

Suicide of the West versus National Awakening

Since the millennium, the liberal mood music in the West has changed from Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, after victory over all ideological competitors, to Ravel's *Pavane pour une enfant defunte*, at the failure to impose the West's universal vision on a recalcitrant globe. Brexit and the election of Donald Trump suggested that the rough beast of populism slouched towards Brussels and Washington and its coming appears far from progressive. Certainly, the populist movements that have emerged across Europe and the United States since the financial crash of 2008 threaten a liberal consensus based on multiculturalism at home and the promotion of globalisation, social justice and human rights abroad.

This *bouleversement* surprised mainstream political commentators. Douglas Murray's study *The Strange Death of Europe* revealed a continent exhausted, bored and self-loathing. David Goodhart's *The Road to Somewhere* identified a "great divide" between two "subterranean value blocs" that had appeared in modern Britain. Meanwhile, across the pond, liberal commentators like Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt contemplate the death of democracy and the re-emergence of the authoritarian personality, in the person of Donald Trump. Channelling the zeitgeist, Kevin Rudd, somewhat predictably, thinks "democratic capitalism is showing signs of deep, systemic sickness".

Western decline is on the political menu once more and, not for the first time, it is the dish *du jour*.

The Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics is Destroying American Democracy

by Jonah Goldberg
Crown, 2018, 464 pages, \$56

The Virtue of Nationalism

by Yoram Hazony
Basic Books, 2018, 304 pages, \$43

Jonah Goldberg and Yoram Hazony trace its recent roots and examine its political implications. Both writers are conservatives, but come to very different conclusions about the new populist mood sweeping the West.

Penning one of the longer suicide notes in history, Goldberg contends that "the rebirth of tribalism, populism, nationalism, and identity politics" is killing Western democracy. By contrast, Yoram Hazony finds in populism a welcome reassertion of national values, political freedom and self-determination. How, we might wonder, could two conservative thinkers arrive at such diametrically opposed views on the populist trend? Moreover, does populism portend the suicide of the West, or a welcome reassertion of national identity?

Goldberg's pessimistic analysis of the West's suicidal disenchantment restates in a declinist demotic the predicament outlined in the classic sociologies of modernity. Following Max Weber, this holds that the Protestant Reformation and the scientific revolution caused a momentous paradigm shift. The traditional world of status collapsed and a *novus ordo saeculorum* founded on social contract, individualism and mobility replaced it.

From prehistory to the Enlightenment, mankind lived highly circumscribed and impoverished lives. The shift from hunter-gatherer tribalism to the agrarian axial age resulted only in better organised but rigidly hierarchical societies. A Malthusian trap naturally constrained population growth and social standing determined fate.

There was no exit from this closed circle, or there was one and it only happened once, miraculously, in England. Tracing these developments, Goldberg eventually concludes that England was "weird". More precisely, eighteenth-century England tolerated a degree of religious difference, it was geographically isolated, and preferred its ancient constitution to the continent's fashionable absolutism.

English exceptionalism, in other words, made the “miracle” of modernity. The empirical theory of knowledge associated with Locke, Boyle and Newton and its logic of scientific discovery caused the great economic transformation, first in the Anglo-American world and eventually globally. Socially, it enabled the shift from status to contract and the free market. As Goldberg explains, “The Miracle ... is the product of a bourgeois revolution, an eighteenth-century middle-class ideology of merit, industriousness, innovation, contracts, and rights.”

Although English nonconformity generated this radical impulse, it was Puritan migrants to the New World that fulfilled its promise. John Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding* and his *Second Treatise of Government* provided the intellectual basis for this revolutionary form of political and social organization. But it was the American founding fathers who established the practical conditions for liberty, property, industry and civil society to thrive.

The problem was that although the liberal market economy was “the most cooperative system ever created for the peaceful improvement of people’s lives”, it suffered a “fatal flaw: it doesn’t feel like it”. Capitalism and liberal democracy, in other words, are unnatural:

We stumbled into them in a process of trial and error but also blind luck, contingency, and happenstance a blink of an eye ago. The market system depends on bourgeois values, i.e., principles, ideas, habits, and sentiments that it did not create and cannot restore once lost.

The difficulty in sustaining these “bourgeois values” is modernity’s predicament. More accurately, as Ernest Gellner explained, the rational theory of knowledge left “a highly disenchanting vision of the world”. It thus encountered the problem of enchantment, “that the world be shown not to be ... too impersonally icy”. Enlightenment *anomie*, in other words, encouraged Romantic revolt.

In his revision of *The Social Contract*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau captured the felt need for tribalism and a sense of community. He fashioned this Romantic impulse into the revolutionary ideal of the general will. As Goldberg explains:

The idea that the state should go to great lengths to stamp out income inequality, for example, is wholly consistent with statism in the tradition of Rousseau, but antithetical to the idea of government in the tradition of Locke.

The contemporary crisis of the West, Goldberg

contends, begins with Romantic nationalism and ends with the administrative state. Progressive-era politicians, like Woodrow Wilson, abandoned the minimal state of the founding fathers for the more intrusive European version of community that Rousseau envisaged, but which German thinkers like Fichte, Herder and Hegel transformed into a corporate *rechtstaat*. From this administrative perspective, the industrial revolution’s urban masses required tutelage and a bureaucracy to guide them. The new administrative class constituted “a parallel government, operating in the shadows, outside the light of democratic transparency”. In time, it corrupted the founders’ vision. Instead the new administrative elite devoted itself to shibboleths like education and social justice. Goldberg traces our current malaise to this rationalist, bureaucratic assault on individualism and the nuclear family. Progressive administration combined with the death of God and the Romantic reaction to the Age of Reason ultimately resulted in the manufactured tribalism of postmodernity.

Liberal fascism, to use Goldberg’s term, through its ideological pursuit of multiculturalism and minority rights, has transformed Western politics into “one big university campus” obsessed with victimhood and oppression quotients. As Hazony observes, “the same kinds of campaigns of vilification that were until recently associated with universities” have come to dominate Western democratic politics. In a similar vein, Goldberg finds that “social justice warriors do not seek to simply destroy existing traditional Western culture (or what’s left of it); they seek to create a new culture, or what Hillary Clinton called a ‘new politics of meaning’”.

This new politics, however, has countervailing consequences. It led “whites and Christians” to respond “by creating their own tribal politics”. This retribalisation of democratic politics formed the prologue, Goldberg avers, “to the story of Donald Trump’s victory and the rise of the ‘alt-right’”. It is also the context for the ascent of Marine Le Pen, the victory of Brexit, and the new global crusade against ‘globalism.’” Simply put, “progressivism conjured a nationalist backlash that is less an alternative to the statism of the left and more a right-wing version of it”.

Goldberg bitterly laments this development. Populism, he declares, is “an orientation and a passion. In theory ... it elevates ‘the people,’ but in reality it only speaks for a subset of them. It shares with nationalism a romantic glorification or sanctification of the group.”

Consequently, demagoguery is in high demand and a paranoid style of politics, antithetical to the disenchanting vision of modernity, prevails. In

Trump and Brexit it carries with it an ominous “echo of the language of the 1930s”. Or does it?

Trump’s populism may have “profoundly changed the conversation of our democracy”, as Goldberg asserts, but Hazony welcomes it. Rather than paranoia, Hazony discovers in the new populism a reawakening of a long-dormant national consciousness. The originality of Hazony’s thesis resides in his sympathy with the populist mood and his discussion of its often misunderstood historic and religious antecedents.

Like Goldberg, Hazony has a penchant for grand historical narrative. Rather than the predicament of modernity, however, Hazony finds three forms of organisation that have determined the course of world history from the Book of Deuteronomy to the contemporary progressive pursuit of “globalism”. Tribalism, the nation-state and imperialism have existed, Hazony avers, since time immemorial, or at least since Moses led his people out of bondage.

Whilst tribal or clan-based societies have a propensity to anarchy, the preferred elite form of rule, since Sargon of Akkad united ancient Mesopotamia to Emmanuel Macron’s recent call for a “new world order” at the United Nations, is empire. Imperialism, of course, comes in many shapes and sizes. In the ancient world empire took Assyrian, Persian and Roman forms; in the Middle Ages, Muslim caliphs and Catholic popes promoted monotheistic religious truths, often at sword point; whilst modernity witnessed communism and fascism advancing ideological formulae for utopian new world orders.

The end of the Cold War, Hazony contends, witnessed the latest “flowering” of “imperialist political ideals”, this time in a progressive guise committed to global governance, rule-based order and pooled sovereignty. It assumed two, not unrelated, styles. First, after its Cold War victory a “super sovereign” United States tried to impose a *pax Americana* which would “provide security and quiet for the entire world”. This peace came, Ozymandias-like, to a shuddering halt in the Mesopotamian desert. Since Iraq, progressives prefer a more consensual version of global governance. A “post-national constellation”, according to Frankfurt school guru Jurgen Habermas, would agree, through uncoerced communication, on universal norms ensuring a perpetual peace. The Maastricht Treaty in 1992 offered the premonitory snuffing of first European, and eventual global union on the basis of these internationally agreed, but essentially liberal, rules.

Such a utopian vision of uniting mankind under a single political regime clashes with a far more circumscribed view of world order premised, more realistically, on self-determining nation-states “charting

their own independent course without interference”. It is this vision that, Hazony argues, populism resurrects and which progressive internationalism “hates”. Why might this be the case?

After 1945, Western liberals, socialists and conservatives agreed on one thing, namely that nationalism “had contributed little more than a new vocabulary to the history of political evil”. Romanticism, especially that of the European nineteenth-century variety, awakened the dormant nation, like a sleeping beauty, from its deep cultural repose. Under the influence of the new historicist philosophy of Schlegel, Fichte, Herder and Hegel, the sleeping beauty transformed herself, via Bismarck, Kaiser Wilhelm and Hitler, into the Frankenstein’s monster of ethnic purity that devastated Europe and the globe between 1870 and 1945.

However, after 1952, an enlightened economic and commercial union, *sans frontieres*, soothed the nationalist monster and put its terrible beauty into a coma, from which, the liberal mind piously hoped, it would never wake. Hazony considers this a political myth that sustains the dream of ever closer European and eventual universal union.

The myth is premised on a confused misidentification of twentieth-century German imperialism with the pursuit of national self-determination. Hitler’s vision of a Third Reich merely reiterated, in totalitarian garb, the Hohenstaufen and Habsburg dream of imperial world monarchy. In fact, Hazony maintains, the movable geographic feast that represented the German variety of nineteenth- and twentieth-century statism sought world domination, not the self-determination of a particular culture and people.

Properly understood, Hazony further contends, nationalism was neither Romantic nor German. It emerged in the early modern Protestant world of Northern Europe. Moreover, it possessed a number of virtues that its distorted manifestation in nineteenth-century German, French and Italian Romanticism neglected.

Hazony, like Conor Cruise O’Brien before him, traces the origins of nationalism to ancient Israel, where a unique, yet potentially universal, deity had a culturally distinct and exclusive clientele. This exclusive biblical perspective subsequently formed the “pillar of the Protestant construction of western civilization”. In its Calvinist manifestation, notably in the United Provinces of the Netherlands after 1581 and the English Commonwealth of 1649–52, the elect people covenanted with God to establish a new Israel freed from the Babylonian captivity of Catholic absolutism. In a similar vein, the Mayflower pilgrims to the new promised land drew up a

covenant with God to be governed by the articles they made to establish “a civil bodie politicke” in the vast wilderness of the world that was America.

Order, understood in terms of this “Protestant construction” of self-determining states, offered a protected space of peace and prosperity. This fortress of order, moreover, constitutes the only practical basis for the development of free institutions and constitutional, rather than abstract, rights and liberties.

Such virtuous nationalism, then, recognises “the large interest that all mankind shares in a world of independent and self-determining nations, each pursuing interests and aspirations” uniquely their own. Good fences make good neighbours, and nation-states necessarily tolerate “diverse ways of life”. Liberation from the rationalist vice of universal imperialism creates an environment of “astonishingly productive competition amongst nations as each strives to attain the maximal development of its abilities and those of its members”. Even classical liberals, like John Stuart Mill, considered national liberty “an ordering principle for the entire world”. In *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) Mill maintained that European progress reflected the “plurality of paths” adopted by its various states and “the remarkable diversity” of their cultures.

By contrast, the contemporary progressive character, defined as “the international good citizen”, is ill at ease in this plural, nation-state order. Progressives discover victims everywhere and pursue universal norms to alleviate their pain both locally and globally. After the Cold War, this ethical imperialism could not tolerate Western nations charting unilateral courses that contravened internationally agreed rules.

However, its moral judgment appeared strangely prejudiced. Thus, the progressive elite considers Brexit or Trump’s independent approach to international agreements deplorable, whilst Russia’s or China’s more flagrant breaches of international law are overlooked. In a similar vein, progressive opprobrium greets any Israeli action in the Gaza Strip while the savagery of Islamist terrorists or Third World despots evokes only mild disapproval. What accounts for this double standard?

Hazon offers a plausible answer. All ideologies assume that world history follows an inexorable trajectory towards a realisable utopia. In its post-Cold War progressive manifestation, liberalism assumes

a teleological progression from barbarism to the triumph of reason culminating in a universal state.

Before the Second World War, liberal idealist teleology traded at a political discount. This all changed, however, after 1945, when the political class maintained that European peace and progress required a paradigm shift, “dismantling the states in which they live for the rule of an international regime”. Such a world state responded to pure reason, advancing to the union of nations that Immanuel Kant first anticipated in *Perpetual Peace* (1795).

Ignored for two centuries, an academically reinvigorated Kantianism now pervades the progressive mind. Transnational elites have come to share Kant’s *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (1784). History, from this perspective, proceeds through three stages: from tribal barbarism, through the intermediary stage of the nation-state, to the ultimate realisation of Kant’s “eschatological

hope”—a world state. During the nation-state stage, more advanced states would “renounce their savage and lawless freedom, adapt themselves to public coercive laws and thus form an international state, which would continue to grow until it embraced all the people of the earth”. Those who advanced it formed an enlightened, morally mature, cosmopolitan vanguard.

The problem such an idealist version of the end of history encountered in practice was that nations and cultures moved along the path

from barbarism to the rule of universal reason at a different pace. While Europeans and progressive American Democrats were well advanced on the road to moral maturity, less developed peoples in the Middle East, Asia and Africa remained at a politically prepubescent stage.

Consequently, the moral and legal standards applied to the advanced West could not apply to Turkey, Syria, Iran, or ISIS, whose murderous behaviour indicated a state of childish savagery from which virtually nothing moral could be expected. Cosmopolitan progressives patronisingly assume these moral adolescents will eventually grow up, but the process may be long and require great tolerance.

At the same time, this cosmopolitan worldview espouses a fanatical intolerance for those it deems to have apostatised from its progressive faith. Thus it excuses a Daesh-style management of savagery in Raqqa, while condemning Israeli conduct for defending its political integrity against Hamas or Hizbollah. This otherwise paradoxical behaviour is explained by the fact that the liberal mind considers

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Israel nominally European and an Enlightenment product that has reneged upon the values that after 1945 characterised good, progressive, international citizenship.

The moral contortions of this rebooted Kantianism consequently subject Israel to a higher moral standard than “more primitive Arabs and Palestinians”, because Israelis are really Europeans. In 2014, the Danish ambassador to Jerusalem revealed the nature of this moral posture when he informed his hosts, without evident irony, that Europe had the “right to insist that we apply double standards” to Israel. A further consequence of such hypocrisy is progressive tolerance of anti-Semitism and the otherwise bizarre comparison of Israel with Hitler’s Nazi regime.

What the Israel case exemplifies, Hazony observes, is the neglected capacity for liberal tolerance to turn to hatred for those who dissent from its universal claims. Intolerance is a “direct consequence of the advance of their own aspiration of attaining universal order”. In the eyes of the liberal imperialist, every dissident and every dissent looks the same. Hence whether it is Israel, Serbia or South Africa, or more recently, Trump’s unilateralism or the UK’s pursuit of Brexit, a fanatic hatred is turned upon any movement with a nominal European heritage that severs its connection to the liberal project.

Contra declinism, then, Hazony locates our current predicament in the hubristic ambition of liberal theory and practice. Unlike Goldberg, he finds John Locke and Friedrich Hayek the problem rather than the solution to the dilemma of modernity. The abstract notion of individual rational consent to a social contract and the limited and accountable government that followed, invited utopian speculation. It culminated in Jurgen Habermas’s and John Rawls’s neo-Kantian fantasies of post-national constellations agreeing on procedural rules as the basis for public reason and the progressive cult of social justice. Such rationalism prefers abstract rule by universal principles and dismisses the contingent traditions of particular and culturally different nation-states.

Political and academic discourse, predisposed to this liberal epistemology, occupies itself with a theory of just government based on individual consent rather than troubling itself with the actual foundations of political order. Yet foundation myths and biblical-style covenants were not the acts of rationally consenting adults. Romulus killed Remus and Cain accounted for Abel. As Hannah Arendt observed, “whatever political organisation man has achieved has its origin in crime”.

A return to political realism would perhaps undermine the abstract, academic preoccupation with just, normative procedures. It might also absolve self-loathing Westerners from the tyranny

of guilt and the cult of victimhood that haunts contemporary progressive debate. Rational abstraction only inspires normative nonsense.

Goldberg and Hazony contribute, in different ways, to our understanding of the progressive delusion that has distorted Western democracy, and alert us to what might be at stake in the protean populist awakening that has emerged as an inchoate response. In Western Europe and North America, the pragmatic return to the virtues of the nation-state, in the wake of imperial liberal failure, might as Hazony infers offer a neglected democratic resource.

Yet as Ernest Gellner explained, although it might look for historic roots, nationalism is a direct consequence of the centrally administered modern state. The social mobility, anonymity and atomisation of the modern state, together with the semantic nature of work, require a base of a homogenous high culture, or nation.

However, the promise of cultural and linguistic separateness as the basis for diverse *kulturstaats* ultimately offers no solution. The right to self-determination, which Hazony applauds, might sound like a national principle which could be implemented, and generate uniquely binding solutions in diverse, concrete situations. But in political practice, as recent European history shows, state and culture rarely coincide. Moreover, various procedures—demographic, historic or geographic—that might make them coincide cut across each other. The former Yugoslavia demonstrates the murderous demographic rationality of applying such cross-cutting procedures.

Ultimately, Gellner says, “we may be doomed to a painful compromise between the longing for a meaningful order and the demands of rationalism and scepticism”. Disenchantment and the iron cage may be our fate and politics may have to acknowledge them rather than aspire to abolish them. In the context of a burgeoning populism, stability, continuity and affluence should be recognised as political goods that soften manners. As Gellner notes, “People who are affluent or who believe themselves to be in an improving situation are much less likely to be tempted into violent conduct which will disrupt their world, than people whose situation is deteriorating.” It is the sense of an economic as well as a morally deteriorating situation that nationalism exploits and a prudent conservatism must thoughtfully address.

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