

THE  
**FATE**  
OF THE  
**WEST**

The Battle to Save the World's Most Successful Political Idea

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Books

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# Introduction: The idea of the West

FOR AS LONG AS ANY OF US CAN REMEMBER, to be modern has meant to be Western, and to be Western has meant being at the forefront of pretty much everything – of science, of social change, of culture, of affluence, of influence, of power in all its forms. Not everyone has liked this state of affairs, even inside Western countries themselves, but regardless of sour grapes or ideological discontent this Western dominance of modernity has become such an established fact that we have lost sight of quite why it is so. We have also lost sight of quite who we mean by “Westerners”, albeit for the benign reason that neither modernity nor the features that bring it are any longer exclusively associated with geography, any longer exclusively the possession of western Europe, North America and those countries elsewhere that shared European origins through colonial histories. Japan, Taiwan, Slovenia and South Korea are now as intrinsically modern and Western as are Sweden, France and Canada. For what they share is not geography, not history, but an idea.

It is a powerful idea, one that matters. It matters, most obviously, because it has brought levels of prosperity, well-being, security, stability, peace and scientific progress that in previous eras would have felt simply inconceivable. It matters, right now, because it is under threat and under attack, not principally from outside the West but from within. It is under attack for the good reason that it has recently failed to deliver enough of what citizens have come to expect of it, notably fairness, prosperity and security, but with the bad consequence that people and forces that stand for distinctly unWestern ideas, chief among them Donald Trump, have risen to prominence and power. Those ideas could, if allowed to prevail and become entrenched, destroy the West and much of what it has achieved.

Such a defeat would be a tragedy, of historic dimensions. For the idea of the West has provided more freedom and opportunities to more people in every country that has adopted it, than any other way of organising a society has ever achieved before. It truly has been the world's most successful political idea, by far. One reason why so many have liked it, and why others have been converging on it, is that when nurtured it brings a virtuous circle, by which freedom and the widespread chance to create new things and lead relatively unconstrained lives bring prosperity, stability and security, which in turn provides the social trust and economic resources that make further progress possible.

We often call this idea “liberalism”, or “liberal democracy”, but neither term quite commands either the heart or the brain. The heart demurs because the words sound too technical, philosophical or academic to stir the passions. They can anyway confuse, as to some Americans the term “liberal” has become an insult connoting what they see as the excessive use of taxpayers’ money to cosset undeserving citizens and distort markets, while to others, especially in Europe, by adding the prefix “neo” the same word can insult by connoting an advocate of brutal market forces. The brain rebels at this confusion but also demurs on grounds that “liberal democracy” is a tautology – how could there be an “illiberal democracy”, since democracy is supposed to give power to the *demos*, the people? – or that in modern use the word democracy must carry little meaning beyond describing a mechanical process than can be used or abused at will.

Behind those phrases, however, lie two other crucial words – one could call them ideals or even lodestars. The first is openness, for the Latin *liber* or freedom expressed through liberalism is both a desired outcome for the individual and a statement of the condition of any society in which such a collection of free individuals resides. Such a society is one that is thereby open to new ideas, new elites, new circumstances and new opportunities whether of trade in goods and services or of culture and science. It is thus a society not directed by a central intelligence but formed by the collective desires and actions of its members. Which leads to the second ideal or lodestar: equality.

Openness has required a steadily advancing notion of equality in order to make its bracing winds work and be accepted by society at large over the long term. Otherwise, conflicts inevitably arise between free individuals, with no means available to temper or resolve them, as some come to feel neglected,

disadvantaged, powerless or left behind. This is exactly what has happened recently in the United States and in many countries of western Europe. The feeling of equality has been lost, neglected or simply eroded.

This conflict-resolving, socially soothing “equality” is not principally one of income or wealth – though widening gaps between rich and poor can affect equality’s practical meaning, for good or ill – but rather of voice, rights and treatment, of having an equal say and participation in the openness that is being established. It is what in ancient Greek democracy was called *isonomia*, equality of political rights, which also crucially encompasses equality before the law. Thus in shorthand we can call it citizenship.

In ancient Greece *isonomia* had, and has since had, various extensions such as the equal right to speak in a parliament, but such things represent particular choices made by particular political systems. It is the principle of equality of rights and of voice for all adult citizens that connects together all countries that operate according to the rule of law, that protect freedom of speech and information, and that choose to provide political accountability through regular free elections based on a universal adult franchise.

The sense of shared interest that such equality represents has further encouraged societies to choose to make collective provision, through laws or the use of tax revenues, for some “public goods” that are deemed to be of general societal benefit, such as access to mandatory and state-financed education, to forms of social welfare in case of hardship, to broadly available and affordable health care, and to security provided by armed forces and police. That *isonomia* is the sort of equality that has been enjoyed by Japanese and Americans, French and Swedes, Australians and British alike, even if its precise form differs greatly from place to place, from culture to culture.

We are, and always will be, unequal in all sorts of ways – income, wealth, talent, profession, personality, social status – but in principle in a Western society we are, or should be, equal in our basic civic rights and in the political voice that this gives us. This equality of rights serves to flip the emphasis in society away from central, dictatorial direction and towards a more organic, bottom-up character. It provides the protection of property, ideas and actions that allows or encourages us to take risks, create new things, make investments of time and money. It represents, too, a fundamental humility, in contrast to the utopian arrogance of communism and fascism or of any dictator claiming to be omniscient and omnipotent. It is what provides the social trust, the legitimacy,

that allows a society to absorb and adapt to the shocks and transformations that openness has brought, and will always bring.

This Western idea has been enormously successful. Now, however, the idea is in trouble, deep trouble. A feeling of decline has set in in the Western heartlands of the United States of America, Europe and – a true Western heartland from at least the 1970s onwards – Japan. The decline begins with economic failure and disappointment, and moves on to ageing, less vigorous demographics and then to a new sense of impotence in influencing world affairs. This feeling, and the ailments that lie behind it, are producing new divisions between countries and within them, creating cracks in the structures of international collaboration that Western countries built during the decades after 1945 and which helped to add to our collective strength and resilience. These are pessimistic times, times of disintegration and of the rekindling of old nationalisms. Our knowledge of where such forces led us during the first half of the 20th century rightly adds to our pessimism and foreboding. Even many of those who voted for Trump or Brexit in 2016 must now share that foreboding. Their votes were cries of anger at the establishment and the system they see as having failed them, not necessarily endorsements of the ideas that he represents or that Brexit will bring.

Trump's 2016 campaign, like the campaigns of other anti-establishment political movements on both sides of the Atlantic, was right in many ways about the problems faced by, and felt by, citizens of Western countries. But to be right about the problems does not make you right about the solutions. The three main solutions that America's president stands for are all deeply threatening to the future of the West: he has said he will withdraw from free-trade agreements and use protectionist measures to benefit American companies and punish foreigners, an approach not used systematically by any US administration since the 1930s; he has indicated that he does not consider the security alliances the US has struck since 1945 as any longer part of America's essential national interest, casting doubt even on whether under his presidency the US would stick by the mutual defence obligation in what has been the country's most important and strongest postwar alliance, NATO; and he has set about seeking not only to tighten up American control of immigration (as many countries wish to do) but also to discriminate in immigration procedures according to country of origin and by implication religion, which would take US immigration policy back, too, to the 1930s.

Such solutions threaten the West, first because they would replace openness on trade, an openness governed by agreed international rules, with a reversion not only to closure but to a system of commerce based on threats and brute power. In such a system, the chosen measure of success is not the amount of trade nor its benefit to consumers, as has prevailed since 1945, but the size of trade surpluses and deficits, a view of trade more common in authoritarian times. Secondly, it would threaten because it would increase divisions among currently liberal, open, friendly nations, reducing the flow of ideas between them as well, crucially, as trust. Thirdly, it would threaten because by casting serious doubt on long-standing alliance structures and commitments it would inevitably lead countries to hedge their bets and form new relationships with non-western nations, breaking a basic assumption that liberal nations are more dependable and trustworthy for each other than are other countries.

Peter Thiel, a Silicon Valley billionaire who supported Trump, has fostered the notion that while the new president's voters took him seriously but not literally, his critics made the mistake of taking him literally but not seriously. Yet whether or not his policy ideas should be taken literally, what is serious is that they suggest he does not understand the problems he – or any western government – needs to solve.

Our current ailments can, and should, be blamed on the long aftermath of what in 2008 was the greatest financial calamity that Western countries had seen since the 1930s, a calamity that had as its cause a devastating blend of complacency, negligence and corruption in preceding years. That calamity had inequality of political voice and power high among its origins, and the failure to deal properly and fairly with its consequences is also a symptom of inequality. A system in which the banks that created the calamity have been supported, and in which their present and past executives have stayed rich, but in which 15 million homeowners in the US saw their mortgages foreclosed upon in 2008–12, is not a system likely to feel fair.

A rapid recovery in jobs and incomes from the 2008 calamity might have quelled the anger, whether in the US, the UK, France, Italy or elsewhere. But it didn't happen. Nearly a decade later too many citizens feel trapped in dud jobs, dud circumstances, dud education. More deep-seated forces, including technological change, the impact of ageing populations and growing income inequality had already been causing strains before 2008, strains which could and should have been dealt with by governments had they been more attuned to

the equality of citizenship and better at preparing their societies for the longer term. But they had not been and were not, and the vastness of the financial calamity then swamped everything.

The result is that many of our societies have lost confidence in the combination they have enjoyed of openness and equality, as they have lost the prosperity, security, stability and well-being that this blend had brought. Instead of supporting each other, acting together as our lodestars, the principles of openness and equality find themselves in conflict with one another, in more and more of our societies, making various forms of closedness increasingly popular as potential solutions and increasingly demanded by those who see themselves as having been left behind as unequal citizens.

To understand this malaise and to overcome it we need to recognise that, powerful and successful though it is, the Western idea comes with at least one important weakness, one that needs to be overcome at regular intervals. This is that the way in which a Western society works is so free, so decentralised, so lacking in any blueprint or fixed manner of doing things that its essential virtues are easy to take for granted and even easier to neglect or distort. Which means, in turn, that it is easy for that essence to be undermined and subverted, not just by ill-wishers outside but by inadvertent, self-interested and sometimes malign insiders. Openness, equality and their expression through democracy can, over time, serve to weaken, undermine and potentially destroy their own foundations.

That, as this book will seek to show, is what has happened in the US and the UK, in France and Italy, in Japan and Germany, most dramatically in the run-up to 2008. For that reason, the idea of the West and our understanding of what it means need periodically to be refreshed and reinvigorated so that this weakness can be overcome. To stay modern, Western countries need to jolt themselves out of their innate complacency, to revisit the essential values that have made them so successful, and to revive and if necessary reinvent them. Yet to be able to achieve such jolting, revival and reinvention the West needs at the same time to win the battle of ideas against those now arguing for solutions of closure, of isolationism, of exclusionary nationalism. President Trump is nothing if not a jolt, but he is likely to be a jolt in the wrong direction. And his disregard for facts and the truth, shown repeatedly during the campaign and since, threatens to keep citizens in ignorance or misled denial rather than waking them up to reality .

There is also, however, a fundamental motive for optimism and for a greater confidence in ourselves, one that is based on the most fundamental strength of the Western idea. The very reason Western societies have survived and thrived is that with openness and equality has come a vital characteristic: the ability to evolve, in the face of new threats and conditions, internally and externally. The Western idea, if it is protected, preserved and when necessary revived, contains within it a power of evolution that has proved superior to that of any other form of social organisation.

Recent history gives us a simple but compelling example. In 1956 Nikita Khrushchev proclaimed to a group of Western ambassadors: "Whether you like it or not, history is on our side. We will bury you." As we now know he was proved wrong. The reason is that the Western system proved far more flexible, more evolutionary, than was the Soviet system over which Khrushchev presided as premier.

It was not a matter of having history on your side. It was a matter of having the ability to adapt and learn new steps while history was leading everyone on its merry dances. The Soviet Union's problem was that it proved rigid and closed, unable to evolve as a system or as a society, so in the end it toppled over. Meanwhile, the countries we know of as the West adapted and changed, in their different ways. Like their communist rivals they faced crises and social disorder of various forms during the period of the Cold War: the 1968 youth movements in Europe, civil rights and anti-war protests in the US, terrorism in Italy and Germany, strikes and separatist violence in the UK, protests and environmental troubles in Japan. They often mused during those troubles that the good days might be over. They were often divided against each other. But they found ways to adjust and to deal with these sorts of problems through evolution rather than revolution.

The source of the West's evolutionary power has been its openness, its equality of rights, and so its social trust. Levels and forms of these ingredients have varied between countries and continents, as well as over time. There is ample room for debate about how open, equal and trusting societies can or should be, on many dimensions. But all have shown – so far – the ability to roll with history's punches, to adapt, evolve and find new ways of doing things and new things to do. Our concern now must be whether that ability remains intact enough to be repaired, or whether it might now be or soon become fatally weakened.

Such a concern is not new. When Oswald Spengler, a German historian, published his epic two-volume book *Decline of the West* at the end of the first world war, he had in mind a Western civilisation which he considered to be European-American, and he had a concept of it that was less about ideas than about cultures.<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising that, at the end of such a devastating and ultimately pointless war, Spengler saw the European-American civilisation as being in its twilight or sunset period. Plenty of others felt similarly gloomy. His argument went further, however: he posited that history had consisted of a series of civilisations, of high cultures, each of which passed through cycles of rise, maturity and decline. It was now the turn of the Western, that is the European-American world, to slip into decline and, ultimately, to be replaced.

Since Spengler gave his civilisational cycles roughly 1,000 years each, we should perhaps not be too quick to consider him wrong less than 100 years later. The second world war, culminating in the dropping of two atom bombs on Japanese cities, was a pretty apocalyptic event, one which could have led to even worse destruction had either Germany or Japan succeeded in developing nuclear weapons to compete with those of the US. Between the two world wars Mahatma Gandhi is said (possibly apocryphally – no firm citation has been found) to have been asked what he thought of Western civilisation and to have responded drily: “It would be a good idea.” Had the second world war turned more widely atomic, it could have been a dead idea.

It did not and we have flourished, instead, for more than 70 years, adding more and more countries to the list of flourishing Westerners as more nations converged on the ideas that bring modernity. The question that stands before us now, wagging its fingers and shaking its head at us in a somewhat Spenglerian manner, is whether or not this period of flourishing has come to an end, or at least is coming to an end. The West may no longer be definable in the civilisational terms that Spengler deployed 100 years ago, nor is it simply European-American. But plenty of people think that it is in decline.

We are living in a time when openness is under challenge, when equality of rights and treatment is under greater doubt than for many decades, and when social trust is looking frayed. We seem to be losing faith in the idea that we ourselves created, through a long process of trial and error, of how best to arrange our societies. This loss of faith is putting in danger the very thing that made us not just survive but also thrive: the ability to evolve, to adapt to changing circumstances, to overcome threats and predators.

The fate of the West now, and in the decades to come, is in the hands of that evolutionary ability, and thus of our ability, as citizens of Western countries, first to resist attempts to close doors, borders and minds, and then to identify, agree upon and remove the major obstacles that have built up and are blocking such evolutionary change. There is ample cause for optimism. Our record, as Western countries, of confounding our own doubters and of dealing with our own demons, should give us confidence that once again this fight can be won. But nothing, of course, is inevitable. The fight is on.

If the idea of the West is to prevail, we will have to follow again our lodestars and keep this firmly in mind: without openness, the West cannot thrive; but without equality, the West cannot last.