Politics and Civilization: Recent Works in Political Theory

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Books Reviewed

Bailie, Gil (2004). *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads.* New York: Crossroad.

Berlin, Isaiah (2006). *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought.* London: Princeton University Press.

Brague, Rémi (2002). *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization.* South Bend, IN: St Augustine's Press.

Cooper, Barry (2004). *New Political Religions, or An Analysis of Modern Terrorism.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press.

Manent, Pierre (1998). *The City of Man.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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We live in a time of great fragmentation, as empires have collapsed and traditional understandings and compass points falter in their efficacy in providing us with an adequate bearing. At the same time, there is an ardent wish for a great leap forward, yet our uncertainty translates this wish into purposiveness without purpose. What contribution can political philosophy make to understanding and ameliorating the disorders of our time or guiding us to an acceptable future? What status do canonical works have for future political philosophy? How receptive is political philosophy to breakthroughs in cognate disciplines? These are the questions, by no means exhaustive, guiding the selection of five (relatively) recent works.

Political philosophy is not a rummage in the dustbin of history for the sake of nostalgia or messianic hopes. Instead, it is the painstaking analysis of the sources of political disorder, and the recollection of the experiential sources of order,

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as well as judgment as to how the products of this recollection can be codified, institutionalized, and administered. What complicates such recollection is a perspective as old as the pre-Socratics that all is flux, and so we are condemned to acknowledge the relative and conditional nature of all things, and the sheer contingency of our actions. Over the past few decades writers including Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and Rorty have reminded us in the language of "rupture," "transgression," and "incompletability" of the transitory and fleeting nature of our actions, concepts, and argumentative structures. They have also made us aware of the political interests at the ground of our everyday utterances and actions, and how quickly our apparently benign and often just or compassionate interventions, speeches, and justifications transform into master narratives or totalizing discourses, denying the otherness of others. How we have arrived at this insight is integral to the dynamic enfolded within the history of political philosophy, from Plato to Heidegger, in which successive proposals for the ground of thought and action were rebutted or radicalized to the point where, by the 20th century, it appears that no traditional ground is left. The complication of our times is that we find ourselves in a twilight or darkness which is accompanied by an elated sense of liberty, but equally a foreboding sense of grave danger. Increasing incidents of culpable willfulness, combined with deadly mass weapons and availability of life-altering technologies, make our times especially tense, and the sense of our being especially problematic. It has not helped that the "grand narrative" of the western world, that is the history of (political) philosophy, has undergone a 2000-year process of load-shedding, in which substantive first principles and conclusions were progressively abandoned, century by century, not merely to accommodate external critique, but as a consequence of an internal process of a repeated radicalization of the originating premise, until (like the proverbial snake that eats its own tail, and thus devours its being) ideas taken to their natural conclusion were exposed to be groundless, so nothing was left to justify and substantiate either theoretical inquiry or practice. The times are particularly dangerous because we risk doing too little or overreaching, in our efforts to get back on track, and it may also be the case that we no longer know what the track was. As Gil Bailie concludes, echoing a long line of 20th-century philosophers, philosophy is an intellectually spent force in our world, it is no longer able to supervise humanity's moral and intellectual adventure (Bailie: 236).

Hannah Arendt has reminded us, nevertheless, that political philosophy is driven not only by its own inner philosophical momentum, but also by events and the judgments levied by their consequences. If this review were written before 9/11, the choice of authors would have canvassed a wide spectrum, by including samples from analytical political philosophy, feminist political philosophy, non-western political philosophy, and critical theory. But 9/11 and its aftermath of shockwaves worldwide have necessitated a sustained assessment of the West and its relation to the non-West. The spirit of playful competition has gone from the world, and whether the tension has a real foundation or is merely manufactured, the effects are real, and deadly. Present dangers sharpen the lens, focusing on real and palpable threats, tensions, dangers, and therapies. We have been pushed decisively by 9/11 to a place where the assessment and possible restatement of the western tradition becomes an urgency (where before such work may have been entertained as a diversion or glass-bead game). Crisis provokes opportunity and existential need, and since the tradition is grounded in theoretical reflection, the

evaluation of the use and abuse, and the possibilities and the limits, of philosophy is integral to our response to the crisis.

To determine the full meaning of the scale of events, to have a reason to say that the actions were murderous, mad, and savage, it is necessary to have a comprehensive philosophical anthropology. Since Thomas Szasz and R.D. Laing, not to say Foucault and Deleuze, we have been reluctant and timid to denounce the mad. Their critiques revealed the arbitrariness of the social and economic rationale that often served to justify clapping others into a madhouse. In *New Political Religions*, Barry Cooper has no qualms in calling the 9/11 terrorists madmen, but his categories are far more universal and grounded, drawn from the philosophy of consciousness of Eric Voegelin and from Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarian domination. No political philosophy incapable of sufficiently analyzing the "pneumo-pathological fantasies" of terrorists will be up to the task of adequately describing the new political reality.

At the same time, he acknowledges that "the immensity of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, was shocking [and] it can, therefore, easily overwhelm any theoretical or analytical considerations," and so with Aristotle, Cooper also avails himself of the common-sense view of citizens – in this case that the terrorists were fanatics and murderers – and concludes his book with hard-headed (one is tempted to say Machiavellian) counsels on killing or disarming the enemy. That enemy, it should go without saying, is not Islam, least of all the pious, traditional Muslim, but the Salafist, the "Islam of suicidal murderers," whose actions are, however, precipitating a "crisis in the spiritual order of the Islamic community" (Cooper: 74).

The preponderant part of Cooper's analysis is of the nature of the disordered soul and the deformed perspective on reality to which it is prone, as well as of the texts and experiences that trigger or reinforce the pathology. This also entails providing an explanation of why the West's institutions were designed as they were, to capitalize and tame desires and longings. If the things that terrorists believe (that the West is greedy and selfish, godless and bourgeois, where life is anonymous and licentious) were true, in all fairness the argument that there are prudent reasons for the way western life is organized, where specifiable advantages outweighed potentially negative attributes, ought to be entertained. Cooper supplies such a justification. If it is true that western cities in their anonymity and liberty engender licentiousness and hypocrisy, Cooper is insistent that the West's institutions did not develop haphazardly, nor were occasioned by fleeting economic and social urgencies, but through clear-headed assessment of human potential and limitation. There is, for example, an internal coherence to having both a democratic and a market-oriented system, for, properly understood, they are mutually entailed.

But Cooper indicts the 9/11 terrorists not just for being crazy, or intellectually lazy, but also for being spiritually disordered. His benchmark, drawn from Thomas Hobbes and Hannah Arendt, is the premise that sane and ordinary individuals exercising prudence do not claim divine inspiration, and do not become possessed by the idea that terror is a magical instrument capable of transfiguring reality. He does not deny that ideology and rationalization may redeem terrorist acts from the judgment that such actions are gratuitous and senseless, but "to analyze the inner logic of terrorism one must examine the structure of terrorist consciousness" (Cooper: 35). That consciousness is pathological, indeed is a spiritual

disease, and is immune to common sense. The "pneumo-pathology" (perversion of the experience of faith into an instrument of pragmatic political action) of the terrorists is animated by "an intellectual act whereby a thinker arbitrarily denies the reality of one or another aspect of the world in order to fantasize about an imaginary world" (Cooper: 41). The psychic distortion entails imagining oneself to be other than human (for example, devoid of shame, nothing but pure will, a divine avenger, and so on). And inevitably, garden-variety disappointments and boredom with the simple demands and pieties of life, mushroom into imaginary conspiracies and willful provocations. The dream, in its fullest expression, is that life need not be a sad and penitent trial, nor entail any compromises, but should be the satisfaction of all appetites and longings, however proscribed they may conventionally be. Of course, "living the dream" can only proceed when terror is used as a magical instrument, believed to be capable of transfiguring reality.

One of the most important arguments Cooper makes is that traditional terrorism, constrained by limited political purposes, had no need for weapons of mass destruction. This age has passed, replaced by a terrorism enacted on a cosmic scale, animated by apocalyptic scenarios on the plane of history. The terrorists' ambition is no mere psychological distortion, but a philosophical one: they believe they can remake reality in their own image, evocative of a pure state putatively denied to them in present times, just as concentration camps run by the Nazis were used as laboratories for the remaking of pure human beings of the future. Where the Nazis were held hostage by the inner logic of fascism, which insulated them from the reality of the common world, the terrorists are animated by a sacramental or divine duty emanating from a theological second reality (such as the paradisal promise of black-eyed *hur'ayn*). Driven by the desire for a pristine world, where the inconveniences and tensions from which embodied, temporal life suffers, and that make prudence and moderation necessary, terrorists let violence become the rationale of their being ("I bomb, therefore I am"), and a sacramental duty, whereby the distinction between enemy and innocent civilians is lost. Neither internal limit (shame, conscience, or moderation) nor authoritative proscription have any standing in the terrorists' deformed consciousness. As long as terrorists had limited political purposes (for example, the release of hostages or recognition of independence), their actions were constrained by practical judgment, and their bid for some absolute good was woven into a concrete social context. This changed when the language of grievance and alienation was enlisted to mobilize support for transforming the structure of reality by violence. When the forces they believe they are commandeering (nature, God, or history) are played out as a universal program and a remaking of nature, not only are the conventional remedies of salutary punishment or forgiveness unavailable, but usually the motives are exposed as little more than pedestrian desires for recognition, greed, or madness.

Moreover, as Cooper wryly comments, "magic operations do not work" (Cooper: 58). Westerners have learned from their own bitter experience that laws made by the spiritually pure in the name of God "invariably turn out to be the univocal, undebated decrees of human beings, which Westerners have come to understand to be an attribute of tyranny" (Cooper: 9). The West, however modest its success under certain circumstances may be, takes refuge in universally prescribed conventions, which establish the ethical limits of ordinary people, thus harnessing the desire for achieving an unlimited goal.

Cooper's thoughtful reflections on the impact secularism may have on Islam, his reminder that western science and technology were always inextricably linked to free enquiry and secularism, his clear preference for the "existential stamina" demanded by a faith that entails enduring uncertainty and precariousness, his advocacy for understanding persuasion as a jihad of the tongue and thus jihad as spiritual and intellectual struggle may signal the exhortatory function that political philosophy cannot abdicate (under the guise of a "neutral" science), though equally they provide an appreciation of the scope of relevant phenomena comprising a comprehensive political science.

Strength of conviction that the West has made the right choices is faltering, not merely from outside the West, but equally from within. It is questionable whether universal agreement that the western model is superior can be taken for granted. Though published before 9/11, Pierre Manent's book *The City of Man* still stands as one of the most incisive and troubling accounts of western man, and cannot help but serve to confirm the prejudices of the West's enemies.

Manent, who teaches Political Philosophy at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, offers a devastating assessment of the West's turn away from the City of God, and of the successive waves of radicalization which followed the initial turn from a metaphysical self-understanding (the human as part of nature or the divine economy) to historical self-consciousness. Indicting Montesquieu for the fateful turn, Manent sees it as being responsible for the decline of philosophy and the emergence of the "sociological viewpoint" which, depriving him of any specific nature, empties out the category of "man" to sheer historicity. The different sources of conditioning (climate and political regime) are accorded equal status, to the point that no longer able intelligibly to ask questions such as "which is the true religion?" or "which family organization is more in conformity with nature or vocation?" "man" is simply the by-product of the reciprocal equality of different social functions. Without an idea of the best regime, or a human nature that is both formed by and able to challenge the political domain toward higher forms of completion, western "man" was left either as rigidly constructed by economic, sociological, and historical requirements or as a mere cipher of contingency – which usually meant a reduction to the lowest common denominator of mere comfortable self-preservation and diversion by consumer objects.

Montesquieu dealt the death blow to the authority of ancient virtue, both moral and intellectual. Declaring ourselves free and autonomous, distinguished by no specificity, paradoxically took us to a point where "man appears no longer as cause, but as effect, no longer as causing but as caused" (Manent: 61). With "man" as simply the sum of his determinations, there can no longer be a science of man for it excludes from consideration the question about what is proper to man. And this fateful turn precipitated a dramatic truncation of human potential: "the imagination for its part no longer seeks to embrace as in the past the Being which is 'greater than which nothing can be conceived' nor even the lesser divinities who preside over Love and War. It has ceased to build temples or erect statues of a beauty worthy of their greatness" (Manent: 108). Individuals might, subjectively, long ardently for or dream of noble goals, but these cannot be objectively justified, as the human sciences have abandoned confidence in accounting for the whole of the human phenomena.

With man as creator and custodian of his own genesis, will-to-power was accorded greater status than concrete goods. Once, the difference and dialogue between Greek and Roman ideas of morality, and Hebrew and Christian understandings of human perfectibility, gave European civilization its extraordinary achievements in law, politics, the sciences, and the arts. It drove the impulse to be "the arrow aimed at a target in the sky," signified by the creative tension of magnanimity and humility. But when conflict overwhelmed dialogue, such as during the wars of the Reformation, these two primals were abandoned. Reality, it was reasoned, no longer contained purposes and design, but was perceived to be nothing more than necessity and chance, whose reality could only be captured by putting nature under the artificial conditions of the laboratory. Hence, scientific methodology entailed a double movement: of forceful distance from familiarity with what is real, and forceful effort to recover the familiar, but newly packaged by modern scientific method or, better put, technology. As a consequence, the everyday, in all its paradoxes and ambiguities, was depleted of substantive meaning. The reality within which humans live and reason would henceforth be limited to rationally intelligible universal laws of matter, with unwelcome fortuity banished to the periphery of human consciousness.

After Durkheim the "human" is defined solely by its social determinations, in the spheres of history, society, and economy. These determinations are, as Durkheim explained, "either social phenomena incompatible with science or they are governed by the same laws as the rest of the universe," which amounts to saying that human life swings erratically between absolute indeterminacy and absolute determination. The loss of a scale of value meant that "any aspect of nature, human or nonhuman, referred to in current research or in history can become the sociological determinant." It also entailed, inevitably, the reassertion of the particular, as any restraint could only be judged an unjustifiable self-limitation. Not surprisingly, the law, purely negative and repressive, yet now redesigned with a fearful symmetry, is deployed to subdue the heterogeneity of nature – a project that Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* vividly portrays in the most lurid terms.

Manent's harrowing portrayal of the West's historical trajectory, which had assumed a kind of inevitability once the decisive step was taken to deny that humans have a nature, constitutes a severe indictment of the western world, and its civilizational commitments to knowledge, self-knowledge, and the virtues ministerial to these vocations. Caught in a process, like a tumbling deck of cards, western life will appear as having depleted itself century by century, triggered by internal necessity. The death knell on western civilization has, of course, been tolled many times. It did not take 9/11 to issue a wake-up call for the West. Westerners did not have to wait to hear of their enemies' hatred of our "decadence" to be apprized of Manent's point. One has only to recall Max Weber's chilling conclusion to his own study of the modern era with its references to "mechanized petrification embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance," of "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart."

But equally evident is the West's repeated ability to find restorative tools to kick-start western civilization. René Girard is a magisterial thinker who diagnoses western civilization with acute perception, and who avails himself of contemporary tools in hopes of triggering another civilizational renewal. His many books on the "scapegoat mechanism" have been deftly analyzed in Gil Bailie's 2004 book *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads.*

Ostensibly a work of cultural anthropology, it is equally an attempt to step in where philosophy has faltered. The task of monitoring everyday life, guided by a coherent philosophical anthropology, has been handed over to cultural anthropology:

> A trail of blood, savage torture and death marks the long 20th century – Rwanda, Bosnia, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, to name a few. Words like nationalism, civil war and ethnic cleansing are words for trying to talk about the recrudescence of the primitive sacred as though it were something less ominous and significant than it is ... It involves spasms of violence of the kind that we humans were once able to endow with religious meaning and whose cathartic climax we were once able to convert into reasonably durable cultural structures. (Bailie: 262)

A failure to recognize the dark mechanic at the core of western civilization, which has brought us to the point that cities are collapsing, responsibility abdicated, and social and psychological stability at risk, leaves us not only in darkness about who we are, but cuts us off from the restorative sources that may allow us to turn a corner on the bloodbath of the 20th century. But the risk is great: "We will either discover the experience of genuine religious transcendence or we will fashion out of our own social and spiritual confusions, with even more virulence, something that simulates it" (Bailie: 264).

The Greek poet Archilochus once wrote that the fox knows many things, while the hedgehog knows one big thing. Girard is a hedgehog: at the center of his thought is one idea alone, that is, the omnipresence and cunning of the scapegoat and sacrificial mechanism at the heart of culture. In his works entitled *The Scapegoat* and *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard describes human desire, not as benignly original and spontaneous, but always mediated by the desire of another, as imitative, and always conflictual. There is no mythic time before competition and political constraint, without jealousy, envy, resentment, and rivalry. There is nothing romantic about the origins of society. Desire, he says, is essentially mimetic – we see others enjoying what they desire, and we desire their desire, not because what they desire is objectively good for us, but because they desire it. In fact, we become so obsessed with our rivals that we lose sight of the objects for which we compete and begin to focus angrily on one another. Now, each just wants to prevent the other from obtaining the object they desire, desiring only the prestige that comes from victory over the other. Rivals, formerly different, become mirror images of each other, returning tit for tat endlessly. The more intense their mimetic rivalry, the more prone retaliating others are to join in on one side or the other, with an increasing number of individuals polarizing against fewer and fewer enemies, creating an environment of acute danger and anxiety. And then, at the apparent height of the contagion of mimetic rivalry, when a society is teetering on the brink of destroying itself, the mimetic contagion suddenly focuses on one person, whose guilt and responsibility for the social violence is universally acknowledged. Scapegoating extinguishes their rivalry. The death is a catharsis, triggering memory of the sense of community that generated the violence, and restoring peace and order. More importantly, the scapegoat is a catalyst to a purging of the dark mechanic of desire of others, as rivalry transforms into empathy and compassion for the victim, under the right circumstances.

The lesson to be learned from the scapegoat mechanism, for Girard, is not sociological (moving beyond mimetic desire to social unity), but is instead metaphysical. In the classic locus of the scapegoat mechanism, namely Christianity, the God who sacrifices himself to end the mimetic violence becomes the victim who forgives – evidencing the miracle of transcendent love emerging from immanent collective violence. The New Testament destroys the mesmerizing power of the myths of righteous violence. For the all-too-human, the mechanism offers the prospect of a redemptive power born in guilt, that gives to the individual the choice to refuse mimetic rivalry and instead embrace love, or, at the very least, pity for the victim. The turnaround is so dramatic and awesome because, where the scapegoat is worshiped as a god, there may be born the hope that it lies within human possibility to be like the god who gives himself freely. While such a god will seem remote from a world enmeshed in mimetic rivalry, it holds up a model in the sacrificing Christ (or, more experientially, in the capacities for forgiveness, mercy, and charity or as public policy, for example multiculturalism) for a more scrupulous attention to cathartic purification.

The road to such a moment of decision is, however, a bloody one, and, alarmingly, is intimately connected to the breakdown of western society's traditional channels for curbing outbreaks of violence: business and war. "Until recently," Bailie writes, "Western societies have been able to exploit the economic and to some degree the political potential that this explosion of mimetic desire presented ... [but] the West's attempt to exploit desire rather than to expose its hollowness and renounce its chimeras is one fraught with dangers. Even as the economic miracle made possible by mimetic desire is winning converts around the world, the social and psychological ravages of desire are destroying the social arrangements, the family among them, that make the enjoyment of economic plenty possible" (Bailie: 113). The other channel is even more volatile, and the consequences can be murderous. Commenting on Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević's campaign of racial hatred, and the omnipresence of the tombs after the vortex of passion and ferocity that seized the Nagorno-Karabakh partisans and the Serbian nationalists, Bailie writes, "we are not immune to the seductive power the author of John's Gospel calls the 'father of lies and murderer from the beginning.' There is growing evidence that many unsatisfied with the utilitarian banalities of modern life are becoming nostalgic for the kind of pure conviction the 'father of lies' dispenses often enough at the tomb" (Bailie: 230). When neither competitive business nor war any longer serve to channel or sublimate the spiritedness that mimetic rivalry enflames, young men, in particular, endure "the subjective experience of psychological insubstantiality," and their passion is left free-floating, susceptible to propagandistic indoctrination. "We are," Bailie writes, "perpetually on the brink, these days, of a chain reaction of uncontrollable violence" (Bailie: 57). The choice is either rituals of sacred violence that have lost their religious authority and moral immunity or the gospel's insistence on empathy and forgiveness.

For Bailie, we stand at a point of decision, and the traditional tools of western philosophy are of no value. Citing Girard, he writes "Our rationality cannot reach the founding role of mimetic victimage because it remains tainted with it" (Bailie: 258). Elsewhere he suggests that "since the attempt to understand religion on the basis of philosophy has failed, we ought to try to reverse the method and read philosophy in the light of religion" (Bailie: 234). In addition, "while

Christianity, like all other cultural institutions, is in crisis in our day, it is perhaps philosophical Christianity that is in the deepest crisis" (Bailie: 235). The Cross, on the other hand, is the hermeneutic principle that will permit a restatement of biblical faith that can stand "at the center of the struggle for a culture beyond violence" (Bailie: 7). We need to turn the corner on traditional methods of simulating transcendence in social contagion and violence, find new resources for another experience of religious transcendence, and ask "Could something as seemingly powerless as the screams of a victim actually annihilate the logic of the mind, the logic of history, the logic of politics, and the myth of the twentieth century?" (Bailie: 35). Precisely the West's concern for the plight of victims (not its appetite for power, wealth, and dominion) is its true civilizational achievement. Hence, "in cultures under gospel influence, acts of violence that once endowed its perpetrators with religious and cultural preeminence gradually begin to rob them of it" (Bailie: 52). Thus, the "never-ending parade of social innovations and political correctives is the defining characteristic of Western civilization, and at its core lies the biblical sympathy for victims" (Bailie: 26). And as a cultural, not natural, phenomenon, empathy for victims was mythologized in the West, so that recollection of actual violent events is sufficient to reanimate continually the new humanity that the Cross made possible, and to destroy the mesmerizing power of the myths of righteous violence. The danger, of course, lurks in the resurgence of ethnic, gender, and class distinctions which would precipitate a regress to violence. And, Bailie notes, "the world is convulsing with the most grotesque resurgence of scapegoating violence." But, while biblical revelation has not eliminated the human predisposition for solving social tensions at the expense of scapegoat victims (Rodney King comes to mind), it has destroyed the mesmerizing power of the myths of righteous violence.

The attempt to forge violence into something that simulates real religious transcendence is, unquestionably, fraught with dangerous temptations, and it will appear to one of a more cautious nature to shrink back from something that has the apocalyptic tone of the war to end all wars. Flaming the ashes to extinguish the fire can be accompanied by more risk than prudence should entertain. The last decades have certainly revealed that there is something seductively magical about the war to end all wars. Bailie appreciates the risk, alluding to what one might term the essentially contested nature of the wager: "unless one of these factions can convincingly declare its violence to be *metaphysically distinct* from violence that is *physically indistinguishable* from it, no resolution is possible, and the society teeters on the brink of 'apocalyptic violence'" (Bailie: 59). But overall he may appear somewhat nonplused by the dangers entailed in casting the all-out wager to "reinvent culture" (Bailie: 79), even though he appreciates that "the violence that fascinates but fails to achieve catharsis leads to imitation" (Bailie: 96).

A more measured response to the perils around us, one more concerned about the political devices which harness the love of the unconditioned, is Isaiah Berlin's *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought.* This new and posthumous book offers no substantive departures from the ideas and arguments one associates with Berlin, but as its editors justifiably claim, it is the "*ur*text" of all of Berlin's writings, and it exhibits a comprehensiveness one sometimes finds lacking in his published essays. It is also surprisingly topical. At a time when the recrudescence of romantic themes has accompanied numerous new political foundings in the post-Soviet era, and in the turmoil and realignments

in the Middle East and Africa, there is a refreshing clarity in this work, and a robust comprehensiveness to his commentary on romanticist ideas.

And, given his own proximity to the catastrophic events of the 20th century, one senses on every page an existential urgency supporting incisive assessments, akin to those one discerns in Hannah Arendt or Leo Strauss. Granted, Berlin works his way through these writers with a wide swath, and restricts himself to commenting on the inherited stock of ideas for which thinkers such as Helvetius, Rousseau, Holbach, Mill, Kant, and Herder are best known, thereby detaching himself somewhat from the conversation based on more interpretive readings of canonical writers one finds in continental philosophers. But while an eye to the political environment is also never lacking in these writers, there is a historical specificity to Berlin's attention to Europe tearing itself apart, which speaks profoundly to the healthy respect for a living historical inheritance, rich in specificity and with which one has an immediate resonance.

Berlin's overall thesis in this work can be simply stated. Justifying his classification of this disparate array of thinkers as "romantics," he writes that they share the same assumption that all the great questions must of necessity agree with one another, for they must correspond with reality, and reality is a harmonious whole. Long before the deconstructionists identified the logocentricity or ontotheology of all western discourse, Berlin, commenting on the widespread proclivity to see all goods as harmonizing, writes:

> Here we conspicuously abandon the voice of experience – which records every obvious conflict of ultimate ideals – and encounter a doctrine that stems from older theological roots – from the belief that unless all the positive virtues are harmonious with one another ... the notion of the Perfect Entity – whether it be called nature or God or Ultimate Reality – is not conceivable.

Berlin is intent on finding the intellectual roots of the disasters of the 20th century. He finds the core error in the utopian ideal of perfect harmony, and its refusal to accept the testimony of experience, with its message of irresolvable conflict. The Enlightenment, Berlin writes, propagated a monistic philosophy, too proximate to totalitarianism, and too susceptible to enthusiasms. The alternative is a liberalism of "necessarily precarious balance between incompatible ideas based on the recognition of the equal or nearly equal validity of human aspirations as such, none of which must be subordinated to any single uncriticizable principle" (Berlin: xxix).

An opponent of technocracy, politics by charter, romanticism, metaphysics, and ideology, Berlin's political perspective is avowedly Kantian: "freedom is good, not only as a means to the pursuit of ends that individuals choose to pursue ... but because it is simply and intrinsically good to be free" (Berlin: xxiii). Accepting the irreducible plurality of tastes and beliefs, rationalities, and ontologies which may be freely exhibited may make for chaos. It may also insufficiently exploit the potential in politics to mature the judgment and desires of citizens, and may even preclude the serious pursuit of goods that transcend politics. Nonetheless, Berlin's pluralistic and noninstrumentalist understanding of liberty speaks to the moral dignity of the activity of politics, and the irreducible potentiality (for renewal, restoration, or, when necessary, revolution) that resides in action and speech.

But impatience with the open-endedness and incompletability of politics, or intimation that its potential has not been insufficiently tapped, and that so much more can be expected of it (truth, harmony with the laws of historical necessity, authenticity, uncompromised justice, unity, or freedom), will inevitably invite intervention, often in a language informed by metaphysics, which contains esoteric truths beyond natural science and common sense. Concomitantly, the inefficiency of politics will invite innumerable technocratic and managerial schemas, or speculative constructions. Berlin's advocacy of value pluralism and liberalism, as Joshua Cherniss explains in his highly informative introduction, was deliberately unsystematic, to destabilize the attraction of these schemas. Whatever veers toward utopianism, progressivism, or a claim of universal validity, he refuted, for he knew the inevitable coercion it would exercise.

Behind this reserve lie Berlin's central presuppositions. Severed from truth, the central articles of faith of the past must be jettisoned. Man is no longer an immortal soul. Men are no longer fallen creatures. There is no great drama of existence. There are no glimpses of the infinite by the wise. The rejection of old dogmatic truths is absolute, and irrevocable. That humans were capable of self-completion, hence able to rise above the unpredictability, fallibility, and complexity of human life, he denied. "Man is incapable of self-completion," he writes, "and therefore never wholly predictable; fallible, a complex combination of opposites, some reconcilable, others incapable of being resolved or harmonized; unable to cease from his search for truth, happiness, novelty, freedom, but with no guarantee ... of being able to attain them; a free, imperfect being capable of determining his own destiny in circumstances favorable to the development of his reason and his gifts" (Berlin: liii). Each of these steps confirms the judgment that the central issue of political philosophy is the question "why should any man obey any other man or body of men?" Despite a history of answers to this question, Berlin withholds consent to any of them, leaving the "why" of obedience as an unsurpassable problem. Limited politics, freedom, plurality, and tolerance are essential because we are "doomed to eternal ignorance on the most essential issues."

The romantic political option was (and is), however, a beguilingly attractive alternative to the modern state and its dogmas. Some of its ideas reinforced the modern turn, others took it radically forward. That values are human creations arising out of self-perceptions and personality, that self-determining choice imparts moral dignity, and that variety is an intrinsic good, were ideas, though romantic, amenable to Berlin's political perspective, and hedges against scientism, totalitarianism, and ideological dogma. He also credits romanticism with being "the largest step in the moral consciousness of mankind since the Middle Ages" and the last great "transvaluation of values" in modern history.

On the other hand, romanticism insinuated exalted, but usually volatile, new ideas in old containers. Its beguiling grandeur obscured its dangers. Berlin offers incisively critical assessments of its leading thinkers: Montesquieu, who reduced identity to differences of material conditions and a focus on the collective experience of an entire society; Shaftesbury and Lessing, who reduced morals to aesthetics; Rousseau, who turned away from cleverness, erudition, and skill, in favor of a "special" purity of heart and will, to be found among the simple and humble; Kant, who took morality out of the world, interiorizing it into the absolutely good will or worthiness of happiness; Fichte, who planted the idea of realizing ideals conceived in terms of an inner self, which then confers on some

individuals the sense of election to a supreme moral task; Vico, who structured change into manageable development; Herder, who abandoned the world for the raw nexus of the mechanical world of science and a spiritual realm offering a special illumination, revealed only "in moments of the special illumination peculiar to spirit beings" (Berlin: 148); and Hegel, who adopted the romantic idea that to know a thing is to know the way it is developing, toward that final culmination which represents the purpose of or reason for its existence, governed by inevitable law. The cumulative effect, Berlin concludes, is a legacy that had a decisive social effect of whittling away individual rights, areas of privacy, and freedom of choice and subjective aspirations, by assuming a single coherent pattern, the natural harmony of all goods, real prospects of enlightened morality or self-consciousness, and an authoritative distinction between historical explanation and scientific understanding. They were ideas which, inevitably, followed the pattern of starting from unlimited freedom and arriving at unlimited despotism, justifying the casuistry of "liberat[ing] people ... to do just that for them which, were they rational, they would do for themselves" (Berlin: 124).

Yet, at the same time, Berlin's own perspective (which like Cooper's, Manent's, and Bailie's supplies an explanation of the choices the West reasoned it must make in the prudent assessment of risk and possibility) is less a wholesale opposition to romanticism than a sustained, reasoned modulation within the conversation of the West filled with subtle discernment and practical judgment shaped both by advocacy and resistance to romanticist ideas. "We classify not in accordance with some abstract theory," Herder writes, in words which could be Berlin's, "because we have a sense of inner relevance which relates everything which flows from that common outlook which is the historical pattern that makes peoples what they are ... and at once shapes and justifies what is best in everything they do." It is an invitation, so elegantly exemplified in Berlin's own writings, to the serious study of the inner necessity, architecture, and practical plausibility of traditions.

Possibly the most arresting and suggestive of the new books in political philosophy that can be brought to bear on the challenges to the West is Rémi Brague's 2002 study *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization*. Here, he not only undertakes to demonstrate to the non-West the danger of seeing only the most superficial characteristics of the mode of life of the inhabitants of Europe (and tacitly suggesting the changes the non-West might entertain that would give them the tools of self-reparation that Europe learned to maneuver), but equally to say emphatically to Europeans that the content of Europe is "just to be a container," rather than a possessed inheritance, or equally "nothing other than a constant movement of self-Europeanization."

Turning on its head the thesis that the history of political philosophy is a single linear path starting with the pre-Socratics and culminating in Nietzsche or Heidegger, and immured from the civilizational achievements of the non-West, Brague provides a sustained reflection on the Greek, Arab, and Roman worlds, and their relation or contribution to modern Europe, concluding that the only recurring pattern in the West is "a continual plebiscite." Eschewing the Greek parentage of Europe, and the traditional symbol of "Athens and Jerusalem," Brague proposes that Europe is essentially Roman, by which he means not so much the contents as the form. He uses an analogy: just as the circulation of wealth frees up the time that would be required for each to produce everything individually, the unique content of "Romanity" is its transmission of what is received. Rome itself

received Greek culture and transmitted it further, but this was not its distinctive feature. Rather, transmitting it on, Rome transmitted innovation itself, not as content, but as form. Its perspective was not one of looking back, but looking forward: "To be Roman is to experience the ancient as new and as something renewed by its transplantation in new soil, a transplantation that makes the old a principle of new developments. The experience of the commencement as a (re)-commencement is what it is to be Roman" (Brague: 34).

Brague's chief illustration is the Hellenization of Roman culture. Rome did not restrict itself to bringing its own civilization to the conquered world, for it also brought Greek culture. Rome was itself a transplantation, and it repeated the gesture. "The Romans at least had the courage to bow down to Greek culture and to admit that they were a rough-hewn people, but nevertheless capable of learning." The model was duplicated wherever the Romans went in Europe. Romanity did not entail a neutral transmission; instead, appealing upward to a classicism to imitate and stooping downwards to barbarism needing to be subdued, it knew itself only in a fragile and provisional manner (Brague: 40). "Roman culture is thus essentially a passage: a way." Rome's unique contribution to European civilization was to bring innovation itself. Resisting nostalgia, Rome brought the perspective of looking forward, of preserving by reforming. What the Romans did in regard to Hellenism, the Roman Church did in relation to Israel: "The Church is 'Roman' because it is founded, and because it is founded on the Christ that it confesses to be novelty itself" (Brague: 55).

The two fundamental components of Europe are Greek and Jewish. These two trajectories produced their effects on Europe from a Roman perspective. Despite contrarian pressure from the Marcion heresies, Rome did not abandon or vilify the Old Testament by imposing a gnostic interpretation upon it (the angry God versus the God of love), but emphasized Christ's words – "there is no question of abolishing the old Law, but of fulfilling it to perfection" (Brague: 58). By contrast to this Romanity, Brague adds, the Koran, while noting Jesus as messiah and born of a virgin, underestimates the pragmatic significance of the idea of the miraculous birth of Jesus in its role of breaking the continuity of generations, nor does it dwell on the ongoing engagement of God in the human adventure. This is evident in the manner by which it borrowed from others. Islamic civilization absorbed the civilizations that it conquered by translating into Arabic the texts that it found useful, then used the translations and almost never returned to the originals. Brague speculates that the reason was that Arabic, being the perfect language chosen for Allah's revelation, *perfected* the originals. The translated texts were considered *better* in Arabic. In translating only what it needed (and, even then, primarily for didactic purposes, and chosen primarily for their accessibility), it did not repeatedly go back to the originals, as a source of renewal. By denying itself repeated access to the original, it closed off recognition of its own cultural borrowings, and thereby shielded itself from self-critique.

The Byzantine Greeks fared no better. Book burning was an accepted practice and an obvious complication, but so was the process of text-copying, leaving future generations dependent on the selectiveness of what survived and what was copied. Often, simple compendiums were copied, but not the originals, which were deemed less didactic and accessible. Diffidence in regard to the original has meant that were it not for the Arabic translations, chief works of philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy would be lost.

Brague's aim is not to boast of the Roman achievement, indeed to the contrary: "To say that we are Romans is entirely the contrary of identifying ourselves with a prestigious ancestor. It is rather a divestiture, not a claim. It is to recognize that fundamentally we have invented nothing, but simply that we learned how to transmit a current come from higher up, without interrupting it, and the while placing ourselves back in it" (Brague: 91). In preserving sources and returning to them, Europe checks itself critically against the other at its core. While Europe's unique and distinct character is the recurring possibility of renaissance, neither Byzantium nor Islam had a renaissance, nor perpetuated the need of periodic renaissance.

Where lies the future? To Europe, Brague lays down the challenge to be strong enough not to fill its empty frame with determinate content, but to continue to be self-conscious of its particularity, and to open up to the rest of the world, in such a way that it continues to renew itself. And to Islam, or, indeed, other civilizations embarked on the substantive process of self-reconstitution in the context of contemporary life, he extends the invitation to imitate, not (obviously) western culture, but the dynamic of secondarity.

To return to where this review started, the paramount sources of the danger of our times may be the rigidity that stems from ignorance of the other, and the willful indifference to sources of renewal. If Bailie is even partially right that philosophy, traditionally understood, "is no longer able to supervise – and reluctant even to chaperon – humanity's moral and intellectual adventure," it may require not quite his (and many others') apocalyptic solutions, but the slow, steady, and imaginative incrementalism of "Romanity," as *the* world dialogue and global project.

Biographical Note

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