

Liberalism is NOT Dead. And the West is Not Over.
Reasons for vigilant hope in an age of darkening storm clouds

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‘Bang the drum, Oskar! Bang the drum, keep us awake! Bang the drum for all our sakes!’

The rousing refrain of [Kneehigh](#)’s fantastic new stage adaptation of Günter Grass’s masterpiece *The Tin Drum* is a wake-up call of exquisite timeliness. The prescient, kind toymaker implores Oscar – the boy who has decided, in angry repudiation of the world, that he will never grow up – telling him that darkness is coming, creeping into souls and killing light, laughter, hope.

Today, Trump and Brexit have many worried, but they can feel more like farce than tragedy. This can lull us into the false sense of reassurance that the self-evident madness of these developments cannot prevail. But the toymaker reminds us what is really going on here, what is really at stake – as perhaps becomes clearer from the broader surge of authoritarian populist nationalism around the world. Where fear, division and recrimination are allowed to grow, let alone are actively fed, even that which appears absurd can incubate real terror and destruction. Consider, for instance, how the contemporary surge of illiberalism is the single most powerful political threat to urgent climate action. Even if American society (and the world) survives Trump, and Europe (*including* the UK) absorbs Brexit, the costs of damage to the planet incurred in the meantime may yet prove definitive.

It follows that only active and urgent cultivation of their opposites – hope, fellow-feeling and concerted, hard-headed, pragmatic collective action – can stem the tide. For even if we cannot stop the fall of night – and, indeed, perhaps *need* darkness to learn anew the value of the light – we can, and must, light our own candles now (and begin to bang our drums) while there is light enough to see each other, allowing us to come together, and to see what we are doing.

This urgent call for vigilance and hope is crucial, then, but it is not enough. Banging the drum may keep us awake, but what if we *want* to go to sleep since nightfall is scary. What will keep us awake through the night to see us safely through to dawn? We must also have *grounds* for hope, a sense of where else we could be going if not into the finality of the proverbial ditch. It is in this context that we must re-appraise the current wave of bleak prognostications that are the height of intellectual and political fashion in the West today. Everywhere one looks, titles declaim the “death of liberalism”, the “end of democracy”, the “collapse of the West”, and with all these variations covering much the same ground, albeit taking the idiosyncratic slant of the author in each case. Indeed, even the diversity of positions taken across the genre (possibly despairing Jeremiad, or stout to-the-death defence, or triumphalist *schadenfreude*) simply compounds the overall impression: that the Western political imagination and its institutions are exhausted, and all that is left is mutually destructive posturing for dibs on the biggest book sales.

But this new dismal – yet [self-congratulatory](#) – genre is not just a symptom and/or chronicler of the downbeat zeitgeist of nightfall. It is much worse than that. At best, it is banging a lugubrious, somniferous drum; at worst, it is actively complicit in ushering darkness in, bowing down to the night (or rather the end of a ‘great day’) while lighting no tapers to guide

us through it. This, in itself, could be forgiven if there were no other possible readings of the present. But there are, though they involve some significant shifts in perspective, as I set out in my new book, [Liberalism 2.0 and the Rise of China](#). This takes the seemingly maverick, if not outlandish, position today that liberalism is not dead, but rather the most powerful political force of the age, currently re-emerging as a 'liberalism 2.0'. Similarly, the West is not over, but just entering a new phase of global receptivity. And while both of these are themselves not unalloyed causes of celebration, but augur significant potential downsides, they also furnish prospects for qualitatively unprecedented, bright, egalitarian futures and thereby grounded visions for precisely the hope and action needed to beat the imminent threat of worsening illiberal brutality.

Liberalism – not what you think

First, we need to work out what we mean by liberalism, for this is a term that is a hopeless, and strategically self-defeating, mess at present. Liberalism is not a short-hand for 'progressive politics', nor synonymous with liberal, representative democracy. It is a system of government that works through the production and consumption of the autonomy and freedom of individuals – hence precisely *liberal*-ism.

As such, it is both more and less than is usually acknowledged, by proponents and detractors alike: less, because there is no necessary and intrinsic connection between liberalism and democracy or broad-based popular empowerment, so that liberalism is not necessarily 'progressive' or compassionate; more, because liberalism subsists primarily in the everyday workings of society and its constituent subjects, not in the relentlessly policed statements and policies of (Twitter-sphere) 'politics'. This is perfectly illustrated by the original 'classical' age of liberalism in the early 19th century. For even the global centre and acme of this new gospel of liberalism – the triumphant post-Napoleonic Great Britain – was very far from universal suffrage, let alone an exemplar of liberal democracy. Yet it remained unequivocally 'liberal' in its robust and self-conscious empowerment of the individual.

Moreover, as this period also exemplifies, liberalism is thus a system of government characterised not by harmonious stability but by highly turbulent yet productive jostling of liberties. Indeed, so tumultuous is a classical liberal age that it is marked by the omnipresent shadow of a seemingly existential threat of revolution. But this simply further enables liberal system dynamics, compelling the political unification of the disparate constituencies supportive of liberalism into a resilient and tenacious political force that is more than the sum of its parts. It is no coincidence that the age of the triumph of classical liberalism is also, therefore, Hobsbawm's 'age of revolution'.

Finally, at the heart of liberalism is the figure of the individual on whose liberty it subsists as a system of government. But this 'individual' is not a given and ahistorical universal, even as liberalism presents it as such. Rather it is a concept firmly situated in its time, and so subject to changing, and possibly growing, definition. Certainly, with the birth of liberalism in the early 19th century, the 'individual' is defined extremely narrowly, as the white, bourgeois, Christian, straight, adult male – and with all the violence this licenses and propels on those (i.e. the global majority) outside these criteria. Surely the most graphic illustration of this paradox is the very founding of the United States, as simultaneously a constitutively [liberal and racist state](#). Or consider the outrageousness of Haiti, freeing itself from slavery under the banner of the French Revolution ("*Liberté! Égalité! Fraternité!*") only to be forced to pay the

new French Republic reparations for 150 years for the loss of revenue arising from its presumptuous self-determination.

To be sure, the relevant definition of ‘individual’ has been expanded, through effortful political struggle, in the intervening centuries. Yet government through individual liberties must always draw the line *somewhere* between the ‘reasonable’, who may be trusted to exercise their freedom appropriately, and the ‘unreasonable’, who may not and so must be policed instead. As the definition of ‘individual’ is always socio-historically situated, therefore, it remains inescapably the case that liberalism will always involve fundamental, and likely contested and problematic, distinctions of inclusion and exclusion regarding the rights it supposedly accords universally.

In the light of all this, then, liberalism is actually a curious beast to elicit the kind of political heat, for and against, that we see today. Against its loudest cheerleaders (now engaged in breast-beating lament of its demise), liberalism at best merits support with the significant qualification that it is a system of government that enables an ongoing and uncertain *process* of deepening democratic empowerment. But against its opponents, this is in fact not something to be sniffed at. Indeed, precisely at a moment of growing *il*-liberalism, intolerance and authoritarianism, it is the height of political irresponsibility to belittle the importance of how liberalism, while never even close to ‘perfect’, has historically been particularly productive of empowered individuals who may *then* be increasingly capable of battling for their own greater enfranchisement.

A new classical liberal age

So one cheer for liberalism, loud enough to drown out any siren call that suggests trying to beat illiberalism at its own game (if Michelle Obama has not already done that for us). But, more to the point, recasting our understanding of liberalism in this way also opens up a completely different, and more hopeful, analysis of the present. For, from this perspective, how is liberalism doing today?

While liberal democracy is everywhere on the back foot, if not yet on the ropes, liberalism as defined above is alive and kicking. Indeed, the present is precisely a moment reminiscent of the age of classical liberalism. Here, the emergence of new communications and knowledge technologies (back then, the canal and railway, post and pamphlet) enables a surging, volatile, pulsating construction of a new political settlement, dramatically challenging the corrupt and decadent order of the day (*viz.* financialized, globalizing neoliberalism today; the *Ancien Régime*, rotten boroughs and nabobs alike back then). And in which this is taking place precisely through the expansion and relentless jostling of individual autonomy enabled by those new technologies. In short, liberalism is not dead. It is just being painfully reborn.

The shift in perspective to this more rigorous definition of liberalism in itself would allow such a conclusion to be drawn, even from analysis of contemporary trends in the West, where the Jeremiads tend to focus for their evidence. Consider, for instance, how it is massive marches *against* illiberalism – for women, for science, for climate, for Europe – that have actually claimed the streets so far, and where these have been massively enabled – impossible absent – new communication technologies. So too regarding the hopeful emergence of a newly engaged youth politics, or even the ambivalent figure of hipster radicalism (precisely ‘*bourgeois* bohemianism’, i.e. the acme of new liberalism). Moreover, that all these developments primarily take the form of essential, Twitter-fuelled contestation and

polarization simply further evidences the profoundly *liberal* character of contemporary political turbulence.

But these quintessentially liberal dynamics are also evident, arguably even more so, elsewhere in the world. This is especially clear in the rising metropolises of the East and South in the form of the emerging global ‘middle class’, surely the demographic/political development of the age. For even where these ascendant constituencies remain fundamentally contained by authoritarian and/or nationalist state powers, their growing power and self-conscious aspirations of autonomy continue to fashion these classes into increasingly central pillars of their national systems of government. Indeed, from this perspective, the current clampdown on liberal self-assertion appears as evidence more of such states desperately attempting to contain these demands than of the fundamental weakness of these pressures.

In short, then, properly understood, liberalism is actually alive and kicking, and arguing otherwise is, at best, parochial, unimaginative and self-commiserating extrapolation of superficial (if undoubtedly troubling) headline trends in Western politics.

But if liberalism must be distinguished from democracy, is this itself cause for hope? Certainly, it follows immediately that a robust, if embryonic, liberalism offers no grounds for complacent and premature celebration, only a vigilant positivity. For this liberal dynamism must still be actively harnessed to greater democracy, and this may take a long time – again, consider how from the early 19th century it took another century of unrelenting struggle to achieve universal suffrage in the West, and longer still for decolonization. But the forces of greater liberal *democracy* are hardly disabled at present! Rather they are bursting with new-found vigour and enthusiasm. While, of no less importance, convincing ourselves of the dynamism of a nascent liberalism behind, beneath and beyond the current fascinating surface of illiberalism allows us to see through that dangerous illusion and thereby dispel it.

The peaking, not collapse, of the ‘West’

Moreover, from this broader perspective, we can also start to rethink the parallel discourse of the ‘decline of the West’ in more productive ways. As with the supposed death of liberalism (i.e. as liberal democracy), evidence abounds of the end of the West. Likewise, there is a growing literature eager to prove this, from across the political spectrum including ‘objective’ academic study. Moreover, a great deal of this literature (especially coming from the US) glibly identifies the ‘West’ with liberal democracy, as ‘our’ gift to (an increasingly ungrateful) world. The irony of these arguments seem utterly lost on their protagonists. Ostensibly made to defend a world order of [increasing numbers of democratic states](#) against the backlash of illiberal populism, with Trump and Brexit foremost in their minds, such arguments actually serve only to boost those movements they aim to oppose. On the one hand, at home, they feed Western exceptionalism, thereby also boosting self-confirming nativist anxieties about civilizational decline against a rising but uncivilized Other. On the other, overseas, they provide chapter and verse with which nationalist autocrats can repudiate democracy as a foreign, ‘Western’ invention that would simply weaken their great and now resurgent cultures.

By contrast, just as we had to redefine liberalism to see what is actually going on and a way forward, so too we must do so for the idea of the ‘West’. And just as that redefinition of liberalism involved consideration of how liberalism *actually works as a form of government*, so too the ‘West’ is best conceptualized as short-hand for a broad and evolving *paradigm of*

thought and culture. Today this consists of (post-)Enlightenment conceptions of politics, society, knowledge and meaning. This is, thus, not a definition of the ‘West’ that adopts a black-and-white *ex ante* position either as celebrant (and, thereby, apologist) or as all-out critic and opponent. Rather, it enables precisely the same measured but clear-eyed evaluation of the West’s record as globally dominant culture over the past two-plus centuries as our definition of liberalism did for that social movement. Crucially, this also allows us to distinguish analytically between the West and liberalism – and, of course, democracy and its prospects for, and directions of, further growth.

From this perspective, then, we may admit that there is progressively compelling evidence that the contemporary Western paradigm of (post-)Enlightenment thought is increasingly unable to grapple with the multiple, overlapping and profound challenges of global system complexity that it itself has engendered through its very success and dominance to date. In other words, while in prior centuries Western thought was sufficiently productive to catapult the West to global domination (again, for good and/or ill), today it is simply not up to the unprecedented challenges that confront us. Indeed, to the contrary, it is primarily responsible not just for their emergence but now also for their worsening. As such, attempts to resolve these problems with further inspiration of a purely ‘Western’ provenance remind one of Einstein’s aphorism that madness is trying to solve a problem from the perspective that created it in the first place. In short, we need [new relations to knowledge](#), and this must involve drawing on inspiration from [traditions of thought from other parts of the world](#) that both boast their own rich cultural histories and are now politically ascendant.

But this does not mean the ‘West’ is ‘over’ – let alone that it is taking any idea of universal human progress with it. It just means that the unipolar global dominance of the Western paradigm has *peaked*, and that Western cultural and political influence will henceforth increasingly be refracted through a new and increasingly concerted engagement with great non-Western paradigms. Moreover, this does not in itself spell the imminent collapse of the pre-eminence of Western cultural and political institutions, let alone of the broader standard of living of Western polities. Were this to happen, it would be *our fault* for falling asleep and letting it come to pass. To the contrary, even as the ‘West’ may no longer itself be the primary source of new, powerful ideas and worldviews, its public spheres and its aesthetic and scientific cultures will likely remain the most attractive in the world for at least several generations to come.

Moreover, *this* peaking of the ‘West’, while unquestionably (and understandably) marking a moment of significant disorientation around the world, is very far from something to lament, even for those, like myself, who are ‘Westerners’. On the one hand, for the world as a whole, the passing of unrivalled Western domination is great news: not just in terms of the increased possibility of post-colonial restorative justice and the emergence of a genuinely equitable cosmopolitanism; but also regarding urgent efforts to stem and reverse planetary environmental destruction, which has taken place built on Western ideas. On the other hand, for the ‘West’ itself it is also hugely to be welcomed. Just consider the alternative! The clear and present danger of illiberalism is precisely a recidivist and violent Western exceptionalism, and this will only be effectively countered and ultimately beaten through whole-hearted embrace of its opposite: a new concerted engagement with non-Western ideas and cultures to their mutual advantage.

Finally, though, having analytically distinguished the ‘West’, liberalism and democracy – such that their supposed historical conjunction in the emergence of the latter two can be seen as contingent, not intrinsic and necessary – and then having highlighted how the current

turmoil does not in fact signal bleak futures for any of these when considered separately, we may also pull them back together anew to an even brighter prospect, albeit still uncertain and disquieting. For analytically separating these terms out from the lazy and self-satisfied conflation on display in the new Western miserabilism allows us to admit the peaking (but not collapse) of the West without this entailing the global peaking of democracy and of human civilization. In other words, here a renewed, resurgent and *global* liberalism, emergent primarily from *non*-Western places, offers at least the prospect of a 21st century that is still characterised by turbulence, but now turbulence that is potentially productive of a greater and unprecedented global democracy. Conversely, if the West has peaked, it *cannot* push human civilization to greater heights alone, and attempts to do so will be catastrophically self-defeating.

The new declinism as near enemy

What, then, of the new declinism? From this perspective, we can see that this particularly *Western* genre is actually self-fulfilling in its dismal analyses and prognostications. In particular, its overstatement of civilizational collapse directly feeds, and itself enacts, the illiberal triumphalist destruction of the world it wants to save, while shedding or tending no light on a realistic vision to counter that looming darkness. Moreover, styling itself as the supposed voice of informed ‘progressive’ Western thought – i.e. the apparent *opposition* to Trump et al.!! –, it is doubly debilitating. But with an alternative, more rigorous, more global and more hopeful reading of the emerging present, we have no reason to stay locked to this false friend, and every reason actively and loudly to repudiate it as a near enemy. Looking up and out, not in and back, is essential to any viable strategy of progressive preparatory response to the current dusk.

In short, it may well be the end of the Western liberal world as we know it. But you should feel fine. For this is a cause for inspiration and for revitalized, hopeful and con-vivial action, not despair, cynicism or vindictive schadenfreude. We must change the conversation from the despairing and rhetorical question of ‘whither liberalism?’ to the open and strategic question of ‘*which* liberalism (2.0) do we want (in the short/medium term)?’ In this way, if not nipped in the bud, we Westerners can at least stop feeding illiberalism with our anxieties and fears, and even perhaps pass through night without facing terrible monsters of our own making, at great and as-yet-unquantified cost to ourselves and the planet.

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