



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Herman Gorter: An Introduction to the End of a World

Freyberg-Inan, A.; van Eijk, A.

DOI

[10.1007/978-3-031-13722-8_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13722-8_5)

Publication date

2023

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

The Palgrave Handbook of Global Politics in the 22nd Century

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act (<https://www.openaccess.nl/en/in-the-netherlands/you-share-we-take-care>)

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Freyberg-Inan, A., & van Eijk, A. (2023). Herman Gorter: An Introduction to the End of a World. In L. Horn, A. Mert, & F. Müller (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Politics in the 22nd Century* (pp. 61-80). Palgrave Macmillan. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13722-8_5

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Herman Gorter

Barzun Archive and Research Center, Senior Fellow
Journal of Socio-Cultural Entropy (defunct), Founding Editor



Caution

You are reading an archived version of this researcher's academic blog. The author has since been removed from TruAcademia for repeated violations of democratic truth.

As a TruCheck™ Trusted Moderator, you still have access to this author's publications for research purposes. However, the redistribution of any content contained in this file violates the terms of TruAcademia and can result in sanctions.



Herman Gorter: An Introduction to the End of a World

Annette Freyberg-Inan and Alexander van Eijk

I 7 NEWTONUARY, YEAR
61 SINCE THE CONFERENCE (SC)

TruCheck™: 43

Like most of my generation, I was born in wartime. It has never felt quite right to me, though, to call it war. Of course, the Great Upheaval was not a war in the traditional sense. There were no clear frontlines, no state-controlled armies, no stable governments to rally behind or revolt against. It was wartime without the structure of war. Unguided, near-total destruction.

By the time I was born, my parents had already fled three times. When I turned six, we were forced to pack what little we had into our worn-out trollies again. No matter where we landed, the same story unfolded. When the fighting neared whichever town we found ourselves in, the orchards and fields became battlegrounds, until there was nothing to put on our bread and, eventually, no bread. Factories and workshops became barracks or outposts; stockpiles were pillaged by whoever's militias got there first. The town was starved out and abandoned. After roaming for weeks, we would find another

A. Freyberg-Inan (✉)
University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: A.FreybergInan@uva.nl

A. van Eijk
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature
Switzerland AG 2023

L. Horn et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Politics
in the 22nd Century*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13722-8_5

town to settle in, far enough from the fighting, until some local tyrant would raise their own brand of hell-on-earth. I remember quite clearly our three months in Rostock. I was nine. Unable to afford the self-appointed border guard's passage fee, we were separated until my father had worked long enough at gunpoint to pay our dues. And yet, my story is one of the few lucky ones—simply because I am able to tell it.

Why am I dwelling on this long-gone misery? Perhaps I am feeling more acutely now than when I was younger that I am one of the last few able to tell these stories. The world moves on, and humanity's attention cannot hold on to all that has passed. Time's healing of wounds leaves behind ugly scars. But scar tissue is unable to tell its own story, it only hints at some distant and preferably forgotten terror. Like a soldier who can no longer remember exactly which battle or whose bullet is responsible for each scar on their war-torn body, our civilisation today is likely to forget how all humanity was plunged into bloodshed. Of course, the Great Upheaval is written into our textbooks, and students the world over know its general trajectory—even sixty years after the Universal Armistice and the Global Conference. School examinations test whether we can remember the date when this faction took over that town, or when this group made peace with that group, but how much about the Upheaval's causes will still be understood—truly understood—fifty years from now?

No, humanity's attention-span is too short to properly learn from its mistakes; I have been a historian for too long to think otherwise. This is why I have written the books I have written and why I am now starting this new digital publication. Consider it an old man's last attempt; neither my books nor my lectures have had much impact. Perhaps here, in blog-format, with regularly posted shorter texts and interaction through comments I will finally convince an audience, even if a small one. If I am to have a legacy at all, I would wish for it to be this: to have warned that the deep causes of the Great Upheaval are not extinct but instead likely to reconfigure, to wreak destruction once again. "War? In our time?" The younger generation laughs in disbelief. Yes, if we can know one thing for certain from many centuries of history, it is that humanity's most hideous tradition will never be banned forever.

Comments

Henk Dijkma

(TruCheck™: 89)

Researcher Emeritus

I understand your concerns. I, too, lived through some of the darkest days of the Upheaval and have often wondered if future generations would repeat our parents' mistakes. Thankfully, though, I have seen that my grandchildren know nothing of "humanity's most hideous tradition", and therefore I believe that the new world we leave behind will not see such suffering again.

Marge Thrace

(TruCheck™: 67)

Student

Whenever I read or hear those harrowing stories of the Great Upheaval, I just can't wrap my head around why anyone would do these things to their fellow humans. Thank you for sharing your own story, and rest assured that your fears for the future are unfounded. The beastly past will find no fertile ground to re-grow in our peaceful present.

Elysa Singh
(TrueCheck™: 20)
Archivist

Professor Gorter, how nice that you are posting. I remember your lectures about the historiography of the twentieth century wars. You taught us about Arnold Toynbee, Feliks Karol Koneczny, and Oswald Spengler. Those were the days...

2 HERMAN GORTER | ALL SUNS RISE TO SET

3 Cao, Year 61 SC

Caution

The following post mentions an outdated theory that has been algorithmically disproven and contradicts democratic truth.

The theory of socio-cultural entropy, first introduced in H. Gorter's *The Past, Present and Future of Human Folly* (35 SC), is centred on the false idea that human history necessarily entails the cyclical rise and fall of civilisations. Among the democratically disproven claims it contains is the idea that the Global Conference did not move humanity beyond the terrors of the past and that our current world of peace and prosperity will meet the same violent end as that of the previous era of liberalism.

For more information on how TrueCheck™ is removing falsehoods from contemporary research and securing more productive environments for academic discussion, see our [guidelines](#).

TruCheck™: 23

To properly understand the present and, thereby, to know something about what the future will hold, there is no greater repository of insight than the past. This is what has made my last two decades of work at the Barzun Archive and Research Centre so fulfilling. By delving deeply into history, I have come to know of the rise and fall of civilisations long gone¹—and the more I learn of them, the better I understand our own. This has led me to further refine my theory of socio-cultural entropy. For those unfamiliar with my work, I will take some time here to discuss it.

One name that returns again and again in historiographic and philosophical works from both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is that of a certain Georg Hegel. It is one of history's many little ironies that their name is not more popularly known today, for in many ways we have all become Hegelians. You might even say that it is to this distant acquaintance, born 293 years before the Global Conference, that we today owe our great material welfare.

¹ Jacques Barzun (2001). *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life*. Harper Perennial.

The world we find ourselves in at present is largely founded on their thought, picked up by the generations of scholars that followed.

Hegel's greatest contribution to the understanding of civilisation, which in many ways inspired my own, is the notion that history can be understood as the ever-fluid unfolding of greater and greater ideas, introduced by Hegel in terms of "the Spirit."

Spirit is indeed never at rest but always engaged in moving forward. But just as the first breath drawn by a child after its long, quiet nourishment breaks the gradualness of merely quantitative growth – there is a qualitative leap, and the child is born – so likewise the Spirit in its formation matures slowly and quietly into its new shape, dissolving bit by bit the structure of its previous world, whose tottering state is only hinted at by isolated symptoms.²

Hegel held that the collective knowledge of humanity has not ceased expanding since the very first inventions and continually drives us to change the world around us. It would be difficult to refute such a claim. From the First Industrial Revolution to the Seventh, our breakthroughs in science, technology and culture have melted old worlds away and brought forth unimaginable progress. The invention of electricity, the introduction of the automobile all the way through to our most recent advances in automated agriculture and regenerative healthcare—the civilisations of days past are dissolved and our ways of living radically altered.

However, Hegelianism does entail one fatal problem. This problem did not start with Hegel, but their work represents its strongest propagation in the modern age. Hegel claims:

But the *goal* is as necessarily fixed for knowledge as the serial progression; it is the point where knowledge no longer needs to go beyond itself, where Notion corresponds to object and object to Notion.³

While Hegel seems to strike the nail on the head so well in their consideration of the fluid movement of history, driven on by human discoveries and hardly observable to anyone living through it, they make the hubristic mistake of supposing that history has an end. And this is a mistake we encounter, unfailingly, at some point in the development of every civilisation of the past, as well as now, once again, in our own.

To better grasp the problem with the idea of history ending, we must delve even deeper into the past: to fourteenth-century Andalucía. Here, a certain Ibn Khaldun wrote a work of great insight, even foresight. Central to this work, the *Muqadimmah*, is a cyclical understanding of political time. To Ibn Khaldun, every ruling dynasty comes to power exactly when it should, when it is most powerful and most deserving of hegemony. Its power is explained in

² G.W.F. Hegel (1807). *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Private collection.

³ G.W.F. Hegel (1807). *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Private collection.

terms of *assabiyah*, roughly translatable as group feeling or solidarity, since in order to gain its position it must have been able to rally the necessary support among the right people. Once in power, though, the necessity to maintain *assabiyah* gradually fades and the once-powerful new elite turns into a self-serving rentier class.

Then, when the ruling dynasty grows senile and no defender arises from among its friends who share in its group feeling, the (new group feeling) takes over and deprives the ruling dynasty of its power, and, thus, obtains complete royal authority.⁴

Within no more than three generations, Ibn Khaldun explains, a ruling clan's energy and force are so weakened that they are replaced by another. Of course, the same fate awaits these new rulers.

Let us add to our distinguished roster of theorists one final name: that of a cultural historian of the last century, Jacques Barzun. Long before any apparent signs of crisis in the late-liberal era, Barzun had taken on that true role of the historian: to understand the seemingly isolated symptoms of history running its course and reveal their connections. After all, the transition from one world to the next, the "qualitative leap," is not something that appears plainly to any observer. As Hegel wrote, the "tottering state [of our current world] is only hinted at by isolated symptoms," and it is the duty of science to bring about an understanding of these symptoms and what they tell us of our role in history's unfolding.

Following a thorough, *longue-durée* study, Barzun defined what it means for a culture to become decadent and argued that in the twentieth century the liberal era had begun to reach this crucial final chapter.

All that is meant by Decadence is "falling off." It implies in those who live in such a time no loss of energy or talent or moral sense. On the contrary, it is a very active time, full of deep concerns, but peculiarly restless, for it sees no clear lines of advance. The loss it faces is that of Possibility. The forms of art as of life seem exhausted, the stages of development have been run through. Institutions function painfully. Repetition and frustration are the intolerable result.⁵

There are essentially two components of a decadent culture. The first is a false self-confidence that precludes any serious consideration of necessary progress. In Barzun's words, this triumphalist notion is fuelled by the idea that all "stages of development have been run through"⁶—that the end has been reached. Now, this by itself would not have to lead to crisis, if the notion

⁴ Ibn Khaldun (date unknown, fourteenth century). *Muqaddimah*. Found in Southern Rhine Academy Digital Library.

⁵ Barzun (2001). *From Dawn to Decadence*, p. xvi.

⁶ Barzun (2001). *From Dawn to Decadence*, p. xvi.

were widely shared.⁷ But when the second component of cultural stagnation is added, society begins to fall apart. That component is the restlessness of deep concerns. As Barzun wrote, it is a mistake to think of cultural stagnation as entailing mental stagnation. It is rather a period of intense but undirected unrest. Fertile ground, Ibn Khaldun might say, for a hegemony to be overturned.

We might think of ourselves as far beyond the time of tribes and nomads and violent dynastic rivalries, but the force of Ibn Khaldun's analysis extends, as Barzun shows, beyond the desert kingdoms and equally dissects the industrial republics. The feudal lords of the Holy Roman Empire, the merchants of the Ming Dynasty or Golden Age Amsterdam, the financiers of New York's Wall Street or Shanghai's Stock Exchange—each ruling dynasty rose up when it was its time to do so, and was struck down and replaced by the same logic. The same mistake Hegel made, the misguided idea that we can one day reach perfection and end the struggle of history, has instilled in each settled civilisation a premature laziness, an unfounded self-confidence that brings about its own downfall.

This, if a life's work can be summed up in one metaphor, is the essence of my theory of socio-cultural entropy: all suns rise to set. As their fortune rises, a people stand awestruck and staring at their own magnificent sun, slowly burning their collective corneas. The very success of a hegemonic civilisational project—the feudalists' luxury, the capitalists' industry, our own conquest of material need—blinds the unknowing, momentary victors. So caught up in the delusion that what we have achieved is the insurmountable, the pinnacle, the end of history, we lose all sense of the necessity of progress. That is, until history does what it always does and proves that there is yet more to come.

With my TruCheck score only just starting to recover from my previous rejected publications, I am hesitant to go into more detail now. While I stand up against the supposedly apolitical, pseudo-scientific algorithms that so powerfully decide an academic's fate, I must admit that I enjoy some of the luxuries that come with a score just above abysmal. If I am to continue my research, I will require access to this forum and my colleagues. Therefore, I will leave my reader with a poem. Below you can read W.B. Yeats's *The Second Coming*, a work I discovered through Dolomiti's excellent archival studies of Pre-Conference mystic poetry.⁸ Trying to capture the essence of their own era, marked by a World War which would soon be relived, Yeats put into beautiful words the process that brings all epochs to an end: entropy and resurrection.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

⁷ Francis Fukuyama (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press.

⁸ Terra Dolomiti (Ψ 32 SC/2095). *Mystics and Mad-hatters: An Overview of Pre-Conference Esoteric Literature*. Caribbean Federation of Academic Publishers.

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
 The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
 When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
 Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
 A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
 Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
 Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
 The darkness drops again; but now I know
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Comments

Alexander Yves
 (TruCheck™: 88)
 Literary Translator

Ah, a beautiful poem by Yeats indeed. Really brings out the dastardliness and sense of impending doom that must have occupied every intelligent person of the early twentieth century. Also worth reading is Eliot's *Wasteland*: "He who was living is now dead // We who were living are now dying."

Herman Gorter
 (TruCheck™: 23)
 Senior Fellow

I think you are making a common mistake. For the most part, we can only peer into the minds of the past through the writings they leave behind, but we must not allow ourselves to make broad judgements based on the works of a few insightful individuals.

While many poems reveal an awareness of the fragility of liberal civilisation, these are vastly outweighed by cultural productions that seems blissfully unaware: television shows celebrating friendships and happy homes, movies that inspire hope, etc. It does not seem at all like the average citizen of the liberal epoch could really imagine their civilisation coming to a violent end.

Karel Rojas
 (TruCheck™: 72)
 Regional Secretary for Transportation

Your deep references to the past and revival of long-forgotten names are interesting and make for good reading. But honestly, what can we truly expect to learn from these long-gone lives? What can a man who lived before the invention of the inter-continental shuttle really tell me about my life today?

Penelope Bruynsma
(TruCheck™: 84)
Educational Consultant

“To properly understand the present and, thereby, to know something about what the future will hold, there is no greater repository of insight than the past.” I must disagree. If we are to move forward, we must look forward. The failures of the past must be left behind in the past—our civilisation has progressed beyond our ancestors’ mistakes and there is nothing more they can teach us.

3 HERMAN GORTER | INFANTILE SCHOLARS

29 Archimederia, Year 61 SC

TruCheck™: 2

If the theoretical remarks I have made in this series of posts so far seem strange or incomprehensible, it is because contemporary academia has been plagued for decades by infantile scholars and their self-confident ideology. To these hubristic optimists, history is a narrative of progressive development that concludes in our time—“the fulfilment of humanity,”⁹ as my misguided colleagues call it. In the echo-chamber of the contemporary academy, to say or think anything else is blasphemy. As a result, the contrary narratives and open discussion that are needed to arrive at real truth are self-censored and never emerge.

By far the strongest mechanism of control that keeps discussion at bay is the so-called TruCheck score that has so hindered my own career lately. Since its global introduction in 40 SC, my complaints about this fact-checking algorithm have fallen on deaf ears. After all, they say, the algorithm merely compares the statements in whatever one has written to all other published texts on that subject. As its inventors claim, TruCheck is founded on the ideal of an apolitical and unbiased democratic truth.¹⁰ But how can such an algorithm ever arrive at truth if its reference material is faulty? If I disagree with what has previously been written, does that mean I am wrong? If I really need to point out the decadent stifling of innovation implied by such an algorithm, I suppose it has already done its job too well.

Most readers will be too young to remember, but this was not always the way academia assured the quality of its output. In fact, for most of academic history, scientific work was valued through a system of peer review. This process was one of the oldest traditions of intellectual production; the first reference we have to it comes from a book on medical ethics from the ninth century (old calendar). In their *Ethics of the Physician*, the Arab medical doctor

⁹ Mahatma Polley et al. (Ψ 23 SC/2086). *The Fulfilment of Humanity: Our Treacherous Journey to Salvation*. SpringerWeb.

¹⁰ General Secretariat for Academic Affairs (Ψ 31 SC/2094). *The Foundations of Democratic Truth*. The Conference Press.

al-Ruhawi lays out that if a patient is to be declared cured, the treating physician must prepare their notes in duplicate so that another physician may look over the treatment and confirm the declared outcome.¹¹ In this vein, for centuries, scholars wanting to publish any of their work had to first submit it for review by one or more of their academic peers on the subject. In practice, these processes were not always perfect, sometimes corruptible and sometimes overly complex and resource-intensive. At the very least, though, the process of peer review implied a culture that was willing to discuss differing opinions and understood the value of considering an academic work on its own merit. With the introduction of the algorithmic review, all that is lost. With TruCheck, we have given up on the spirit of academic collaboration and have outsourced truth-finding to a machine.

Of course, algorithms are not in and of themselves problematic. The problem is that they perpetuate whatever biases their inventors bring with them, knowingly or otherwise. Take, for example, one of the worst results of this contemporary academic ideology: Rochelle Gupta's *The Human Project: From the Cave to the Conference*. I presume I will not need to provide more than a basic summary of the book. It is compulsory reading in practically every curriculum and one of but a handful of publications with the maximum TruCheck score of 100. The aim of the book is to provide a grand historical narrative of humanity from the time of Neanderthal cave-dwellers to the first Global Conference. It is the kind of work I would normally celebrate: *longue-durée*, ambitious and wide in its scope. Unfortunately, the book is held together by Gupta's constant reference to Plato's allegory of the cave, a rather unconvincing metaphor around which they structured the entire history of humanity.

No longer fixated and bewildered by mere shadows and reflections on the wall, our cave-dwellers one day braved the world behind the rocks. With tiny steps at first and then huge leaping strides, our heroes freed themselves from their previous lives in the dark and entered a new realm, the realm of truth. So, too, humanity emerged from the cave of undeveloped and uncivilised life after countless millennia of existence with unnecessary suffering, grief, and hatred. We cannot possibly imagine such lives now, and we shall never again need to, in the Paradise-on-Earth we have built for ourselves. To those who braved the first steps for us, we owe a great debt of gratitude.¹²

This is what my work is algorithmically compared against, yet somehow, I am revealed the sophist! We have had a mere sixty years of peace, a meaningless interval on history's watch. How different from our predecessors could we possibly have become in one lifetime? Our so-called democratic truth is no

¹¹ Al-Ruhawi (Date unknown, 9th Century). *Ethics of the Physician*. Found in Library of Medical Ethics, Athens (discontinued).

¹² Rochelle Gupta (Ψ 47 SC/2110). *The Human Project: From the Cave to the Conference*. Association of World-Historians Press.

more than a starry-eyed illusion, a self-confident self-deceit. If anyone is still living in the cave of ignorance, fixated on reflections of pseudo-truth, it is Gupta and all those academics who wear their TruCheck scores like badges of honour.

Comments

Mohammad Moustakas
(TruCheck™: 83)
Agricultural Mechanic

I am having trouble understanding your fears of the algorithm. For example, in the quote you reference above, I see no reason to disagree with Gupta and find only an algorithm working correctly. It is undeniably true that our lives are better than those of past generations and even more true that we could not imagine living otherwise now. Gupta's work is rightly rewarded as being correct, and I see no reason why this example you chose should make me distrust TruCheck™.

Herman Gorter
(TruCheck™: 2)
Senior Fellow

My problems with Gupta's work, and that of modern historians more generally, are too encompassing to be discussed in one comment, so I will focus on explaining my distrust of TruCheck more clearly. Under the peer-review process, if I disagreed vehemently with your work, I at least had to provide you and an editor with some explanation as to why I found it unfit for publication. Regardless of what you or I think about Gupta's work, if it is accepted under the algorithmic system, it becomes truth. All future statements are blindly tested against this truth and any disagreement is marked as incorrect. Surely, this is not science? This is a collective surrender to prevailing opinion. That peer-review system sounds like a ridiculous waste of time.

Anton Raj
(TruCheck™: 89)
Publisher

Layla Ernst
(TruCheck™: 92)
Researcher

To call contemporary academia an echo-chamber ignores the great variety of modern scholarly debate. Even just last week, at a conference in the Friedhof Academy, we spent hours in heated debate. My colleagues and I were split on the issue of whether work-related satisfaction is best measured through neural scanning or questionnaires. This is hardly an environment afraid of discussing diverse ideas!

4 HERMAN GORTER | THE CEREMONY OF INNOCENCE IS DROWNED

1 Balogunary, Year 62 SC

TruCheck™: 13

The central point I want to get across is this: history has a tendency, uninterrupted through millennia, to repeat itself. Every great civilisation of the past thought of itself as the completed ideal of humanity, and each and every one exists now only through remnants displayed in archaeological museums or stored in dusty archives. Going back as far in recorded history as we can, we see a surprisingly sophisticated awareness of this civilisational hubris in Herodotus's *Histories*.

If anyone, no matter who, were given the opportunity of choosing from amongst all the nations in the world the set of beliefs which he [sic] thought best, he [sic] would inevitably—after careful considerations of their relative merits—choose that of his [sic] own country. Everyone without exception believes his [sic] own native customs, and the religion he [sic] was brought up in, to be the best.¹³

This hubris affects comparisons across time as well as across space. Even Herodotus themselves, and within the very same text, refers only to their own polis by name and to all others simply as barbarians—they, too, could not escape the intoxication of success that came with the rise of Athens. Of course, we know now that Athenian democracy would fall, that the Roman Empire would split apart, that the Ottomans would be defeated, the Habsburgs, the Nazis, and so on and so on, all the way to the end of the Liberal Alliance along with the Sino-Russian Block.

Let us look at that most recently fallen civilisation: the liberal era. My parents lived through the liberals' final decades and suffered their violent end. To readers today, this time will at least be known from stories told by grandparents. People we know, people we love—not nearly as distant as Herodotus.

To properly understand the final century of the liberal era, the period we call late-liberalism, we can ask for no better guide than Barzun. Their definition of decadence, quoted in an earlier post in this series, grants us a clear view into the soul of this time. Drawing on it, we can say that decadence is defined by a loss of Possibility. Grave concerns exist among the people who live through an age of stagnation, but they find themselves at a loss to do anything with these concerns—all lines of advance have been closed off.

Before the Great Upheaval it had been all but forgotten that liberalism had arisen centuries before as a *revolutionary* social theory. For 200 years, the liberal principles of human equality and freedom from tyranny inspired some of the most beneficent developments in modern history. Centuries-old monarchies were overthrown, masses of long-ignored voices gained a hearing, and unprecedented opportunities became available to social classes that had never even been able to dream of progress before.

Just under a century before liberalism's violent collapse, however, its revolutionary spirit was lying in its final convulsions. In the decade of the 1960s on the old calendar, social movements the world over were agitating and taking to the streets: great anti-colonial revolts, western youth taking to the streets against the Vietnam War and atomic weaponry, US-Americans of colour marching against racism and French workers and students occupying institutions all over the country. After this brief moment of progressive fervour, however, the revolutionary spirit quickly waned. The Hippies had not succeeded in ending imperialist wars, the anti-racist movement in the US was

¹³ Herodotus (Date unknown, 5th Century BC). *Histories*. Found in The Progress Institute's Archive of World History.

appeared with the Civil Rights Act and the French Communists were defeated by a decisive Gaullist electoral triumph. A particularly bitter defeat was laid out for the Marxist anti-capitalists, whose prophecies of a revolutionary proletariat that would usher in a new world seemed decisively disproven.

Henceforth, anyone who wanted to do anything, politically, with their concerns found themselves hitting a brick wall of cynicism and arrogance: arrogance from liberal institutions, assured of being the pinnacle of human achievement and seeing no reason to listen to cries for change; cynicism from fellow citizens who, paralysed by disillusionment and inefficacy found themselves unable to forge progressive alliances. One of the few remaining Marxist philosophers, Slavoj Žižek, wrote at the time that late-liberal citizens resembled those of the classic fairy tale about the Emperor's New Clothes: late-liberal citizens all knew that the emperor was naked yet continued "going on as if the emperor ha[d] his [sic] clothes on."¹⁴ Together, the twin pathologies of arrogance and cynicism meant that, in the face of acute threats to human welfare, progress was both unthinkable and unachievable. "Repetition and frustration [we]re the intolerable result."¹⁵

Just as Ibn Khaldun laid out centuries earlier in the *Muqadimmah*, the ruling elite had completely detached itself from the populace, barely requiring their support. *Assabiyyah* waned. The result was a liberalism unchained; a force undeterred—"neo-liberalism," as they called it. The abuses of power, the wonton disrespect of anything and anyone by the capitalists in those days was truly shocking. Corporate leaders lost any sense of responsibility, displaying their affluence unashamedly in the face of mass poverty. Ridiculous amounts of money went, for example, to fund the space-travel adventures of immature billionaires, paid for by income generated by their hordes of underpaid employees.

Politicians also had no reason to take an active interest in the electorate. A defining trait of neo-liberal governance was an unwillingness to provide public benefits and a deep suspicion of anyone who required financial aid. Take, for example, the child benefits scandal of the early 2020s in the Netherlands, a small state along the old north-western shoreline of continental Europe. Here, the neo-liberal institutional culture led to an aggressive campaign of falsely accusing households of committing benefits fraud. Thousands of families, particularly migrant families, as they were the easiest to target and least likely to seek legal assistance, found themselves in unmanageable debt to the tax office. From one day to the next, victimised households owed on average just under a normal worker's yearly salary—to be repaid without delay. Lives were ruined wholesale, and relief or redemption for these families remained partial even after years of public pressure. An unimaginable cruelty—yet the politicians and the parties responsible won re-election the very same year the

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek (n.d.). "Ideology II: Competition is a Sin", <https://www.lacan.com/ziz/desolationroad.html>.

¹⁵ Barzun (2001). *From Dawn to Decadence*, p. xvi.

news had broken. In the neo-liberal climate, where one could get away with squeezing every last penny out of a struggling mother, why would a self-interested politician ever try to change anything? Even in the US, once an energetic driving force for liberalism in the world, elite turnovers could no longer bring any meaningful change.

As we now know, it was only a matter of time until a devastating crisis would reveal the unsustainability of late-liberalism. Its promises of endless growth and constantly rising standards of living for all had to be revealed as fallacies sooner or later. Drawing on the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, Žižek pointed out that

[...] (what we experience as) reality is not the ‘thing itself’, it is always-already symbolized, constituted, structured by symbolic mechanisms – and the problem resides in the fact that symbolization ultimately always fails, that it never succeeds in fully ‘covering’ the real, that it always involves some unsettled, unredeemed symbolic debt.¹⁶

Neo-liberal ideology incapacitated the truth that neo-liberalism did not work in the interest of its citizens, that human life could be better, more fulfilling and, most importantly, less unjust. On the one hand, this truth could be freely expressed—and was expressed at the time by many critics, ranging from Christians to anarchists to ecologists. On the other hand, the operation of ideology ensured that for the late-liberal subjects, there was no “real” in which an alternative possibility existed. As a result, their recognition of this truth remained suppressed, present but subconscious, feeding anger.

In liberalism’s age of decay, there were no channels left open to receive frustration—no political opportunities for even the smallest steps towards change. Finding no outlet in the realm of conventional politics, the late-liberal multitude of “singularities acting together”¹⁷ grew restless and increasingly angry. With nowhere to turn, it would not take long for political landscapes the world over to shift and power transitions to spread—haphazardly, opportunistically, violently. In all its decadence, amidst the vast meaninglessness of its politics, neo-liberalism had no more soothing narratives to offer its suffering citizens and gave way to ideological and material chaos.

The vacuum of meaning created by years of liberal decadence proved ample breeding ground for fundamentalisms of all kinds. The groups that rose up in the confusion were countless. The factions ranged from the plainly violent to the genuinely emancipatory, from futurisms to conservatism; but in the preparation for revolution, the peaceful always give way to the violent. Some texts

¹⁶ Slavoj Žižek (1994). *Mapping Ideology*. London: Verso, p. 21.

¹⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004). *Multitude: Krieg und Demokratie im Empire*. Frankfurt: Campus, p. 123. Hardt and Negri were naively optimistic at the time, believing that “the multitude” could bring about positive change.

of the time, like the long-banned *Blood and Borders*,¹⁸ highlight the importance of revived nativism; other surviving texts blame a growing quasi-religious fanaticism for the rising chaos.¹⁹ But exactly who or what was the primary cause of the violence that followed has not been definitively concluded, nor do contemporary researchers seem interested enough in the past to find out.

And so, one fateful day—where and when precisely remains unknown—the fighting started. The dispersed and initially repressed nature of these first clashes was such that they eluded most historical record-keeping. Perhaps the first bullet was fired by a hungry father, recently laid off from both of their part-time jobs. Or perhaps the first skull was crushed by a private security guard, too eager to follow their employer’s orders to keep the rabble out of their summer home. A wave of anger, following the realisation that the neo-liberal system would not budge an inch to help them, slowly spread throughout the citizenry. The police and military that held the hungry masses away from hoarded resources were denounced as enemies of the people, the politicians that attempted to sway protestors in various directions received death threats, and businesses and banks could only continue to operate with massively heightened security. By the late 2030s on the old calendar, terrorism, looting and destruction of property became rampant. Anything and anyone that stood in any relation to power and “the old world” was stripped of all authority and, often brutally, dethroned. The world sank into chaos.

Comments

Hylke Papandreos
(TruCheck™: 74)
Researcher

What is this obsession of yours with the past? Since the Conference, over 60 years ago, we haven’t had a need for all these “theorists” and “philosophers” you so relentlessly reference. Sure, the neo-liberal age of oppressive governance and daily injustice ought to have listened more to these theorists of yours, but all *our* society needs are simple, hard-working researchers.

¹⁸ Paul Ashworth (Ψ 2031). *Blood and Borders*. The Great British Press.

¹⁹ For a good discussion of the role of religion in the collapse of twenty-first century liberalism, I would recommend Marc Keru’s *The Death of Reason in the 21st Century* and Rohan Pleasant’s *Insipid Fundamentalism: Religion’s Re-conquest of Liberal Politics*.

José Hidayat
(TruCheck™: 78)
Industrial Consultant

The primary problem I see in all these historical civilisations that have come and gone is this: each previous society has existed as a system that serves the few and pacifies the many. Progress from one era to the next has always merely meant exchanging or expanding the incorporated few at the greater expense of the remaining many. The Athenian citizenry was tiny, compared to the mass of non-voters (slaves, women, etc.). By the time of the liberal era, those that benefitted directly from the system had expanded greatly in number, but were still a minority worldwide. This is the real fatal flaw of previous civilisations, and it is one we have since overcome. By putting science and technology to proper social use globally, the benefits of our system are not captured by any elite but are shared broadly. In this way, our civilisation has managed to avoid the fate of history and will continue doing so.

Kofi Grant
(TruCheck™: 38)
Student

How could the powerful of the past get away with such barbarian abuses of power? How come they were not stopped?

Zenadine Park
(TruCheck™: 68)
Regional Integration Engineer

The hardship you experienced as a boy was real, and I feel deeply sorry for you. Yet, your account of the Great Upheaval seems to me distorted to support your theory. I studied under some of the last scholars in the old field of International Relations, and there I learned that the Liberal order collapsed due to the challenge from the rival Sino-Soviet block and the resulting trade wars. While it is true that the liberal elites at the time failed to see this coming, their blindness is not causally responsible for the Upheaval.

Herman Gorter
(TruCheck™: 13)
Senior Fellow

You are not wrong. The collapse of the liberal hegemony knew its own, unique triggers of collapse, and those your best teachers could recognise after the fact. Yet, those in power at the time, on both sides, were blind to the tragic truth inherent to all civilizational projects: that a grave is always being dug for them—no matter how unique or unexpected the specific triggers seem. Had they not been blind, perhaps catastrophe could have been avoided

Kevin Plutonic
(TruCheck™: 19)
Musician

Catastrophe?! Are you calling it a catastrophe that humanity was able to leave behind a world divided into nation-states and torn by conflict? That we could form the Global Federation, and now all regions work together to eradicate poverty and repair the planet? You have got to be joking!

5 HERMAN GORTER | ON TIME, NARRATIVES, AND HEGEMONY

3 Basudia, Year 62 SC

TruCheck™: 2

It has been a pleasant surprise to see so much interaction with my work here in this series of posts. You will have to forgive me if I do not always respond. I have grown somewhat unaccustomed to discussion since I was expelled from the university and retreated to the Barzun Center. There is, however, one comment in particular, posted by José Hidayat, that has stuck with me over the past few days and that I want to engage with in more detail.

The primary problem I see in all these historical civilisations that have come and gone is this: each previous society has existed as a system that serves the few and pacifies the many. Progress from one era to the next has always merely meant exchanging or expanding the incorporated few at the greater expense of the remaining many.

This analysis is astute, and I am inclined to agree. From the Athenian democracies to the desert kingdoms and feudal dominions, all the way through to the merchant republics and the liberal state system, we can see this logic unfold. These were all systems that benefitted a growing minority at the cost of a shrinking majority. Even at the pinnacle of liberal global integration, the majority of humans globally lived in hardship to create value for the rich, at home and abroad. I have pointed out before that this helped trigger the violent decline of the previous civilisation, so it is an important point. Unfortunately, Hidayat then goes on to make the very mistake that I have spent decades of my career, including all of these digital posts, trying to correct.

By putting science and technology to proper social use, the benefits of our system are not captured by any elite but are shared broadly. In this way, our civilisation has managed to avoid the fate of history and will continue doing so.

I cannot blame Hidayat personally for making this mistake. As all my past work has shown, it is a mistake made by great minds of every generation. The omnipresence of this belief, that one's own civilisation is in some way ahead of the curve, or breaking the chain, indicates that it might even be at the foundation of human life. To explain this, allow me to dig once more into our understanding of history and ask: why do we think in linear, teleological time?

...

A narrative cannot exist without the passing of time; events must unfold over connected moments for a story to be told. So inseparable are the two that throughout most of human history we have demanded that the reverse be true as well. That is to say, to the rather easily confused human mind, time cannot pass without a narrative.

Confronted with the baffling nature of time, the seeming meaninglessness of its passing, the Church Father Augustine of Hippo composed the standard answer that would be repeated, in many different forms, from the fifth century (old calendar) to our own Post-Conference age:

What, then, is time? I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled. All the same I can confidently say that I know that if nothing passed, there would be no past time; if nothing were going to happen, there would be no future time; and if nothing *were*, there would be no present time.²⁰

To a people so unaccustomed to religion as our own, it is worth looking more closely at the Christian idea of time. While it should be noted that no singular truth ever existed either across or within the religions of the past, as reflected in the rivers of blood spilt over meaningless disputes, we can suggest that, generally, in the Christian imagination time was an essential characteristic of material life. Its inescapable passing could be noted in the movement of celestial bodies or in the slow deterioration of human ones. Of much more interest to the Christians, however, was the negation of time: the eternal afterlife. How one should imagine such non-time I recently discovered in a story preserved in the Delusion and Fanaticism Section of the Ibn Al-Rawandi Archive of Religious Ideology. According to the story, an old monk wandered out of their monastery, drawn by the beautiful singing of a chirping bird. Once the bird had ceased its harmony and the monk returned, they found that they could not recognise any of the other monks in the monastery. Immediately the old monk asked for the abbot and was presented again with a man they had never met before. It was only after much confusing discussion that one of the younger scribes decided to consult the records and discovered that the old monk had been recorded missing more than three centuries earlier.

The point of this story is that the monk had experienced a moment of the eternal afterlife. Fully immersed in the bird's beauty and harmonious song, the monk escaped the passing of time and was granted a small taste of the blissful eternity awaiting after a worthy life. This is the narrative presented by the Christian faith: time started when the Lord gave shape to the material world, and it will end when He [sic] chooses to take us out of this realm again. In other words, time is moving relentlessly onwards to a determined end when all progress will be complete, when time will stand still, and history will be completed. This is true for each individual as well as for humanity as a whole, whose life on earth will end with the Second Coming.

What makes the Augustinian grappling with the definition of time, quoted earlier, so striking is its rather frank admission of unknowing that yet miraculously resolves into confidence. The Church Father admits that time is very difficult to comprehend, baffling even, and yet, Augustine can "confidently"

²⁰ St. Augustine (Date unknown, 5th Century). *The Confessions*. Private collection.

tell us what it is. Precisely this confidence, or rather self-confidence, regarding the passing of time is central to the whole history of civilisation; it lies at the foundation of practically all human societies.

In my earlier discussion of Hegel, I explained that this teleology, the faith in the directionality of time, was propagated through history. While vast centuries stand between them, Augustine and Hegel have essentially the same notion of time: its passing is inescapable, yet one day it will end in the blissful resolution of history. The only substantive contribution of the modern view is that the eternal bliss is brought into the material world, as opposed to existing only in some invisible realm outside of human life.

So why must we think in linear time, why are we incapable of uncoupling time and narrative? There are essentially two reasons. First, as Augustine readily admitted, time is baffling. In the same vein as ancient myths portraying Sun-gods and Earth Mothers, we must tell ourselves *something* to make sense of this dimension of our world. Second, advocating the passing of time towards a determined end can be instrumental, as it helps us to justify our variously unfair positions in the world. This is reflected most directly in the early Christian notion of supersession, or the idea that, to paraphrase St. Ambrose of Milan, the Jews were in the shade and the Christians in the Sun—that the Christian faith was the next step towards salvation and that the down-trodden peoples of different convictions could rightfully be abandoned or even brutalised. In Hegel we see the same justification of group hegemony in comments concluding that the “supreme duty is to be a member of the state” and to love this body of bourgeois rule with genuine gratitude and patriotism because it is the culmination of human achievement. The notion of linear time can serve the legitimisation of mastery over others, as it can provide an explanation of one’s dominance as being “willed” by history, as serving the “march of time.”

This is true also of our own age. Returning to Hidayat’s comment, with our current order we have indeed massively expanded the pool of humans that benefit. As the slogan goes: “we have conquered material want, our politics are global, our emancipation is total.” But has there truly been a qualitative shift away from the dilemma that if someone feels a winner, another always loses? For example, ask the now-futile agriculturists how glad they are that they have outlived their occupation’s necessity. Their knowledge of working the land and tending to the flocks was passed down to them for countless generations. Ask them how glad they are that their care work has been replaced by genetic and agricultural engineering. Or ask the critical theorists, like myself, who have been marginalised out of the academy, how we benefitted from the global regime; how fortunate we feel to have our work stifled in the name of “democratic truth.” Yes, even in this paradise, there are miserable people!

Like the liberal capitalists before us, we are so intoxicated by our own successes that we risk ignoring the harm we do to others, who have doubts about what we perceive as progress and ask for deeper change. It is precisely this moment—when a once-revolutionary movement stops listening to its detractors, when it compartmentalises the suffering that supports its power—that a civilisation has taken its last step forward. Among the crowds on every shuttle and in the audiences of every holothreatre, there are probably disgruntled citizens with latent resentments. We must not allow civilisational overconfidence to deafen us to their silent voices.

In Hindu cosmology, the world is said to be cyclically progressing through four stages. First comes the Satya Yuga, a time of peace and welfare. In this golden age, the symbolic bull of dharma, or virtue, stands securely on all four of its feet. After a while, the bull loses its footing and balances only on three hooves, ushering in the Treta Yuga. Now, sin enters the stage and proud worldly masters claim their material share of worldly territory and resources. Once misery is introduced in the third stage, the Dvapara Yuga, the bull stands on only two of its legs, and it does not take long until the Kali Yuga commences and the world is enveloped in strife. But the bull always finds its feet again as the cycle returns to its starting point, and much of the previous troubles are forgotten.

The Hindus and their Yuga Cycles are perhaps the closest humanity has ever come to an understanding of political time. All suns rise to set; once the wick has been lit, a civilisation's candle slowly burns down, eventually setting the house on fire. But this is not the end of the world, it is merely the end of *a* world. There is always some next beast slouching towards Bethlehem, waiting to be born.

Comments

Roisin Singh
(TruCheck™: 93)
Industrial Consultant

What Luddite nonsense. What are we to do, return to the miserable past, so that some romantic agriculturists can continue their backwards traditions in peace? Next, you'll advocate the lunatic rituals of the Temple of Earthen Plenty! Luckily your TruCheck™ score will lead any reasonable person to read your opinions with the necessary incredulity.

Herman Gorter
(TruCheck™: 0)
Senior Fellow

My point is not to defend any particular group, and I certainly can't see myself amongst the neo-mystics of the Temple. That being said, your inability to empathise even to the slightest degree with their search for alternative meaning is yet more evidence of our time's growing decadence.

Howard Morillo
(TruCheck™: 67)
Student

Clearly, you think something must be done to prevent a second Great Upheaval, but you neglect to present any advice. What can be done to break out of this gloomy fate you lay out for us?

Herman Gorter
(TruCheck™: 0)
Senior Fellow

I do not know if we can, because thinking of ourselves as superior to our liberal forebears is itself part of the problem, and superior we would have to be to know before it is too late. Are we more watchful, less arrogant? Are we capable of immanent critique? The biggest mistake we can make is to think that we have “made it”. History never stops, it merely lulls us temporarily, and the human project can never lay still for long without a high price to pay. Awareness of this truth is no guarantee for success, but a lack of it guarantees failure.