A Weaker West Opens the Way for the Rest of the World—Good and Bad

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“So far, the 21st century has been a rotten one for the western model,” according to a new book, The Fourth Revolution, by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge.

This seems an extraordinary admission from two editors of the Economist, the flag-bearer of English liberalism, which has long insisted that the non-west could only achieve prosperity and stability through western prescriptions. It almost obscures the fact that the 20th century was blighted by the same pathologies that today make the western model seem unworkable, and render its fervent advocates a bit lost.

The most violent century in human history, it was hardly the best advertisement for the “bland fanatics of western civilization,” as the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr called them at the height of the Cold War, “who regard the highly contingent achievements of our culture as the final form and norm of human existence.”

Niebuhr was critiquing a fundamentalist creed that has colored our view of the world for more than a century: that western institutions of the nation-state and liberal democracy will be gradually generalized around the world,
and that the aspiring middle classes created by industrial capitalism will bring about accountable, representative and stable governments—that every society, in short, is destined to evolve just as the west did.

**A WORLD IN FLAMES** | One event after another in recent months has cruelly exposed such facile narratives. China, though market-friendly, looks further from democracy than before. The experiment with free-market capitalism in Russia has entrenched a kleptocratic regime with a messianic belief in Russian supremacism. Authoritarian leaders, anti-democratic backlashes and right wing extremism define the politics of even such ostensibly democratic countries as India, Israel, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Turkey.

The atrocities of this summer in particular have plunged political and media elites in the west into stunned bewilderment and some truly desperate cliches. The extraordinary hegemonic power of their ideas had helped them escape radical examination when the world could still be presented as going America’s way. But their preferred image of the west—the idealized one in which they sought to remake the rest of the world—has been consistently challenged by many critics, left or right, in the west as well as the east.

Herzen was already warning in the 19th century that “our classic ignorance of the western European will be productive of a great deal of harm; racial hatred and bloody collisions will develop from it.” Herzen was skeptical of those liberal “westernizers” who believed that Russia could progress only by diligently emulating western institutions and ideologies.

Intimate experience and knowledge of Europe during his long exile there had convinced him that European dominance, arrived at after much fratricidal violence and underpinned by much intellectual deception and self-deception, did not amount to “progress.”

Herzen, a believer in cultural pluralism, asked a question that rarely occurs to today’s westernizers: “Why should a nation that has developed in its own way, under completely different conditions from those of the west European states, with different elements in its life, live through the European past, and that, too, when it knows perfectly well what that past leads to?”

The brutality that Herzen saw as underpinning Europe’s progress turned out, in the next century, to be a mere prelude to the biggest bloodbath in history:

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two world wars, and ferocious ethnic cleansing that claimed tens of millions of victims.

The imperative to emulate Europe’s progress was nevertheless embraced by the ruling elites of dozens of new nation-states that emerged from the ruins of European empires in the mid-20th century, and embarked on a fantastic quest for western-style wealth and power. Today, racial hatred and bloody collisions ravage the world where liberal democracy and capitalism were expected to jointly reign.

This moment demands a fresh interrogation of what Neibuhr euphemistically called “the highly contingent achievements of the west,” and closer attention to the varied histories of the non-west. Instead, the most common response to the present crisis has been despair over western “weakness”—and much acrimony over what Barack Obama, president of the “sole superpower” and the “indispensable nation” should have done to fix it.

THE STATE FIRST, LIBERTY LATER  | A faith in the west’s superiority has not always been an obstacle to understanding the tormented process of modernization in the rest of the world, as the French anti-communist Raymond Aron demonstrated in books like Progress and Disillusion (1968) and The Opium of the Intellectuals (1955). Aron believed the west made the modern world with its political and economic innovations and material goals, but did not flinch from examining what this fact really augured about the modern world. As he saw it, the conflicts and contradictions thrown up by the pursuit of modernity had been hard enough to manage for western societies for much of the last century.

Industrial societies alone had seemed able to improve material conditions, and bring about a measure of social and economic equality; but the promise of equality, which staved off social unrest, was increasingly difficult to fulfill because specialization kept producing fresh hierarchies.

Some parts of the west had achieved some reduction in material inequalities, due to a market economy which produced both desirable goods and the means to acquire them; organized labor, which made it possible for workers to demand higher wages; and political liberty, which made the rulers accountable to the ruled. And some western countries had also, however
brutally, got the sequencing broadly right: they had managed to build resilient states before trying to turn peasants into citizens. ("We have made Italy; now we must make the Italians," the Italian nationalist Massimo d’Azeglio famously proclaimed in 1860.)

The most successful European states had also accomplished a measure of economic growth before gradually extending democratic rights to a majority of the population. "No European country," Aron pointed out, "ever went through the phase of economic development which India and China are now experiencing, under a regime that was representative and democratic."

Nowhere in Europe, he wrote in The Opium of Intellectuals, "during the long years when industrial populations were growing rapidly, factory chimneys looming up over the suburbs and railways and bridges being constructed, were personal liberties, universal suffrage and the parliamentary system combined."

Countries outside the west, however, faced simultaneously the arduous tasks of establishing strong nation-states and viable economies, and satisfying the demands for dignity and equality of freshly politicized peoples. This made the importation of western measures and techniques of success in places that "have not yet emerged from feudal poverty" an unprecedented and perilous experiment. Travelling through Asia and Africa in the 1950s, Aron discerned the potential for authoritarianism as well as dark chaos.

There were not many political choices before societies that had lost their old traditional sources of authority while embarking on the adventure of building new nation-states and industrial economies in a secular and materialist ethos. These rationalized societies, constituted by "individuals and their desires," had to either build a social and political consensus themselves or have it imposed on them by a strongman. Failure would plunge them into violent anarchy.

Aron was no vulgar can-doist. American individualism, the product of a short history of unrepeatable national success, in his view, "spreads unlimited optimism, denigrates the past, and encourages the adoption of institutions which are in themselves destructive of the collective unity." Nor was he a partisan of the blood-splattered French revolutionary tradition, which requires "people to submit to the strictest discipline in the name of the ultimate freedom"—whose
latest incarnation is ISIS and its attempt to construct a utopian “Islamic State” through a reign of terror.

**THE STATE UNDER SIEGE**

Applied to the many nation-states that emerged in the mid-20th century, Aron’s sombre analysis can only embarrass those who have been daydreaming since 1989 about a worldwide upsurge of liberal democracy in tandem with capitalism. Indeed, long before the rise of European totalitarianisms, urgent state-building and the search for rapid and high economic growth had doomed individual liberties to a precarious existence in Japan. Singapore, Taiwan, Malaysia and South Korea went on to show, after 1945, that a flourishing capitalist economy always was compatible with the denial of democratic rights.

China has more recently achieved a form of capitalist modernity without embracing liberal democracy. Turkey now enjoys economic growth as well as regular elections; but these have not made the country break with long decades of authoritarian rule. The arrival of Anatolian masses in politics has actually enabled a demagogue like Erdoğan to imagine himself as a second Atatürk.

Turkey, however, may have been relatively fortunate in being able to build a modern state out of the ruins of the Ottoman empire.

Disorder was the fate of many new nations that had been insufficiently or too fervidly imagined, such as Myanmar and Pakistan; their weak state structures and fragmented civil society have condemned them to oscillate perennially between civilian and military despots while warding off challenges from disaffected minorities and religious fanatics.

Until the Arab spring, ruthless despots kept a lid on sectarian animosities in the nation-states carved out of the Ottoman empire. Today, as the shattering of Iraq, Libya and Syria reveals, despotism, far from being a bulwark against militant disaffection, is an effective furnace for it.

Countries that managed to rebuild commanding state structures after popular nationalist revolutions—such as China, Vietnam, and Iran—look stable and cohesive when compared with a traditional monarchy such as Thailand or wholly artificial nation-states like Iraq and Syria.

The bloody regimes inaugurated by Khomeini and Mao survived some terrible internal and external conflicts—the Korean and Iran-Iraq wars, the
Cultural Revolution and much fratricidal bloodletting—partly because their core nationalist ideologies secured consent from many of their subjects.

Since 1989, however, this strenuously achieved national consensus in many countries has been under siege from a fresh quarter: an ideology of endless economic expansion and private wealth-creation that had been tamed in the mid-20th century.

After its most severe global crisis in the 1930s, capitalism had suffered a decline in legitimacy, and in much of the non-western world, planned and protected economic growth had become the chosen means to such ends as social justice and gender equality.

In our own age, feral forms of capitalism, which after the Depression were defanged by social-welfarism in the west and protectionist economies elsewhere, have turned into an elemental force. Thus, nation-states already struggling against secessionist movements by ethnic and religious minorities have seen their internal unity further undermined by capitalism’s dominant ethic of primitive accumulation and individual gratification.

China, once the world’s most egalitarian society, is now even more unequal than the United States—1 percent of its population owns one-third of the national wealth—and prone to defuse its increasing social contradictions through a hardline nationalism directed at its neighbors, particularly Japan. Many formally democratic nation-states, such as India, Indonesia, and South Africa, have struggled to maintain their national consensus in the face of the imperative to privatize basic services such as water, health and education (and also, for many countries, to de-industrialize, and surrender their sovereignty to markets). Mobile and transnational capital, which de-territorializes wealth and poverty, has made state-building and its original goals of broad social and economic uplift nearly impossible to achieve within national boundaries.

The elites primarily benefitting from global capitalism have had to devise new ideologies to make their dominance seem natural. Thus, India and Israel, which started out as nation-states committed to social justice, have seen their foundational ideals radically reconfigured by a nexus of neoliberal politicians and majoritarian nationalists, who now try to bludgeon their disaffected subjects into loyalty to a “Jewish state” and a “Hindu nation.” Demagogues in Thailand,
Myanmar, and Pakistan have emerged at the head of populations angry and fearful about being deprived of the endlessly postponed fruits of modernity.

Identified with elite or sectarian interests, the unrepresentative central state in many countries struggles to compete with offers of stability and order from non-state actors. Not surprisingly, even the vicious ISIS claims to offer better governance to Sunnis angry with the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad. So do Maoist insurgents who control large territories in Central India, and even drug-traffickers in Myanmar and Mexico.

**A SHATTERED MIRROR** | The political scientist Francis Fukuyama, asserting that the “power of the democratic ideal” remains immense, claimed earlier this year that “we should have no doubt as to what kind of society lies at the end of History.” But the time for grand Hegelian theories about the rational spirit of history incarnated in the nation-state, socialism, capitalism, or liberal democracy is now over.

Looking at our own complex disorder we can no longer accept that it manifests an *a priori* moral and rational order, visible only to an elite thus far, that will ultimately be revealed to all.

How then do we interpret it? Reflecting on the world’s “pervasive raggedness” in the last essay he wrote before his death in 2006, the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz spoke of how “the shattering of larger coherences ... has made relating local realities with overarching ones... extremely difficult.” “If the general is to be grasped at all,” Geertz wrote, “and new unities uncovered, it must, it seems, be grasped not directly, all at once, but via instances, differences, variations, particulars—piecemeal, case by case. In a splintered world, we must address the splinters.”

Such an approach would necessarily demand greater attention to historical specificity and detail, the presence of contingency, and the ever-deepening contradictions of nation-states amid the crises of capitalism. It would require asking why nation-building in Afghanistan and Iraq failed catastrophically while decentralization helped stabilize Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim country, after a long spell of despotic rule supported by the middle class.

It would require an admission that Iraq can achieve a modicum of stability not by reviving the doomed project of nation-state but through a return to
Ottoman-style confederal institutions that devolve power and guarantee minority rights.

Addressing the splinters leaves no scope for vacuous moralizing against “Islamic extremism”: in their puritanical and utopian zeal, the Islamic revolutionaries brutally advancing across Syria and Iraq resemble the fanatically secular Khmer Rouge more than anything in the long history of Islam.

A fresh grasp of the general also necessitates understanding the precise ways in which western ideologues, and their non-western epigones, continue to “make” the modern world.

“Shock-therapy” administered to a hapless Russian population in the 1990s and the horrific suffering afterwards set the stage for Putin’s messianic Eurasianism. But, following Geertz’s insistence on differences and variations, the resentment of the west articulated by nationalists in Russia, China, and India cannot be conflated with the resistance to a predatory form of modernization—ruthless dispossession by a profit-driven nexus of the state and business—mounted by indigenous peoples in Tibet, India, Peru and Bolivia.

In any case, the doubters of western-style progress today include more than just marginal communities and some angry environmental activists.

Last month the Economist said that, on the basis of IMF data, emerging economies—or the “large part of humanity” that Cambridge historian Christopher Bayly and author of The Birth of the Modern World called the “long-term losers” of history—might have to wait for three centuries in order to catch up with the west.

In the Economist’s assessment, which pitilessly annuls the upbeat projections beloved of consultants and investors, the last decade of rapid growth was an “aberration” and “billions of people will be poorer for a lot longer than they might have expected just a few years ago.”

The implications are sobering: the non-west not only finds itself replicating the west’s violence and trauma on an infinitely larger scale. While helping inflict the profoundest damage yet on the environment—manifest today in rising sea levels, erratic rainfall, drought, declining harvests, and devastating floods—the non-west also has no real prospect of catching up with the west.

How do we chart our way out of this impasse? His own discovery of the
tragically insuperable contradictions of westernization led Aron into the odd company of the many thinkers in the east and the west who questioned the exalting of economic growth as an end in itself. Of course, other ways of conceiving of the good life have existed long before a crudely utilitarian calculus—which institutionalizes greed, credits slavery with economic value and confuses individual freedom with consumer choice—replaced thinking in our most prominent minds.

Such re-examinations of liberal capitalist ideas of “development,” and exploration of suppressed intellectual traditions, are not nearly as rousing or self-flattering as the rhetorical binaries that make laptop bombers pound the keyboard with the caps lock glowing green.

Barack Obama, who struggled to adhere to a wise policy of not doing stupid stuff, has launched another open-ended war after he was assailed for being weak by assorted can-doists.

Plainly, Anglo-American elites who are handsomely compensated to live forever in the early 20th century, when the liberal-democratic west crushed its most vicious enemies, will never cease to find more brutes to exterminate. The rest of us, however, have to live in the 21st century, and prevent it from turning into yet another rotten one for the western model.

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