# The Doctor and the Cure: The Crisis of Sovereignty in the Twenty-first Century

The world is sick. Un/fortunately, while advocates of Brexit and other populists have correctly identified the symptoms of broad societal illness—overpowering anxiety about the present and the future; a loss of control of the self, the family, the community and the nation itself—they have misdiagnosed the primary cause of our infirmity and their efforts to cure the patient are therefore doomed to fail.

The palliative narrative offered by Leavers is a simple one. In their view, a nefarious cabal of 'globalists' are far removed from the everyday realities of regular people. Yet they have somehow wrested authority from local representatives (since globalism and national interest are inherently at odds), and thereby have undermined the democratic character and unique identities of individual countries. Leavers now suggest that a ream of new barriers and other protectionist measures will seal and heal the punctured state and allow people to "take back control" of their countr(ies).

In fact, "globalism" and nation states have long co-existed, and that is very much part of the problem. While the Westphalian Peace led European states (for the most part) to respect the borders and internal affairs of their neighbors, their appetite for imperial expansionism remained insatiable, for with it came tremendous financial gain and opportunity for personal glory.

Print capitalism of the late nineteenth century gave the nation state much more coherency and internal consistency, but not incidentally coincided with belief in scientific racism and the "white man's burden." Colonies shored up not only the resources but the very identity of the metropolitan center of imperial internationalism. Western nation states, in other words, were intricately intertwined with, and were instrumental to, this particular form of globalization, and much of twentieth-century history, including its catastrophic global conflicts, can be seen as a triangular dialectic between nationalism, imperialism, and internationalism (cf. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Thomas Metcalf's *Ideologies of the Raj,* and Jürgen Osterhammel's *The Transformation of the World*.)

Leavers' nostalgic prescription, and that of their American counterparts, targets both economic and personal insecurity wrought by our contemporary crisis of sovereignty (see two related pieces of mine, here and here; see also Sarah Pulliam Bailey's recent piece in the Washington Post). Globalization–here meaning the post-90's Reagan-Thatcher-derived market version–is blamed for job losses throughout the developed world. Simultaneously, in this view, migrant communities have joined the workforce and made employment more challenging. Brexiteers argue that new restrictions on immigration and renegotiated trade deals will help revive British manufacturing and revive the domestic economy by "bringing jobs back". These policies, however, will only make matters worse.

While it is true the West lost some manufacturing jobs to other countries in the first decade of the 21st century, it is technological innovation and ever-increasing productivity that are primarily responsible for this trend. More importantly, automation and intelligent machines will eliminate nearly half of all existing jobs, including blue and white collar positions, within the next 25 years or less, according to multiple studies.

To add to our woes, climate change will continue unabated as Brexit morphs into Clexit, and the top generals of 'the

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Written by Manu Bhagavan

war on experts' literally seek to revive dinosaurs by reinvesting in the fossil fuel industry. Instead of a rising tide to lift all boats, raging seas are set to wipe out our coasts and flood our cities and towns. Cousins of Zika and Ebola we have not yet encountered will swiftly follow suit, wreaking havoc on our populations, which will be less prepared for pandemics when made to rely solely on national mechanisms for protection.

Contemporary populists are looking backwards, hoping to fix our problems by drawing from a medical toolkit from a previous century. And when their solutions fail, as they ultimately will, the race-baiting and veiled threats against minorities unleashed during their campaigns for power will likely take on an ever more sinister character, as scapegoating has often proven an effective deflection from mounting failures.

A number of visionaries, including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Albert Einstein, and even Hans Morgenthau, warned us against this very scenario, and offered a different path. They noted the evolution of weapons of mass destruction and foresaw ever more grandiose and grotesque apocalyptic threats on the horizon. And so they concluded that progressive internationalism, a truly incorporative, democratic global federation, built around a system of human rights and duties, was the only viable means to build a sustainable world that maximized the freedom of all, collectively and individually (see my work on the matter in India and the Quest for One World: The Peacemakers; "India and the United Nations, Or Things Fall Apart," in David Malone, et al., The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy; "Towards Universal Relief and Rehabilitation: India, UNRRA, and the New Internationalism," in Thomas Weiss and Dan Plesch, eds., Wartime History and the Future United Nations; and "Indian Internationalism, the Implementation of Self-Determination, and the Question of Kashmir: Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and the Human Rights Commission," in Vinay Lal and Ellen DuBois, eds. The Plural Universe of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay)

As the great Indian constitutionalist, B.R. Ambedkar observed, for liberty and equality to find their full flowering, fraternity must have pride of place amongst the triad. Nehru put it this way:

People have become, because of the process of disintegration…quite unable to judge anything, more brutal in thought, speech and action. The…remedy is to try to understand the disease…. Obviously [we must]…believe in the ultimate triumph of creative and unifying processes of the day. If you align yourself to some great purpose or to something elemental, it ennobles you.

The world is sick. Do we have the strength to seek the treatment we need?

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**About the author:**

Prof **Manu Bhagavan** is Professor of History and Human Rights at Hunter College and the Graduate Center-CUNY. His most recent book is *The Peacemakers / India and the Quest for One World* , published by HarperCollins India in 2012 and updated and expanded by Palgrave Macmillan in 2013. His other major publications, all with Oxford University Press, include *Sovereign Spheres* (2003), *Heterotopias* (editor, 2010), and *Speaking Truth to Power* and *Claiming Power from Below* (co-edited with Anne Feldhaus, 2009).