

## OUR ILLEGIBLE AGE

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It is time, twenty-five years on, to discuss the Cold War again. In the decade following the events of 1989 we seemed to talk about nothing else. None of us anticipated the rapid breakup of the Soviet empire, or the equally quick return of Eastern Europe to constitutional democracy, or the shriveling of the revolutionary movements Moscow had long supported. Faced with the unexpected, we engaged in some uncharacteristic big thinking. Is this the “end of history”? “What’s left of the Left?”

Then life moved on and our thinking became small again. Europe’s attention turned toward constructing an ill-defined European Union; the United States’ attention turned toward political Islamism and the fantasy of founding Arab democracies; and the whole world’s attention turned to studying economics and business administration. And so, for these reasons and others, we forgot all about the Cold War. Which seemed like a very good thing.

It was not. I believe we have not thought nearly enough about the end of the Cold War, and especially the intellectual vacuum it left behind. If nothing else, the Cold War focused the mind. The ideologies in conflict, whose lineages could be traced back two centuries, offered clear opposing views of political reality and how to act within it. Now that they are gone one would think reality would be clearer to us.

Just the opposite seems true. Never since the end of the Second World War, and perhaps since the Russian Revolution, has political thinking in the West been so shallow and clueless. We all sense that ominous changes are taking place in our societies, and in other societies whose destinies will very much shape our own. Yet we lack adequate concepts or even vocabulary for describing the world we find ourselves in. The connection between words and things has snapped. The end of ideology has not mean the lifting of clouds; it has brought a fog so thick that we can no longer read what is right before us. We find ourselves in an illegible age.

What is, or was, ideology? Dictionaries define it as a “system” of ideas and beliefs people hold that motivate their political action. But the metaphor is misleading. All practical activity, not just political activity, involves ideas and beliefs. An ideology does something different: it holds us in *its* grasp with an enchanting picture of reality. To follow the optical metaphor, ideology takes an undifferentiated visual field and brings it into focus, so that objects appear in relation to each other, in the foreground or background, expanded or foreshortened, in light or in shadow.

The political ideologies born out of the French Revolution were particularly potent because they came with moving pictures showing how the present emerged from a comprehensible past and was now moving toward an intelligible future. Two grand narratives competed for attention in Europe, and then around the world: a progressive one culminating in a liberating revolution, and an apocalyptic one ending with the natural order of things restored.

The ideological narrative of the European Left was a cross between *Prometheus Bound* and the life of Jesus. Mankind was assumed to be equal to the gods but bound to the rock of history by religion, hierarchy, property, and false consciousness. For millennia that's how things stood until a miracle of incarnation occurred in 1789 and the spirits of liberty, equality, and fraternity became flesh. Yet redemption did not follow. Just as the followers of Jesus had some theological work to do when his return kept being deferred, so the nineteenth and twentieth century Left developed a revolutionary apologetics to make sense of historical disappointment.

It taught that while the French Revolution descended into Terror and Napoleonic despotism, it did prepare the way for the pan-European revolutions of 1848. These were short lived but they inspired the Paris Commune. That lasted only a few months, but it set the example for the October Revolution of 1917. True, that was followed by the November Revolution, then Stalin and his terror. But after the Second World War the revolution's pilgrimage wound its way to China and the Third World, globalizing the struggle against capitalism and imperialism.

And then there was Cambodia. And then the music stopped.

The counter-revolutionary Right in Europe, though much stronger politically in the nineteenth century, could not offer a narrative nearly as glorious as the Left's. Formed in reaction and under duress, it was obscure and less inspiring. But in moments of crisis it could be very compelling. The story it told was a cross between the legend of the Golem and the Book of Revelation.

In the best known Golem story a rabbi places into the mouth of a clay figure a slip of paper bearing God's name on it; the figure then comes alive and rages through a Jewish ghetto terrorizing its residents until the rabbi snatches the paper back. If we think of the Golem as *le peuple*, the paper as the writings of Voltaire and Rousseau, and the destruction of the ghetto as the Terror, we have made our way into the mind of the reactionary Right.

In the legend, the rabbi tames the Golem. The forces of reaction, though, never could control the forces of revolution in the nineteenth century, which were scientific, economic, and technological as well. Railroads crisscrossed the unspoiled landscape. Cities replaced villages and country estates, factories replaced farms, secular schools replaced religious ones, unshaved politicians replaced dukes and earls, and the peasants became an undifferentiated mass of brutalized workers.

As the century progressed, a romantic Right dreaming of a restored age of sweetness and light was transformed into an apocalyptic Right convinced it was living through the Great Tribulation. And when the improbable Russian Revolution succeeded, and Marxism went from being a small sect into a powerful global force, the face of the Anti-Christ was exposed for all the world to see. The final battle had begun, and into it leapt nationalist redeemers who ruled their peoples with iron and fear. We have now made our way into the mind of Fascism.

To speak about such matters is already, two decades on, to conjure up a lost world. Try to convey to young students the grand drama of political and intellectual life between 1789 and 1989 and you're left feeling like a blind poet singing of lost Atlantis. Fascism for them is "radical evil," hence incomprehensible; how it could develop and why it appealed to millions remains a mystery. Communism makes little sense either, especially the faith people invested in the Soviet Union (of all places). The millennial generation are not all complacent; some are very agitated about the present, and rightfully so. But the story that I have been telling is not their story. This they know, though they show little interest in hearing a new one.

And perhaps that's a good thing. Most of us over the age of fifty know what it is like to be in the presence of a captive mind. Communists and their Marxist fellow-travellers back in the day were impressive in their serenity and self-confidence. With an air of forbearance they would explain that what we took to be significant facts were actually quite insignificant, and that what seemed trivial was in fact the crux of the matter. They did not appear to be wearing blinders that blocked out reality. On the contrary – and this was the problem – they saw absolutely everything and how it was all connected by occult forces operating at tremendous distances. When embarrassing unforeseen events occurred they might fall into denial. But very soon the casuistry would begin, defending everything from the Berlin Wall to the Red Brigades, and delivered with all the confidence of a Jesuit in his robes.

Such people are rare today, and good riddance to them. But it must be admitted that with them some valuable intellectual qualities disappeared as well. Like curiosity and ambition. The anticommunists used to argue, correctly, that history cannot be mastered by a system or idea. Societies are too complex, human motivations too various, and institutions too opaque for us to get a static picture of reality or discern the invariable laws governing it. But none of the leading Cold War liberals thought the problems Marxism addressed were imaginary or beyond human reckoning. Think of Raymond Aron, Daniel Bell, Leszek Kołakowski, Isaiah Berlin, or Ralf Dahrendorf : they resisted Marxism because it was, in the end, inadequate to the task it took up, not because its ambition was wholly misguided. Daniel Bell imagined that the end of ideology would free up space for less constricted, more attentive inquiry into the way the world works and how the present connects to past and future. He did not imagine that the will to inquire would itself wither. Yet it has.

This is not how what's left of the Western Left sees it. It thinks that the age of ideology never ended and that a new "hegemonic worldview" has simply replaced Fascism and Communism. Americans call it democratic capitalism and are delighted with it; Europeans call it neoliberalism and are unhappy with it. There is a good deal of truth to this. It is hard to deny that the concept of democracy, however misunderstood and betrayed, is the only political form that can claim global, if not universal, recognition today. And it is true that economic growth is the one common aim of governments around the world, usually pursued with unreflective faith in the cost-free benefits of free trade, deregulation, and foreign investment.

I would go even further. The social liberalization that began in a few Western countries in the 1960s is meeting less resistance among educated urban elites nearly everywhere. A new cultural outlook, or at least questioning, has emerged. This outlook treats as axiomatic the primacy of individual self-determination over traditional social ties, indifference in matters of religion and sex, and the a priori obligation to tolerate others. Of course there have also been powerful reactions against this outlook, even in the West. But outside the Islamic world, where theological principles still have authority, there are fewer and fewer objections that persuade people who have no such principles. The recent, and astonishingly rapid, acceptance of homosexuality, gay marriage, and even gay parenthood in so many Western countries – an anthropological transformation of tremendous significance – says more about our time than anything else.

It tells us that this is a libertarian age. That is not because democracy is on the march (it is regressing in many places), or because the bounty of the free market has reached everyone (we have a new class of paupers), or because we are now all free to do as we wish (since wishes inevitably conflict). No, ours is a libertarian age by default; whatever ideas or beliefs muted the demand for individual autonomy in the past have atrophied. There were no public debates on this and no votes were taken. Since the Cold War ended we have simply found ourselves in a world when every advance of the principle of freedom in one sphere advances it in the others, whether we wish it to or not. The only freedom we're losing is the freedom to choose our freedoms.

Not everyone is happy about this. The Left, especially in Europe and Latin America, wants to limit economic autonomy for the public good. Yet they reject out of hand legal limits to individual autonomy in other spheres, such as surveillance and censorship of the internet, that might also serve the public good. They want an uncontrolled cyberspace in a controlled economy – a technological and sociological impossibility. Those on the Right, whether in China, the United States, or elsewhere, would like the inverse: a permissive economy with a restrictive culture, which is equally impossible in the long run. We find ourselves like the man on the speeding train who tried to stop it by pulling on the seat in front of him.

Yet our libertarianism is not an ideology in the old sense. It is a dogma, a distinction worth bearing in mind. Ideology tries to master the historical forces shaping society by first understanding them. The grand ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did just that, and much too well; because they were intellectually “totalizing” they countenanced political totalitarianism. Our libertarianism operates differently: like every dogma it sanctions ignorance about the world, and therefore blinds adherents to its effects in that world. It begins with basic liberal principles – the sanctity of the individual, the priority of freedom, distrust of public authority, tolerance – and advances no further.

It has no taste for reality, no curiosity about how we got here or where we’re going. There is no libertarian sociology (an oxymoron) or psychology or philosophy of history. Nor, strictly speaking, is there a libertarian political theory, since it has no interest in institutions and has nothing to say about the necessary, and productive, tension between individual and collective purposes.

It is not liberal in a sense that Montesquieu, the American Framers, Tocqueville, or John Stuart Mill would have recognized. They would have seen it as a creed little different from Martin Luther's creed, *sola fide*: give individuals maximum freedom in every aspect of their lives and all will be well. And if not, then *pereat mundus*.

Libertarianism's dogmatic simplicity explains why people who otherwise share little can subscribe to it: small-government fundamentalists on the American Right, anarchists on the European and Latin American Left, democratization prophets, civil liberties absolutists, human rights crusaders, neoliberal growth evangelists, rogue hackers, gun fanatics, porn manufacturers, and Chicago School economists the world over. The dogma that unites them is implicit and doesn't require explication; it is a mentality, a mood, a presumption – what used to be called, non-pejoratively, a prejudice. Maintaining an ideology requires work because political developments always threaten its plausibility. Theories must be tweaked, revisions must be revised. Because ideology makes a claim about the way the world actually works, it invites and resists refutation. A dogma does not.

Let me give two examples of what I have been talking about. The first concerns Europe, the second the United States.

Since the 1980s the European Union's project of economic integration has been governed by neoliberalism, a powerful form of contemporary libertarianism. There were concrete reasons for this, having to do – in people's minds, at least – with the failures of the welfare state and the sluggishness of economies held down by state-run enterprises, over-regulation, and powerful unions.

But as time passed the reasons were forgotten and neoliberalism became what it is today, a dogma that obscures its real world effects, which are not just economic. It is shocking, for instance, to see how slow Europeans have been to recognize how seriously the E.U. neoliberal approach to economic integration jeopardizes the principles of democratic self-government that were recovered after the Second World War.

Democracy is about self-determination, collective and individual; and until now modern constitutional democracies have developed only within the context of sovereign nation-states. There is a reason for this. The nation-state represents a compromise of sorts between the politics of empire and the politics of the village: it is large enough to encourage people to think beyond their local interests, but not so large that they feel they have no control over their lives. It provides a clearly demarcated arena of political contestation and collective action by citizens who identify with it, and gives them the means of calling governments to account. Historically speaking, a very hard trick to pull off.

From the start there never was any consensus about just what sort of trick the E.U. was supposed to be, apart from a machine to keep the peace and generate prosperity. All agreed that this would require a diminution of national sovereignty. But at the beginning very little thinking went into establishing democratic procedures within it, and even less into how to build public identification with the project – how to turn Scotsmen and Sicilians into Europeans, so to speak, who feel they share a destiny and recognize the same legitimate institutions.

The result is that ordinary Europeans see that the weighty decisions today are made in the Brussels bureaucracy or in the European Council, whose members are government appointed not directly elected. The European Parliament is elected but there are no real pan-European parties to offer comprehensive programs for governing and suffer the consequences if they fail to enact them. Voters must choose from national lists of candidates who can promise nothing and are accountable for nothing. Not only has the continual expansion of the E.U. borders shaken Europeans' national sense of "we," so has the massive immigration and asylum seeking that the E.U. lacks the will to control. Because Europe no longer thinks it has an essence, or core, or shared history, or even borders, why should it reject for membership any nation or individual that says that it, too, wants to be European?

It's little wonder that citizens today in both weak and strong nations feel cheated and distrust each other. Take the example of Greece, which still teeters on the edge of insolvency. As the E.U. demands austerity, its citizens rightly sense that they have little control over their collective destiny. But that is also true of the restless German public, which worries that it has signed an economic suicide pact with profligates. Nationally elected officials in the weaker states, hoping to stay in office while having to impose austerity, point to the Germans; the Germans shift blame to the E.U. solvency rules. The E.U. then points to the omniscient financial markets, which refer you to American bond rating agencies, the new sovereigns of Europe. And what they demand is less democracy and more reliance on technical governments and economic experts.

Defenders of the European Union remind us that it has successfully maintained peace for two decades, and warn that nations must relinquish even more sovereignty if Europe is to cope with volatile global financial markets and compete with economic behemoths like China and the United States. This may be so. A pacified Europe is a precious thing, and a more powerful E.U. may very well be a necessary thing. But they are not democratic things.

While Europe has been quietly chipping away at the foundation of its post-war democracies, the United States has been trying to build new ones on sand.

Historically, Americans have been better at living democracy than at understanding it. They consider it a birthright and universal aspiration, not a rare form of government that for two millennia was dismissed as base, unstable, and potentially tyrannical. They are generally unaware that democracy in the West went from being considered an irredeemable regime in classical antiquity, to a potentially good one only in the nineteenth century, to the best form of government only after the Second World War, to the sole legitimate regime only in the past twenty-five years. During the Cold War, American scholars convinced of democracy's absolute and unique goodness abandoned the traditional study of non-democratic forms of government like monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy, and tyranny, and took instead to distinguishing regimes along a single line running from democracy (good) to totalitarianism (bad). This way of thinking gave rise to the naïve assumption that after the collapse of the Soviet Union countries would naturally begin making "transitions" from dictatorship and authoritarianism to democracy, as if by magnetic attraction.

That confidence has now evaporated. But in the mind of America's political and journalistic classes only two categories of political regimes exist today: democracy and ... *le déluge*.

Which, if you assume that democracy is the only legitimate form of government, is a perfectly serviceable distinction. *Kann nicht sein, was darf nicht sein*. Unable or just unwilling to distinguish the varieties of non-democracy that exist today, Americans instead speak of their "human rights records," which tell us much less than we think they do. They turn to organizations like Freedom House, a well-meaning think-tank that promotes democracy and publicizes human rights abuses around the world.

It produces an influential annual report, *Freedom in the World*, that claims to quantify levels of freedom in every country on earth. It gives them marks on different factors like rights to political participation, civil liberties, press freedom, and so on. It then combines those figures into a composite index number that indicates to what degree that country is "free," "partly free," or "not free." The document, which is highly influential in Washington, reads like a stock report. In the 2013 report readers were told that "this marks the seventh consecutive year in which countries with declines outnumbered those with improvements." And that the "most noteworthy gains in freedom" in the previous year had been in Egypt, Libya, and Côte d'Ivoire. One hardly knows where to begin.

Clearly, the big news in world politics since the Cold War's end is not the advance of liberal democracy or "freedom," it is the reappearance of classic forms of non-democratic political rule in modern guises. The break-up of the Soviet empire and "shock therapy" produced new oligarchies and kleptocracies that have at their disposal innovative tools of finance and communication. The advance of political Islam has placed millions of Muslims, who make up a quarter of the world's population, under more restrictive theocratic rule. Tribes, clans, and sectarian groups have become the most important actors in the post-colonial states of Africa and the Middle East. And China has brought back despotic mercantilism. Each of these political formations has a distinctive nature that needs to be understood in its own terms, not as inevitable steps on the road to democracy. The world of nations remains what it has always been: an aviary.

But ornithology is complicated and democracy promotion seems so much simpler. After all, don't all peoples want to be well governed and consulted in matters affecting them? Don't they want to be secure and treated justly? Don't they want to escape the humiliations of poverty? The American view is that liberal democracy is the best way of achieving these things. And, true enough, it is shared by many people living in non-democratic countries. But that does not mean they understand the implications of democratization and would accept the social and cultural individualism it would inevitably bring with it.

No nations are as libertarian as Western nations have become today. They still care deeply about goods that individualism destroys, like deference to tradition, a commitment to place, respect for elders, obligations to family and clan, a devotion to piety and virtue. If they and we think that they can have it all, then they and we are very much mistaken. These are the rocks on which the hopes for Arab democracy keep shattering.

The truth is that billions of people will not be living in liberal democracies in our lifetimes or those of our children or grandchildren – if ever. This is not only due to culture and mores; to these must be added ethnic divisions, religious sectarianism, illiteracy, economic injustice, senseless national borders imposed by colonial powers .... the list is long. Without the rule of law and a respected constitution, without professional bureaucracies that treat citizens impartially, without the subordination of the military to civilian rule, without regulatory bodies to keep economic transactions transparent, without social norms that encourage civic engagement and law-abidingness, without the encouragement of secular learning – without all of this, modern liberal democracy is impossible. So the only sensible question to ask when thinking about today's non-democracies is: what's Plan B?

Nothing reflects the bankruptcy of today's political thinking more than our unwillingness to pose this question. If the only choices we can imagine for the troubled nations around the globe are democracy or *le déluge*, we exclude the possibility of improving non-democratic regimes without either trying forcibly to transform them, as Americans do. Or, as Europeans do, hoping vainly that human rights treaties, humanitarian interventions, legal sanctions, NGO projects, and bloggers with iPhones will make a lasting difference. These are the utterly characteristic delusions of our two continents.

The next Nobel Peace Prize should not go to a human rights activist or an NGO founder. It should go to the thinker or leader who contributes most to establishing a model of constitutional theocracy that would provide Muslim countries with a coherent way of recognizing yet limiting the authority of religious law and make it compatible with good governance and intellectual inquiry. This would be an historic, though not necessarily democratic, achievement.

No such prize will be given, of course, and not only because such thinkers and leaders are lacking. To recognize such an achievement would require abandoning the dogma that freedom is always and everywhere everything. It would mean accepting that, if there is a road from serfdom to democracy, it will, in long stretches, be paved with non-democracy. As it was in the West.

I'm beginning to feel some sympathy for those American officials who led the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq a decade ago and immediately began destroying existing political parties, standing armies, and traditional institutions of political consultation and authority. The deepest reason for this colossal blunder was not American hubris or naiveté, though there was plenty of that. It was that they had no way of thinking about alternatives to immediate, and in the end sham, democratization. Where should they have turned? Whose books should they have read? What model should they have relied on? All they knew was the prime directive: draft new constitutions, establish parliaments and presidential offices, then call elections. And after that, it was the deluge indeed.

Our libertarian age is an illegible age. It has given birth to a new kind of hubris unlike that of the old master thinkers. Our hubris is to think that we no longer have to think hard or pay attention or look for connections, that all we have to do is stick to our "democratic values" and economic models and faith in the individual and all will be well. Having witnessed unpleasant scenes of intellectual drunkenness, we have become self-satisfied abstainers removed from life and unprepared for the challenges it is already bringing. The end of the Cold War destroyed whatever confidence in ideology still remained in the West. But it also seems to have destroyed our will to understand. We have abdicated. The libertarian dogma of our time is turning our polities, economies, and cultures upside down – and blinding us to this by making us even more self-absorbed and incurious than we naturally are. The world we are making with our hands is as remote from our minds as the furthest black hole. We once had a nostalgia for the future. Today we have an amnesia for the present.