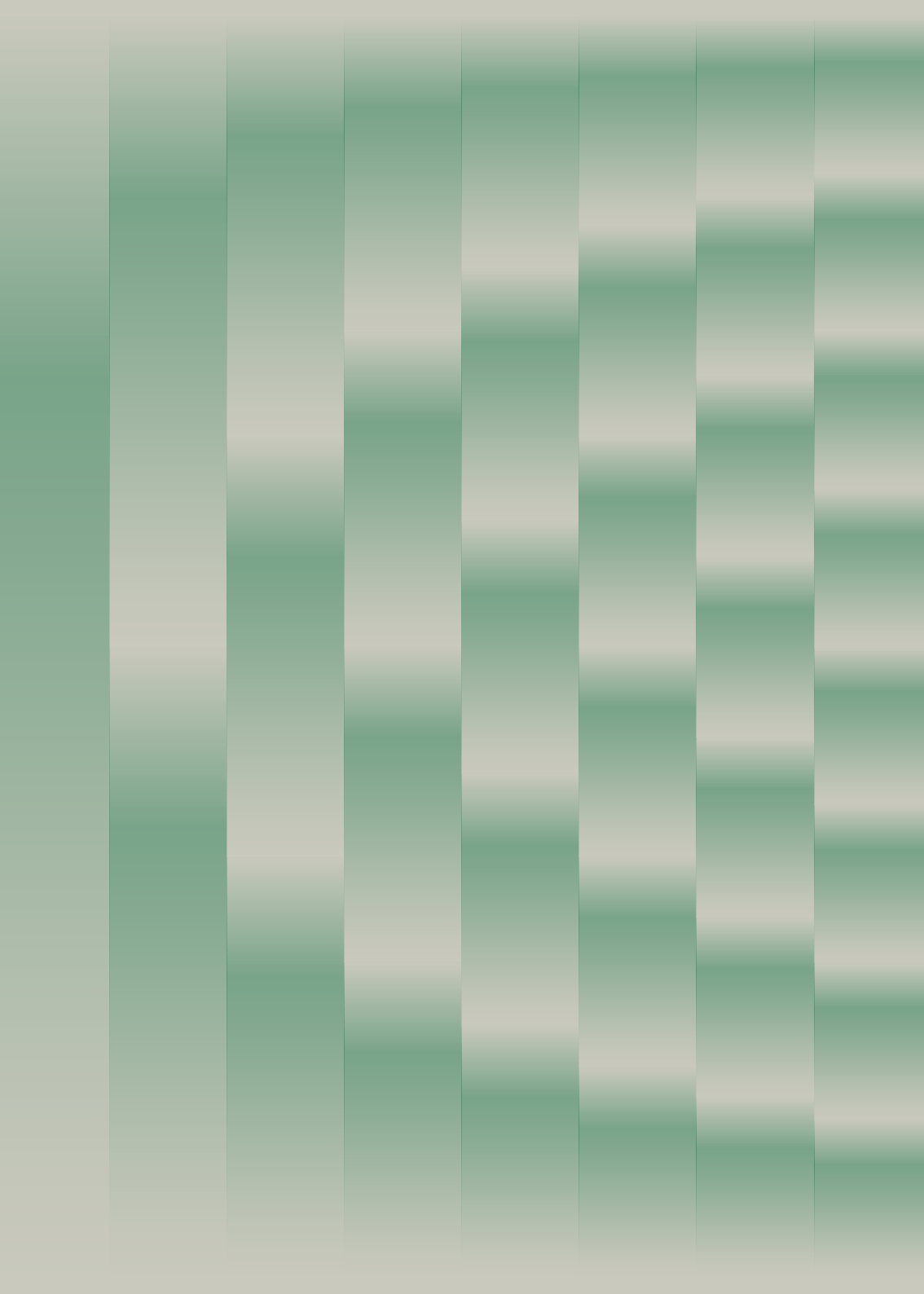


the
ideas
letter

ANTHOLOGY



.the
ideas
letter

ANTHOLOGY

2023–2025

©2025

Contents

Dear Readers	1
Against the Current	
Human Rights on the Edge <i>Nicholas Bequelin</i>	6
Is It All About Power?: A Response to “Human Rights on the Edge” <i>LuHan Gabel</i>	17
Further Thoughts: A Rejoinder to LuHan Gabel <i>Nicholas Bequelin</i>	25
First Principles <i>Aryeh Neier</i>	26
The Moral Economy of the Far Right <i>Miri Davidson</i>	29
The Great Reckoning: What the West Should Learn From China <i>Kaiser Kuo</i>	38

A New Dependency Theory Moment <i>Marcos Nobre</i>	52
Why Identity is Failing—and Can't be Abandoned <i>Tessy Schlosser</i>	64
Social Democracy After Class? <i>Bhaskar Sunkara</i>	74
Social Democracy, Immigration, and the Working Class <i>Sohrab Ahmari</i>	83
The 2024 Nobel Laureates Are Not Only Wrong About China, but Also About the West <i>Yuen Yuen Ang</i>	87
Disaster Capitalism Revisited <i>Isabella M. Weber</i>	96
The New Legislators of Silicon Valley <i>Evgeny Morozov</i>	101
Intellectual Historians Confront the Present: An Interview with Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins <i>Leonard Benardo</i>	112
 Places	
An Inescapable Past <i>Shehryar Fazli</i>	126
Sudan and the Silence of the Activists <i>Nesrine Malik</i>	136
Goodbye, Gibbon <i>Iza Ding</i>	143
India and America: A Certain Ambivalence <i>Basharat Peer</i>	151

Peronism Now 165
Jordana Timerman

Tunisia: When Obsolete Anti-imperialism Kills Democracy 175
Nadia Marzouki

Meditations

Flights of the Intelligentsia 186
Leonid Ragozin

My New York Intellectuals 197
Tomiwa Owolade

Writing from the Vortex of War 205
Muhammad Al-Zaqzouq

Lasching Out 215
Soli Özel

Rethinking Foreign Aid (From the Inside) 224
Almut Rochowanski

Malaparte! 234
Gary Indiana

The Return of the Future and the Last Man: 244
 An Interview with Ivan Krastev
Carlos Bravo Regidor

* *In this print edition, we've omitted links, footnotes, and bibliographies. You can find the full versions of each essay—complete with references—on [The Ideas Letter website](#).*

Following page:

A man wades through floodwaters in Jakarta's central business district on January 17, 2013.

© Ed Wray/Getty



Dear *Readers*

The term “heterodox” has been bandied around by those that prize heterodoxy for heterodoxy’s sake, rather than as a means to understand something larger, something more critical. So we’ve shied away from using it at *The Ideas Letter*. Nonetheless, it is heterodoxy that represents the mode—and the mood—we’re after. We prize discomfort, not in order to transgress safe spaces, but to deepen understanding. It might seem decadent to have a publication that seeks to inspire questions (and not delineate digestible answers) in a time of polycrisis, let alone dystopia. But we are committed to doing just that.

One of the aims of *The Ideas Letter* has been to showcase the larger intellectual ambitions of the Open Society Foundations’ Ideas Workshop, of which it is an inextricable part. The Workshop’s central mission is to interrogate the world of expression in all of its multifarious guises, and to seek out individuals and institutions that questions authority (as declared a prominent button in my childhood). Authority for the Ideas Workshop means received wisdoms, conventional assumptions, garden variety shibboleths and customary conceits. All are richly deserving of thorough questioning.

At *The Ideas Letter*, we are observing a world that has run aground, a world that is barely recognizable from thirty years ago when the Open Society Foundations first revved its programmatic engines. At the time, adherents of modernization theory considered that open society, civil society, democracy, and the bourgeoisie, all went together hand in glove. Now it's clear that they never really did. And that larger canvas which we call liberalism began to suffer under its own contradictions. Was the last thirty years merely a blip? Have we returned to a norm where states have primacy, where ethnicity and ethno-nationalism hold sway, and where global cooperation is, if not badly attenuated, then dramatically reorientated? The relative decline of America is one key piece of the dynamic, but so is the renewed global role of states (civilizations for some) like China, India, and Brazil.

The Ideas Letter is committed to tackling many of these large and complicated conundrums of our time, from the challenges of the anthropocene to the recasting of the global order; from the impoverishment of democracy and liberalism to the rise of a new right wing; from the polarity of identity and universality to a post neoliberal future. These questions are massive, and the answers sorely contested. Our work has been cut out for us.

We are honored to have reached a milestone for our fortnightly publication: fifty issues. We knew that commencing a new online publication amidst a field saturated with Substacks and their progeny would not be easy sledding. In a time when most folk read on their smart device, length loomed especially large as a challenge. Could three-thousand-word essays be reasonably digested and discussed? It was a tall order. Damn the proverbial torpedoes we forged ahead fully aware of the road we had set for ourselves. Here we are two years later (with some one hundred commissioned essays under our belt) and heartened to look back at what we have contributed.

We have gathered a selection of essays from our first fifty issues, a smorgasbord of intellectual query. A central objective is looking beyond received wisdoms, with the intellectual honesty and courage to challenge accepted narratives. In the first section, Against the Current, we include essays that question the global order, ask what human rights really are, and cast a skeptical eye towards identity politics itself. Another section, Places, takes a geographical approach by offering perspectives from Bangladesh to Tunisia, from China to Sudan—critical histories

that invite us to rethink long-held assumptions. Finally we offer *Meditations*: personal stories of intellectual engagement that carefully weigh perspectives and arguments, seeking not resolution but a proper ambivalence.

The Open Society Foundations, of which *The Ideas Letter* is a necessary part, was founded by a student of Karl Popper's named George Soros. Soros commenced his philanthropy with Popper's central tenets closely at hand. Questioning and interrogating social reality was at the core of Popper's philosophy of science and Soros sought to instantiate those rigorous commitments in his support for what he considered to be open society practice. No surprise then that his Foundation's philanthropic efforts began by scholarships for students, support for critical thinking, and new forms of teaching.

Soros has always practiced what he posited, and we take his example as our guide. Open societies can't be confectioned by good cheer or the right prescriptions. They are enabled through critical thought and expression. It may seem antediluvian to think that criticality, especially self-criticism, can once again become a motor of history. Yet, in a world awash in disinformation, where borders matter increasingly less to solve collective problems, this form of thought, uncomfortable though it can be, is required. We need to stand intellectually ready to meet the moment. *The Ideas Letter* is our small effort to do just that.

THANK YOU FOR JOINING US ON THIS INTELLECTUAL ENDEAVOR.

— Leonard Benardo, senior vice president for the Open Society Foundations

Against the *Current*

People enjoy a day on the shore of the Suez Canal as a container ship passes by in Ismailia, Egypt, on May 27, 2021. © Khaled Elfiqi/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock



Human Rights on the Edge

NICHOLAS BEQUELIN

JANUARY 23, 2025 | THE IDEAS LETTER 32

I.

Can human rights survive the decline of global Western hegemony? Rights supporters will no doubt find the question uncomfortable, if not heretical, for it contravenes the very tenets on which the international human rights enterprise has long rested: its claim to universality, its anchoring in impersonal international norms, and its demonstrated record of trying to hold accountable both non-Western and Western governments for their rights violations. Not only that, but the argument that human rights are in essence a Western imposition has long been rights-abusing governments' weapon of choice to reject international scrutiny and hound rights activists at home.

But a much greater danger than discomfort or fear looms: if the human rights enterprise fails to break free from its current downward spiral, then its influence will continue to decline, and its effectiveness will be more profoundly questioned. Granted, to work in human rights—as I have had the privilege to do for over two decades—requires a certain level of optimism. After all, trying to moralize, or at least temper, the conduct of states through international law is bound to remain forever challenging, contested, and tenuous. Setbacks are to be expected. Nevertheless, there is a point at which optimism can feel like burying one's head in the sand.

As large-scale geopolitical shifts drive profound changes in the international system and states reprioritize sovereignty and security over cooperation and global governance, the human rights movement can no longer afford to ignore how much it has depended on a postwar, Western-dominated international order, and what its decline will mean for the global human rights regime and the modicum of protection it offers to billions of people around the world. The

human rights movement must also examine its own responsibility for clinging to tactics that have long been shown to have diminishing returns.

Many factors explain why support for human rights is evaporating worldwide. Among the most commonly cited are the global retreat of democracy; the growing power and influence of authoritarian countries, especially China, now the world's second-largest economy and military; the ability of states to resist external pressure by turning to other authoritarian allies; the rise of illiberal or populist movements (including in the United States and other long-established liberal democracies); the impact of disinformation and social media on public trust; a perception that human rights fail to address global inequalities; a deadlocked United Nations Security Council that cripples multilateralism; and the cumulative effect of decades of Western double standards in addressing crises and conflicts.

While these issues are widely lamented in human rights circles, the true consequences of the tectonic shifts in the international order, and what they portend for human rights, remain largely unexamined—and are therefore left unaddressed.

The reason for this collective myopia is simple enough. Most debates about the future prospects of human rights tend to look at the merits of the enterprise itself: how much—or how little—has been achieved, and whether normative progress in legislation, international treaties, institution building, and statement of political commitment by governments are likely to turn into real-world progress. These assessments are subjective in nature, if not empirically impossible to ascertain: violations that did not occur because of the restraining effect of human rights standards is not something that can be quantified.

The results of this approach are unsurprising. Those who see progress in the rights enterprise conclude that there is “evidence for hope” (to quote the title of a well-known book by Harvard scholar Kathryn Sikkink). Conversely, those who do not see it as a success predict the “end times” of this “last utopia” (to borrow Yale historian Samuel Moyn's disdainful term). In between, a large cohort of critics offer their own prescriptions for addressing the observable global decline in the moral authority of human rights norms. These range from “reinventing” them to making them more “pragmatic,” “decolonizing” their institutions, or shifting their focus to any number of issues, such as economic inequality, climate change, or strictly “core” civil and political rights.

What these approaches miss is that the fate of human rights depends far less on what the human rights movement does than on the structures of the international order and how they shape the interaction between states—which it ultimately has little control over. As the by-product of a waning postwar order, international human rights must urgently find a way to endure without the benefit of its support if it is to survive in a vastly transformed and much less favorable international system.

Gaza, coming at the end of a long list of failures by the international community to prevent mass atrocities, has made one thing clear: the direction of the human rights enterprise today is no longer a question of advances and setbacks, of incremental progress against historic odds, of determining which tactics might be most effective. It is a question of whether, in the face of a new global order, human rights, broadly defined here to include humanitarian concerns, will manage to remain relevant to international politics, and whether they can retain their place as rubrics of international law and institutionalized diplomacy between states.

Autocracies now account for 35 percent of the world economy, up from 10 percent in 2000. Europe's share of the world economy has been cut in half over the past 25 years. Middle powers that are openly hostile or ambivalent about the international human rights regime, such as Russia, Turkey, India, or the Gulf monarchies, have all emerged as significant economies in their own right. Although China's economy, the second largest in the world, is showing signs of having peaked, it remains the top trading partner of almost all the world's developing countries, as well as their lender of first and last resort, dwarfing financial assistance by the World Bank and the IMF. Whether or not this is a positive development, these changes reflect a radically different distribution of power in the world than there was two decades ago.

The election of Donald Trump will further accelerate this trend as the U.S. retreats from the stewardship of the international system, withdraws its stated (if often erratic) attachment to the cause of liberal democracy, exhibits indifference or contempt for international laws and agreements, bestows legitimacy to regimes culpable of egregious violations, and undercuts the longstanding cohesion among Western powers on issues of global governance. In short, America's unmatched economic prosperity could bring down the same postwar order that it once did so much to construct.

If the human rights enterprise wishes to stay relevant and effective, it must shed its magical thinking about the arc of history ultimately bending toward justice. Instead, it must reckon with the fact that the international order that underpinned its rapid expansion around the world was in large part the product of Western dominance, and U.S. predominance above all. As this hegemony wanes, so will the support of the international system, particularly in respect to institutionalized rights diplomacy, participation in mechanisms designed to monitor the implementation of international rights agreements, and attention to international human rights law.

II.

Human rights largely owe their global spread to being embedded in the United Nations, the central pillar of the postwar international order. Although limited and balanced by the principle of “non-interference in the domestic affairs” of member states, this inscription gave human rights the indispensable foothold it needed to become a legitimate, if always contested, rubric of international diplomacy and, later on, an extensive area of international public law. The simple fact that the number of UN members grew exponentially, from 50 in 1945 to 193 today, guaranteed for a while an almost mechanical diffusion of UN-defined human rights norms (a small price for states to have one’s sovereignty recognized).

In contrast to the prewar world, where state sovereignty was seen as almost absolute, it is no exaggeration to talk about the postwar advent of a “human rights revolution.” Under the impetus of the United Nations, individuals for the first time gained a status under international public law (the laws that govern relations between states). Of equal, if not greater, importance was the diplomatic revolution it unleashed: for the first time in the history of international relations, there was a standard expectation that states would have to answer for the way they treated people under their jurisdiction in the very forum that recognized a critical element of their statehood. The human rights movement subsequently benefited from a series of favorable developments in world politics: decolonization, successive democratic “waves,” the outcome of the Cold War, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Each credited human rights as driving inspiration for change.

If the Western-dominated postwar institutions created the conditions for the global spread of human rights aspirations, much of the progress made in terms of state

commitments to human rights—including the drafting and adoption of international covenants—was the result of astute advocacy from below and often had little to do with state commitment to human rights per se (it was seen, for instance, during the Cold War as a useful ideological cudgel against the socialist camp). States that signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and later ratified international human rights covenants (there are, to date, nine core international human rights instruments supplemented by additional optional protocols) probably did not anticipate that these documents, lacking any enforceable mechanisms, would gain such widespread traction beyond the UN corridors and be used by legal experts and activists to pressure governments to uphold these principles.

What was initially conceived by states as high-minded statements with few hard commitments turned into something quite different: a strikingly popular ideology that has led to the creation of a host of NGOs including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (the two organizations with which I have spent most of my professional life); a major topic in national and international media; and an exponential growth in the number of lawyers, scholars, activists, publications, university programs, and advocates around the world. Many governments came to find out that Robert Sherwood, FDR's speechwriter, was correct in observing that “when you state a moral principle, you are stuck with it, no matter how many fingers you have kept crossed at the moment.”

It is hard to overstate how groundbreaking the expectation that states should be attentive to individual rights and accountable to the community of states is. From the emergence of the modern sovereignty-based Westphalian system in 1648 to the end of World War II, the idea that sovereign states did not have absolute power over the people under their rule was pure anathema. Neither the Concert of Europe in the nineteenth century nor the League of Nations in the interwar period saw the rights of individuals as having anything to do with the rules governing relations between states.

When reports of mass arrests and deportations of Jews and other “enemies of the people” in Nazi Germany reached the U.S. State Department in the early 1930s, the conclusion in Washington was that these policies, however deplorable, were well within Germany's rights as a sovereign state. It took two world wars and the Holocaust to put an end to this absolute view of state sovereignty. But it was not until the 1990s that the features we now recognize as part and parcel

of the international human rights system were put in place, chiefly as a reaction to the Balkan wars and the Rwanda genocide: the quest for accountability, the responsibility to protect populations from atrocity crimes, the establishment of UN-backed investigative mechanisms, and the increased use of economic sanctions against wayward governments.

Today, however, countries opposed to the very principle of human rights accountability are on the ascent. The traditional Western “champions” of integrating human rights into the fabric of international relations no longer have a monopoly on the economic levers of material power. In addition to this loss of leverage, the countries that continue to play the largest role in supporting the postwar human rights system are questioning their own commitment to human rights. In many Western capitals, the question is no longer how to reconcile stated commitments with practice, but whether such commitments should be made at all. The “war on terror,” the ever-harsher treatment of migrants and refugees, and the loss of individual privacy thanks to what the celebrated American sociologist Shoshana Zubboff has aptly called “surveillance capitalism” have already created massive exceptions to human rights obligations, undermining the stature of liberal democracies and undercutting their ability to press non-Western states on rights issues.

The implications are profound. The legitimacy of reciprocal human rights scrutiny will face greater resistance. States, large and small, will further deprioritize human rights diplomacy. Rising global and regional powers may selectively address human rights issues that suit their interests or redouble their efforts to undermine the system. China, which has long identified human rights ideals as a destabilizing factor for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule, is more than likely to continue its efforts to build a large enough coalition of member states ideologically or opportunistically opposed to rights accountability to cripple the human rights functions of the United Nations and ultimately hollow out its mandate. It will find many willing allies among authoritarian regimes. In addition, as climate change and artificial intelligence move to the forefront of global priorities, human rights concerns will be pushed even further down what remains of the international agenda.

The long-term impact of gutting the global human rights system will be severe as more and more governments will feel emboldened to ride roughshod over the

prescriptions of international law, suppress their opposition, curtail the rights of minorities, roll back gender equality, restrict freedom of expression, carve out ever more exceptions to fundamental rights on the pretext of “national security,” and shrug off demands for accountability, confident that they can muster enough support from other states to evade accountability and avoid repercussions. And it will most probably fuel what the head of the International Crisis Group (ICG), Comfort Ero, calls “adventurism”: a willingness by states to use force, engage in armed conflicts directly or through proxies because “you can get away with it.”

These cumulative developments are likely to result in a global decline in the number, resources, and influence of the human rights enterprise, particularly where guarantees of civil society independence remain fragile. This will ultimately tilt the international playing field further in favor of authoritarian systems and toward a return to a conception of state sovereignty that precludes attention to human rights and humanitarian concerns, no matter how consequential they may prove to be for international peace.

III.

Adaptation to a shifting state system is now the core challenge. Pursuing broad social transformations is no longer realistic. The critical function that the international human rights regime has established is the onus it places on governments to justify their actions according to a set of supranational norms about how people should be treated. States’ legitimacy suffers when they contravene these norms, and they risk being ostracized by other members of the international community—something states always seek to avoid given the inherently adversarial nature of international relations.

Likewise, the practical significance of international law to the array of actors involved in vindicating human rights lies not so much in its enforcement in judicial settings or the exact adherence of states to its mandates, but rather in the legitimizing influence derived from invoking the international human rights framework to fight injustices, remove barriers to equality, and press for accountability. Demonstrators in Iran, China, Afghanistan, or Russia harbor little faith of obtaining redress through the courts—yet they mobilize the language of human rights because it allows them to transcend their less-than-hopeful domestic settings by inscribing their struggle in the global context

of world politics and forcing their governments to justify themselves on the international stage.

Indeed, states almost invariably still justify their behavior in terms of compliance with legal norms, while at the same time labeling the actions of their rivals as “illegal” in order to discredit them. As Ian Hurd from Northwestern University has noted: “Governments profess to engage in peacekeeping rather than colonial occupation, enhanced interrogation rather than torture, self-defense rather than aggression.” While this is often not enough to constrain the most powerful states, or those willing to be outcasted, compared to the prewar era the human rights regime seems to have had a moderating effect on state conduct. The price for committing serious human rights violations that can be documented is not nil, as evidenced by the regularity and determination with which authoritarian states systematically harass, silence, arrest, or even murder human rights activists; restrict access to international monitoring organizations; or block UN action.

Human rights advocates’ belief that normative progress leads over time to improvements on the ground overlooks how truly tenuous the place is that human rights has occupied in international relations. This is not to deny that human rights resonate with people irrespective of borders, but the hard reality is that human rights could only have gained its current status in a world order where geopolitics favored the values and preferences of liberal, mostly Western, democracies, backed by the most powerful actor in the international system, the United States. The challenge is not a lack of norms—it is the ability to mobilize support to enforce the existing ones.

The rights movement must also examine its own role in the growing disaffection it faces. Nearly eight decades since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, defending the accomplishments of the human rights enterprise often seems contrived and rings hollow in the face of ongoing atrocities. Once-compelling factors—political, social, and economic—have lost their force amid deepening North/South inequalities, democratic decline, entrenched impunity for powerful states, and blatant double standards. Actions taken to defend the rights of individuals and groups are always worthwhile. But the larger question is whether human rights is still the right enterprise to invest in if the objective is to have systemic influence on state behavior.

Perhaps the mistake has been to take what are essentially metrics—how states treat individuals and marginalized groups, and how they deal with civilians in armed conflicts—and to believe that they could be an instrument of change on their own. Just as we find barometers indispensable for predicting the weather but do not rely on them to shield us from it, human rights metrics help us understand conditions of oppression and discrimination but are not, on their own, able to change them. Especially in authoritarian settings where mobilizing public opinion is both harder and less effective in influencing powerholders.

Or maybe what was misguided was to see the positive role of human rights through the lens of functioning democracies with extensive state bureaucracies. Under these circumstances, human rights do indeed serve indispensable functions, such as providing an ideal to guide the design of fair institutions, a touchstone for the judicial system, or a mechanism to curb discriminations and guarantee minority rights. With goals compatible with the foundational values of democratic regimes, solid guarantees for civil society and media freedom, and the measure of accountability brought by periodic elections, human rights advocates have achieved measurable progress over time.

But regrettably, the world has always been largely nondemocratic, and many states lack robust institutions or the fiscal basis to develop them. Authoritarian systems are, in the last analysis, hardly compatible with many principles of international human rights law, such as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and the right to participate in governance or free elections. Since the full realization of human rights as defined under international law would ultimately require democratization—hence regime change—the net effect of undertaking human rights work in authoritarian settings amounts to opposition of a political nature. Authoritarians of all stripes have always recognized this, and have therefore treated human rights as a threat, human rights activists as political dissidents, and human rights criticisms as politically destabilizing influences. Expecting otherwise was illusory, and the response of authoritarian regimes, “shrinking the civic space,” hounding down rights activists, and whipping up nationalist sentiment—the so-called “Autocrat’s Playbook”—should have been better anticipated and prepared for.

Whatever the explanation for why the rights enterprise may have fallen short, it is no less true that much of the criticism directed at it is based on a fundamental

contradiction: the very standards by which critics claim that human rights have failed are themselves drawn from human rights values. If genocide, crimes against humanity, torture, economic exploitation, colonialism, discrimination and disregard for international law are considered outrageous, that requires holding a value system that is based on the idea that human rights are important and that violating them is wrong. Is blatant impunity for human rights violations evidence that these rights are useless, or on the contrary proof that they remain the fundamental benchmark against which we assess state conduct? In both cases the solution turns out to be the same: what is needed is more, rather than less, attention to human rights. The challenge is how to convince states of doing so.

IV.

The human rights movement must accept that it no longer commands the authority that it once had, and that this trend will continue as states deprioritize rights issues. No matter how universal the human rights enterprise claims to be, the reality is that, in the diplomatic realm, only liberal democracies have consistently backed financially and institutionally its endeavors, irrespective of how they conducted their foreign policy in practice. It is imperative for the human rights movement to anticipate its further decline.

Similarly, for liberal states big and small, the idea that ad hoc groups formed to address specific problems can become an alternative to global institutions will run the risk of ceding more ground to illiberal powers. Global governance requires global participation. Western governments as well as rights supporters must accept that the price for staying relevant will require them to cede the leading role to other countries and actors that are able to forge new agreements, even if this requires making concessions on the content and hierarchy of the principles that underpin international rights diplomacy. Finding new common ground as stewards of this reformed space will be challenging, particularly because publicizing abuses—which inevitably antagonizes states—remains the most powerful tool for highlighting human rights issues.

The main thrust of the human rights enterprise has always been to portray states and governments as beasts to be tamed, named and shamed into doing the right thing. But this was predicated on the presence of structural incentives in the postwar international order that are rapidly disappearing, a dynamic that will

only accelerate with the autocratization of the United States. For human rights to endure, it must somehow find ways to remain an accepted rubric of international diplomacy among non-Western states as well.

Human rights advocates also need to do a better job arguing that respect for rights ultimately empowers rather than disempowers states, and to articulate real solutions alongside condemnations. More controversially, they must distinguish which rights should be prioritized in which context, and refrain from applying the same recipes to fundamentally different types of political regimes. This is a struggle for relevance, a precondition for influence.

There are reasons to be confident in the resilience of human rights aspirations around the world. After all, these aspirations were never driven not by the abstract ideals of the United Nations Charter, nor by some sort of broadly benevolent Western hegemony, but by concrete government abuses, situations of chronic injustice, and the reality of a shared humanity. But aspirations are not enough. The challenge ahead is to find how to channel them into the international system without relying solely on institutional Western patronage before it is too late.

Is It All About Power?

A RESPONSE TO “HUMAN RIGHTS ON THE EDGE”

LUHAN GABEL

FEBRUARY 6, 2025 | THE IDEAS LETTER 33

The Japanese feminist Chizuko Ueno begins her book, *The Ideology in Order to Survive*, with an anecdote. In 1994, Ueno attended an international conference organized by the Japanese progressive journal *Sekai* and the French magazine *Le Monde Diplomatique*. At the end of the conference, a French speaker asked the audience: “Human rights is a concept that originated in France. Do you think it is universal?”

“This is a tricky question to answer,” Ueno thought to herself. “If we answered yes, that means ‘you people in Asia also accept this French concept.’ And it also means to acknowledge French universalism. But if we answered no, that could mean ‘Asians are such un-enlightened people who can’t even accept the concept of human rights.’”

After some pondering, however, Ueno thought of a better response: “Human rights is a special French concept. It claims to be universal, but it cannot reach the level of universality it claims, precisely because the West has had monopoly on it.”

Much has changed in the ensuing 30 years since this debate took place. I can imagine the French speaker in this story now asking herself the same question as Nicholas Bequelin does in his recent *The Ideas Letter* piece: “Can human rights survive the decline of global Western hegemony?”

THE “BEASTLY” POSTWAR ORDER

Instead of blaming the human rights movement itself, Bequelin sees the shifting international order as the decisive factor contributing to its decline. If “the

main thrust of the human rights enterprise has always been to portray states and governments as beasts to be tamed, named and shamed into doing the right thing,” then this will no longer be viable as the “beast tamers” lose their relative power globally and even become beasts themselves.

There has been a tremendous amount of ink spilled on Western hypocrisy, so I am reluctant to say more. But if the assumption is that the human rights system has been adequate so far in controlling beastly behaviors, it would be difficult to explain away the various wars America and Russia started and sustained throughout the postwar period, or the apartheid systems maintained by Israel and China against Palestinians and Uyghurs.

Bequelin is right in suggesting that “the human rights movement must accept that it no longer commands the authority that it once had.” The question is: where did this authority come from in the first place? In his analysis, it came from the relative power of liberal states (even if some of these states had always acted beastly). But, if I can push it one step further, it also came from the willingness of these states to conduct diplomatic coercion in the name of universalism.

A more technical component of his argument is the movement's unwavering faith in “naming and shaming” as a core tactic to get states to submit, which Bequelin warns is a tactic the movement may have to give up as a way to make concessions with non-Western states in order “for human rights to endure.” However, political scientists who study the information systems and public opinion in authoritarian states have long expressed skepticism about the efficacy of naming and shaming. As Jennifer Pan and other scholars demonstrated in a 2022 paper titled “How Information Flowed from the World to China,” “antagonistic content may reinforce rather than threaten government control” because it's less likely to be censored, and fits right into the government's domestic narrative that the West cannot tolerate the rise of China.

If the authority of the human rights enterprise comes from beastly power itself, and naming and shaming does not even work, then what do we have left?

What is missing in this power-centric analysis is a deeper reflection on the movement's own reliance on the postwar power configuration, which it had taken for granted until recently. While human rights activists often consider

themselves as promoters of universal values, they inevitably play a supportive role in the “soft power” campaign for the U.S. and its allies. Politics aside, what does it mean to lose the power of monopolizing the language of human rights?

If optimism is to prevail, it should not come from a mundane acknowledgement that this work is “forever challenging,” and therefore “setbacks are to be expected.” (In other words, have faith in human rights. It will bounce back!) The danger and the opportunity are one and the same: if the human rights system wants to create real moral authority, true universalism has to first challenge Western hegemony itself. We need to recognize the agency of countries that found themselves in a postwar order that they did not create, and to understand, while recognizing the unequal nature of this playing field, why would they continue to engage in multilateral spaces. What are the practical, political, and ideological reasons for doing so?

UNIVERSALISM VS SOVEREIGNTY: AN OLD DEBATE

Bequelin observes that the growth of UN membership, from 50 in 1945 to 193 today, transformed the global space of human rights diplomacy while allowing human rights principles to “diffuse mechanically.”

Without a contextual analysis, it can be difficult to understand how the power dynamics in multilateral spaces shifted. If we zoom in on the largest “growth spur” in the history of the UN, one cannot ignore why the number of members more than doubled between 1945 (51) and 1961 (104): there were three dozen or so new states in Asia and Africa that had achieved independence from their European colonial rulers. Their paths to join the “big boys’ table” was anything but straightforward.

The case of the People’s Republic of China is also instructive. It had no place at the UN until 1971. Since 1945, the Republic of China, whose central government retreated to Taiwan after losing the civil war to the Communists in 1949, was the sole representation of China, and a permanent founding member of the Security Council. Starting from the early 1960s, Albania (a key ally of the PRC due to their shared disdain for the Soviet Union) began an annual resolution advocating for the PRC to join the UN, with growing support from African nations. Fearing

the enlargement of the Communist bloc, the U.S. introduced the “Important Question Resolution,” which required a two-thirds vote from the General Assembly in order to raise the threshold for resolutions advocating for a PRC seat at the UN to be passed. However, by the time Nixon became the president, he desperately wanted to end the Vietnam War therefore needed China on his side. The administration began secretly courting leaders of the PRC by promising a seat at the UN and moving U.S.-China relations toward normalization. The ROC became a secondary concern.

China knows this history well. And as historians begin to tap into archival materials that are becoming available in the U.S., an awareness is growing in Taiwan as well about how and why the ROC lost its seat in 1971. Given this history, it is not outrageous that a government like China’s would consider the “international community” a formidable power wielded by outsiders in order to meddle in its own domestic politics. It would also be understandable if Taiwan no longer wanted to engage in multilateral spaces for similar reasons. (It was, after all, Chiang Kai-shek who gave up Taiwan’s seat at the UN out of a sense of disgrace, in the fashion of “宁为玉碎，不为瓦全”: “better to be a piece of broken jade than an intact tile.”) So why do both the PRC and the ROC today still care about their involvement in international spaces, including ones dedicated to human rights?

For countries that gained their independence after the Second World War, they did not join the UN so they could be dominated by an international order they did not create. Understandably, governments of these countries would not be happy with their former colonizers questioning their newly established sovereignty—their legitimacy and their relationship with their own population—through grating declamations of “universality.” They joined in the hope of being able to exercise their agency by making the multilateral space reflect their history, ideas, and interests.

The human rights bargain is as contradictory as it is aspirational. It asks that countries voluntarily give up elements of their sovereignty in order to gain something meaningful: not only survival and mutual respect, in a realpolitik sense, but also for their nation’s identity to be rooted in a basic framework of justice. The story a nation tells its citizens is always a key element of its legitimacy.

Anyone who understands the history of decolonization will notice something crucial about how countries engage in multilateral spaces. In making a government legitimate, it is just as important to protect the sovereignty of one's own nation as it is to adhere to an international framework of justice, equality, and accountability.

That framework aspires to answer an important set of questions: What is there to be done when individual rights are harmed by the actions (or the lack of action) of a government? What is the responsibility of the international community? Who contributes to this community? How does it mediate between individuals and their government? Not only does answering these questions demand new ways of thinking about power dynamics between nations, it also demands ongoing intellectual debates about the fundamental philosophy that undergirds that human rights system. It is only through these debates that states can see human rights values as their own—and therefore *truly* universal.

This does not mean the international rights regime should make the strategic decision on whether to empower or disempower a particular state. Learning about local context and having a dynamic understanding of the role of the state in the realization of rights should be a precondition. If done right, this may very well subvert the very notion that the function of the rights regime is “to police the public-private divide,” by claiming that “the purpose of political power is to subserve private power and to enable the free interaction of notionally free individuals in civil society,” as the legal scholar Gerard Quinn writes.

Are we ready for the kind of debate that may shake the very foundation of liberal values?

PROTAGONISTS AND PATRONS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Inspired by the question from France, Ueno and other Japanese scholars continued their discussion in scholarly journals and popular magazines in Japan. In one essay, she wrote that “it is a naïve Enlightenment perspective to see the contemporary history of human rights as a process of expanding the rights already enjoyed by the privileged to others across class, gender, and race.” In other words, to consider human rights standards as akin to ISO standards—created by experts, waiting to be “diffused mechanically”—is exactly the wrong

approach. The point of human rights struggles is not about bringing everyone to the status of the oppressor.

Bequelin is wise in advising, at the end of his essay, against the continuous reliance on “institutional Western patronage.” This does not necessarily mean finding new patrons. China, with its newfound economic and technical prowess, still prefers sovereignty over universalism, despite the Communist Party’s new language around “人类命运共同体: a human community with a shared future” and all the pearl-clutching in the West about how it is taking over multilateral spaces in the absence of the U.S.

That said, China is directing global conversations away from the human rights paradigm towards climate change, economic development, and finding technological solutions to social issues. Bequelin lamented: “as climate change and artificial intelligence move to the forefront of global priorities, human rights concerns will be pushed even further down what remains of the international agenda.” But seeing rights as a separate agenda, competing for global attention, has been problematic all along. The future of the rights regime will not be in its own legal universe, but one that depends on finding its relevance in other conversations.

This is also a question of positioning. For people whose homes and ancestral land are being swallowed by rising sea levels or raging wildfires, for people who are surveilled and exploited by an algorithm, what can human rights mean to them? What remedies does it bring?

My own human rights education did not come from a degree in international human rights law, but from the trenches of the disability movement in China. The revolutionary promise of the movement is never simply about including people with disabilities into the status quo, or to have one government replace another government. Instead, disability politics sees rights as relational. It questions the presupposed links between individual capacity, self-sufficiency, and deservingness, and it challenges the assumption of human rationality which individual liberty should be based upon. All of these shake the philosophical ground of liberal values and contest the legalistic approach that is part and parcel to a traditional human rights regime.

In 2008, the Chinese government was among the first batch of nations that became signatories of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The local disability movement quickly interpreted the text through the reality experienced by disabled people in China. None of us ever went to Geneva for treaty reviews, for fear of being in open opposition to the government. But a generation of parents, lawyers, teachers, social workers, and government officials would be trained by Chinese people with disabilities. In the following decade or so, this human rights treaty would be debated, and elements of it translated into local laws and policies in education, employment, health, and criminal justice, even as the treaty review process itself became more bureaucratic than meaningful as time went by.

Nine years after China's adoption, I attended the first domestic CRPD review in Taiwan. (Taiwan adopted five human rights treaties into domestic law, despite being excluded from the official treaty review processes.) I was impressed by how normal it seemed to have government representatives seated next to civil society representatives who were critical of their performance. At the same time, I was surprised by how CRPD trainings in Taiwan were rarely conducted by disabled people's organizations. The received wisdom was that lawyers were more qualified to talk about international law, and that there is nothing wrong with disabled people seeing their own rights through the eyes of a legal regime, interpreted by others who do not share their everyday experience.

It is easy to see the limitations in each scenario. But I could not help but notice the silver lining as movements on the ground exercise their agency. For people with disabilities in China, the vacuum left by the lack of professional human rights organizations was the fertile ground where the homegrown disability movement could take control of the revolutionary promise of the CRPD by making a piece of human rights treaty their own. Meanwhile, excluded from the multilateral human rights architecture, the local Taiwanese rights movement brought these debates home and convinced its government that the political identity of Taiwan lies in it being a democracy that respects human rights principles.

Without the benefit of time, it is almost impossible to tell which of these changes are merely bureaucratic and which are part of a deeper social change. But one thing is clear: the international human rights system is not in a position that can

comfortably predict whether people can rewrite their own history, or whether broad social transformation is possible.

TO BE OPTIMISTIC, OR TO BE PESSIMISTIC?

The French philosopher Simone Weil wrote the essay “The Needs of the Soul” in 1943—the last year of her life—for the Free French Resistance Movement as a way to envision a regenerated France once the Germans had been driven back. In her opening paragraph, she writes:

The effective exercise of the right springing not from the individual who possesses it, but from other men who consider themselves as being under a certain obligation towards him. Recognition of an obligation makes it effectual. An obligation which goes unrecognized by anybody loses none of the full force of its existence. A right which goes unrecognized by anybody is not worth very much.

Bequelin’s reflection on the human rights movement’s mistake of taking “metrics” as “instruments for change” is a salient one—documenting rights abuses does not lead to change on its own. He is also right in recognizing that speaking of harms endured is a key step in understanding oppression. But even there, the bigger question remains: Who is the audience of all this speaking?

When the audience is a human rights organization or the international criminal justice system, underwritten by liberal states, victims unavoidably speak the language that they think this powerful machine would understand. Historically, it has always been more difficult for women to articulate the injustice they suffer because when they appeal to the powerful for redress, they face a recognition barrier. Often, the framework they needed to tell their stories truthfully did not exist. This applies to all who are not blessed with political or material power. They are also the intellectual future of the human rights movement as new frameworks come alive through their telling.

Perhaps the international human rights enterprise needs to be less of an authoritative arbiter, floating in a righteous space, holding standards, granting justice, bringing about social changes, with no obligations of its own. Not having the illusion of such an identity may, in the end, be more liberating than devastating.

Further Thoughts

A REJOINDER TO LUHAN GABEL

BY NICHOLAS BEQUELIN

I am deeply gratified that my essay on how tectonic shifts in the world order are likely to impact the human rights enterprise elicited such a thorough and eloquent response from Luhan Gabel. Her critique is both searching and insightful, and I suspect we agree on more than we disagree. But where we do diverge, our differences are significant.

“Is it all about power?” asks LuHan Gabel in the context of human rights. My answer is twofold. As a rubric of international diplomacy, human rights are, regrettably, all about power. Their institutionalization in global affairs was not the inevitable triumph of moral principles, but the result of a particular postwar settlement in which powerful states found it in their interest to make space for them. If the shifting balance of power leads states to withdraw that space, then the human rights system, as we have known it, will inevitably wither.

But when it comes to human rights as a moral and political movement, the answer is more complex. Here, I share LuHan Gabel’s insistence that human rights must not be only about power, but also about the kind of power we seek to build. On this, I suspect we are largely aligned. Like her, I believe that the international human rights movement—and the West more broadly—has never been free of power imbalances, colonial legacies, and moral double standards. Indeed, in my article, I argued that if the movement is to survive, it must forge new covenants that better reflect the needs, priorities, and claims of states outside the West. That is not a concession; it is an imperative.

Yet we part ways in two important respects.

First, I would caution against essentializing countries as if they each embodied a singular, coherent perspective on human rights. Governments are all too eager

to claim that human rights norms are an attack on their culture rather than their policies—not because it is true, but because it shields them from scrutiny. We should not fall into this identitarian trap. The very premise of human rights is that certain aspects of human dignity are not contingent on nationality, ethnicity, or birthplace. A system that allows states to dismiss human rights concerns as a form of external cultural imposition plays directly into the hands of those who benefit from impunity.

Second, while I welcome rigorous debates about the philosophical underpinnings of human rights, I question whether this is what victims of human rights violations most need from the movement at this moment. LuHan Gabel calls for “on-going intellectual debates about the fundamental philosophy that undergirds the human rights system.” Such debates are necessary, but they are also what rights abusers would most like the human rights movement to be doing—rather than documenting violations, exposing perpetrators, supporting domestic rights activists, and holding power to account. To insist that the movement spend more of its energy justifying itself, rather than confronting abuses, is to cede valuable ground to those who would prefer to see it sidelined altogether.

Perhaps the middle ground is best captured by Amartya Sen's observation that a theory of justice “must be more concerned with the elimination of removable injustices rather than defining a perfectly just society.” I believe that is something we could both agree on.

First Principles

BY ARYEH NEIER

Nicholas Bequelin and LuHan Gabel both start with the view that the international effort to promote human rights has declined. In important respects, I agree. The rule of Vladimir Putin in Russia, of Xi Jinping in China, of Narendra Modi in India, and now of Donald Trump in the United States, and of counterparts in a number of countries of somewhat lesser geopolitical significance, has dealt significant

setbacks to the effort to promote human rights internationally. The influence of such rulers extends far beyond the borders of their own countries. For the foreseeable future, it will be very difficult to secure compliance with important human rights norms in many countries. Crimes against humanity and, in two or three cases, even genocide, are now being committed in such widely separated parts of the world as Sudan, Myanmar, the Palestinian Territories, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ukraine, and in China with respect to the Uyghurs. And in many other countries, it is very difficult to curb significant abuses of civil and political rights or to secure accountability for particularly grave abuses.

I think it is important to recognize that despite these developments, there has also been great headway in addressing certain major abuses of human rights in about the last three decades. Apartheid only came to an end in South Africa in 1994 and much of its legacy persists. Much of the progress that has been made in addressing gender equality has also taken place in roughly the last three decades. Before that, the issue was not widely accepted as a legitimate concern of the international human rights movement. The rights of sexual minorities such as gays and lesbians have also advanced significantly in recent years; and the same is true of the rights of the disabled.

An immensely significant advance in the relatively recent period is that the conduct of military forces in both international and internal armed conflicts is now being assessed in accordance with international humanitarian law. Such concerns were hardly ever mentioned when such conflicts as the American war in Vietnam took place in the 1960s and the 1970s, or in connection with such other major conflicts as the Soviet war in Afghanistan in the late 1970s and the 1980s, or the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, or even, more recently, in the Iraq war of the first decade of this century.

Accountability for grave abuses of human rights essentially began in Argentina about four decades ago. It is most highly developed in Latin America where there has been a high level of accountability in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Peru, and Guatemala. There has also been a significant measure of accountability in the countries of the former Yugoslavia; in Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and, to a lesser degree, in a few other countries in Africa. Though the International Criminal Court is under fire by the United States, it is playing a larger role now than previously in its 23-year history.

Though many critics of the international human rights movement and also many of its strong supporters argue that “naming and shaming” has declined in significance, I believe that it remains the most effective means the movement has of promoting its cause. It remains the case that it is in the interest of most governments to claim, or to pretend, that they respect human rights. It serves their purposes so far as trade, educational exchange, tourism, and, most of all, prestige, are concerned. Those few governments that make no effort to portray themselves as respecting human rights are international pariahs. The human rights movement does not have a great many weapons at its disposal. But, in many cases, it is able to gather information on abuses of human rights and thereby, to expose the deceptions of governments that falsely claim to respect rights.

I think it is also important to note that opportunities to make advances in the protection of human rights have recently developed in a few widely separated parts of the world. We do not yet know whether those engaged in valuable efforts in these countries will succeed. They include Syria, which had been one of the most abusive governments in the world during the half century reign by the Assads; Bangladesh, where the rule of Sheikh Hasina had been highly corrupt and highly repressive; and Guatemala, where systematic human rights abuses took place over many years, including genocide according to a UN sponsored “historical clarification commission,” and where a President committed to respect for human rights took office in 2024.

It is important, I think, that the international human rights movement should always question its own performance. I think Nicholas Bequelin has raised important questions and I think LuHan Gabel has provided astute comments. But I am not persuaded that the international human rights movement should make major changes in its ways of trying to achieve its goals.

The Moral Economy of the Far Right

MIRI DAVIDSON

OCTOBER 16, 2025 | THE IDEAS LETTER 50

Of all the criticisms of capitalism, one of the most enduring is the idea that the economy should be moral. French utopian socialists envisaged a solidarity economy in which the hard-working received the true value of their labor. In England, the Chartist slogan of “a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work” still reverberates today. Even Marx, famously seen as an amoral critic of capitalism, contrasted ancient and modern notions of the economy in terms that are surely, at least in some respects, moral: “The ancient conception, in which man always appears (in however narrowly national, religious, or political a definition) as the aim of production, seems very much more exalted than the modern world, in which production is the aim of man and wealth the aim of production.”

But what if one’s morality extends not to “man” or human beings in general, as it did for Marx, but instead to a group limited by national, civilizational, or racial characteristics? Is it not equally possible to envision a moral economy that advocates fair pay, fair trade, social solidarity, and reciprocity within the confines of an identity group and the apparently natural division of labor that structures that group? In fact, today it is the far right that is among the most visible proponents of the idea of a moral economy.

For European New Right thinkers such as the French political philosopher Alain de Benoist, the French theorist and journalist Guillaume Faye, and the Russian political philosopher Alexander Dugin, globalization has ripped the moral heart out of the economy. It has uprooted systems of production and circulation from their native soils, allocating them to the portfolios of transnational elites. In doing so, it has sliced away at the natural bonds that once held communities together: their organic social security systems, ethics of exchange, and traditional work practices. Drained of meaning and spiritual purpose, economies have been

reduced to impersonal mechanisms driven only, in the words of de Benoist, by “the general submission of the world to the market rationale, the reign of quantity, the rationale of profit, the axiomatic force of interest, and the transformation of all values into merchandise.”

This is a strange kind of anti-capitalism. In the first place, it is openly anti-egalitarian. For these thinkers, equality is itself a capitalist concept, an outgrowth of the very reign of quantity and commensurability they seek to overcome. “What is best about equality,” writes de Benoist, “is actually known as ‘reciprocity’ and includes mutual assistance, specific solidarity, and a system of gifts and counter-gifts.” It’s easy to see why reciprocity is a concept so favored by the far right: With its suggestion of concrete, voluntary, and individualized forms of exchange, reciprocity preserves distinctions between parties in the exchange relation—and indeed the whole system of places in which parties are differentially situated—yet it also casts such a relation as an ethical one. In a patriarchy, men can behave chivalrously as a form of reciprocity for women’s submission. In a slave system, masters might imagine themselves and their slaves as behaving according to a principle of mutual assistance. Indeed, gestures of what could pass as solidarity between husband and wife, or master and slave, are the oils that give durability to the whole structure.

Injecting morality back into the economy is therefore not seen, by the European New Right, as requiring the abolition of class. On the contrary, class *is* morality. Classes are, as in the corporatist imaginary, distinct and complementary facets of the social body, working together like organs in a living being. Mussolini’s Charter of Labor of 1927 described the Italian nation as “an organism having ends, life, and means of action superior to those of individuals, singly or in groups, of which it is composed.” Similarly, the moral economy of the European New Right is, in the words of Faye, an “organic economy” based “on the precept that the economy ought to function as a living organism, hierarchical and harmonious.” What is immoral instead is any project that aims to engineer a society of equals, which in doing so can only destroy their differences. But isn’t equality a project of guaranteeing conditions for our individual and collective flourishing, and doesn’t such flourishing take place in inevitably different ways? No. The matter is simple: Equality means uniformity, and a society without classes is necessarily one trapped in what de Benoist calls “the ideology of sameness.”

This is, further, a kind of anti-capitalism that seems less perturbed by capitalism's production of hunger, unfulfilled needs, or unnecessary suffering than by its effects as an aesthetic or cultural regime. In this respect, the European New Right's critique of capitalism finds its roots in a much older personal hatred of the bourgeoisie expressed by aristocratic critics of capitalism and utopian socialists alike. The bourgeoisie is seen as a uniquely cold, calculating, and intellectualizing class (note the strong anti-Jewish coding), capable of extracting the beating heart from every living thing it touches. Through the hand of this bourgeoisie, the bonds of communal life are eviscerated by the abstract rights of the individual, interpersonal connections are transformed into bureaucratic procedures, and traditional modes of reciprocal exchange are replaced by transactions between self-maximizing agents. Money created an entirely new way of thinking, according to the German philosopher Oswald Spengler, writing in the 1920s ("There is monetary thought, just as there is mathematical and juristic."); not only do we think *about* money all the time, we think *through* its abstract and homogenizing logic. As de Benoist writes, "all European history can be read as a history of the rise of the bourgeoisie" and the progressive establishment of bourgeois values such as "individualism (against the significance of social relations), the cult of efficiency and utility (against the ethic of honour), and the normalisation of interest (against charity and gifting)."

While this attack on bourgeois culture contains many elements that people on the left can agree with, the European New Right locates the roots of the current "amoral" economy not in private property or alienated labor but in a much more diffuse worldview identified as materialism. Both a philosophy and a lifestyle, materialism privileges economic determinants above other drivers of historical change, bodily satisfaction above all other aspects of wellbeing, and quantitative logics above all other forms of human understanding.

For Dugin, the capitalist era truly started when "each issue began to be measured by its price" and when "Economic cycles and monetary instruments became the common measure, replacing spirit, knowledge, will, force." Against what it sees as the equivalent materialisms of Marxist socialism and American consumer capitalism, the European New Right proposes to revive a variant of the "third way" socialism proposed by the National Bolsheviks, Strasserites, and neo-socialist Nazi collaborators active in the interwar years.

The Belgian political theorist Jean Thiriart, an important influence on de Benoist, Dugin, and Faye, describes this as a “communitarian socialism” that would be based on free enterprise and economic growth while avoiding monopolism, bureaucracy, welfarism, and the nihilism of consumer culture. In his manifesto *Europe: An Empire of 400 Million*, first published in 1964, Thiriart insists that should this project succeed, “European society will not have fewer automobiles or fridges than the materialist Yankee or Communist societies, but it will have in addition an ethical aim, a Promethean will, for which Russians and Americans manifest no appetite, no attraction.”

This analysis of capitalism brings the economic thinking of the European New Right close to the most well-known of the moral economists, Karl Polanyi. Polanyi, too, understood capitalism as the domination of an economy that had become untethered from social life and the metastasis of its calculative rationality into every corner of human society. To make this argument, which was at the center of his *The Great Transformation* (1944), Polanyi drew from a range of anthropological writings about pre-capitalist economies. The management of subsistence by such societies was so deeply embedded in their religious and moral fabric that it was difficult to refer to them as “economies” at all. He argued that among tribal societies, for example, one witnessed “the performance of all acts of exchange as free gifts that are expected to be reciprocated though not necessarily by the same individuals,” regulated by magical rites. Moreover, the practices of many such societies seemed to display the very reverse of economic self-interest. Since survival depended on not isolating oneself from the group, the need to uphold prestige and social standing overrode any desire for individual accumulation. “Man’s economy, as a rule,” Polanyi concluded, “is submerged in his social relationships.”

With the industrial revolution, a qualitative change took place. “Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system,” wrote Polanyi. The development of large-scale machinery ushered in, for the first time, an economic system defined by the self-regulating market. As commodity relations became generalized, the market began to determine prices of its own accord. Individual acts of buying and selling congealed into a system of measurable laws, and the market gained a rationality of its own, autonomous

of the values of the society that had generated it. The whole of society had to be reorganized around this self-regulating market. What this meant, in Polanyi's view, was "no less than the running of society as an adjunct to the market." Subordinated to the market's logic, human motivations became reduced to hunger or greed. Land, as inextricable from humans as their hands and feet, became real estate. Labor, once inseparable from the organizations of "kinship, neighbourhood, profession, and creed" was replaced by an atomizing "freedom" of contract. The entire social and cultural organization of peoples, in Europe and in the colonized countries, was liquidated. The economy became amoral, disembedded from cultural norms and obligations as well as from social needs.

Like Polanyi, the European New Right understands capitalism in terms of the disembedding of the economy from society and the subsequent domination of this economy over a world of organic social values. Sometimes with direct reference to Polanyi and sometimes without, de Benoist, Dugin, and Faye all reiterate that in "traditional" societies, the economy was embedded in, and hence subordinated to, the spiritual or moral organization of society. "All traditional societies," de Benoist tells us, "have held economic and market values... as inferior or subordinate values for the reason that the economy above all should not become autonomous in relation to the social sphere..." Dugin similarly maintains that in the system of values of "traditional society," "the economy had a secondary quality," relegated to the realm of consequences rather than causes. "The ontology of the economy was a particular case of the ontology of the society (politics), and this in turn a particular case of the ontology of the Church."

Often, these statements about "traditional societies" are infused with references to the so-called trifunctional hypothesis derived from the mythographer and linguist Georges Dumézil, according to which Indo-European society was composed of three "functions": the sovereign function (represented by the priest class), the martial function (represented by the warrior class), and the economic function (represented by the laborer class, ruled over by the other two). For the European New Right, another way of understanding the modern age is as the epoch in which the values of the commoner—economic values—have come to dominate those of the warrior and priest classes: a world turned upside down.

While the European New Right's analysis of capitalism has Polanyian features, its vision for a re-embedded economy is in many ways opposed to his. Against the

social-democratic, redistributive orientation of Polanyi, the European New Right instead interprets the re-embedding of the economy to society as the economy's subordination to the spiritual and ethical purpose of the ethno-state or of a given civilization. What would this look like in practice? First, in place of the welfare state, which these thinkers consider to be artificial—and see as converting a responsible, solidaristic population into a passive recipient of state benefits—they insist that the “organic” social solidarity networks of family, church, co-ops, and local and professional associations must be revived. Second, they argue that the economy must be subordinated to politics—to the power of the sovereign. We must return, as Faye puts it, to a “political economy.” For Faye, as well as Dugin, this amounts to a third-way economic model combining privatization with nationalization in strategic cases, overseen by a strong state that does not administer day-to-day economic life but that steers it with an overall eye to the nation's moral purpose.

Third, and most important, re-embedding the economy is seen by de Benoist, Dugin, and Faye alike to require a project of autarky—not at the level of the nation-state but rather in what they all call, referencing Carl Schmitt, the “great space,” or a civilizational bloc. Such a bloc (“Eurasia” for Dugin, “European civilization” for de Benoist and Faye) is a moral entity in its own right. It must reclaim its status as a unitary whole that is racially homogeneous, territorially coherent, and spiritually motivated. To ensure its self-sufficiency, tariffs, trade barriers, and other protectionist measures must be implemented, to establish “reciprocity” in external trade (for de Benoist) or even zero foreign trade (Dugin's preference). Within the bloc, however, trade should be largely free, except where strategically important sectors, such as energy or raw materials, are involved.

This vision is not incompatible with certain aspects of neoliberalism at the domestic level. Yet it also presents itself as the primary opposition to the globalized neoliberal order. Against the ravages of international speculation and foreign predatory markets, great-space autarky revives the moral coordinates of the economy. If implemented, labor “will be able to find an intrinsic value, a human value, independent of speculation and extortion,” Thiriart writes. Wages and work will no longer be degraded by immigration and offshoring, and the “producers,” not the parasites, will be placed at the heart of economic life. This vision of morality requires the elimination of all those who do not conform to its civilizational goals, whether by their unlucky birth or their injudicious choices.

Polanyi finished writing *The Great Transformation* in the early 1940s. At that moment, he believed that liberal civilization had collapsed. The market system had broken down as a result of the many “disruptive strains” he claimed it had itself wrought through its colonization of human society. Yet he was proven wrong. Stalinism and Nazism turned out not to signal the demise of the market system; instead of collapsing, it revived itself in the postwar decades and took on a vigorous new form with the rise of neoliberalism starting in the 1980s. This suddenly made Polanyi’s work hugely popular, after having been largely overlooked in the postwar decades. It was around this time that the European New Right (mostly through the organization GRECE, le Groupement de recherche et d’études pour la civilisation européenne) began to form its analysis of capitalism as an essentially amoral free market economy, underpinned by the doctrine of economic liberalism, that increasingly encroached on the organic moral life of human communities. According to this line of thinking, capitalism is a force that moves in just one direction: It rationalizes, standardizes, fragments, and liquidates. It commodifies the uncommodifiable, melts all that is solid into air, and reduces tightly organized ethical systems to the atoms of exchange value.

All this tells only part of the story, however. At the same time that neoliberalism was extending the logic of the self-regulating market ever further into the depths of the human soul, it was also involved in an unprecedented effort to recenter the family as the main unit of social reproduction and capital accumulation. As the sociologist Melinda Cooper traces in *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (2017), policies such as President Bill Clinton’s 1996 Welfare Reform Act reallocated large parts of the US welfare budget to tracking down the biological fathers of children on welfare so as to extract child support payments from them, while sanctioning mothers if they did not cooperate. Financial incentives were offered to promote marriage, and states were rewarded financially for reducing the number of illegitimate children. Such initiatives ran alongside fiscal policies aimed at shifting the mechanisms of wealth acquisition from income to assets, setting the groundwork for a class system that today pivots on home ownership and intergenerational inheritance—a development that has only contributed to unforeseen levels of property speculation, causing the very social dislocation that the far right blames on migration.

It would be hard to find a clearer case of how morality and the market are inextricably bound together. But throughout its history, capitalism has produced values as much as it has dissolved them. Traditions have been invented, nations have been composed, and racial differences have been fabricated wherever they help to fend off challenges to private property rights and the mechanisms for capital accumulation. As Cooper argues, what Polanyi saw as the countermovement against the market was merely part of its internal dynamic, involving moments of commodification and decommodification, including the destruction and production of moral values. For this reason, she writes, “economic liberalism and political conservatism—even when the latter speaks the language of anticapitalist critique—are equally constitutive expressions of modern capitalism.”

Seen from this perspective, the moral economy of the European New Right need not pose any real challenge to capitalism as such. Rather, it envisions a reconfiguration of the current capitalist order, now badly malfunctioning in its liberal democratic mode, into something new. While the final character of this new order is not yet possible to predict, it is beginning to cohere around distinct predicates: no longer globalization, but rather a multipolar map of civilizations; no longer formally equal citizens, but ethnically identified “producers”; no longer the big state, but the strong state. Behind each of these shifts lies a powerful ideology—supported by a far-right media ecosystem in which thinkers like de Benoist, Dugin, and Faye play a hugely influential role in fortifying what they see as vulnerable national or ethnic communities against the ravages of a wild, blind, and amoral market. A will to push back against the trajectory of a nihilistic consumer society is part of this imaginary. (Consider the often-quoted 2019 speech of Giorgia Meloni, now Italy’s prime minister: “When I am just a number, when I have no identity, when I have no roots, then I will be the perfect slave at the mercy of big financial speculators. The perfect consumer!”) So are the moves taken by far-right regimes across Europe to pursue a selective model of social welfare targeted at those they consider to be deserving recipients, such as the white, male breadwinner and the heterosexual, fertile (and, again, white) family over other, more precarious, groups. Even President Trump, hardly someone who can be identified with the idea of a moral economy, framed his Liberation Day announcement in April as a grand act of resistance to globalist plunder (“For decades, our country has been looted, pillaged, and plundered by

nations near and far, both friend and foe alike”) and as a setting-straight of the unfair terms of the global marketplace. “Reciprocal,” he said. “That means they do it to us and we do it to them.”

The Great Reckoning

WHAT THE WEST SHOULD LEARN FROM CHINA

KAISER KUO

OCTOBER 16, 2025 | THE IDEAS LETTER 50

The world feels unsettled, as if history itself were changing tempo. The familiar landmarks of the modern age are blurring, slipping away, and the stories we once told ourselves about progress and power no longer map cleanly onto the terrain before us. What we are living through seems, with each new day, less like a passing rearrangement of power, less like a momentary realignment of nations. We sense something deeper and more enduring: a transformation whose outlines we are only beginning to discern. History no longer feels like something unfolding behind us but something rushing toward us, urgent and impossible to ignore.

The economic historian Adam Tooze, reflecting on his recent, intense engagement with China, put it to me in July with characteristic directness: “China isn’t just an analytical problem,” he said. It is “the master key to understanding modernity.” Tooze called China “the biggest laboratory of organized modernizations there has ever been or ever will be at this level [of] organization.” It is a place where the industrial histories of the West now read like prefaces to something larger.

His observation cuts to the heart of what makes this moment so difficult to process. We have witnessed not merely the rise of another great power, but a fundamental challenge to assumptions long embedded in Western thought—about development, political systems, and civilizational achievement itself. We simply haven’t yet found the intellectual courage to face it.

This reckoning touches all of humanity, but it falls especially hard on the developed world and hardest on the United States, where assumptions about exceptionalism and hierarchy are most exposed and most fiercely denied. The familiar framing of China as “rising” or “catching up” no longer holds. China is now shaping the trajectory of development, setting the pace economically, technologically, and

institutionally. For Americans especially, the deeper psychic shock lies in the recognition that modernity is no longer something they authored and others merely inherit. That story has outlived its usefulness.

The denial, the deflection, and the anxious overreaction so often seen in Western discourse are symptoms of that dislocation. Yet the reluctance to acknowledge this shift extends beyond governments, media narratives, or expert consensus. It includes people who've spent years thinking about these issues. I have been as susceptible as anyone—tempering big claims, second-guessing implications, staying in safer territory even when the evidence has been pointing in this direction for some time. There's always a "but" when it comes to recognizing China's accomplishments, a reflex to tick off the costs and enumerate the failings, to pull back just when the scale of transformation becomes clear.

The greater risk, I now believe, lies in saying too little.

This essay doesn't rehearse the familiar bill of particulars on China—constraints on political pluralism and independent media; expansive security powers and preemptive detention; pressure on religious and ethnic expression; and episodes of extraterritorial coercion—not because those concerns are trivial, but because the task here is different. We've all learned to recite that litany, as a way of protecting ourselves from what real comparison might imply. The aim here is to confront, with intellectual honesty, what China's achievements oblige us to reconsider about modernity, state capacity, forms of political legitimacy, and our own complacencies. Recognizing real costs can coexist with taking the magnitude of transformation seriously. This argument asks us to face squarely what has been accomplished and then measure ourselves against it.

And let me be clear: This reckoning is not a surrender. It is not an argument for abandoning liberal values, declaring authoritarian systems superior, or slavishly imitating features of China's governance. It is instead a call for the kind of frank, sober assessment that genuine confidence requires—the willingness to acknowledge challenges directly, to learn from others' successes even when they unsettle our assumptions, and to strengthen our own institutions through clear-eyed recognition of their shortcomings rather than defensive denial of their failures. Liberal democracy is indeed undergoing a profound crisis, but that crisis need not be terminal. The question is whether we will meet it with

the rigorous self-examination that has historically enabled democratic renewal, or retreat once more into the comforting myths that have blinded us to both our weaknesses and our rivals' strengths.

THE SCALE WE STRUGGLE TO PROCESS

If we are to speak honestly, we must take stock of what China has achieved in human terms. The numbers are staggering, but numbers alone cannot capture their significance. Since the early 1980s, according to the World Bank, China has lifted nearly 800 million people out of extreme poverty, accounting for roughly three-quarters of the global reduction in poverty during that time. Life expectancy in China, which stood at only 33 in 1960, reached 78 in 2023; life expectancy at birth in the United States in 2023 was 78.4. Nearly every household in China has had access to electricity for about a decade. Secondary school enrollment is now nearly universal. Per capita income has risen from just a few hundred dollars at the start of reform in the late 1970s to over \$13,000 today.

But perhaps most revealing of the struggle to process the scale is what has happened in the energy sector. China now accounts for more than half of the world's installed solar and wind capacity combined. Roughly three-quarters of all renewable energy projects currently underway worldwide are either in China or being driven by Chinese contractors. About 30% of global emissions come from China, but so too does much of the growth in decarbonization technology. China has transformed the global energy transition by demonstrating that massive and rapid deployment could make renewable energy cost-competitive worldwide.

Whatever one thinks of China's political system, these are the hallmarks not of a failing state, but of a society whose people are, in many respects, flourishing as never before.

THE INTELLECTUAL CHALLENGE OF ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The scale of China's transformation poses what might be called the intellectual challenge of acknowledgment. Even those of us who have followed China closely, who pride ourselves on seeing past Western prejudices, have found it difficult to fully absorb what we are witnessing. The familiar frameworks—middle-income traps, authoritarian brittleness, inevitable convergence with

liberal norms—offer cognitive comfort even as they fail to explain what is actually happening.

The intellectual historian Joseph Levenson, in his magnum opus *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate* (1958–65), argued that China's quest was to find a path that could deliver wealth and power in a way both authentically Chinese and objectively effective. For over a century, Chinese intellectuals grappled with this challenge: how to achieve modernity without losing cultural identity, how to become powerful without abandoning what made China distinctive.

That historical chapter may now be closing. China appears to have found that path. The system powering its success is an extraordinarily intricate alloy of Confucianism, Leninism, technocratic authoritarianism, state capitalism, and market mechanisms. Yet based on the many conversations I've had with Chinese intellectuals, they now recognize that China has attained wealth and power in a distinctly Chinese way. If Levenson's framework is correct, we are witnessing not merely China's rise but its graduation from the central quest that defined its modern history.

Even within China, though, this transition—from the pursuit of modernity to its realization—remains difficult to accept in full. Many Chinese intellectuals I've talked to or have read, however patriotic and confident in their country's accomplishments, still seem unprepared to reckon with what those accomplishments mean. The idea that China has moved beyond catching up to redefining development itself challenges habits of mind formed over generations. For intellectuals conditioned to see the West as a permanent reference point—even if they view it critically—the prospect that China might now be setting terms rather than responding to them demands a fundamental reorientation that has not yet fully occurred.

China's apparent resolution of its modern quest has profound implications. If China is no longer seeking its path to modernity but has become one of modernity's principal architects, then the questions that have long organized our thinking about China—Will it democratize? Will it converge with Western norms? When will the contradictions catch up with it?—may be the wrong questions entirely.

But if China has indeed moved beyond its central quest, new questions must take their place. Chinese intellectuals are grappling with challenges that have

no modern precedent: What kind of global power should China become? How should a civilization that has regained confidence in its own path engage with a world still organized around Western institutions and assumptions? China's leaders speak of building a "community of common destiny for mankind," but the practical meaning of such concepts remains deliberately vague. The deeper questions are harder still: Can a civilization that has never fit comfortably within a Westphalian order find a way to work inside it, or will it seek to reshape the norms themselves? How does a country that has achieved prosperity through state-led development share that model without appearing to compromise others' sovereignty? These are the questions that preoccupy Chinese strategists today—questions not of catching up but of leading responsibly.

The questions the West now faces are equally challenging, if not harder: What does modernity look like when it is no longer exclusively Western in conception? How to understand development when the most successful model does not conform to liberal democratic assumptions? What happens when the world's second-largest economy operates according to principles that upend core Western beliefs about how prosperity is achieved and sustained?

Levenson's framework offers a lens for understanding the United States' current predicament as well. A civilization, in his formulation, is stable when what is *mine* (*meum*) and what is *true* (*verum*) remain in harmony—when a society's inherited assumptions about how the world works align with observable reality. Instability emerges when these fall out of alignment, when what tradition insists must be true no longer accords with what one can plainly see. This was China's crisis after the Opium Wars: The painful recognition that Confucian certainties about China's centrality and civilizational superiority could not explain Western gunboats in the Pearl River. It took nearly two centuries of intellectual upheaval, political experimentation, and often violent transformation for China to resolve that tension.

The question now is whether the shocks more recently delivered by China's rise—less violent but no less disruptive to foundational assumptions—are pushing the United States toward a similar reckoning. When a nation that was supposed to remain forever behind suddenly leaps ahead in renewable energy, artificial intelligence, and infrastructure; when authoritarian capitalism proves more adaptive than was predicted; when "the end of history" reveals itself as premature triumphalism—the gap between *meum* and *verum* widens. The choice, as China

learned over its long modern ordeal, lies between the painful work of intellectual reconstruction and the increasingly desperate defense of comfortable illusions.

The Chinese crisis of the mid-to-late 19th century and the American crisis of the early 21st are not, of course, identical, but there are some historical rhymes worth noting. In the 1860s and 1870s, Chinese reformers of the Self-Strengthening Movement grappled with a civilizational challenge through the formulation of *yong* and *ti*—the idea that China could adopt Western techniques and technologies (*yong*) and harness them in the preservation of its essential Chinese character (*ti*).

Today, something remarkably similar is playing out in reverse across the American political spectrum. From industrial policy to direct government stakes in strategic companies like Intel, U.S. policymakers increasingly embrace methods that look suspiciously like Chinese state capitalism, all while insisting that they are defending rather than abandoning free-market principles. Under both the Biden administration and now in Trump's second term, coordinated government-industry partnerships have emerged that represent a quiet but decisive shift. There may not have been a national conversation about it, but the United States has unmistakably entered the domain of industrial policy it once disdained.

To be sure, the United States has long practiced forms of industrial policy—from the construction of transcontinental railroads to the Manhattan Project and the space race—but it has generally done so while insisting that it was something else. For decades, American economic orthodoxy treated state planning as both inefficient and un-American, deriding other nations' developmental models—whether Japan's rise through its Ministry of International Trade and Industry; the coordination of *chaebol*, or conglomerates, in South Korea; or China's state capitalism—as violations of free-market faith. Yet with the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022, the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, and now Trump's explicitly protectionist revival of state-driven economics, the United States has abandoned that pretense. What once marked the ideological boundary between “us” and “them” has quietly dissolved. Just as Chinese reformers once argued they could selectively borrow Western methods without compromising Chinese civilization, U.S. leaders now claim they can adopt Chinese-style state intervention without betraying U.S. values. History suggests that such experiments in selective borrowing are rarely as tidy as their architects imagine.

CHINA DID NOT CAUSE AMERICA'S CRISIS

Just as historians of modern China have in recent decades wisely revised the old impact-response paradigm that once dominated narratives of “China’s encounter with the West”—moving beyond simply registering an external shock to centering the domestic Chinese factors that shaped the country’s transformation—so too should Americans, and other Westerners, resist the temptation to attribute America’s current malaise primarily to Chinese provocation. The seeds of self-doubt were sown long before: the quagmires of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the 2008 financial crisis, Washington’s polarization and paralysis, the shameful spectacle of the attack on the Capitol in January 6, 2021, and the visible fraying of civic cohesion.

But China has magnified that doubt, and it has done so in unsettling ways. Seeing a rival building, educating, and innovating at the scale that China has done casts U.S. dysfunction into sharper relief. Every infrastructure breakdown, every squabble over basic funding, every government shutdown feels more noticeable in contrast to China’s rapid and extensive transformation.

What might have been another season of U.S. introspection has morphed into something more acute: the painful recognition that another system, however flawed, has delivered results on a scale that the United States has not. This is to me, as an American, a source of not inconsiderable anguish. I take no pleasure in witnessing what my country has become—a nation I love, torn apart by political tribalism so intense and so toxic that I fear it may be beyond repair, at least in the coming, and critical, decade.

But confronting this crisis requires looking squarely at what seems so unsettling about China’s success. As Chas W. Freeman, a retired senior U.S. diplomat, has observed, “Americans now exhibit an odd combination of self-doubt, complacency, and hubris”—a mix that has prevented the kind of clear-eyed assessment the moment requires.

Part of what sticks in the United States’ craw is, uncomfortably, racial. It would be surprising if it weren’t. The twilight of white privilege in an increasingly diverse country maps onto the twilight of American hegemony in an increasingly multipolar world. Just as white ethnonationalism represents an irrational

response to the perceived erosion of white privilege domestically, so too does the lurch toward a new Cold War represent an irrational response to the perceived erosion of U.S. privilege globally.

But race is only one current in a larger riptide. To understand why China sticks in the craw, one needs to appreciate the deeper psychological challenge it poses to U.S. identity. For generations, Americans inhabited a national story that assured them they would always be first in the domains that matter most—innovation, technology, military might, economic dynamism, cultural magnetism. China's achievements have systematically undermined pillar after pillar of American exceptionalism. Deep-rooted and often unconscious hierarchies still position the West as normative and other states as derivative. The moment of recognition and readjustment requires confronting those reflexes.

It was once axiomatic that a dynamic market economy required liberal democracy; China has showcased an authoritarian capitalism that works anyway. It was believed that social media would inevitably liberate the subjects of autocracies; then the Arab Spring fizzled, Edward Snowden reframed surveillance debates, and platform politics went sideways at home. It was assumed that genuine innovation required political freedom; then Chinese firms and labs began producing world-class results while operating within a very different information ecosystem. Each inversion chips away at the catechism. Each surprise compounds the shock.

Western discourse consistently attributes China's achievements to its regime type rather than its substantive capabilities. Breakthroughs by Tencent, BYD, Huawei, or Shenzhen's hardware ecosystem are often explained away as resulting from state diktat rather than design brilliance or the unrivaled speed of co-located manufacturing. That flattening of context feeds the sense that China's ascent is somehow an affront to how the world should work, rather than evidence that the world works differently than was assumed.

THE CLIMATE MIRROR

No global problem mirrors this Great Reckoning more starkly than climate change. A fundamental pattern emerges: evidence accumulating faster than our willingness to absorb it, narratives designed to soothe rather than illuminate, and a collective refusal to revise assumptions that no longer fit the world we inhabit.

The parallels run deep. With climate, we watch wildfire smoke choke our cities, once-in-a-century floods arrive every few years, oceans warm and acidify at alarming rates—and still we avert our eyes, hunting for reasons to delay, deflect, or offload responsibility. In China, infrastructure is growing on a continental scale, technological breakthroughs accumulate, renewable-energy capacity doubles and redoubles—and yet still we find ways to explain that away, minimize it, deride it as overcapacity, and predict its imminent unraveling. Some even dismiss these advances as a hoax. In both cases, we prefer the comfort of familiar stories to the discomfort of genuine reckoning.

The symmetry goes deeper still. Climate change has forced all of us to confront the limits of human mastery over nature—the Enlightenment conceit that humans could harness natural forces without consequence. China's rise forces us to confront the limits of Western mastery over modernity: the potent conceit that only liberal democratic capitalism could deliver sustained prosperity and innovation. Both developments demand that we abandon wishful thinking and face the world as it is. Both reveal how brittle our inherited certainties have become, and how dangerous denial can be.

Climate also illuminates something else: the shift in what constitutes political legitimacy in the 21st century. If legitimacy once rested primarily on procedures and forms—constitutions, elections, parliaments—it now rests increasingly (though by no means exclusively) on performance. What could matter more than the ability to safeguard the very habitability of the planet?

Here, the China paradox becomes instructive. China is simultaneously the world's largest emitter of carbon and the largest builder of renewable energy capacity; it installs more solar and wind power each year than the rest of the world. That contradiction contains a lesson: Legitimacy in this century will not flow from ideological purity but from the messy, uneven, urgent capacity to deliver. Systems will be judged not by the elegance of their theories but by their ability to meet existential challenges.

For Americans, the contrast cuts deep. While they quarrel endlessly over pipelines and transmission lines, China wires continent-spanning grids. While Americans have retreated from global climate leadership—the second Trump administration pulled out again from the Paris Agreement and recently slammed renewable

energy at the UN General Assembly—China has become the indispensable actor in the energy transition. The country that was supposed to be the problem has become essential to the solution, not through moral transformation but through sheer manufacturing and deployment capacity.

This points to another dimension of performance legitimacy that must now be acknowledged: resilience under pressure. For decades, the United States leveraged its dominance over financial systems, technological chokepoints, and global supply chains to coerce adversaries—and occasionally even allies. That leverage is no longer one-sided. China has demonstrated it can withstand such pressure and respond in kind, from its mining of rare earths to its advanced manufacturing inputs. Its response to technological containment—accelerating domestic innovation in semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and other strategic sectors—reveals a system with remarkable adaptive capacity.

Performance legitimacy in the 21st century, then, encompasses multiple dimensions: the ability to deliver prosperity and stability, yes, but also to build at scale, to innovate under pressure, to absorb economic coercion without buckling, and to mobilize resources for global challenges like the energy transition. On each dimension, the contrast between U.S. dysfunction and Chinese capacity becomes harder to ignore.

These achievements come at a moment when not just the United States but many democracies in the West are themselves in crisis. This simultaneity forces an uncomfortable question: Is political legitimacy purely about procedural democracy? Or must it also encompass performance, delivery, competence, and resilience? Can the virtues of technocratic governance—its efficiency, its ability to plan and build and manufacture at scale—be adopted without succumbing to authoritarian temptation?

The answer is no longer self-evident. And that uncertainty is itself part of the reckoning the West faces.

SIGNS OF RECOGNITION

Signs of recognition are beginning to emerge across the U.S. political spectrum. The most vital force in the Democratic Party may be the “abundance” movement

sparked by writers like Derek Thompson and Ezra Klein. While they don't explicitly center China in their analysis, their focus on state capacity, industrial policy, and the need to build more and faster clearly reflects a dawning recognition that the United States' approach to development has been inadequate.

That recognition found its fullest expression in the technology analyst and writer Dan Wang's *Breakneck: China's Quest to Engineer the Future*, arguably the most talked-about, if not the most important, book of 2025 for anyone who thinks seriously about China's trajectory. Wang's argument that technocracy and engineering governance have driven China's success has found an eager audience among Americans finally ready to confront what they had ignored or dismissed.

Even more surprising is the response from parts of the U.S. right. While much of the MAGA movement's interest in China stems from troubling sources—admiration for its ethnic homogeneity, its surveillance capabilities, its authoritarian toolkit—it represents a grudging acknowledgment that China's system delivers results in ways that the United States' increasingly does not. Meanwhile, Silicon Valley accelerationists and tech entrepreneurs, many of whom are now aligned with Trump, openly express what might be called “China envy”—recognition that China's coordination between state and private sectors has produced breakthroughs that fragmentation in the United States has not.

Perhaps most tellingly, recent polling shows a shift among younger Americans in their attitudes toward China. Born long after Tiananmen and constantly exposed on social media to what one friend calls “Chinese infrastructure porn,” they see a country that increasingly looks like the future rather than the past. This generational change may prove more consequential than elite opinion in reshaping how the United States ultimately responds to China's emergence.

In conversations I've had over the last few months in Beijing with professionals spanning various industries, from biotech to automotive, from renewable energy to humanoid robotics, I've heard variations of the same observation: The transformation that has swept through their sectors in China over the past two decades—or even just the past five years—would be utterly unfathomable to anyone who hasn't witnessed it firsthand. They describe returning from conferences in the United States or Europe struck by a disconnect: The tsunami

of transformation coming from China just isn't felt with an urgency remotely commensurate with the scale of the disruption in store.

In China, this moment feels different. Among the intellectuals and cultural figures I encounter during my extended stays there, there's a palpable confidence that wasn't present when I first arrived decades ago. They're not asking whether China can catch up anymore. They've grown up in a country that is already technologically advanced, globally consequential, and proud of its achievements. They see China's ability to weather trade wars, leap ahead in artificial intelligence, and build infrastructure on a continental scale, and they take it as a given that China belongs in the front rank of nations.

That confidence, though it can shade into arrogance, is healthier than the insecurity that once gnawed at the national psyche. It also suggests that China's leaders and citizens alike are beginning to grapple with what it means to be not a rising power but a risen one—with all the responsibilities and expectations that entails and all the anxieties it may yet provoke abroad.

THE RECKONING IS COMING

What should follow from this recognition is not despair but humility before the sheer unpredictability of what comes next. If China has unsettled the West's inherited assumptions about development and governance, so too will the currents rising across the Global South, which are already beginning to reorder expectations in ways that can barely be anticipated.

Technological ingenuity, demographic weight, and political experimentation will emerge from quarters long dismissed as peripheral. The real challenge is not to anchor oneself too firmly to any present arrangement, but to cultivate the intellectual flexibility to adapt when the world changes faster than one's theories can keep up with.

The Great Reckoning may be about China right now, but in the larger arc of history, it is about far more: about a world no longer revolving around familiar centers, about the need to find steadiness without the comfort of inherited myths, about recognizing that the stories some of us told ourselves about modernity may have been too narrow, too self-serving, too small for the world we're actually living in.

Consider what China's trajectory means for countries across the Global South that were told for decades there was only one path to prosperity: the Washington Consensus path of privatization, deregulation, and democratic governance. China offers proof that another model can work: state-led development, long-term planning, massive infrastructure investment, and selective integration with global markets, all while maintaining political autonomy. Whether one admires this model or not, its success cannot be denied, and its implications ripple far beyond East Asia.

This forces all of us to acknowledge that modernity itself—the entire project of human development, technological progress, and social organization that has defined the last several centuries—is no longer the exclusive property of the West. The future is being written in multiple places, according to multiple logics, with results that confound easy categorization.

For Americans especially, that recognition requires abandoning the assumption that they are uniquely qualified to lead, uniquely positioned to judge, uniquely capable of innovation and adaptation. It means accepting that their way of organizing society, however precious to them, is one among several viable approaches to human flourishing.

Yet the United States retains profound sources of strength, chief among them its universities, which remain powerful magnets for global talent even amid mounting political attacks. There are also the vast Chinese diasporic communities whose creativity, mobility, and cultural fluency form connective tissue between worlds. They are not instruments of any single state but participants in a shared global project of knowledge, invention, and exchange. To the extent that a more plural modernity is emerging, it may be these communities, rather than governments, that embody it.

Coming to terms with China doesn't require abandoning one's own values or surrendering one's aspirations. But it does require that the rest of us hold them more lightly, argue for them more persuasively, and demonstrate their worth through performance rather than proclamation. If liberal democracy and market capitalism are indeed superior forms of organization, they should be able to prove that through results, not rhetoric.

Above all, some of us need to stop framing our approach to China in terms of why it can't last, what must go wrong, or when the contradictions will finally catch up with it. The system has worked. It has delivered. Waiting for its collapse is not a strategy; it's a coping mechanism.

The Great Reckoning is ultimately about intellectual honesty: the willingness to see the world as it is rather than as we wish it were, acknowledge achievement wherever it occurs, and learn from success even when it emerges from sources we find uncomfortable. To reckon is to resist denial, accept the evidence of our eyes, and choose candor over illusion.

That is where any genuine reckoning must begin: not with policy prescriptions nor strategic frameworks, but with the simple recognition that the world has changed in ways we're only beginning to understand. What policies should follow? I don't pretend to know. The policy work can only begin after we stop lying to ourselves. The reckoning I'm calling for is perceptual and psychological, not programmatic. We need to see China's achievements clearly, without the reflexive "yes, but" that immediately minimizes them, before we can think clearly about what they mean for us. The cope itself is the problem I'm trying to solve.

The world has fundamentally changed. The choice, for the West, is not between resistance and surrender, but between thoughtful adaptation and stubborn denial, between strengthening our institutions through honest self-examination or watching them weaken through willful blindness to new realities.

A New Dependency Theory Moment

MARCOS NOBRE

APRIL 18, 2024 | THE IDEAS LETTER 14

Historical analogies are fashionable, in seemingly *déjà vu* times such as ours. It would be in vain to signal the inaccuracies of these analogies just for the sake of highlighting their imperfections. On the contrary, the more incongruous the analogies, the more we can learn from them.

Some of the analogies currently in vogue reference the end of World War I; others, the Bretton Woods negotiations that culminated in the July 1944 agreements. These two historical events bookmark related historical references that serve as sources for additional analogies: Fascism, Nazism, the New Deal, and the two World Wars; the Soviet Union holds a secondary role, if any.

The analogy of a “New Bretton Woods” or of a possible “Bretton Woods moment” had been circulating for quite some time when IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva stated in October 2020: “Today we face a new Bretton Woods ‘moment.’” In that vein, UN Secretary-General António Guterres told the General Assembly in February 2023 that “it is time for a new Bretton Woods moment.” It is an analogy that calls for parties to skip the war and go directly into peace negotiations, something which everyone committed to peace and demilitarization of geopolitics should understand and actively support. Nevertheless, it remains an awkward analogy.

These Bretton Woods invocations coincided with global elite calls for a post-neoliberal order in October 2020. From this perspective, the Bretton Woods analogy represents efforts to overcome a second crisis of liberalism—neoliberalism this time—avoiding the world conflict that followed the crisis of the 1920s and 30s. That is to say, despite the comparisons to the state of affairs of a hundred years ago, despite the troubled times of the present, despite the friend and foe

divisions present in still-democratic countries today, the project, this time, calls for a transition *within* the order.

NEOLIBERALISM'S RISE

Interestingly, this call for a post-neoliberal order mimics a model largely seen as that of the rise of neoliberalism itself. According to that generalized, now almost common-sense view, the neoliberal “project” was first produced between the 1930s and 1950s and then gradually “implemented,” as advocates occupied strategic positions in academia, in national economic policies, and in international institutions.

It is striking that there has been no similar previous history in the case of the current calls for a post-neoliberal reorganization of capitalism. Perhaps there will be a retrospective one, depending on who the winners of the current battles are, who knows. Such calls—to formulate a “project” to be later “implemented”—have only been issued very recently, especially after the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic. Another element of the analogy that is lacking in today’s disputes is the existence of the Soviet Union, which was of decisive importance in the making both of the New Deal/Welfare State orders and of the neoliberal project itself. The fall of the Soviet bloc had far-reaching consequences for the ideological battles from the 1990s on, the first being to squeeze liberal economics and social democracy into the same political space. That inelastic political space may account for much of the reason why current calls for a post-neoliberal reorganization come from within the establishment itself.

However, even understood as a transition within the established order, this characterization of neoliberalism’s rise and consolidation does not match the framework of current calls for a post-neoliberal order. Neoliberalism represented a transition within the order, but it presented itself an anti-establishment movement. Neoliberalism’s rise did not only involve the occupation of existing institutions, but also victories in major elections with a combination of “antisystem” tactics with “conservative racial and religious fury,” as was the case with its most emblematic electoral victory, Ronald Reagan’s, in 1980.

Furthermore, neoliberalism did not just “hack” academia and the Bretton Woods institutions; it was not only a “project” that was “implemented.” In its institutional

dimension, it also emerged on a piecemeal, day-to-day basis, as a response to practical problems arising from dysfunctions of the New Deal and Welfare State models. Arguably, major economic and political players actively sought for and created the dysfunctions. Nonetheless, this interpretation fails to account for the New Deal and Welfare State models' incapacity for corrective self-reforms. Neoliberal solutions were available to be tested, and tested they were.

THE TRANSITION TO A POST-NEOLIBERAL ORDER

This is a striking difference when we look at the current transition to a post-neoliberal order: serious difficulties in managing neoliberalism emerged without an available reformist framework for piecemeal, trial-and-error based corrections. It is crucial to explain why this is so—the present text is also a tentative partial explanation for some of it, at least—but it does not do away with the disturbing “Keynes and Bretton Woods” mantras that repeatedly appear as solutions that are not really such because they do not immediately translate into possible political alliances and/or concrete public policies that can be mobilized and tested in the present.

As occurred with the decline of the New Deal and the Welfare State models, in the current decline of neoliberalism major global players have already introduced and tested corrections. They have even been introduced in economic textbooks, albeit at a slow pace. If the intention is to mimic neoliberalism's rise and consolidation, trying to systematize ongoing changes in economic policy and in economic theory would be an important starting point. This would not mean holding proposals for new major reconfigurations at bay. It would just acknowledge that changes are underway, and that the effective understanding of their horizon and scope may help identify potential *loci* for intervention and establish development tendencies that delimit a logic space for political and technical innovation.

Nonetheless, those calling for a post-neoliberal reorganization of capitalism remain committed to top-down projects despite the deep social roots neoliberalism has established. Neoliberalism's social victory did depend on institutional occupation and significant electoral victories. But these victories also shaped the subjectivation processes themselves, in that they gave a sense and a purpose to diverse and scattered anti-system impulses that became

endurable, in both senses of the word. The then-dominant models of the New Deal and the Welfare State, already in decline, were not able to reconfigure to face the new situation.

Those deep social roots of neoliberalism are precisely one of the decisive mainstays of the neoliberal establishment in decline that seeks to reform itself. Neoliberalism's victory over a New Deal or a Welfare State model was definitive, in that there is no return to those two previous models of society. That is the irreducibility of neoliberalism at the moment of its fall.

The still-dominant neoliberal forces feel strong enough to intend to control the transition to a post-neoliberal order. Neoliberalism's deep social roots have evolved towards a political divide, at least in the still democratic countries, which means the "economistic" approach could not be more wrong and misleading.

The major political divide in these countries plays out as a sort of revival of neoliberalism's rise. However, this time around, it comes with much more explicit authoritarian content on the part of a right-wing field that does not fear to ally itself with the far right. Antisystem impulses, which passed from the left to the right in the late 1970s and early 1980s, now lie with the far right. The transition within the order proposed by a new progressivism reflects the current hegemony of progressive neoliberalism turned into the establishment. Right-wingers allied with the far right challenge this hegemony with political and electoral tactics that are similar—though much more violent and threatening—to those of their neoliberal predecessors in the 1970s and 1980s.

There are at least two legitimate heirs of neoliberalism—two ways of going beyond neoliberalism without leaving neoliberalism entirely behind. The present divide inherited the configuration of neoliberalism that Gary Gerstle described as a battle between "neo-Victorians" and "Cosmopolitans." New progressivism is a reconfiguration of progressive neoliberalism in one view of a post-neoliberal order, while the far-right defense of a neo-Victorian neoliberalism is another configuration of a post-neoliberal order. In the transition to a post-neoliberal order, the previous tension between neo-Victorians and Cosmopolitans have been reconfigured as a divide between a far right that seeks to normalize itself in alliance with a more traditional right camp on one hand, and a new

progressivism that intends to reform neoliberalism, abandoning its doomed extremist versions, on the other.

This is a very different situation from the crisis of liberalism and its replacement by the New Deal and the Welfare State orders, and it is very different from the rise of neoliberalism itself. Shrinking the political space between a new progressivism that is the heir of progressive neoliberalism and the far right that appeals to their neo-Victorian predecessors prepares the typical blackmail logic that will ensure a transition within the order, no matter which side of the divide wins at each place, no matter how such victories play out at the end.

The divide is such that people on either side cannot imagine common ground with the other. Yet, shared common ground exists: Neoliberalism. What the two sides dispute is what to preserve and what to discard from the neoliberal period.

The blueprint for overcoming neoliberalism emerges as a call for neoliberal elites to convert to a new creed. It is an as-yet undefined creed, a work in progress, still largely a battlefield within the neoliberal establishment itself, but a creed, nevertheless; something that since the neoliberal era has usually been called “consensus.” Not surprisingly, therefore, Jake Sullivan, National Security Advisor to President Joe Biden, delivered a speech in April 2023 in which he defended exactly that: the necessity of forging a “new consensus.”

The roots of the intersection between the calls for a new Bretton Woods and those for a reorganization of capitalism beyond neoliberalism are found in ongoing deglobalization, a geopolitical reconfiguration that risks assuming a bellicose character. International relations risk militarization in the war years that have followed COVID-19, endangering democracy and the fight against the effects of climate change, while subsuming all sorts of inequality issues along the way. The current arms race threatens any sensible reform of international and multilateral institutions.

THE MISMATCH BETWEEN POLITICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL DIVIDES

That said, the call for a new Bretton Woods comes from just one of the sides in this conflict: the new progressivism camp. Calls for a transition within the order

toward a post-neoliberal reorganization of capitalism empowers proponents of economic theories considered as heterodox by the previous neoliberal mainstream without substantially altering the present “correlation of forces.” It serves as a transition within existing institutions.

Though championed by the new progressivism camp, the call to refound Bretton Woods involves much more than the still-democratic countries and their new progressive blocs. It is an attempt to beat the heirs of neo-Victorianism on national grounds by establishing new forms of global governance that would ultimately isolate them. However, to achieve that, the call must also be addressed to consolidated autocracies and one-party ruled countries, and to countries on the brink of becoming autocracies or one-party states. The main feature of the present situation is one of a mismatch between political and geopolitical divides.

The internal political divides faced by the United States and Western European countries today are not limited to national spaces; they are spread all over still-democratic countries, with global articulations and alliances. But there is no established order organizing the geopolitical divides, as could be said of the Cold War period, when even an independent group like the G77 of developing nations did not operate without explicit declarations of allegiance to one of the two sides of that divide. The transition to a post-neoliberal order within each country is itself the object of deadly battles.

This calls for a crucial distinction in the expression I have used so far indistinctively, that of “still-democratic countries.” In the case of countries of the Global South, this expression means that the mismatch between politics and geopolitics leads to a zero-sum game. For most countries in the Global South, being on the new progressivism side from a geopolitical point of view results in a lack of means to fight the far right on national grounds.

NEOLIBERALISM’S LEGACY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

This is the legacy of neoliberalism in the still-democratic countries of the Global South. Let us take the case of Latin America. In the late 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, the straitjacket of the Cold War loosened up a bit, the dictatorships that were the rule in those developing countries were facing severe state debt crises, and democratic movements were on the rise. That moment in which the

so-called “import substituting industrialization” models began to be replaced by “primary export” models, was also the beginning of re-democratization processes in the region.

So, with the notable exception of Chile, the first dictatorial laboratory of neoliberalism, such democratization or re-democratization processes coincided with the rise and consolidation of neoliberalism. Even if they led to policies that, at first sight, seem incongruous with neoliberalism—as in the case of the increased tax burden faced in those countries in the last decades, for instance—the fact remains that, in Latin America, democracy has also served as a prop for neoliberalism. In turn, neoliberalism now serves as a prop for the new social and economic forces that gained terrain within the neoliberal order and want to translate their acquired strength into political power, even if that requires assuming a far-right stance. Such forces claim to be anti-system, fighting progressive governments which are now identified with the establishment.

Such anti-system impulses identify with the far right, including more or less open supporters of previous military dictatorships in the region. In the case of Brazil, the far-right claims that these dictatorships should be considered “democracies.” A substantial part of the armed forces now prefers not to take power directly, as they did from the 1960s to the 1980s, but to support far-right candidates and participate in their governments when they win. This tendency is possible because of another neoliberal legacy in the region: the militarization of politics and of social life more broadly as a direct result of the implementation of the “war on drugs” security model.

The anti-establishment character of these far-rightish forces in Latin America often comes packaged in labels like “liberal,” “neoliberal,” or even “libertarian.” This was only plausible because progressive governments in the region explicitly declared themselves to be fighting neoliberalism, categorically refusing the label of representatives of progressive neoliberalism. The anti-establishment character neoliberalism had in major capitalist countries during its rise in the 1970s has now enjoyed a second coming in Latin America, even as neoliberalism is in decline in the Global North.

There is no reason to attribute neoliberal intent to progressive governments in Latin America since they explicitly reject it. At the same time, since it is a

global order, neoliberalism and its requirements overwhelm the intentions and the margins of action available to peripheral countries. Thus, despite all their efforts, Latin American progressive governments have become identified with progressive neoliberal governments worldwide, feeding the political divide, both in national and in global terms, whether these political forces like it or not.

Let us look at Brazil's 2018 election, in which Jair Bolsonaro won the presidency. It was an election in which outsiders challenged and defeated the established powers. Agribusiness claimed the hegemonic position that had previously belonged to industry, based on its increased participation in the GDP in recent decades. At the same time, due to its continuous and impressive demographic growth, the evangelical electorate no longer accepted subordination to the Catholicism still dominant in official politics. The armed forces and police no longer intended to be subject to limitations on their participation in governments, and control and accountability initiatives. Segments of the financial market, unhappy with the type of accommodation usually sought by large institutions in the sector, decided to join the rebellious alliance, demanding liberalizing reforms... and so on.

This is not to say that these groups did not have power before. On the contrary, they had a lot of power; they were not outsiders in that sense. The difference is that they no longer seek to dictate policies only in their own sectors. They do not only want the Ministry of Agriculture, or the command of the Armed Forces under the umbrella of the Ministry of Defense, and they do not just want the Central Bank. These groups want to govern according to a political program of their own. This project is certainly the expression of what, in Global North terms, could be described as a version of the neo-Victorian wing of neoliberalism, in alliance with the Brazilian authoritarian tradition; it is also, however, the ultimate result of neoliberal policies.

The globalization of the "comparative advantages" principle by neoliberalism produced deindustrialization and re-primarization of the economies in Latin America; Brazil is no exception. This is how neoliberalism has turned most of Latin America into a neo-extractivist region. Although some countries in the region have managed to maintain some of their industry, the general picture is the dismantling of "import substitution industrialization," the only actual, self-reliant, autonomous, development attempt. However, the current margin for action is much smaller than it has been in the past. This directly affects any project of maintaining democracy

as a still-meaningful form of life, and not as some one-party rule within “a fully democratic system,” as Nayib Bukele declared El Salvador had become after his landslide re-election as president, in February 2024.

The scant margin for action derives from the neo-extractivist position itself. If one is to defend democracy and fight the far right, it is not possible to give up neo-extractivism, since it is the only resource you have to avoid economic disaster, bearing in mind that the far right will go for neo-extractivism wholeheartedly, without reservations or hindrances, and that they will use the results to their political advantage. At the same time, if one does not give up neo-extractivism, the new alliance led by the far right has already won, since their program is already victorious.

Still-democratic countries in the Global South cannot afford to uncouple or decouple from autocracies and one-party rule economic partners. Deglobalization in the uncoupling way is reserved only for countries that can afford it, such as the United States vis-à-vis China, or as Germany did regarding Russia. “Friendshoring” as a trade policy and as a national security policy is reserved only for those countries which can afford to choose who their friends are.

NEW BRETTON WOODS FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH

So, for the time being at least, international concertation is required for a possible exit from this cul-de-sac. One that would alleviate national debt and find new sources of funding for a meaningful ecological transition. This is what a new Bretton Woods moment could mean for those still-democratic countries in the Global South.

In the medium and long term, it seems that there are two main possible developmental trends. On the one hand, the current deglobalization process offers a unique opportunity for many countries of the Global South to revert the deindustrialization and the reprimarization of their economies brought about by neoliberalism. It will take time, and it will not be by any means a total uncoupling from traditional trade partners, but it may reshape the correlation of forces on national grounds and that may allow for some democratic rule to survive. It may also rebalance the political chessboard to challenge the current hegemony of neo-extractivism that is the most visible face of decades of neoliberalism.

But even if reformist efforts regarding international funding institutions like the IMF or the World Bank succeed at some point, and in some measure, that will come at a price. Geopolitical alignment could be one, even if it is a price that still democratic countries in the Global South cannot afford—particularly if they require adopting a “new consensus” regarding the post-neoliberal reorganization of capitalism in the Global North.

On the other hand, an effective post-neoliberal order might not be equally possible for all countries. It remains to be seen how much of neoliberalism’s existing institutional ties will actually be broken, even in central countries. When one thinks, for example, of the so-called budget crisis in Germany, in December 2023, the impression is that these constraints are still firmly established and operating. The strict precepts of budgetary austerity established in the constitutional reform carried out by the Grand Coalition of the Merkel government in 2009 remain in force and will not be easily removed. The same applies to Javier Milei in Argentina. The IMF endorsed the first, classically neoliberal austerity measures taken by Milei’s government in November 2023.

Neo-extractivist countries may well be inextricably trapped in neoliberalism. Neoliberalism and post-neoliberalism might coexist in unequal extents for a long time, stratified according to the power and relative autonomy of each country. The energy transition itself could take the risky path of a similar unequal pace depending on a country’s belonging to either the Global South or to the Global North—which, by the way, is the aspect in which this distinction makes more sense than any other. That is not to mention the possible coexistence of democratic progressive post-neoliberal orders with authoritarian post-neoliberal orders, or the coexistence of still democratic neoliberal orders with authoritarian and still neoliberal orders.

A transition to a post-neoliberal reorganization in two paces would come together with the persistence of two elements of the neoliberal arrangement against which the new progressivism has risen: inequalities at a level of systemic risk for any capitalist political order that is not based on repression, and imminent environmental collapse. If progressive post-neoliberal orders are limited to central countries, it is the very idea of a post-neoliberal order that ceases to make sense as a global reconfiguration of capitalism, boosting systemic risks.

A DEPENDENCY THEORY ANALOGY

Assuming that international relief for democracies in the Global South will actually come through and that a meaningful ecological transition will at least effectively start, these countries remain as unprepared, in terms of theoretical and practical tools, as four decades ago, when neoliberalism was on the rise. It is imperative that the struggle for meaningful reform of global governance, of global economic governance in particular, comes with a concerted effort to produce such tools.

There is a decisive precedent in the production of such theoretical and practical tools. Since its origins, in the 1960s, Dependency Theory aimed at the understanding of the specific position developing countries occupy in the world's economy and politics, especially from the focus point of Latin American nations. In the case of Latin America, Dependency Theory is closely associated with import substitution industrialization and with the "structuralism" typical of the work developed by the ECLA (Economic Commission for Latin America, later expanded to include the Caribbean as ECLAC), of the United Nations, from 1947 on. Differentiating between the two is as important as maintaining their intimate ties.

A renovated Dependency Theory must renew economic theory and policy and avoid an economistic stance to understand how neoliberalism works, to accurately describe the current possible development tendencies of a post-neoliberal reconfiguration of capitalism. At the same time, a renewed Dependency Theory should be understood as a global platform for research and collaboration. In this way Dependency Theory could develop new tools for accounting for the present global forms of capitalist integration.

These would be the intellectual requirements, in my view, for the Global South to engage in discussions on the calls for a new Bretton Woods, for a post-neoliberal reorganization of capitalism. However, this will only be possible if the negotiations around new pacts and agreements are carried out in a way that does not freeze the present correlations of forces. That is to say, if claims to justice for and from the Global South are heard and implemented.

"Import substitution industrialization" and Dependency Theory are tools that were not available during the Bretton Woods negotiations; they only came to be afterward. They are pillars that today, once more, are lacking for Global South

countries to enter into negotiations for the building of a new economic global governance, or for any other levels of governance for that matter. But they were already available when the NIEO, the New International Economic Order, was proposed by developing countries in 1974. The Global South should look to 1974 rather than 1944 as a reference for its action. If capitalism is to be reorganized according to a post-neoliberal model, there is no doubt that it will require a new economic paradigm. However, in order for it to allow demands for justice to have their fair share in the process, in order for it to allow countries to choose democracy, it will have to include much more than a new economic paradigm. From the point of view of the Global South, the openness to such claims will also depend on the development of its critical counterpart, that is to say, a renovated Dependency Theory that may account for current domination patterns and possible means to fight them; a theory in which decolonization efforts include not only South-North dependency, but also dependence within the Global South itself.

Such a theory will not be the work of one group of researchers alone, just as it will not be the product of a single region of the world; it must come from the collaboration of a whole network. It should be seen as a platform for collaboration, oriented by a shared past reference and a common goal, rather than by a search for a unique formulation, as Dependency Theory has always been, in fact.

So, since analogies are fashionable, let us add a call for a new Dependency Theory moment to the call for a new Bretton Woods moment. As in the case of the original Bretton Woods conferences, this collective global effort may also take longer than it should to take shape. But if there is one thing that the distance between the urges of the present and the shortcomings of action should not lead to, it is inaction.

Why Identity is Failing— and Can't be Abandoned

TESSY SCHLOSSER

JUNE 26, 2025 | THE IDEAS LETTER 43

It would be convenient to start this essay with a clear definition of identity politics—a dictionary-worthy entry, presented like a compact and neat truth. But identity politics resists tidy definitions, and that is because it was never meant to have one. It emerged not from a theory but from a condition: People excluded from public life began to make demands based on their sense of exclusion.

I often hear that by now identity politics has been exhausted. Because it is too narrow. Too divisive. Too easy to co-opt. It is all tactics and no strategy, all feeling and no horizon. Too particular to a Western sensibility. In contemporary political discourse, identity politics has become a placeholder and an easy scapegoat: For some on the right, it feels like a politics of pettiness and vengeance; some on the left dismiss it as a diversity performance that leaves deeper structures of inequality intact. I do not think this is by accident. What if this sense of exhaustion is a sign not that identity politics has failed but that it has been asked to do too much? Or maybe that we are disappointed with its successes because those, although steady, are never comprehensive or definitive?

This essay is neither a defense nor a criticism of identity politics. It is a reckoning with what identity politics—as a term and a practice—has borne: liberalism's broken promises, a nation's conditions for belonging, the perverse costs of formal recognition. Let me illustrate this point with three historical examples: the emancipation of Jews in eighteenth to nineteenth century Europe, the various waves of the feminist movement, and the treatment of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples in modern Mexico. These examples are not bound by any single story, but together they reveal the burdens that identity politics has shouldered, the limits it exposes, and the horizons it might still open.

IDENTITY AND THE LEFT

The notion of citizenship that emerged in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was tied to a universalist ideal that masked particular exclusions. The figure of the citizen was imagined as abstract, yet implicitly it was white, Christian, male, and, often, propertied. In France, the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man in theory granted equal rights to all individuals. In fact, its universality was conditional: The emancipation of Jews, for example, hinged on their renouncing their collective identities and traditions. In 1791, the National Assembly declared Jews to be French citizens but only as individuals, not as a people. Being Jewish was admissible as a private faith, not as a public or political identity.

In Germany, the process was slower and more fractured. Emancipation came piecemeal across the German states, with some granting rights only to Jews deemed to be useful or educated. Full emancipation was not achieved until the country's unification in 1871. And even then, it had a price: assimilation into German bourgeois norms, cultural conformity, the abandonment of communal autonomy. Jews who resisted these terms were considered ungrateful, suspect, or dangerous. The rise, later, of modern antisemitism was in part a backlash against them—against Jews who had entered society not in the way that the majority was comfortable with.

As the European state's liberal fictions about equality became clear, socialism and communism arose, calling for collective emancipation, the end of exploitation, and a world without classes. And yet identity posed a problem to those movements, too. They often regarded identity-based demands with suspicion, as distractions from the class struggle, as bourgeois diversions, or, worse, as threats to their unity.

And so it was that many Jews found themselves caught between a state that offered them only conditional inclusion and a revolutionary left that mistrusted their particularity. Any claims based on a specific history, culture, religion, or on sex, race, ability were seen as secondary at best and sometimes even as reactionary. The universal subject of socialist politics—much like the universal subject of liberal rights—had to be unmarked and, tacitly, majoritarian.

In his 1844 essay *On the Jewish Question*, Marx distinguished political emancipation (being granted rights within the liberal state) from human emancipation (a deeper transformation of the conditions that produce inequality and alienation). He

argued that political rights only privatized difference without addressing material dispossession. Yet even as he exposed the limits of recognition under liberalism, Marx missed how identity could be the medium through which exclusion is named and redress is demanded. He missed this in part by reproducing an antisemitic trope: By equating Jewishness with money-worship, self-interest, and rootless circulation—conflating it with the logic of capital—he overlooked the historical exclusion and persecution that had forged those stereotypes and now underpinned Jews' demand for political rights.

Identity politics, then, is not a detour from economic or structural struggle; often, it is the expression of that struggle. It is not just a call for inclusion; it is a call for *repair*—not in the sense of reparation or final resolution, but as reckoning. A reckoning with histories of dispossession and with the uneven ways in which power continues to shape who counts.

The uneasy relationship between identity and leftist politics resurfaced vividly in the 1970s, with the Combahee River Collective, a group of Black lesbians active in socialist and feminist circles. They argued that the personal was political because no politics had accounted for their lives. And they waved the flag of identity politics not only because they were being denied who they were but because of how their experiences (lifestyles, desires, and shared histories, all ignored or worse) represented forms of harm that had not yet been addressed.

In the case of the Combahee River Collective, too, identity was not a claim to separateness but a response to exclusion. In male-dominated Black liberation movements, gender and sexuality were sidelined; whiteness structured the assumptions of mainstream feminism; in socialist organizing, race and other bodily differences were consistently seen as secondary to class. Much like European Jews could obtain rights only if their difference was denied, the difference of Black lesbians had to be minimized (or compartmentalized) for other movements to feel coherent. In their hands, identity politics was not a politics of fragmentation but an attempt to consider together wrongs that others insisted be addressed separately. (Some now call this “intersectionality,” but as Jennifer C. Nash, a professor of gender, sexuality, and feminist studies, has shown, the contemporary institutionalization of intersectionality as a framework of discrete, additive identities that can be easily included in bureaucratic logics risks ultimately flattening the radical critique that the Collective offered.) Identity politics emerged within movements, not outside

them—and to this day it is the mark of their internal fractures, evidence of what they could not contain. In both the case of Jews' rights in eighteenth to nineteenth century Europe and the case of the Combahee River Collective, identity was not the problem: All it did was to express the limits of the promise of universal liberation.

FEMINISM, THE RESTLESS IDENTITY

The feminist movement is often described as having occurred in waves. First wave: legal rights. Second wave: economic and sexual freedoms. Third wave: the recognition of other differences within sexual difference. Fourth, fifth, sixth waves: the fractalizing of womanhood, or the undoing of the idea that womanhood is a single thing. But what are waves except flows that rise and crash, and rise and crash again? Demands for legal rights, economic equality, sexual liberation, etc. have existed at each and every moment of the movement—all are a part of the fraught history of an identity politics.

And each of these waves has had its undertow. As feminists have worked to expand the meaning of “woman,” they have also discovered the harms caused in presuming the term's clarity, its unity. “Woman” should not mean a person without the cognitive capacity to choose who governs her; “woman” should not mean an unpaid laborer; “woman” should not mean object of desire. All agreed. But can the gender of a formerly enslaved woman in the United States be compared to that of a middle-class woman in 1950s France? Can either explain the life of an Indigenous woman in northern Chile? Black and Indigenous feminists in the Americas have long pointed out these epistemic differences—and the violence inherent in ignoring them. The category “woman,” like that of “citizen,” is implicitly forged in the image of a particular subject, and so when it is treated as universal, it often reproduces the exclusions it set out to overcome. Anyone who does not readily fit in is either subsumed or erased.

The historian Joan W. Scott famously defined gender as a historical category in her 1986 essay “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis”—a way of signifying relationships of power through the body, language, and institutions. She urged scholars to move beyond descriptive accounts of what gender is toward an analysis of how gender operates: to see it in all its contextual specificity and be mindful that it is being produced by, and is itself producing, contested symbolic and material systems rather than pre-given truths.

But even this expansive framework meets its limits when confronted with the afterlife of slavery, the profound injury marking Black identity in the United States and other African diasporas. Identity is not just how history positions people; it is what history imprints on them. On this point, I have found the literary critic Hortense Spillers incredibly insightful. In her landmark 1987 essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” she argued that before the very category “woman” could be claimed, it had to be wrested from gendered language—and a Black woman’s body had to be wrested from the hold of property.

Spillers distinguishes “flesh” and “body” to show how slavery reduced the Black person to even less than a gendered or social subject: to raw meat—stripped of protection, kinship, and narrative. Flesh, for Spillers, is not just the body before language; it is a body broken by violence and made into property. But then, too, it is in that very understanding that lies the potential for change: The flesh calls for something beyond the dominant grammar of race and gender; it calls not for freedom but for rupture, and for the creation of a new kind of meaning. The point is not to eradicate identity, but to radically reconfigure the norms and codes of how identity is constructed.

Still, the demand for a coherent feminist subject persists. When women are denied rights *as women*, they are often compelled to organize as women. But insisting on legibility in this way can reassert the very exclusions that feminism once sought to undo: Trans women, for instance, are seen in some feminist politics as threats to the very category of womanhood. Black, Indigenous, and trans feminists, though, have shown that coherence often is a luxury afforded only to those whose lives were already considered normative. And even lives that are considered normative experience fragmentary or contradictory identities. Coherence is a luxury but also a limitation. It is inherited, improvised, or performed; experienced collectively and in private; it is tangled. The cacophony of difference that had prompted feminism to push back against patriarchy itself became a problem to solve rather than a condition to hold.

THE STATE RECOGNIZES YOU (SORT OF)

And now for contemporary Mexico, where two seemingly unrelated episodes illustrate how identity politics can be a means of confronting the afterlives of colonialism.

First, following the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, the federal government granted municipalities in Oaxaca the right to govern through *usos y costumbres* (customary law). Second, in 2020, Afro-Mexicans, or Afro-descendants, were officially allowed to identify as such in the national census for the first time: Some 2,576,213 people did. Both *usos y costumbres* and the inclusion of Afro-Mexicans in the census were forms of state recognition that marginalized communities had long demanded. And yet both raise unsettling questions about the terms and the consequences of being seen that way.

The Zapatista uprising was a rebellion against economic exploitation, prompted by concerns that the federal Mexican state's move toward a free-trade agreement with North America would harm impoverished and Indigenous communities. It was also, as the anthropologists George Collier and Elizabeth Lowery Quaratiello argue, a profoundly Indigenous response to centuries of dispossession—and it redefined political struggle in terms of territory, memory, and, importantly, dignity. Building on this, feminist scholars like Sylvia Marcos have shown how the movement's internal and external politics were shaped by gender as well, drawing directly from Zapatista communiqués and declarations.

At the same time, as the Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui has argued, indigeneity is not just a reclaimed identity: It was also a colonial invention designed to manage populations and extract labor. In Mexico, this process intensified after independence (1810–1821), as the nation-state was being formed. President Benito Juárez's effort to implement the separation of State and Church during his liberal reform period (1855–1863) expropriated all communal goods—including indigenous lands. And in 1895, the administration of Porfirio Díaz deployed the first national census, which recognized native populations but also consolidated them into a single category: the *mestizo* Mexican, a fusion of Spanish colonizer and Indigenous colonized. That singular vision of national belonging absorbed some identities while erasing others.

Even today, the term “Indigenous” can function more as a political strategy than a fixed identity. Communities such as the Otomies or the Mayans do not always refer to themselves as Indigenous—except when doing so translates into claims to land, solidarity, or resistance to the Mexican state or transnational enterprises.

Consider the history of *usos y costumbres*. The Spanish Crown had selectively recognized Indigenous customary law in order to rule indirectly, but post-independence Mexico moved toward a homogenizing legal regime. It was not until the 1990s—under pressure from international notions of multiculturalism and internal Indigenous mobilizations (especially the Zapatista armed uprising)—that *usos y costumbres* was included in the Mexican Constitution. Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination was affirmed, including the right to elect local authorities according to traditional norms. But as the political scientist Allyson Benton has shown in her analysis of post-Zapatista Oaxaca, that legal recognition has operated less as a means of decolonization than a form of containment: Political parties often exploit it to neutralize their opponents and consolidate power—influencing local elections, co-opting traditional leaders, manipulating community norms, and selecting where *usos y costumbres* should apply at all.

By institutionalizing some forms of Indigenous governance, the state corrals other, more radical, demands—for redistribution, autonomy, epistemic transformation—into the safer territory of cultural rights. Tradition is not liberated; it is bracketed and framed. Formal recognition, rather than empowering communities, can narrow their chances at political reinvention and experimentation. Glen Coulthard, a scholar of Indigenous studies and political science, argued in his 2014 book *Red Skin, White Masks* that recognition often functions as a substitute for justice. Instead of confronting the foundational violence of settler colonialism, liberal states offer symbolic inclusion. Self-determination is domesticated and regulated.

And yet no recognition, and no form of control, is total. And no identity politics is ever purely symbolic. For example, the African presence in Mexico was systematically erased or obscured for centuries, especially through the national myth of *mestizaje*. The legacy of enslavement, resistance, and African immigration was not just forgotten; it was actively disavowed. The first national census tried to occlude that history; it named to frame. But the simple fact of counting people who were seeking identitarian recognition pierced a previous silence and opened a door. Identity politics may not resolve contradictions but it can make them visible and so contestable. Being counted while being contained creates friction, and from that, new possibilities emerge.

NOT POSSESSION BUT PASSAGE

What is identity, really, if not a construct always in crisis? It is a language we inherit and reshape, a form imposed and reclaimed, a wound and a weave. Identity can dissolve in an instant and persist across generations. It lives in the flesh and in the name; in the rituals and the songs we do not remember ever learning. And it carries even more than it holds: ancestral weight, imposed silence, collective memory. What would it mean to approach identity not as a problem that needs solving, but as something to consider with care and to critique in the knowledge that it is too much and not enough?

Identity politics is not exhausted, no, but it does place a disproportionate burden on the people it tries to represent. You must narrate your pain. You must do so clearly. You must perform your intelligibility—or risk being cast out of the visible, the speakable, the political. These demands are made ostensibly in the name of empowerment, but often they re-inscribe the very conditions that identity politics seeks to undo. Many of us do not live according to clean narrative arcs: We live in fragments, with interlocking histories, contradictory inheritances, and generational wounds. In fact, I think a majority of us, at one time or another, live as exiles within our own categories.

Critics of identity politics often argue that it detracts from “real” economic and political struggles—as if the demand to be named were a distraction from the demand to live. But identity politics, at its core, is not just about symbols; it is about power. It is about who is remembered, who is heard—and who is protected, paid, or punished. The experience of belonging is also shaped through institutions; memory pervades land, lineage, law. Identity is one of the conditions of material redistribution.

Fred Moten's writings confront those conditions powerfully. His commitment—what he calls “consent to not be a single being”—turns his poetry into a practice of living in relation to others without collapsing into sameness. His work does not discard identity; it challenges its fixity, placing it within and across histories. It affirms that one may inhabit a position without being defined by it and that our affiliations can be both unfinished and real. Identity is not a possession but a passage: through time, through grief, through others.

I am less interested in celebrating incoherence than in staying with it. What if we stopped demanding that people arrive at politics with a unified self? What if identity politics did not mean being someone but meant standing with others and sharing with them the tension of not being one? What if the power that identity politics seeks was not purity or unity but the ability to remain vulnerable in messy and unresolvable struggles?

A HUMANISM OF FRICTION

The world today is not post-identity. It is post-coherence. The old subjects have frayed: the individual, the citizen, even the people. What remains are entanglements. Half-named wounds. Provisional alliances. The desire for clarity has not vanished, but its forms no longer hold.

We do not need another universal; we need a way of living together that does not require sameness. This is a humanism not of shared essence, but of shared difficulty. This understanding of political identity is not new, but I want to reclaim it for what we call identity politics. And I want to make the case for relations premised on identity as the base for friction not fusion. This is not a call to abandon identity politics. It is a call to let it breathe and loosen its borders.

The world demands clarity, yet we live in contradiction. This is not our failing; it is our condition. I must admit that I, too, have a romanticism. So does liberalism, and socialism, and nationalism—each animated by the longing for freedom, justice, belonging. The pulse of politics means yearning for what might be possible even if it is not yet real. Some find hope in the past, others in the future, others still in a parallel world. Forget fixed enemies and loyal friends, I want to bet on porousness—on identity being agonic. I wager that difference need not be eradicated in order for solidarity to be forged. This is difficult, as it is supposed to be.

To be porous is to admit the touch of the world—not as something that one survives, but as something that also reaches back. No identity is ever fully ours, and yet none is fully foreign. Naming ourselves in ways that others can grasp is part of what politics requires. And yet there is no fully legible person, and there is no complete recognition. There are only moments of contact.

Identity politics, in particular, is the place where held anger lives on—it demands repair in the face of irreparable harm: marked bodies and mapped pain. It also stands for the difficulty of holding together histories that cannot easily coexist, because some communities have been directly implicated in the injury of others. Sometimes the pain is mutual; more often, it is uneven. Friction is not evenly distributed. Still, we live amid the recursive noise of both inheritance and interruption, and if politics is anything, it is the attempt to move within that noise without silencing it.

Social Democracy After Class?

BHASKAR SUNKARA

OCTOBER 17, 2024 | THE IDEAS LETTER 26

Can you build social democracy without workers? This question would have been unthinkable a few decades ago. Today, it captures a central challenge that left-of-center parties face around the world.

In the United States, even as the Democratic Party has moved leftward on both social and economic issues, it has less working-class support than ever. In 2020, Joe Biden lost non-college educated voters by 4 points. In a recent *New York Times*/Siena poll, Harris was trailing by 17 points. The shift in the party's appeal is evident even among unionized workers. In 1992, Bill Clinton won that demographic by 30 points. In 2020, Biden beat Donald Trump by 19. In the latest forecasts, Harris's advantage is just 9 points.

Similar shifts are in play across the advanced capitalist world, such as in Germany, where the socialist party Die Linke (the Left Party) went from receiving nearly one third of the vote in the country's industrial eastern states in 2019 to barely registering as an electoral force there this year. Likewise, even though it is still in power, the Social Democratic Party has tended to fare poorly among workers, who are increasingly drawn to the far-right appeals of the Alternative for Germany: The AfD recently became the biggest group in Thuringia's state parliament.

For decades, those still committed to a traditional social-democratic program have responded to this crisis of support with some combination of downplaying the problem, looking for substitutes for lost working-class voters, and trying to re-engage their former base by moving rightward on social issues. So far none of those answers has proved satisfactory.

To understand the dealignment of social-democratic parties from workers, we must go back to the origins of these parties. With the emergence of a mass working class in the nineteenth century, workers began to search for political and economic representation. Since capitalists held political and economic power, workers needed organizations that would pursue their collective interests. Social-democratic parties became the political expression of working-class interests in society writ large, and trade unions pursued those interests at the point of production. Never mind whether those organs were effective representatives or whether they were also populated by peasants, artisans, and others who could hardly be considered part of the industrial working class; they were inseparable from their core social base.

A left-wing politics rooted around these working-class parties and unions and a set of egalitarian demands were the norm for a century and a half. By no means did this politics represent a unified movement; fractures and splits—between prewar social democracy and anarchism, between postwar social democracy and communism—were common. But any intra-left competition was always over the allegiance of the same people.

In cities like Liverpool or Turin, people lived in neighborhoods and labored in factories densely packed together, forced by capitalism into, if not always bonds of solidarity, then at least commonality. Unsurprisingly, they voted in the main for parties of the broad left. The job of the revolutionary was to convince workers committed to a slow road to socialism to embrace an urgent one.

That is a laughably easy starting point compared with today, when the working class appears both more fragmented than ever and less drawn to egalitarian politics. William Morris wrote in 1885 that while workers knew they were a class, socialists had to convince them “they ought to be Society,” a force capable of not just existing within an economy but also controlling the future of that economy. Now socialists must scramble to make the case about the class part, too.

How did this happen? Nearly a half-century ago, the British historian Eric Hobsbawm asked whether “the forward march of labor and the labor movement”

had been halted, and the French theorist André Gorz declared that the working class was dead as a social agent. Considering the depth of class dealignment today, those prior pronouncements seem both prescient and premature.

The incipient shifts Hobsbawm and Gorz spotted had economic and sociological roots. The gains of postwar social democracy (and those of its stunted American New Deal counterpart) were predicated on economic expansion that gave succor to both workers and capital. When growth slowed in the 1970s, the worker demands that capitalists previously had stomachached to keep the peace seemed to them economically untenable. In this new environment, retreating unions and political parties had less to offer workers for their participation.

At the same time, the workers themselves were changing rapidly. Automation and global competition prompted a shift from Fordist employment in industrial sectors to work in service-producing industries. Meanwhile, mass immigration further diversified the working class ethnically. The working class had never been a static entity; rather, it was always a group of people dependent on wages from jobs created by a capitalist system in a perpetual state of flux and recomposition. But the 1970s and '80s was a period of particularly rapid transformation, and what really distinguished it was the surprising response of worker-backed parties.

Social-democratic formations met the economic capitalist crises of those days by seeking a resolution on the back of their own base. Their ultimate course was conditioned by the basic and universally understood reality that economic growth under capitalism was predicated on capitalists' belief that they could invest profitably. The working class only existed because of private firms, and workers were locked into both an inexorable class conflict with their employers and a state of dependence on them. Similarly, the redistributive states they had voted into office relied on taxes to sustain themselves. What could be done when capitalists demanded structural change before resuming investment?

At first the stagflation crisis caught the center-left by surprise. Thinking they had abolished the business cycle through state intervention, the old parties of the Marxist Second International forgot a core Marxist tenet: that the contradictions of capitalism, and its tendency toward crisis, could not be resolved within the system. When economic difficulties proved to be more than a transitory effect of the 1973 oil shock, social democrats were left flatfooted.

Without the will to pursue alternatives on the left—such as enabling workers to wrest more power over investment through wage-earner funds—they accepted a neoliberal resolution.

The neoliberals had argued that Keynesian capitalism worked to a certain point but had fixed limits. Monetary stimulus beyond those limits would yield inflation without growth, as in the mid-1970s. To unleash growth again meant not spending more money to stimulate demand but dialing back the regulatory welfare state and constricting the bargaining power of unions, which were then seeking inflationary wage hikes to compensate for existing inflation. In short, to jumpstart the economy, the working class would have to accept less. After attempting and failing to borrow its way out of the crisis, social democracy eventually responded to the charge that social democracy itself was at the root of the economic crisis by wholeheartedly agreeing.

In Western Europe, this U-turn was most dramatic in France. François Mitterrand's 1980s socialist government had come into power with communist backing and radical plans. "You can be a manager of [a] capitalist society or a founder of a socialist society," Mitterrand said at a 1971 press conference. "As far as we're concerned, we want to be the second." However, by the time France's first leftist government in decades entered office in 1981 France already faced unemployment, economic stagnation, and international headwinds. A resolution was attempted along Keynesian grounds: Mitterrand's "110 Propositions for France" included a massive public works program, enhanced union rights and codetermination measures, increased minimum wages and pensions, and a reduction of hours in the working week. In 1982, the government put some key industrial groups and almost 40 banks under state control to help maintain employment and speed up economic restructuring.

The result was massive capital flight and deepening economic difficulties. To no avail Mitterrand pled with the business class that he was not a "revolutionary Marxist-Leninist" and that his way was the only way to "end the class struggle." Ultimately, he won them over not just by halting his program but also by retreating dramatically into the politics of austerity. The lesson was clear for social democrats like Germany's Gerhard Schröder and Tony Blair's New Labour: When their time came, they at most sought to marry ex-post redistributive measures to the new economic orthodoxy.

In the United States, where the Democrats' commitment to workers was always suspect, the transformation had been no less consequential. Jimmy Carter entered the White House in 1977 with a labor-backed program centered around infrastructure spending, full-employment targets, and welfare state expansions. But within a year, alarmed by rising consumer prices, he thought better of these plans and proposed a "lean and tight" budget to control spending.

Inflation continued to rise, reaching double digits in 1979, and so an even more drastic measure was soon taken. Under Paul Volcker, the Federal Reserve contracted the overall money supply by allowing interest rates to soar. Unemployment reached levels not seen since the Great Depression. Carter paired Volker's shock treatment with reductions in New Deal-era regulatory infrastructure, especially in the financial sector. While the president spoke on TV about America's moral health, the economic health of the workers who had elected him was failing. A wave of deindustrialization hit the U.S. manufacturing base, spiked the trade deficit, and fueled urban decay. By the time a halting recovery eventually took place in the mid-1980s, Ronald Reagan was in power to take credit.

Like social democracy in Europe, the Democratic Party in the U.S. made its own supporters responsible for getting growth back on track. But what came next was equally damaging. Despite the pain wrought in the late-1970s and '80s, Bill Clinton counted on much of the old New Deal coalition to win office in 1992. Once in power, however, he pursued a new bipartisan consensus on free trade and "ending welfare as we know it." Clinton did little to prevent industrial-job loss, and he embraced suburban professionals and "knowledge workers" as replacements for his party's lost voters. He found new sources of capitalist support in big tech—among the so-called "Atari Democrats"—and in finance.

The Democrats went from being the party of justice and stability to the party of meritocracy and dynamism. This transformation was clear in Senator Chuck Schumer's infamous comment on the eve of the 2016 election: "For every blue-collar Democrat we lose in western Pennsylvania, we will pick up two moderate Republicans in the suburbs in Philadelphia, and you can repeat that in Ohio and Illinois and Wisconsin." Without a New Deal-sized economic vision with a unified working class at the center, Democrats were left to talk about progress solely in the language of representation and civil rights. Such appeals had little tangible to offer to anyone, especially the white men who flocked to Trump in 2016.

Social democracy, and to varying degrees its center-left imitators, first emerged to represent the interests of workers against capital, but it eventually responded to the contradictions of capitalism by choosing the interests of capital over those of workers. Given the asymmetric dependence of labor on capital, this response was rational in an economic sense. But one of its political consequences was the mass departure of workers from parties of the left.

According to *Political Cleavages and Social Inequalities*, edited by the economists Amory Gethin, Clara Martínez-Toledano, and Thomas Piketty, between 1950 and 1959 on average 31 percent more of the working class in Western democracies voted for the left than did voters of other classes. In 2020, that margin was only 8 percent. Importantly, the rich have maintained their traditional allegiance to parties of the right, but the professional classes have shifted in response to the social liberal turn of social-democratic parties. In short, parties of labor are becoming parties of the educated.

Some figures on today's center-left and left glorify the changes underway. Schumer's remarks were perhaps the most extreme example of this tendency, but it is present even on the contemporary far left. The working class itself is changing, left-wing activists and politicians note, correctly. As more jobs require greater credentials, it has become more educated. It has also become more diverse. Rather than pegging left-of-center politics to a universal subject, they contend, we should see labor as just one important interest group among others, much like "people of color," environmentalists, the poor, and so on. This broad coalition may look different from the workers' movement that built classical social democracy, but it will prove just as capable of delivering redistribution.

Although this current is correct to avoid valorizing one particular moment in working-class life, it ignores both the extent to which Fordist stability was the result and that the rise of the precariat is itself related to defeats suffered by social democrats and trade unions. Rather than trying to rebuild the left's social base, these organizers attempt to find a new one, but this time through actors less strategically positioned than workers at the points of production and exchange.

However, a coalition based primarily on ideology is always thinner than one based on both ideology and shared material interests. This fact will create new dilemmas for the center-left parties when they come to power. How will it be possible, for example, to expand welfare states without additional tax revenues from the professionals who now vote against the right for social and cultural reasons?

This recent left-wing approach to politics mirrors the one once embraced by New Labour in Britain. Following Labour's loss in the 1992 general election, the Fabian Society published "Southern Discomfort," a pamphlet calling for Labour to reorient toward professionals in the south of England. Its conclusions, which included an emphasis on "opportunity," "individualism," and fiscal constraint, were embraced by Tony Blair in his successful 1997 campaign. Blair's New Labour was at least in part a project to turn Labour from a social-democratic party of the working class into "the political wing of the British people"—young, cosmopolitan, and dynamic. The contemporary foes of Blairism seemed to be competing on much the same terrain.

Two other responses to class dealignment are also unsatisfying. One is to deny that it is taking place at all. Michael Podhorzer, a former political director of the AFL-CIO, for example, argues that shifts in voting patterns are mostly the result of divergent regional trends: Workers have moved rightward in states that already were red. Yet as Jared Abbott counters in a thorough review of the data in the U.S., "Working-class voters are indeed more likely to vote Democrat in blue states than in red or purple states, but they are trending away from Democrats in all partisan contexts."

Another response from social democrats has been to excise liberal values from center-left politics to appeal to what they see as the traditionally conservative values of the working class. In this telling, when parties of the left were more rooted in laboring communities they understood instinctively how to appeal to their constituencies. As they bureaucratized and became more distant from this base and as their voting bloc became more middle class, they sought support by moving too far left on cultural and social issues.

The party of Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) in Germany is a prominent example of this approach: It offers much of the left's traditional economic program but tries to outflank the right on issues like immigration, now a major political

issue in Germany. The policy of establishment parties in the country has been to reinstate border controls and limit asylum seekers while encouraging immigration from skilled workers.

That national conversation has coincided with the loss of manufacturing employment. Germany had long avoided the industrial job shedding experienced by other advanced capitalist countries, but employment in the auto sector fell by 6.5 percent last year and 60 percent of automotive suppliers were planning additional cuts in Germany over the next five years. The same is true in other industrial areas. Conglomerates such as ThyssenKrupp and BASF are embarking on cuts. Rapid deindustrialization and the shift to a lower-paid service economy have coincided with the growth of a foreign-born population on benefits. Of the 750,000 working-age Ukrainian refugees residing in Germany, for instance, only one quarter have found work, slightly more than the share receiving unemployment assistance.

This environment has allowed the right-wing AfD to prosper, especially in the deindustrializing east of Germany. BSW, which still identifies as being on the left, has avoided the worst rhetoric on immigration and Wagenknecht herself regularly states her opposition to racism. But in her attempt to win over rightward-moving workers, she has said that “Germany is overwhelmed” and “has no more room” for asylum seekers, and she has lamented the existence of “parallel societies” in unintegrated Muslim neighborhoods. Such narratives make the issue of immigration ever more salient in German politics—more salient than jobs or the role of the state—and that shift will ultimately benefit the far right.

BSW is concerned, and rightly so, with just how rooted in class leftist parties are today. But its framing of divisions based on national origin within the working class mirrors in a way the left-cum-neoliberal rhetoric that opposes the interests of, say, women and minorities to that of Old White Men. Both descriptions are departures from the traditional socialist foregrounding of the division between capital and labor.

Is there any path forward in response to social democracy’s class dealignment? Other parts of Europe offer a more promising alternative—one that is more

orthodox from a socialist perspective and that has also proven itself to be effective electorally. The Workers' Party of Belgium (PTB-PVDA) was once a sectarian party of the communist left, but it has evolved since 2008 into a mass force shaping its country's politics. Although it dropped its Maoist baggage long ago, its approach to organizing still seems like it was ripped out of a playbook from a bygone era. The party focuses extensively on base-building in working-class communities; it provides professional social services like primary health care at party action centers; and it has put working-class people at the head of its electoral lists.

This approach has had successes, even beyond the areas of the Workers' Party greatest support, like Wallonia: In an October election in Antwerp, it secured 20 percent of the vote, second only to the right-wing New Flemish Alliance. Yet while long-term organizing in the mold of the PTB-PVDA has rebuilt the left as an opposition force and helped fuse together socialist ideology with a real social base, it has so far fallen short of securing the power to govern.

This is a concern because lasting political influence cannot be guaranteed without state power. But it is also worth identifying the shortfalls of pursuing government at all costs.

When conditions are not favorable to a leftist program, social democracy can best serve its interests by exerting outside pressure on capitalist-led governments. In fact, a half-century ago, it would have perhaps been better for the left to return to the opposition than to bring about structural adjustments that hurt its base, even if the right-wing variant of austerity risked being even more dislocating. And today it might be better to lose an election with voters committed to your program than to win one thanks to voters who only want to beat back a right-wing social agenda.

Ultimately, the left cannot win enough power to change society without foregrounding bread-and-butter concerns and rooting itself in the constituencies that would benefit the most from the redistribution of resources. That means a commitment to solidarity in many forms, but it also means ultimately recognizing that victory is not possible without the support of people who might have all sorts of contradictory, even reactionary, views. Without this basic realization, the new social democrats will sound like the old communist bureaucrats in Bertolt Brecht's 1953 poem "Die Lösung" who, after an uprising, propose dissolving the people and electing another.

Social Democracy, Immigration, and the Working Class

SOHRAB AHMARI

OCTOBER 31, 2024 | THE IDEAS LETTER 27

Writing for *The Ideas Letter*, Bhaskar Sunkara recently offered a magisterial account of the decline of social democracy. The upshot is that the movement waned because its leaders put “the interests of capital over those of workers” amid the crises of the 1970s—a trend that persists to this day. In response, many workers abandoned these parties in search of better representation, not least on the populist right; educated professionals replaced them as social democracy’s base.

So how might proponents of social democracy turn things around? What would it take to revivify the model’s core elements—above all, high union density leading to better wages and a less lopsided distribution of the social income—in an inauspicious twenty-first century? In sketching a way forward, Sunkara rules out what he considers three dead-ends. I am with him on the first two, which involve either celebrating these developments or pretending they are not taking place.

Yet I have to part ways with him on the third approach: namely, accommodating popular discontent with the, well, liberal aspects of neoliberalism, most notably mass, low-wage migration. That is no dead-end at all, but common electoral and political-economic sense.

The first dead-end is to “glorify the changes underway”: that is, to welcome the takeover of erstwhile workers’ parties, including the U.S. Democratic Party, by professionals more interested in liberalizing cultural mores than mounting countervailing power against capital. Recall, for example, then-Rep. Carolyn Mahoney (D-NY) responding to a 2020 news story about the obscene compensation packages of corporate CEOs by asking, “Where are the women?”

The professional classes' ideological interests here are not merely "ideological": The production and maintenance of progressive normativity entails material gains for the members of this class, in the form of sinecures as corporate HR managers, university administrators, and the like. But as Sunkara rightly notes, even if the professionals were pure of heart, the fact is that they are "less strategically positioned than workers at the points of production and exchange."

This helps explain why professional-class environmental politics too often amount to little more than policing ordinary people at the level of consumption—the straws they drink out of, the forms of mobility they use to get to work, and so on—rather than advancing grand-scale reforms in the mode and relations of production.

Fortifying Sunkara's argument, we might turn to his collaborator Vivek Chibber's 2022 book, *The Class Matrix*. The author doubles down on the core Marxian insight that people's place in the class structure constrains their range of choices to a degree unmatched by any belief, cultural identity, or ideological commitment. Hence the chief diversity officer who opens her antiunion rant with a pronoun announcement. Or the mining company that proclaims the centrality of land acknowledgments to the industry. Or the Catholic private-equity boss for whom the Church's social teaching is no bar to asset-stripping. Sunkara (and Chibber) are right, then, to identify social class and the "dull compulsion" meted out by market economies as central to social reform in a way that is simply not the case with race, gender, culture, belief, and other such dimensions of identity.

The second of Sunkara's dead-ends is simple denial: the insistence among some left activists and union organizers that there is no dealignment taking place between social-democratic parties and the working class. Sunkara marshals plenty of polling data to the contrary. I would add anecdotal evidence from my own conversations with labor leaders—some on the record, others off—astonished by their rank and file's attraction to Donald Trump.

Which brings us to the point of disagreement. Sunkara rejects a third approach that would "excise liberal values from center-left politics to appeal to what they see as the traditionally conservative values of the working class." To put it more bluntly: He thinks it is a mistake for proponents of social democracy to offer any sop to the working class on immigration. He singles out Sahra Wagenknecht, a

former leader of Germany's Left party who has since launched her own political movement, for doing just that.

But Sunkara's critique of Wagenknecht's approach—which presumably extends to that of Denmark's Social Democrats, among other left formations shifting right on migration—rests on flimsy analysis.

At the heart of social democracy is the primacy of politics over the economy. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, nascent market societies promised political equality, but the pledge was withdrawn as soon as workers walked through the factory gates. At a larger scale, what the economic historian Karl Polanyi described as the “autonomous market” barreled past local preferences and upended familiar social and moral coordinates. Mass movements for political and economic democracy arose in response to this imperious market, culminating in the achievements of the New Deal order in America and social and Christian democracy in Europe.

Fast-forward to our time, and asserting the primacy of the political means representing working-class people when they oppose massive, low-wage, unskilled migration, the perennial fetish of the likes of the Koch Brothers, the Cato Institute, and *The Wall Street Journal* editorial page. As the writer Michael Lind has documented, such migration is one of two chief forms of labor arbitrage by which the employer class plays populations and jurisdictions against each other to lower costs (the other being offshoring).

In other words, opposition to mass, low-wage migration is not an expression of working-class people's irrational or atavistic *cultural* illiberalism, as Sunkara implies. It is part of a rational calculation that in a primarily services-based economy, high migrant flows diminish what little bargaining power native-born workers enjoy. Newcomers who lack language proficiency and fret about their legal status are not going to organize to push back against management; they are not going to turn to federal regulators to complain about wage theft and abysmal working conditions.

Sunkara hints that reviving manufacturing in the Western heartland would address these concerns. Social democrats should indeed support tariffs and industrial policies aimed at protecting and nurturing domestic industry. But even

if the manufacturing share of the economy could be boosted to say 20 percent of GDP (from less than 10 percent currently), the manufacturing share of total employment is unlikely to change much, owing to automation, which will only accelerate with the advance of AI, robotics, and the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution. A significant share of tomorrow's workers will thus remain in the service sector—even if both parties commit to renewing the Hamiltonian system of import substitution in our century.

Sunkara might counter this point by arguing that the way forward is by organizing the newcomers. Put another way: Let them in, but then work hard to build up social democracy at the workplace. But history throws cold water at such enthusiasm.

In the United States, for example, the New Deal order correlated with the fairly restrictive immigration regime inherited from the 1924 Immigration Act. As *The American Prospect's* Harold Meyerson wrote long ago: "It was only during the one period in American history when immigration was almost shut off—1923 through 1965—that industrial workers were able to organize themselves." Vernon Briggs, the eminent historian of the labor movement's intersection with immigration, concluded that "membership in American unions has over time moved inversely with trends in the size of immigration inflows." And the neoliberals and libertarians themselves proudly boast that higher migration has been a major factor in the overall decline of union density.

The free movement of labor is a central component of the neoliberal order that supplanted social democracy on both sides of the Atlantic. Working-class people will continue to dealign from social democracy—and turn to ever more terrifying far-right parties—so long as would-be economic reformers remain wedded to this defining aspect of the neoliberal agenda.

The 2024 Nobel Laureates Are Not Only Wrong About China, but Also About the West

YUEN YUEN ANG

OCTOBER 31, 2024 | THE IDEAS LETTER 27

This year, Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and Jim Robinson (known as AJR for short) were awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for their work on “how institutions are formed and affect prosperity.” AJR are not only exceptionally prolific and persuasive, their influence is stratospheric. With a combined citation count of almost 500,000, one economist called them “gods of the discipline.”

I congratulate them heartily on their award—with one regret: they should have received it twenty years ago. Those were the days Acemoglu and Robinson recently recalled nostalgically in the *New York Times*: “Remember the 1990s, when everybody thought liberal democracy was the only game in town and the end of history was upon us?”

Conferring them with the Nobel today seems anachronistic, out of touch with the reality of a world moving steadily toward multipolarity. Today, the Global Majority, the 85 percent of humanity outside North America and Western Europe, are less and less inclined to accept idealized narratives of Western development with naïve, unbridled enthusiasm. So it is not surprising that AJR’s award has sparked vigorous debate not only in the Global Majority but also in parts of the Global North, even in the *Financial Times*.

Let me begin by underscoring where I agree with AJR. Their core argument is that political institutions matter for development, more so than fixed

attributes like geography. Specifically, societies with “inclusive, non-extractive” institutions are more likely to prosper. “Inclusive” and “non-extractive” are both positive adjectives, similar to words like just and fair—or, more simply, *good* (to use Acemoglu’s term). Who would dislike “good”? Of course, everyone wants inclusive, non-extractive institutions.

Where I am skeptical is their classification of which parts of the world qualify as “good,” and their claim that it is such goodness and democracy—rather than other obvious reasons such as colonial extraction—that could have contributed to wealth and power.

One common assumption is that AJR is only wrong about China, but right that democracy alone explains prosperity in the West (my work has often been cited to make this point). Peeling just a few layers back, however, suggests that this is not true: AJR is not right about either.

WHO IS GOOD?

According to AJR, which parts of the world best exemplify “inclusive, non-extractive”—*good*—institutions? The United States and Great Britain (the first two countries they named in their best-selling book, *Why Nations Fail*, co-authored by Acemoglu and Robinson, which popularized their theory), and other settler colonies they term “neo-Europes” (in their 2002 article, “Reversal of Fortune”), including Australia, Canada, New Zealand. Which nations fail? Poor countries in “sub-Saharan Africa, Central America, and South Asia.”

This classification of “good” countries is not unique to AJR but replicated across political economy. For example, corruption expert Alina Mungiu-Pippidi posits a near-identical rank-ordering of countries in her book *The Quest for Good Governance*. According to her, at the top is a small group that has achieved an end state of “ethical universalism,” where “equal treatment applies to everyone.” These “historical achievers” include “Britain, the classic historical performer,” followed by “British empire splinters populated mostly by populations of European descent.” The rest of the world is lagging behind and catching up.

In case the pattern is still not clear to you, let me highlight a third parallel. The Good Country Index, produced by British policy advisor Simon Anholt, claims

to measure “what each country on earth contributes to the common good of humanity, and what it takes away.” In 2023, *all* top 20 “Good” countries are in North America and Europe.

When the mainstream always ranks certain countries as “good” and the rest as less good, you should begin to wonder why. Based on AJR’s classification of countries, it appears that what they *really* mean by “inclusive, non-extractive” are Western democracies. Where non-Western societies approximate good institutions, as they claim is the case in Botswana, it is a “primitive form of pluralism” that resembles... the Magna Carta!

DID RICH NATIONS BECOME RICH ONLY BY BEING GOOD?

AJR claims that rich nations exemplified by “neo-Europes” became rich because their colonial legacies left them, fortuitously, with inclusive, non-extractive institutions. In other words, these countries succeeded because they were democratic—or good.

Skillfully, they make their argument by comparing the “reversal of fortune” among former European colonies between the years 1500 and the 1990s. Nonsettler colonies (like Egypt, India, and Mexico) used to be densely populated, attracting European colonists to impose extractive institutions such as slavery and taxation, which kept them poor over the long term. By contrast, European-settler colonies (like the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand) “created institutions of private property, providing secure property rights to a broad cross section of the society.” This reversal of fortune, they conclude, proves that geography is not the “root cause” of divergence in wealth—rather, it is the establishment of democracy.

Gushing with praise, the Nobel committee reaffirmed the laureates’ conclusions in its press release: “The more European settlers, the greater the probability of establishing economic systems that promoted long-run economic growth.” (If true, this statement leaves one wondering what the practical implication would be.) Thanks to the economists’ “groundbreaking research,” the committee chairman Jakob Svensson said, “we have a much deeper understanding of the root causes of why countries fail or succeed.”

But *do we*? Taking the U.S. as a prominent case, what *actually* happened in European-settler colonies? Acemoglu writes in his 2003 essay “Root Causes”:

At the other extreme, Europeans founded a number of colonies where they created settler societies, replicating—and often improving—the European form of institutions protecting private property... in colonies where there was little to be extracted, where most of the land was empty, where the disease environment was favorable, Europeans settled in large numbers and developed laws and institutions to ensure that they themselves were protected, in both their political and their economic lives. (29)

Was the land *empty*? No, there was an estimated population of 10 million Native Americans who were violently evicted or killed by white settlers. Was there *little to be extracted*? European settlers exploited labor on a large scale by importing it from abroad. This included African slaves who toiled on plantations and indentured Chinese laborers who built the transcontinental railroads on dirt-cheap wages. When the latter asked for fairer pay and safer work conditions, corporations starved them into submission, and after their job was done, they were kicked out by the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.

Even among the ruling class, it was no “level playing field.” During America’s phase of rapid industrialization, known as the Gilded Age (roughly 1880–1900), prosperity was accompanied by inequality and corruption. Robber barons publicly championed free-market principles while privately benefiting from state-supplied privileges and protection. Ordinary citizens bore the burden of bailing out companies that were too big to fail, which failed again and again. (This pattern was repeated in the 2008 financial crisis, leading U.S. historian Richard White to remark: “the present is so nineteenth century.”)

In short, the complete truth that AJR’s elegant theory omits is this: European settler colonies built wealth by establishing a bifurcated economy—inclusive and non-extractive for elite white males, but systematically extracting from the rest. Admirably, the U.S. steadily extended the democratic franchise, even fighting a civil war to abolish slavery, and eventually transforming itself into a nation of multiethnic immigrants, but make no mistake: when its economy was taking off, its political institutions were extractive.

In “Reversal of Fortune,” AJR only show descriptive evidence of two patterns:

- Non-settler colonies (more urbanized places in 1500 like India and Egypt) became poorer than European settler colonies in 1990.
- Non-settler colonies had “worse” institutions (defined as lack of formal “checks on power”) than European settler colonies in 1990.

Put simply, AJR confirms a well-known correlation: richer countries tend to be liberal democracies. But they provide zero causal evidence that it is good institutions, rather than other entangled factors, that explains divergent incomes. Edward Glaeser and his colleagues make a similar critique, noting: “the data [that AJR use] do not tell us whether the Europeans brought with them human capital, political institutions, or something else.”

Indeed, AJR’s analysis asserts, “Notice that what is important for our story is not the ‘plunder’ or direct extraction of resources by the European powers, but the long-run consequences of the institutions they set up.” Insisting, however, that an obvious competing explanation—extraction—is not important “for our story” does not make it go away.

What is the takeaway? Upon closer examination, the econometric and historical evidence for AJR’s claim that inclusive, non-extractive institutions caused Western prosperity is actually shaky, if not cherry-picked. The *Financial Times* faults them for “econspaining”—liberally taking historical references out of context to justify their favored conclusions, writing they “used the bits about American freedom and tossed the bits about American slavery.”

That is not to say that democracy did not matter in Western development—it did. But its democracy was accompanied by colonial extraction (as shown by Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*), industrial policies and trade protectionism (Ha-Joon Chang’s *Kicking Away the Ladder*), and cronyism among politicians and big capitalists that gradually became legalized in the form of lobbies (Richard White’s *Railroaded*). AJR and their followers celebrate only the first factor—and downplay or erase the rest.

HOW AJR GOT CHINA WRONG

Given the limitations of AJR's theory in the context of the West, it is no surprise that they have struggled even more to explain Chinese development. By their definition, China's political institutions are "extractive, non-inclusive" because it is autocratic. If so, how can they explain the country's phenomenal growth since the 1980s?

In *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap*, I unpacked Acemoglu & Robinson's attempts to square this circle in *Why Nations Fail*, which I repeat here:

In defense, Acemoglu and Robinson surmise that sooner or later, China's hyper-growth will run out of steam. Yet even if growth slows, which is expected for any economy that reaches middle-income status, the burning question remains: how did China come this amazingly far?

Their reply is that "a critical juncture," namely Mao's death, followed by Deng's efforts to build a reform coalition, turned China around. Furthermore, they claim, growth under extractive institutions was possible because an extremely poor country like China had plenty of "catching up" to do. Finally, they sum up: "Some luck is key, because history always unfolds in a contingent way."

Luck, of course, influences any outcome. But assigning three decades of sustained economic and institutional remaking to luck is hardly satisfying. Moreover, all poor countries have ample room for "catching up," so why didn't they catch up the way China did?

Just as I have been stumped by AJR's assertion that colonial extraction "is [not] important for our story" (given the intense level of scrutiny in top journals), I am equally astounded that they can wave away the "China anomaly" by attributing it to "luck." That alone should tell you a lot about the state of the academic profession.

Between 1980 and 2012, China escaped abject poverty and became the world's second-largest economy within one generation—without Western-style democracy. How did that happen? What has AJR missed? They fail to appreciate the existence of a variety of autocracies: archetypal ones concentrate power entirely in one dictator (like China under Mao Zedong or North Korea under Kim

Jong Un) but others can be partially inclusive and non-extractive even without elections. The reverse can be true of democracies; many analysts see the U.S. under President Trump as an illiberal variety of democracy.

When Deng Xiaoping took the reins of power after Mao died, he inserted democratic qualities (specifically, competition, accountability, and partial limits on power) into a single-party autocracy—not through open political contestation, but by revolutionizing the bureaucracy. This is a point I earlier made in an essay in *Foreign Affairs*, “Autocracy with Chinese Characteristics,” and discussed with Ezra Klein in the *New York Times* in 2023.

My argument must be distinguished from Chinese state propaganda calling its political system a “whole process people’s democracy,” which no intelligent adult believes. Clearly, China is an autocracy: dominated by one party, which exercises tight political control. But within it, Deng and his reformist team introduced partial checks on power such as the norm of collective leadership at the highest level and empowered citizens to lodge complaints about corruption and bad policy implementation. They practiced “directed improvisation”—a blend of top-down direction from the national leadership and bottom-up adaptation by numerous local governments and entrepreneurs—that produced diverse development paths and policy innovations within China, often tailored to local conditions.

But Deng’s ingenious system contained an expiration date. His single-minded focus on getting rich laid the seeds for capitalist excesses, not least corruption and inequality. His partial checks on power within the leadership also turned out to be fragile and reversible. When Xi Jinping ascended to the highest seat of power in 2012, he steadily overturned Deng’s partial liberalization and reinstated personalist rule. He believes that his concentration of power is necessary for taking China out of its Gilded Age and into a “Red Progressive Era” of cleaner, high-quality development—but with the ruling party firmly in power.

If you subscribe to the simplistic binary view that Western democracies are by definition “inclusive, non-extractive” while non-Western non-democracies must be “non-inclusive, extractive,” then you will be fooled by words. Democracies can contain sharply non-inclusive, extractive qualities and vice versa. In China’s case, despite the absence of regime change, its political institutions have profoundly transformed from Mao to Deng to Xi.

PROMOTING DEMOCRACY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

By raising questions about AJR's claims, my objective is to advocate for a better way of promoting democracy in the twenty-first century. One uncomfortable but not surprising truth is this: especially during the Cold War, liberalism was an ideological instrument for great power competition, "and the field of development was one of the arenas in which this competition played out most actively," as the historian Corinna Unger reminds us.

The ideologizing of capitalist democracy is distorting. When translated into development programs, it invariably becomes top-down, one-size-fits-all campaigns that disempower the poor. Not only that, it has blinded the establishment from detecting long-simmering problems in Western capitalism and democracy. Corruption studies is a case in point. By consistently measuring rich democracies as clean and poor countries as corrupt, elites failed to see that the flourish of "access money" (legalized elite exchanges of power and profit) in rich countries was angering citizens and pushing them toward populism.

What is the alternative? First, in a multipolar world, we should embrace a global principle of nondomination, rather than any great-power's politics as an ideology. This means recognizing that authoritarianism and colonial-imperialism are both forms of domination, and both should be rejected. It means valuing indigenous knowledge and diverse solutions in the Global Majority—doing development by "using what you have," not by copying someone else's templates. Preaching democratic values within societies while upholding a Western-centric political and ideational order, either explicitly or implicitly, is hypocritical.

Second, we should celebrate democracy for its intrinsic value—in giving voice to diverse, marginalized groups and holding power to account—instead of making exaggerated promises that democracy alone will make nations rich and powerful. This kind of sales pitch, which has long been the norm in the political economy of development, is no different from cultivating followers based on material interest; as soon as democracy runs into problems—as we see in the West today—the appeal of democracy falls apart.

Today, many experts and powerholders see the twenty-first century as a dreadful time of “polycrisis”—without realizing that this, *too*, is a Western-centric idea, triggered primarily by the dual crises of capitalism and democracy in the rich world. I see the times differently: this is a promising moment for paradigm shifts. If AJR had won the Nobel Prize twenty years ago—when history ended, temporarily—hardly anyone would have questioned their claims. Today, however, there is an emerging wave of healthy skepticism. For those who are not attached to the old order, we are living through a “polytunity” to question many conventional wisdoms. Let’s be sure we seize this opportunity and speak up.

Disaster Capitalism Revisited

ISABELLA M. WEBER

AUGUST 8, 2024 | THE IDEAS LETTER 22

One of the big takeaways of the COVID-19 pandemic is that we need to enhance resilience. This applies to pretty much every dimension of what has become known as the polycrisis. We hear calls for greater cyber resilience, climate resilience, democratic resilience, supply chain resilience, and so on. But what is missing from all the resilience chatter is that powerful corporations have reaped record profits thanks to global shocks.

War, pandemic, and climate disasters have sent the prices of essentials like shipping, energy, and food spiking, making it the worst of times for the many, but the best of times for the companies in charge. As long as disaster profits spiral out of control, there can be little hope for resilience. The collateral damage of allowing prices to explode in the face of external shocks is that companies lack incentives to become more resilient to future calamities. Which firm could be expected to prevent a situation that brought the best financial results in decades or even a century?

If we are serious about resilience, the profit motive of individual companies needs to be aligned with the goal of resilience. Companies' pursuit of profits is the most powerful force in our economy. Trying to go up against it is like trying to make an airplane fly while ignoring the forces of gravity. If prices are not allowed to explode in response to shocks, the only possibility left for firms to safeguard profit flows is to ensure that their sales volumes do not collapse. In other words, the supply resilience of individual companies becomes aligned with the goal of economy-wide resilience. Simply put, price regulation and windfall profits are necessary in the name of resilience.

If we get repeated rounds of disaster profiteering of the type we have witnessed in recent years, the result will be disaster capitalism on steroids instead of

enhanced resilience. This goes way beyond what Naomi Klein described as “disaster capitalism” more than a decade ago. Klein forensically traced the profits that security firms and disaster response service providers were making off of wars and extreme weather shocks. In an age of overlapping emergencies, it is not just the firms directly involved in disaster management, but the industries at the heart of our economic system that reap record profits as the essentials of life and production are hit by shocks.

One such essential sector is shipping. Whether you like it or not, we are living in a globalized world and international supply chains are the lifelines of our economies. This means that everything is connected through oversea shipping. In a recent paper my coauthors and I stress tested the impact of the price shocks that followed Russia’s invasion of Ukraine across 71 different sectors of the U.S. economy. We concluded that commercial infrastructure, such as shipping, was one of the strategic areas that are too important to ignore because of their potential impact on inflation and economy-wide stability. Along similar lines, the IMF found that the rise in shipping costs associated with the end of COVID-19 lockdowns in 2021/22 had large effects on inflation, even more important than the price shocks in food and oil.

In March 2021 the *Ever Given*, one of the giant vessels carrying goods from Asia to Europe and the U.S., blocked the Suez Canal for six days. It became a meme all over social media. *Ever Given* showed for everyone to see how a local bottleneck can let whole swathes of the economy grind to a halt. Almost one third of global container shipping used to flow through the Suez canal. The blockage came on the back of already very major dislocations in global shipping. Due to the pandemic, key ports in China temporarily shut down. Truck drivers fell sick and were in short supply in the U.S. Congestions at the chokepoints of the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach were epic, causing massive delays.

After decades of mergers following on the heels of deregulation, just eight carrier groups manage more than 80 per cent of the world’s shipping fleet. They are the survivors of years of price wars in which companies took a bet that controlling the industry would eventually pay back. With the pandemic, their moment had come.

The largest among the shipping giants, Maersk, has been around for 120 years. At the height of the global shipping crisis in 2022, the company recorded the

“best financial results in its history.” But Maersk is by no means alone. In the wake of the emergencies of pandemic and the Russian war on Ukraine the shipping giants reaped record-breaking profits. The chart of their profits looks like a tsunami wave with a sixty-fold increase. Some go as far as to claim that the container giants manipulated the market to drive up prices. Even if they did not, there can be little doubt that they were in no rush to overcome the congestions and bottlenecks that presented themselves as a once-in-a-century opportunity for the shippers.

Once the pandemic bonanza came to an end, the forecast for the shipping giants darkened. People had spent a lot of money on consumer goods while stuck at home and now started to tighten their belt under the pressure of inflation. Meanwhile, the congestions in ports lifted and the window of opportunity for record freight rate closed. 2024 was meant to be a painful season in shipping.

But climate change, geopolitical confrontations, and conflicts came to the rescue for freight rates. By late 2023, the World Container Index had roughly returned to where it was in 2019. But thanks to the drought in the Panama Canal, the continued impact of the war in Ukraine for Black Sea shipping, and, most importantly, the escalation of the war on Gaza and the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, freight rates have increased threefold. This renewed price explosion happened even though the shipping industry has been warning against overcapacity.

Not being able to ship through the Suez Canal means that ships from Asia to Europe and the U.S. have to go around the African continent instead, much prolonging the journey and hence increasing the costs. But the stock market still thinks the overlapping crises are good news for shipping companies. The Marine Shipping Index is at an all-time high, outperforming the stock market index of the world's largest companies, the S&P 500. Analysts have predicted a windfall for some carriers for a while.

The risk of an all-out war in the Middle East is rising. After by and large holding steady, oil prices have also started to edge up—another essential sector that reaped record profits in recent years of crises. It is unlikely the crisis in the Red Sea by itself will set off an inflationary spike comparable to what we have seen since the pandemic, but if it further escalates and coincides with additional shocks (due to extreme weather events, for example), then inflation might well return.

One key lesson politicians and central bankers should learn from the recent inflation is that their preferred weapon for dealing with inflation—interest rate hikes—is a paper tiger to fight shockflation unleashed by supply chain shocks, bottlenecks and sectoral demand shifts. But does this mean that policy makers and central banks should weather sectoral shocks? This question will keep coming back in an age of overlapping emergencies. The shipping crisis is just one case in place. And the answer is no.

Policy makers should not entrust the considerable risk of economic dislocations from freight rate explosions to a handful of companies that control the systemically important shipping industry. And the same applies to all essentials for the production and circulation of goods and livelihoods. If economic “resilience” is to be more than a polite talking point, policy makers should act when prices and profits in essentials explode. In times of geopolitical clashes and climate disaster the price mechanism is bound to fail. Water is not flowing back into the drought-ridden Panama canal in response to price signals. Wars do not stop because freight rates shoot up.

How about the demand side? Are price explosions necessary to allocate scarce resources in a disaster? Price increases certainly help in convincing some market participants to pull out. But a lot of demand for essentials like shipping cannot be delayed and during disasters there is enormous uncertainty. In this situation, prices are likely to overshoot. They are not simply an efficient signal as the neoliberals would have it. In an extremely concentrated market like shipping, it is in fact fair to assume that gigantic companies are rationing to privilege long-standing clients. In fact, Maersk reported exactly this in an earnings call during the pandemic-induced disruptions.

For all these reasons, when there are shortages in essentials, prices are not the efficient allocation mechanism that they are assumed to be in stabler times. Of course, shipping companies have to cover the costs of longer journeys caused by having to sail around Africa to deliver Europe-bound goods. Shipping is also a highly cyclical business. So companies need to recoup losses and low earnings from more straightened times. But when profits explode in an emergency, there is a risk that economic stability and resilience is sacrificed to the interests of the companies who happen to control a critical sector like shipping. In fact, the price overshooting can also harm their business in the

medium run, as it can encourage overcapacity, sending prices crashing when the emergency is over.

Windfall taxes—that is, taxes on large unexpected profits—are a potential policy response to a situation like this. But the trouble is that the economies affected by shipping price explosions are unlikely to have tax authority. A pragmatic alternative could be a limit to the rate at which freight rates can be increased during major disasters that could be enforced via insurance companies, just like the price cap on Russian gas. To render the shipping business viable this could also be complemented with a suitable price floor when the disaster is over.

Such a price policy might sound like “communism” to skeptics. In fact, it used to be U.S. policy to regulate shipping like a utility. In return for being exempted from anti-trust policy, the carriers were under strict supervision by the shipping board including on pricing.

No doubt the best way to address the potential economic dislocations from the Red Sea crisis is an end to the war on Gaza and peace in the Middle East—and inflation and economic resilience risks are way down on the list of reasons for that. But, even in the hopeful scenario where this would be achieved, we are still in a world of overlapping emergencies. Climate change is a reality and geopolitical tensions are mounting. To enhance economic resilience, disaster profiteering must be ruled out.

The New Legislators of Silicon Valley

EVGENY MOROZOV

APRIL 3, 2025 | THE IDEAS LETTER 37

There is a certain disorienting thrill in witnessing, over the past few years, the profusion of bold, often baffling, occasionally horrifying ideas pouring from the ranks of America's tech elite.

Consider the heresies of Balaji Srinivasan and Peter Thiel, who, in celebrating the “network state” and seasteading have hatched an escape doctrine for digital aristocrats. Where Srinivasan conjures blockchain fiefdoms with à la carte citizenship and pay-per-view police forces, Thiel pines for oceanic platforms where the wealthy might float beyond government reach, their libertarian fantasies bobbing like luxury yachts in international waters.

Elsewhere, Silicon Valley's solutionist overdose has inflated an ideas bubble that rivals its financial ones—a frothy marketplace where grand narratives appreciate faster than stock options. Thus, Sam Altman casually drafts planetary blueprints for AI (non-)regulation and even AI welfare (“capitalism for everyone!”), while crypto acolytes (Marc Andreessen, David Sacks), aspiring celestial colonizers (Elon Musk, Bezos), and nuclear revivalists (Bill Gates, Bezos, Altman) offer their own grandiose, exciting solutions to problems of seemingly unknown origin. (Who is guzzling up all this energy we suddenly need so badly? A true mystery, this.)

But more mundane subjects, from foreign policy to defense, increasingly preoccupy them too. Eric Schmidt—a man whose personality could be mistaken for a blank Google Doc—has not only penned two books with Henry Kissinger but also regularly contributes to *Foreign Affairs* and other such factories of doom and dogma. And he is after big, meaty subjects, the kind that demand somber nods at think-tank luncheons. “Ukraine is losing the drone war” proclaims a piece

of his from January 2024. Could this be—a pure coincidence, surely—the same Eric Schmidt, who, just months earlier, launched a drone company?

Now that the tech elites have joined the party, speculation on the future of warfare, once the cloistered domain of “defense intellectuals” mumbling into their tweed at RAND Corporation, plays as prime-time entertainment. Palantir’s Alex Karp and Anduril’s Palmer Luckey—combined net worth north of \$11 billion—pose as scrappy Davids battling the spendthrift Goliaths of the Pentagon. Inevitably, Elon Musk, techno-capitalism’s own Zelig, also has strong opinions on the subject: In destroy-infrastructure-first wars of the future, he opined in a recent Westpoint appearance, “any ground based communications like fiber optic cables and cell phone towers will be destroyed.” If only someone ran an internet satellite company to save us!

Michel Foucault’s “specific intellectuals,” who earned their authority through specialized technical mastery, appear quaint next to someone like Palmer Luckey, the VR wunderkind turned defense contractor. Having swapped the tweed jacket for flip flops, cargo shorts, and a Hawaiian shirt, he struts through interviews announcing himself “a propagandist” willing to “twist the truth.” In this reordered pantheon, the sober analyst of the Cold War era yields to a new archetype: spectacularly wealthy, celebrity-conscious, and ideologically shameless.

To write off these founders and executives as mere showmen—more “public offering” than “public intellectual”—would be a misreading. For one, they manufacture ideas with assembly-line efficiency: their blog posts, podcasts, and Substacks arrive with the subtlety of freight trains. And their “hot takes,” despite vulgar packaging, are often grounded in distinct philosophical traditions. Thus, what appears as intellectual fast food—the ultra-processed thought-nuggets deep fried in venture capital—often conceals wholesome ingredients sourced from a gourmet pantry of quite some sophistication.

Not surprisingly, the billionaire bibliophile is Silicon Valley’s newest fetish, the bookshelf having supplanted the yacht as the ultimate status barometer. And it is full of strange, unlikely hits: Albert O. Hirschman would surely be surprised

to see the powerful analytic of his *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* fueling efforts to build network states, private cities, and seasteads.

Thiel's much-discussed dalliances with Leo Strauss and René Girard constitute just one branch of this philosophical family tree. Another, more robust limb belongs to Karp, whose doctoral thesis on Adorno and Talcott Parsons now serves as intellectual ballast for Palantir's surveillance empire. His communications with investors arrive garnished with erudite citations; Samuel Huntington made a recent appearance.

Yet, somehow, Karp's realpolitik-for-optimists feels decidedly un-Adornian. "America's ability to organize violence in a superior way," he announced on Fox Business in March, "is the single reason why the world improved over the last . . . 70–80 years." Frankfurt School goes Nasdaq, with a pit stop at the CIA: Where Adorno and Horkheimer saw Enlightenment rationality concealing violence, Karp sees organized violence revealing the global benefits of America's hegemony—and a lucrative profit opportunity to help improve its further organization (this time, with algorithms, drones, AI!)

Karp's militant rhetoric exposes Silicon Valley's impatience with thought unmoored from action. Marx would surely toast their pivot to praxis: Instead of just "arguing the world," they have the will, the means—and now, apparently, the "Big Balls"—to change it. Trump's return has granted them direct conduits to federal machinery: now Andreessen plays hiring coach, Thiel installs his lieutenants throughout government, and Musk's confederates run amok in DOGE. Their approach? The same that leveled "dinosaur industries": disrupt first, debug later.

The taxonomic vocabularies we have relied upon—those tidy categories of elites, oligarchs, public intellectuals—falter before this new species. Silicon Valley's philosopher-kings are not merely the patrons of yesteryear bankrolling think tanks or nonprofits, nor accidental plutocrats scribbling manifestos between yacht purchases. They have engineered a more muscular hybrid: investment portfolios that function as philosophical arguments, market positions that operationalize convictions. And while industrial-age billionaires constructed foundations to memorialize their worldviews, these figures erect investment funds that double as ideological fortresses. It is the Hegelian evolution from capitalism (thesis) to philanthro-capitalism (anti-thesis) to cultural warfare as a profit center (synthesis).

Consider the battleground of ethical investment—that corporate confessional branded ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance), where Wall Street’s dubious attempt to measure virtue like a quarterly earnings report has mutated into a culture war flashpoint. For the uninitiated, ESG represents the financial world’s belated recognition that perhaps poisoning rivers, exploiting workers, and installing boards composed entirely of golf buddies might eventually impact the bottom line. Companies receive ESG scores that purportedly measure their environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and governance practices—a sort of moral credit rating for corporations eager to prove they have evolved beyond strip-mining both nature and human dignity.

What is peculiar—almost perversely fascinating—is how Silicon Valley’s elites have positioned their artillery on this battlefield, so seemingly distant from their digital kingdoms. The drama, much of it unfolding in the past few years, proceeded with mechanical inevitability: Musk’s dismissal (“a scam”), Chamath Palihapitiya’s denunciation (“complete fraud”), Andreessen’s burial rites (“zombie idea”).

But these men transcend mere commentary. When praxis beckons, Silicon Valley answers with investment, not mere philanthropy. Thiel, fresh from comparing ESG to Chinese communism and calling it an “ideological cartel,” bankrolled Strive Asset Management, an anti-ESG fund. (It was then led by Vivek Ramaswamy, Musk’s erstwhile DOGE lieutenant, who ran a whole presidential campaign on a single issue: attacking “woke capitalism.”) Andreessen, having backed a Christian pro-MAGA fund called New Founding, also helped to seed 1789 Capital, another anti-ESG rampart now fortified by Don Trump Jr. Their genius? Converting intellectual positions into market arbitrage while wielding (and often owning) digital megaphones to reshape the very reality their investments bet against.

Has Silicon Valley’s intellectual imprint carved deeper grooves than we realized? While the likes of Andreessen cosplay as America’s plucky “Little Tech,” what if they are something bigger than this pantomime suggests? A hypothesis dangles before us, thorny and disquieting: What if our multitasking tech elites are the very forces—cunning, mighty, occasionally delusional—driving the “structural transformation” of the public sphere that Jürgen Habermas diagnosed in his early writings?

The young Habermas—before systems theory bloated his prose and nuance diluted his fury—identified the villain with brass-knuckled clarity: The decline of critical, open debate was due to the corrupting influence of concentrated power. Truer words have never been spoken. And yet. . . Updating his 1962 analysis in 2023, Habermas, the patrician-academic, chose to fuss over topics like “algorithmic steering”—a quaint concern akin to adjusting picture frames while the house collapses into a sinkhole.

Today, it is increasingly clear that it is the tech oligarchs—not their algorithmically-steered platforms—who present the greater danger. Their arsenal combines three deadly implements: plutocratic gravity (fortunes so vast they distort reality’s basic physics), oracular authority (their technological visions treated as inevitable prophecy), and platform sovereignty (ownership of the digital intersections where society’s conversation unfolds). Musk’s takeover of Twitter (now X), Andreessen’s strategic investments into Substack, Peter Thiel’s courting of Rumble, the conservative YouTube: they have colonized both the medium and the message, the system and the lifeworld.

We must update our taxonomies to account for this new species of oligarch-intellectuals. If yesterday’s public intellectual resembled a careful archaeologist methodically excavating cultural artifacts for display in rarefied literary journals, today’s model is the demolition expert, wiring entire societal structures with ideological explosives and detonating them from the safe distance of offshore accounts. They do not write about the future; they install it, beta-testing theories on unwitting populations in history’s largest unreviewed experiment.

What distinguishes them from previous wealth-encrusted elites is not avarice but verbosity—a torrential output that would exhaust even Balzac. Where industrial barons funded think tanks to launder interests into policy papers, our oligarch-intellectuals cut out the middleman. Forget steering the algorithms: Oligarch-intellectuals steer the conversation itself—and they do it with philosophical meme-grenades. Dropped at 3 a.m. on X, they invariably become international headlines by breakfast.

How should we situate such figures in established debates about intellectuals? In the late 1980s, Zygmunt Bauman mapped two intellectual archetypes: the “legislators,” who descended from mountaintops with society’s commandments

etched in stone, and the “interpreters,” who merely translated between cultural dialects without prescribing universal rules. He traced postmodernity’s erosion of the legislative stance. Grand narratives died. Universal authority withered. All that remained was interpretation.

Our oligarch-intellectuals begin as interpreters par excellence. They position themselves as technological mediums, passive channels for inevitable futures. Their special gift? Reading the tea leaves of technological determinism with perfect clarity. They do not prescribe; they merely translate the gospel of inevitability. This performs the “intellectual” function of their double-helix identity.

But the oligarchic DNA strand coils tighter. Armed with their prophetic visions, they demand specific sacrifices—from the public, the government, and their employees. Altman jetsets between capitals like a tech Kissinger, offering peace treaties for AI wars that have not even begun. Musk diagrams humanity’s cosmic destiny with the certainty of a Soviet five-year plan. Thiel and Karp redraft defense strategy while Andreessen reimagines money and Srinivasan governance. Their interpretive gift transforms, chameleon-like, into legislative mandate.

In the process, Silicon Valley’s oligarch-intellectuals have built cathedral doors from what postmodernists once declared rubble: a grand narrative with “technology” (but also: “disruption,” “innovation,” “AGI”) inscribed on every stone, heavy with the weight of inevitability. They thumb through tomes like Kevin Kelly’s *What Technology Wants* not as readers but as editors, penciling in their own imperatives between the lines. The tech mogul, once content to predict the future, now demands we conform to it.

The metamorphosis reaches its final stage not in manifestos or tweetstorms but in their colonization of Washington’s power chambers. Watch as they glide from boardroom to Cabinet Room, mercury-smooth and purpose-driven, having masterfully fused interpretation and legislation: first prophesying technology’s demands, then crafting policy to satisfy the gods they themselves invented.

Where RAND’s Cold Warriors may have whispered into Pentagon corridors, our oligarch-intellectuals orchestrate reality’s symphony—controlling media platforms, deploying venture capital like carpet bombs, and perfecting Steve Bannon’s “flooding the zone” strategy to a hydraulic science. Combining powers

previously scattered across societal domains, they propose futures Monday, finance them Tuesday, and force their manifestation by Friday. And who questions prophets whose previous revelations birthed PayPal, Tesla, and ChatGPT? Their divine right to predict derives from their proven divinity.

Their pronouncements frame the entrenchment and expansion of their own agendas not as corporate self-interest but as capitalism's only chance at salvation. Andreessen's "Techno-Optimist Manifesto"—that digital encyclical urging America to "build" rather than lament—drips with references to economic stagnation and prescribes entrepreneurial daring as the only antidote to systemic sclerosis. Invoking Nietzsche and Marinetti, he legislates acceleration as virtue and condemns the cautionary impulse as heresy. "We believe that there is no material problem," he intones, "that cannot be solved with more technology." This isn't just a statement—it is a catechism for his desired future.

Thiel, in his continued insistence that the West has lost its capacity for bold innovations, also conjures an image of a technological desert that must be irrigated by Silicon Valley. Meanwhile, Altman performs a nimble two-step: first declaring AI will devour jobs, then extending universal basic income as the only logical solution—not merely through rhetorical flourishes but via research dollars and Worldcoin, his other, less-known startup (after all, why not get paid—possibly, in perpetuity! —for letting Sam Altman scan your iris?). These are not just self-serving bromides but existential imperatives: reject their proposals and watch civilization crumble to dust.

This messianic self-promotion—tech oligarchs crowning themselves humanity's official spokesmen—would have Antonio Gramsci reaching for his prison notebooks. The Italian Marxist theorized "organic intellectuals" as voices emerging from ascendant classes, especially the proletariat, who translate particular interests into universal imperatives in the battle for cultural hegemony. The bitter punchline? Capital has beaten the left at its own game—oligarch-intellectuals now serve as capital's unanointed organic intellectuals, with capitalism perfecting in a decade what socialists could not achieve in a century.

Between the cold arithmetic of profit-seeking and the messianic theater of civilization-saving stretches the oligarch-intellectuals' most revealing contradiction: They must extinguish the very revolutionary flames their empires were kindled to ignite. Their obsessive campaign against "wokeness" reveals power's oldest reflex—containment of its own contradictions.

Watch Musk denounce the "woke mind virus" or Karp attack wokeness as "a form of thin pagan religion." Andreessen, meanwhile, paints elite universities as Marxist seminaries producing "America-hating communists." Joe Lonsdale, another tech mogul (and a co-founder of Palantir) has been the driving force behind the University of Austin—the anti-woke university hoping to mass produce "America-loving capitalists."

Tracing the origins of this oligarchic anxiety requires revisiting Alvin Gouldner's predictions about the rise of the "New Class" from the late 1970s. Gouldner identified a "technical intelligentsia" whose very DNA carried revolutionary potential. Though they appeared docile—"wishing nothing more than to enjoy their opiate obsessions with technical puzzles"—their fundamental purpose was to "revolutionize technology continually," destabilizing cultural bedrock and social architecture by their refusal to worship yesterday's gods.

The alliance Gouldner envisioned—rational engineers joining hands with cultural intellectuals to challenge entrenched capital—constituted his "New Class," a potentially revolutionary force hamstrung by its own privilege. As subsequent decades have shown, Gouldner's utopia never quite materialized (though reactionaries like Bannon and Curtis Yarvin, with his conspiratorial notion of "the Cathedral," might beg to differ). Yet Silicon Valley emerged as a strange exception. Its rank-and-file—if not always its generals—marinated in countercultural ideals, championing diversity and flattened hierarchies. Researchers probing tech's trenches have documented an emerging "post-neoliberal subjectivity," a consciousness allergic to inequality and increasingly hostile to the entrepreneurial theology that once demanded complete surrender of private life at the corporate altar.

The evidence is not merely anecdotal. A comprehensive 2023 study tracking political donations of 200,000 employees across 18 industries revealed tech workers as uniquely anti-establishment—and trailing only the bohemians of

arts and entertainment in their liberal fervor. The source of this radicalism lies precisely where Gouldner placed his faith: in what he called the “culture of critical discourse” embedded in technical work itself. Thus, the researchers discovered that non-technical employees within the same tech companies showed none of this rebellious disposition, confirming that coding itself, not mere proximity to ping pong tables, contributes to their dissenting mindset.

Most revealing in that study was the cavernous gap between liberal tech workers and their right-leaning bosses—a schism wider than in all but two other industries. That gap was a ticking time bomb. And it exploded at the start of the first Trump administration. Catalyzed by its clumsily executed but aggressive policies—on immigration, race, war—Silicon Valley’s employees transformed from compliant keystrokers into digital dissidents.

Abetted by social media and rising racial tensions following the murder of George Floyd by police officers, tech workers emerged as an unforeseen challenge. The oligarchs found themselves ambushed from within—their liberal-leaning legions suddenly refusing to drape their technical artistry over the Pentagon’s blood machines or ICE’s deportation directive. These revolts—at Google, Microsoft, Amazon—threatened not merely contractual agreements but the very covenant that bound Silicon Valley to the military-industrial complex.

The rebellion’s second front—climate consciousness—emerged with evangelical fervor when Amazon’s employees issued their green manifesto, declaring themselves capable of “redefining what is possible” for planetary salvation. For the oligarchs, this dual rebellion against militarism and for environmental stewardship—never mind other headaches like ESG—presented a malignant tumor requiring swift excision.

Unable to reprogram their workforce through direct means, Silicon Valley’s oligarch-intellectuals adopted a more elegant solution: condemning “woke” infiltration with the fervor of medieval witch-hunters while disguising national security behind the rhetoric of patriotic duty.

Karp, having already crowned “wokeness” the “central risk to Palantir and America,” now demands geopolitical fealty from his payroll peasantry. They must support Israel and oppose China; those who disagree are free to look for employment

elsewhere. As he told his Davos audience in 2023, “we want [employees] who want to be on the side of the West. You may not agree with that and, bless you, don’t work here.” Recently, Andreessen even confided to the Times that it was not uncommon to suspect that some employees were joining tech companies with the explicit goal of destroying them from within.

The playbook behind all these declarations is brutally simple: re-align the tech intelligentsia with old-money power by cleansing their ranks of subversive thought. Gouldner’s dream of cultural-technical alliance lies fractured—shattered by pink slips, mockery of social conscience as weakness, and flag-waving paranoia about Chinese competition.

Oligarch-intellectuals have emerged a stable and coherent social entity as a byproduct of this battle for hegemony. And they certainly will not be retiring even after quashing their woke and ESG-loving enemies. In Trump’s Washington, they arrive not as guests but as architects. Their reality-bending machinery—money hydraulics, platform dominance, bureaucracies kneeling to translate private fantasy into public policy—wields unprecedented force. Carnegie and Rockefeller commanded respect but lacked this lethal arsenal: social media thunderbox, celebrity aura, venture capital chainsaw, West Wing passkey. By rewriting regulations, channeling subsidies, and recalibrating public expectations, oligarch-intellectuals transmute fever dreams—blockchain fiefdoms, Martian homesteads—into seemingly plausible futures.

Fortunately, what appears as the monolithic fortress of techno-oligarchic power conceals structural flaws invisible to worshipful observers. Their apparent capacity to bend reality to their will paradoxically undermines itself by constructing echo chambers that asphyxiate essential criticism, all while celebrating free expression.

Divorced from the caustic touch of unvarnished facts, these Silicon Valley pontiffs lose their navigational instruments. And in a landscape already littered with founder worship, contact with unfiltered truth grows scarcer. (Do not count on court hagiographers like Walter Isaacson to tell them!)

This is one of the many ways in which politics is very much not like business. Standard venture capitalism still faces the market's cold judgment. VCs who crowned WeWork the future of work watched pandemic realities puncture their bubble. The market, however flawed, regularly tests one's investment hypotheses.

But oligarchic power offers a darker temptation: Why adjust predictions to match reality when you can bend reality to validate predictions? When Andreessen Horowitz anoints cryptocurrency as banking's inevitable successor, the next step is not adaptation but activation—deploying Trump administration influence to transmute prophecy into policy. The collision between venture fantasies and stubborn facts becomes avoidable when you own the levers to reconfigure the facts themselves. This, then, is the final gambit: oligarch-intellectuals reconfiguring legislation, institutions, and cultural expectations until prophecy and reality fuse into a single hallucination (courtesy of ChatGPT, of course).

Reality, however, maintains its breaking point—a lesson Soviet bureaucrats learned when their carefully constructed fictions shattered against material constraints. The Chinese Communist Party, shrewder in its methods, built multi-tiered grievance collection systems—digital forums, local officials, vetted NGOs—delivering crucial intelligence about potential turmoil.

The oligarch-intellectuals demonstrate precisely the opposite instinct: They are treading the Soviet path. Musk's DOGE apparatus converts remaining employees into nodding mannequins, while his cohort hunts dissenters across digital platforms with algorithmic efficiency. In selecting Soviet-style reality denial over Chinese-style reality monitoring, they have fashioned echo chambers that will ultimately fracture their grand designs.

The irony cuts to the bone: These men who see communists lurking everywhere are about to perfect the cardinal sin of Soviet technocracy, mistaking their sleek models for the unruly reality they pretend to tame.

We should not really be all that surprised: When oligarch-intellectuals seize history's most powerful apparatus, they transform, inevitably, into apparatchiks—this time, holidaying by the makeshift tents of Burning Man rather than at the swanky sanatoriums of Crimea. Elon Musk might have started as a Henry Ford but he will exit as a Leonid Brezhnev.

Intellectual Historians Confront the Present

AN INTERVIEW WITH
DANIEL STEINMETZ-JENKINS

LEONARD BENARDO

MAY 1, 2025 | THE IDEAS LETTER 39

The intellectual historian Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins has been a stellar interviewer of a broad range of intellectuals. He agreed to turn the tables with *The Ideas Letter* and make himself the interviewee. Our center of gravity is intellectual history, but we span far and wide and discuss the role (or absence thereof) of public intellectuals today and the role of ideas generally in public debate.

This month-long epistolary exchange was lightly edited for length and clarity.

Leonard Benardo: *I thought I would begin by asking you why you think the field of intellectual history has made such an unanticipated resurgence in recent years. At some point, only a decade or so ago, it was seemingly on the brink of turning moribund, and if you were interested in the area you would have been well advised to go to law school instead. Jobs were scarce. What happened? What were the triggers that reignited the field? How do you account for the turn in terms of structure, ideology, and otherwise?*

Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins: I do think intellectual history has been revitalized but primarily outside the confines of the academy. Of course, there are plenty of great intellectual historians currently writing, but the field has experienced the same fate as the general history profession in terms of the so-called academic jobs crisis that has significantly deepened since 2016. Even if one were to be admitted to Harvard, Yale, or Princeton to study intellectual history, it is probably unlikely that doing so would lead to a tenure-track job. I think there is a hesitancy for

professors at even these places to take on students as they know there is a good chance it will not result in a tenure-track offer. Whenever one of my students at Wesleyan says they want to go to grad school to become a history professor, I feel an ethical obligation to explain to them the risk involved in that decision. In terms of your comment about law school, I encourage them to do a PhD/JD so that if a history job does not materialize, they at least have the fallback option of a law career or even becoming a law professor. Of course, some students are privileged enough so as not to have to worry about the risk, which means that we might end up with a profession, in a generation, dominated by a particular class.

The most recent breakthrough for hiring in intellectual history occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s. I'm just thinking about my respective field of modern European intellectual history, and it is amazing to see how many jobs Martin Jay and Dominick LaCapra's students landed. There has been nothing even close, in terms of hiring, since. Perhaps this is also due, in part, to the global turn in intellectual history, which is where cutting-edge research is primarily now taking place. Indeed, it might be professionally limiting for a younger person just to frame themselves as an intellectual historian of France or Germany instead of something like "Europe and the world." This is interesting because the world in which we are living is becoming increasingly nationalistic, suggesting that perhaps the turn to the global in academia is widely out of touch with the turn to nationalism in contemporary politics.

Academic job precarity explains, in part, why so many young intellectual historians are writing in places like *Dissent*, *The Nation*, *Jacobin Magazine*, *N+1*, *The Drift*, etc. I did my PhD at Columbia, for instance, with David Marcus (literary editor at *The Nation*), Thomas Meaney (editor at *Granta*), and Tim Shenk (former editor of *Dissent* who, after several years, landed a job at George Washington). It is at the level of the essay and the book review that some of the best intellectual-history writing is taking place today. Indeed, it has now become acceptable for an intellectual historian to publish their first book with a trade press, which, in part, is due to the academic job crisis—if you can not get a job, why not try for a big contract with a trade press?

I'm reminded that small magazines thrived in the U.S. in the period between the World Wars because young writers, often Jewish and limited by university quota systems, had little chance for an academic career. Not by coincidence,

once this system was lifted after the war and academic hiring exploded, many of these little magazines went out of business. All of which is to say that, yes, intellectual history is thriving in a sense, but a lot of this is taking place outside of the academy, academic journals, and university presses. This is a tragic situation for the profession, but it also has allowed intellectual historians to use their skills to address the political crisis of our times, and for a general audience desperate for answers.

LB: *I suppose the exciting, tantalizing even, possibility is that despite the tragedy of the humanities in academia there is a potential rebirth of the public intellectual. We remember a few decades ago Russell Jacoby and others bemoaning the paucity of citizen intellectuals who would have household resonance across social spheres. Can the academy's implosion breathe new life into what we thought was dead and buried: the hallowed public intellectual? And as a corollary to that, might this become, as you imply, a new boon time for small magazines? In other words, might the current contradictions produce unanticipated intellectual benefits?*

DJ: Historians are, no doubt, heavily involved with magazines, podcasts, Substacks, and other forms of social media. I'm not quite sure, however, this entails a renewal of the public intellectual, because they are typically speaking to disconnected individuals sitting in front of their computers at home or taking the train to work. Of course, this isn't to deny the intellectual benefits of these outlets, which keep their listeners very well informed.

Ultimately, I tend to think of it as a good development, but in terms of my field of history, many professional historians express concern about the matter. There is anxiety in some corners of the profession regarding a turn to presentism in history. The fear here is that by trying to inform their audiences of how history can illuminate the present, the distant past—say, ancient and medieval history—will prove of less interest. This, in turn, is connected, whether fairly or not, to the history profession's anxieties about decreasing student enrollments in these same distant eras of history.

I believe such concerns have some level of legitimacy. I think of a historian like Timothy Snyder who, in an overtly political way, essentially uses Russian history as a Rosetta Stone for interpreting every major contemporary event—"lessons on tyranny" quickly follow, which can be purchased at the local Starbucks.

At the same time, I think a lot of the concerns over presentism are misguided, as the attempt to understand the present can offer a springboard for understanding the past and show obvious differences with the present in doing so. The Stanford scholar of French thought Dan Edelstein, for instance, has a very interesting forthcoming book that tries to show how the modern understanding of revolution has generally been viewed in a positive light, especially since the French Revolution. This differs from ancient/medieval interpretations of revolution, which typically were viewed with horror. In other words, any historical analogy involves substantive disanalogies, which mitigate against presentist concerns.

There is one turn toward public intellectual life, which I think has a fundamental limitation. Many liberals and leftists have taken to social media, podcasts, newsletters, and essays to fully devote themselves to knowing their rightwing enemies. As someone who just edited a collection on the American fascism debate and teaches a class on the history of conservatism since 1945, I have learned much and appreciate these efforts—and particularly, Corey Robin's 2011 book, *The Reactionary Mind*, which is probably most responsible for starting this trend.

However, it now seems to me that left/liberal writers—of which I count myself—are at a general loss in articulating a robust political, intellectual, and economic alternative to Trumpism. My sense is that the other side, instead of just obsessing about the Left—which it of course does—has been much more constructive in articulating a rightwing vision of the U.S. and the world. Liberal/left intellectuals need to follow their lead instead of being totally consumed by the politics of fear, pinpointing when the clock broke, and parsing the minutiae of every rightwing thought.

I've mentioned this before to friends and was immediately asked what such a vision would involve and how I would contribute to it. Exit polls suggest that Harris lost because of inflation, immigration, and wars. These are three areas where the Left has rich resources for articulating a new political vision of the future. I myself am now, at the level of the essay, writing about nonviolent/antiwar thought as a modern tradition in the history of political thought; one which is in desperate need of revival today.

LB: *Is there a way to address the anxieties over presentism that have been in full swing in the wake of George Floyd, but also, as you say, in the writing of scholar-pundits like Tim Snyder? You are of course right to point out that we live by analogy, and it would be ludicrous to deprive historians, or anyone else, from making a sound case for looking at history comparatively, both past and present (the name of a famous history journal, by the way!). But when it is used for a particular political project, does it cause concern for you? I think that has been the fear of those who are anxious about its practice. As you say, it might be a springboard for a richer discussion—a gateway, if you will, for those otherwise resistant to thinking historically to see parallels in human history.*

You play your hand, if you will, in your critique of the Left's intense focus with understanding the Right, by noting its interest in "knowing their ...enemies" and "pinpointing when the clock broke." We know of whom you write! Have these podcasts and books not enriched an understanding for the Left, furnished it with a deeper set of explanations of why politics and institutions have shifted as they have? Must it be a constraint on fashioning a new and different left/liberal project? Can't both be achieved?

DJ: Historians have played a leading public role in the so-called liberal resistance against MAGA. Indeed, the efforts of historians have been so great in this regard that they have been called "Resistance Historians"—I can't think of another academic field that has been given a similar label. At no point in my lifetime can I recall historians playing such a significant public role. Snyder, Ruth Ben-Ghiat, Kevin Kruse, Heather Cox Richardson—the list goes on—have become household names on MSNBC and other media outlets. As Trump is suspected of fascism or white supremacy, these historians have used their expertise to inform their audience what that is and how to resist it.

Many professional historians have been critical of these efforts. I will offer just two criticisms that have nothing to do with their work as historians, for which I have a high level of respect. First, Trump won in 2016, did not lose by much in 2020, and in 2024 established the biggest multiracial GOP coalition since Ulysses S. Grant. Clearly, the efforts of the Resistance Historians, the bulk of whom work in the Northeast at private universities, have not succeeded in resisting Trump. Most Americans do not care about their warnings of fascism, just like most Americans did not care about the warnings of the New Atheist who said after 9/11 that religion poisons everything. Of course, many liberal academics and the highly educated do, but they do not speak to the increasing number of

working-class Black and Latino voters who are moving more in the direction of the Republican Party. In other words, the Resistance Historians have an audience problem. They are preaching to the choir.

Second, they rarely have a positive message to articulate because they are fixated on reducing the current moment to Hitler's rise in Germany, or the failures of Reconstruction. I do believe that historians can play a powerful role in the public sphere but right now they are just too depressing. The average person wants to get out of bed in the morning with some minimal motivation to go to work, to have a decent life. They appreciate a bit of inspiration and encouragement. Telling them apocalyptic stories about the end of democracy will leave them depressed and in bed. Even Trump is more positive, in this regard, than the Resistance Historians. Yes, I totally disagree with his message, but he has a fall-and-rise story about America that the Democrats sorely lack—and the Resistance Historians contribute to this lack by offering bleak history.

What they should instead do is use their expertise to look at how peoples, citizens, nations, etc., in the past sought to articulate a progressive way forward given the transitional period in which they found themselves. We can let the world burn, or we can be like Cooper in Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* and find the wormhole to human progress.

As mentioned, I am an advocate of using history to understand the present—I teach a class on it, have written about it, etc.—primarily because looking to the past is simply an unavoidable existential need that humans have when trying to make sense of their times. However, I have grown in my concerns about presentism, and especially because of the overly political way it has been used to resist Trump, which has led to some rather poor history, in my opinion. When making historical analogies it is essential that they be accompanied by disanalogies since no era is exactly the same. As Samuel Moyn puts it, "The past is not simply a mirror for our own self-regard." Of course, the present is, in a sense, a product of the past. Holding these together in tension can do much to avoid crude forms of presentism.

All of this, of course, relates to your last question regarding the recent proliferation of literature written by liberals and leftists devoted to unpacking the rightwing historical origins of our current moment. I can remember being in grad school

around 2009 and a history professor lamenting the fact that historians have taken so little interest in the history of conservatism. In his thinking, liberals ignored, to their peril, conservative thought. I think that sentiment is why, since the election of Trump in 2016, there has been so much literature devoted to Trump's origins: They failed to see him coming. Also, there was the 2008 financial crisis that gave way to a liberal/leftist avalanche of literature on neoliberalism and its history.

I am not saying this is a bad development, but it needs to be accompanied by even more of an effort to articulate a new progressive vision. It is my belief that the GOP remains the party of ideas, at least that is the impression given by the literature examining those ideas. Meanwhile, every other year a piece appears in the *New York Times* saying that John Rawls's highly academic *Theory of Justice*, published in 1971, holds the keys for saving and revitalizing the Democratic Party.

LB: *I appreciate what you share here about the so-called Resistance Historians. I wonder, at least in the U.S. context, whether this hasn't always been the case. Weren't the "Resistance Historians" of the 1950s (Richard Hofstadter maybe, Louis Hartz perhaps) also preaching to the choir? Were they making any greater traction with the working classes? There were, however, radical historians who were writing accomplished history and were part of movement-building that wasn't divorced from their scholarship (Herbert Gutman, EP Thompson, WEB Du Bois, and Philip Foner come to mind). Snyder is beloved in Ukraine and likely across classes, but outside that country who knows of him except over-educated elites? No different, I don't think, from other periods. But today we have a new class of intellectuals fully outside the academy, some even eking out (or better) a living through Substack. In fact, the fiercest debates are often happening via electronic media and Substack postings that put to shame the loudest intellectual contestation on any campus. Podcasts are where most will turn to for a deeper understanding (or underscoring) of their positions. Getting back to our original question on intellectual history: Are intellectual historians accounting for this far more plural and ramified environment when interpreting how ideas travel and gain traction? Does the intellectual history subfield of conceptual history need freshening up?*

DJ: My sense regarding mid-20th-century consensus historians like Richard Hofstadter, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., etc., is that they were writing in large measure to resist hysteria, not to create hysteria by talking up civil wars or Red Scare warnings of Fifth Columns in our midst. They, no doubt, worried about conspiracy theories and rightwing populism, but they offered socioeconomic historical explanations as well

as rigorous intellectual explanations that in a sense demystified these phenomena—even as their interpretations represented the liberal political establishment.

I think Resistance Historians almost succumb to offering their own conspiracy theories of these sorts of things today by tracing everything, for instance, to Moscow. Granted, who knows how well-known Snyder is, but millions of Democrats believed Russiagate would succeed in exposing and impeaching Trump, which it ultimately didn't, and many still buy into that thesis, which has proven to be a distracting sideshow. And I am in complete agreement with what you say about Gutman, Thompson, Du Bois, and Philip Foner. Again, I am totally for doing the history of the present—I am offering a class right now with that very title at City College—but having a PhD in history doesn't necessarily make one an expert on contemporary politics (just like knowing the history of dentistry doesn't suffice for making one a dentist). There seems to be some slippage here, in which expert historical knowledge of the past gives a historian some kind of political-guru status.

I agree with you that the intellectual energy today is to be found in podcasts, Substacks, etc. The history profession, in general, is wrestling with how to adjust to media such as these. There have been numerous discussions, for instance, about this in the *American Historical Review*. Regarding the field of intellectual history, of course, there are rich resources, especially in a journal like *History and Theory*, which has long focused on issues of temporality and spatiality as it relates to the writing of history. The field of Global Intellectual History has devoted significant attention to the transformation, circulation, and globalization of ideas. Indeed, intellectual history is one of the few fields of history where you can find serious discussions devoted to theorizing how the discipline can reconcile itself to some acceptance of presentism—here I have in mind the excellent piece by the Harvard historian David Armitage, “In Defense of Presentism.”

There are also plenty of intellectual historians/historians of ideas involved with podcasts and Substacks. My sense is that intellectual historians can devote more attention to theorizing and discussing these matters, but that they are probably the most advanced at doing so compared to other subfields in the profession. It should be said that for the last decade there has been a revival of interest in conceptual history, and particularly the work of Reinhart Koselleck. There are also a number of works devoted to intellectual history and the subject of temporality

that are influenced by Koselleck. Here, I'm thinking of the recent edited collection, *Power and Time: Temporalities in Conflict and the Making of History* co-edited by Natasha Wheatley, Dan Edelstein, and Stefanos Geroulanos.

LB: *I am intrigued by your earlier jab at these Resistance Historians for proffering unrelentingly bleak history. Would you say something similar about the 1619 debate? Does history need stories that can ensure that, despite always existing power differentials, there must be something we can historically point to that empowers, affirms, even deepens solidaristic bonds? Can you say a bit more about your counsel for Resistance Historians (and hopefully others) to "articulate a progressive way forward?" What does that exactly mean?*

DJ: Yes, 1619 offered bleak history insofar as it presumed that the original sin of slavery—unless somehow atoned for—rendered ineffective emancipatory political doctrines of equality, freedom, and the like. As Matt Karp argued in *Harper's*, the project typically presumed what he called "history as end," which entailed a kind of genetic fallacy that reduced human destiny to its origins. One possible implication of such a view is that, even as the various contributors of the 1619 Project are presumably Democrats, the philosophy of history the project entails seems to be conservative as it's not exactly clear how change in the present day, which is to say wide-ranging progressive change for African Americans, can truly happen given the original sin of slavery.

There is a similar point of comparison here with Resistance Historians but only in a limited sense. Whereas 1619 defines the Black predicament, the post-Cold War period under Clinton or Obama defines the self-understanding of many Resistance Historians. Any kind of progressive doctrine that calls into question the liberal international order birthed out of the Cold War is viewed with all-out skepticism because history has shown, in their eyes, that of the twentieth century's myriad ideologies, only liberalism succeeded. Thus, many Resistance Historians, or just liberals in general, think the answer to Trump is not to articulate a new political vision, but rather to find the next Obama and return to the status quo of 2012. Like with the 1619 Project, this is a backward-looking view of how politics should function, and it implies an underlying philosophy of history.

And so does my argument that Resistance Historians should spend more time devoted to articulating a progressive way forward. I would say—and I know this

sounds overly academic—that a return to the philosophy of history is essential for those historians interested in getting out of the rut of either pessimistic accounts that lead to the present and future being trapped in the past or even moderate liberal thinking that reduces a progressive philosophy of history to being ideological and thus dangerous. I take it that most historians have relegated the philosophy of history to the dustbin of history—a vestige of the nineteenth century inseparable from Europe's Age of High Imperialism, for giving birth to totalizing illiberal philosophies or positivist conceptions of history proven wrong by the horrors of the World Wars.

But it would be impossible to think of how progress happened in the past, and in turn, how it can be reimagined today, without some philosophical account of positive historical change. Here resources can be found in such philosophical traditions as American pragmatism, neo-Hegelian and Marxist thought, and notions of the social imaginary. That so many liberals take for granted either a pessimistic or moderate understanding of change is a tacit belief that needs to be made more explicit and needs to be questioned since it is premised on philosophical assumptions that themselves can be questioned, especially given the crisis in which liberalism now finds itself.

LB: *I am particularly struck by your insistence on the need for reflecting on one's philosophy of history as a way out of the current impasse. Questioning one's first principles, normatively or intellectually, is not the general habit of most historians. So much stands in its way: publishing/perishing, advancing one's career, mounds of teaching, and so on. Digging deep into one's customary tropes and questioning foundational assumptions might be as attractive as a root canal. Yet, as you imply, not to do so, especially in this extraordinarily complicated and anything-goes historical moment, would be a dereliction of intellectual responsibility. Can a historian be self-reflexive about their intellectual priors and theoretical commitments and, at the same time, address thorny issues of academic history, and find avenues to bring those academic issues to a broader audience to address vexing intellectual questions of the day? Sounds like a tall order.*

DJ: Your question reminds me of the adage attributed to Keynes (rightly or wrongly): "When the facts change, I change my mind." Tony Judt named a collection of essays with exactly that title, which, in part, captured his turn from a biting critique of the French Left to a critic of the American empire. One thing

that can allow for this is the willingness for historians to not remain content with simply historicizing the distant past but also historicizing themselves.

As you mention, this is no easy task, as it might involve admitting that assumptions are wrong. I think the inability to practice self-historicization explains why many historians rely on so many stale historical analogies to explain the current state of democracy. Rather than interrogating, for instance, an assumption that liberal democracy necessarily entails the greater diversification of the Democratic Party over time, there's a tendency instead to say that Latinos or Black men are low-information voters duped by the internet. I'm reminded of the long-held secular liberal assumption that expanding science, education, and modernization will necessarily lead to a decline of religious belief—a thesis that at best applies to parts of Europe and nearly nowhere else. This way of thinking is what Roberto Unger famously described as “false necessity.” False necessity happens on both the Left and the Right. Coming to terms with the contingency of the present allows for an openness to the contingency of the future, allowing for creative thought about the possibility for a better future—not a return to some imaginary golden age.

I think there are a number of historians and theorists whose work proves valuable in this regard. There is the relatively new book by Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, which essentially is a book about what a political order constitutes, and what gives rise to their success and decline. A lot of scholars have taken interest in the idea of “worldmaking” and specifically Adom Getachew's book, *Worldmaking After Empire*, which looks at how postcolonial leaders imagined a new, more just, world order on account of decolonization. Samuel Moyn, in *Liberalism Against Itself*, attempts to return liberalism to its more romantic, creatively progressive nineteenth century roots. There is, of course, the classic book by Geoffrey Barraclough titled *An Introduction to Contemporary History*, which provides a rich account of how historians can try to grasp the end of one era and the beginning of a new one.



Places

A man carries a bull-shaped frame of fireworks in Cuajinicuilapa, Mexico, on September 9, 2020.
© Pedro Pardo/AFP/Getty

An Inescapable Past

SHEHRYAR FAZLI

MARCH 6, 2025 | THE IDEAS LETTER 35

“This was a destruction not of a house but of our history, of *my* history,” said a veteran of Bangladesh’s 1971 liberation war. He was speaking to me of the destruction on February 5 of the Dhaka home of Sheikh Mujib ur Rahman, Bangladesh’s first leader.

The address, 32 Dhanmondi, is as well known in Bangladesh as 1600 Pennsylvania in the U.S. It is where, in March 1971, Mujib was apprehended by Pakistani troops as they began their violent crackdown in East Pakistan that culminated in a genocide, the third Pakistan–India war, and the birth of a new nation. And it is where, on August 15, 1975, Bangladeshi soldiers slaughtered Prime Minister Mujib and several members of his family in the country’s first military coup. That it now stands in ruins is an indication of how much public anger had accumulated during the 15 years of the increasingly repressive rule under Mujib’s daughter, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, which ended dramatically on August 5, 2024 after weeks of student-led protests.

Hasina had turned 32 Dhanmondi into a memorial for her father. Now exiled in India, where she fled after her fall from power, Hasina is plotting a political comeback. On February 5, marking a gathering of her Awami League party, she planned to give a speech that would condemn Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus’s interim government and announce her intentions to avenge her ouster. The youth leaders warned that if she spoke they would destroy her father’s house. She spoke anyway and the leaders stayed true to their word: The house was smashed. For people like the liberation-war veteran, who sacrificed so much and had seen his own father killed in that conflict, this was a case of a mob indulging in senseless, self-defeating violence against a symbol of their country’s founding. But for the students who participated, it was another act of freedom in defiance not just of a “fascist” Awami League, but of a particular version of history that enabled Hasina to present herself and her family as the only legitimate custodians of Bangladesh’s independence.

The uprising began last June after a court order revived a quota system reserving a proportion of government jobs for 1971 war veterans and their descendants. This was effectively a spoils system for allies of the Awami League, the party that Mujib founded and that Hasina has led since 1981, but was draped in the memory of the liberation so that challenges to it would seem unpatriotic. This did not matter to a new generation eager for employment opportunities in an unfair economy. When Hasina implied that the protesters were *razakars*, a Persian word meaning “volunteer” but widely used for Bengalis who collaborated with the Pakistan army during the 1971 genocide, the resulting fury swelled the protesters’ ranks to an uncontrollable level.

Symbolism played a vital role in the events around the uprising. The most potent was the symbol of Abu Sayed, a 23-year-old whom police shot dead on July 16 as he stood in the middle of a road with his arms spread wide, facing a barrage of bullets. His death was a decisive turning point in the movement, prompting the respected photojournalist Shahidul Alam to declare, “the end is nigh.” Others replicated Sayed’s act of defiance, and a graphic of a young man with outstretched arms, a staff in one hand, has essentially become the youth movement’s logo.

This figure is not only meant to taunt trigger-happy police; it is forcing open a new era for Bangladesh. Yet for this new era to form, an older one must be settled.

THE FRIEND OF BENGAL

Fifty years later, the 1971 liberation war still serves as a court of appeal in which the main political players try to disenfranchise one another by litigating two unresolved issues: Who was the true custodian of Bangladesh’s independence? And what kind of nation was born? A third, more essential question emerges from these two: Who stood for and who against the spirit of the liberation?

Outsiders can be forgiven for believing that Mujib’s status as the country’s founding father is as unquestioned as Jinnah’s in Pakistan or Gandhi’s and Nehru’s in India. At home he is known as Bangabandhu, or Friend of Bengal. In 1970, when after over a decade of military rule the Pakistan army agreed to transfer power to civilians, he led his Awami League to victory in Pakistan’s first democratic election, against Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). But he was denied his mandate to form a government by a West Pakistan establishment that could not abide being

ruled by Bengalis. In late March 1971, amid a stalemate between East and West Pakistan, troops deployed to Dhaka from West Pakistan poised for a crackdown. Their first order of business was to apprehend the Bengalis' leader, which they did on the first day of the operation, March 25.

That night has passed into Awami League lore, much of it based on Mujib's own account after the war ended. According to him, Mujib, hearing of a West Pakistani plot to kill him and blame it on Bengali extremists (therefore compelling the army to crush the rebellion in the East) sent most of his children into hiding while preparing for martyrdom. The key was for Mujib to be killed inside the house to make it clear that soldiers and not bandits on the streets were the culprits. Thus, would his blood "purify my people." Mujib dictated a final message to his people, recorded and later broadcast via secret transmitter, to fight the West Pakistan army for independence, regardless of his own fate. He wisely ordered away the paramilitary and party men protecting him to limit the bloodshed. And, most poetically, he recalled how as the soldiers took him away, having decided to arrest rather than kill him, he insisted on retrieving his pipe and tobacco.

If this was a profile of courage for Mujib's admirers, for his opponents it was proof of something else: that Mujib, removed from the battlefield, was alive and safe in Rawalpindi amid the slaughter in Bengal. On my first visit to Dhaka many years ago, a retired government official asked me, rhetorically, why the army did not kill or disappear Mujib then, given that in the chaos of the moment the top brass could easily have feigned ignorance of what had happened to him. My interlocutor proposed his theory: The West Pakistan leadership believed that Mujib was still open to keeping Pakistan united and was therefore to be kept alive for a future negotiation.

It is difficult to determine whether this explanation is credible, but it does speak to a larger contest over the liberation narrative. For the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by Hasina's perennial rival Khaleda Zia, who has twice been prime minister, it was fighters and not politicians who won the country's independence. And it was army major Ziaur Rahman, Khaleda's husband and the BNP's founder, who declared Bangladesh's independence over the radio on March 27, 1971, two days after Mujib was arrested. That he did so "at the directive" and "in the name" of Mujib is no longer noted.

Wielding a broad coalition of anti-Awami League constituencies, the BNP has long struggled to create a brand of its own. This may explain why the party gives as much importance to a legitimizing myth around 1971 as it does.

In a deeply polarized society, both narratives have teeth. For the Awami League, the BNP's fidelity to an independent Bangladesh is questionable, given its pro-Pakistani sympathies and, above all, its long partnership with the Jamaat-i-Islami that explicitly opposed Bangladesh's creation, on the grounds of Islamic unity. BNP and Jamaat supporters, meanwhile, accuse both Mujib and Hasina of having surrendered Bangladesh's sovereignty to India. The Awami League holds Ziaur Rahman responsible for the assassination of Mujib and that of many of his family members, in the bloody 1975 coup that augured 15 years of military rule. The BNP blames Mujib's extreme concentration of power in a one-party state for provoking the violent backlash of August 15, 1975. And on it goes, a tooth for a tooth.

WHAT KIND OF A NATION?

The 1975 coup also opened debate over whether the country's essential character was rooted in geography or in religion. Bengal was a major site of British divide-and-rule strategies and resistance to them. In a bid to suppress local resistance to colonial rule, the British partitioned Bengal in 1905 between a Hindu-majority West Bengal and a Muslim-majority East Bengal. This had the reverse effect of what was intended: Instead of quelling Bengali nationalism, it "provoked an upsurge of nationalist protest, and the province had become the focus of both the constitutional and revolutionary faces of the freedom movement," wrote the late Patrick French in his virtuoso account of the independence movement, *Liberty or Death*. While the protests forced the British to reunite Bengal in 1911, their effects did not stop there. A nationalist Bengali identity assumed new force and became a primary threat to the British Empire. The repressive 1915 Defence of India Act was passed specifically in response to agitation in Bengal.

The 1947 partition is hence commonly referred to in Bangladesh as the Second Partition of Bengal. In June of that year, the Bengal Legislative Assembly voted for a united Bengal to join Pakistan. After legislators from Hindu-majority West Bengal later voted for the partitioning of Bengal and for West Bengal to become part of India, Muslim-majority East Bengal legislators—who still sought a united

province—voted that in the event of a provincial partition, East Bengal would join Pakistan, where Bengalis would form the popular majority.

Political power would, however, be concentrated in Karachi and, after the federal capital was moved, Islamabad. Clearly, the predominately Urdu-speaking West Pakistan leadership did not believe its own rhetoric about Muslim unity, and it immediately saw the country's ethnic and linguistic diversity as a threat. Tensions between the center and the provinces created either secessionist or ethnic nationalist movements in Balochistan, the Northwest Frontier Province, and Sindh—but most prominently in East Bengal. The defining moment after the Second Partition was Jinnah's 1948 policy declaring Urdu—the *linga franca* of minority West Pakistanis—the sole national language, provoking a movement in 1952 for Bangla to be given equal status as a national language. On the movement's first day, February 21, police killed four student demonstrators at Dhaka University (for which a monument, Martyr Tower, was built in central Dhaka in 1963). Although Bangla was ultimately recognized as a national language and enshrined in the 1956 constitution, these killings made reconciliation between the eastern and western wings of the country all but impossible.

The refusal to honor what a wide majority of Bengalis—indeed a majority of the country—voted for in the 1970 national election was the final indignity. Estimates of the numbers killed in the violence that followed, as West Pakistan tried to crush Bengalis in the East, vary widely from 30,000 to over 3 million, though many foreign observers and academics have come to a consensus figure of around a million. There is, as the respected journalist David Bergman has argued, “an academic consensus that this campaign of violence, particularly against the Hindu population, was a genocide.” It was only through India's intervention in December 1971, and the third Pakistan–India war, that the massacre stopped and a new nation was born.

Two independence struggles, therefore, endowed Bengali nationalism with a rich history of resistance to colonial and West Pakistani domination. Liberation provided an opportunity to codify that nationalism. Distinguishing the new nation from the one it had seceded from, the 1972 constitution espoused nationalism and secularism, in addition to democracy and socialism, as founding principles. It also banned Jamaat-i-Islami and any other religion-based party.

The Awami League's emphasis on ethnic nationalism and secularism was openly contested after Mujib's assassination, when Ziaur Rahman, upon assuming control after the 1975 coup, promoted a different conception of Bangladeshi national identity, one that underscored its religious and territorial makeup: a Muslim nation that happened to be majority Bengali rather than a Bengali nation that happened to be majority Muslim. If Bangladesh was essentially Bengali, this argument went, then it would have reunited with West Bengal after 1971. The fact that it had not was proof that the two-nation theory calling for South Asia's Muslims to have a homeland still applied.

Rahman's constitutional amendments replaced "secularism" with "absolute trust and faith in the almighty Allah," lifted the ban on religion-based parties, and called on the state "to consolidate, preserve and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity." The constitution's preamble now began with the Muslim salutation: "In the Name of Allah, Beneficent, the Merciful." Islamic studies became a compulsory subject for all Muslim schoolchildren. General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, who imposed martial law in 1982, a year after Rahman's assassination in a mid-level coup, later inserted a constitutional clause declaring Islam the state religion. This Islamization drive ran in parallel to the one occurring in Pakistan under General Zia ul Haq's military regime, albeit significantly more cautiously and gradually.

By no stretch has the binary between Awami League secularism and the religious politics of its opponents been neat. Political expediency and patronage have shaped policy choices at least as much as ideology, if not more. Hasina's Awami League, for example, reinserted secularism into the constitution in 2011 but retained Islam as the state religion and made several, often alarming concessions to Islamists, some of whom remain a powerful force not despite but because of her policies. But 1971 remains a potent political weapon, one that Hasina flaunted against her rivals on returning to office in 2009, tapping a still deeply felt wound: the role of Bengalis who collaborated with the Pakistan army in that war.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

War crimes were destined to be a major issue. The 1973 International Crimes (Tribunal) Act authorized the prosecution of members of "any armed, defence of auxiliary forces, irrespective of nationality, who commits or has committed in the

territory of Bangladesh” crimes against humanity. The purpose was to prosecute Pakistani prisoners of war, some 93,000 of whom had been captured by Indian troops and transported to India.

Pakistan's government, led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto after the country's dismemberment, made the release of all prisoners of war a precondition of its recognizing of the new Bangladeshi state. Its ally China, acting on Islamabad's behalf, wielded its first-ever UN Security Council veto to block Bangladesh's admission to the UN. With so much riding on recognition from Pakistan, Mujib and Indira Gandhi yielded: The Delhi Agreement of 1973 called for the repatriation of all POWs in the three countries. As per the terms of the Simla Agreement between Islamabad and Delhi the year before, this repatriation deal triggered Islamabad's recognition of Bangladesh.

For the country to feel whole, however, it had to hold someone to account for the genocide. But who?

If the Pakistan army was the main culprit, for many veterans of the civil war the Jamaat-e-Islami's role was just as malevolent. Two of its armed wings, Al Shams and Al Badr (the original *razakars*), were widely accused of having committed atrocities like murder, rape, arson, and looting alongside army soldiers. With Jamaat playing a prominent role in politics during the democratic interlude of 1990–2006, little action was taken against it. By the 2009 election, however, which came after the army had suspended democracy in 2007, Sheikh Hasina promised accountability for 1971 at last. Returning to office, her government updated the 1973 law to make it easier to prosecute Jamaat's leadership and established the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT). The tribunal's work began in earnest in 2010 to significant criticism at home and abroad for the absence of due process and the use of the death penalty.

The trials soon became *the* national story, as a legitimate demand for justice turned into political theater. The people convicted included the Jamaat party chief Motiur Rahman Nizami and several other senior party members and office bearers. It also included a prominent BNP figure, Salauddin Quader Chowdhury, who was hanged in November 2015.

The ICT's most consequential year was 2013. In February, the tribunal issued a death sentence for the Jamaat Vice President Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, a

popular preacher, provoking violent demonstrations that left over 40 people dead, including several police officers. The same month, another Jamaat leader, Abdul Quader Mollah, was sentenced to life imprisonment. This decision drew a different kind of protest, as huge numbers of young people filled Dhaka's Shahbagh Square demanding that Mollah be given death rather than a life sentence. Their anger grew again that September, when the Supreme Court commuted Sayeedi's sentence to life imprisonment. One report described the Shahbagh protests as "the biggest mass demonstration the country has seen in 20 years." In response, the government amended a law prohibiting the state from challenging ICT verdicts and successfully appealed to enhance Mollah's sentence: The high court raised it to death in September 2013. Mollah was hanged that December.

When I attended an ICT hearing in Dhaka on the invitation of one of the prosecutors in the immediate aftermath of these events, I was a strong critic of the whole process—and I remain one. But interviewing students who took part in the Shahbagh Square protests, I was also aware of how the trials had politicized a new generation of Bangladeshis and familiarized them with the atrocities of 1971. To them, the concerns about due process and the death penalty sounded quaint. An older activist, who had fought in the liberation war, told me that while he acknowledged critiques of the death penalty, he believed that the Jamaat collaborators deserved whatever the maximum punishment on the books—if that meant execution, so be it. To be sure, many other rights activists opposed the death penalty and the ICT itself, and they argued that the "Shahbaghis" had undermined the quest for justice and lit a dangerous fuse.

Just how dangerous soon became evident. Shahbagh had inspired a counter-movement led by the Hefazat-e-Islam, hitherto a marginal Islamist coalition supported by the Jamaat and others, and fed by a large *qaumi* (privately run) madrasa sector. The ICT breathed new life into an organization that had previously focused on curtailing women's right to work and other freedoms. In April 2013, barely two months after Shahbagh began, Hefazat held massive rallies in Dhaka around 13 demands, the third of which was "stringent punishment against self-declared atheists and bloggers."

Secular bloggers had been the prime organizers of the Shahbagh movement. On February 15, 2013, one such blogger, Ahmed Rajib Haider, was hacked to death by machete-wielding members of an extremist group, Ansarullah Bangla Team,

which espoused Al Qaeda's ideology. At Hefazat rallies, clerics explicitly called for the bloggers' hanging. Soon, a list of 84 "atheist" bloggers started circulating in the press and elsewhere, with nobody claiming authorship. On February 26, 2015, the blogger Avijit Roy was hacked to death outside a book fair in Dhaka. Ansarullah again claimed responsibility. Four other secular bloggers, publishers, and commentators were killed in a similar fashion the same year.

The politics of 1971 has indeed been bloody of late. Hefazat remains an influential force (as does Jamaat), bolstered by concessions Hasina made to appease it, including yielding to the group's demand in 2018 for qaumi madrasa diplomas to be recognized as the equivalent of a Master's degree. And now, after several years of dormancy, the ICT has been revived—to prosecute Hasina in absentia for *her* crimes.

A NEW ERA?

In November 2023, Hasina inaugurated a new site of murals and a large golden statue of her father to honor his role in Bangladesh's freedom struggle. On the day her government collapsed, protesters demolished it. Several other sculptures and images of Mujib were destroyed in the ensuing days. In January, the interim government changed the national curriculum to reflect the BNP version of events, replacing Mujib with Rahman as the recognized founding father—a bid, officials said, to rectify historical inaccuracies. The destruction of 32 Dhanmondi seems almost a logical, if disturbing, climax. The youth movement's more revolutionary elements are also calling for scrapping (rather than amending) Mujib's 1972 constitution and permanently banning the Awami League.

But there are other more forward-looking rumblings within the youth leadership. It is worth recalling that student demonstrations over the quota system first occurred in April 2018, and that in July young people again took the streets after two students were killed in a road accident. What began as a call for improved road safety grew into a huge protest about broader governance failures. These events augured an emergent force in the polity: Organized youth who were not allied with a party ideology or a 1971 narrative, as their predecessors in Shahbagh Square had been, but who were focused on bread-and-butter issues. And they clearly rattled the government, which after initial attempts at appeasement cracked down harshly, in a precursor to the events of 2024.

In their engagement with the student leadership, one can clearly see a new generation of activists and political leaders less inclined to fight in the name of old myths. Arguments over 1971 have so saturated the country's politics that national reconciliation may to some extent depend on an open debate about them. But the more compelling struggle ahead may not be between different accounts of the country's birth, but between those who want a new politics focused on justice, equity, and democratic governance and those who want to stake their claim on high office by summoning the ghosts of liberation past. Repeating the cycle of vengeance and delegitimizing one's opponents again may be tempting in a deeply traumatized nation, but it will likely have a bitter afterlife. The past often does.

Sudan and the Silence of the Activists

NESRINE MALIK

JULY 25, 2024 | THE IDEAS LETTER 21

Some 20 years ago, the Darfur region of Sudan was in the throes of a brutal war against rebel African groups protesting their economic and political marginalization. Arab militias known as the Janjaweed joined the central government to quell the rebellion, and the repression soon metastasized into ethnic cleansing—and, some say, genocide. Outrage abroad over the atrocities spurred a global advocacy campaign that came to be known as the Save Darfur movement. Two decades later, Darfur is burning once again, but the network that once heeded its cries is now dramatically diminished.

At its peak, Save Darfur drew a constellation of celebrities from Hollywood, sports, and politics, and from across lobbying and activist groups. Advocates included the actors George Clooney, Don Cheadle, and Ryan Gosling; the Olympic speed-skating champion Joey Cheek; and a charismatic, young U.S. senator named Barack Obama. Addressing a crowd gathered at the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in April 2006, Obama said of the conflict in Darfur: “If we care, the world will care. If we act, then the world will follow.”

The movement began in 2004 with the Save Darfur coalition, which sprang from established Jewish antigenocide networks in the U.S. In July that year, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the American Jewish World Service organized the Darfur Emergency Summit in New York, featuring the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel, to draw attention to events in Darfur and make the case for intervention. The coalition then grew to include some 190 religious and human rights organizations affiliated in cause and purpose. The most high-profile among them was the Enough Project, an advocacy group hoping to end mass atrocities in African conflicts cofounded in 2007 by Gayle Smith, a former journalist and U.S. government official, and John Prendergast, a human rights activist. The outcome

was a powerful, well-funded network that successfully lobbied the U.S. government and international organizations such as the United Nations for attention, and raised private and public donations. Between 2003 and 2005, the United States provided more than \$638 million in humanitarian aid for Darfur. In 2007, the UN approved the creation and mobilization of a peacekeeping mission in the region.

By 2006, Save Darfur had already grown into the sort of campaign that could draw so many influential people to the Mall. The shadow of mass atrocities in Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the 1990s loomed large over a guilty global conscience; the UN Security Council had established two ad hoc tribunals to judge those crimes. The International Criminal Court was established in 2002—and some years later would hand out Darfur-related indictments. The Responsibility to Protect, which calls on all states to protect all populations from genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity—and to prevent such acts “through appropriate and necessary means”—was adopted in 2005 at the UN World Summit.

According to Rebecca Hamilton's book *Fighting for Darfur: Public Action and the Struggle to Stop Genocide*, President George W. Bush declared that the Clinton administration's failure to halt the massacres in Rwanda would not be repeated on his watch. His own administration had also heavily invested in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended a decades-long civil war between Sudan's central government and rebel groups in the south, leading to South Sudan's eventual independence in 2011. That effort drew on religious solidarity with the largely Christian South Sudanese—or on Bush's faith.

But the Darfur conflict was more than a chance at redemption: It also coincided with the early years of the U.S. government's war on terrorism. American troops spread into Afghanistan and Iraq. Washington was unapologetic about projecting power. It was trigger-happy about the application of sanctions.

To some, however, these overlapping agendas suggested that saving Darfur was less about Darfur than about the vanities of foreign policy interventionism. That the movement was not actually engaging with the deeper origins of the issue and the appropriate sources of possible solutions—namely, complicated structural challenges within Sudan and the disempowered local actors best placed to address them. Alex de Waal, the executive director of the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University, wrote in September 2009, “If ‘Save Darfur’ is interested in peace, the

best it can do in the cause of peace is to fall silent.” Earlier that year, in a debate with Prendergast at Columbia University, Mahmoud Mamdani, a professor of government and anthropology, said that Save Darfur “has not created or even tried to create an informed movement, but a feel-good constituency.”

A little under two decades later, it is not only Darfur but all of Sudan that is engulfed in conflict. In April 2023, a military partnership fell apart and took the country with it. Fracturing swiftly followed. Today, there is looting and rape in the capital Khartoum, ethnic cleansing in the west, and a steady stream of refugees in the east. The specter of genocide looms once again over African peoples in Darfur. What there is not is the sort of global attention that some 20 years ago achieved the challenging task of capturing attention, advocacy, and funding for a complicated conflict in a remote part of Africa.

A fraction of that attention, whatever one thinks of its motivations, now seems impossible, miraculous even. When the news covers Sudan at all, it broadcasts events in snatches of atrocity. At best it presents a potted history of the conflict, followed by an appeal from a frustrated analyst or a humanitarian organization's representative summarizing all the ways in which things are bad. Since October 7 and Israel's war in Gaza, Sudan has been reduced to something even smaller: to a “what about” talking point, to be raised among the flurry of another discourse. It is a tragedy often mentioned not in its own right, but to suggest that it does not receive enough attention because so much has been unreasonably diverted toward other conflicts.

For this essay, I recently approached the media spokesman of the Enough Project—now shuttered and its work incorporated into The Sentry, a group cofounded by Clooney and Prendergast that investigates links between corruption and conflict—asking for clarification about the Enough Project's position on current events in Sudan. He told me the organization's work has pivoted to being “fully focused on investigations and policy engagement.” In an op-ed in April, Prendergast and Cheadle lamented that Darfur is engulfed in war again and declared that Save Darfur, and so their own previous efforts, had failed. “What was missing 20 years ago,” they wrote, “was any biting consequences for those committing genocide,” and, “This time, the United States in partnership with its allies should utilize the vast array of policy tools of financial pressure such as targeted network sanctions and anti-money laundering measures.”

In January 2019, when the uprising that eventually ousted President Omar Hassan al-Bashir was being violently suppressed to little global outcry, I had asked in a column in *The Guardian* why Clooney and company were keeping silent about the Sudanese revolution or why, as they put the issue, “the human rights caravan moved on.” Clooney and Prendergast promptly answered, in an opinion piece of their own: “over time, we realized that naming and shaming the regime and exposing its complicity in mass atrocities were not having sufficient impact on the policies of governments in Europe, America and Africa, so we decided on a new approach.”

This new approach involved working to prevent Sudan from being removed from the U.S. government’s list of state sponsors of terrorism—even though that designation, in place for years, had not meaningfully weakened the regime and the regime’s business networks were able to bypass sanctions. (The blacklisting did, however, make it hard for everyday Sudanese citizens to travel, bank, or participate in the global economy.) Clooney and Prendergast explained that their efforts to prevent normalization with the Bashir regime were combined with a campaign to go after the funds it had looted and the international financial system that had enabled that theft. Much of their advocacy, they added, was not “done in public.”

It is not entirely clear how this approach could yield better results than the previous in the new absence of the will needed to implement the punitive measures recommended. And it seemed to elide the fact that previously, when that will did exist, sanctions and blacklists had been heavily deployed to little effect. The spotlight on Darfur two decades ago did result in direct sanctions against several individuals associated with the regime’s actions in the region, and in 2009, it did earn al Bashir himself an indictment from the International Criminal Court for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. And yet Clooney and Prendergast were dissatisfied with the yield of their public advocacy.

A generous reading of their assessment is that over time they developed a deeper understanding of the conflict in Sudan: an awareness that anything short of regime change was not a sufficiently ambitious goal and that freeing Darfur from the risk of subjugation was impossible so long as the same cohort of elite military and commercial interests remained in power in Khartoum.

Another possible reading is that the limitations of external advocacy in solving complex issues on the ground will always thwart even its most well-meaning representatives. So far, the vital movements for change have happened within Sudan, brought about by Sudanese, with little outside support or funding. It was a colossal popular revolution that toppled al Bashir in 2019—offering a momentary glimpse into another possible Sudan, one in which ethnic and class solidarities could be forged, civilians brought into government, and a corrosive, extractive military and security establishment sent back to the barracks once and for all.

One reason the former dedicated international effort to draw eyes on Sudan has melted away undoubtedly is just time and fatigue. It has been more than 20 years since the war in Darfur started in earnest, and caring about Sudan's succumbing to conflict again draws on resources that already have been depleted. It is difficult to maintain the same level of attention, commitment, and fundraising efforts over decades, as a conflict waxes and wanes. People move on, new wars flare up—notably in Ukraine and Gaza—and the governments at the heart of advocacy movements change.

This moment is profoundly different. The country that was the locus of the Save Darfur movement was on the cusp of an Obama presidency; today, that country is bracing itself for the possibility of another Trump administration. In the intervening years, the United States stepped back, practically and ideologically, from interventionism. The withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan after the Taliban returned to power in 2021, an embarrassing and humbling episode, called time on the U.S.'s claim to moral, military, and strategic supremacy. More broadly: The genocides of the 1990s are now a distant memory, and the idealistic “never again” pose of those years has been replaced by steely realpolitik. U.S. legislators bicker over aid to Ukraine. Even as Israel is being investigated on credible charges that it is committing genocide in Gaza and the International Court of Justice rules that its occupation of the West Bank is unlawful, the U.S. government's commitment to preventing mass crimes is faltering.

Another factor in the difference between then and now is that the situation in Sudan today tests activists' reliance on a simple story—the kind of story that pits a singularly powerful bad perpetrator against a weak, helpless victim. Binaries sharpen narratives. A religious or ethnic angle, in which one dominant group discriminates against another, is helpful in defining the contours of a foreign

conflict and making it salient. The plight of women under the Taliban was pressed into service to garner support for the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 by both Cherie Blair, the British prime minister's wife at the time, and Laura Bush, then the U.S. first lady. Ethnic cleansing in Darfur was not just a tribal conflict; it was a conflict between Arabs and Africans, much like before it the war between Sudan and what became South Sudan had been cast as opposing Muslims and Christians. Various nuances underlay both conflicts, mostly related to the monopolization of political and economic power by a small Arab elite in Khartoum, but they also played along ethnic lines and that feature became the entire story.

If the crime scene is in Africa, framing the events in binaries is even more important—so hard is it to draw in outsiders accustomed to narratives of disaster and inured by years of various civil wars and famine. Some of that is about human nature. But some of it is about the sadly high hurdle that conflicts in the non-Western world have to scale in order to be deemed worthy of attention. It is not enough that there is suffering. That suffering must also pass the narrative test—ideally by playing into tropes about ethnic supremacism or religiously fundamentalist warlords.

The Sudanese are now failing that test, badly. This story is so complicated that outsiders can gain no purchase on it in a way that evocatively pricks saviors' impulses or sparks outrage against a Biblical Goliath. The war opposes two Arab parties, the army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which the army created from the remnants of the brutal Janjaweed groups it unleashed in Darfur two decades ago. The Goliath has split into two and is now fighting itself. The people who have been killed, raped and driven from their homes are disparate in class and ethnicity. The horror is being visited not just on small villages in a stricken remote hinterland, but in the cities. Khartoum, the country's large, stable and prosperous capital on the Nile, was in a few months reduced to a battleground where dogs eat the corpses of the dead on the streets and the airport is a charred graveyard of bombed international passenger planes. The city's tragedy is inconvenient: Its inhabitants, its infrastructure, its rich history, its precious heritage are at the country's center, not its margins. And then the involvement of outsiders, such as the United Arab Emirates, whose support for the RSF is feeding the war, add yet another layer of complexity.

All of that is the awkward truth, and a reason for the bewildering silence on events in Sudan at a time when outside help is crucial. The prospect of the

largest famine in the world is fast approaching. More than half the population is now facing crisis levels of hunger, according to the World Food Program. More than 10 million people have been displaced inside Sudan since the beginning of the conflict—the largest number anywhere in the world. And yet the United Nations said in June that only 16% of the humanitarian funds required to help the Sudanese have been raised. What is needed today is the sort of loud protest and media-catching events, all that public noise, from two decades ago.

Humanizing suffering should not demand a good backstory; international legal censure is a blunt tool that should not be the default solution. It may be difficult to confront the fact that sometimes little can be done other than to support the victims of war and apply pressure on the perpetrators. Yet that is not nothing. If activists are frustrated with the limitations of their own efforts, it is because historically they have relied on too narrow and too prescriptive a definition of what deserves sympathy and on too simplistic and too activist-centric a reading of the solutions. Unless the role of outside actors is rethought and redefined, advocacy will always be more an expression of the cultural and political forces around it rather than an adequate response to the calamities it denounces. Now, as the world reneges on its grand promises and Sudan collapses, is the moment to learn this lesson. Otherwise, what little remains of Save Darfur and the human rights infrastructure that birthed it will hurtle, along with Sudan, into the void.

Goodbye, Gibbon

IZA DING

NOVEMBER 14, 2024 | THE IDEAS LETTER 28

Sometime in the mid-twelfth century, a Chinese poet named Lin Sheng traveled 365 kilometers from his hometown Pingyang to Lin'an—what is now Hangzhou, a city on the southeast coast, where the tech giant Alibaba is based.

Lin stayed at a B&B and roamed the city for days. He climbed various hills, drifted through Buddhist temples, sampled an assortment of crabs, shrimps, lamb, and sweet rice, all marinated in alcohol—a culinary specialty of the region—and, like today's tourists, spent a significant amount of time on and around the impossibly beautiful West Lake, the sin and soul of Hangzhou.

Hangzhou is glorious on summer nights. The lake lies sultrily within the warm embrace of the hills, blue as sapphire. When the breezes pick up in the evening, as they always do, the water undulates like dancers' long, silky sleeves, gleaming with reflections of candles in the boats and pavilions, homes on the hills, and lanterns carried by residents. And there was singing and dancing, lots of singing and dancing, deep into the orange night. Our delicate poet found himself both entranced and uneasy.

One morning, after the merriment had melted into dawn, Lin rose from his bed, inked his brush, and wrote on his chamber wall. This tiny poem, 28 characters light, would be memorized by every schoolchild in China almost a millennium later.

*Hills beyond blue hills,
Pavilions beyond pavilions.
When will the singing and dancing on West Lake cease?
Travelers, drunk on a warm breeze,
Have mistaken Hangzhou for Bianzhou.*

Bianzhou is today's Kaifeng city, 900 kilometers southwest of Hangzhou in the inland province of Henan. Kaifeng's GDP per capita in 2023 was about \$7,500, one-third of Hangzhou's.

Today's hinterland was yesterday's metropolis. *Kai* means to open, *feng* means to close; so *Kaifeng* literally means opening what is closed—in this case, conquering new land. True to its name, Kaifeng was the capital city of no fewer than eight Chinese dynasties; the earliest is believed to have been the Xia dynasty (c. 2070–1600 BCE) and the last was the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). Kaifeng today is charming yet unassuming. Only after a good, clean rain can one catch the petrichor of millennia lingering in the dampened stones and ancient streets.

Artists know Kaifeng from *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (1101), perhaps the most famous painting in Chinese history. It has been called China's *Mona Lisa*, but *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) offers a better comparison. Both *Along the River* and *Liberty* capture consummate snapshots of their societies in the eras of their creators.

Yet the worlds they depict could not be more different. *Liberty* is Eugène Delacroix's (1798–1863) romantic rendition of the young French Republic, born from the violent revolutions of 1789 and 1830. "If I haven't fought for my country, at least I'll paint for her," wrote Delacroix to his brother.

Along the River by Zhang Zeduan (1085–1145) could not be less violent and revolutionary. Stretching over five meters, it is estimated to contain 14 bridges, 28 boats, 30 buildings, 60 animals, 170 trees, and hundreds of people (mostly men) from all walks of life going about their daily business: buying, selling, playing, hustling, or just chilling. Had Delacroix painted it, he might have called it *Prosperity Leading the People*.

Lying beneath the festive surface of *Along the River*, however, are Zhang's hidden warnings to the emperor. Upon closer inspection, we see hints of crisis: startled horses, boats on a collision course, smoke curling from wooden edifices, and soldiers napping at midday. Indeed, only two decades later, the Jurchens would lay siege to Kaifeng, capturing Emperor Qinzong. His father, Emperor Huizong, fled south to Hangzhou and founded the Southern Song dynasty in 1127.

Not long after the emperor settled in Hangzhou, our poet Lin Sheng journeyed there and left his laments on a wall. To Lin, the singing, dancing, and revelry around West Lake were no more than the death throes of the Song dynasty, which would last for another hundred some years until the Mongols brought its end.

Death is the greatest fear of every human being. Decline and demise are the ultimate fears of every regime. For millennia, intellectuals have pondered decline, artists have steeped in its melancholy, and rulers have sought, often in vain, to forestall it. Without question, anxiety over personal mortality and dread over a nation's, dynasty's, or civilization's end are deeply entwined.

The contemplation of decline goes hand-in-hand with the quest for eternal life. Religions offer solace with promises of an afterlife. Billionaires invest in medical breakthroughs. Dictators soak their dead bodies in silicon dioxide. Intellectuals pine, mostly delusionally, for the timelessness of their names and works. For the common person, the nation promises the everlasting by linking the fates of individuals who, when all is said and done, have little to do with one another—and may well loathe and fight each other if they met in real life. Yet nationalism creates the illusion of an eternal “people,” whether this people is 5,000 or 250 years old, granting mortals a comforting sense of permanence, a way to have lived before and to live beyond.

All this is to say that “Is America in decline?”—the question for this special issue—is not merely empirical but existential. It reflects our most basic fears. Because of its essential human quality, this question has doppelgängers throughout the historical record. Some version of it has echoed, in various forms, in various places, across the tiny speck of world history that is human.

The puzzle of decline was most famously tackled—with the benefit of centuries of hindsight—by Edward Gibbon in his six-volume magnum opus produced at the height of Enlightenment. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88) documents that empire's gradual erosion brought on by military exhaustion, moral and material decadence, and the ascendance of Christianity, which weakened the Romans' civic virtue and commitment. Gibbon revolutionized the field of history and cemented the timeless allure of decline as an intellectual puzzle.

Gibbon's descendants have revisited the decline thesis in depth and at length in paint and ink. Decline was the opium of the Romantics, epitomized magnificently in J. M. W. Turner's *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* (1817) and Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire* (1833–36). Declinism surged in the twentieth century as Western intellectuals pondered the fallout of modernity. Most notably, Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, published around the time of World War I, compared civilizational trajectories to the life cycles of organisms, predicting the *Untergang* (downfall) of the “evening land”—that is, the West—to be followed by an age of Caesarism led by authoritarian figures. The fatalism in Spengler's work echoed his contemporaries' racial and cultural anxieties, which would eventually be exploited by modern—or perhaps anti-modern—Caesars.

Declinist thought persisted after World War II, taking root in a land that was by all means on the rise: the United States. In the 1970s declinism was over the Vietnam War; in the 1980s declinism was over Japan. Despite the fall of the Soviet Union and America's triumph in the Cold War, the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s were also steeped in declinism, as in Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996) and *Who Are We?* (2005). In contemporary discussions about American decline, Gibbon's fallen empire frequently resurfaces, inspiring symposiums with titles like “Is America the New Rome?”

Today, declinists find themselves on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum. Decline is the demagoguery of some and the despair of others. Some declinists thunder from campaign rostrums, others pontificate from the ivory tower.

The task I have been given is to explore a Chinese perspective on the question “Is America in decline?”—to the extent that the Chinese consider this question at all, and with the understanding that a thousand Chinese people may have a thousand different answers.

In these turbulent times, there is a certain comfort in surrendering to the narrative of being threatened, undermined, or taken advantage of. I will not lean into that sentiment here, as readers can find plenty of it elsewhere. Instead, my response is that the question may be ultimately unanswerable, because many Chinese

tend not to view dynastic, imperial, and civilizational decline through the same interpretive lens as their European and American counterparts.

Let us go through the Chinese story again, starting shortly after the apex of the Northern Song dynasty in the twelfth century, when *Along the River* was painted. Northern Song prosperity eventually gave way to decline and fall, followed by the rise of the Southern Song dynasty around West Lake, which, too, experienced decline and fall (in 1279). The storyline continues: Then rose the Yuan dynasty, which also declined and fell (in 1368), to be replaced by the Ming, which was superseded (in 1644) by the Qing, before a revolution led to a Republic (in 1911) and another revolution established a People's Republic (in 1949).

There is a hackneyed term for this storyline: "dynastic cycle." Though often abused by its proponents and criticized by its opponents, the concept remains influential in mainstream Chinese historical thought. The idea is simple: A new dynasty rises from the ashes of an old one. Its founders are given the mandate to rule by heaven because they are strong and benevolent. The ruling group leads the dynasty into a golden age. But over time, the rulers become corrupt and complacent, and the dynasty enters decay and turmoil. In the final stage, the dynasty is too weak to resist rebellion or invasion. A new ruling group comes to power, commencing the cycle anew, fresh with virtue, strength, and legitimacy. "How to escape the dynastic cycle" is a topic Chinese elites have puzzled over, from the Chinese Communist Party's theoreticians to the nation's top leadership.

There are some similarities between the Chinese and Roman storylines. In particular, decline is often attributed to the decadence of those in power and in society—the debauched theaters and public baths in Rome, and the carefree singing and dancing on West Lake. Material decline is also always interpreted through a deeply moral lens: We declined because we became complacent, too comfortable; we declined because we forgot who we are. We are not supposed to be enjoying baths and throwing parties when our homelands are in trouble.

Nonetheless, significant differences in thinking stand out. First, Western historiography generally follows a linear trajectory. Conservative thinkers like Spengler have proposed more cyclical theories of history, but even in Spengler's analysis, each civilization goes through the cycle of birth-growth-peak-decay only once, with the Western civilization, the focus of his analysis, nearing its end.

While not necessarily linear in a Hegelian or Marxist sense, Spengler's cycle is not *cyclical* either, as history does not repeat in the same place.

Second, while the rises and falls in European historiography seesaw geographically between different civilizations, the dynastic cycles in Chinese historiography rotate internally along the wheels of time, with Chinese civilization always at its center.

The European story is often framed as a successive march of top dogs in a pageant of Paxes. Something like: The fifteenth century was the Portuguese century, the sixteenth century was Spanish, the seventeenth century was Dutch, the eighteenth century was French, the nineteenth century was British, and the twentieth century was American. Of course, even before all that, we had Athens overtaken by Sparta and the Byzantines bending the knee to the Ottomans. The civilizational game is exactly like the computer game *Civilization*. Every time an old civilization falls, a new civilization rises. Only one civilization survives in the end. By this logic, the rise of Japan, China, or whichever the next up-and-coming economy is, must come at the cost of America's decline.

The Chinese story is told differently. One of the first things American college students learn in a course on China is that "China," or *Zhongguo* in Chinese, means the "Central Kingdom." They are told that this suggests China has historically seen itself as the center of the world. Some attribute this to China's geography and its agriculture-focused economy. As a result, Chinese culture is often described as inward-looking, in contrast to Europe's outward-looking, adventurous, seafaring civilizations. Until the Opium Wars, China's attention was turned mainly toward herself. This is why China never became the kind of global imperial power that Europe or the U.S. did. And the flipside of an inward orientation is an attitude of "mind your own business."

Within China, the dynastic-cycle view implies that any new ruling group, however "barbaric," would become a Chinese dynasty and be absorbed into the civilizational mothership. The official story goes that the Jurchens embraced Confucianism, the Mongols accepted religious pluralism, and Manchu emperors became patrons of Chinese literature and the arts (although they banned the abhorrent practice of foot-binding). All of them relied on the imperial bureaucracy.

Revisionist historians have criticized the Sinocentrism of this master narrative, with careers made and broken over the controversy of how Sinicized China's ethnic rulers truly were. Others challenge the conservative reading of the dynastic cycle, arguing instead that these cycles push history in a generally progressive direction. With each new dynasty correcting its predecessor's mistakes, new errors inevitably emerge, only to be addressed by the dynasty that follows. This cyclical yet progressive view of history aligns with certain aspects of Hegelian philosophy.

But to address the question "Does China think America is in decline?" it is not so important to focus on what has objectively happened. More relevant is what people believe has happened. The regnant Chinese perspective on the rise and fall of dynasties differs from the linear, universalizing, and zero-sum perspective preponderant in the West.

So you have heard enough about Chinese dynasties. What about Xi Jinping, then? Did he not invoke the idea that "The East is rising and the West is declining"? Yes, but Xi was far from the first to say that. Once the Westphalian system was imposed on the non-European world, newly independent countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East began to position themselves in relation to the West. Asia, in particular, is said to have "risen" thanks to its newly wealthy states. Long before China became the world's second-largest economy, Asian leaders like Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore and Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia exalted "Asian values" and Asian development models, announcing their ambition to catch up with the West.

Yet catching up is not the same as replacing. When Chinese leaders muse about the decline of the West, what they are saying is that the West is no longer a model for China, however correct or incorrect this conclusion may be. When Chinese state media play footage of looting on Chicago's Michigan Avenue or police brutality in Ferguson, Missouri, they are telling viewers that the United States is not the kind of shining city on the hill it makes itself out to be. The message is not to go help America restore social stability with Confucian values. For better or for worse, the Chinese worldview, while by no means static, is still quite particularistic, in contrast to the more universalizing worldviews of the Christian tradition.

So my answer to “Do the Chinese think America is in decline?” is the following: We should be careful not to let a question turn into a prophecy. Rises and falls need not be an intercivilizational zero-sum struggle, however seductive Thucydides’ *lair* may seem. Rather than getting swept up in the collective effervescence of status anxiety, only to look for an elixir in the intellectual Viagra of declinism, perhaps we should forget Gibbon.

India and America

A CERTAIN AMBIVALENCE

BASHARAT PEER

NOVEMBER 14, 2024 | THE IDEAS LETTER 28

America reaches us everywhere: in our villages by the mountains, in our towns by the sea, in our cities by the desert. America shapes and distorts, regenerates and ruins. America is hope and America is anxiety.

My first memorable encounter with American power was a story my father told me in the mid-1980s in our village in the mountains of Kashmir. Our few acres of rice fields would have a rich harvest in the autumn. After school, I would carry samovars of tea for the workers harvesting and threshing the grain. My father, an energetic civil servant in his mid-thirties, would join us after work.

We would drink tea, and he would tell me stories. One of those afternoons, my father spoke of the bleak years of his adolescence in the 1960s, when hunger stalked not just our little villages, not just India and Pakistan but all of Asia. He was born in the early fifties as Asia and Africa were winning back their freedom from European empires, whose extractive colonialism had squeezed the colonies of almost everything valuable.

Father spoke of an American man. A scientist who traveled to India in the early 1960s, worked with Indian scientists, and introduced high-yielding crop varieties that multiplied agricultural yields and significantly helped reduce global hunger.

“It was the Green Revolution,” father said. “His name is Norman Borlaug.”

“Norman Borlaug.” I repeated.

Norman Borlaug, who was born on a farm in Iowa, who eventually won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 for his singular contribution to significantly reducing hunger in Asia and Latin America, defined the best of America for me.

I never forgot his name.

India has grappled with American power—through its rise and rise and its relative decline, through its benevolence and its cruelty—with a range of responses rooted in experiences of colonialism and its own visions of economic and political power: from postcolonial righteous indignation to reluctant supplication to defiant Soviet embrace to today’s amoral nationalism.

On an October evening in 1949, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who served as the president of Columbia University after leading the Allied forces to victory in World War II, conferred the degree of Doctor of Laws upon Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, at the Low Memorial Library. The Cold War was on: George Kennan’s argument for “containment of Russian expansive tendencies” had shaped American policy; the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan were already in place; the Berlin blockade was ongoing; and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was five months old.

Americans wanted India to “get on the democratic side immediately,” as Henry F. Grady, the first American ambassador to India, put it to Prime Minister Nehru in December 1947. Nehru had read widely about America—from Upton Sinclair to Henry David Thoreau to Reinhold Niebuhr—and admired former President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s support for Indian independence. But the Indian leader saw America representing “a reactionary policy” in world affairs and was certain that India would not align with a particular nation or group of nations.

With Eisenhower and Arthur Hays Sulzberger, publisher of the *New York Times*, in his audience, Nehru roasted American Cold War doctrines. “The very process of marshalling of the world into two hostile camps precipitates the conflict which it sought to avoid,” he told his hosts. His fundamental intellectual concerns were radically different. He spoke of three grave dangers to global peace and progress: colonialism, white supremacy, and hunger. European colonial powers were still delaying decolonization in parts of Asia and most of Africa; American reluctance to push their European allies disappointed him. “It is clear that all vestiges of imperialism and colonialism will have to disappear.”

The America Nehru spoke to was still Jim Crow America and the civil rights movement was still years away. “Secondly, there is the problem of race relations,” Nehru told his hosts. Indian nationalist leaders and Black civil rights leaders in America—Lala Lajpat Rai, Gandhi, Nehru, Marcus Garvey, W. E. B. Du Bois—had been in conversation for years and saw white supremacy as a defining factor in British colonialism in India and in Jim Crow in America. “The West has too often despised the Asian and the African and still, in many places, denies them not only equality of rights but even common humanity and kindness,” Nehru said. Legacies of war, colonialism, and political turmoil had exacerbated hunger across Asia and Africa. India was facing a shortage of wheat and rice and ensuring food security was an urgent concern for Nehru. “The third reason for war and revolution is misery and want,” he told his hosts. “If we offer no remedy, then other cries and slogans make an appeal to the minds of the people.”

The East Coast intellectuals were impressed, the Truman administration was irritated, and Nehru was convinced India should “align somewhat” with the United States but not be subservient. The essence of India’s view of America is distilled in a note Nehru wrote to his colleagues who were finalizing a commercial treaty with the United States. “The safest policy,” he wrote, “appears to be friendly to America, to give them fair terms, to invite their help on such terms, and at the same time not to tie ourselves up too much with their world or their economic policy.”

That stance of being friendly and open to all the American help one needs while refusing formal military or economic alliances and maintaining autonomy to pursue relationships with other powers to strengthen India’s national interests has survived with minor variations in form and tone over the decades.

If foreign policy is the face a nation wears to the world, as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote, American power in the Cold War and Indian responses to that colossal destructive and regenerative force were a series of scowls and smiles, glares and grins, wails and shrugs. Cycles of annoyance and accommodation, hostility and warmth defined the relations between India and the United States during the Cold War.

The first significant illustration of Nehru's policy of neutrality was the Korean War between 1950 and 1953. Fearful of the war expanding in Asia, but also aware of the opportunity to act as "a counterbalancing force" in a bipolar world by uniting the Third World and the Commonwealth countries, Nehru's India cooperated, bargained, and battled with the United States throughout the war at the United Nations. India's hectic diplomacy and mediation between the Americans, the Russians, and the Chinese to find a compromise to end the war were thwarted at various stages by the colliding powers. Eventually, after Stalin's death in March 1953, as the warring parties were ready for a ceasefire, a vigorous Indian effort united the Third World and Commonwealth countries behind a UN resolution, forced reluctant Americans to support a compromise on the repatriation of 20,000 prisoners of war, and paved the path to the signing of the Korean armistice. The historian Richard Barnes writes that the experience led Nehru to place "his allegiance squarely" with the Third World.

After the war, the patrician voice of Jawaharlal Nehru called for Asian and African solidarity, decolonization, and Cold War neutrality. He was a prominent player in the landmark Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955, which eventually led to the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, along with other flawed giants of his era: Gamel Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Josef Broz Tito of Yugoslavia, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Sukarno of Indonesia.

But the promise of Asian solidarity was diminished by the Chinese invasion of India in 1962. Although India's defeat was crushing, the country encountered two assuring and friendly faces of American power in John F. Kennedy and John Kenneth Galbraith, his ambassador to India, who ensured U.S. military support for India and brought warmth to Indian views of America. A year later, in 1963, Norman Borlaug arrived in India, testing his high-yielding crop varieties, collaborating with Indian scientists, and helping India achieve self-sufficiency in a decade.

Two years after the war with China, in 1964, a broken Nehru died. India was a lesser country without him and everyone who followed him was dwarfed by his shadow. But the mistakes of great men also exact a great price: Nehru's intransigence and failure to allow a just resolution to the Kashmir dispute contributed to decades of violence, militarization, and great suffering for the people of Kashmir, and the furies unleashed by the battles for my home distorted the politics of India and Pakistan.

American power and its manifestations in Asia—military aid, alliances, food assistance, deployment of its overwhelming force—remained tied to the fundamental goal of maintaining American supremacy by containing Soviet power and influence. A confluence of values was largely ignored at the altar of strategic interests. As Nehru once remarked in the context of Kashmir, “We cannot afford to lose,” he told a visitor. “Till things improve, democracy and morality can wait.”

America’s need for an ally on the eastern flank of the Soviet Union willing to offer bases from where American jets could strike inside the Red Imperium was met by Pakistan, which also joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization and the Central Treaty Organization. America reciprocated by supplying weapons, and Pakistani soldiers drove American Patton tanks across the border into Indian territory when the intimate enemies fought another war over Kashmir in 1965.

Six months after that war, when Lal Bahadur Shastri, her father’s successor, died of a heart attack in Tashkent after signing a peace agreement with Pakistan, Indira Gandhi, the 49-year-old daughter of Nehru, became prime minister in January 1966. The monsoon had failed that year and she needed American wheat to save millions from starvation. President Lyndon Johnson was already embroiled in the Vietnam War when Mrs. Gandhi traveled to the United States to meet him in the spring of 1966. A year earlier, India’s president, S. Radhakrishnan, a philosopher who had served as Nehru’s ambassador to the Soviet Union, proposed a peace plan for Vietnam calling for cessation of hostilities. Johnson was not pleased. As the historian Ramachandra Guha recounts, India was receiving 15 million tons of American wheat under a public loan scheme from the United States in 1965 and 1966. And while Johnson offered Mrs. Gandhi a warm reception, the American president decided to “keep his supplicants on a tight leash.”

On her return from Washington, Indira Gandhi faced an economic and political crisis at home. The wily old bosses of the Congress Party were trying to be the real power behind the throne. To fight the power brokers, Indira had surrounded herself with a group of brilliant mandarins who preferred the Soviet Union over the United States. A turn toward rousing socialist rhetoric in a very poor country would endear her to the masses.

In the summer of 1966, the Indian government condemned the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong. Mrs. Gandhi traveled to Moscow, where she signed a joint statement with Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin condemning the imperial aggression in Vietnam and calling for an “immediate and unconditional” end to the bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong. A furious Lyndon Johnson ordered that the monthly food shipments to India not be sent without his personal authorization, which he relished in delaying. Inder Malhotra, an Indian journalist, recalled decades later, “India literally almost lived from ‘ship to mouth’ and those of us who lived through that era swallowed a measure of humiliation with every morsel of American food.”

The war in Vietnam found its way into Satyajit Ray's 1970 film *Pratidwandi*, or *The Adversary*, which captures the upheaval and the despair of the time in India, through a medical school dropout's search of an unattainable job. In a job interview, an aging suit asks the protagonist to name the most outstanding and significant event of the last decade, and they spar over their choices: the moon landing versus the Vietnam war. The candidate does not find the moon landing surprising or unpredictable considering the advances in space technology.

“Do you think the war in Vietnam was unpredictable?” the suit demands.

“Not the war itself. But what it has revealed about the Vietnamese people, about their extraordinary power of resistance. Ordinary people. Peasants,” the candidate replies.

“And no one knew they had it in them. And this is not a matter of technology. . . It is just plain, human courage and it takes your breath away.”

The closer American power, wars, and great power gambits came to Indian shores, the more American prestige declined in India. In the summer of 1969, as the war escalated in Vietnam and antiwar protests raged across the country, President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were working on a rapprochement with the People's Republic of China to change the balance of power against the Soviet Union. General Yahya Khan, the military dictator of Pakistan, who had warm relations with both, became the secret channel between Nixon and the Communist China leadership.

In December 1970, Pakistan, whose Eastern and Western wings uneasily flanked India, held its national election. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League, which represented the more populous Bengali-speaking East Pakistan, won. Yahya Khan and the West Pakistani elite, dominated by the Punjabis, which looked down on the Bengalis, refused to allow Rahman to form the government. Protests erupted in Dhaka and Yahya Khan's military responded with genocidal violence, killing hundreds of thousands Bengalis and forcing ten million refugees into India.

In April 1971, Arthur Blood, an American diplomat in Dhaka, wrote "The Blood Telegram" to Washington, a devastating plea for action that described the horrors being inflicted by the Pakistani military. Nixon ignored it. Yahya Khan's secret diplomacy with the Chinese leadership had landed Nixon the coveted invitation to visit the People's Republic. American grand strategy was always more important than brown lives in the Third World. Nixon did nothing to restrain Yahya Khan. Public opinion in America was not a concern for Nixon, who was certain of American indifference toward "just a bunch of brown goddamn Moslems."

Three million people were killed in East Pakistan. "To condemn these violations publicly would have destroyed the Pakistani channel, which would be needed for months to complete the opening to China," Kissinger told the *Atlantic* in an interview. India, which had been secretly training and arming Bengali insurgents, briskly accelerated ongoing conversations with Moscow and signed a military pact with the Soviet Union in August 1970. Any remaining pretense of nonalignment was over.

Mrs. Gandhi met with Nixon and Kissinger at the White House, a visit that achieved little in preventing a war between India and Pakistan. Gary H. Bass, a Princeton historian, analyzed declassified audio conversations between Nixon and Kissinger, which provided a stunning record of their racist and sexist vocabulary that he believes influenced foreign policy. Among the abusive epithets Kissinger and Nixon used for Mrs. Gandhi and Indians: unattractive, pathetic, repulsive, a scavenging people, masters at subtle flattery.

After a short war in December, India defeated Pakistan, and helped create the independent state of Bangladesh. Two images from that time profoundly shaped India's attitudes toward America: Nixon dispatching the nuclear armed

USS *Enterprise* to the Indian Ocean; Soviet Navy vessels equipped with nuclear missiles arriving in Indian waters in solidarity.

The lure of America never ceases to diminish despite the destruction America inflicts and heaps upon the world. The war in Vietnam coincided with the liberalization of American immigration laws in 1965, which removed restrictive national origin quotas for Asia and allowed Asian students, skilled workers, and professionals to migrate to the United States. An Indian engineering student from Lucknow, in northern India, who studied and worked in America in the 1970s recalled watching a film about the 1964 New York World's Fair at a United States Information Service outpost in his city: "I was dazzled by what I saw in the film since it was a showcase of all the latest gadgets of modern life." The Indian diaspora in America grew at an incredibly brisk pace: from 12,000 in 1960 to 450,000 in 1990.

The long estrangement between India and the United States continued, largely hovering around India's nuclear ambitions. India conducted its first nuclear test in 1974. Four years later, in 1978, President Jimmy Carter signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which demanded inspections of nuclear facilities of countries not included in the treaty. India, which was not a signatory, refused. America stopped nuclear assistance to India's nuclear power plants, a move it reversed after Mrs. Gandhi traveled to Washington in 1982. *India Today*, the leading Indian magazine of the time, christened Mrs. Gandhi's visit "Operation Defrost," and described it with the Indian love of hyperbole as a "spectacular voyage" in which Mrs. Gandhi "dazzled America," as no other world leader had in recent memory.

Two assassinations bookended Indian polity between the early eighties and the early nineties: Indira Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984 after she ordered Indian troops to attack the Golden Temple, the holiest Sikh shrine, to flush out Sikh militants sheltering there; and the 1991 assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, her younger son, by Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers, avenging his botched military intervention in Sri Lanka. A series of cynical political plays by Mrs. Gandhi and her son had intensified religious strife across the country and

contributed to the eruption of an armed insurgency in Kashmir in the winter of 1989–90. Economic policies guiding India's mixed economy, which combined the "worst aspects of socialism and capitalism," had brought the economy to the brink of collapse by the summer of 1991.

It was a time of profound global transformation with the reunification of Germany, the fall of communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union on the verge of dissolution. India faced a moment of reckoning: Its foreign debt had risen to around \$72 billion and foreign exchange reserves had collapsed to less than the sum required to finance imports for two weeks. Desperate, India pawned off its gold on banks in Europe and Japan to raise funds. In June 1991, P. V. Narasimha Rao, a Congress Party leader who had served as Rajiv Gandhi's foreign minister, took office as prime minister and appointed Manmohan Singh, a Cambridge economist, as finance minister.

In the summer of 1991, Manmohan Singh dismantled the controlled economy of India by ending the Byzantine regulatory regime that had long stifled industry and opening up the country to foreign investment, removing currency controls, lowering import tariffs, devaluing the rupee, reducing taxes, and scrapping industrial licensing. In a July 1991 speech to the Indian parliament, Singh, wearing a blue turban and a white sherwani, spoke with controlled passion, and called for a second industrial revolution and a second agricultural revolution. He quoted Victor Hugo: "No power on earth can stop an idea whose time has come. I suggest to this august House that the emergence of India as a major economic power in the world happens to be one such idea."

In the following decade, Singh's reforms grew the economy rapidly, producing a new middle class with disposable incomes. In the mid- and late 1990s, I was a student at a public university in a small town a couple of hours from Delhi. Despite our genteel poverty, the sense of possibility and transformation was palpable. The United States in its unipolar moment, and the icons of American capitalism and technology, were quickly replacing the old heroes of socialist India.

Our conversations at university did not center on Nasser, Sukarno, or Nkrumah but on Bill Gates and Sabeer Bhatia, who cofounded Hotmail. Cyber cafes, powered by dial-up Internet, were our gateways to American universities. When McDonald's came to India, without beef but with a vegetarian menu, the

waiting lines recalled religious festivals. The newspapers and magazines listed the shocking salaries the graduates of elite management and computer sciences schools were offered. Azim Premji, Shiv Nadar, Narayana Murthy, and F. C. Kohli, the pioneers of India's infotech revolution, the billionaire makers of the New India, became names that evoked the same reverence once reserved for the Nehrus and the Gandhis.

Indian society was enthralled by America and American attitudes to consumerism, capitalism, and individual freedoms. I found work as a reporter for a website in Delhi at the turn of the millennium. Globalization was the vibe. American corporations were outsourcing service jobs by the thousands to India. The rise of the multibillion outsourcing industry in India even captured the attention of Susan Sontag, who spoke about young Indians acquiring mastery of English and inventing American personas in their call center jobs. "To pull this off, they have to be plausibly American to themselves. They have been assigned American names and little biographies of their American identities," Sontag said.

Mujahid, my flatmate, was one of those young Indians. He trained for months to erase traces of Tamil in his English and emerged with a middle-American accent. He taught me American slang and idioms and spoke relentlessly about American sitcoms and the Super Bowl. He would leave for work in the evenings to work on Central Standard Time and pass as an American through the night on calls with customers in Chicago and Milwaukee. His American name was Adam Smith.

The New India evoked breathless comparisons to the Roaring Twenties. Yet a million mutinies exacting terrible human costs persisted in India along with its euphoric transformation: a savage war still raged in Kashmir; insurgencies flourished in the northeastern states bordering Myanmar and China; Maoist rebels fought Indian forces across the forests of central India; crushing loans and the failure to increase agricultural productivity had pushed thousands of farmers to suicide; the quality of most educational institutions remained bleak; the state of the health care, legal, and policing systems remained terrifying.

The humiliation of waiting for American wheat and the righteous activism that fought against American hegemony were distant memories when I moved to New

York for graduate school in the mid-2000s. India was a rising power, a would-be great power. "The world—and particularly the United States—is courting India as it never has before," Fareed Zakaria wrote in *Newsweek*. "Fascinated by the new growth story, perhaps wary of Asia's Chinese superpower, searching to hedge some bets, the world has woken up to India's potential." He recalled being at the World Economic Forum in Davos where he witnessed India dominate the conversation and Klaus Schwab dressed in "a colorful Indian turban and shawl, nibbled on chicken tikka and talked up the country's prospects with Michael Dell."

In New York, I encountered a lot of hand-wringing about the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, about the scandals of Abu Ghraib and Bagram and the languages of torture and rendition. American colleagues were curious how India saw the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The truth is that they simply did not incite the fury and advocacy that the Korean and Vietnam wars did in India. *The Times of India*, the highest-selling English newspaper in the country, did publish a cartoon strip called "Dubyaman," which lampooned George Bush. And India, witnessing the rise of Hindu nationalism in parallel with economic liberalization, had a coalition government led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party that refused an American request for 17,000 Indian soldiers to be deployed in Iraq.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee, a Hindu nationalist politician with decades of experience, led the Indian government. The political costs of risking the lives of Indian soldiers for an American war would be prohibitive. The Indian pursuit of strategic autonomy remained alive and well. The Hindu nationalists collaborated with the Bush administration on terrorism—with an eye on Pakistan and Kashmir—and imported American Islamophobic rhetoric for political gain, but the nuclear isolation imposed by America was never forgotten.

Prime Minister Vajpayee—moved by the pursuit of great power status, as well as converting a nuclear nationalist surge into electoral gains—greenlit the nuclear weapon tests by India in May 1998 and subsequently declared India a nuclear armed state. Pakistan followed with its own nuclear weapons tests within days. President Bill Clinton imposed sanctions prohibiting American economic and military assistance to India and Pakistan. The nuclear order led by the United States had been punishing since its first nuclear test in 1974. Now, America had tightened the noose of nonproliferation. "India had been the target of an increasingly restrictive, rigorous and continually expanding regime of technology

denial,” the diplomat Shyam Saran, who served as India’s foreign secretary, lamented in *How India Sees the World: Kautilya to the 21st Century*. India’s economy, energy needs, and electricity shortages were growing. Nuclear power could help but India did not have uranium or the advanced nuclear reactors of Europe and the United States since it was barred from the nuclear energy market.

America evokes unparalleled desire and unparalleled envy. I was in Delhi when I found out about the September 11 attacks: Sudden euphoric cries rose from several desks around me. I was a young reporter, and spending my nights trying to learn from Gay Talese, Norman Mailer, Michael Herr, and Joan Didion. I was among the few in the office who went quiet. America ceased to be invincible that morning. In its wounded fury and indiscriminate lashing out—the invasion of Iraq, industrial use of torture and rendition, wild expansion of homeland security, and shredding of norms and alliances—America began to squander its legitimacy and moral standing.

China was rising fast, and the heirs of George Kennan and Paul Nitze were energetically offering manifestoes for managing or containing its rise. They spoke of the road to contain Beijing passing through New Delhi. They spoke of the shared values of liberalism, democracy, and boisterous multiethnic polities. The reliable American quest for preserving the country’s global dominance and the attractions of a consistently growing Indian economy updated American ideas about India.

On October 10, 2008, the United States and India signed the U.S.–India Civil Nuclear Agreement after three years of negotiations and domestic opposition. It was unprecedented: India was firm in its refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which it considered a discriminatory regime. America modified its laws, created the first exception to the nuclear order, accepted in spirit India as a nuclear weapons state, and opened India’s access to nuclear technology. India’s embrace of American influence and power was never more clear. Still, the orgiastic moment would not change the Indian way of doing business: India would be friendly and open to all the American help it needed—while also pursuing relationships with other powers to strengthen its interests.

The euphoric success with America was followed by a dramatic decline of the Congress Party and subsequent fall of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government. In the summer of 2014, another "New India" was born with the electoral success of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party and the rise of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In the following years, Modi's India focused on two interlinked goals: India's transformation from a semi-liberal democracy into an authoritarian Hindu-first state, and a vigorously advertised pursuit of great power through transactional nonalignment.

The presidency of Donald J. Trump magnified perceptions of American decline as he shredded commitments to multilateral institutions, tore up international agreements, and eviscerated even the pretense of values in the affairs of nations. Trump took a more aggressive approach to China, increased defense cooperation with India, and strengthened the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue alliance between India, the United States, Australia, and Japan to contain Beijing. The great gift Trump's America offered Modi's India was the gift of American silence on minority rights and the limiting of the freedom of press and expression.

Soon after taking office, President Joe Biden declared: "America is back." After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Biden responded with a rousing call of a struggle between "a rules-based order and one governed by brute force." American attempts to make Russia's isolation a matter of stark moral choice clashed against a transformed world that was uninterested in arranging itself into camps of followers in a Cold War-style confrontation between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing.

The age of transactional nationalism had dawned and the middle powers had energetically embraced it. Soon after Russia invaded Ukraine, Turkey made sure that Russians knew that their country, despite being a member of NATO, was still a welcoming tourist destination. The United Arab Emirates had a surge in property purchases by wealthy Russians looking for safe harbor for their wealth as sanctions squeeze them out of Europe. Brazil, where agriculture is a pillar of the economy, sought ways to avoid American sanctions on Russia in order to keep a steady supply of Russian fertilizers flowing into the country. And India moved to purchase immense amounts of Russian crude oil every day—at a steeply discounted price.

America was and remains the most powerful player in the game. The world was still keen to influence America, become friends, and do business but American sanctimony and rhetoric about democratic values and the liberal order would evoke yawns and sniggers in India and elsewhere in the Global South. The liberal order turned to ash in the fires that eviscerated Palestinian lives and habitats in Gaza—fires that were kept burning by America.

Testimonies of the famine in Gaza and images of Palestinian children dying of hunger started reaching us in January and February. American power played a great role in ensuring they had been denied food. I thought of my father telling me stories about an American man, a scientist, who gave years of his life to help hungry strangers across the world grow more food.

I still remember his name.

Norman Borlaug.

Peronism Now

JORDANA TIMERMAN

FEBRUARY 20, 2025 | THE IDEAS LETTER 34

The 14 blocks that separate the national congress building from the executive palace, the Pink House, in Buenos Aires are the epicenter of Argentine politics, formal and informal. Near one end is Plaza de Mayo. On October 17, 1945, masses of workers congregated there to demand the release of their champion, General Juan Perón, a member of the ruling military government who had been detained because he had been amassing too much political clout. The march had an immediate effect: Perón was released by the evening and addressed the crowd from a balcony of the Pink House. With that, protests became a defining feature of Argentina's political life and turned protesters into the ultimate arbiters of power.

Peronism is a pragmatic and populist labor-oriented movement rooted in redistributive justice, focused on social rights particularly for the lower classes, and for 80 years it won most of the country's elections. But its representation of the masses was challenged by the surprise victory of Javier Milei, a self-described "anarcho-libertarian," in 2023, who was elected with the support of angry lower-class voters.

Since its inception, Peronism has been *the* party of organized labor in Argentina, eclipsing Communists and Socialists, who historically led leftist politics in neighboring Chile and Uruguay. Its governance has not been exemplary, though. As president, Perón persecuted his opponents and silenced his critics, and Peronist governments after him have often relied on clientelist and corrupt practices—as have the country's other politically viable forces. Some of their economic positions have proven unsustainable, contributing to a perennial cycle of financial crises. But overall they have lived up to their promise to champion the rights of marginalized groups: Over the years, they have enacted female suffrage, paid vacations and other labor rights, free university education, gay marriage, abortion legalization, protections for domestic workers, and a child allowance for poor families.

Argentina is a country of frequent and spectacular crises, and during those the people express their adherence or anger, their joy or sorrow publicly, in marches, protests, rallies, banging pots and honking car horns. The streets are palimpsests of our political struggles. Which is why in 2025, as Milei hacks away at hard-won rights with a budget-slashing chainsaw, I look to those 14 blocks in central Buenos Aires to understand how we Argentines will define ourselves in this struggle. For I am a Peronist and, if the party is to survive this crisis, too, its agenda will have to come, once again, from these streets.

THE DIVIDE

Buenos Aires has long fancied itself the Paris of South America, but the masses that marched into the country's history that October day in 1945, demanding that their leader be set free, came from its gritty industrial belt. They showed up in shirtsleeves, the working-class attire that earned them the nickname of "descamisados," or "the shirtless." As the people amassed in front of the Pink House under the searing sun, several tried to cool off by wading in the square's elegant fountains. This irreverence set the tone for Peronism broadly: Beyond its left- or right-wing positions—it has adopted either at different times—the movement celebrates the plebeian, or the "low" in socio-economic-cultural terms, and has consistently challenged social hierarchies, both symbolically and through concrete policies.

These features also help explain its detractors' deep-seated anti-populism, the other defining force of Argentine politics for 80 years. Peronism is best understood in relation to its opponents. Peronists have always come to power through the ballot box, while efforts to oust them have veered toward authoritarianism (if in the name of defending democracy). Perón won the 1946 presidential elections, not long after that march, and remained in office for nearly a decade, until September 1955, when he was ousted in a military coup dubbed the "Liberating Revolution." (In an earlier attempt to topple him, which failed, the Air Force bombed Plaza de Mayo, killing 300 civilians.)

The Argentine novelist and intellectual Ernesto Sábato wrote about receiving the news of the coup and what he realized then about the depth of Argentina's political divide:

“ . . . While we doctors, farm-owners and writers were noisily rejoicing in the living room over the fall of the tyrant, in the corner of the kitchen I saw how the two Indian women who worked there had their eyes drenched with tears. And although in all those years I had meditated upon the tragic duality that divided the Argentine people, at that moment it appeared to me in its most moving form. ... Many millions of dispossessed people and workers were shedding tears at that instant, for them a hard and sober moment. Great multitudes of their humble compatriots were symbolized by those two Indian girls who wept in a kitchen in Salta.” (El otro rostro del peronismo, 1956; The Other Face of Peronism)

I read this quote for the first time when I was a teenager and grappling with how to square my history classes' negative characterizations of Perón, focused on his strongman leadership style, with my leftist father's affinity to the movement. My father was wont to solve such questions by handing me a book—in this case Joseph Page's clear-eyed biography of Perón—and with moral reasoning. For him it was obvious which side stood for the greater good. His interpretation undergirds my enduring Peronist allegiance.

Anti-Peronism is as defining a feature of the country's history as Peronism itself. Since 1945, each side has cast the other as dangerous, and that dynamic has made them codependent while undermining democracy. Overthrowing Perón in 1955 was not enough for the reactionary forces that toppled him: They prohibited his party from participating in electoral politics for nearly 20 years after that and banned Perón's very name from being spoken. Peronist activists were executed. Graffiti celebrated cancer, the disease that in 1952 had killed his wife, Evita.

There is a curious obsession within Argentina's intellectual class about how a country so blessed with such fertile lands has failed to develop like Canada or Australia. The question is a canard, but the classic right-wing explanation is that Argentina has underperformed because of Peronism's focus on economic inclusion, which has translated into protectionist industrial policies, stringent labor rights, and costly social services. Detractors claim that they oppose Peronism not on ideological grounds but for pragmatic reasons: A developing country cannot afford the luxuries the party promises, and the lower classes should wait for wealth to trickle down rather than follow its populist siren call.

To posit that a majoritarian political movement is fundamentally misguided is to imply that Argentina's masses might be unfit for democracy. Yet that is exactly the stance that anti-populists have tacitly adopted throughout Latin America: that populism, the movement that enfranchised much of the region's masses, has brought democracy to populations unprepared for it, according to the historian Ernesto Semán in *Breve historia del antipopulismo (A Brief History of Antipopulism, 2021)*. It is unclear to me, however, why it is Peronism that is so often described as the root of Argentina's ills rather than the bitter hatred and violence of its opponents.

For two decades after the 1955 coup, elected governments alternated with military regimes: Peronism was illegal and any hint of its political resurgence was enough to precipitate another coup, as in 1962 and 1966. But politics without Argentina's most popular political movement proved unstable and the military government eventually allowed Perón himself to return. He won the 1973 elections by a landslide. By then, however, even he could not overcome deep tensions between his party's left- and right-wing supporters.

After Perón's death in 1974, his wife Isabel, also the vice president at the time, took office. She was ousted in a coup in 1976, in the midst of increasing violence by right-wing paramilitaries and revolutionary movements. The dictatorship that followed, Argentina's last, was its bloodiest: 30,000 people deemed to be dissenters disappeared into a network of clandestine torture centers. In this context of absolute repression, the Plaza de Mayo again played a central role: It was there that the mothers of the disappeared would march again and again, asking for their children's return, always walking in a circle to defy a prohibition on public gatherings.

GOD IS A PERONIST

Some of us tend to see the arc of history bending along with our lives. I was born in 1983, the year that Argentina transitioned from dictatorship to democracy, and my political growth can be measured along the streets bordering the Plaza de Mayo, like a child's height is tracked with notches up a wall.

Peronism did not win the 1983 elections that ended the dictatorship; it was Raúl Alfonsín's Radical Party that did, on a promise that democracy would bring prosperity. Alfonsín's term was cut short by hyperinflation, labor unrest, and

the threat of a military uprising. In 1989, he was succeeded by Carlos Menem, another kind of Peronist who implemented Washington Consensus neoliberal reforms—and who after two terms of that had to hand the presidential baton to Fernando de la Rúa and his non-Peronist center-right coalition. De la Rúa then foundered hopelessly in the face of a deep recession and the currency's collapse, all of which culminated in the dramatic social, political, and economic crisis of 2001. On December 20, he had to leave the Pink House in a helicopter to avoid the angry mob in Plaza de Mayo.

The summer before, having just graduated from high school, I had taken to sitting in the square, waiting for the social explosion that seemed like the only answer to such a profound systemic meltdown. The anger was palpable. Demonstrations were multiplying, organized by unions, students, and unemployed workers. In a few months, they swelled into massive, exasperated protests. I went to one of those with my father and sister. We held hands as we fled the tear gas the police sprayed at the pot-banging protesters who were clamoring, “Que se vayan todos!” (“Out with all of them!”).

The experience was a baptism of fire for a generation who had grown up in the apolitical ‘90s. The country’s democracy also came of age in 2001. The multifaceted crisis sparked not a military coup but a profound return to the belief in the relevance of the political. A (Peronist) caretaker government ran the country for a time and then a (Peronist) political unknown, Néstor Kirchner, won the 2003 election. He and his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, would redefine both Peronism and national politics for two decades. Still, like periods past, this one was defined by a hyperpolarized opposition, this time from the conservative right wing led by Mauricio Macri.

The Kirchnerist Peronism of my early adulthood—part of the “pink tide” of leftist governments that swept the region—further expanded social rights and enacted new redistributive policies: more funds for public education, more public universities, laptops for poor children, pensions for informal workers and housewives, rights for domestic workers, public housing. The Kirchners also adopted a progressive narrative of Argentina’s recent history, revalorizing the struggle against the dictatorship that had defined their generation and rejecting the failed neoliberal experiment of the ‘90s. When Néstor Kirchner revoked the pardons granted to military personnel and civilians who had

tortured or killed people or made them disappear, he triggered a period of landmark trials that strengthened a new human rights paradigm. Contra Fukuyama, we held a firm belief in history: We knew history had not ended because we were making it.

I returned to those streets countless times in the years after the upheaval of 2001: to oppose femicides, leniency toward human rights violators, and budget cuts for public universities; to support gay marriage and redistributive agricultural taxes. In 2018, I joined the angry throngs of women who demanded the right to abortion and failed to obtain it; in 2020, I joined the cheerful throngs sparkling in green glitter who celebrated the legalization of abortion, finally. In my teens, human rights marches had been sparsely attended. Now these were an annual intergenerational gathering.

The country I believe in, the one I want for my children, is to be found in the masses that gather in protest. My father is dead, but I still look for him on these streets and see our shared ideals there. These causes we march for are not exclusive to Peronists; they are shared by other Argentine progressives. But Peronist governments historically have achieved the most advances on these issues: Peronism, like its founder, is pragmatic above all, and to me its concrete achievements so far trump the criticisms.

THE PARTY IN ITS LABYRINTH

Between 1983 and 2023, Peronism alternated power with an ever-changing array of ill-fated opposition forces. None of them was ever re-elected, and in two cases, their presidents failed to even complete their terms. Conventional wisdom long held that only the Peronists could govern Argentina's fractious landscape.

But now it's 2025 and Peronism is in shambles: rudderless, leaderless, and ignominiously blasted out of the electoral waters by the radical outsider Milei. Not only did he win the presidency in 2023, but so far he has defied smug predictions that he would soon lose power. Milei remains popular with half of the country, despite the high social costs of the austerity policies his administration has deployed to tame inflation. Milei's success depends on economic recovery. International markets celebrate his single-minded focus on budget cuts, which have been so ambitious that even the IMF has warned Milei that social spending

might need to increase to combat poverty. His party is poised to make gains in this year's midterm elections.

The wheels of the Peronist party machine, stunned by its recent defeat and in need of renewal, are now spinning. Its ideology seems out of touch with contemporary social and economic realities: It has no fresh face to unite its many bickering factions. Has Peronism's longstanding dominance over Argentina's political life finally ended?

Its historical claim that it is a party of inclusion—for workers, women, minorities—has foundered against an extended period of economic decline, high inflation, and rising poverty. The conservative Macri government (2015–19) failed on similar issues, but at least it never pretended to have a socially progressive agenda. The latest Peronist government was that of Alberto Fernández, seconded by Cristina Kirchner (2019–23). Their coalition was rife with infighting and governed defensively; it became the party of the establishment, rather than that of social reform. Perhaps most damning has been the Peronists' inability to grapple with their own failures, including the fact that a new socioeconomic class of the excluded arose under their watch.

Milei has been able to tap the frustration of Argentina's increasingly marginalized populations, with a populist discourse that flips Peronism on its head: He has recast the historical party of the disenfranchised as the leader of a thieving political establishment. Milei has also deployed many of Peronism's own political strategies against it, in particular to capture the votes of a new class of workers: those in the growing informal sector. That precariat had been excluded from the labor protections and social-subsidy net that are the backbone of Peronism. Milei has struck at the heart of Peronism's *raison d'être*, pointing out that the movement has failed to respond to the changing needs of social justice.

Milei follows the outsider-politician playbook. He has capitalized on a wave of anti-establishment sentiment against both leftist Peronist and conservative anti-Peronist governments. He originally painted the two sides of the Kirchner-Macri divide with the same brush, labeling both as “the caste” and promising to free citizens from the yoke of all corrupt politicians. Given Argentina's long-term economic malaise, his campaign did convince voters desperate for change, any change. Milei seemed to offer a possible exit from the schism.

The political scientist David Runciman argues that today representative democracies are not facing the totalitarian threats of yore but rather a midlife crisis of dissatisfaction. Argentina's political woes resemble the challenges that democracy faces in Brazil and the United States. (And the Peronists have been losing touch with their traditional electorate for similar reasons the U.S. Democratic Party has with its own.) Peronism has lost the powers of conviction it had during the years of my early adulthood, and for my peers and I, who grew up in democracy and are now in our 40s, the notion that we should stick with this side because the other is worse feels threadbare. The popular anti-establishment anger captured by Milei needs a concrete response, not just a harangue. Are we done with Peronism?

No: Rumors of its death have been greatly exaggerated. This moment is hardly the movement's first crisis. Critics argue that Peronism lasts because it's an ideologically empty carapace with a Zelig-like ability change with the times. Perón himself cultivated the ambiguity between his leftist and right-wing followers—which resulted in bloody confrontation in the '70s. Detractors often point to this to delegitimize Peronism as an authentic political movement, but it surpassed the inclinations of Perón himself long ago.

If anything, according to the anthropologist Alejandro Grimson, Peronism's success has been built on its ability to impose political hegemony (in a Gramscian sense) in response to changing times. Grimson writes in *¿Qué es el peronismo?* (*What is Peronism?*) that to define Peronism narrowly is to leave aside what he calls its "constitutive heterogeneity." Peronism, which had relied on a strong working class, managed to survive the death of the industrial economy in the neoliberal '90s under Menem and then thanks to the Kirchers' pivot to a constituency that also included the urban poor, social organizations, and progressive middle-class sectors.

The Peronists' strength historically has been their ability to channel the popular demands of the time; Milei's success is built on their failure to perform this trick in recent years. But when he has been forced to seek political allies to shore up his legislative agenda, Milei has often adopted the classic Peronists vs. anti-Peronists trope. Milei hasn't overcome the schism: He is just the latest iteration in a long line of virulent anti-Peronists.

Milei has benefited from this divide, and from anger at the political establishment, and hasn't yet suffered a backlash against his administration's austerity policies. But his strategy could boomerang. Milei campaigned on promises to make "the caste" pay for economic adjustments; in reality, his fiscal surplus has been financed by significant cuts to pensioners and educators, to health care and other social programs.

This is an opportunity for new Peronist leaders to pull the rabbit out of the hat and reinvent the movement—now justly reviled as a political elite—as a champion of social justice for a new generation, a changed economic landscape, and an informal gig-based labor market. As Leopoldo Marechal, a mid-century surrealist Peronist poet, wrote, "every labyrinth is exited from above." Peronism's electoral strength depends less on its legacy to date than on its ability to remain relevant. So far, though, a stagnating agenda and infighting have prevented the party from coalescing around a new viable leader: Cristina Kirchner is still its strongest voice, and her image is tattered.

"WE'RE ALL PERONISTS" (APOCRYPHAL)

It might be time for a divorce, for a new party, for a new movement. But the emotional pull of Peronism, while hard to define, shouldn't be underestimated. The historian Juan Carlos Torres says it "has the strength of a religious faith or loyalty to a soccer team."

The demonstrations of Plaza de Mayo aren't just protests. They are also markers of celebration, after electoral victories, or of communal sadness. When Néstor Kirchner died on Oct. 27, 2010, throngs of silent mourners spontaneously gathered in the square throughout the day—and then they held a raucous wake outside the Pink House that lasted three days. When Diego Maradona died in 2020, not even pandemic restrictions could stop the Plaza de Mayo hordes. And remember the delirious celebrations after Argentina's World Cup victory in 2022?

Argentine politicians listen to the street. Following the death of two activists at the hands of security forces in 2002, the Kirchner government adopted a principle of "non-repression" when it came to protests. Although the Macri administration partially renounced it, the security forces still largely tolerated

demonstrations. The kind of violence Chilean protesters faced in 2019 would be beyond the pale here.

But when Milei came to office, he promised to crack down and initially sought to limit public gatherings of more than three people. His government has implemented an elaborate machinery of repression—which criminalizes traffic disturbances and gives the police broad powers to disperse demonstrations. It stomps on human rights in the name of the freedom to drive through the city.

There has been remarkably little social unrest given the level of economic pain, but a few impactful gatherings are challenging Milei's efforts to redefine the country. Massive protests have been held against labor deregulation and the defunding of public university education. Again on March 24, like every year since 1985, people marched to commemorate the victims of Argentina's last dictatorship. The latest protest, in Buenos Aires on Feb.1, was an antifascist, antiracist march—attended by an estimated one million people—that had been called in defense of minority rights after Milei railed against “the mental virus of woke ideology.”

Argentina's politics are in crisis and its progressives are floundering, but protests continue to delineate our outer limits, to establish what we are not. Peronism could once again be the party that best translates the sentiments of these demonstrations into concrete governance. To resurge, though, the movement will have to redefine its understanding of the struggle for social justice. And that means writing our future, much as we have written our past, on those 14 blocks of Buenos Aires' streets.

Tunisia

WHEN OBSOLETE ANTI-IMPERIALISM KILLS DEMOCRACY

NADIA MARZOUKI

OCTOBER 3, 2024 | THE IDEAS LETTER 25

For most Tunisians, July 25, 2021, was not only the day when Kais Saied invoked article 80 of the constitution to claim emergency powers, dismiss the government, and suspend the parliament. It was also a moment of truth and division among friends and families. I had always known that many of my friends and acquaintances on the left resented the Tunisian Revolution of 2011 for offering their archenemy, the Islamist party Ennahda, a seat at the table. What I had not anticipated was how quickly this deeply rooted hatred of Ennahda would push some of them to turn a blind eye to Saied's authoritarian turn. "This is not exactly a coup"; "We need to give him a chance"; "Ennahda leaders brought it upon themselves"; "The political elite has hijacked the revolution": these were some of the rebuttals we heard when we questioned Saied's commitment to democracy.

Fast forward to September 2024 and there is no room for doubt. July 25 *was* a coup that allowed Saied to institute an autocratic regime, depriving the parliament and the judiciary from their power and independence. Political leaders, activists, journalists, and civil society leaders are in exile or in jail. The latest arrests and unlawful imprisonments include three women: the prominent Black Tunisian intellectual and activist, Saadia Mosbah, lawyer Sonia Dahmani, and the former head of the Truth and Dignity Commission, Sihem Bensedrine. Ahead of the Presidential election of October 6, the High Independent Authority for Election, ISIE, has banned three candidates from running, arguing that they had not gathered the sufficient number of endorsements. And candidate Ayachi Zammal was sentenced on September 18 to 20 months in prison after being convicted of falsifying signatures in support of his registration as a candidate. While protesters took to the streets on September 13, chanting the 2011 Revolution slogan "Irhal!" ("Get out!"), the many who evoked anti-imperialism as an excuse for antidemocracy are stuck in an embarrassing silence.

It has often been asked how a country once seen as the poster child of democratization in the Arab world sunk into such an abyss of authoritarianism. A question that has attracted less interest is: why and how so many of the intellectuals and civil society activists on the left, who had been so intransigent with Ennahda's democratic attitude, have been so willfully blind to the dangers of Kais Saied?

While the democratic experiment may have lost to a politics of rotten compromise, whatever was left of democracy after Kais Saied's 2021 *auto golpe* (self-coup) has been lost to a fossilized and authoritarian form of anti-imperialist nativism. Breaking from the transactional politics that were the trademark of the post 2011 era, Saied built his popularity—according to the populist playbook—on a blunt rejection of party politics, elites, and institutions. He benefited from, and gave shape to, a collective sentiment of deep frustration with how little the years 2011–2019 had delivered in terms of economic prosperity and political stability. Yet, the success of Saiedian populism also has a substantive ideological content that combines nativism, Islam, and anti-imperialism. While the elusive figure of the “disgruntled youth” has been cited as the main constituents of Saied, it is important to reflect upon the role of a segment of intellectuals and organizers from the urban middle class who perceived themselves as underappreciated, sidelined, and betrayed by the post-2011 coalitions. Some of these intellectuals and activists have given Saied's antidemocratism a free pass under the pretext that Saied was a herald of anti-imperialism, and would turn Tunisia into a beacon of the nonaligned world. A similar phenomenon of appropriation of the anti-imperialist lexicon into antidemocracy justification has occurred in countries such as Syria, Egypt, and Venezuela. In Tunisia, the rapidity with which some opinion makers and political leaders have rallied to this narrative in service of a nativist, xenophobic, and authoritarian platform has had dramatic effects on individual and public freedoms.

Anti-imperialism, as a story for Tunisia's past failures, and as political program, has developed around the three related ideas of nativism, sovereignty, and purity. Right after July 25, 2021, a small yet determined constellation of analysts elaborated sophisticated arguments in the language of decolonialism that spoke in favor of Saied's *tabula rasa* strategy. The democratic experiment that began after 2011, their argument went, was hijacked by Western experts and financial institutions. Under the pressure of foreign donors and experts, they argued,

Tunisians were misled into lengthy constitutional debates and lost track of what they really wanted: social justice and dignity. From that point of view, the 2011 democratic experiment was obsolete and colonial. Tunisia needed to reset the course of its pure revolution. Anti-imperialists advocated for a type of democracy that would grant marginalized regions more power and revive Tunisia's sense of authenticity and pride. Democracy, rule of law, and checks and balances, they argued, had become fraught concepts due to their association with liberal Western-centric political thought. From their standpoint, the Saiedian disruption, albeit worrying, may end up being beneficial to Tunisia's retrieval of authenticity and postcolonial healing.

Most of those who were delighted by or lenient towards the chaotic and liberticidal measures of Kais Saied came from a secularist and leftist political culture, such as the UGTT (Tunisian General Labour Union), or the Watad party, a nationalist party claiming Marxist-Leninist inspiration and formerly led by Chorkri Belaïd—who was assassinated in 2013—or the nasserist pan-Arabism of the People's Movement political party. A common thread was the deep-seated distaste of the Islamist party Ennahda. A number of the issues raised by the pro-Saied anti-imperialists were legitimate questions that came up after 2011 regarding how knowledge about the “Arab Spring” was produced and by whom, of the reiteration of the vicious financial cycle of debt through dependance on loans from international financial institutions, and Tunisia's subservient role in the regional balance of powers.

Yet the way in which these analysts answered these questions by rapidly discarding democracy altogether is intriguing. Claiming to speak strictly for the Tunisian people and to stand for indigenous knowledge production, most of these analysts were themselves part of Western networks of scholars and policy experts, based in the U.K. or the U.S. They embarked on a fierce policing battle on social media against foreign and Tunisian analysts who decried July 25.

Tunisian scholar Haythem Guesmi has offered a sobering reflection of how decolonial arguments were distorted in the service of antidemocracy. Reacting to a trenchant piece that the Washington DC-based Tunisian policy analyst Ouiem Chettaoui wrote in *Jadaliyya* which virulently denounced “Western-based pundits, think-tankers, and self-styled ‘progressive’ US politicians” who had warned against Saied's coup, Guesmi said: “When I wrote a few years ago about

the myth of Tunisia's exceptionalism and the fetishization of its democracy by dominant media narratives, the least I expected was for its main argument to be hijacked to accommodate middle-class anxieties of inclusion and prestige". Chettaoui's decolonial take, Guesmi argued, was doubly problematic. First, rather than actually promoting an alternative to colonial knowledge power, it came across as merely complaining of not getting enough recognition and benefits from that power: "Here, the discourse on decolonizing local knowledge production is hijacked to demand better access to the same systems of power." Second, and most importantly, it misdiagnosed Saied's popularity that had, according to Guesmi, more to do with a fascination for its conspiratorial tales than with its alleged revolutionary appeal.

No matter how biased, the expertise of Western transitologists did not cause the political deadlock that led to the 2021 coup. The witch-hunt orchestrated by decolonial analysts who have resorted to trolling, intimidation, and smear campaigns on social media has contributed to the shrinking of public space for debate and analysis about the very questions they claim to address. The question of Tunisia's sovereignty in realms such as food security, military strategy, and migration policy is of essence. Yet the personal vendettas against analysts accused of being Western sell outs have discouraged many scholars and analysts from participating in these public debates.

A second key iteration of the pro-Saied anti-imperialist argument revolved around national sovereignty. Ridha Mekki, a leftist political activist often known as "Ridha Lenin," acted as an unofficial advisor to Saied and is often referred to as the main source of inspiration of the July 25 coup. He was not part of any opposition group during Ben Ali's dictatorship, and criticized the 2011–2019 phase as a distortion of the dignity claims of the revolutionary people. Playing on the distinction between legality and legitimacy, like many political leaders since 2011, he called for a rupture from the 2011–2019 phase that would set a new path. This would require the building of a strong and sovereign state and the promotion of national values. Most of his media interventions reveal a preoccupation with the risk of foreign meddling.

As early as January 2011, Mekki founded the organization Forces of Free Tunisia, an informal think tank dedicated to the revival of a truly revolutionary project that would draw upon local organizations in every region. Against party politics,

Mekki advocates for a direct relationship between state and society, unmediated by intermediary organizations. One question remains unresolved: how the idea of a strong local democracy—in which citizens have deliberative and implementation powers—works with the idea of a strong state. When asked, “Rida Lenin” often reverts back to elusive Marxist notions to decry foreign influences.

In an even more extreme vein, Sofiane Ben Sghaier, the founding leader of the small Tunisian Nationalist Party, has played an important role in rationalizing and publicizing a nativist and xenophobic version of anti-imperialism. In November 2022, the party published on its website a manifesto calling out panafrican intellectuals such as Marcus Garvey and anthropologist Cheikh Anta Diop as the inspiration for a plan to bring masses of Sub-Saharan African migrants to Tunisia in order to dilute its Arabic and Islamic identity. Saied’s infamous speech of February 2023, in which he blamed African migrants of being part of a conspiracy to “great replace” Tunisia’s Arab and Islamic identity, draws on the party’s reasoning. Since Saied delivered this speech, Black migrants and Black Tunisians alike have been the target of unprecedented levels of violence and discrimination.

Sghaier’s Tunisian Nationalist Party draws on an anti-colonial critique to justify a policy of “tunisianization” of all associations. In a memorandum issued in June 2024, they argued that “protecting Tunisia’s sovereign national orientation requires depriving Europe of any internal weapon it can use against the Tunisian state”. The statement argues for “a new law on associations that imposes full Tunisianization of associations and their independence from abroad, as well as the evacuation of foreign organizations and associations from Tunisia.” This type of rationale has served to justify a politics of surveillance and repression against civil society organizations that operate under the constant suspicion of being traitors to the nation.

In the rhetoric of Mekki, Sghaier, and others, liberation is a style and sensibility rather than a political project. As political economist Hamza Meddeb has incisively noted, these nativist anti-imperialists see Tunisia as engaged in an ongoing war of liberation, even though the entity from which Tunisia needs to be liberated is undefined. Echoing Hofstadter’s paranoid style, liberationism is a style and emotion of politics that works in a self-referential manner. This conspiracist and liberationist style has imbued the entirety of Saied’s rhetoric

since 2021. In his aforementioned speech of February 2023, he borrowed from the great replacement theory of French right wing thinker Renaud Camus. In September 2023, he claimed that the “Zionist movement” was responsible for naming the flood that caused thousands of deaths in Libya “Storm Daniel.” On July 25, 2024, he celebrated Republic Day with a speech denouncing the meddling of Freemasons in Tunisian domestic affairs.

This nativist rhetoric is all the more outlandish since Saied's strategy of international diplomacy comes across as anything but driven towards serving Tunisia's self-interests and sovereignty. In North Africa, he has broken away with Tunisia's well-known tradition of neutrality between Algerian and Morocco, and has sided with Algeria on the Western Sahara conflict. The rapprochement between Algeria and Tunisia has progressed at the expense of the relationship with Morocco. In the Middle East, Saied has given signs of an interest in a rapprochement with Iran. His own brother is seen as a key advocate of the formation of a pro-Iran diplomacy. In the ranks of the Saied supporters, observers have noted an enthrallment for Shiism as a proxy for anti-imperialism.

While agitating for this idea of turning Tunisia into a new beacon of the non-aligned countries in North Africa, Saied's regime has worked hand in hand with the Italian PM Georgia Meloni's government to implement strict policy of border control in the Mediterranean. Caricatures portraying his ongoing honeymoon with Meloni and Ursula Van der Leyen, the President of the EU commission, have proliferated since 2021.

In its nativist and nationalist iteration, the anti-imperialist narrative that has enabled Saiedist supporters is not just anti-democratic. It is obsolete. It situates the locus of anti-imperialist struggles solely at the level of the nation state at a time when a significant part of today's decolonial political debates, despite all their internal diversity, revolve around centering peoples and communities rather than states, and when ideas such as diasporism, exile, transnational solidarities are key to the thinking of non or post Zionism and post supremacism. The silence of “decolonial” Saiedists vis à vis the plight of Sub-Saharan migrants reveals how decolonialism works as a fig leaf for authoritarian and statist nationalism.

In July 2023, an anthropologist friend of mine and I sat down with D., a migrant from Côte d'Ivoire who had tried to reach Europe a number of times through

Tunisia. After eight failed attempts at crossing the Mediterranean by boat, he finally succeeded, and reached France through Italy. His retelling of the various dehumanizing processes he had been exposed to in Tunisia by the state and its proxies was chilling. He described his fear when in February 2023, Tunisian vigilantes banged at the door of his apartment to scare him away. He recalled the fear and anxiety during the long days of waiting for the next crossing, at the mercy of smugglers who parked the would-be travelers in random shelters near the beach. He told us with amused disillusionment how when the boat that got him to Italy was about to sink, Tunisian fishermen demanded parts of their boats (such as the engines or the iron pieces that could be sold) in exchange for pulling the boat to the Italian waters. There is an abundance of stories like D's. They show how inadequate it is to look at the tragic question of migration through Tunisia from a nationalist lens. D., the smugglers, and the fishermen are all caught up in an ecosystem of mutual exploitation and dehumanization that Saied's subservient submission to EU demands has consolidated, notwithstanding his anti-imperialist rants. D. was very clear-eyed about how hard his life in Europe would be. It didn't change his determination to leave Tunisia. "When I saw the Italian coast guards, I knew we had finally left the dark waters of Tunisia, and were reaching the blue water of Italy", D. recalls. Saiedists' decolonial harangues about the evils of the West, and the so-called unity of the anti-imperial south had no impact on his life.

Why did the nativist anti-imperialist refrain take hold with such relative ease after 2021? First, a number of the themes around which Saied's supporters built their agenda were already part of the moral landscape of civil society since 2011. Movements such as *Mnich Msamah*, a social movement opposing reconciliation bills, *Winou el Trottoir*, a grassroots movement advocating for clean and walkable sidewalks, or *Winou el Petrol*, a campaign calling for transparency in the wealth repartition of the energy sector, have contributed to making themes such as dignity, wealth distribution, and local empowerment central aspects of Tunisians' political conversations. Organizations such as I-watch and *mourakiboun* have accomplished key educational work by illuminating issues of electoral accountability and anti-corruption. Saiedists didn't create anything from scratch, and drew upon an ecosystem where generative democracy activism was growing hand in hand with a culture of resentment and revenge. Saiedists capitalized on a *kairos* of disenchantment and frustration, and transformed the 2011 uprisings' grammar of dignity into an authoritarian dogma of purification.

Looking at the longer political history shows that the Saiedist self-appointed intellectual avant-garde reenacts the old ideological campus wars of the 1970's and 1980's that opposed the leftist secularists and nationalists, and the Islamists that organized around the Movement of Islamic Tendency (the ancestor of Ennahda). Ridha Lenin, influenced by the leftist movement *Perspectives*, was an activist in law school in the 1970's. He then became inspector of high school education and got closer to Chokri Belaïd. Interestingly, Mekki argued in a 2020 interview that the key rupture of Tunisia's political history was not the end of the protectorate in 1956 but the 1980's in which he saw the beginning of a new era.

In other words, the Saiedian version of nativist anti-imperialism and the impulse toward a politics of revenge instead of a politics of dignity was already engrained in Tunisian politics. The key question is: what is it that made it so easy for it rise from one political view among others into exercising hegemonic power over Tunisia? What was there or what was missing that enabled the hijacking, distortion, and simplification of these important and legitimate trends of organizing and debate around dignity, accountability and social justice, into weapons for authoritarian return? While all eyes are on the October 6 election, it will be essential to find answers to these questions in order that we not make the same mistakes if another democratic opening ever occurs. Aside from electoral battles, finding resources, and creating conditions for the elaboration of political visions that address questions of decoloniality and independence without falling into the trap of authoritarian anti-imperialism will be of essence.

One can only hope that in the long run, a contribution of Saiedism will be to have immunized Tunisians against this kind of rigid anti-imperialism. Some of the early supporters of Saiedism are quietly confessing a change of heart. On September 13 and 22, protestors took to the streets of Tunis to denounce Saied's authoritarianism ahead of what many fear will be a staged plebiscite rather than a democratic election. "Ministry of Interior = Ministry of Terror," "We are the people and the anger," "the people want the fall of the regime," "Kais Saied dictator, it's your turn" were some of the slogans they chanted. Children of political prisoners, journalists, cyber activists, and civil society leaders have called for more demonstrations. Legal scholars and the Administrative court have denounced ISIE's bias when excluding some candidates from the race. However fragmented and marginalized, pro-democracy Tunisians remain determined and faithful, and are now even more clear eyed about the lure of outmoded ideological framings.

Meditations

An elderly woman hangs upside down during group fitness at a park in Beijing on June 19, 2025.
© Wang Zhao/AFP/Getty



Flights of the Intelligentsia

LEONID RAGOZIN

AUGUST 7, 2025 | THE IDEAS LETTER 45

There is a French-themed café in the center of Riga called Vivien. But when a Russian emigre friend posted photos from its opening, his caption read: “It’s like ten years ago—I am at a new Jean-Jacques.” My reaction: oh no, not *that* again. Having left Moscow for Riga after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, I felt chased and cornered by a ghost—the ghost of Russian intelligentsia.

Disguised under a pseudonym, Vivien indeed turned out to be a reincarnation of Jean-Jacques, an old Moscow haunt that grew into a formidable chain since its opening in 2004. Jean-Jacques outlets were made to look like Parisian cafés with maroon-colored doors and bar stands, dark vintage furniture, and—a trademark feature—paper tablecloths that patrons were invited to draw on with pencils provided by the establishment. A Jean-Jacques (named, of course, after Rousseau) would be typically paired with a John Donne, a somewhat darker and edgier English pub. The name choices reflected the intellectual and geopolitical leanings of the owners and their clientele: West European humanism.

Over the years, the Jean-Jacques brand became so synonymous with Russian liberal intelligentsia that Kremlin propaganda began using it as a derogatory term to describe the entire anti-Putin opposition. “Russia is bigger than Jean-Jacques,” RT founder Margarita Simonyan declared in 2012 as the Kremlin attempted to marginalize the Bolotnaya protest movement. When Putin ordered a clampdown on those protests in May of that year, riot police raided the original Jean-Jacques on Nikitsky Boulevard, beating up and arresting the clients. I got arrested in that crackdown too, albeit in a different location—an event that complemented my decision to leave Russia when it attacked Ukraine in 2014.

The founder—present seemingly every night, drinking with his pals—was Mitya Borisov, a larger-than-life Moscow socialite who hails from a prominent Soviet dissident family linked to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. It was he who presided over the opening of Café Vivien in Riga. Pictures from the event mostly featured familiar faces from the pre-2022 Jean-Jacques—as it was before the winds of history, namely Russia's all-out invasion in Ukraine, scattered its clientele in all directions, from Tbilisi to Buenos Aires.

Back in Moscow and in much better times, Borisov's bars were where I spent a significant part of my young adulthood and received a serious overdose of that strange and unsavory substance: Russian intelligentsia.

I am hardly the only member of the group—let us admit my affiliation head on—who shares this sentiment. The story of the Russian intelligentsia is that of self-loathing and escapism—from itself as well as from Russia. This is especially poignant now, at the height of Ukraine conflict, which has forced pretty much the entire Russian opposition and civil society to flee the country and hastily reinvent itself abroad, a situation fraught with serious personal risks to those on all sides of the conflict.

In his seminal work on the Bolsheviks, *The House of Government*, UC Berkeley professor Yuri Slezkine describes the Russian intelligentsia as a group that combines “millenarian faith and lifelong learning.” It is the millenarian and apocalyptic worldview that explains its rather inhuman propensity to sacrifice itself in the name of any current political cause. Its flight from Putin's regime in response to the invasion in Ukraine is one recent example. “I can't think of any analogy to the mass exodus of one country's intellectual elite in response to its invasion of another country,” Slezkine pointed out in one of our conversations.

Is there indeed a precedent for the lion's share of a major world power's liberal intellectuals fleeing their own country in protest of its unjustified aggression? The Iraq War definitely did not prompt the same outcome in the U.S. Israel's genocide in Gaza is not exactly causing an exodus of intellectuals either.

The causes of this escapism, however, keep changing. From agrarian socialism and Bolshevik totalitarianism, to the Soviet dissident movement and post-Soviet right-wing libertarianism, the intelligentsia keeps trying to build a new church

on the ashes of an old, discredited, and desecrated temple (no matter if that church denies the existence of God at times—it will still have its martyr saints, holy places, and ashes).

In Maxim Gorky's *The Life of Klim Samgin*, a saga imbued with the author's loathing of the Russian intelligentsia of which he was part and parcel, one character muses: "In Russia, everyone strives to believe in something. Doesn't matter what, even in the salutariness of atheism. In Christ. In chemistry. In the nation. The pursuit of faith is the pursuit of the peace of mind. We have no people who condemn themselves to the anxiety of independent thinking."

THE CIVILIZERS

Like the other quintessentially Russian product, vodka, the word "intelligentsia" is a Polish import. Unlike vodka, it is notoriously hard to define. Is it a class, a social group, or a vague term that stands for all educated and well-meaning people?

Slezkine describes it as a "particularly vibrant tradition of millenarian sectarianism." I personally tend to see it as a hereditary caste which perpetually fluctuates between self-sacrificial messianism coupled with inherent subversiveness and—at the very same time—extreme servility that results in a never-ending search for the next strongman to embrace—be it Stalin, Putin, Netanyahu, or the anti-Russian NATO adoration club today.

As Gorky's protagonist Samgin puts it, the intelligentsia is "the country's best people who take responsibility for all the bad things in it." Another character warns Samgin against trusting "good Russian people" who believe they can change the fate of society with the power of words but who are destined to be trampled upon by the horses of history that are "driven by experienced but indelicate coachmen." Tellingly, Gorky himself lived the life of a genuine humanist and democratic socialist, only to end it as an apologist for Stalin and the Gulag.

In its canonical origin myth, the Russian intelligentsia traces its roots to the progressive aristocracy of the early nineteenth century, which was exemplified by the Decembrists who staged a failed uprising against the tsar in 1825. As Lenin put it, the Decembrists politically awakened the writer Aleksandr Herzen

who in turn inspired the *Narodniks*, the first revolutionary movement made of *raznochintsy*—educated but not so wealthy people: the original intelligentsia.

One feature of the aristocratic class to which the Decembrists belonged was that it saw itself as a European nation within the much larger nation of semi-Asiatic barbarians. Comprising to a significant extent of Baltic Germans and Western European immigrants, it used French as its primary language of communication and treated the empire's Slavic peasant majority in much the same way as European colonizers treated African slaves in the Americas.

This two-nation sentiment lingered through centuries and feels even stronger now that the intelligentsia's opinion leaders are physically detached from Russia. "There are two separate nations living in Russia, totally dissimilar and hostile to each other," bestselling author Boris Akunin (Chkhartishvili) wrote back in 2013 when he was a prominent figure of Bolotnaya protest—an intelligentsia/middle class movement that failed to rally broader masses in the manner of Ukraine's Maidan revolution. "There is Us and there is Them. We have our own heroes: Chekhov, Mandelshtam, Pasternak, Sakharov. They have theirs: Ivan the Terrible, Stalin, Dzerzhinsky and now Putin."

No matter how they viewed the masses, no matter the current intellectual celebrity who adorned their banners—Rousseau, Marx, or Hayek—members of the Russian intelligentsia have largely retained that self-perception of being agents of civilization in a land of savages. Not any civilization, but specifically that which developed and flourished in Western Europe and North America. The yawning gap between the educated class and common folks is not historically unique to Russia, but in Russia, with its peripheral and—occasionally—pariah status in Europe, it would always harbor a geopolitical dimension.

The intelligentsia has tried to erase the boundary dividing them from *narod* (the people)—a mysterious entity which they either worshipped (if only along the lines of Rousseau's noble savage) or despised, depending on historical circumstances and political views. The core political method of the *Narodniks*, for instance, was called Going to the People, encouraging members of the intelligentsia to live with peasant communities and spread revolutionary ideas among them.

Although Marx and Engels relentlessly criticized Herzen for perceived pan-Slavism, even his breakup with the icons of radical political thought in Western Europe highlighted the Westernizing zeal of the revolutionary intelligentsia in Russia. In an article penned on Herzen's 100-year anniversary in the ominous year of 1917, Leon Trotsky compared the Slavophile tendencies of the Narodniks to a photo negative: "light instead of shades and shades instead of light!—a reflection of the superiority and might of the European culture in the anxious mind of a Russian man."

The Bolsheviks were Russia's most radical Westernizers albeit in the most unhinged way, given that their Westernization project resulted in isolation from the West. They claimed to be pursuing the "dictatorship of proletariat," but in reality they built a dictatorship of a radical and ethnically mixed intelligentsia group which succeeded in destroying the former empire's largest social class by far, the peasantry, through the policies of genocidal terror and artificially induced famines.

While it was also subject to terror, the intelligentsia mushroomed enormously during the Soviet years, thanks to the Bolsheviks' obsession with education. This stratum was now largely made of the beneficiaries of the revolution who came from the lower social classes and ethnic minorities from the western fringes of the former empire: Jews, Latvians, and Poles. But it manifested much the same features as its predecessor, including the combustible mixtures of elitism and servility that alternated with subversiveness and self-sacrifice. Over 70 years of Soviet power, it drifted from being the intellectual locomotive of the Bolshevik movement towards the dissidence of the 1960–70s and ended up leading the drive to topple the Communist regime—its very own brainchild—in 1991.

The new political religion that replaced the Bolshevik totalitarian project was the worship of the West *per se*, which meant recognizing not just its political and economic predominance, but also its moral and spiritual supremacy. The prime minister who unleashed the brutal shock therapy to reform the socialist economy along of the lines of Western free market orthodoxy—an effort now blamed for causing extreme poverty and rapid demographic decline—was Yegor Gaidar, the grandson of a ruthless Red Guard commander who evolved into a celebrated children's writer and a founder of a prominent intelligentsia family.

Incentives for conversion to the occidental church were not entirely spiritual though. American and European institutions became a lifeline for much of the intelligentsia in Russia, Ukraine, and other former Soviet states in the troubled 1990s. This resulted in the emergence of what Western media describes as “civil society.” Left-wing thinkers tend to dismiss it as “comprador intelligentsia”—an intellectual class whose personal interests are often more aligned with the West than with its own nation. Pro-Western liberals would typically claim that it is in the best interests of their home countries to follow the Western party line. But the dreary reality of life in post-Soviet countries kept undermining that view over and over again, especially as the West set on a self-degrading drift towards far right populism and unhinged militarism.

As a common expression goes, the Russian intelligentsia feels perpetually “unlucky with the people” which so often fails to appreciate its grandiose social experiments like forced collectivization or shock therapy. This disdain was best expressed by pro-democracy politician and Dostoyevsky expert Yuri Karyakin during the election night broadcast in 1993. “Russia, you’ve gone mad,” he roared upon learning that Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s far right LDPR was prevailing over Gaidar’s Russia’s Choice party. Another prominent perestroika-era idiom (coined by historian Yuri Afanasyev)—the “aggressively obedient majority”—came to be used as a slur casually thrown at *narod*. If only its active users knew back at the time how “aggressively obedient” their own intelligentsia caste, the supposedly enlightened minority, would look in the next 35 years. Much like the anti-Trump Americans today, Russian liberals never really bother to look in the mirror as they explain the nation’s unsavory electoral choices.

The new epoch provided multiple ways for members of the intelligentsia to disentangle themselves from this incorrigible nation which reliably fails to live up to their expectations: the simplest was emigrating to the West. But for millions of people, it was the Russian motherland which disentangled itself from them when President Boris Yeltsin signed the Belovezha accords, thereby undoing the Soviet Union in December 1991. That left major intelligentsia hotbeds—Kyiv, Odessa, Kharkiv, Minsk, and Almaty—outside the Kremlin’s realm. The intelligentsia were no longer Russian, but Russophone—united by their primary language while holding passports of new nations on increasing divergent paths.

That situation offered people a range of potential strategies from stubbornly sticking to their Russianness to reinventing their identity altogether. The latter avenue is available to many, if not most members of the intelligentsia, given their ethnic diversity. But most people went for a combination of both in ever-changing proportions, depending on circumstances and geopolitical choices.

The wonderful Odessa poet Boris Khersonsky, for example, has reinvented himself as both Ukrainian and Jewish nationalist who keeps emphasizing his own otherness from modern Russians—including friends and fellow ex-members of the Soviet dissident movement—while continuing to write both poetry and political commentary largely in the Russian language. A few Odessa and Kyiv-born people I knew of moved to Moscow in the 1990s, often becoming fully-fledged Putinists a decade later. Later, however, they would take up lucrative jobs in Ukraine as highly-qualified Moscow transplants and gradually morph into ardent Ukrainian nationalists in the wake of Russian aggression. These transitions tend to go seamlessly because Russian statism and different forms of anti-Russian ethnonationalism are two sides of the same far right coin.

GEOPOLITICS VS VALUES

The Russian aggression against Ukraine provided the most powerful incentive for the intelligentsia to break up with the homeland. The occupation of Crimea generated a steady flow of politically motivated emigration (a wave that I joined, too), but it turned into an outpour at the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022. That massive exodus was partly driven by the fear of persecution—very real for the politically active minority and less so for its largely passive support base.

For the latter, the reasons ranged from moral principles to selfish pragmatism. The assumed pragmatism boiled down to essentialist perceptions of the Western side in the conflict being inherently “more civilized” and “on the right side of history”—views that stem from the 200-year-old self-perception as occidental missionaries in the land of savages. As former Russian politician Andrey Piontkovsky put it in 2022: “Ukraine is defending Western civilization from eastern barbarians.” That is Western supremacism in its purest form.

This line of thinking leads more than a few members of the intelligentsia to a quintessentially Russian extreme—desiring Russia’s destruction. In a speech at a

security conference in Tallinn, political scientist Sergey Medvedev, a prominent opinion leader with a large following, lamented that the West does not have the guts to treat Russia like Nazi Germany—defeat militarily, occupy, and dismember. “It is evident therefore that the world will have to keep living through the twenty-first century together with this toxic swamp in northern Eurasia, hoping that this yet-to-disintegrate empire will digest itself and generate some lifeforms that will be friendlier to the outer world.”

But the assumptions of the West’s “civilizational” supremacy look increasingly questionable given that the West is not exactly winning the conflict, partly because the moral aspect is rather more nuanced than the Western supremacists would have us believe. Rejecting Putin’s aggression on moral grounds is one thing, but presuming the West’s moral superiority is quite another. The West in the epoch of Trump—with the far right menace engulfing Europe and genocide in Gaza supported by the major powers—is hardly a shining city upon a hill, which is how it looked to many ex-Soviets, including myself, in 1991. Its wholesale embrace of radical Ukrainian ethnonationalism—down to Nazi collaborator chants repeated by senior Western politicians—is a larger-than-life symptom of that malaise.

Main opinion leaders of the Russian intelligentsia tend to parrot standard Western and Ukrainian ethnonationalist tropes with regards to the Russo-Ukrainian war, but these Manichean and essentialist explanations of the war’s historical roots leave more questions than answers, clashing massively with their perception of intellectual decency and lived experience (which involves permanent exposure to Ukraine and Ukrainians, often close relatives, over the entire course of life). Too many things in Ukraine are hard to explain or justify if you oppose Putin’s aggression on moral rather than geopolitical grounds. That includes brutal press gangs hunting for new army recruits in the streets of Ukrainian cities as well as thousands of Ukrainians serving prison sentences for “collaboration” with Russia. Eleven prominent Russian political prisoners equalized themselves with these people, describing them as “civic hostages” in a recent appeal for an “all for all” swap of prisoners between Ukraine and Russia. “All of us have been punished for one thing—our civic position,” they wrote.

Rampant far right extremism that defines politics in Ukraine is also hard to ignore—as in the case of the new head of Ukrainian National Memory Institute, former Azov movement spokesman Oleksandr Aliforov, who said in his very

first interview after the appointment that Hitler was a highly educated person compared to Putin, while Holocaust-era Germans were far more cultured than contemporary Russians who, he claimed, were worse than orcs.

But the intelligentsia's discourse on Ukraine is subdued, partly by the sense of collective guilt for Putin's actions, partly because of fear of reprisals. One of those who dares criticize Ukraine is the controversial right wing commentator Yulia Latynina, who was recently sanctioned by Zelensky's administration. In a lengthy response on X, Latynina shamed the Russian opposition for turning a blind eye on what she calls the "elephant in the room," including a mudflow of xenophobic rhetoric which top Ukrainian officials pour on Russians, no matter what they stand for.

She recalled Zelensky's chief of staff Andriy Yermak insulting them as "a nation of murderers and non-humans, the biological garbage of this world," former Ukrainian Security Council Oleksiy Danilov chief calling them "inhuman Asians," and Zelensky himself urging all Russians to be expelled from the E.U., including those who fled Russia due to their opposition to war in Ukraine (tellingly, Zelensky and Yermak come from Russian-speaking Soviet intelligentsia families). The reaction to Latynina's post in Russian opposition circles was by and large disdainful, with virtually no one offering support.

Unlike Ukraine, the controversy over the Gaza genocide and Israel's war on Iran is out in the open. Thousands of Russians fled to Israel after February 2022, the start of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine. Just over a year later, in October 2023, they found themselves on the battlefield of another major conflict. That is where the breaking point came, whereby some of the people capable of critical thinking in the context of Putin's Russia became vulnerable to the crudest of infowar tricks and military propaganda.

Western supremacism shone through the commentary. "Israel today (just like Ukraine) is the frontline in the war of western civilization against political and ethical archaism—a well-armed and lethally dangerous archaism," the famous satirist Viktor Shenderovich wrote at the outset of Israel's attack on Iran in June. One of the sharpest critics of Putin's regime, Shenderovich was arrested during the Jean-Jacques raid back in 2012. The above-mentioned Latynina goes on with much the same tropes when it comes to Israel.

There was something truly mesmerizing in this transition from healthy skepticism and outrage at the Kremlin's rampant lies to embracing the alternate reality in which facts are being dismissed wholesale while everyone who describes Netanyahu's methods in Gaza as genocidal—Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and much of the mainstream Western media—is seen as an anti-Semitic conspirator aimed at undoing the Jewish state. The sheer scale of pro-Israeli agitation in the Russophone sphere raises the question: What was their conflict with Putin about? Is it universal values or geopolitical choices, which boil down to crude Western supremacism and imperialism?

By contrast with Ukraine, pro-Israeli opinion leaders meet a considerable backlash from rank-and-file members of the intelligentsia, including Israeli passport holders. Genocidal comments like those by the writer Dina Rubina—she said in a TV interview that she wants Palestinians “completely exterminated,” “dissolved in hydrochloric acid,” and that Gaza should be “turned into a parking lot”—in fact prompted masses of people to read more about the plight of Palestinians despite being pro-Israeli by default, as most Russian liberal intellectuals are.

A Russian-Israeli friend (who opposes genocide) told me that the cannibalistic zeal of pro-Israeli Russians is primarily driven by the sense of belonging. People hailing from post-totalitarian environments feel orphaned in the absence of a strongman backed by a security apparatus and state of the art weaponry. Netanyahu, the Mossad, and the IDF fully fit the bill while retaining a strong affiliation with the “civilized” world, as opposed to the “uncivilized” Putin.

This is the path of least resistance as opposed to the perpetual “anxiety of independent thinking” in the words of Gorky's character. The other path is way thornier, especially now that the West no longer works as a role model, not least because of the cowardly conformism of its intellectual elites. Thankfully, it is the Russian intelligentsia itself that developed a method for approaching this task during darker historical periods. If the outside world is unfree, you can still cultivate your internal freedom.

The old political prisoners' maxim of “don't expect, don't fear, don't plead” applies to one's life as an exile in the contemporary West as much as it applied to life in the Gulag, because it works for any society with a deficiency of freedom. If the West has chosen to follow Russia into the darkness of nativism and militarism,

we can still cherish our own freedom and avoid Sieg-Heiling with the rest of the crowd.

But to achieve that, one needs to follow Anton Chekhov's advice and keep "squeezing out your inner slave drop by drop"—and that means squeezing out the inherent servility which comes with being a part of Russian—or indeed—European/Western intelligentsia. This is hardly confined to rejecting Putin: there is a far larger, all-encompassing evil of far right populism and militarism in the contemporary world that needs to be firmly rejected.

But if I choose to go by the Russian intelligentsia's recipe, if its habits and instincts can provide a dignified escape from a hostile and unsavory world, then why would I escape from the Russian intelligentsia? Perhaps a glass of wine at Cafe Vivien, aka Jean-Jacques, is a better idea.

My New York Intellectuals

TOMIWA OWOLADE

JUNE 13, 2024 | THE IDEAS LETTER 18

I am not from New York. I am not Jewish. I am not a member of a Marxist group. I did not live through the 1930s and 1940s. I am a 27-year-old British-Nigerian who grew up in London. Yet the New York Intellectuals are my people.

They are my people because even though they had ample reason to be defined by their identity, they tried to transcend their personal circumstances with their wide-ranging embrace of culture. They did not see themselves, and they should not be seen, simply as Jewish New Yorkers who were advocating antifascism and anti-Stalinism in the middle of the twentieth century; they possessed a universalist spirit. And this is a spirit to which I aspire.

I remember the wonder I felt reading my first James Baldwin essays from his 1955 collection *Notes of a Native Son* at my university library or watching *I Am Not Your Negro*, Raoul Peck's excellent documentary about Baldwin, on a bright spring afternoon of 2017. I remember in my early 20s picking up Elizabeth Hardwick's fat collection of criticism (published by NYRB Classics) in a second-hand bookshop and devouring it. I remember discovering the lives and works of other New York Intellectuals in Louis Menand's monumental 2021 cultural history *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War*.

I was captivated by the energy and fizz of Saul Bellow's prose in *The Adventures of Augie March* when I read the book for the first time during the Covid-19 lockdown in the spring of 2020. I adore Hardwick for her stylish criticism: the way she can explain in rich and invigorating detail why the prose of Vladimir Nabokov is magical and the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop is perfect. And I revere Baldwin for his penetrating essays—for his ability to argue, for example, that moral protest should not be the objective of literature.

Even when I had no inkling of who any of the New York Intellectuals were or what they stood for, these professors and literary critics, novelists and essayists already were my people. Discovering them was like a homecoming. They spoke to me. Their way of seeing literature was—and is—my way.

The New York Intellectuals emerged from a particular historical and cultural context: Most were second-generation Jewish-American writers in the 1930s and 1940s fascinated by European Modernism and attracted to the anti-Stalinist radical Left. They wrote for publications like *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, and the *New York Review of Books*.

Norman Podhoretz, a Jew from Brooklyn, called them “the family.” As he wrote in his 1967 memoir *Making It*, the New York Intellectuals were “stuck with one another against the rest of the world, whether they liked it or not (and most did not), and preoccupied with one another to the point of obsession, and intense in their attachment and hostilities as only a family is capable of being.” Irving Howe, arguably the most incisive exponent of what they were about, wrote, “by birth or osmosis, they are Jews.”

The New York Intellectuals were disproportionately Jewish New Yorkers, yet many prominent members of the group were not. Bellow was Jewish but from Chicago; Hannah Arendt was Jewish and from Germany. Mary McCarthy came from a midwestern Irish-Catholic background. Dwight MacDonald and F.W. Dupee were of Anglo-Saxon Protestant stock. Baldwin was African-American. Hardwick was born to a Southern Protestant family and throughout her life retained a Kentucky accent.

They did not all come from the same racial, religious, or urban background, but they did share other significant affinities. My kinship with them is based on those—not on a shared background, but on a shared approach to the relationship between art and politics.

The family looked out into the world. Alfred Kazin, another one of its members, brought out this tension when he recollected for Joseph Dorman’s 2000 book *Arguing the World: The New York Intellectuals in Their Own Words*: “The atmosphere at *Partisan Review* was both exciting because of the wealth of their interests, and insular because of the nature of these people themselves.” And as the sociologist

Nathan Glazer, another one of the New York Intellectuals, said of them: “even as they became more openly Jewish, they could never shake their belief in a more expansive universalist agenda.”

Given these internal contrasts, some have wondered if the label “New York Intellectual” means anything in the first place. Robert Boynton wrote in the *Atlantic* in 1995: “anyone who steepes himself in the writings of these groups knows that there is no such person as *the* New York Intellectual or *the* Black intellectual.”

What he meant was that the New York Intellectuals did not all believe in the same thing. They were not a cult. In fact, one of the things that distinguished them as a group was the fact that they argued so intensely with one another. Some (like Howe) always put a great emphasis on socialism and retained their allegiance to it throughout the Cold War. Others (like Podhoretz and Irving Kristol) ultimately abandoned leftist politics in favor of neoconservatism.

For me, what united the New York Intellectuals beyond their differences in backgrounds and beliefs was their not wanting to be defined by their identity, as well as their conviction that culture matters on its own terms and should not be analyzed through the lens of politics. Many of them were in some way marginalized from the cultural mainstream and yet always insisted on learning and promoting—to use a famous quote from Matthew Arnold—“the best that has been thought and said in the world.”

I feel the same way. Despite our differences in background and age, I, like them, do not want to be defined simply by my identity. I also subscribe to their approach to literature: Being from a marginalized background should not prevent someone from embracing and engaging with the best of what has been thought and said.

Reading has been an integral part of my life since I was a boy; for the New York Intellectuals, reading was everything. Not only reading for pleasure, but reading to transcend one’s circumstances and upbringing. In my case, to be transported from the London suburb in which I grew up, from an immigrant middle-class background, into a universal world of culture.

In the case of many New York Intellectuals, expansive reading came out of the desire to not be confined by their Eastern European Jewish background. Glazer once said of his attraction to the *Partisan Review*:

I've always found it astonishing that educators believe the way to reach people is to discuss where they are. I was not interested in where I was. I was bored to death with where I was. If they were going to talk about life on the Lower East Side, I'd say what are you talking about? You want to talk about life in the shtetl, I didn't care either. We wanted to learn about big things. We wanted to learn about great movements of history, great movements of ideas, the great novels, poems, music.

To learn about the “big things.” To learn about “the great movements of history, great movements of ideas, the great novels, poems, music.” For these intellectuals, learning was not a rite of passage; it was a life-long vocation and passion. *Partisan Review* published a Who's Who of litterateurs from the 1930s and 1940s: the poetry of T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and W.H. Auden; the critical essays of George Orwell and Arthur Koestler; the literary essays of Edmund Wilson. If you wanted an excellent education in transatlantic literary culture at that time, *Partisan Review* was the magazine to read.

The New York Intellectuals' notion of culture was decidedly cosmopolitan. Their interests were expansive precisely because, as Jews, their upbringing had been so estranged from the literary and intellectual establishment. They pursued what they had not been given by birth and upbringing.

Their example matters to many cultural and political debates today because it illustrates that we should not form an opinion of political outlook on the basis of cultural tastes: Just because someone is politically progressive does not necessarily mean they would reject what is sometimes called High Culture. Culture should be examined on its own terms.

The New York Intellectuals also matter because they rebut the impulse to analyze art through identity. This runs contrary to the assumption today that people from so-called marginalized backgrounds should study works by people from backgrounds like their own. Inclusivity is often invoked nowadays to defend this point of view. The argument goes: There is little racial and ethnic diversity in the kind of culture young people are exposed to, and that undermines their self-worth.

Many see sticking to a canon as an expression of reactionary politics, crudely exclusionary and reflecting the prejudices of a white and male establishment. But this view reduces the canon to a zero-sum game. In fact, writers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds are not locked in a perpetual conflict.

I think young people—indeed, anyone—should be exposed to a wide variety of art and culture. And what should guide their evaluation of those works is not the identities of the people who produced them, but the works' individual aesthetic merits.

Is this a profoundly narrow form of cultural criticism? The New York Intellectuals had a comprehensive attitude to culture—one of the qualities that most attracted me to them. They were not specialists. They possessed, as Podhoretz put it, “the synoptic mind.” They drew connections between literature and politics, the past and the present, the particular and the universal.

This synoptic approach is useful for analyzing culture today. Writers from different backgrounds are always in conversation with one another. Zadie Smith is renewing the exuberant fiction of Charles Dickens for a twenty-first century London; Derek Walcott is renewing the poetry of Homer from the vantage point of the Caribbean. Chinua Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*, one of the most influential African novels of the twentieth century, partly as a rejection of two depictions of Africa by European writers he saw as racist: Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. But his novel's title is taken from a poem by William Butler Yeats, and the plot resembles the structure of a classic Greek tragedy.

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is an enchanting tale about a young Black American man from Michigan called Milkman and his attempt to trace his lineage. It employs folklore and myths like that of the Flying Dutchman to explore the theme of Black liberation. But the book is not simply a great African-American novel; it is also a great American novel. It resembles the frontier novels of travel and adventure that characterized so much of nineteenth century American fiction; it follows in the tradition of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*.

One might be tempted, moreover, to view the debate on the teaching of a canon simply as one of radicalism versus conservatism, progress versus tradition. But

this would also be a severe mistake. Many of the New York Intellectuals, like Howe, retained a fiercely egalitarian spirit throughout their lives. At the same time, they, like other intellectuals throughout history, retained a deep love for High Culture—loving even culture that at times fiercely contradicted their political and moral beliefs.

W.E.B. Du Bois was one of the most influential radical Black thinkers of the twentieth century. But he also loved the work of Richard Wagner, the racist German composer. Du Bois loved Wagner so much that in 1936 he attended the Bayreuth Festival, an annual celebration of Wagner's work. Du Bois argued that "the musical dramas of Wagner tell of human life as he lived it, and no human being, white or Black, can afford not to know them, if he would know life."

Du Bois also famously said: "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color-line, I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension."

C.L.R. James, a Marxist from Trinidad and Tobago, was another radical thinker who mined the very Western civilization he might have had good reason to reject. "I didn't learn literature from the mango-tree, or bathing on the shore and getting the sun of colonial countries," he once wrote. "I set out to master the literature, philosophy and ideas of Western civilization. That is where I have come from and I would not pretend to be anything else."

Baldwin, a key member of the New York Intellectuals and one of the leading advocates for the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, used to hate the work of Shakespeare. He associated it with the canon and saw it as something that had been denied to him because of his race. But he later grew to love Shakespeare, he said. And he did, Baldwin once wrote, because the playwright and poet was able to "defeat all labels and complicate all battles by insisting on the human riddle."

This description of Shakespeare serves as a summary of Baldwin's fiction and essays: resisting simplification, emphasizing complexity. But it also serves as a useful way of thinking about the New York Intellectuals more generally. For

Baldwin and other New York Intellectuals, one should never sacrifice the “human riddle” in favor of a one-dimensional account of literature.

As Lionel Trilling, a professor of English at Columbia University and one of the founding fathers of the New York Intellectuals, wrote in his classic collection of essays *The Liberal Imagination*: “Literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty.”

To expect writers from marginalized backgrounds to be ideologically opposed to white, male writers is wrong as a matter of fact and wrong in principle. It undermines the actual relationship that exists between many writers from marginalized backgrounds and authors from other backgrounds and from the past. It undermines what literature should be for in the first place: emphasizing our universal humanity, not putting us into competing silos.

Many of the New York Intellectuals abandoned dissident leftism in favor of authoritarian anticommunism. In 1933, Sidney Hook, who was always more passionate about political theory than literature, wrote a program for a revolutionary communist party called the American Workers Party. By 1953, he was arguing that members of the Communist Party should be banned from teaching in American schools and universities.

The New York Intellectuals were not all united by a shared background or a shared politics, nor necessarily by shared values. They were bound by something more like a shared sensibility about the relation between politics and culture, a sense of the inherent distinction between the two: Culture is not simply an extension of politics; we should not infer one from the other.

For the New York Intellectuals, there was no tension between valuing the literary canon and espousing progressive beliefs, or any other political framework. More than anything, they despised provincialism: They were Americans but Americans open to the rest of the world.

The literary critic Adam Kirsch, in an essay on the influence of Jewish-American writers on the wider American canon, expressed what I feel whenever I think of the New York Intellectuals: “. . . the truth is that the American literary inheritance can be passed down to anyone who wishes to claim it. That category includes

only a few people in any American generation, but they can be Jewish, Black, Asian, or anything else, as easily as they can be Anglo-Saxon Protestants.”

I am a British-Nigerian Londoner, and I want to claim the legacy of these Jewish-American New Yorkers. Almost all of them are dead. Their world has vanished. *Partisan Review* is defunct, and you can only access it through clunky pdf files or second-hand copies from online retailers; it is rare nowadays to find people writing for both *Commentary* and the *NYRB*. But the legacy of the New York Intellectuals is alive.

I could not give a fig for their politics or background. What drew me to them is what has been my guiding sensibility since that day when I was 10 and my school gave me an encyclopedia: the pursuit of knowledge and culture for its own sake. Culture is not an extension of politics. It is its own thing.

Writing from the Vortex of War

MUHAMMAD AL-ZAQZOUQ

JULY 11, 2024 | THE IDEAS LETTER 20

Translated into English by: Katharine Halls

After much wrangling and back-and-forth with myself, alternately accepting and refusing, believing and disbelieving, asking what the point would be, I have decided to start writing. 106 days since we were suddenly, startlingly, swept into the vortex of war once again, I am writing so as not to become brutalized, so as not to be consumed by the pitiless machine of war and turned into a monster in a dark hole.

I have spent days paralyzed, disoriented, doubting the truth of what is happening, and all the while running the grueling course that is daily life under wartime conditions: endless queues and unimaginable humiliation for a few rounds of bread or a gallon of drinking water or a gas canister that will save us having to cook our meals on an open fire, and the constant struggle to keep up with fast-moving events, which spread dementedly from one part of Gaza to another. Running in these never-ending circles, with the convoluted details and heart-rending sights they bring, occupies all my days. There is never a moment to contemplate the turn of events that has made all forms of life in Gaza into a perpetual hell.

It came all at once, smothering every last comfortable and pleasant space I was blessed with before the war restarted. My summer of 2023 was overflowing with life. Between my various jobs, I was busy at all hours, but I still made time now and then to meet up with my friends, who were much less busy than me, to play cards on the beach at Khan Younis.

For a person like me who does not like sitting around at home, it was the perfect summer. I felt at ease when life was busy and noisy, full of experiments, shared projects, work, and endeavors; maybe they were my refuge from what things

were really like in Gaza, a city which over the last seventeen years had suffered more kinds of pain than a person can count.

Although the situation in the city had improved marginally, the general environment remained intolerable for whole swathes of society, particularly young people, who were leaving in droves. Whole neighborhoods were left empty of young people after successive waves of mass migration. They plotted their journeys to Europe together, all different, but unfailingly dangerous. These waves of youth emigration had reached a frenzied pitch by summer 2023, as a result of the unbearable conditions Gaza was forced to endure.

My own feelings were so numbed that I did not pay much attention to people's suffering. Like others, I was accustomed to the situation and I made the best of it. Keeping busy saved me from drowning in Gaza's oceans of pain. We thought we had reached the lowest point after seventeen years of siege, and seventeen waves of killing that ranged from assaults lasting a few days to more major escalations, on top of the poverty, unemployment, crime, addiction, and endless other social problems we lived with. We did not know that months and months of new pain awaited us, and would make everything we had been through so far feel like pinpricks by comparison.

8 OCTOBER, LEAVING HOME

The night of Saturday, October 7 was an ordinary night in Gaza; nothing on the horizon suggested anything was about to happen. I had come home late after a long day during which I had attended the burial of a cousin who had died after a short battle with mouth cancer. He was a charming, funny man whose approach to life I envied. He was the life and soul of our family get-togethers, a magnetic presence full of jokes and caustic commentaries on Gaza's political and social life whom everybody gathered around, especially the younger members of the family. When he started getting toothaches regular painkillers did not seem to help, so he went to see a doctor who ordered some tests, and after a biopsy was performed on a small swelling in his jaw, he was told he had cancer. The family were stunned. He began a treatment journey that began in Gaza then took him to Ramallah, back to Gaza, and then to Jerusalem for chemotherapy. He died six months after his diagnosis. Even though all the signs had suggested this was how things would end, the family were devastated. And his death seemed to be an

omen, because before the days of mourning and condolences were out, Gaza had found itself in the blazing furnace of war.

I was exhausted after the long, somber day, and quickly fell into a deep sleep, which is where I was when all hell broke loose at around 6:30 the next morning. It began with the terrifying sound of bombing—huge missiles in large numbers, coming from every direction all at once—which woke my wife and three children. I rushed into the children's bedroom to try to calm them down; they and their mother were petrified. The sounds of rockets and explosions went on continuously for over half an hour, and for the duration of that half-hour, a single question—instinctive, spontaneous, yet for the time being unanswerable—revolved in my head: What was happening?

The sounds gradually tailed off, to be replaced by the hubbub of voices outside in the open square of Hamad City residential complex, in Khan Younis, where we lived. The voices were many and mingled, so you could not make out anything they were saying. I ran downstairs to try to find out what had happened. What had happened was a surprise large-scale attack on the settlements and military positions adjacent to the Gaza Strip, an event which was quite possibly unprecedented in the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I gazed at the street around me. Agitated and confused, people were moving in every direction: some were leaving in cars, others were hurrying to nearby grocery stores to buy provisions, others were looking for transport to take them to relatives' homes. People in Gaza had lived through so many wars they had got into the habit of gathering in the family home whenever a new war broke out, to help them feel safer. A rush of chaos and anxiety had possessed the neighborhood, and in the midst of all this confusion and motion I stood silent and stupefied.

I retraced my steps up to the flat and told my family that war had begun and that we needed to decide if we were going to evacuate, like others were doing, and move to the family home in Khan Yunis Camp. Ula, my wife, did not want to go. I felt unable to make decisions or think clearly. We were adrift in a mix of fear and bewilderment at the conflicting news we were hearing, as well as being taken utterly by surprise. With every minute that went by, as we found out a little more about what was going on, my fear and shock increased. Just then, my phone rang, and I answered to find my older brother on the line, his voice heavy with fear and uncertainty. He also lived in Hamad City complex, but he had more accurate

news than the rumors doing the rounds, which people were repeating without knowing whether they were true or not.

He told me tensely that there was a long and brutal war ahead and that we could not stay where we were. We needed to move right away to Khan Yunis Camp where the family home was. He had decided quickly and was already there with his family even though in those first few hours it did not necessarily seem justified for people to leave Hamad City. But since it was a newly built neighborhood in a relatively isolated area at some distance from Khan Yunis city center, people quickly found that they needed to move into the city to be closer to the hospitals, markets, and UNRWA schools which become shelters for displaced people during times of war. My brother and his family had survived certain death during the war of 2021 when Israeli planes bombed a flat in the building directly next door to his, in the Amal neighborhood of Khan Yunis, and destroyed whole sections of his flat. He and his family were at home at the time, and it was only by a miracle they were not all killed. When we went to see the house, we were staggered that they had escaped unharmed. My brother was deeply shaken, and the shock stayed with him for many months afterward. Although they managed to rebuild the flat, my brother decided to sell it and buy a new flat in Hamad City, because he could not stay in a house where the very walls made him think of imminent death. After that experience in 2021, any disturbance made him and his family feel especially claustrophobic and afraid, which was why he had so swiftly moved to the family house while I sat for an hour agonizing over whether or not to leave the flat I had only just finished renovating a week earlier. Ula was refusing to leave. The flat was her personal heaven, the place where she felt most comfortable.

In the four years since we had bought it, we had put lots of thought into decorating and furnishing it together, and she had paid attention to every detail: the paint colors, the design of the curtains, the sitting room suite, and the children's room. She felt safe and comfortable in the flat in a way I could not identify with; I shared her feelings to a certain degree, but in general I had a stronger relationship with the family home in Khan Yunis where I was born, and where I had memories of my childhood in the streets and alleyways of the camp, of early adolescence and the blossom of new experiences and tastes it brought me. I was certainly attached to the flat in Hamad City as the fruits of my own hard work and patience, yet it still felt more like a hotel to me, a place

to spend the night after a hard day at work followed by evenings spent loitering in Gaza's cities and neighborhoods.

After some cautious discussion and back and forth with her, I decided we should vacate the flat and go to the family home in Khan Yunis Camp. That was to be our first displacement. We quickly packed a bag of clothes and some blankets, and another small bag with our papers, ID cards, and passports, and then we were ready to leave. It was not easy finding a taxi to take us to Khan Yunis Camp, because people were on the move and there were not enough taxis in Hamad City to cope, so I called the city taxi service. They told me I would have to wait half an hour, when usually it only took three or four minutes, because so many people were trying to leave. The half-hour felt like an age. I do not know why I was in such a hurry; at that point, we were still taking in what was happening and working out its dimensions and possible repercussions, no more. Maybe I just needed to talk to my father and brothers so we could all absorb together what was happening, then attempt to anticipate what would come next and share the fear, which was growing to the point it was getting out of control.

The taxi finally arrived, and I quickly loaded up the bags and got the children, Baraa, Jawad, and Basel, into their seats. We set off. We could not believe what we were seeing as we drove: Israeli army jeeps on the roads, surrounded by people, everyone in a state of shock. The jeeps were driving like crazy in all directions, and columns of smoke were rising all along the eastern side of Salah al-Din street. People's conversations sounded like they had come straight out of a film: there were four soldiers lying on the ground, large numbers of people had succeeded in entering military positions and settlements. There were unbelievable reports coming in, each new piece of information bringing intensified fear, expectation, and shock. When we reached Khan Yunis Camp, the neighborhood was in a state of anxiety and alarm, neighbors and relatives gathered here and there in groups and pairs outside, while military jeeps roamed the streets and the sound of gunfire came from all around. I was gripped by a desire to get into the house as fast as possible without having to talk to anyone. Inside, my father and all my brothers, and my mother and sisters, were in a state of fear and dismay. We did not want another war. Why was this happening? Israel was going to torch Gaza. The atmosphere was suffocating and tense with anticipation.

I sat down and silently smoked a cigarette, still overwhelmed by shock and fear.

A MONTH LATER, AFTER RETURNING HOME

So this is hunger. A new war raging within the war of missiles and bombs, a war no less brutal or mighty than the one searing us with its fires and sending us running to escape its crushing force. Hunger came for us in our home, as it did for others. We eat one meal a day now, halfway through the day. In the morning, a few biscuits are shared out between the children and then the adults, and in the evenings, we make do with tea.

Shortly after flour disappeared from the market, it began to circulate again in the form of sacks intended for distribution by UNRWA. This sudden appearance was the result of looting of the UNRWA warehouses, which we only heard about afterwards: crowds of hungry people had stormed the warehouse, some breaking down the doors while others scaled the walls, and emptied it of its supplies—not only flour, but also tinned sardines, corn oil, milk powder, and dried lentils and chickpeas—in a matter of minutes. Apparently they had even taken wooden desks and shelves and the agency's archives. I bought a sack of looted UNRWA flour for over four times the usual price, and made my way home as if bearing some priceless treasure. Ula and her sisters were jubilant, and we were all seized by a dark joy amid the wasteland of fear and grief that grows vaster and more desolate by the day as the war continues to escalate. We felt momentarily comfortable and safe; we could bake our own bread now, instead of waiting under the hot sun for hours in the uncertain hope of finding some at the bakery. But another problem stood in our path: to turn the thin rounds of dough into bread, we needed an oven, and all we had in the flat was a gas canister that barely sufficed to cook our regular meals. We would have to find some other way.

Mud ovens, which is what rural Gazan families have always used for cooking and baking, are dotted all over the green patches that lie between the apartment blocks in Hamad City. The women they belong to are generous and gladly volunteer their help when other families turn up needing to bake something, only asking them to bring enough paper and cardboard for fuel. But we did not have any paper or cardboard in the house—just my books. Ula looked at me timidly. "Let's use one or two for now, and when the war's over you can replace them," she said as gently as she could. "The kids need food more than they need to be read to." The ugliness of it was devastating. In all the years I had spent amassing my modest library, it had never occurred to me that I might one day have to weigh a book against a piece

of bread for my children. I was stunned by the cruelty of the choice, paralyzed by the question it raised: How had things got this bad, this fast?

I had collected my books over many years, and I had around two hundred now, including works on philosophy, society, and religion, novels, and poetry collections gifted to me by friends at their book signings, with dedications hand-written in the front pages. The books felt to me like part of a shared memory belonging to all those people, some of whom were still in Gaza, some of whom had gone abroad, and some of whom had died while searching for life. The more I thought about it, the clearer the feeling burned: My library was a pulsing bundle of flesh and blood and memories and lives and errands run in Gaza's streets and alleys and evenings spent in cafes and on the seafront in summer and in winter.

Which is why I replied, "I'm not going to burn a single page of a book. There must be some other solution." Ula realized her gentle pressure had not worked. "Never mind then," she said. "We just have to get hold of some paper somehow, so we can bake the bread before it goes bad."

I went downstairs and headed out, thinking I would find a stack of empty boxes lying next to the garbage containers or outside a grocery stores. But as I walked down the street, there was not a scrap of paper or cardboard to be seen. People had used up everything they could find in the garbage containers, and as I searched, I realized others were searching with me. Young and old alike were raking the ground with their eyes, all looking for paper to give to the village women so as to bake their bread. I wondered for a second if there might be none to be found anywhere in Hamad City, and I was overcome by a crushing sense of despair as I looked left and right, running now, chasing the paper mirage. I nearly went back to the flat and took two books from the shelves, and would have burned them to bake bread for the hungry children had not the owner of the store beneath our building intervened. He seemed to have been watching me on my search, and had finally decided to help me when he saw I was losing hope.

"You're looking for cardboard boxes, aren't you?" he asked. "Do you have any?" I replied eagerly. "Here," he said, handing me three large pieces of cardboard, "nothing's too precious for you." I thanked him several times before racing back upstairs, happy and proud, and grateful to the man for rescuing me from the sea of regret I would soon have been drowning in had I begun to burn my library.

They were only a small and humble collection of books, but to me they were the souls of the people who had written them—and this was no metaphor or poetic image, but a truth I had felt for many years.

THE NOVEMBER CEASEFIRE

The temporary ceasefire in November was over in a matter of days. We had hoped it would be extended, and maybe even signal an end to the war, but it fell apart on the morning of the seventh day. I had woken up early to find out what was going to happen, and when I heard a huge explosion that rocked the city, I knew that our temporary reprieve from the killing was over. We would have to ready ourselves for the next wave of death, destruction, and destitution. The Israeli raid targeted a residential apartment in a block next to the building where my older brother's apartment was, but he and his family had left, to my immense relief. He called me later on and asked me to go to the site of the bombing to check all the windows were intact and the front door still locked shut, because they could easily be blown in by an explosion so close by. When I got there, there was simply a void where the building that had been targeted used to be, but my brother's building was unscathed and its windows unbroken. As I called him back to let him know his home was safe, the sense that we too should leave was already encroaching upon my thoughts. The ceasefire we had placed our hopes in was over already, the bombardment of the city seemed to be intensifying, and we had been hearing news of Israeli plans for a ground invasion of Khan Yunis. I needed to make a decision in good time, I told myself, because leaving at zero hour would be dangerous and frightening. I wanted to have left the city well before any ground invasion took place, because it would be near impossible to move around while an invasion was underway, and I had not only my own children to consider but also my in-laws, who were staying in the flat with us. My thoughts began to whirl once again, I felt sick with worry and fear, and before I knew it I was thrown back into the maelstrom of wretched confusion where I had spent so many days the first time I decided to move my family to my parents' home in Khan Yunis camp.

My wife Ula's family felt comfortable and safe in the apartment, even though we were all concerned and afraid now that the ceasefire had come to an end and residential areas in the city were being bombed. Whenever I tried to prepare the family for the prospect of leaving home and moving to the Amal neighborhood,

where my in-laws had sheltered at her sister's place when they first left their home, I was met with refusal and a stubborn insistence we should stay put. All indications were that something major was going to happen, and yet I did not want to put pressure on them to leave; after all, it was my house, and any insistence on my part might be misunderstood by my guests. So I resolved to keep quiet, and wait and see what the days would bring, in the hope that matters would arrange themselves without putting me in an awkward position with my in-laws.

I did not have to wait long. Night had fallen, pitch-black and silent, on Hamad City's lines of apartment blocks. People were fast asleep, weary from weeks of accumulated exhaustion, and I too was in bed, when an enormous bombardment began at around 2:00 a.m., with dozens of planes pounding the outskirts of the city and the nearby agricultural lands. It was not just one or two raids, but dozens in rapid succession. The city was lit up by the red and yellow glare of explosions so bright it could have been broad daylight. Terrifying, ear-shattering sounds shook the entire city without break. The bombing was so vicious it seemed it would obliterate anything in its path. Everybody in the apartment was immediately awake, and hurried in terror into the narrow passageway between the sitting room and the kitchen, where we huddled on the floor, wide-eyed in shock and fear. What was happening?

This was insanity. It could not be normal. Each time we got over the terror of one raid, another more forceful came fast on its heels. The three children were in a state of hysteria none of us could allay. Some of the adults were trying to calm Jawad and Basel down, while Baraa clung to me, shaking, his body cold with fear, his lips blue, his teeth chattering, and his heart pounding so hard it mirrored the explosions outside. As I held him close, I felt every tremor of his fear as if it were in my own body. I tried to convince him that we were safe, that the bombing was not as close by as he thought—even though the sounds were really really loud, even though he could see the bright glow of the explosions and smell their acrid gunpowder smell, even though he could see that I was frightened and trembling just like him. It was as much use as trying to convince fire that water could not put it out, but I persisted. I was worried he might die of fear otherwise.

Just a few hours more and the sun would rise, I told Baraa, and then we would leave the apartment and go somewhere safer. He took hold of this idea, and as

dawn approached, he reminded me insistently that we had to leave, telling me he wanted to go somewhere safer. But while Baraa was appealing to the sun to rise, I was berating myself for being so selfish and irresponsible as to have had a child in a place condemned to death like this, and for being so useless that I could not even reassure him I would keep him safe from death. How could I explain the complicated truths of the life we were living to a child as young as him? I could not. What a sin I had committed by bringing him into the world. It was unforgivable.

Before we left, I thought of making a quick tour of the apartment—a farewell glance, perhaps, a last look at our home of four years, which held all our memories and secrets and emotions and joyful occasions—because who knew when we would be able to return? But I pushed the thought aside. I will not say any farewells, I said to myself. Farewells are bad luck. No need to make such a big deal about it. We will be back soon.

Lasching Out

SOLI ÖZEL

JULY 10, 2025 | THE IDEAS LETTER 44

“Everything in Trumpworld happens twice,” the Irish journalist Fintan O’Toole wrote recently—“the first time as performance and the second as reality.” He was commenting on the deployment of the U.S. National Guard and U.S. Marines in Los Angeles against protesters challenging President Donald Trump’s immigration policies. If Trump’s victory in 2016 was performance, the aftermath of his 2024 victory is reality. And that reality, now manifest daily, is one that most liberals, leftists, or middle-of-the-roaders had not fully anticipated, despite warnings.

Among the most prescient, consistent, and insistent critics to warn the United States of its own frailties was the historian Christopher Lasch.

Some observers were blinded by their belief in the rootedness and resilience of the country’s institutions, its liberal political tradition, and the irreversibility of progress. Others failed to fully appreciate how money would corrode the American political system and would so deepen cultural-cum-class polarization. But beginning several decades ago, Lasch identified the growing divide between the educated managerial elites and the bulk of the lesser educated public.

Writing of “an enlightened elite (as it thinks of itself),” he argued that it “seeks not so much to impose its values on the majority (a majority perceived as incorrigibly racist, sexist, provincial, and xenophobic), much less to persuade the majority by means of rational public debate, as to create parallel or ‘alternative’ institutions in which it will no longer be necessary to confront the unenlightened at all.” American democracy would deteriorate based on “the routine acceptance of professionals as a class apart.”

Lasch was erudite. He was engaged in intellectual conversation with different disciplines, theories, and approaches worldwide, including the Frankfurt School, which inspired his texts from the late-1970s and 1980s. His major works present

an archeology of social and political upheavals today: He identified long ago the roots of the current crisis of liberalism in the United States. After arguing that neither socialism nor fascism represented the future, Lasch asserted that “the danger to democracy comes less from totalitarian or collectivist movements abroad than from the erosion of its psychological, cultural, and spiritual foundations from within.”

Lasch's last book, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, was published posthumously, in 1995; he had rushed it into print as he was fighting cancer. In that work, along with what is arguably his most famous book, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979), and his most substantive one, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (1991), he identified, with alarm, the corrosive influence of markets and bureaucratization on individualism and responsible citizenship. He also tracked the economic and cultural trends that turned citizens into consumers and created an environment in which “indifference, not the fear of deeply divisive disagreements, underlies the public's refusal to get excited about politics.” And, for Lasch, “this indifference betrays the erosion of the capacity to take any interest in anything outside the self.”

To read Lasch, therefore, is in part to read the history of the transformation of capitalism, class, and cultural conflict in America over the last few decades—the rise of a mainly white, middle-age, and middle-class rebellion with patriarchal leanings—well before all those issues crystallized over wokeness and the inequalities caused by globalization.

Writing *The Revolt of the Elites* in the heyday of the West's triumphalism after the end of the Cold War, Lasch questioned its self-congratulatory tone over the supposed victory of liberal democratic capitalism. As a critic of progressivism—an obsession, he believed, of both the right and the left—he called attention to the growing crisis of citizenship in advanced capitalist democracies such as the U.S. and warned, “Having defeated its totalitarian adversaries, liberalism is crumbling from within.” One reason for this, he argued, in keeping with themes he had pursued in the 1970s and 80s, was that: “Liberalism was never utopian, unless the democratization of consumption is itself a utopian ideal. It made no difficult demands on human nature”—and yet, to him, such demands were precisely what made civic virtue.

His solution? Populism. One could say Lasch was a romantic when it came to rectifying an enfeebled democracy. But today the burgeoning literature on populism sees the movement as a threat to democracy. The German political philosopher Jan-Werner Müller has argued that populism is not just anti-elite but also anti-pluralism: Populists believe they are the only true representatives of the people and that anyone who is not with them is not part of the people. This exclusivist approach is inherently authoritarian, and so populism is, on the face of it, against liberalism and democracy.

For Lasch, though, writing in the early 1990s, “at a time when other ideologies are greeted with apathy, populism has the capacity to generate real enthusiasm,” because “populism, as I understand it, is unambiguously committed to the principle of respect.” In his view, respect was the essential ingredient of civic virtue—without it, liberalism loses its constitutive ethos and deteriorates toward “a narcissistic preoccupation with the self.” Populism, he wrote, “is the authentic voice of democracy.”

Lasch did recognize that:

It would be foolish to deny the characteristic features of populist movements at their worst—racism, anti-Semitism, nativism, anti-intellectualism, and all the other evils so often cited by liberal critics. But it would be equally foolish to deny what is indispensable in this tradition—its appreciation of the moral value of honest work, its respect for competence, its egalitarian opposition to entrenched privilege, its refusal to be impressed by the jargon of experts, its insistence on plain speech and on holding people accountable for their actions.

Considering today's realities, it turns out that he could have been more circumspect about tooting the positive aspects of populism.

A LEFTIST CONSERVATIVE

Lasch was a critic from within, if not at times a contrarian. As a person of the left, he started to ring the alarm for the leftish-liberal New Deal order during social and political turbulence prompted by the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and student radicalism in the United States. Though he then remained a leftist in matters of political economy—in particular privileging equality in both

economic and especially civic matters—he gradually distanced himself from the social and cultural tenets of the New Left. He believed that the once-hopeful movement of the '60s had gradually substituted culture for class and that its sense of individualism had paved the way for the neoliberal order and its egotistic ethos. "Most of us can see the system but not the class that administers it and monopolizes its wealth," he wrote. "We resist a class analysis of modern society as a 'conspiracy theory.' Thus, we prevent ourselves from understanding how our current difficulties arose, why they persist, or how they might be solved."

In the late 1970s, during the depths of the stagflation years that followed the 1973 oil crisis, Lasch published his *cri du coeur* about the family, *Haven in a Heartless World*. The family unit was, to him, the mainstay of a healthy society, because it could instill in children a sense of authority, discipline, and solidarity, as well as responsibility—and now, in his view, the family's cohesion and sustainability were under threat from the savage attacks of the market and bureaucratization.

The Culture of Narcissism came soon after. The media reported that it inspired President Jimmy Carter's so-called "malaise" speech of July 1979, in which Carter attacked consumerism and selfishness. The speech backfired spectacularly in political terms: Soon after, the Iran hostage crisis began and he was seen as a defeatist who could not lead the nation. Lasch later claimed that Carter had misunderstood his work. Still, Lasch's writings then reflected the overall pessimism of the times, and to this day, they are evidence of his perceptive assessment of the pitfalls of a liberal democracy built on market relations. Those trends only grew stronger in subsequent decades, propelling Trump and Trumpism to power.

Lasch argued that Americans in the 1970s suffered from three structural transformations: the rise of postindustrial modes of manufacturing, the ubiquity of mass media, and the undermining of the role of the family in socializing children and reproducing the community spirit. The market invaded and undermined the family, and the welfare state intruded on its most intimate issues, the better to regulate them. And these forces produced a new, modal type of personality: the narcissist. "The new narcissist is haunted not by guilt but by anxiety," Lasch wrote; he "has no interest in the future because, in part, he has so little interest in the past"; "the cultural devaluation of the past reflects not only the poverty of the prevailing ideologies... but the poverty of the narcissist's inner life."

From the time these words were written to our times today, the structural transformations only deepened. So did the societal and political crises that these changes triggered or exacerbated under the combined weight of the technological and digital revolution, ever-freer trade, the free movement of capital in a hyperglobalized world, and a politics increasingly beholden to capital. I think Lasch would have said that the advent, later, of the internet and social media made only a quantitative difference to the influence of the media, which already was corrosive. As Fred Turner, a professor of communication at Stanford, has pointed out: “It is the need for advertisers to make a profit that has remained constant from Lasch’s time to our own. Together, the spread of electronic media and the arm-twisting habits of advertising, writes Lasch, have made ‘the categories of truth and falsehood irrelevant to an evaluation of their influence. Truth has given way to credibility.’”

THE ANALYST AS MORALIST

Lasch was a Midwesterner with an Ivy League education who did not feel at ease, culturally or socially, in metropolitan and elite environments. He started reflecting much earlier than many on trends in American society that brought about today’s clear and present dangers of illiberal democracy and competitive authoritarianism. And unlike many commentators today, he put the blame squarely on the elites. At the same time, he was almost totally oblivious to the potential darkness in the ways and thoughts of the people he believed were being discounted or ignored by the managerial elites. He believed that *they* were the true bearers of virtues such as loyalty, honesty, restraint, good manners, a solid work ethic—the building blocks of a healthy democracy. Trumpism has proved him wrong.

Yet the dynamics he analyzed over several decades are now widely accepted as the economic, social, and cultural causes of Trumpism—even though Trump himself is arguably the unlikeliest of personalities to articulate and amplify the resentment of less educated white males. Remarkably—and this symbolizes both the severe erosion of the establishment’s legitimacy and the fury of those who feel to have been left behind, against existing democratic norms—Trump’s reelection as president in 2024 took place after he was convicted as a felon and he had encouraged his supporters to stage a coup after the 2020 election, which he lost but would not concede.

Lasch probably would not have been surprised by Trump's victories: After all, he wrote back in 1991, in *The True and Only Heaven*, that "old political ideologies have exhausted their capacity to explain events or to inspire men and women to constructive action" and that "American society suffered from the collapse of legitimate authority." He consistently blamed the crisis of democracy on the educated managerial class and its condescension of the lower classes, particularly white workers: "One study after another depicted a working class newly suburbanized, economically secure for the first time but socially at sea, resentful of blacks and other minorities pressing up from below, beset by status anxiety, and ripe for radical demagogues." The elites looked upon the family structure, approach to education, and democratic values of this class as founts of authoritarianism—as a result, they welcomed its apathy toward political participation. And so Lasch concluded, "the only people who really mattered, it appeared, were the members of the professional and managerial class."

The main tenets of Lasch's analysis about economic dynamics, the clash of cultures as a substitute for class struggle, the devastating effects of the crisis of the family, and the quest for social equality and justice did not change over time. His social and cultural views did evolve, in a more conservative direction, as he increasingly came to see the family and religious belief as the bulwarks of a stable and functional society. And yet he did not join the ranks of political conservatism or neo-conservatism. There is an admirable consistency in Lasch's work, as well as a Coleridge-type of temperament, which does not fear change but instead wishes for change to be rooted in tradition and carried out through the agency of institutions. It is questionable, though, whether what he yearned for—a return to a simpler capitalism, the entrepreneurial spirit, de-bureaucratization, civic responsibility, citizenship not consumerism, social equality—could be attainable today. Then again, for a man who disliked nostalgia, Lasch arguably was being nostalgic about times long gone and that could never return as capitalism transformed itself.

TODAY'S GAZE

Reading Lasch's work now reveals a simple truth: Many, if not most, of the analyses in circulation since Trump's victory in 2016 had been readily available in the past. Trumpism also clearly had political precursors. And yet for decades the trends Lasch identified were not taken with the seriousness they deserved.

They were filtered out as anomalies by the prevalent liberal ethos or, in Lasch's parlance, the "progressive elitist" outlook of the managerial classes.

In fact, though, the 1992 presidential elections—held on the heels of the United States' first post-Cold War military victory, in Iraq—featured two candidates outside the prevailing consensus on cultural and economic matters: Pat Buchanan and Ross Perot. Buchanan's challenge was staved off in the GOP primaries; the old Republican Party elite still held the reins. But Perot, a businessman like Trump, ran as an independent and received 18.9% of the vote—possibly contributing to Bill Clinton's victory against George H.W. Bush. He spoke to the anxiety the working classes were feeling about losing jobs, income, and status to free trade; unimpeded capital flows; and immigration. Since his time, these anxieties have only been exacerbated. One must acknowledge, perhaps begrudgingly, that Trump acted as a catalyst in the wake of the great recession of 2008–09 and funneled all that pent-up fury into his campaign.

Lasch lamented that market relations penetrated every sphere of life, destroying civic responsibility, and he disdained the fact that money had become the measure of all activities. He thought that the liberal welfare state eroded individual self-reliance; he claimed that the market weakened the family and its role in sustaining a stable social order. In *True and Only Heaven*, he wrote:

I have no intention of minimizing the narrowness and provincialism of lower-middle-class culture; nor do I deny that it has produced racism, nativism, anti-intellectualism, and all the other evils so often cited by liberal critics. But liberals have lost sight of what is valuable in lower-middle-class culture in their eagerness to condemn what is objectionable ... : its moral realism, its understanding that everything has its price, its respect for limits, its skepticism about progress.

He looked upon the family the same way he did the white working class or the populist crowds: He saw in both what he wished rather than what they might actually have thought, felt, or acted upon. He was always a passionate anti-capitalist, opposing in particular the bureaucratic-cum-corporate version of capitalism that relies on a vast managerial class. Public and private bureaucracies alike were, he believed, primarily responsible for creating a culture of dependency and indifference, which ill served a democratic order.

Although Lasch was very good at exposing the educated elites' condescending views toward those they deemed uncouth, the working- and lower-middle classes, he left many questions open. For all his relentless critique of nostalgia, he offered no way to restore the family as the "haven" he thought it was supposed to be in ways that would respond to changes in gender roles, women's participation in the work force, and the marketization of all social relations in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. That failing might tempt some to equate his alarm about the fate of the family with the reactionary proposals of *Project 2025*, by the Heritage Foundation, whose sole purpose appears to be to reestablish control over women. This was not Lasch's point, nor was it his aspiration.

He would have lashed out at the regressive, repressive, and inequalitarian propositions of *Project 2025*. His understanding of the function of the family was not at all the same: On political economy as well as ethics, Lasch stood almost at the opposite of the Heritage Foundation's report. But because his work remained unfinished at his death, he did not have a chance to propose a fuller picture of how to restructure the family for the twenty-first century while maintaining its core attributes in a way that would build a civic culture.

"DOES DEMOCRACY DESERVE TO SURVIVE?"

Such is the title of one of Lasch's essays anthologized in *The Revolt of the Elites*, first written in 1992, and this question remains, or recurs, as the second Trump administration disproves the comforting political notion that America's institutions can hold the line against any assault on liberal democratic principles and practices. We now know better. A determined and unscrupulous executive, combined with a subservient legislature and a Supreme Court ideologically committed to the theory of the unitary executive, can and do forcefully disrupt the balance among the branches of government, trample the rule of law, and weaken democratic norms.

Lasch saw this coming 30 years ago, when he argued: "Liberals have always taken the position that democracy can dispense with civic virtue. According to this way of thinking, it is liberal institutions, not the character of citizens, that make democracy work." And I have no doubt Lasch would say that democracy does deserve to survive. After all, he relentlessly criticized the elites out of anger that they were betraying democracy. He railed against them and their

“revolt,” as he put it, precisely for undermining the democratic ideal, abusing meritocracy, and caring nothing about either income or social inequality. In his anger, though, he downplayed the nature of the potential counter elite—the one that now holds the reins of power in America and is paving the way for an authoritarian and regressive system. Despite his consistent warnings about the power of capitalist classes, Lasch was unable to foresee how a plutocracy could adjust to new circumstances and adopt an inward-looking political, economic, and cultural program.

The real question, though, is one that he posed this way: “For all its intrinsic attractions, democracy is not an end in itself. It has to be judged by its success in producing superior goods, superior works of art and learning, a superior type of character.” It is through this lens that the decline in popular support for democracy in all advanced capitalist democracies ought to be assessed.

The social and political agenda of Trumpism, its intellectual backdrop (including *Project 2025*), and certainly the second Trump administration’s record to date go against the grain of a liberal democratic order. Yet so far, the people whom Lasch, the Midwesterner, championed for their commitment to the civic virtues he cherished—equality, coexistence, constructive political engagement—have failed to show up to defend them.

Time will tell if the calamitous economic consequences of the One Big Beautiful Bill for the poor and the lower-middle classes will lead to a revolt against the plutocracy and a search for a more meaningful democratic system predicated on equality and civic virtues. Now for the stress test. In 1787, Benjamin Franklin was asked, “Well, Doctor, what have we got: a republic or a monarchy?” He famously answered, “A Republic, if you can keep it.”

If you can keep it.

Rethinking Foreign Aid (From the Inside)

ALMUT ROCHOWANSKI

MAY 30, 2024 | THE IDEAS LETTER 17

In 2001, when I was in my 20s, I arrived for my first-ever internship in the picturesque, alluring, but wounded setting of the republic of Georgia. I worked on conflict prevention with the United Nations Development Programme's Georgia office. Conflict prevention was all the rage back then. It was a kind of age of reason. There was a belief that technocratic multilateral operators could make a precise diagnosis of the causes of conflict, would swoop in and apply a set of measures to abate those causes and, *voilà*, no conflict. Less than a decade earlier, Georgia had fought, and lost, two wars with secession-minded ethnic minority communities, which had left a legacy of mass displacement and chronic crisis of statehood. There were more regions inhabited by ethnic minorities, and the conflict prevention template demand required that they be probed for their risk of turning into another such conflict.

I, however, was as green as they come, wide-eyed with awe for international organizations' role in peace, democratic transition, and development in the former Soviet Union. My heart beat faster every time I walked into the U.N. Country House.

I had been instructed to reach out to “everyone” for my research on one of those ethnic minority regions—“everyone” meaning multilateral organizations and local NGOs. They were easy to find. Walking the crumbling streets of the central Vake district in Tbilisi, I noticed how on practically every building there were brass plaques of local NGO offices. They typically had long, ponderous names linking words like “international,” “committee,” “association,” “institute,” “democracy,” “development,” and they seemed to work primarily on researching and documenting the many problems faced by their country, outlining how they thought they should be addressed and offering themselves to take on that role, too.

In a country that veered so close to a failing state, I found conspicuous that this new, peculiar crop of social enterprises radiated energy and effectiveness and that they were already the preferred go-to partners for the same international aid organizations that were also the source of their funding.

My next internship was with an up-and-coming human rights NGO that a few short years later catapulted to the top of the political elite. I got to sit in on local NGOs drawing up campaigns to enlighten the population about women's rights. My initial thrill of being in the thick of civil society work soon gave way to nagging questions. In one meeting I asked "how are you ensuring that this campaign will be seen by women, that it will make an actual difference in their lives?" The women around the table turned their beautiful faces towards me, their large, dark-lashed eyes wide open with incomprehension.

I left Georgia with seeds of doubt in my heart. What does the "develop" in civil society development actually mean? Is it a transitive or an intransitive verb? Does civil society develop, or do *we* develop *it*? Still, I went on to become a full-time civil society professional, working dutifully within the paradigm of international funding for grassroots civil society. I worked in Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Central Asia, and, every once in a while, Georgia. Sometimes, if rarely, I operated within the very heart of this system, as a grant-maker, in charge of large amounts of money at a foundation or a bilateral aid agency, divining who should get it, and who should work on which issues and through what kind of selection process. More often, I was at the margins, pushing and flattering foundations and diplomats in order to pry off some crumbs from the cake for activists in locations—or working on causes—that had not attracted any donors' attention.

More than 20 years down the road, I have been asked to write a personal account set in the greater story about how we all (meaning those of us wielding Western money and thus power) "behaved inappropriately" in Georgia and elsewhere, captured politics and policy-making in poor countries and eventually "corrupted and corroded" them, in the words of a long-term philanthropist leader.

This is a story about foreign-aid and philanthropy's role in shaping civil society sectors in the former Soviet Union during the post-Cold War period, and how foreign money and the interests it represents creeps right into policy-making, politics, democracy, and, ultimately, sovereignty. It echoes dynamics across the

entire Global South or in the very recent, barely digested, past of countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The republic of Georgia, in the news these weeks because of massive protests connected to NGOs and their foreign funding, will be the main case study. The Bildungsroman turns Brechtian here: the Georgian version of this story is so extreme, so overdrawn, that it is almost too on the nose.

Today Georgia is making global news, with the same iconography of every previous decade since the late Soviet era: large crowds of this photogenic people, their expressive features and theatrical passion, wrapped in flags (their own and those of their favored foreign patrons), facing the police on the wide boulevards of Tbilisi. They are protesting, we are told, a law that would require NGOs receiving 20% or more of their funding from abroad to register as “representing the interests of a foreign power.” But Georgians do not trust NGOs and care even less about them, a fact well-established over long years of polling. So those same NGOs had to persuade the public that it is a “Russian law,” which will turn Georgia into Russia and bring the country under Russian domination, ending Georgians’ most fervent dream: joining the E.U. None of this has any basis in fact, although E.U. leaders, to their discredit, have exploited Georgians’ ardent desire for E.U. membership and fueled their fears with vague threats.

Georgia’s story is exceptional, by a wide margin. The country had experienced arguably the steepest fall of any former Soviet republic upon independence. It had been the Florida of the Soviet Union—a gorgeous vacation spot that also had monopolies on producing tea, wine, and citrus and thus black market income, punching above its weight in Soviet Union politics due to the acumen of its leaders, its artists (and by extension all Georgian men) enjoying a Latin lover–like allure among Soviet women. Its nationalist independence movement was one of the most fervent, carried by high hopes for an equally privileged future. Then the country fell into the abyss—two lost separatist wars, hundreds of thousands of refugees, civil war, its GDP dropped by more than half, all within a few short years.

In 1998, Ghia Nodia, a leading public intellectual, wrote a seminal essay about the role foreign patrons had played in Georgians’ visions of state-building, security, and development for centuries. In the 90s, the West and its pipeline projects were expected to bring “parasitic well-being under magnanimous patronage.” Nowhere in the world did the West ever endeavor such a zealous, massive project

of recreating societies in its own image as in the former Soviet Union. More than any other post-Soviet country, Georgia made an early and wholehearted decision to accept foreign funding in all its shapes and forms, with all the outlandish agendas and strings attached. If that meant relinquishing domestic policy-making control across the board to foreigners, it was no problem. In the 1990s, Georgian political elites were too feckless and corrupt, and the country too prostrate, to care about policy anyway.

That corruption and fecklessness meant that by the early 2000s, Edvard Shevardnadze, the wily former Soviet foreign minister who had led the country out of civil and separatist wars a decade earlier, was an utterly spent force in the eyes of Georgians and Western governments alike. A coalition of young former officials and NGOs (including the one I had interned with) prepared to use the 2003 elections, which Shevardnadze predictably rigged, to topple him through street protests.

In the months building up to the Rose Revolution, I witnessed how already powerful Georgian NGOs were treated as a government *in waiting* by their interlocutors in the West. Around conference tables in New York and DC, the notion was normalized that once the change came, Western organizations would play a leading role in reshaping the country. There was a total absence of squeamishness about seizing a controlling stake in a foreign country and micromanaging its fate. Instead, there was rousing unanimity with the brilliant, inspired Georgian activists about what their country needed to be free, just, and prosperous. We would be working hand in glove with them. How could that possibly go awry?

The zealous new crowd that took power by the 2003 Rose Revolution bought wholesale into a vision of adopting the shiny, technocratic solutions proffered by the World Bank and the E.U. of emulating the West and even outdoing it. They were true believers. They said yes not just to the money, but to the ideas and prescriptions, and to outsourcing their implementation to the market—and to NGOs.

When the Rose Revolution came, much as it had been planned, I felt uneasy. At the time, I lacked the words and ideas to express it, though I tried. I realize now that my unease came from seeing just how flattered and tickled the foundations

in the U.S., think tanks in London, and E.U. offices in Brussels were by the whole thing. It was still early days in the post-Cold War period and the end of history still looked like it might be within our grasp. Here was their chance.

Surely, I thought, someone else must share this apprehension? Perhaps someone in a high place, where they ought to have cooler heads? Quite the contrary. The Rose Revolution was seen in Brussels as a fantastic opportunity. But an opportunity for whom, I wondered. They meant for the E.U. and the West, not the Georgian people. Opportunity for what? For turning a country into an experimental policy lab, like a twenty-first century Pygmalion might? For the early stirrings of a geopolitical E.U.? At the first post-revolution donor conference, donors pledged twice as much as the new Georgian government had requested. I have never heard of this happening before or since.

For the next decade, Georgia received some of the highest per capita foreign aid globally. All that money brought thousands of expats, running countless numbers of projects and programs from entire districts of office buildings. It spawned the growth of an enormous local NGO sector. But it did not stop there. During the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili, the salaries of senior government officials were topped up generously by Western donors, including private foundations. This was done quite openly and indeed with pride: The thinking was that if they had a decent income, they could not be corrupted. These practices morphed over the years but were never relinquished entirely. To this day, senior public servants get salary increases from governance projects by international donors or lenders. A donor or lender might have an office right inside a ministry, with nicer furniture and newer computers than the government can afford. Civil servants might move a few doors down the hall into that office and work for that donor for some years, for a bigger paycheck.

At universities, professors' official salaries are symbolic, not enough to allow them to survive. But they can apply for foreign research grants or write needs assessment reports for aid agencies, and in this way achieve a middle-class lifestyle. This is feasible for faculty in the law, economics, or public policy departments, which donors have long prioritized as crucial to a nation's flourishing. If you are a specialist in Georgian musicology, however, no such additional income streams exist. A two-class academia has emerged as a result. Our money has captured public institutions, reshaped them and made them dependent. This has become the new normal.

With Georgia getting so crowded with expats, foreign money, and foreign-led projects after the Rose Revolution, I stepped away, but never entirely. I kept watching, especially how its civil society developed. Occasionally, I engaged, like I might with a high-stakes experiment too gripping to ignore. In drug testing, some subjects get doses calculated to be effective yet safe, while others—the control group—get a placebo. Georgia received a dose of the medicine many times over the estimated healthy dose. It would be unethical to do this in human drug trials. But it is done with rodents, for the sake of science.

I started working on Chechnya, just across the Caucasus range from Georgia. They are polar opposites. After years of horrific wars, Chechnya was firmly within Russia and thus off-limits for foreign-led experiments. It was also brutalized by large-scale human rights violations, isolated from the world; there were no graduates of Western public policy degrees to be found, and only the barest international humanitarian aid coming in. With needs so great and most donors making a wide berth around it, I made it my goal to put the region on the map—on the map of grant-makers, that is. For the longest time, I had no doubt that this was the best and quickest way to address the task at hand: that local activists could get their own funding for work that was essential, life-saving, and often very effective, even though it would have seemed clunky and far from cutting-edge at a conference south of the mountains, in Georgia. There were side-effects to the grant-based model, with its complicated applications, arduous reporting, capricious timelines, and dependencies, but in my mind those paled against the benefits. On the whole, they still do.

Even if foreign funding for Chechen activists was modest in scale and unambitious in content compared to Georgia, the typical distortions appeared quickly. Money—the prospect of money, from faraway, unfathomable benefactors—sets certain inescapable effects in motion.

Urgent, indispensable human rights work needs to be done, and even with all the volunteering we can mobilize, this work cannot be done without money, and there is no other, more sustainable, way to get enough of that money fast enough besides applying for a grant (which, of course, we might not even win). Yet, while we write the proposal, we regret the compromises we are forcing ourselves into, the templates into which we squeeze complex, messy communities, and how it takes us further down a dead-end road of dependency and deformation. I went through this countless times, with activists in Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia,

and Moscow; in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan; in Ukraine and Moldova; in Belarus and Georgia. Despite the enormous differences between these places, the process is always eerily similar.

There will first of all be constituency confusion: when activists begin to perform for their donors, not their communities, they begin to think of themselves as distinct by virtue of that special financial relationship. Once, just a few short years after foreign grants started trickling into Chechnya, in a van ferrying Chechen human rights defenders from the airport of a European capital to a conference venue, the host organization gathered paper boarding pass stubs, a standard way to report to their donor that every activist whose ticket had been paid for had actually shown up. "Had she remembered to hold on to her stub?" the host asked an older woman activist from Chechnya. The activist flashed what was probably intended to be a conspiratorial smile, but came off a little witchy: "Of course I kept the stub! We wouldn't be *human rights defenders* if we didn't know to always hold on to our stubs."

This happened 15 years ago, but it is seared into my brain because at that moment I felt so ashamed. Ashamed for this woman, or rather for the vast, hard power discrepancies that had reduced a formidable, brave activist to such a cringe-worthy moment. The dynamics that had shaped her thinking and sense of self are almost impossible to escape. Money tends to have that effect.

Every one of us who has worked in this field has stories like this. In smoke-filled rooms or around kitchen tables, we roll our eyes at the insanities of the foreign-grant-funded civil society racket. We shake our heads, we groan, we gossip, we snigger, at how greedy and mercenary this or that activist is, how ridiculous and puffed up, how deluded, how unmoored. We cluck our tongues at how high-handed this or that donor is. In our best moments, we have compassion for all of us warped by the logic of money and power.

Money is never just money. It is power incarnate. Like a magnet under a plate of iron shavings, it makes things bend and strain this or that way. It strengthens the institutions that receive it, while those that do not get it wither. Someone far away, for inexorable reasons, decided that classic civil and political rights would get money, but not social or economic rights. Or that LGBT youth get money, but not ethnic minority kids.

For some who receive our money, the process is effortless. They were always in perfect alignment with what the donors wanted and are surprised to find out that others felt unheard, ignored, excluded. Communities are jerked this way and that, some groups lifted up and some left behind, some agendas amplified while others are silenced. And in the end, entire countries are changed beyond recognition without having had much of a say in it or being able to hold anyone accountable for it. This process is traumatic: a perpetual crisis of representation. Those of us who care about power, equality, freedom, and accountability cannot ignore that. We cannot flick a magic wand to make our money lose these terrible powers. It will always have that particular Midas touch.

But if we genuinely feel that we have behaved inappropriately, we—meaning here Western aid agencies and philanthropists—can start by being honest with ourselves. We know that unconstrained and nontransparent political funding erodes our own democracy, even if it comes from domestic sources. Yet we insist that poor countries in the Global South permit unlimited and unregulated foreign funding of their NGOs (whom we often prod away from pedestrian service provision and into ever more political work) and celebrate such permissiveness as a sign of their democratic bona fides. “NGOs fall into a dangerous trap,” William Natrass recently wrote, “if they believe their own freedom to operate without scrutiny is what constitutes democracy. On the contrary, subjecting organizations that influence policy to tough transparency requirements should be par for the course in a democratic society.”

What if the shoe was on the other foot? What if, like in Georgia, more than 90% of our civil society was funded from abroad? Not by Danish grannies holding charitable bake sales, but by governments. Our partners and allies, sure, but immensely more powerful than we are (can we even imagine such a thing?). What if that civil society was paid not just to write our laws and monitor their implementation, but some of its most exposed members claim the right to form a government, without bothering to run in an election first? Would we still be cool about it and accept that it all falls under freedom of association?

Of course not. If our civil societies were being funded to any significant extent from abroad, we would regulate the hell out of it. (In fact, we have already started.) Sovereignty matters. We cannot have democracy and accountability without it.

The institutions that have equated any attempt to regulate foreign funding with a violation of the freedom of association—the Council of Europe, the UN in Georgia (and some UN actors not only in Georgia), international and national NGOs, foreign aid agencies, etc.—all have a manifest conflict of interest: They could not do their work, achieve their objectives, pay the office rent, and their staff could not build careers, if money no longer flowed unimpeded from Western donors to grantees in the Global South. Conspicuously, this new norm derived from the original freedom of association—namely, that by default all cross-border funding for civil society is a right, and no form of regulation is deemed appropriate—has emerged in a context where virtually all such funding goes in one direction: from the West to the Global South, from wealthy and powerful countries to poor and vulnerable ones.

For much of the past 30 years, the rationale for Western capture of Georgia's civil society and our pervasive, intrusive role in governance, politics, culture, and knowledge production was that the country needed help in its transition to democracy. But in recent years and especially in the frenzied debate over the foreign influence law since this crisis first flared over a year ago the tone has been changing: *Georgia will always skew authoritarian. A succession of ruling parties have all turned to the dark side. Democratic institutions remain weak, despite Western donors having spent billions, over decades, on building them. Only NGOs, and only if they have our funding, can serve as a check on power and halt Georgia's descent into authoritarianism. We are in this for good. NGOs flirting with regime change while we fund them is awkward, but then again, they are the Damocles sword we must dangle over the government's neck. For the country's own good.*

I stopped much of my work with grants and grant-makers at the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine to clear my head and think about whether we can ever do this work *appropriately*, and if so, how. A radical critique of our sector starts with truly accepting people and communities in places like Georgia as our equals. This means seeing—really seeing and acknowledging—their capacity for managing their own affairs in their own way. It goes much further than the twee “decentering” we practice, in which a Western donor might forego sitting in the center of the stage, even though they have paid for the stage, the speakers on the stage, the travel and hotel rooms of all the guests—guests that were hand-picked by the donor.

The best I could come up with are things we have been doing all along, if not in Georgia or anywhere in the former Soviet Union, but here at home, where democracy and accountability are real to us. We cannot rid money of its Midas touch, but we can change the dose, like that of any poison. We could set ourselves limits, like never putting more foreign grants into an NGO than it raises at home. We could draw hard red lines at a safe distance from all things politics and governance. We could apply the same standards of sovereignty, autonomy, and dignity to poor, struggling countries that we see as the norm for our own. We could be honest with ourselves. Since we still hold far more power in these relationships, it is up to us. No one can make us do this, except ourselves.

In 2016, at the annual session of the UN's Commission on the Status of Women I sat in on a meeting of women's rights donors. I told the head of an American foundation over coffee about an experiment we had run in Chechnya: Local NGOs could get grants from us, but only if they raised 20% in donations at home. "Wow," the foundation director said, "how fascinating. You know, we always demand a community contribution before we make a grant in the U.S. But we never do this in our grant-making abroad."

Malaparte!

GARY INDIANA

OCTOBER 17, 2024 | THE IDEAS LETTER 26

Curzio Malaparte's desire to be Marcel Proust is among the few undisputed facts about this transigent literary incubus whose singular invention could be called the fictional nonfiction novel. Malaparte's works are Proustian neither in style nor sensibility, but rather, in their author's view, in their "keen sense of *désintéressement*"—evidenced by the fact "that the characters, events, and episodes. . . are bound by a fatality which propels them all toward one end, toward a novelistic denouement." Therefore, Malaparte asseverates, no single protagonist appears in his novels; society itself is the subject: in *The Kremlin Ball*, "the USSR's Marxist nobility" of 1929; in *Kaputt*, the Nazi-fascist administrative elites of Eastern Europe during wartime; in *The Skin*, the devastated society of Naples encountering the victorious, oblivious American armed forces.

True and false, like everything Malapartian: Malaparte the literary virtuoso is joined at the cranium to Malaparte the insufferable egoist, one hand digging deep into poisonous realities with magically addictive prose, the other sculpting the author-narrator into an aloof, often otiose gadfly buzzing around piles of human trash. Malaparte is *always* the protagonist, insofar as his rhetorical flights and intrusions into what he observes keep us constantly aware of his presence.

The irritating quirk percolating through Malaparte's factitiously real-life narratives is not, per se, the exaggeration and distortion of his personal experiences or his occult materialization at monstrous events he did not witness, such as the Iași Pogrom in Romania. Whether he actually saw them or not, his depictions of such atrocities are true to the forensic reality of contemporary barbarism: mangled bodies with their heads blown off, intestines spilling from exploded stomachs, the thick stench of blood and shit and rotting flesh spreading everywhere, corpses piled into mass graves. Malaparte's accounts are valuably graphic in ways that works of history tend to elide with quantifying euphemisms. Like Barbusse, Junger, Celine, and so many other writers of the

last century, Malaparte fought in the first war to end wars (his lungs were permanently damaged by poison gas at the Battle of Bligny). He saw what modern warfare does to human bodies and minds, and exposes his readers to the obscene results—and to the artfully costumed depravity that launches the wars fought in their name. On this score, Malaparte is irreproachable, for the carnage he floodlights as well as his scabrous portraiture—at banquets, balls, golf courses, tennis courts, spas, and regally appointed government offices—of the powerful few enjoying the high life while their conscripted serfs finish up as cannon fodder, often within hearing range of the caviar buffet.

The wine sparkled in the glasses, our faces were suffused with the color of blood, eyes shone merrily, and our voices once again became warm and deep, like the voices of living people. Suddenly we heard the long wail of the alert, followed at once by the barrage of anti-aircraft guns. The mellow beelike hum of the Soviet planes came from over the sea.

"This may seem funny," said Constantinidu in a calm voice, "but I am frightened."

"I'm frightened too," said de Foxa, "and it is not in the least funny."

(Kaputt, p.244)

Almost irreproachable. The flaws in a novel, as the novelist Claire Messud recently observed, are the flaws in the writer. Malaparte's signature defect is an ungovernable effusion of every writer's semi-sublimated wish: to appear exceptional and, in one way or other, slightly more important than other people. For most writers, literary achievement and a modicum of recognition can assuage at least some of their gnawing sense of nonexistence. Malaparte, on the other hand, conceived of himself as a *figure*, and became a writer whose works, unparalleled in so many ingenious ways, were partly contrived to confirm his importance in the world outside his narratives—worse still, his *political* importance.

In scenes of meticulously orchestrated hideousness that otherwise pierce the reader to the bone, Malaparte abruptly plants himself center stage, either to dramatize his superior sang-froid in a crisis or deliver an aria of interminable cogitation.

"Oui, Dieu méprise les hommes," I said. "The Russian people are conscious of this abandonment, this solitude. Man's greatest strength is precisely his consciousness of his abandonment, of his solitude. A man who doesn't feel God's contempt, his abandonment, is not a free man, but a miserable slave. In fact, the enslavement of the European people consists in precisely their conviction that God watches them, helps them, takes care of them, guides them, worries about them like a father worries about his children. Their glory and misery is caused by their belief that God forgives them and inspires them. They mix God into all their smallest matters, their business affairs, their passions, their daily well-being, their happiness and unhappiness. Without their conviction that God helps them, they wouldn't know how to live, struggle, build, hope, be happy, despair. . ."

(The Kremlin Ball, p.126)

This continues for at least another few hundred words. His interlocutor—if she can be called such, as she only utters three brief sentences before Malaparte starts talking—is Madame Kameneva, *Leon Trotsky's sister*, whose husband was hauled off to prison on Stalin's orders a few days earlier. And Malaparte is lecturing *her* on what the Russian people are conscious of.

Malaparte lectures everybody in his books: princes, the Nazi Gauleiter of Poland, American army generals, the President of Finland, Oswald Mosley. What he says, as often as not, evinces unconventional insight, along with a scarily limitless black humor. Framing it as dialogue, especially when addressed to people with far more power than himself, betrays the high degree of surreal artifice at work, and the riskiness of presenting literary *délire* as documentary reality.

He was acquainted with power, intimately; after World War I he served as a press liaison at the Versailles Conference, then held diplomatic posts in Belgium and Poland; he was young, bullishly handsome, erudite, gifted with languages, and possibly the most adroit social climber of his era. Before he turned 30 he knew almost everyone bearing a title in Europe, or knew enough gossip about them to pretend he did. How he happened to travel through the exalted social realms he mined for bizarre material is no mystery. The mystery is why the character named Malaparte in his novels always delivers the sharpest lines, and usually gets the final word in every conversation, when a writer so surpassingly dexterous in other respects should certainly know when to shut up.

I spoke to her of Paris. Of the city's gray and turquoise colors, of the autumnal pinks, the golden leaves of the marronniers, the horse chestnuts along the Seine, of the mist that rises in the evenings along the river, of the leaves crackling beneath the feet of passers-by, of the Tuileries Gardens.

"Tell me about the Place Vendôme," Madame Lunarcharskaya said.

I spoke to her of the Place Vendôme, of the harmonious silence of the Place Vendôme, of its gray stone color, that same gray-blue of the "pietra serena," the sandstone of Florence. I spoke to her of the Place Vendôme where there is nothing to suggest nature, no trees, grass, flowers, water, where everything is human, an entirely cerebral humanity like a Racine poem or a Cartesian idea.

...

"Tell me about Giraudoux," Madame Lunacharskaya said.

I spoke to her of Jean Giraudoux....

(The Kremlin Ball, pp.15-16)

And so on. During his spells of verbal overkill, other characters, including the most worldly and perspicacious—all actual persons, identified by their real names—are dumbstruck by his audacious candor, his cutting wit, his bravery, his morbid pranks, his intricate knowledge of everything from the zazous of 1940 Paris to the pleats in a Schiaparelli gown. If he had had nothing less trivial to recount, he might have become a chaste version of Henry Miller.

As a fictional character, Malaparte might be more dimensional, and more fun, if these books were written in the third person. He could still have been called Malaparte; the reader would situate him on the same plane as the other characters, and view him with the same curiosity. Witold Gombrowicz accomplished this, in more obviously fictional works, even in the first person form. But Gombrowicz was shrewd enough to make "Gombrowicz" and "Witold" far more perverse, sinister, and feckless than the author himself. Gombrowicz accepted the meaningless chaos of existence, and understood the arbitrary nature of the forms human beings impose on it—religions, social systems, moral doctrines—in the manner of spiders spinning webs.

Malaparte was a more splintered, equivocating personality. He lacked any firm convictions, but repined for certainty of some worldly or unworldly sort, a durable belief system to curtain off the void. He willed himself into one ideological stance after another, in a struggle against the intolerable recognition that he could not believe in anything except the certainty of death. The tension of this conflict intermittently rescues him from rhetorical banality. His intent is more confused, and confusing, than Gombrowicz's ever could have been. Malaparte's infernal "I" that spills all over the place in his writing aims past a strictly literary audience, at a political constituency: before and during part of World War II, he stayed within fascist propriety while gingerly testing it, not because he opposed it per se, but because he felt uniquely exempt from the oppression of everyone else. Later, he distanced himself from any association with fascism, presenting his complicity as a highly rarefied form of opposition. In this regard, *The Skin* is both an indelible depiction of humanity in ruins and a self-serving, recuperative dossier aligning him with the Allied forces in Naples. He apparently thought switching sides before the war ended had a retroactive cleansing effect, and felt bitter resentment when people with long memories failed to congratulate him. *Diary of a Foreigner in Paris* records Malaparte's postwar encounters with Camus and others who gave him the cold shoulder when he repaired to France in 1947 to escape the purge of fascists in Italy; he paints his transparent opportunism in valorizing colors, and impugns the good faith of anyone who was not compromised. After a snub from Mauriac, he writes:

Ultimately, none of this concerns me personally. I'm a foreigner, I'll play the foreigner. I feel weighing on my head the reproach that can be made against my country's policies, for which I am not responsible. It's not my fault if Mussolini declared war against France, if he behaved badly toward France. I think that certain foreigners who came to Rome before the war to pay homage to Mussolini are rather more responsible than the Italians, who had no choice.

(Diary, p.16)

Malaparte was jailed four times between 1938 and 1943. These very brief confinements did not prevent him from junketing all over Nazidom as a journalist in the early years of the war, sometimes wearing an Italian military uniform. Gramsci (who wrote of Malaparte that "to achieve success he was capable of

any infamy") spent *eleven years* in Mussolini's prisons, and became so ill in them that he died before his release date. It is appalling to find passages like this in Malaparte's postwar books:

The author remembers that during the tyranny of Mussolini and Hitler he suffered for a long time in fascist prisons—but nonetheless the experience did not induce him to make a career of being a martyr for freedom, a profession that is these days very advantageous with a guaranteed return.

(The Kremlin Ball, p.8)

Even a week in jail *feels* like a long time, of course. But who *can* he be slagging in that last phrase? Robert Desnos? Walter Benjamin? Jacques Decour? Bruno Schulz? Irene Némirovsky? Anne Frank, possibly? Wait, no, of course: he means Mauriac, Camus, and other French resistance writers he had met on friendlier terms in the '30s.

It is possible that Malaparte was unwontedly snared into politics when his first book, *Viva Caporetto!* (later retitled *The Revolt of the Cursed Saints*) appeared in 1921. (Malaparte was not yet Malaparte, but published it under his original name, Kurt Erich Suckert.) *Viva Caporetto!* is a book-length pamphlet defending the Italian soldiers who mutinied after a chlorine-arsenic attack during the Battle of Caporetto. They knew their gas masks, shoddily manufactured by war profiteers, would only protect them for two hours, and sensibly fled. Suckert/Malaparte heaps execration on the army leadership for its treatment of infantry soldiers; on corrupt, indifferent civilians; on incompetent political elites. As William Hope writes in his incisive *Curzio Malaparte: The Narrative Contract Strained*, *Viva Caporetto!*'s "main thrust was a radically new interpretation of the Caporetto revolt as a proletarian uprising against social injustice, a thesis that was bound to alienate the patriotism of bourgeois, civilian readers." In fact, it alienated everybody. Windows of bookshops displaying it were smashed. The book was confiscated by Liberal government ministers and, in an unusual display of unanimity, also attacked by the right-wing press.

Neither Malaparte's war experience nor the reception of his first book instilled any pacifistic sentiments. Malaparte was spellbound by violence—he reputedly fought sixteen duels over a thirty-year period—as an expression of masculinity,

a lever for social disruption, an immutable fact of human life, or simply relief from boredom. In his personal life, when he had one, he seems to have been a relatively easy person to get along with, reclusive and bookish; perhaps he simply understood that war, bloodshed, and degradation were literary gold, and posing as a stolid political swami was a great way to get publicity.

He later lied about marching on Rome with Mussolini's mob in 1922, but he really did support Il Duce after the murder of Matteotti, leader of the Socialist Party, in 1924. He barely knew Mussolini, who supposedly detested him, but sometimes claimed to be one of the dictator's close advisors. Malaparte did have social connections to Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law; Ciano was an authentic Count, and part of the *beau monde* Malaparte felt comfortable in.

Malaparte remained a mercurial, unenthusiastic Fascist Party member through the '20s, producing novels, poems, and stories imbued with the pastoral lyricism of the anti-urban, back-to-the-farm Strapaese wing of the fascist movement, at the same time publishing articles and editing journals supporting the opposite, pro-industrializing faction. He took himself seriously, but little else.

The Matteotti affair, which could have ended Mussolini's political existence but instead tightened his grip on power, has a legible connection to *The Kremlin Ball*. The Liberal senator Alfredo Frassati had been owner and editor of *La Stampa*, the Turinese daily newspaper and one of Italy's oldest, since 1895. After publishing investigative reports on Matteotti's assassination, Frassati was pressured to sell the paper to Giovanni Agnelli, the Fiat magnate, who "fascisized" *La Stampa* as per Mussolini's ukase (or fiat, if you like). In February, 1929, Agnelli appointed Malaparte, who fiercely lobbied for the job, as editorial director of the newspaper.

A mere three months later, Malaparte travelled to Moscow as a correspondent, and began filing articles on the state of things in the USSR. (He may also have been furthering Agnelli's business interests in Russia.) *The Kremlin Ball*, written in fits and starts between 1948 and 1950, recounts Malaparte's experiences during this visit. Thanks to Maurizio Serra's 2011 biography, we now know that Malaparte stayed only a month in Moscow, in May-June 1929. His dispatches ran at widely-spaced intervals in *La Stampa*, however, creating the illusion that Malaparte remained in Russia, or returned there regularly, until late December. He had a squidlike instinct to cloud his movements. It helped turn his life into fiction.

What a fertile month it must have been: Malaparte squeezed two books from it: *Intelligenza di Lenin* (1930), a collection of his *La Stampa* articles, and *Le Bonhomme Lénin* (1932), a badly sourced, deflationary biography: entertaining, spirited, and utterly specious. It became popular for a time.

Between these Lenin volumes, Malaparte published *Coup d'Etat: The Technique of Revolution*, which became an international best-seller. A repetitive, lucid tract, it lays out the formula for successful insurrections ("capture of all strategic points in the town and province. . . the vital centers of technical organization—gas and electricity works, general Post Offices, telephone and telegraph exchanges, bridges, railway stations."). Given the instability of the times and the book's chapter subjects ("Trotsky vs. Stalin," "Primo de Rivera and Pilsudski," "Mussolini," etc.) its success was predictable. As in his Lenin biography, Malaparte credits Trotsky's tactical skills with the success of the October Revolution, disparaging Lenin as an ineffectual, bourgeois strategist. The chapter on Mussolini describes the cultural propaganda surrounding him as "the summit of bad taste," while Mussolini himself is examined with cautious but less than adoring scrutiny.

In this period of foreseeable entente between Fascist Italy and the ascendent German Nazis, titling the final chapter "A Woman: Hitler," was a fraught provocation. Malaparte writes that Adolf H. "is a weak man who takes shelter in violence, so that he may conceal his lack of energy, his unexpected failings, his morbid egoism, and his clumsy pride. . . There is something confused, equivocal, something morbidly sexual in Hitler's opportunistic tactics ... and in his hatred of every form of individual freedom and dignity."

Calling Hitler a woman was a supreme insult to fascist machismo, a mindset Malaparte shared to an extent, along with its homophobia and anti-Semitism. Malaparte does not entirely dehumanize the victims of fascism in his novels. By his own lights, he treats them sympathetically. His lights are none too bright, however, and the objects of his sympathy conform to derisive stereotypes. He means no harm to the brutalized people he sees, but has not the faintest idea how they see him, strutting about with their murderers. It is somehow more appalling that so many of the horrors Malaparte depicts are his own invention, and invented solely to show himself in a flattering light. His visit to the Warsaw ghetto in *Kaputt*—one of numerous hideous fictions debunked over time—is an outstanding example of Malaparte's cavalier use of other people's suffering to

burnish his image. Another is a strategically placed, adventitious scene in *Diary of a Foreigner in Paris* where Malaparte rescues a Jew who collapsed in the street while indifferent Parisians promenade around him.

Malaparte's relationship with Agnelli went south, as his editorship of *La Stampa*, as William Hope puts it, "was decidedly unorthodox," particularly in the newspaper's "extensive coverage. . . given to the strikes and industrial unrest which swept across France and Belgium in the aftermath of the Wall Street Crash." Agnelli fired him in 1931. (Two years later, Malaparte commenced a long affair with Virginia Bourbon del Monte, the wife of Agnelli's son Edoardo; after Edoardo's plane crash death in 1935, the lovers planned to marry, but the Agnelli family threatened to take Virginia's seven children away if they did.)

Counter to Malaparte's version of things, it is unlikely that his expulsion from the Fascist Party in 1933, and his sentencing to five years of exile on the island of Lipari, had much to do with the publication of *Coup d'Etat*. It is probable that Mussolini never read it, though Malaparte avowed that the dictator kept an open copy on his desk with several passages thickly underlined. He also put it about that Hitler himself, enraged by the book, had demanded the author be thrown into prison.

The prevailing consensus is that Malaparte was banished for defaming Italo Balbo, Italy's Air Minister, on the basis of a private letter Malaparte sent from Paris to Nello Quilici, the editor of *Corriere Padano*, a publication Balbo happened to own. The Balbo contretemps has remained a murky business ever since it happened. Balbo's biography refers twice to Malaparte as Balbo's friend, and later mentions the letter to Quilici, but says nothing about the defamation charge, or Malaparte's exile. Purportedly, Malaparte accused Balbo of corruption, which was probably true, and also insinuated that Italy's beloved aviator (who later died in Libya, when his plane was mistaken for a British bomber and shot down by his own anti-aircraft squad) was plotting a coup to depose Mussolini. That probably was not true.

After a year on sulfurous, volcanic Lipari, through his ties with Count Ciano, Malaparte was allowed to move to more resort-like Ischia, then to even plushier Forte de Marmi in Tuscany, conveniently near Villa Agnelli, where his paramour lived.

I would love to just skip World War II, except to note that, after a brief remobilization to the Alpine Franco-Italian front, Malaparte moved about freely in Axis-occupied Eastern Europe as a journalist, though he frequently did so while wearing his Italian officer's uniform. (It is improbable that he would have been given this unusual liberty if Hitler had ever heard of *Coup d'Etat*.) Malaparte reported from the German army's battle lines in Ukraine, Russia, Romania, Belorussia; he spent time away from the front in Poland, Croatia, Finland, and Norway, hobnobbing with the upper crud of the Master Race. The bulk of his frontline reporting, which contains some of Malaparte's most sensitive writing and strikes no fictional-sounding notes, is collected in *The Volga Rises in Europe*. Much of what he did not report—mass killings of Jews, arbitrary executions of Russian civilians, a basket of human eyes delivered to Ante Pavelic, the Croatian dictator—found its way into *Kaputt*.

In an afterword to the NYRB edition of *Kaputt*, Dan Hofstadter reports that Lino Pellegrini, a young journalist who was Malaparte's driver during his wartime travels, "recalled that the first part of *Kaputt* was originally drafted with the conviction that Hitler would win the war. . . . Later, seeing how the wind was blowing, Malaparte rewrote the manuscript."

This should be appalling, probably, but the quiddity of Malaparte is such that it also seems hilarious, consistent with the absence of moral inflection that gives Malaparte's work its macabre comedic drift. For despite the dire, desperate, atrocious situations Malaparte conjures up in his books, his narrative poker face, his unexcited stare at things that should be unbelievable but really are not at all, transmit a repulsive but irresistible sense of cosmic absurdity. Pellegrini's disclosure unravels Malaparte's dramatic introduction to *Kaputt*, "The History of a Manuscript," the exciting saga of a secretly written exposé of Nazi insanity, parts of it dispersed across Europe via diplomatic confederates, some chapters sewn into the lining of the author's coat by a Russian peasant girl, its final chapters secreted in the double soles of his shoes. This tale is diverting as a straight preface, but finding out it is bullshit raises it almost to the level of genius.

The Return of the Future and the Last Man

AN INTERVIEW WITH IVAN KRASTEV

CARLOS BRAVO REGIDOR

DECEMBER 12, 2024 | THE IDEAS LETTER 30

Carlos Bravo Regidor: *The year 2024 is coming to an end and it might be fitting to kick off this conversation by asking you about its significance—not necessarily in terms of what is to follow, but rather in terms of what has happened and what it means retrospectively. How would you assess 2024 in light of where we were coming from and where it leaves us?*

Ivan Krastev: 2024 is certainly going to be remembered as a turning point. When the year started, everybody was pointing at its unusual combination of wars and elections. And there was this sense of change, of something ending and something else starting, and that was felt everywhere. But the strongest sign of the fact that we're living in a moment of radical change is not what we're discussing about the future; it's what we're discussing about the past. If you look at 2024 and you go back to the debates about what happened in, for example, 1989, you'll see how different that conversation is today. Because, in a certain way, it's not simply about this cliché that the post-Cold War world was ending: It's more about how we've realized there was always something about it, something more, that we weren't ready to see. And now we are.

Today we see 1989 as something more than the fall of the Berlin Wall; it was about the massacre at Tiananmen Square, too. So, it meant not only the end of communism in Europe, but also the resilience of communism in China, which has turned out to be quite important, perhaps even more important, historically. And 1989 was significant for radical Islam: It was that year that for the first time an Islamist country defeated a superpower. In fact, a 2019 survey conducted by the Levada Center, an independent pollster, asked Russians what was for

them the most important thing that happened in 1989, and most answered not elections in Poland, not Tiananmen, not the Berlin Wall, but the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. That wasn't about the end of communism; it was about Moscow losing its superpower mystique.

And 1989 very much marked a nationalistic moment. In Yugoslavia, it was then that Milosevic delivered his famous speech in Kosovo, essentially telling the Serbs that he was there to defend them.

The major story about 1989 we got used to was that we were sure about the direction in which the world was going, on which side history was supposed to be. This was based on a certain understanding of democracy, of liberalism, of the international constellation of hegemonic power and so forth. But looking at this from 2024, we now know that story isn't relevant anymore. The only thing we know today is how fast things are changing, including our past. We can't be sure about direction anymore; we can only be sure about speed. The late Eric Hobsbawm used to talk about the "short 20th century," referring to the period from 1914 to 1989; well, in 2024 we are witnessing the end of the *long* 20th century.

CBR: *Ten years ago, you published Democracy Disrupted: The Politics of Global Protest (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), a book about the spread of massive protests all over the world. You interpreted those protests as genuine articulations of discontent and distrust but argued they were lacking an actual political project. In your formulation, they ended up being about "participation without representation"; they were an unequivocal rejection of the status quo yet offered no vision of an alternative future. Actually, the whole 2010s were a decade of massive social mobilization, but, alas, they didn't produce a more democratic nor a more egalitarian world. Why not? What, then, was the legacy of that decade of contestation without imagination?*

IK: When we talk of 2024 retrospectively, of going back and revisiting the importance of certain things, we surely have to discuss the 2010s as a decade of strong social movements. Some people might not remember this, but it all started with the Arab Spring, which then became a global phenomenon; people took to the streets almost everywhere. What happened was a very strange yet strong articulation of a certain post-2008 financial crisis sensibility, after trust in capitalism was shattered. Nevertheless, these movements didn't make a claim for power: People were protesting but they rejected having any political leaders.

In a way, the protests were about the experience of protesting itself, about the performance or the pedagogy of changing society by just going out there. Nobody really put a claim on power; nobody said “I want to govern” or “I will govern differently” or anything like that. The demonstrators’ demands were much more modest than the size of their crowds.

Another important aspect of these protests was that they were, in many countries, kind of a middle-class thing; quite a lot of educated people took part in them. There was also a very strong generational dimension to them. Both their middle-class nature and the fact that they were articulated in the language of youth culture explain, at least partially, why these movements never claimed power. But being born of distrust, they were also defeated by distrust, because if you aren’t ready to trust and delegate, you cannot govern.

Finally, one of the major stories about this kind of mass mobilization, at least in my view, is that authoritarian leaders then used them to try to consolidate their power. People went on the streets to say, “We are the society!” and these leaders responded, “I am the majority!” This was very much what Erdogan did, for instance, when he went up against the Gezi Park protesters in 2013. It’s also a clue that Putin’s decision to invade Crimea in 2014 should be understood as a response to the middle-class protests in Moscow of 2011-12.

CBR: *Was that, in a certain way, Putin’s own idiosyncratic interpretation of an Occupy movement?*

IK: Totally! Yet it appears that the problem with the protest movements was that they were occupying but they were not *annexing*.

CBR: *When I finished reading Democracy Disrupted, I was left with the impression that certain kinds of protests in certain circumstances might end up working against democracy. But in Is It Tomorrow Yet? Paradoxes of the Pandemic (Allen Lane, 2020), your book about Covid-19, you make a very forceful argument about how the pandemic threatened democratic politics on a very essential level because “democracy cannot function if people have to stay indoors”—meaning that there is no democracy when there can’t be street protests. How have your ideas about the value of street action and its relationship to democracy evolved since you published those books?*

IK: I've always believed that protests are extremely consequential for people to actually *feel* that they live in a democracy. You see, elections matter not simply for what they represent, but also for what they don't represent. They represent the interests, the values, and so on of the voters, but they don't represent *intensity*. You might have very strong feelings about something, I might not, but each of us has a vote. So, the best way to show how much one cares about certain things is not through the ballot but on the streets. Particularly if you're trying to convey the significance of something, want to put on the public agenda certain issues that are not the preoccupation of the majority of the population, protests are critically important. Intensity is also a signal to policymakers that they cannot rely on elections alone, that voting is not enough for democratic governance, and that some people are ready to take a risk and come out because of the strength of their beliefs—willing to break certain rules, occupy a space, etc.

Protests can be energizing. They can push governments to do things that otherwise they wouldn't do. But they can also become an excuse that governments can take advantage of, an excuse to deploy authoritarian measures that would otherwise seem illegitimate to those people who are not on the streets. So, in a sense, protests make clear the choices that governments face. Are those governments going to use the protests as a way to rejuvenate democracy, to strengthen the people's feeling that their voice matters? Or will governments use them as a pretext to silence the opposition and destroy a democratic regime? Both options are there; which one is chosen very much depends on the context and the leaders in power.

CBR: *In Is It Tomorrow Yet? You wrote that the change Covid-19 was bringing about wasn't a new version, either authoritarian or democratic, of the "end of history," but a less ideological and more unstable future. Among the many paradoxes you discussed in that book, there are two in particular that I would like to examine with the benefit of hindsight.*

One is the paradox that we were eager to return to normality but would discover it was impossible to. Yet, four years after, it seems that the page has been turned and that a certain normalization has taken quite a strong hold, fueled not so much by a nostalgia of the world as we knew it before but by a neurotic effort to forget about the pandemic as much as we can. It's like a paradox upon a paradox: No matter how disruptive that experience was, today we try to live as if it just hadn't happened.

IK: Yes, I agree. But, let me tell you something: That book was written very early on during the pandemic. I've always believed that situations like that, pandemics or wars, are like love—you either write a book at the start or when it's over; in the middle, things are just too muddy. I'm grateful for your question because it allows me to revisit the impact of the pandemic, the strange ways in which it was transformative, and the intuition that we're going to have more and more experiences like that one in the future.

To begin with—and this is something I write in the book—we should recall that probably more people died from the 1918 influenza (some estimates say 50 million people but others as many as 100 million) than during World War I (16 million–17 million) or World War II (60 million). Between just 1918 and 1920, what was long called the “Spanish flu” may have killed just as many people, or even more, than both wars taken *together*. Yet nobody remembers it and everybody remembers the wars. And I mean not only regular people but also historians: As Laura Spinney describes in her superb history of the period (*Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World*, PublicAffairs, 2017), a search in one of the largest library catalogues (WorldCat) found about 80,000 books on World War I in more than 40 languages but hardly 400 about the “Spanish Flu” and in just five languages. Why? Well, maybe because it's hard to turn a pandemic into a good story: It seems like such a random thing; it lacks a plot and a moral. During a pandemic, death becomes sort of meaningless, even undignified: There is nothing heroic in it; many people die without a proper funeral. It's strange, moreover, because you don't even know exactly who to blame for those deaths. So, in a certain way, it isn't so surprising that we just tend to not remember. We cannot know how people will remember or forget Covid in the end, but my guess is that at least in Ukraine or Gaza the pandemic has already vanished from the memory of the people destroyed by war.

My major argument now, looking back, about the Covid-19 pandemic is different. Because even if we forget it, the pandemic had major impacts in three different political ways. I would even argue that its legacy was critically important for Trump's second victory in the United States.

The first impact was that when the Covid-19 pandemic started, some key differences between democracies and authoritarian regimes disappeared. Almost everybody was doing the same thing. Lockdowns, masks, this and that—suddenly

governments acted like governments, no matter the kind of regime. And I believe this blurring of the distinction between democracy and authoritarianism is something that has stayed. I've always liked making comparisons and contrasts, but now they're becoming increasingly complicated to make. Do you recall that US Supreme Court justice, Potter Stewart, who famously said that pornography was hard to define but, "I know it when I see it"? Well, I believe that with authoritarianism these days it's just the opposite: It's easy to define, but are we sure we recognize it when we see it?

The second impact of Covid was that, on the one hand, people suddenly discovered that they need a government and, on the other hand, governments showed they can care for the people. Many countries turned the pandemic into another Great Depression or a warlike project. The United States under Joe Biden is a great example. It had a classic F.D.R. moment: There was a major transformation in all sorts of policies, stimulus, regulations, huge public investments; people were willing to tolerate high levels of spending and so on—all of this was very much justified by fear of the virus and the scale of the crisis. But three or four years later, people's thinking is now going back; they think these measures were excessive, partly because of the rise in inflation that resulted. Besides, some major groups—particularly those working in the informal sector—were quite angry even back then about the prolonged lockdowns and felt they weren't really taken care of. I believe some of the Latinos in the U.S. who used to support the Democrats but now vote for Trump might be doing so because of that. Perhaps in the past they saw this kind of more interventionist state as an ally, but in 2024 they might be seeing it more as an obstacle.

And this extends beyond the United States. I was talking to a colleague in Argentina and he was claiming that the lockdown experience was one of the reasons young people supported Milei in the last election. Because they felt they had had to deal with many restrictions but hadn't received enough help. In general, when the pandemic started, everybody focused on older people, senior citizens, because the risk for them was much higher, right? Well, now that the pandemic is over many young people probably see themselves as its main victims: because of the closing of schools, the lost job opportunities, and also because of the social isolation—all that time they ended up spending in front of their screens made them much lonelier. These sorts of backlashes against government intervention are quite important to understanding the legacy of the Covid experience.

The pandemic's third main impact was a profound shift in political identities, ranging from the left to the right. There was a softening or mixing up of standard ideological distinctions, centered around a strong articulation of mistrust toward the state, toward anything coming from the government. A culture of suspicion arose that has cut across the normal cleavages and has opened a space allowing people to change where they stand politically. What happened with Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is a good example of this. Naomi Klein touches on something critically important in that regard in her latest book, *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World* (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2023): Suddenly the border between fringe and mainstream thinking collapsed. There is a surprising readiness, in the current intellectual environment, to buy into any type of conspiracy theory. Mistrust has become the default option; only the naïve now trust what they are told by the government. Which makes the advent of the so-called post-truth, fake news, and all of that much more important. It's not only about supply; there is demand, too. For some people the easiest way to deal with a conspiracy theory is to buy into another conspiracy theory.

I'm always going to remember a story a friend of mine, a Bulgarian living in the U.S., told me about this. During the pandemic, she was in a hospital waiting room and a woman started saying to her, "You shouldn't get a vaccine; those who are vaccinated will be chipped." She was referring to the infamous conspiracy theory targeting Bill Gates about vaccines being used to implant Microsoft tracking chips into people. My friend, who happens to be married to a doctor, was tired and didn't have the time nor the disposition to have any kind of normal conversation with this person, and so she told her: "Yes, there is a conspiracy, but you're getting it wrong. Everybody who doesn't get vaccinated is going to die. There are too many people in the world, a decision was taken to reduce the population, so only those who get the vaccine will survive." The woman looked at her and replied, "I knew there was something behind this! OK, you're right, I'll get vaccinated." Many people are now willing to believe almost anything they are told if it isn't coming from the traditional communication channels. And they can easily shift from one conspiracy theory to another, and move from the left to the right. It doesn't really matter: What remains constant is the lack of trust in mainstream institutions.

CBR: *The second big pandemic paradox that I want to touch on is about protectionism gaining momentum globally. You already saw that coming in Is it Tomorrow Yet?—and you were wary. Because in this day and age, as you wrote, "nationalism is economically*

unsustainable," but also, if the world is really going protectionist, you warned, effective protectionism is possible only on a larger, regional or even continental, level.

In Mexico, for instance, there are a lot of expectations regarding nearshoring as the most viable option to ride out the new wave of protectionism within the North American space, that is, in partnership with the United States and Canada. But some American and Canadian leaders have already signaled reluctance about that, scolding Mexico for potentially becoming a sort of Trojan horse for Chinese goods and influence in North America. They are not substantiating their allegations; still, this calls Mexico's geopolitical belonging into question, which is quite an unprecedented move. And in Europe, protectionism doesn't mean strengthening the borders between European countries; it means strengthening the outward borders of the European Union. That might make some sense economically, perhaps, but the problem is that even as the politics of neoprotectionism become more popular, they are still formulated in a rather national or nationalistic framework. So what would a political path for deglobalization through regional protectionism look like?

IK: This is a very interesting question, because the answer is very different from region to region. Strengthening the external borders of the European Union has indeed become a kind of a new consensus, but the situation is very complicated because Europe needs immigrants given the aging of its population. Its borders cannot be totally closed. Perhaps the story isn't about opening or closing those borders but about changing their nature. Still, a decision will need to be made about who is going to be let in and who isn't. Other places, like China, are so big that, in a certain way, they are more like a continent than a country. Same with India. Mexico is in a sort of intermediate position: It's a big country but very close to the United States, so its opening or closing depends on the Americans. Besides, Mexico has become a transit country.

Strangely enough, at the same time that there is all this new talk about protectionism, geographies are changing. I was recently following Brazil's idea of developing new infrastructure to make it much easier and cheaper for Chinese goods to come to Brazil and also Latin America. Because protectionism doesn't mean that you're simply going to create some regional economy; you're also probably going to change the infrastructure of your regional economy to work with others. So, here's a paradox. On one level, of course, countries want to protect themselves, improve their industries, secure their production, etc. But on another

level, the very meaning of sovereignty in today's world is about having options. Before, the major story was about which side you were on; during the Cold War, the choice was between the Americans or the Soviets. Nowadays, in order to signal how important you are, you need to show that you can be part of any number of possible alliances, and maybe several at once. Turkey is a great example of this. It's a NATO member, it wants to join the EU, but Erdogan also went to Kazan to take part in the latest BRICS summit. The more clubs you belong to, the more you can convince your own population that you have agency in the world.

Moreover, one of the things that has happened in recent years—and this is quite interesting—is that the question of who is a given country's largest trading partner, or where most of that country's foreign investment comes from, doesn't say much about its geopolitical loyalties. That main partner is probably going to be China or the U.S., here and there, but that doesn't mean the country is aligned or allied with them. The thing that best predicts the geopolitical loyalties of a state is which other states it's sharing data with—that, in many ways, is the most important fact. And this points to a much bigger story about technological walls. Tell me what kind of technology you use and I will tell you where you stand geopolitically. Is it American or Chinese? Are you allowing Huawei to be part of your national telecom system or not? There's the traditional story about protectionism—industrial policy, trade, tariffs, and so on—which is very easy to see. But that might not be where the core geopolitical competition lies, because today's walls are less visible than those during the Cold War.

And there are many uncertainties. For example, Trump says he wants to impose 60 percent tariffs on Chinese goods. Many people are asking themselves if he's really going to do it, or if he's just bluffing, or if he's trying to improve his position at the negotiation table. The same has happened many times with Putin's threats, too. I believe the best way to understand this sort of leaders is to take them at their word. Putin told us that he was going to invade Ukraine, we didn't believe him, and he did. I think Trump is basically telling us what he wants to do. So, if he does do it, what happens next? The Chinese will probably look for other markets in strategic places, like Mexico, perhaps even by trying to use the framework of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement in their favor. Suddenly, then, Trump's tariffs could cause a more aggressive global China, which is going to be more political than before. If the Chinese are expelled from parts of the U.S. market and forced to look elsewhere to sell their products, they will ensure they

have enough influence to prevent non-Western countries from adopting anti-China tariffs. Because if the Chinese are going to increase their investments in places like Mexico, believe me, they aren't going to be indifferent about who governs there. Chinese mercantilism will turn much more openly political. In my view, China's growing investments in Mexico, and its growing trade with Latin America, are the most serious challenges that the United States has faced as a regional power. They can dramatically increase tensions and can affect not only the economy but also the politics of countries like Mexico.

Protectionist politics are now perceived as legitimate policy by different players. Yet they are harder to put in practice for smaller countries than for bigger ones. But even those who believe they can afford them don't know what the unintended long-term consequences will be. And I mean that not only in economic terms, regarding production and prices and so on, but also in terms of political power, of geopolitical loyalties.

CBR: *Something I find fascinating reading your work is how you develop a truly global perspective and yet always remain anchored in your Eastern European experience. This is particularly salient in books like *After Europe* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017) or *The Light That Failed* (Pegasus Books, 2019), coauthored with Stephen Holmes, where that perspective is placed front and center, very explicitly, in how you interpret phenomena like the politics of the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe or the debacle of liberal democracies all over the world. How would you characterize the intellectual intention of that perspective?*

IK: I appreciate that question because for me, regardless of where anyone has been or what they've read, their view of the world is very much shaped by concrete time and concrete space. And this is particularly true when you go through moments of major transformation. I'm an East European of a very particular generation: I was 25 years old in 1989, and one of the things that is always going to stay with me from that moment is the sense of how fast things can change.

Eastern Europe is one of the most Eurocentric places in the world, much more so than Western Europe. Eastern European countries never were imperial; they suffer none of that guilt. In fact, East European countries were born out of the disintegration of three continental colonial empires—Ottoman, Habsburg, and Russian—and so we basically carry this kind of anti-imperialist, anticolonial

legacy; that's how our nation states were built. At the same time, all the models we have are very much European.

Moreover, in the 1960s and 70s Eastern Europe was perceived as quite important for some newly independent countries. It's no accident that one of the greatest reporters of the anticolonial revolution of that period was the Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski. Because he knew two things that were crucial for the world at that moment. Being a leftist Pole, he knew something about revolutions, but as a Pole who lived under the Soviet Empire, he also knew something about imperialism. It's kind of instructive that he wrote, on the one hand, all these books about different types of anticolonial revolutions, all these chronicles that start with him taking a plane, then landing somewhere and telling a story. On the other hand, his last book, *Imperium* (Vintage, 1995) was not about him going somewhere abroad; it was about the Soviet Union coming to his country.

After 1989, Eastern Europe was also crucial in Western discourse. The “end of history” arrived in Eastern Europe in a very peculiar way. In the classical liberal story of the post-Cold War period, what happened in Eastern Europe then was also going to happen in many places at some point. On the eve of 1991, some believed that there were two types of countries in the world: The majority, like Poland, where democracy could grow from the grassroots, and the others, like Iraq, where democracy would have to be sown with the help of the U.S. Air Force. From that point of view, there was a certain universalization of the East European experience—but the West got that wrong, because most of the world was not like Eastern Europe.

Finally, I believe that Eastern Europe was oddly well prepared to understand the promises and failures of European societies that followed, and we were probably better able to grasp certain things that have happened in other places since, including in the United States. When in 2016 some people started saying that they didn't understand Trump, I realized I had no problem understanding what he represented. After he won, the same people said that they didn't know what he was going to do, and again, I sort of did. Why? Because I had seen this phenomenon before as an East European. Even though Eastern Europe totally lost its geopolitical centrality for anybody who wasn't interested in Europe, I have the feeling that our history has a certain type of heuristic value. Besides, I've never believed that I can see the world with anything other than

Eastern European eyes anyway: My point of view is very much rooted in my experience coming from a small village in a small East European country, from the periphery of the periphery

CBR: *In The Light that Failed*, co-authored with Stephen Holmes, you discuss how liberal democracy is going awry all over the world. The book argues that the “losers” of the Cold War engaged in a politics of imitation that bred a lot of anger and resentment, fueling what John B. Judis has called “the populist explosion.” That claim makes a lot of sense, but it took a rather unexpected turn later on with the rise of that same kind of politics in Western Europe and the United States, the Cold War’s supposed “winners.” How are we to make sense of this?

IK: Well, what was the “end of history”? It was a moment about which basically Francis Fukuyama, very much following the logic of modernization theory—and not simply Hegelian thinking—argued that the world had reached a sort of final destination, that ideological competition was over. His theory held that the world’s future would not look very different from the West’s present in 1992. By the way, Fukuyama was not exactly fascinated by that future and wrote that the last man was going to be quite bored, essentially just a consumer and very uninspiring.

The “end of history” kind of turned time into space. Germany became the future of Poland. Poles had a choice: They could wait for their country to become like Germany or they could migrate to Germany and start living in the future immediately. This narrative, a form of time travel, created a major movement of people. It also transformed the far-right parties as they turned the ballot into another sort of time-travel machine—this one going backward: By vowing to expel migrants, they were promising a return to the world of yesterday. That was an important part of our argument.

Another major argument Holmes and I made was about the expectation that while Eastern Europe was going to become like the West, the West was going to stay just the way it was. Many countries are paying a very dear political price for that illusion today. Back then this was perceived as very normal, but the moment the rest of the world started changing, guess what happened? The West started changing too. This is a major development, and it’s the reason I believe that we are today at the end of a certain historical period. Real change is happening—not because the purported “losers” of the Cold War have managed to mobilize, but

because the “winners” have started to perceive themselves as the ultimate losers. That’s the story of the period we’re currently in. Trump is essentially telling Americans: “The elites told you we won the Cold War, but they lied to you. The real winner was China, and it’s taking our jobs. They’re not telling you the truth. America is not the real hegemon. We have been taken hostage by them, by NATO, by Mexico—basically everybody is abusing us.”

This change is critically important to understanding what’s happening. With the rise of new authoritarian leaders and far-right movements in the West, winning the Cold War turned out to be a big lie. Before, the prevailing narrative in the West was based on a very simplistic premise about imitation, namely that all the others wanted to “be like us.” But the argument of the book is that relations of imitation are much more complicated and contestable than that. Sometimes I try to imitate you not because I want to be like you, but because I want to beat you, replace you. And it’s that kind of story, in which suddenly everything you thought were your strengths you start perceiving as your weaknesses, that really inspired Holmes and I to try to explain what was happening. Here’s a very simple example. Until about ten years ago, Europeans thought Europe was the greatest place in the world and that everybody wanted to immigrate there; now the same people are saying that everybody wants to go there and that that’s the worst thing that has ever happened.

CBR: *Speaking of immigration, why did you write in After Europe that “the refugee crisis turned out to be Europe’s 9/11”?*

IK: On Sept. 10, 2001, America had a certain view of the world, of itself and its vulnerabilities, of how others perceived it. Then 9/11 happened and all of that changed. Well, I believe something like that also happened in Europe with the refugee crisis of 2015. And it was very important not so much because of the number of people who came to Europe, but because that crisis transformed the idea of borders that had been at the core of the European project.

After 1989, Europe wasn’t simply about tearing down walls, about people crossing borders, about redrawing those borders. Europe was about changing the very nature of borders, about making them easy to cross and almost invisible. And all of that was very much challenged with the refugee crisis.

Different kinds of borders create different types of identities. Ken Jowitt—a brilliant American political scientist, though not very well known—who wrote a truly great book called *New World Disorder* (University of California Press, 1992), argued that some borders are like barricades that create very firm identities you just cannot change. During the Cold War, for instance, you were either in the East or in the West. In beautiful metaphorical language, Jowitt wrote that a world divided by barricades is like a Catholic marriage: There is no divorce; you basically stay where you are. Other borders are more like frontiers, lines between large and open spaces that are rather easy to cross, and the identity those borders confer is only whatever identity helps you survive. Possibilities seem unlimited; no decision is fateful. It's more like a one-night stand, an encounter with someone whose name you might not even remember the next day. In my view, that very easiness, much like the borders within the European Union, is prone to creating an identity crisis.

In my books, particularly in my book with Holmes, I often go back to Albert O. Hirschman, an author both Holmes and I hold in very high esteem. In his classic work *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Harvard University Press, 1970), Hirschman explained that when people are disappointed, they react in one of two ways: They push for change or they leave; fight or flight. In the market, for instance, if you're dissatisfied with a Pepsi product, you might first complain to the company. But if things don't change, you'll simply start drinking Coca Cola, because moving from one brand to another isn't an existential issue for you. But, as Hirschman recognized, it's not so easy to leave your family, your political party, or your country, because your loyalties lie with them. Interestingly enough, for Hirschman loyalty was such an obvious force that he didn't devote much time conceptualizing it. But in the last decades or so, we've started living in a world in which leaving your family, your party or your county has become somewhat like shifting from Pepsi to Coca Cola. And that's a very dramatic change. That, in some ways, is the larger story about the immigration crisis.

In Eastern Europe, as we argued in *The Light That Failed*, the migration crisis isn't so much about fearing the people who are coming: Not too many people have wanted to live in Bulgaria, in 2015 or even now. It is, rather, about the trauma of the people who have left many East European countries—according to some estimates, about 20 million Eastern Europeans left, basically for Western Europe, between the early 1990s and the mid 2010s. And this, alongside Covid,

has prompted questions like “What is happening to us?” and “Are we going to survive?” If the pandemic forced all of us to face our own individual mortality, migration is forcing small countries to face the mortality of their national community. This is something Holmes and I have been working on lately: the demographic anxieties of a world in which people are moving all the time, there aren’t enough children in some places and identities dramatically change with movement. The population of my own country, Bulgaria, is the fastest-shrinking of any state in the world that isn’t experiencing war or some natural disaster. The combination of low birth rates and massive emigration has resulted in a panic, and Bulgarians are starting to imagine that in a hundred years nobody will speak their language anymore.

That’s why, for me, the 2015 refugee crisis was Europe’s 9/11. Of all the crises that Europe has been facing for the last 15 years or so—the global financial crisis, the climate crisis, Covid, the war in Ukraine and so forth—I believe the immigration crisis has been the most consequential politically: We’re seeing its impact in every election.

Beyond Europe: I believe Trump managed to take advantage of this very successfully. During the US presidential election, the Democrats focused on his racist remarks and attacks on different ethnic groups, but one of his major arguments was about migration, about those “illegals” who should not be allowed in, much less to vote, who should be deported, etc. In the end, his message was about how the most important difference in the US ought to be between citizens and non-citizens.

CBR: *Immigration has become a subject that allows citizenship to be weaponized as an acceptable criterion for discrimination?*

IK: Yes, absolutely.

CBR: *The last chapter of After Europe is called “Perhapsburg: Reflections on the Fragility and Resilience of Europe.” It makes an argument that isn’t exactly optimistic but that is clarifying and that, in a way, turns the conventional diagnosis of European integration upside down: Because Europe is facing so many adversities, people tend to think that it has become both weak and outdated, yet its very survival might be a testament to its strength and necessity. In the 1990s, Europe was thought of as a*

project in search of a reality. Perhaps 30 years later it should be understood as a reality in search of a project?

IK: You're totally right. And listen, I have quite often been accused of being pessimistic. But I keep on telling people that I am neither optimistic nor pessimistic. Both optimists and pessimists share something that I don't, and that is a predisposition to believe we can somehow anticipate what the future is going to look like. I believe that the future is open, uncertain, and that is precisely why I try to be hopeful.

Of course, Europe has proven to be much more resilient than many had thought possible. And I have always believed that its survival is critically important. That's why in *After Europe* I quoted Rilke: "Who speaks of victory? To endure is all." Surviving a crisis creates legitimacy for any political project; all nation-states are nothing less than a collection of survival stories of different kinds. From that point of view, I do believe Europe still has a purpose. You're totally right in pointing out that Europe is surviving, but Europe's identity is changing and not as a product of public deliberation. Europe today knows less about itself than it did, for example, two decades ago. The European Union used to be a project, yes; perhaps today it's very much a survival mechanism for its member states and their societies. Is that a problem? I don't know. Probably this is how the world works. And probably at some point Europeans are going to conceptualize better what they want to do.

Europe is now very vulnerable because in times of dramatic change, such as in our world today, the most vulnerable are those actors that were the biggest winners of the previous game. And the European Union was indeed the biggest winner of the post-Cold War era. So much so that war on the continent was just unthinkable before the Russians did what they did in Ukraine. European societies were really on a holiday from history. Now the holiday is over, and Europe faces major economic and security threats.

From time to time, when I'm kind of in a bad mood watching what's happening in the EU, I recall an old film with Peter Sellers, *Being There*. The protagonist is a gardener who has spent all his life tending a mansion's garden and watching television; he has no experience of the outside world. When the owner of the mansion dies, the gardener is kicked out. The first time he wonders around in

the streets, he suddenly finds himself being attacked by some gangsters. Having spent his entire life watching television, when a thug wields a knife to his face, he takes a remote control out of his pocket and tries to change the channel. Every now and then I feel like Europe's responses to the crises we're facing today are just like that, that we're just taking the remote control out and trying to change the channel.

CBR: *In the conclusion of The Light That Failed, after arguing that we are going through the end of an era, you wrote: "the end of the Age of Imitation will spell either tragedy or hope depending on how liberals manage to make sense of their post-Cold War experience. We can endlessly mourn the globally dominant liberal order that we have lost, or we can celebrate our return to a world of perpetually jostling political alternatives, realizing that a chastised liberalism, having recovered from its unrealistic and self-defeating aspirations to global hegemony, remains the political idea most at home in the twenty-first century." Five years after having published those words, where would you say we are now?*

IK: I think a lot of people make the conceptual mistake of confusing the end of liberal hegemony with the end of liberalism. But liberalism is very much part of the fundamental human experience of putting limits on power. Yes, the triumphal liberalism that was going to transform the world is just not there anymore. And Trump's second victory should push liberals very strongly to revisit what's happening and why.

But a good thing about the difference between individuals and ideas is this: While we don't have any proof that individuals can be resurrected, ideas never die. It's fascinating to see the return of an interest in Marxism or in the end of capitalism or even in a certain type of historically conservative ideas that everybody believed were dead forever. Well, the same will be true for liberalism, although now liberalism will be different, much more contextually centered. Liberalism is not about a world without borders; it's about a world in which you can cross borders based on individual decisions. But the crossing of borders comes at a cost. How are borders going to be reconceptualized? What will be the limits of power? What can we do collectively? All those questions remain, but the answers are not going to be what they were in the 1990s. The arrogance of liberals is one of the worst things that happened to liberalism as a result of its hegemony. Many liberals behave as if they've been betrayed by history, but history is married to nobody.

CBR: *I know you're very interested in the metamorphoses of democracy and, more specifically, in the revival of assertions around the concept of sovereignty today. What do you see as the promises or perils of this sort of neo-sovereigntist turn?*

IK: Democracy is also a story of bounded communities. Democracy does not create political communities, but it cannot exist in the total absence of borders. Who is in and who is out is critically important, because democracy is about loyalty, about solidarity, about what we decide to do together as a political community and, thus, about how we understand sovereignty. The concept has had very different understandings throughout history. There was a moment where the sovereign was God, then it was the State—whether in the form of the King or the People—and during the last liberal decades I think the sovereign was the Individual. In a certain way, almost everything was reduced to individual choices.

But suddenly all those choices started to look equally important. And one of the problems of this age we're talking about is the extent to which lack of commitment has become an everyday experience. For example, I've always been stunned and mesmerized by the fact that you can go to one of those big fashion shops, buy a dress and then return it 24 hours later, not because there's something wrong with the dress, but because you changed your mind. We're living in a world in which basically everything can be re-decided very easily. And I do believe that part of the story about this new sovereigntist moment is that it shouldn't be so easy to re-decide. It should be clear that there is a difference between choosing and picking.

At the level of international politics, it used to be that in order to keep or improve their status, countries and their leaders behaved a bit like in the old regime: Their best bet was to try to marry into a prosperous family. So, for instance, when a small country like Bulgaria joined NATO or some other organization, that made it look important. But now it's like the world has gone on Tinder, and some countries, like Turkey, as we discussed before, want to show that they have lots of options, that they can do many things. It's an exhausting exercise.

But for people, it's very important to know that they can decide on something. Precisely because everything is perceived as a choice, we're making choices all the time. This, in a sense, has created the central cultural contradiction of contemporary life that democracy is now contending with: On one level,

everything is our choice; on another level, we feel incredibly powerless. So how to reconnect the idea of individual or collective choice with the notion of actual power is, I find, critically important.

CBR: *What other developments or innovations have caught your eye lately? What social trends or political shifts are you paying attention to? What are the ideas or intellectual currents that you are most interested in nowadays, at the end of 2024?*

IK: Well, I'm currently working on another book about something that absolutely fascinates me, and that's the politics of demographic imagination.

We're living in very interesting different times. Between 1965 and 2015, as Martin Wolf recently wrote in the *Financial Times*, the fertility rate of the world halved. Many people today are living in societies where fertility is below the reproduction level. This is our current demographic reality. And then there are the demographic projections—the future is no longer a project; it has become a projection—and those could be wrong, but many are quite astonishing. The population of South Korea, for instance, could be halved over the next 50 years. This means a very different age structure, with very few babies being born and the older generation becoming the biggest cohort. How is democracy going to function when the young just don't have the numbers to ever become a majority? Or take Russia, as I argue in a recent piece with Holmes in *Foreign Policy*, which today has a population of around 145 million but which, according to some projections, by the year 2100 could count as few as 74 million Russians in Russia proper. This is quite a problem for a country obsessed with portraying itself as a strong world power.

When you focus on democracy and demography, and particularly on the way political decisions are taken based on demographic anxieties and fear, you find a number of authoritarian states where people are blaming low fertility rates on the spread of Western cultural values. This creates a whole new set of tensions and conflicts. I've been arguing, for instance, that it's hard to understand Putin's decision to invade Ukraine without considering how concerned he is with the demographic decline of Russia; his only successful policy to increase Russia's population has been the annexation of Crimea. If you look close enough, you can see this kind of biopolitics playing out all over the globe. You can see it also in the case of the recent American elections, in the fear that suddenly the government is

going to “elect” its people, so to speak, by granting citizenship to people who vote for its camp or taking it away from those who vote for the other party.

I'm not interested anymore in discussions about the end of history and the last man. I'm much more interested in the return of the future and the last man. The last man defined by the demographic imagination is different from the last man defined by the environmental imagination or by the technological imagination. A lot of people are worried about the climate crisis, about the possibility that we could be the last humans on earth; others are worried about a sort of technological takeover, about machines and software replacing all sorts of human labor. Funnily enough, the problem with the demographic imagination is that it posits no such thing as the last human; it's all about the last Bulgarian or the last Hungarian and so on. Even as some Silicon Valley types are talking about the immortality of the individual, we're facing the mortality of nations, of family, of having children—of the traditional ways in which people used to fight their mortality. I see this as a dramatic change with incredibly important political consequences. This is the thing that at the moment is at the center of my attention.

CBR: *About the second Trump presidency and its potential reverberations across the globe: It feels that in the coming months we'll be forced to live through a “fasten your seat belts” moment, bracing for impact. What kind of surprises, for better or for worse, might occur in the months and years to come as a result of Trump's reelection?*

IK: Great question. Oddly enough, for me the most telling sign lies not so much in the election results as in Trump's early announcements about nominations to his cabinet. This moment reminds me so much of Bulgaria in the 1990s, when a journalist could very easily become the defense minister because of the political divide, because what really mattered was not competence but loyalty. In many ways, the leadership was putting people in posts not because they would know what they were doing but precisely because they *wouldn't*—and that meant they were capable of breaking the system, of wreaking radical change. But the biggest problem with radical change is that it can have unintended consequences. We basically know what kind of things Trump is going to do, but we don't know how the world is going to react.

I believe, for example, that Trump is absolutely saying what he thinks when he claims that he is going to stop the war in Ukraine in 24 hours. The problem

is that it's not only up to him. Where is the Russian president going to stand on this? Or if Trump imposes high tariffs on products from China or other countries, what are they going to do? The more radical the action, the more unintended the consequences it can produce. Some of them could be positive, some negative. But there is one thing that cannot happen, and that is a return to how things used to be.

In my view, the recent US election marks the end of an era. Before, when someone was trying to oppose Trump or political leaders like him, their pitch was, "Vote for our camp because we represent normality and we're fighting against something *weird*"—a term American Democrats have actually used. Well, there's no normality anymore. If there's going to be an alternative to Trump and the like, it should be an alternative that's well spelled out, not just a vague hope about going back to the past. Trump isn't only killing the world of yesterday; he is also burying it.

The Ideas Letter Team

Leonard Benardo

Darius Cuplinskas

Ayisha Osori

LuHan Gabel

Stephen Hubbell

Mario Arriagada

Omar Waraich

Sophie Ward

Valentina Pérez Ruiz

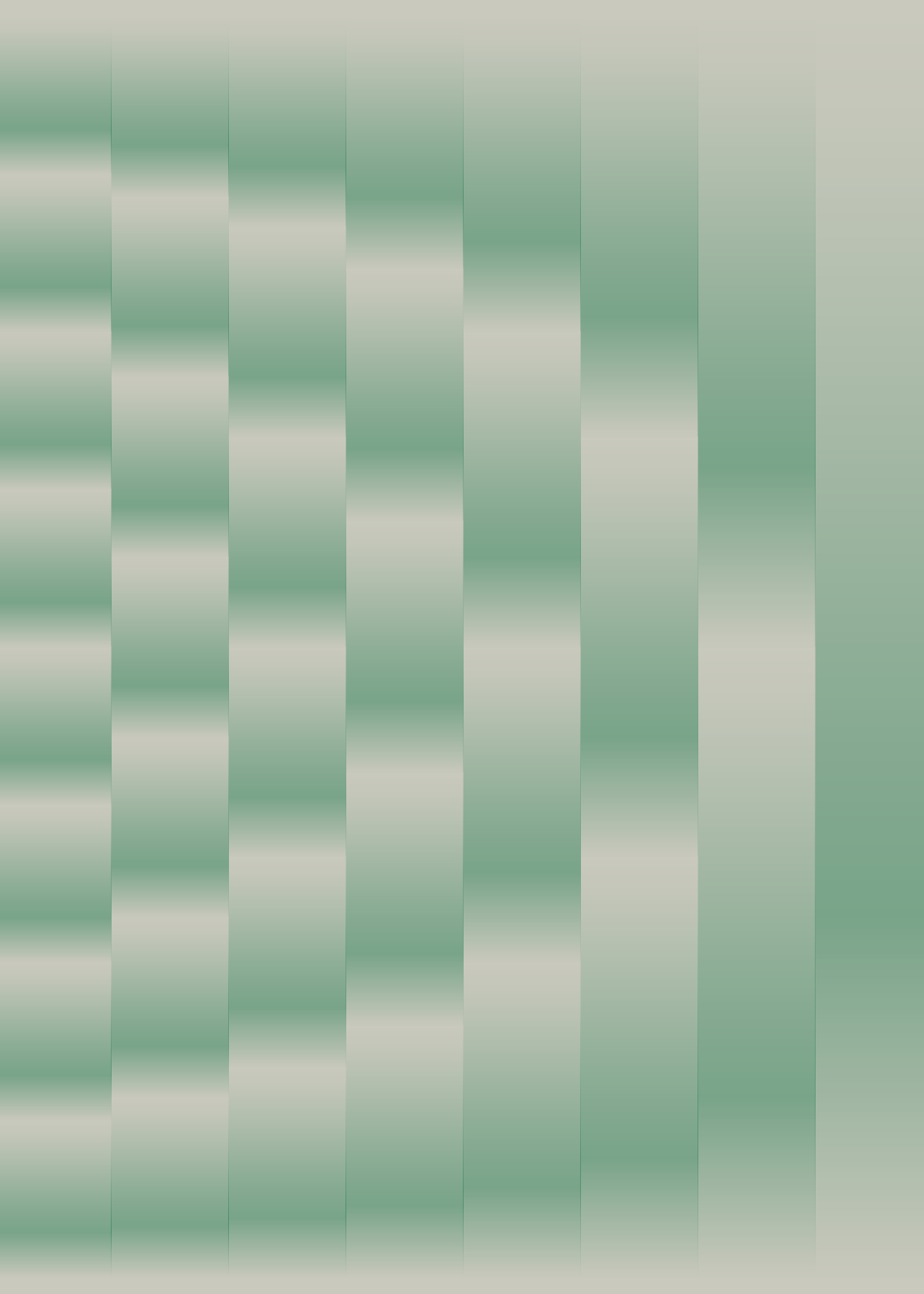
Ami Cholia

Maggie Soladay

Jordana Timerman

Stéphanie Giry

Sam Dresser



WWW.THEIDEASLETTER.ORG