

The significance of the twentieth century

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The politics of the twentieth century have been marked by three great processes: war, revolution and democratization. The first half of the century was dominated by two world wars – conflicts which engulfed almost all of Europe, and much of the Middle and Far East, and brought the hitherto isolated United States into the affairs of both Europe and Asia. The second half was marked, until 1991, by the more complex and multidimensional global rivalry of the Cold War. Militarily, this was a strategic competition between two blocs which threatened to destroy humanity in a nuclear nightmare. It was accompanied by a succession of wars in the Third World that left an estimated twenty million dead. These wars raged over the Middle East, southern Africa and Latin America, but the most intense and lethal were in East Asia – China in the late 1940s, Korea 1950–53, and Vietnam 1946–75.

Above all, the Cold War was an ideological conflict, a clash between two conceptions, and two heterogeneous social systems, as to how the world should be organized. It had a social, as much as a military or political, history. Millions fought and died for these rival conceptions. If, in the closing decade, there were those who doubted that the Cold War was ‘about’ anything, the scale of the change, and subjugation, visited after its end on the defeated Soviet bloc has settled this once and for all. Each side aspired to victory. One side won.

The most important dates, the punctuation marks of the century, are related to its constitutive processes: 1914 and 1939 for the world wars, 1917 and 1949 for the revolutions, 1945 and 1991 for democratization. There was no firebreak between these three processes. The world wars of the first half of the century were caused, above all, by the explosion of social conflict within developing authoritarian states on to the international arena, just as the Cold War was sustained by the contradictory, rival diversity of the capitalist and communist systems. At the termination of each of the three world conflicts – 1918, 1945, 1991 – there occurred not just a realignment of great powers but also revolutionary political change: in Russia after the First World War, in China and other parts of the Third World after the Second World War, and in the social and political transformation of the former Soviet bloc after the Cold War – a change that, to all but those blinded by a facile teleology, has amounted to a revolution.

1945 today

For some there is no pattern in these events. Here, anti-foundationalist scepticism and traditional historiography meet: just one event after the other. One may, however, suggest that there is a certain shape: in the first half of the century the general crisis of modern society exploded into war and revolution; in the second,

the tensions that matured in the first, leaving their legacy in the Cold War, were gradually brought under some form of political control – democratic within states, diplomatic and multilateral between them.

The central moment, the turning point, was 1945. Beyond all the significances which states and self-justifying elites wish to impose on 1945, it serves as both a warning and a suggestion of hope. The warning consists in an awareness of the dangers which authoritarian capitalism poses for the world, and which it could still pose in the future. The victory of 1945 was decisive, but provisional: the potential for authoritarian and racist politics under capitalism remains. As Horkheimer put it, those who do not wish to talk about capitalism should not talk about fascism – and many do not. In the triumphalist atmosphere of the 1990s, that has been too easily forgotten. Memory of the fascist period is confined to selective indignation over genocide.

However, 1945 also prompts us to look forward – to remember, revise, develop our concept of human emancipation. There is an economic history of the twentieth century, as there is a military and a scientific one. But the twentieth century was, as much as anything, the age of politics. The second half saw the gradual spread of emancipation, the constant conflict between rulers and ruled in which, gradually, and at enormous cost, the ruled have gained ground at the expense of their rulers. So far as Europe was concerned, the liberation of the continent from fascism in 1945 – bar Spain and Portugal – benefited all, including the peoples of the former fascist states themselves. It marked the end of a conflict, the most bloody in human history, that had been justified by the anti-fascist alliance in the name of freedom.

Yet, as the ensuing fifty years have shown, that liberation concealed within it the contradictions of the modern concept of freedom and, above all, the contest between two warped competitors for emancipation. World War II was a war fought by two rival inheritors of the Enlightenment against a third force, authoritarian and racist capitalism, which sought to deny that Enlightenment, even as it profited from the technologies and ideas of modernity. It rose to power on the very social and political conflicts that modernity itself had generated.

The original hopes of 1945, of a single emancipatory project continuing the project of the wartime alliance, epitomized in the aspirations of antifascist coalitions (the



United Nations from above, and popular front from below), were soon confounded. Yet, for all the freezing of the Cold War, emancipation continued. The defeat of fascism in Germany, Italy and Japan led to the establishment of prosperous and, within strikingly divergent limits, democratic regimes. Whatever else, they ceased to be military threats to their neighbours. The impact of World War II on the European colonial states, combined with pressure from both the USSR and the USA, led within the space of two decades to the ending of the European colonial empires. In the 1960s within Western Europe, a series of emancipatory movements – many influenced, paradoxically, by the emergence of radical social and cultural trends within the USA – came increasingly to contest established systems of hierarchy and power, not least of gender.

In the 1970s, the authoritarian regimes of the Right, entrenched in Spain and Portugal and recently reconsolidated in Greece, crumbled in the face of democratic and social pressures. Finally, and most dramatically, at the end of the 1980s the contest between these two distorted forms of emancipation ended in the crumbling of the authoritarian regimes of the Left. Unable to prevail over its liberal democratic rival, and, even more importantly, unable to evolve into a democratic form capable of realizing an alternative political path, the systems of bureaucratic communism collapsed, with merciful speed and passivity.

This resolution of the rivalry between two social systems was accompanied by a tectonic shift in the map of world power. The twentieth century began with a dramatic defeat for Europe, in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–05; its last years were marked by the final end, fitful but inexorable, of five centuries of European domination of the world, evident above all in the shift of economic power from the Atlantic to the Far East. Yet this very shift requires an assessment of Europe's place in that history. The World Wars and the Cold War were, for all their global impact, generated in Europe. It is the outcome of their histories for Europe that has above all determined the significance of the twentieth century.

The ends of Europe

The negative dimensions of this European record should never be forgotten. There is no place for piety about the defence of 'European' values: recent work in the history of slavery and colonialism has re-emphasized the role of murder, disease and plunder in the earlier European subjugation of the world. The greatest crimes of the twentieth century, and the most inhuman ideas of our history, were generated in Europe. The authoritarianisms of Right and Left destroyed millions of people in the name of their historical visions. The liberal democracies, more benign at home, visited destruction on the Third World through colonialism and postcolonial wars that added many more millions to the avoidable toll of the century. Invocation of 'European identity' too often has a racist subtext, be this in regard to Islamic peoples or in the post-1992 wars of the Balkans: here such an invocation of the European past, and identity, by Serbs and Croats, was irretrievably linked to sectarian and genocidal projects, the former against Muslims, the latter against Serbs.

This history, European and global, reinforces our awareness of the contradictory character of modernity itself. Such an awareness should warn us against the simplistic theories that are being generated to explain the post-Cold War world. The 'end of history' ignores the uneven, and itself contradictory, spread of economic integration and political change. While Fukuyama is right to claim that no ideology of global aspiration exists to challenge that of liberal capitalism, no one can be sure that this situation will endure. The threat of authoritarian regression, as of renewed inter-state military rivalry, hangs over the onset of the new century as it did over the *belle époque* of a

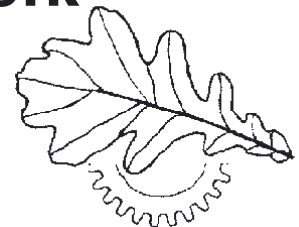
century ago, casting a shadow on the horizon of modish optimism. The great majority of humanity does not live under democratic or advanced industrial conditions. Indeed, as the underside of the prosperity and growth of recent years, the gap between the developed 10 per cent of the world's population and the rest has grown over the last hundred years, and continues to do so. The complacently celebrated 'triumph of the West' ignores the historic destructiveness of the West, the growing inequality within contemporary globalization, and the rise of economic centres that reject the mid-Atlantic hegemonies of the past half-millennium.

Yet much of modernity, and much of what is of universal value in terms of political liberties, arose in Europe. This was a product not of some undifferentiated 'West', but of the social and political conflicts and movements for emancipation within the West. To reject this legacy as unacceptably 'Eurocentric' or 'ethnocentric', a product of an undifferentiated hegemonic narrative, is to lose an important element in the emancipatory legacy of humanity as a whole. It is to accede, in the name of a relativistic uncertainty, to forms of oppression, justified in nationalist terms. Any assessment of oppression and denial of rights has to combine denunciation of that which is exogenous, imperial or hegemonic and that which is endogenous, nativist and instrumentally 'authentic'.

On the other hand, the most prominent pessimistic scenarios currently being propagated by political analysts are also misplaced: talk of a 'new middle ages' or of an age of chaotic globalization is inaccurate and sensationalist – the state, as a unit of administrative and military power, has not disappeared and is not about to do so. It allows democratic control and direction. Similarly, the condition avidly promoted as a 'clash of civilizations' by Huntington is but another factitious generalization, a confusion of revived, but longstanding, cultural issues with banal generalizations about yesterday's television news. The strength of multitudinous ethnic and religious movements often conceals their mimetic relation to modernistic ideas and preconditions: no national or cultural movement rejects the principle of national self-determination, or the right of nations to participate in the World Cup. Relativism is very much a selective process. This should, if anything, reinforce the defence of universal values such as tolerance and reason, appropriated from below.

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