

Societal Involution in the North*

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The term “involution” – which means to turn into oneself, or to shrink, or to reverse a process of evolving – may seem like a strange one to apply to societies. Yet that is the term that increasingly comes to mind when considering recent social and political trends in the United States and in some parts of Europe.

Consider the United Kingdom, currently in the throes of a heated debate before the referendum that will be held about whether or not Britain should stay in the European Union. Many issues and concerns have been raised on both sides, and politicians and business leaders inside and outside the country, from top financiers to US President Obama, have pitched in with their own views and warnings about the implications of “Brexit”. But within the country, public discussion appears to be focussed essentially on only one issue: immigration.

Rightly or wrongly, in the British public imagination today, membership of the European Union appears to have become a proxy for more open borders for the movement (or inflow) of people. And in this discussion, all sorts of issues come up, even if they are not directly affected by membership of the European Union and do not necessarily result from greater in-migration.

It is true that some of the expressed concern is about the ability of other Europeans to enter the United Kingdom and “feed off” the social welfare system, including health services. Sooner or later references are made to the Polish migrants who may be filling critical labour market gaps but do so by lowering market wages, and are perceived to have taken over parts of London like Hounslow, partly displacing earlier South Asian migrant communities.

The fear and even distaste about having to take in more refugees fleeing from zones of conflict in the Arab world is clearly present. The implicit and sometime even explicit argument is that misguided do-gooders in the rest of Europe, such as Angela Merkel in Germany, have opened the floodgates for the entry of all sorts and numbers of people. It is interesting that relatively few people are willing to recognise or acknowledge the role of Europe – or at least of European governments – in destabilising countries like Libya and Syria and Afghanistan that now generate ever larger waves of people desperate to get away from the chaos, insecurity and unutterable violence that has resulted. Interventions in these countries by Europe are still largely perceived as well-meaning and humanitarian in its intent, and the British people seem to shrug off any responsibility for the outcomes. Certainly they generally do not seem to feel any moral imperative to give them refuge.

Then there are other concerns, which have little to do with the rest of Europe really, but are still clubbed together in this general feeling of discontent. The lack of sufficient job opportunities, especially for the young, and the poor quality and greater insecurity of most newly created employment, are ascribed to immigration of workers who mess up domestic labour markets. The British government, seeking to deflect attention from the inadequacies of its own policies, has insidiously played up to this, and is only now discovering the political costs of this strategy.

The housing market in London, currently in the throes of another irrational bubble driven by state policies, is another irritant. High house prices in Greater London and the south of England are blamed on the influx of people from abroad, even though this results from continued easy credit as well as the UK government's strategy of trying to attract the rich from all countries (not just Europe) into the city with various incentives. It is probably the case that central London is now unaffordable for most former residents not because of mass immigration at all, but because London is seen as a safe haven by Russian oligarchs, Chinese elite, Indian businessmen like Vijay Mallya and tax dodging global celebrities, along with their less famous counterparts from across the world. This tendency will be unaffected by British departure from the European Union, but the inchoate resentment among London's residents does not distinguish the different causative factors clearly and so migrants end up being blamed for everything.

These social perceptions create some interesting anomalies. A taxi driver from Myanmar, himself resident in Britain for 17 years and with every intention of staying on with his wife and children, defends those who want the UK to leave Europe on the grounds that "it's a small island – where is the room here to take in everybody who wants to come?" A shop assistant whose parents came from Hungary half a century ago bemoans the latest influx of east and central Europeans because they do not try to absorb the local culture and integrate with British society. A young student of mixed Muslim-Christian parentage worries about the patriarchal attitudes and untoward behaviour of Arab male migrants.

So the tendency of closing in, of hunkering down and putting up barriers, is not confined to any particular ethnic group, although presumably it is more widespread among the white English population. Rather, it reflects something that we are familiar with in India that was once called the "third class compartment syndrome", whereby those who managed to get in and get seats in the crowded railways carriages would try and limit the numbers of new entrants, to prevent overcrowding and congestion.

From here it is but a small step towards even more explicitly racial and religious overtones in the discussion. And in this, sadly, Britain is hardly an outlier in Europe today, where anti-Muslim sentiment has gone from being a murmur in the shadows to being a mainstream and acceptable position. In Germany, for example, the recently created right wing party Alternative fur Deutschland has just approved a manifesto that declares that "Islam is not part of Germany" and "orthodox Islam is not compatible with our legal system or with our culture". It has called for bans on the Muslim call to prayer and the wearing face-covering veils by women in public. This new party is also Eurosceptic, and it made substantial inroads in provincial elections in German in March. Opinion polls suggest that it will go on to gain further strength and win seats in the Bundestag (Parliament) elections in 2017.

In France, the openly anti-immigrant party of Marine Le Pen is doing extremely well and she is now a serious contender for the Presidency, seen as the one to beat in the next election. Right wing parties that are openly anti-immigration, implicitly racist and generally Islamophobic are significant presences, often even part of the government, in many European countries, from Hungary and Finland to Serbia, Armenia, Austria. They are on the ascendant in crisis-ridden countries like Spain and Greece.

These tendencies are not confined to Europe, as the rise and rise of Donald Trump in the United States now makes clear. The man who is now almost certain to be the Republican candidate for President has publicly declared that Mexican immigrants tend to be rapists who bring in drugs to the US, and that all Muslims should simply be barred from entering the country.

Those with a sense of the material underpinnings of social change would see in this extraordinarily widespread process in the advanced countries, the outcome of forces of financial globalisation that have rendered advanced economies stagnant, given inordinate power to capital and made life more insecure and fragile for workers. The irony is that the economic forces that have created this are rarely blamed or sought to be even partially controlled or reversed and the ascendancy of global capital remains supreme. Instead, societal involution creates regressive tendencies that seek to recreate a past that now seems less complicated, but only manage to intensify unhappiness.

*** This article was originally published in the Frontline, Print edition: May 27, 2016.**