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A 21st-century medievalism?

Is the future in the past?

The great twist of globalisation is that it may take us back into the past. The type of future that we may face could be the same that parts of the world, notably Europe, experienced some 600 years ago.

As we have seen, there are some unintended consequences, or poison, in the chalice of globalisation. The confluence of technology and the push for global economic integration has produced the empowerment of a range of actors, who are, in turn, challenging the historic authority of states. Many of these actors’ interests have nothing to do with the state. They have nothing to do with business or capitalism either. For many of the newly empowered, allegiance to the interests of any single state or economic growth is at best of secondary importance. These ‘out of state’ or transnational interests can embrace a diverse range of issues from the rapid accumulation of personal wealth through to saving the environment, eliminating land mines, promoting human rights and, of course, religion.

For these actors, it is the cause that is important for them.

Some (e.g. Rapley, 2006) call this, quite aptly, a process of ‘gnawing at the edges’ of states. Perversely, the traditionally stronger states, including the ‘superpowers’ of the 20th century, may well prove to be the most vulnerable to these ‘gnawing away’ attempts. An example of this eating away process came during the Euro Crisis of 2011. Pressure from money markets contributed both to the exit of democratically elected prime ministers (George Papandreou of Greece and Silvio Berlusconi of Italy) and, additionally, to the establishment of a cabinet constructed, in Italy’s case, of unelected ‘technocrats’. All this leads to a raft of questions being asked,
such as ‘Must democracy be sacrificed to save Europe?’ (Reinhardt, 2011) and:

If democratically elected leaders do not satisfy the markets, the IMF and the European Commission, they are now, in effect, summarily dismissed, without any reference to the wishes of the people.

(Skelton, 2011)

But there is another perspective to consider. Others see this process of gnawing away from a different view, observing that the empowerment of the money markets is a positive element of globalisation. The argument here is that money markets can be more effective and efficient decision makers than governments, especially in times of crisis (Altman, 2011).

But there are earlier examples of the vulnerability of states. Terrorism, or more particularly, the attack on the Twin Towers in New York, is a recent example of an assault upon a state by a non-state actor.

However, an earlier victim was the Soviet Union. Cerny (2005) argues that the collapse of the Soviet Union was not solely due to its decline as a military superpower, but that its downfall really was the result of two other underlying, deeper struggles. The first was the ineffectiveness of military force, or relational power, to gain victory in conflicts, both in Afghanistan and Angola. The second struggle was the inability of the Soviet Union to defeat an emerging hunger for consumerism amongst its citizens. One lesson to be taken from the fall of the Soviet Union is that military prowess, or relational power, may be helpful in ensuring that weaker states will obey the commands of more powerful dominant states, but it is of little use against other actors, particularly the newly empowered (Judah, 2011).

All this of course means that the long-established sources of traditional power available to the state become increasingly questionable, as we progress further into the 21st century, a conclusion that we reached in Chapter 3.

The problem becomes obvious.

Traditional military-based or relational power’s only relevance will be when states come to confront each other. This type of power becomes increasingly less effective when states venture out