

**The New York Times** | <https://nyti.ms/2lCgqis>

---

The Opinion Pages | OP-ED COLUMNIST

# The Unmaking of Europe

Roger Cohen FEB. 24, 2017

MADRID — Something is brewing. The world is not as it was. Beneath the Magic Mountain grim tides gather. You hear this kind of thing all over Europe. Old assumptions seem obsolete. Apprehension is in the air.

Let's connect some dots. Last November, Britain's Daily Mail screamed "Enemies of the People!" on its front page. The target was Britain's lord chief justice and two other judges who had ruled that the formal process of British exit from the European Union — known as Article 50 — could not be triggered without a parliamentary vote. This was too much for the howling Brexit wolves of The Mail.

Fast-forward to President Trump using the same phrase — "enemy of the American people" — for the news media, having already taken aim at the judiciary, dismissing as a "so-called judge" the man who had halted his rabble-raising travel ban against seven mainly Muslim countries.

Trump heads a movement. It needs to be fed. It is hungry. Its enemies include Hollywood and the press (with a few exceptions). It demands energy, disruption and anger to grow.

"Enemy of the people" is a phrase with a near-perfect totalitarian pedigree deployed with refinements by the Nazis, Stalin and Mao. For Goebbels, writing in 1941, every Jew was "a sworn enemy of the German people." Here the "people"

are an aroused mob imbued with some mythical essence of nationhood or goodness by a charismatic leader. The enemy is everyone else. Citizenship, with its shared rights and responsibilities, has ceased to be.

Liberal Western democracies depend on various institutions to mediate differences and provide the checks and balances of lawful governance. They include a free press, an independent judiciary, political parties and the Congress or parliament. All are under withering attack from the populist, xenophobic nationalists who are attempting, on both sides of the Atlantic, to replace representative democracy with something else.

What that 21st-century “something” may be is not completely clear, but it involves a direct social-media connection between the leader and the people that circumvents mainstream parties and the press, and brands all critics as enemies of the movement. Representative democracy then yields by degrees to a system driven by plebiscite, referendums, intimidation and lies — of the kind that produced the victories of Brexit and Trump.

There is a movement in people’s minds. They occur periodically in history. They are potent.

A methodical attack on the institutions of Western democracies has one ultimate objective: their replacement with the “soft” autocracies of which President Vladimir Putin of Russia is the supreme exponent. The lifeblood of autocracies is the glorification of a mythical past and the designation of enemies who stand in the way of greatness.

“Nationalism is war,” François Mitterrand, the former French president, observed. That is the end point of the fear mongering used by the nationalists being elevated as representative democracy frays. Nigel Farage, the clownish leader of the Brexit campaign, is the natural ally of Trump.

Technology has enabled many things, among them the apotheosis of stupidity.

In Europe, the next act is being readied. The Party for Freedom, or PVV, of Geert Wilders, the rabid anti-immigrant Dutch politician, may emerge as the country’s largest political force in elections next month, even if he proves unable to form a coalition government. The PVV is a very flimsy political organization

but Wilders — like Trump — wields an effective Twitter account emblazoned with “STOP ISLAM.” He hates Moroccan immigrants (whom he had called “scum”) and the European Union.

Then, in April, France will vote for its next president, with the rightist Marine Le Pen in serious contention. Le Pen is a direct descendant of the xenophobic French nationalism that produced the Dreyfus Affair in the late 19th century, the Jew-slaughtering Vichy government in World War II, and her own National Front party in more recent times. She has modulated her message but that is her lineage. Nobody should doubt it. If she wins, the European Union could unravel, a development Trump seems to favor. European peace and stability would not be far behind.

Connect the dots. For the Brexit crowd, the enemy was immigrants, Germany, Turks, European bureaucrats. For Trump it was Muslims and Mexicans. The mythical past found expression in Britain’s “I want my country back” and across the Atlantic in “make America great again.” In both countries flat-out lies galvanized the campaigns.

These methods worked. They worked because of growing precariousness, inequality, impunity, alienation, globalization, tribalism, powerlessness, bombardment and cacophony — all the failures of democracies and bewilderments of digital disruption.

But the lesson is that democracies must adapt, not that they must be swept away. There are ascendant movements that want to replace democracy. They use phrases like “enemy of the American people.”

Emile Zola, the French writer, confronted by the bigots and liars of his day, wrote: “When truth is buried underground it grows, it chokes, it gathers such an explosive force that on the day it bursts out, it blows up everything with it.”

“Only connect,” wrote E.M. Forster, the British novelist. Only connect. Only confront.

You can follow me on Twitter (@NYTimesCohen) or join me on Facebook.

*Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYTopinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.*

A version of this op-ed appears in print on February 25, 2017, in The International New York Times.

---

© 2017 The New York Times Company