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The Disruptive Search for Identity

By Han Fook Kwang

Synopsis

The world is entering a new period of political uncertainty amid a popular backlash against globalisation. People feel dislocated in their own societies and want to reclaim their identity. This search for identity is what causes many conflicts and will make for a more disruptive future.

Commentary

IF YOU cannot wait to see the end of 2016, you are probably not alone. It has been a year of surprises, disappointments and shocks. The Brexit vote in Britain, Donald Trump's election victory in the United States, the spate of terrorist attacks in Europe including the latest in Munich, the continuing instability in the Middle East all point towards an uncertain future with many more upheavals to come.

On the economic front, growth has not returned in many countries with too many people unemployed, wage levels stagnating, and the gap between the rich and poor widening. There is popular revolt in many places against the ill-effects of globalisation which is seen by many to benefit mainly the elite.

Political Backlash

The political backlash has upended the established order in the US, the United Kingdom and threatens to do so in several other European countries facing important elections next year. The European Union's future is now more uncertain than it has ever been, but even more unknown is what will take its place. US-China relations look like entering a new period of uncertainty following Mr Trump's election.

It is possible to conclude from all this that the world is heading towards some calamitous end and to wish for the return of saner times. Be careful though what you wish for. For all the perplexing turns and unpredictability, the changes taking place today and the upheavals they bring are nowhere near those that have taken place the last century.

Two world wars have been fought killing up to 100 million people and destroying entire cities, including two in Japan that were devastated by atomic bombs. There were other wars that not only brought more deaths and destruction but also changed the geopolitical landscape dramatically: the civil war in China, in the Korean peninsula, in Vietnam, and the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union.

Disruptive Ideas and the Digital Revolution

As for disruptive ideas that threaten to change our lives for better or worse, today's list -- globalisation, the fourth industrial revolution, extremist Islamist ideology, to name a few -- doesn't look as game-changing as the grand ideas of the past century that did change the world: The rise of communism in Russia and China, the anti-colonialist nationalist movements in China, India and Southeast Asia, the trade union movement of the 20th century which entrenched workers' rights and the suffrage and feminist movements.

These were historical events which overturned the established political and social order, liberating millions of people, sometimes from physical oppression, but mostly in the way they changed human thinking and how people saw the world and their future.

On the technology front, today's digital revolution has been truly amazing but there have been equally revolutionary inventions in the past including the discovery of electricity and the invention of the motor car and the internal combustion engine, airplanes and nuclear energy.

Can we really say the world we are living in today is more disruptive and unpredictable than those in the past? As we review the year and ponder what is in store the next, it is useful to do so taking a wider perspective and longer time horizon, and not be overwhelmed by the hype and exaggeration of the moment.

Issue of Identity

This isn't the most foreboding period in human history -- not by a long shot. But there are worrying trends common to many of the recent events that are worth watching because they will shape the course of human history. Of these, one of the most important concerns the issue of identity.

Every individual, nation and society seeks to identify itself in some way that sets it apart from another. For countries, this national identity is shaped by its history, the culture and tradition of its people, and their hopes and aspirations for the future.

But the speed of change in the modern world has disrupted the formation of these

identities, changing or replacing them with new ones. This is disruptive because the old identities formed along traditional lines of culture, religion and language existed for long periods, resulting in stable and strong societies.

But globalisation and the digitally connected world fragmented these societies enabling many people to identify with others inside and outside their countries with similar interests, setting them apart from others. They take on multiple identities which might strengthen or weaken their attachment to their own national identity. Many commentators, for example, have pointed out that America is a divided country with many white voters in the recent election identifying with President-elect Trump while large numbers of non-white and urban voters are opposed to him.

Who You Are Determines Your Way Forward

Pro-Trump voters want to reclaim the identity they believe has been lost because of the actions and policies of the elites in Washington and want to “make America great again”. You could say the same for Britons who voted for the county to leave the European Union. They too seek an identity that isn’t shaped by bureaucrats in Brussels.

One outcome of the dislocation felt by many people as a result of their fragmented societies is to seek refuge in an earlier identity often along race and religious lines. Extremist Islamist terrorists exploit this, propagating their form of violent identity, to differentiate themselves from moderate Muslims and what they see as the decadence of the western world.

The crisis of identity experienced by so many people and countries is a signature theme of the post-modern world. Everywhere, people are seeking answers to the questions: Who are we and where do we want to go? They have to answer the first question first before they can answer the second.

Who you are determines where you want to go. National identity isn’t a static concept but changes continuously, and, according to many sociologists, is always contested, constructed and re-constructed. That’s a recipe for more disruptions.

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