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WELCOME BACK TO 19th CENTURY! WORLD CHALLENGES AND THE COMEBACK OF THE IMPERIAL POWERS RIVALRIES IN A POST-WESTERN ERA

Revolution 4.0, start-ups, energy transition, cybersecurity, augmented man, internet of things, blockchain, artificial intelligence, space tourism, fake news, the 21st century vocabulary seems well established. The singers of permanent innovation are at the top of the box, social networks unveiled new paradigms that make nothing more-nothing-will-be-as-before, the media announce a new revolution every day. To all these apostles of the new religion, I want to answer: bof! Business as usual, the profiteers of the technological break are selling their usual salads to the stupid guys anxious to miss the hyperloop train of the latest fashionable ideas... To tell the truth, I am even convinced of the opposite. Rather than moving into the future with the power of our hypersonic engines, we are rather regressing to the past at full speed.

Take the case of the environment crisis. Here too, the run forward, i.e. backward, is spectacular. Global warming is on everyone's lips, but no one wants to take the first step. There is no question of taxing kerosene on planes and boats, which would threaten the sacrosanct international trade. Biodiversity, especially that of pollinators and marine resources, is in total collapse. Who cares? Glyphosate and pesticides are taboos. Polar ice caps and glaciers melt? Where is the problem? Ditto for concreting, demography, degradation of agricultural soils, acidification of oceans, overfishing and urbanization which are galloping. While agriculture, despite all the chemistry and mechanization, will have returned to the production levels of the 1900s... If we go on in that direction, the rush backward will not only stop to the 19th Century but to one million years ago, until to a state of the planet without *Homo sapiens*...

The case of international politics is even more flagrant. At the beginning of the 21st century, we thought that global governance was going to fix everything. Humanity, converted to the delights of globalized liberal democracy, was, thanks to the benevolent magisterium of the United States and the European Union, to destroy the hydra of nationalisms and obscurantisms. Thanks to the enlightenment provided by the NGOs which are the depositories of the Good, an international civil society would emerge that would make humanity more fluid and infinitely respectful of human rights and the principles of financial capitalism, the source of prosperity.

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In fact, exactly the opposite is happening. Europe is falling apart under the blows of nations in need of identity or freedom (see Brexit, Catalan secession, the crushing of Greece and the success of so-called populist parties) and of popular classes looking for recognition (see the Yellow Jackets crisis in France). We are observing the collapse of the dream of a multipolar world, governed by democratic states and a share of power between traditional Western powers and new emerging powers such as the BRICs. But this dream is vanishing. The present world is transforming its self in a new bipolar world, with a tougher and tougher race between United States and China. The sudden emergence of China has got caught everybody by surprise. And provoked a contraction, a growing nervous tension of the United States, which reacts severely with containment manoeuvres (Let think to the measures they did against USSR during the Cold War). The multiplication of economic sanctions against any supposed enemy and the growth of military expenses as well as the denunciation of disarmament treaties bring evidence to that alarming evolution. This new bipolar world is far more dangerous than the previous era, because diplomatic channels have been broken or are a state of paralysis.

The global world has entered into a phase of imperial re-composition, like post-1815 Europe. The unexpected emergence of China, India, Brazil and now Africa has shoved the deal. China aims to regain the place it had occupied until the nineteenth century, before the opium wars led by the British imperialists put it on its knees.

Faced with this new competition, the United States reacts by force, multiplying economic sanctions against anyone who gets in their way. Iraq, Libya, Syria, Ukraine, Iran and now Venezuela, the list of "soft" coups d'état, deadly economic blockades, orange revolutions and other organized regime changes or brutal invasions justified under pretexts invented from scratch like the false weapons of mass destruction of Saddam Hussein, does not stop growing.

And recently, with the arrival of Donald Trump, brutality has imposed itself at the head of the world's leading power. International law, already flouted by congressional and US justice claims to impose extraterritorial and retroactive rules, no longer exists. The arms race has resumed again, international treaties are denounced, international organizations shunned. Welcome to the new nineteenth century, in this ruthless world where unscrupulous empires were plowing the planet to savagely own its resources.

Let's take a closer look at the main features of this ancient world that is disappearing and the new world that is being born.

First of all the end of the story announced by Francis Fukuyama and the clash of civilizations predicted by Samuel Huntington did not take place, and will not take place in the form they had planned.

The dream of a world in which liberal democracy and free-market capitalism would have triumphed over its adversaries and spread over the entire planet is definitely buried. Everywhere the liberal model is in crisis while deregulated capitalism is giving rise more and more to skepticism and resistance. On the one hand, so-called authoritarian regimes perpetuate their hold on society, whether under the influence of nationalism or that of religion. From Turkey to China, through Egypt, the Arab world, Iran and Russia, each of these countries defends its own national vision, based on its culture, political traditions and ideological beliefs, that those they are inspired by communism, Sunni Islam, Shiism or Orthodoxy.

On the other hand, traditional Western democracies are increasingly moving towards post-democratic or “illiberal” regimes, while populist parties are growing everywhere. Under the pretext of the fight against terrorism or the so-called externally propagated fake news, as is the case in the United States with the obsession with alleged Russian interference in the 2016 elections, these democracies have adopted anti-democratic laws while their open social system is closed gradually, the social classes becoming completely sealed between them for the greater benefit of an oligarchy increasingly totalitarian. This authoritarian stiffening is manifested through the widespread mass surveillance (surveillance cameras, police custody, wiretapping, espionage of at-risk populations, secret prisons and exceptional courts), the setting up of social networks and the media by States and private monopolies in the hands of some ultrariches, strengthening the police and its intervention doctrines against protesters, anti-fake news laws, lawsuits against historic whistleblowers like Julian Assange and Edward Snowden, the manipulation of human rights for geopolitical purposes.

We can add the denigration of the people by the elites, the growing oligarchization of democratic societies by progressive impoverishment and crushing of the middle classes that form the social base of the republics. At the forefront of these democracies about to turn into authoritarian oligarchies are naturally Donald Trump’s United States, but also Poland, Hungary, Jair Bolosonaro’s Brazil and to a certain extent Emmanuel Macron’s France, which exploded the political parties and bypassed the intermediary bodies guaranteeing the proper functioning of democracy and introduced an original form of populism, much more chic and polished, after his accession to power.

As for the clash of civilizations, it will not take place in this form either. Rather than a clash between civilizations, it is a clash between new empires that must be feared. In our eyes, it is rather in the past, in the nineteenth century, at the time of rivalry between empires, that we must go back to interpret the future. Huntington believed that the twenty-first century, as opposed to the twentieth century that had been marked by the exacerbated shock of nationalism, the new millennium would be marked by a clash of values, cultures, areas of civilization that would engage in a ruthless fight between them for the symbolic domination – and of course the political world. This vision was influenced by his conception of American power, fully focused on conquer-

ing and maintaining his global hegemony through the dissemination of his soft power, his corpus of values, democracy, freedom, human rights, primacy of the individual on the collective, etc. He thought that the other cultural areas, that of Islam, that of Chinese Confucianism or Russian Eurasism would do the same, causing a general conflagration of civilizations.

Recent developments show that this is not the case for the simple reason that, apart from Sunni Islam, none of these cultural areas is imperialist or expansionist. China does not seek to impose Confucianism or even communism on the rest of the world, nor does Russia intend to convert Africa or Asia to Orthodoxy. Even Iran, today accused of all evil, does not launch its imams to conquer the world. In fact, all these facts aim at securing their borders and their close neighborhood and defending their positions where history and geography have placed them.

They have no imperialist aims. China wants to stay mistress at home, in its historical space: Sinkiang, Tibet, Taiwan, China and Yellow Seas. Russia also in what it regards as its territorial space (Crimea) and the zone of its traditional allies (Caucasus, Donbass, Central Asia), just as France protects what it considers as being its possessions or its partners in Africa, the Caribbean or the Pacific. Ditto for Iran with its Shiite allies. The imams of the mosques of Europe are trained at the University of Medina and not of Qom in Iran.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, there has been a rise in the power of strong nation-states determined to preserve their cultural traditions and to defend their interests without being dictated by their external behavior or by standards imposed by the West. On the side of the West, this rise in pressure and the questioning of Western hegemony provoked two reactions: the stiffening of the United States on the one hand, and the political and cultural collapse of Europe and his vassalization by the United States on the other hand.

From this point of view, the attacks of 11 September 2001 against the Twin Towers of the WTC in New York caused a turning point. Until then, the United States was willing to define itself as a benevolent, peacemaking power that worked for the general prosperity and self-fulfillment of individuals around the world by overthrowing dictators and facilitating the flow of goods, ideas, resources and men and, if necessary, providing general security by correcting the wicked men who threatened global harmony. This attitude changed dramatically after 2001, as a result of military interventions that had nothing to do with a Gendarmerie mission protecting the global public order but were entirely devoted to the defense of crude interests and the setting up political regimes entirely under their control. We know the list: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Ukraine and today Venezuela, while Iran and Cuba, after a short truce, quickly became enemies again.

Alongside this military radicalization, the United States began to adopt all kinds of economic warfare measures against countries that they considered hostile or simply resistant to their interests: I mean sanctions imposed either by the President or by the Congress, sanctions whose number and intensity are increasing day by day, while commercial retaliation measures are also increasing, sometimes even against their own allies.

This stiffening, begun in the 1990s against Iraq and Serbia, has now become the main feature of US foreign policy. An additional step was taken with the arrival of Donald Trump in power, less in substance than in form. Masked and dressed in a polish of civility under the Clinton, Bush and Obama eras, this policy became brutal, displayed and uninhibited under the Trump era. It expanded to include China and Europe, while military reinforcement, NATO aggressiveness and the denunciation of disarmament treaties intensified.

In our hypothesis, this trend will increase in the future. Indeed, the more the American superpower is confronted with the rise of China and the states that dispute its hegemony, the more it will stiffen militarily and economically by seeking on the one hand to isolate and weaken its adversaries and on the other hand to reduce its allies and partners in vassals and protectorates. This trend is likely to be a major trend of the coming decades, regardless of the presidents of the United States, Republicans or Democrats, rude populists or distinguished technocrats.

The corollary of this evolution is the collapse of Europe, both as a power and as a model. Europe will remain for a long time an important economic power. But its political and symbolic weight will diminish ever more, because of its divisions and its inability to constitute an organized federal state and to take its autonomy from the United States. Basically, two equally negative scenarios are available in Europe today. On the one hand, a retreat to a more and more fragmented continent, in a situation of slow de-federalisation, in the manner of the Roman-Germanic empire which had gradually emptied of its substance over the course of the reforms and treaties. From this point of view, the future of Europe is no more than managing its decline and managing the crises in order to make the system last and those who benefit from it for as long as possible. In short, a destiny constrained, without vision, without project, a Europe narrow, truncated and doomed to a growing marginalization in the face of the rise of more and more powerful peripheral states (United States, China and Russia).

In a world in the midst of imperial and neo-Westphalian recomposition, with the United States wishing to keep all the levers of power at their disposal (US dollar, armaments, economic sanctions or customs taxes) as the presidential slogan (Make America Great Again), and with a China that does not hide its ambition to become once again the world's largest economic power, Europe is playing small arms with its method of management at 28 (soon 27?) States butressed on their particular and short term interests.

The second scenario is hardly more comforting, since it amounts to confirming the progressive but inexorable vassalization of Europe by the new tutelary power of the moment, the United States of America, so close and so friendly that do not hesitate to aspire to his culture and his creative energy and to embrace it with all the vigor of their benevolent tentacles...

After the great epoch of Pericles and the civil war of Peloponnese, ancient Greece had emptied of its blood, of its economic and political vitality while Hellenizing the neighboring peoples. By passing on to them their values, their ideas, their talents for commerce and navigation, and their mercenaries for war, Greece had conquered the spirit and sometimes the hearts of other nations, but she had lost herself in this process. She had ended up being entirely conquered by the Romans that she had the bad idea to call for help.

Modern Europe, which has invented almost everything, follows the same trend: it has given the world its principles of democratic governance, its political and economic doctrines, its intellectual genius and artistic creativity, but emptying itself of its energies. The rest of the world is becoming Europeanized, as Asia and Rome were yesterday, while Europe is americanizing, sinizing, and slowly becoming a third world with the applause of its leaders and media, opening unrestricted ports, its schools and theaters to the ubiquitous products Made in USA and China, and turning into a great melting pot of globalization... And contemporary Europe is on the way to completely lose its independence and to be conquered by his American ally, whom she had called for her help in 1917, 1941 and 1949 with the Cold War.

At this point in our synthesis, the questions are: Europe, and more precisely the political entity that represents it, the EU, is irremediably doomed to political insignificance and servitude? Or is it capable of a start, a recovery in hand that would allow it to recover its independence and sovereignty, and regain the status of a great democratic power? A Europe that would no longer be imperial but balancing and stabilizing in a world increasingly weakened by the confrontation United States – China.

This observation will make good souls scream, but this colonization upside down is it really questionable? Are there no other ways, more effective, more humane and more sustainable, to preserve fraternity and compassion?

This is the world towards which we seem to evolve, with human views. Let's conclude to a more optimistic mode that if the best is unlikely, the worst is never certain either. Happy bursts can always happen. And it depends on us to make sure to avoid the worst and act for the better.