world might be at risk of another such crisis. However, coverage of such fears, like so many other topics, was quickly tossed aside in favor of paying yet more attention to Donald Trump's latest tweets, complaints, insults, and lies. Why? Because such a crisis was so 2008 in a year in which, it was claimed, we were enjoying a first class economic high and edging toward the longest bull-market in Wall Street

history. When it came to “boom versus gloom,” boom won hands down.

None of that changed one thing, though: most people still feel left behind both in the U.S. and globally. Thanks to the massive accumulation of wealth by a 1 percent skilled at gaming the system, the roots of a crisis that didn't end with the end of the Great Recession have spread across the planet, while the dividing line between the “have-nots” and the “have-a-lots” only sharpened and widened.

Though the media hasn't been paying much attention to the resulting inequality, the statistics (when you see them) on that ever-widening wealth gap are mind-boggling. According to Inequality.org, for instance, those with at least \$30 million in wealth globally had the fastest growth rate of any group between 2016 and 2017. The size of that club rose by more than 25 percent during those years, to 174,800 members. Or if you really want to grasp what's been happening, consider that, between 2009 and 2017, the number of billionaires whose combined wealth was greater than that of the world's poorest 50 percent fell from 380 to just eight. And by the way, despite claims by the president that every other country is screwing America, the U.S. leads the pack when it comes to the growth of inequality. As Inequality.org notes, it has “much greater shares of national wealth and income going to the richest 1 percent than any other country.”

That, in part, is due to an institution many in the U.S. normally pay little attention to: the U.S. central bank, the Federal Reserve. It helped spark that increase in wealth disparity domestically and globally by adopting a post-

crisis monetary policy in which electronically fabricated money (via a program called quantitative easing) was offered to banks and corporations at significantly cheaper rates than to ordinary Americans.

Pumped into financial markets, that money sent stock prices soaring, which naturally ballooned the wealth of the small percentage of the population that actually owned stocks. According to economist Stephen Roach, considering the Fed's Survey of Consumer Finances, "It is hardly a stretch to conclude that [quantitative easing] exacerbated America's already severe income disparities."

Wall Street, Central Banks, and Everyday People

What has since taken place around the world seems right out of the 1930s. At that time, as the world was emerging from the Great Depression, a sense of broad economic security was slow to return. Instead, fascism and other forms of nationalism gained steam as people turned on the usual cast of politicians, on other countries, and on each other. (If that sounds faintly Trumpian to you, it should.)

In our post-2008 era, people have witnessed trillions of dollars flowing into bank bailouts and other financial subsidies, not just from governments but from the world's major central banks. Theoretically, private banks, as a result, would have more money and pay less interest to get it. They would then lend that money to Main Street. Businesses, big and small, would tap into those funds and, in turn, produce real economic growth through expansion, hiring sprees, and wage increases. People would then have more dollars in their pockets and, feeling more financially

secure, would spend that money driving the economy to new heights—and all, of course, would then be well.

That fairy tale was pitched around the globe. In fact, cheap money also pushed debt to epic levels, while the share prices of banks rose, as did those of all sorts of other firms, to record-shattering heights.

Even in the U.S., however, where a magnificent recovery was supposed to have been in place for years, actual economic growth simply didn't materialize at the levels promised. At 2 percent per year, the average growth of the American gross domestic product over the past decade, for instance, has been half the average of 4 percent before the 2008 crisis. Similar numbers were repeated throughout the developed world and most emerging markets. In the meantime, total global debt hit \$247 trillion in the first quarter of 2018. As the Institute of International Finance found, countries were, on average, borrowing about three dollars for every dollar of goods or services created.

Global Consequences

What the Fed (along with central banks from Europe to Japan) ignited, in fact, was a disproportionate rise in the stock and bond markets with the money they created. That capital sought higher and faster returns than could be achieved in crucial infrastructure or social strengthening projects like building roads, high-speed railways, hospitals, or schools.

What followed was anything but fair. As former Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen noted four years ago, "It is no secret that the past few decades of widening inequality can be summed up as significant income and wealth gains for

those at the very top and stagnant living standards for the majority.” And, of course, continuing to pour money into the highest levels of the private banking system was anything but a formula for walking that back.

Instead, as more citizens fell behind, a sense of disenfranchisement and bitterness with existing governments only grew. In the U.S., that meant Donald Trump. In the United Kingdom, similar discontent was reflected in the June 2016 Brexit vote to leave the European Union, which those who felt economically squeezed to death clearly meant as a slap at both the establishment domestically and EU leaders abroad.

Since then, multiple governments in the European Union, too, have shifted toward the populist right. In Germany, recent elections swung both right and left just six years after, in July 2012, European Central Bank head Mario Draghi exuded optimism over the ability of such banks to protect the financial system, the Euro, and generally hold things together.

Like the Fed in the U.S., the ECB went on to manufacture money, adding another \$3 trillion to its books that would be deployed to buy bonds from favored countries and companies. That artificial stimulus, too, only increased inequality within and between countries in Europe. Meanwhile, Brexit negotiations remain ruinously divisive, threatening to rip Great Britain apart.

Nor was such a story the captive of the North Atlantic. In Brazil, where left-wing president Dilma Rouseff was ousted from power in 2016, her successor Michel Temer oversaw

plummeting economic growth and escalating unemployment. That, in turn, led to the election of that country's own Donald Trump, nationalistic far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro who won a striking 55.2 percent of the vote against a backdrop of popular discontent. In true Trumpian style, he is disposed against both the very idea of climate change and multilateral trade agreements.

In Mexico, dissatisfied voters similarly rejected the political known, but by swinging left for the first time in 70 years. New president Andrés Manuel López Obrador, popularly known by his initials AMLO, promised to put the needs of ordinary Mexicans first. However, he has the U.S.—and the whims of Donald Trump and his “great wall” —to contend with, which could hamper those efforts.

As AMLO took office on Dec. 1, the G20 summit of world leaders was unfolding in Argentina. There, amid a glittering backdrop of power and influence, the trade war between the U.S. and the world's rising superpower, China, came even more clearly into focus. While its president, Xi Jinping, having fully consolidated power amid a wave of Chinese nationalism, could become his country's longest serving leader, he faces an international landscape that would have amazed and befuddled Mao Zedong.

Though Trump declared his meeting with Xi a success because the two sides agreed on a 90-day tariff truce, his prompt appointment of an anti-Chinese hardliner, Robert Lighthizer, to head negotiations, a tweet in which he referred to himself in superhero fashion as a “Tariff Man,” and news that the U.S. had requested that Canada arrest and extradite an executive of a key Chinese tech company, caused

the Dow to take its fourth largest plunge in history and then fluctuate wildly as economic fears of a future “Great Something” rose. More uncertainty and distrust were the true product of that meeting.

In fact, we are now in a world whose key leaders, especially the president of the United States, remain willfully oblivious to its long-term problems, putting policies like deregulation, fake nationalist solutions, and profits for the already grotesquely wealthy ahead of the future lives of the mass of citizens. Consider the yellow-vest protests that have broken out in France, where protestors identifying with left and right political parties are calling for the resignation of neoliberal French President Emmanuel Macron. Many of them, from financially starved provincial towns, are angry that their purchasing power has dropped so low they can barely make ends meet.

Ultimately, what transcends geography and geopolitics is an underlying level of economic discontent sparked by twenty-first-century economics and a resulting Grand Canyon-sized global inequality gap that is still widening. Whether the protests go left or right, what continues to lie at the heart of the matter is the way failed policies and stop-gap measures put in place around the world are no longer working, not when it comes to the non-1 percent anyway. People from Washington to Paris, London to Beijing, increasingly grasp that their economic circumstances are not getting better and are not likely to in any presently imaginable future, given those now in power.

A Dangerous Recipe

The financial crisis of 2008 initially fostered a policy of bailing out banks with cheap money that went not into Main Street economies but into markets enriching the few. As a result, large numbers of people increasingly felt that they were being left behind and so turned against their leaders and sometimes each other as well.

This situation was then exploited by a set of self-appointed politicians of the people, including a billionaire TV personality who capitalized on an increasingly widespread fear of a future at risk. Their promises of economic prosperity were wrapped in populist platitudes, normally (but not always) of a right-wing sort. Lost in this shift away from previously dominant political parties and the systems that went with them was a true form of populism, which would genuinely put the needs of the majority of people over the elite few, build real things including infrastructure, foster organic wealth distribution, and stabilize economies above financial markets.

In the meantime, what we have is, of course, a recipe for an increasingly unstable and vicious world.

Nomi Prins is a [TomDispatch regular](#). Her latest book is ["Collusion: How Central Bankers Rigged the World"](#) (Nation Books). Of her six other books, the most recent is ["All the Presidents' Bankers: The Hidden Alliances That Drive American Power."](#) She is a former Wall Street executive. Special thanks go to researcher Craig Wilson for his superb work on this piece.
