Mapping the road to unfreedom

Timothy Snyder’s ‘The Road to Unfreedom’ critiqued and explored

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In ‘The Road to Unfreedom’, historian Timothy Snyder traces the intellectual roots of modern authoritarianism in Russia and how its influence has spread, not least in the West. In the following exchange, three east-central European scholars, brought together by ‘Razpoţja’, critique Snyder's new book – and Snyder responds.

History and the inevitability of eternity?

By Peter Verovšek

Over the past decade Timothy Snyder has sought to convince western European and English-speaking audiences of the importance of east-central Europe for the history of the twentieth-century. Although the Holocaust is usually thought of as a western phenomenon, in Bloodlands (2010) and Black Earth (2015) he shows that by almost any measure (death rates, physical devastation, population displacement, societal breakdown or institutional destruction) it was primarily an eastern atrocity. If we wish to draw the lessons of the 1930s and 40s, we must first understand what happened there.

As a scholar of totalitarianism Snyder is understandably concerned by the return of fascist ideas clothed in the guise of right-wing populism. The striking similarities between the interwar crisis that followed the Great Depression (1929-39) and the aftermath of the Great Recession (from 2007) lead him to worry that the beginning of this century might end up looking much like the early decades of the last. His previous work, On Tyranny (2017), started off as a warning posted on Facebook that went viral after Donald Trump’s election and details ‘20 lessons from across the fearful 20th century, adapted to the circumstances of today’. [1]

Snyder’s The Road to Unfreedom (2018) brings his longstanding interest in combating the western-centrism of European history and his more recent attempts to apply his knowledge of the past to the present together in a single volume. The book traces the
current crisis of democracy back to Russia, showing how Vladimir Putin used fake news and the hacking of personal data – as well as support for neo-fascist parties in Europe and America – to rebuild Russian power and influence in the world.

Snyder’s narrative is organized chronologically, with each of the six chapters devoted to developments in a single year from 2011 to 2016. In particular, it focuses on how Russia rapidly shifted from rapprochement with the West to overt antagonism in 2012. Snyder links this transformation to the fact that Putin had to fake the presidential election that year in order to retain his grip on power. He argues that after defeating the uprising in Chechnya, Putin needed a new enemy to rally the people behind him. He settled on the West, concocting a ‘fictional problem’ that focused on the alleged ‘designs of the European Union and the United States to destroy Russia’ (p.51).

Snyder highlights how Putin adopted the ideas of the fascist thinker Ivan Ilyin (1883-1954), who argued that the Russian spirit must be mobilized against all external threats ‘by the caprice of a single ruler’ (p.24). Ilyin’s Manichaean worldview, combined with his obsession with sexual purity, helps explain both the vehemence of Russia’s recent rhetoric, as well as its erotic focus on the ‘homosexual’ attempts of the EU and America to ‘sodomize’ Russian virtue. Snyder notes, ‘The dramatic change in Russia’s orientation bore no relation to any new unfriendly action from the outside. Western enmity was not a matter of what a Western actor was doing, but what the West was portrayed as being’ (p.91).

Snyder’s account of the renaissance of fascist thought within the Kremlin and his analysis of how it spread west into Europe and America is fascinating, especially for those of us who rely primarily on western sources. His analysis of Ilyin’s Christian totalitarianism, the Eurasianism of Lev Gumilev (the son of the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova) and the ‘Eurasian’ Nazism of Alexander Dugin, as well as their neo-fascist followers at the Izborsk Club think tank led by Alexander Prokhanov are equally illuminating. This survey is an important reminder of the crucial role of ideas in politics, if that were even needed. It also highlights the need for a more thorough philosophical examination of eastern fascism (unfortunately, English-speaking political theorists tend to share the narrow western focus of many historians).

Snyder structures The Road to Unfreedom around the dichotomy between ‘the politics of inevitability’ and ‘the politics of eternity.’ The former – which Snyder associates with the West – is his take on Francis Fukuyama’s idea of the ‘end of history.’ It refers to a mode of politics where ‘the future is just more of the present’ (p.7). In America, the politics of inevitability takes ‘the market as a substitute for policy’ (p.15), whereas in the EU it is represented by bureaucrats in Brussels armed with the TINA doctrine (‘there is no alternative’).

By contrast, ‘the politics of eternity,’ which describes post-2012 Russia, places the nation ‘at the centre of a cyclical story of victimhood.’ While inevitability relies on a linear notion of progress, eternity ‘endlessly returns to the same threats from the past’ (p.8). It is this revolutionary view of history – in the original sense of the Latin revolutio describing a cyclical movement [2] – that grounds Putin’s neo-fascist contention that the West is a permanent threat to Russia.
This static picture of inevitability versus eternity is broken up by history. The third part of Snyder’s puzzle ‘opens an aperture between inevitability and eternity, preventing us from drifting from one to the other, helping us see the moment when we might make a difference’ (pp.12-3). It seeks to win back the present by introducing new possibilities and unexpected tangents. Snyder notes, ‘To break the spell of inevitability, we must see ourselves as we are, not on some exceptional path, but in history alongside others. To avoid the temptation of eternity, we must address our own particular problems, beginning with inequality’ (p.275).

While the book has much to recommend it, I am unconvinced by this theoretical framework for three main reasons. First, it is unclear how these ideas are related normatively. Based on his abstract descriptions of them, Snyder seems to imply that inevitability and eternity are equally enslaving. In this sense, it seems as though Snyder is attacking both Russia and the West, even though the book focuses almost exclusively on the former. However, Snyder undermines this impression of equivalence at other points. For example, referring to the title of the book, he argues, ‘The road to unfreedom is the passage from the politics of inevitability to the politics of eternity’ (p.257). While this sentence hardly serves as an endorsement of inevitability, it certainly makes it appear preferable to eternity. Is this the case? A more thorough discussion of the politics of inevitability is necessary to clarify this point.

My second question regards the role of history. It is unclear to me if this concept is even necessary given that Snyder seems to be arguing for a revitalization of politics, i.e. of a form of collective action that eschews both inevitability and eternity, allowing for real choices in the present. This is visible in his favourite example, the 2013-14 Maidan protests, where the Ukrainian people spontaneously came out to fight ‘for a sense that there could be a past, a present, and a future’ (p.151). While the concept of history emphasizes this temporal dynamic, the idea of politics also requires a vision that links narratives of the past to visions of the future through action in the present.

My concerns about how Snyder speaks of history are reflected in his evaluation of the Maidan protests. Commenting on the disappointing aftermath of the Revolution of Dignity, he observes, ‘The association agreement with Europe was signed in June 2014. It went into force in September 2017. History went on’ (p.154). Whereas history is supposed to be a source of action in the present, in this passage Snyder speaks of it in the passive voice as something that just goes on. This implies that much like politics, history too can easily become either inevitable or cyclical. If this was indeed the case, would it not be better to simply stick with a call for politics?

My third question is closely related to the previous two. One of the major ambiguities of the text revolves around Snyder’s evaluation of the EU. At times, Snyder presents the EU as a beacon of hope. Returning to the example of the ‘Euro-Maidan’, Snyder notes that in these protests Ukrainians were ‘defending a European future’ (p.151) that had been imperilled by President Viktor Yanukovich’s failure to sign the association agreement. This implies that the EU is (or at least can be) a resource for reclaiming politics in the present. At other points, however, Snyder speaks of the EU in much less favourable terms, noting that membership allowed the post-communist states to recast their actions during the two World Wars ‘as unique moments of national victimhood’ (p.77). His classification of the EU as part of the politics of inevitability reinforces this impression. Is
the EU a potential site of politics (or history, as Snyder may still prefer to call it)? Or has it slipped too far into the inevitability of TINA?

Given its rigid adherence to rules and its reliance on technocratic solutions, the EU has undoubtedly flirted with the politics of inevitability. In spite of these worrying characteristics, however, I would argue that the EU has experienced a ‘return of politics’ since the start of the euro crisis in the winter of 2010, as the Eurocrats in Brussels have been forced to recognize that crisis situations require action that is not governed by pre-existing rules. [3] Additionally, while the European project may seem to have lost its momentum when viewed from the inside, ‘it is the simple desire for peace, and the achievement of peace, that makes the European Union attractive in Kiev and elsewhere’. [4]

This last quotation comes from Snyder’s real-time reporting on the Maidan protests in his blog at the New York Review of Books. In 2013 Snyder still saw the EU as an effective bulwark for politics against both inevitability and eternity. Have things really changed so much since then? If anything, it seems as though we need the example of the EU now more than ever to show that conflict and enmity – whether between France and Germany, or between Russia and the West – are neither inevitable nor eternal, but can be resolved through political action in the present.

From influence to similarity

By Ferenc Laczó

In The Road to Unfreedom, Timothy Snyder aims to reclaim the present for historical time and political thought. His engaging book chronicles the passage from ‘the politics of inevitability’ to ‘the politics of eternity.’ Snyder argues that the insistence on unregulated capitalism and on the absence of alternatives had eroded the sense of civic responsibility just when the lessons of the twentieth century were being unlearned. Subsequently, politics came to be redefined as a form of being rather than doing. Increasingly preoccupied with imaginary threats and self-defence, it started to be devoted to little more than manufacturing crises and emotional spectacle. Thus far, Snyder’s terminology may be original and insightful but his diagnosis is largely familiar: others have discussed closely related themes under headings such as ‘the crisis of democracy’ or – even more frequently – ‘the rise of populism.’

By focusing on the opposites of the political virtues of individuality, endurance, cooperation, novelty, honesty and justice, The Road to Unfreedom explicitly aims to offer a guide to repair. However, the details of Snyder’s advice are rather to be found in his recent pamphlet On Tyranny. What makes The Road to Unfreedom more intriguing is Snyder’s ambition to revive the original agenda of the historian: to confront war propaganda and thereby help establish the possibilities of freedom. This is a noble and urgent ambition which, however, has its pitfalls, not least of which is how to confront new propaganda techniques, most particularly those used in cyberwarfare, while keeping the broader socio-political context in mind and maintaining a sense of proportion.
The bulk of the book is a treatise on the consolidation of a new kind of authoritarianism in Russia and the accompanying rise of what Snyder calls ‘political fiction’ since around 2011. This is combined with a less thorough examination of the international impact the two have exerted. With every chapter being devoted to a particular year, a particular concept and a particular event (the return of totalitarian thought; the collapse of democratic politics in Russia; the Russian assault on the European Union; the revolution in Ukraine and the subsequent Russian invasion; the spread of political fiction in Russia, Europe, and America; the election of Donald Trump), the book errs somewhat – in contrast to the subjects it studies – on the side of too much coherence.

Beyond its sustained attention on Russian politics, *The Road to Unfreedom* makes a timely attempt to trace how concepts and practices have moved from east to west. Snyder is careful to emphasize here that there is nothing inherently Russian about the dominance of what he calls political fiction. Nonetheless, he occasionally contributes to the inflation of terms, such as when he writes of Russia’s ‘war against Ukraine, the European Union, and the United States’ (p.27), when he argues that ‘Russia would bomb Syria to generate refugees, then encourage Europeans to panic’ (pp.198-9), or when he repeatedly suggests that ‘Trump, the successful businessman’ was a Russian creation and that the Russians practically own him. Moreover, his discussions of [Ivan] Ilyin’s Christian totalitarianism, [Lev] Gumilev’s Eurasianism, [Alexander] Dugin’s “Eurasian” Nazism’ (p.91) are thoroughly engaging and in parts enlightening; however, they are also too polemical to qualify as proper explorations in the history of ideas. These are unnecessary overstatements in a book that otherwise offers illuminating insights into Russian propaganda.

Snyder is at his best when he focuses on Russia’s war propaganda related to the attack on Ukraine, which he calls a modest affair in military terms accompanied by ‘the most sophisticated propaganda campaign in the history of warfare’ (p.162). His dissections of Russian ‘sexual geopolitics’ (constantly mobilizing the sexual phobias and gender-related fears of Russians when misrepresenting international political developments), ‘schizofascism’ (manifested, most concretely, in Russian fascists labelling non-Russian non-fascists as fascists, which seemed plausible to them once the meaning of fascism was distorted to denote little more than perceived ‘anti-Russianism’) and ‘implausible deniability’ (the strategy of undermining all standards of factuality to sow confusion and disable discussions of double standards) offer a plethora of suggestive evidence. Snyder highlights that the prime ambition of these propaganda techniques has not been to develop a coherent story but rather to break the story that happened to be true. As he perceptively remarks, the idea that truths could be understood regardless of perspective was to be made to seem impossible: arguments were no longer meant to be considered on their own terms, thus creating inexhaustible possibilities for *ad hominem* attacks.

What this particularly chilling part ultimately shows is that the Russian propaganda machinery largely succeeded: while 10,000 people were killed and another two million displaced in Ukraine, much of the western debate was preoccupied with casting doubt on basic facts, such as whether Ukraine existed and whether Russia had really invaded it.

Snyder’s insistence on the – only seemingly odd – combination of the knowing cynicism of the Russian public, on the one hand, and its sheer ignorance that begets a sense of innocence, on the other, strikes me as convincing. He is also right to suggest that politics in the age of the internet is increasingly turning into a competition over psychological
states rather than material objects and so the ability to manipulate subjective perception has become much more important. Crucially, he is spot on to highlight that such a shift has favoured a regime like Putin’s, and I would have enjoyed seeing this idea developed further.

The book’s emphasis on how the stronger Russian side also employed the weapons of the weak during its physical assault on Ukraine is well-placed too. What is missing is some reflection on whether Russian propaganda warfare, including cyberwarfare, might also be qualified as a weapon of the weak when viewed as merely one element of the international system. One could plausibly argue that, given Russia’s strategic weaknesses, its ‘strategic relativism’ needs to rely on such weapons. In other words, the ‘negative-sum game’ of cyberwarfare can be effective on its own terms but such a game is far from reversing the developmental and power hierarchies of the global system. The author’s reluctance to gauge the actual impact of cyberwarfare, i.e. not what messages were sent but how they were received and with what consequences, is to my mind a major weakness of The Road to Unfreedom.

The author’s reflections on Europe and the European Union belong among the most agreeable parts of the book. Writing in the shadow of the Brexit vote, Snyder emphasizes that upon the loss of their empires, major European states were rescued by the integration process: the European order that emerged in the post-war era has not only supported but in fact enabled their continued exercise of sovereignty. It is intriguing to read his critique of the European politics of inevitability founded on what he calls ‘the fable of the wise nation’, i.e. the canonical story that European states learned a lesson from war and began to integrate. This fable indeed fatefully ignores the paramount mid-century attempts by Europeans to establish empires within Europe – for which Ukraine is the ‘hypertypical’ case. What is equally if not more problematic is that this fable overlooks the fact that major European powers were never just nation states in modern history and thereby allows for the illusion that great powers could simply leave the union to become nation states again, whereas – as Snyder somewhat derisively remarks – an exit from the EU in fact means joining Russia as another remnant state of a European empire beyond the reach of European integration (p.101). These remarks offer important correctives to the European ‘lessons of history’ as they are currently understood by mainstream politicians and publics.

I find the author’s simultaneous insistence on Russia’s strong links to the European far-right and Russian influence on the political mainstream of the EU much less illuminating. I would have welcomed an approach that distinguished more clearly between Russian overlaps with, support for and influence over the – strengthened but far from victorious – anti-systemic forces in the union, on the one hand, and the many other – superficially banal – types of connections between Russia and the centripetal forces in Europe, on the other; sympathy among European radicals for the Russian regime and the values it claims to embody is one issue, the creeping and utterly thoughtless normalization of the country across much of the European mainstream is a distinct – and arguably even more significant – problem.

The last chapter in turn details the highly controversial and inevitably much politicized collusion between Russia and Donald Trump. Snyder seems to oscillate here between a radical thesis of a successful Russian plot to undermine the US – whereby he, rather
ironically in light of his critique of the Russian cult of innocence, appears to externalize the blame for the Trump phenomenon – and a more self-critical view that rather insists on the similarities between the two countries. Has American politics been hijacked by a Russian intervention, or is it instead following a strikingly similar trajectory largely independently of Russia?

It is indeed true that unfettered American capitalism has colluded with kleptocratic Russian authoritarianism via a global system of oligarchic patronage. Snyder is also correct to assert that no American presidential campaign was ‘ever so closely bound to a foreign power’ (p.233) and that Trump subsequently filled his cabinet with people who had ‘startlingly intimate connections’ to Russia (p.241). However, his thesis on growing similarities between the two countries – in terms of massive inequalities and the resulting insecurity of the middle classes as well as the personalization and emotionalization of politics that have followed in their wake - strikes me as vastly more relevant from a long-term view. I trust that Timothy Snyder essentially agrees with me on this and his insistence on alleged collusion is of more momentary relevance – which is a different way of saying that his stance on the matter would require further clarifications.

To conclude, the key shortcoming of the book is in not gauging the actual impact of cyberwarfare. This appears to be intimately connected to the rather cursory treatment of two major themes: how politics have changed in the age of the internet, and the more theoretical discussions around the relations between facts, narrative, truth and fiction. Frequent internet use can indeed worsen our ability to concentrate and recall, and impede critical reflection. Snyder also sends an important warning that the eroding line between private and public life threatens us with the ‘quiet emergence of totalitarianism’, whereby political outcomes are increasingly determined by control over the secrets of others, to the benefit of the most shameless. However, his key statement that ‘authoritarianism arrives when people lose the ability to distinguish between facts and desires’ (p.249) falls short of a more substantial discussion of how attention and appeal have become closely merged in the internet age, and what we could do to reverse this dangerous trend – via the crucial medium of the internet and not in futile opposition to it.

Snyder’s use of concepts suggests a strict dichotomy between factuality and truth, on the one hand, and narrative and fiction, on the other. Such a position is difficult to maintain in the light of contemporary theory. After all, his book is another example where facts are narrated in order to make sense of the world and stake a claim to truthfulness, and at least some of the techniques used while doing so are conspicuously similar to those of fiction writers. We do not have to accept the self-serving relativism of autocrats to state that while we can falsify their untruth, there is no way for us to prove our truth. Luckily, the former ought to be a sufficient basis for a liberal and argumentative society.

Captivated by the metaphor, enchanted by ideas

By Kacper Szulecki

I have long been a fan of Timothy Snyder’s writings: his seamless prose, the topics he deals with and the way he interprets sources. I assign The Reconstruction of Nations as
course reading and recommend *The Red Prince* to my students as a superb introduction to nationalist politics. I consider *Bloodlands* ground-breaking in shifting the geopolitical gaze to include an eastern European perspective on twentieth-century history. For Holocaust studies laymen, his book *Black Earth* is very useful in putting several jigsaw pieces together to form one gruesome image.

That last book, however, already signalled Snyder’s ambition to take his unquestioned historical expertise and apply it to contemporary political debates. In *The Road to Unfreedom*, he dives into current politics head first. *The Road to Unfreedom* is a ‘history of the present’, to use Timothy Garton Ash’s title, but even though Snyder is less personally present in his book, his side-taking is even more visible. And all of this in a historical moment which lends itself much less to black and white depictions than the fall of the Iron Curtain.

On the level of basic structure, *The Road to Unfreedom* is very similar to *Black Earth*. The author begins by pitching an interesting and provocative idea – there, that Hitler’s anti-Semitism is best understood in ecological terms, here that contemporary politics is stretched between the extremes of ‘inevitability’ and ‘eternity’. What follows in both cases is a detailed close reading of the texts of several ideologues which could constitute a separate essay. To expand the essay into a book, as in *Black Earth*, Snyder then opens up for a long, empirical journey, at first sight only loosely linked to the theoretical ‘heading’. But then comes the acrobatic climax in which the author tries to use the strength of the conceptual framework and the historical evidence gathered to make an argument about contemporary American politics. Some readers were surely struck by the unusual parallel *Black Earth* drew between mass killing and climate change. *The Road to Unfreedom* ends with a very engaged chapter on the last presidential campaign, a devastating critique of Donald Trump, and even a short passage on the role of the ongoing ‘opioid crisis’ in pulling America down the road of unfreedom.

The metaphor Snyder selected for the title describes his approach but captivates his analysis. A road implies a chronological sequence forming a causal chain. Throughout the book Snyder swings between two roles: a historian of *events* and a historian of *ideas*. The causal story is driven by events. There are moments in the book when this approach yields great results – the detailed, chronological analysis of the war in Ukraine from Maidan to Minsk II is outstanding. It suits the historian’s toolkit, and Snyder was personally engaged and closely watched the unfolding events.

But then, the metaphor and the resulting approach fail Snyder in his overall aim. Following a single chain of events, Snyder suggests that Putin’s Russia is the necessary if not sufficient causal factor in the rise of unfreedom and America’s slide into the ‘politics of eternity’. Only the professional vanity of an eastern Europe expert and the lasting shock of Trump’s victory could lead to that notion. The ‘politics of eternity’ as a rhetorical strategy and as a mindset has been present for much longer, and what might be more interesting is how it has been buoyed up by the ‘rising tide of unfreedom’ (a different and perhaps better-suited metaphor) in several places at once. As Snyder admits late in the book, ‘there is nothing inherently Russian about political fiction’ (p.208). There is also nothing inherently Russian about kleptocracy, politics of eternity, geopolitical delusions, violence, poor governance, etc., even if they are all present in contemporary Russia. The author’s brief discussion of the 2015 Polish elections, which led to the country’s
democratic backsliding, reveals the weaknesses of the causal chain approach. As hard as he tries, Snyder is not able to convincingly argue that Russians had anything much to do with the result – and the idea that the liberal side lost due to the ‘tape scandal’ is a form of self-delusion that even the liberal opposition confronted and overcame more than a year ago. American liberals still seem to be licking their wounds. Casting the blame on Russian cyberwarfare possibly helps by removing responsibility from Americans in general and, more particularly, from liberals themselves, the Democrats and their supporters.

The idea of the ‘politics of inevitability’ giving way to the ‘politics of eternity’ provides Snyder with an interesting framing of the entire issue, and offers a novel epistemology of modern politics as ‘inevitability and eternity turn facts into narratives’ (p.8). The two are, however, ideal-type constructs and not observable realities. Snyder visibly slips at times, attaching normative charge but also actual political presence to his two concepts – with the meaning of supposedly western ‘inevitability politics’ remaining far less clear than that of its eternity counterpart. This is unsurprising, as there will never be a pure example of either ideal type. Russia is not Sauron’s Mordor trapped in ‘eternal’ thinking. Similarly, in Europe the threads of ‘eternity’ have been recurring for years.

The tension between inevitability and eternity as drivers of politics is most visible in the Ukraine-Russia nexus. Snyder tells the story of the Maidan with (com)passion and an eye for detail. This is perhaps the most important moment in Europe since 1989, a crossroads between freedom and unfreedom. All those who have ever made the effort to step into the shoes of the Maidan protestors and brush aside the numerous lies that have been spun about them understand that this protest was about a fundamental choice for Ukraine, about the most basic principles of good governance, about hope and dignity (p.125). This mechanism is captured quite well by Francis Fukuyama, who argued that east European anti-communist dissidents were motivated by the moral imperative to defend their thymos (Plato’s notion for the drive to preserve one’s dignity). But Snyder simultaneously casts Fukuyama as the icon of the ‘politics of inevitability’, which he appears to scorn. Yet throughout the book he seems to be convinced – as any liberal should be – that ‘western’ freedom is indeed better than ‘non-western’ unfreedom. If that were so, and if we were to understand that ‘inevitability’ and ‘eternity’ always work side by side, why would Russia be eternally condemned to a ‘politics of eternity’?

While Russia is the unquestioned villain in the book, and for good reasons, Snyder has surprisingly little to say about the mechanics of Putin’s rule. The crucial twist in the story appears as early as page 5, when ‘Russia turned against the European Union’. The explanation of this is scattered and Snyder appears to be suggesting that the ‘succession problem’ in Russia was the main cause, but this point is so important for the entire book that it deserved a more thorough analysis.

This is where the historian of ideas enters the scene. The Road to Unfreedom begins with a lengthy dissection of a number of eccentric writers – Ivan Ilyin, Lev Gumilev, Alexander Dugin and the Izborsk Club. For Snyder, who scorns the ‘inevitability’ orthodoxy for which ‘ideas do not matter’, ideas are practically everything: he presents them as omnipotent, and depicts them as unique – even though each of his sources is a rather typical representative of nationalist bilge. What is the impact of these writers on Russian policy? Are they indeed the intellectual godfathers of Putinism, as Snyder seems to
suggest, or rather rhetorical figures, which Russian kleptocrats employ strategically? This peculiar marriage of Sovietology with the history of ideas (or a selective reading of some authors, but not others) necessitates a leap of faith: the implication that these particular ideas matter and draw the boundaries of thinkable political action. This, however, is not convincingly demonstrated in the book.

We have to applaud Snyder for giving political agency to Ukrainians, something that many western commentators – from right to left, from Mearsheimer, through Cohen to van der Pijl – clearly deny them. But then, Snyder seems so enchanted by his notion of a reified Russian ‘politics of eternity’ that he forgets to consider the agency of Russians, and the way it plays out in specific domestic and international contexts. He has very little to say about the broader political, structural and political economic characteristics of Russia which might in fact explain its foreign and domestic policy much better than Ilyin’s thought. In short, though Snyder nails it by saying that ‘to think historically is to see the limits of structures, the spaces of indeterminacy, the possibilities for freedom’ (p.112), he fails to practice what he preaches on the main object of his analysis.

In Chapter 4, Snyder introduces a number of very enlightening concepts of his own (e.g. schizofascism, implausible deniability, reverse asymmetry). Among these, the most interesting for a student of international relations is ‘strategic relativism’ (pp.195, 249). This is really the key to the whole argument and here Snyder puts his finger on something really important. Cast aside the anti-Russian impetus (as understandable as it might be after the invasion of Ukraine), the recurring ideas about Russian uniqueness (she ‘cannot be understood with the mind alone’, the poet claimed), the useful folly of Ilyin and Dugin. Let us assume for a moment that Putin and his gang are rational actors – not grand strategists, as many modern Kremlinologists seem to think, but policymakers entangled in a peculiar but mundane political-economic network. Constrained by the feet of clay of the giant they govern as well as their own their short-sightedness, navigating stormy international waters, and jumping on opportunities when they present themselves. The whole of The Road to Unfreedom could be retold with ‘strategic relativism’ as the guiding concept and, I am quite convinced, it would result in a more compelling narrative.

The Road to Unfreedom is a bumpy journey. Brilliant ideas and breathtaking passages are mixed with some frustrating elements. Many good analytical paragraphs are for some reason summed up by short, single sentence ‘golden thoughts’ which culminate in the three-page epilogue – a set of motivational quotes for liberals resembling Snyder’s recent pamphlet On Tyranny. The author’s ‘northern-centrism’ is also striking. Here is a book on contemporary international politics, where the only actors and spaces are Russia, Europe and the US – China, for instance, is hardly mentioned, nor are any global shifts or the resonance of the events described. Nothing else matters?

This take on contemporary politics by one of the leading experts on the first half of the 20th century remains an important contribution. Though we might disagree on the mechanisms and some of the nuances, Snyder’s powerful argument for the need to bring historical awareness back in and to challenge ‘alternative facts’ wherever they are cited is both timely and refreshing.
The study of the possible, not the inevitable

By Timothy Snyder

To believe that ‘history is over’ was to imagine that politics will continue in its own autonomous sphere, uncontaminated by actual events, defined by rules that we all know. This notion and the kindred one that, for better or worse, ‘there are no alternatives’ were ideas of a particular, self-denying sort. To say that ‘history is over’ is to change history while denying that one is doing so. To say that ‘there are no alternatives’ is to blind oneself to them without realizing it. I introduce The Road to Unfreedom with the concept of the ‘politics of inevitability’ to describe this moment in intellectual history, roughly the last quarter century, the moment when intellectuals denied both ideas and history.

The politics of inevitability does not simply dull our sensibilities to the existence of alternatives: it also helps to brings one of these alternatives about. If we believe that progress is inevitable, we have no reason to ask what we as individuals or citizens should be doing to further a good political order. The politics of inevitability suppresses a sense of responsibility. If we believe that the future will be like the present except better, we do not have to ask just what is good in the present. We do not, in other words, have to undertake any sort of normative or metaphysical discussion. A claim about quantity, that the future will have more, displaces any discussion of quality: just what is the good? The politics of inevitability is a kind of sleepwalking, and has to end with a crash.

When people cease to believe that progress is inevitable, they shift to a different understanding of time, one that I call in the book ‘the politics of eternity.’ Rather than a line from a known present to a known future, the politics of eternity is a cycle, a loop from the present back to the past. The future disappears entirely. All temporal references are to a better past lost through the fault of others, and politics becomes a discourse about the good people who deserve better and the bad ones who took away what was good in the past. One begins to speak, for example, of ‘making America great again’ or begins to invoke slogans from the 1930s such as, in the American case, ‘America first.’ From day to day, eternity politicians use modern technology, the television or the internet, to create a cycle of elation or outrage (it matters little which) so that politics becomes an emotional cycle, discussions of policy fade, and the future collapses into an eternally discordant present.

These are the concepts through which I try in the book to unify what might seem to be disparate experiences in the United States, Europe, and Russia. In the book the Russian Federation holds a privileged position because Russia reaches the politics of eternity first. In the specific history of the Russian attempt to destroy the European Union and the United States, we see the general process of inevitability becoming eternity: and how this shift can be hastened by outside actors who see weaknesses and exploit them. The point is not that Russia poses a special threat qua Russia: it is rather to find a conceptual framework that allows for a description of the state of politics in the West in the 2010s which allows both for diversity and for mutual influence.

Although the book narrates in detail events since 2010, it begins with the period

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1989-1991, as the moment when certain political and intellectual mistakes were made. Rather than an end to history or of alternatives, the end of communism was marked by the concretization and hegemony of the politics of inevitability. In the 1990s ‘the politics of inevitability’ took on one form in United States and another in the European Union. In the United States, the dominant idea was that capitalism would bring democracy. The myth of the ‘free market’ (an inherent impossibility) opened the way for an actively antidemocratic form of politics to take shape in the grey zones which most closely approach unregulated capitalism: the offshore bank accounts, the shell companies, the anonymous transactions. In was in this zone that a Donald Trump could encounter the Russian oligarchs who would rescue him financially, sponsor him politically, and aid his campaign for the office of president of the United States. This was one of many possible such encounters; similar ones are very likely unless something is done.

Part of the American politics of inevitability was the notion that the internet must enlighten. In fact, the global penetration of the internet has corresponded with the global retreat of democracy. It was precisely the social media platforms that have dominated the internet since about 2010 that provided a vector by which the Russian government could support its American client in the 2016 elections (and support Brexit, and support Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, among many other examples).

As one used to say, the politics of inevitability generates its own contradictions in economics. By denying the importance of the welfare state, generating arguments for suppressing unions, and proclaiming that aggregate growth brings general happiness, the American politics of inevitability generates massive inequality of wealth. When Americans no longer believed that progress was possible, the politics of inevitability was vulnerable; Russia took advantage of specific vulnerabilities, as I show in detail in the book.

In the European Union, the politics of inevitability took a different form. It is so pervasive and runs so deep that it takes a moment to explain. In the book I call it the ‘fable of the wise nation.’

The great arc of European history in the twentieth century is from empire to integration. The most important west European member-states of the European Union were never nation-states in the modern period. None of them was ever a sovereign entity with defined borders and a uniform relationship between citizens and the state. They were empires with undefined borders, various kinds of sovereignty, and unequal relations among citizens and subjects.

European education systems tend to suppress the imperial character of British, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, etc. history, in favour of the fable of the wise nation: the idea that a durable nation learned from the Second World War that peace is good. In fact, Europeans changed their ways after losing imperial wars. Germany led the way: the Second World War was above all things a colonial war, an attempt by Germany to gain for itself in eastern Europe the sort of colony other empires had achieved elsewhere. Because Germany was the first major European power to be decisively defeated in an imperial war, it was also the first (as West Germany) to see European integration as
substitute for empire. Other European powers joined in the project precisely at the moment when they too lost imperial wars and thus imperial markets and imperial forms of economic exchange. The European Union (as it is now thought of but was not then called) thus collected, from the 1950s through the 1980s, the metropolitan remnants of world empires into a new entity with a different economic logic.

After 1989, the east European states that joined the European Union in 2004, 2007, and 2013 contributed to this common myth. These states had a different history to their west European neighbours: generally as parts of traditional European land empires, rather than as the metropoles of traditional European maritime empires. Unlike their west European neighbours, east European countries do have a history of being nation-states: in the period between the two world wars. Every single one of them experienced, after this brief period of sovereignty, some combination of state destruction, Nazi domination, and Soviet domination. So whereas west European societies generally have no experience of nation-statehood, east European societies have the experience of disastrously failed nation-statehood.

It was this general lesson of the twentieth century that inspired east European intellectuals and politicians to speak in the 1980s and the 1990s of a ‘return to Europe,’ in the sense of membership in the European Union. Like their west European neighbours, however, east Europeans excelled in the twenty-first century in replacing history with ‘memory.’ Whereas west Europeans forget that they never had a nation-state in modern history, east Europeans forget that their experience with the nation-state was nasty, brutish, and short. The great achievement of the European Union was that it brought together states with such different experiences of empire: as metropoles of maritime empires and as peripheries of land empires. The great vulnerability of the European Union is the common idea, west and east, that the nation-state is somehow historically given. Thus the anti-European discourse in Poland and Hungary is essentially indistinguishable from that of Italy, Britain, or France.

The fable of the wise nation is the idea that the European nation-state has a long historical existence, that the nation-states gained wisdom from the Second World War, and then wisely chose the path of integration. The underlying fallacies are that the nation-state existed and that national leaders ever had such a choice. There is little evidence that the European state, at least as generations of Europeans have taken it for granted, can exist without either empire or integration. Debates about leaving the European Union are thus always improperly framed: as between a return to some kind of national home and the maintenance of a union that has objective benefits.

Since most Europeans do not have a history of national statehood, the stakes in a debate such as that over Brexit are entirely different: a leap into something entirely unknown to modern British history, a state without either empire or integration, versus an integration process that has maintained the British state. The same goes for anti-European positions of the Front National in France of the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany. By no coincidence, and as I demonstrate in detail in the book, Russia supported all three. In post-communist Europe, Russia has organized internet campaigns designed to generate mistrust of the European Union.

What Russia has done since 2013 is to take both the American and the European politics
of inevitability and push them towards a politics of eternity.

Now that the idea of ‘liberal democracy’ is faltering, the contest begins for the underlying foundations of what comes next. Unlike in the twentieth century, in the twenty-first the alternatives dare not speak their name. They tend towards passive-aggression, imitating the institutions of liberalism and democracy while subverting them – meanwhile complaining of the ‘hypocrisy’ of states that are more liberal and democratic. Eternity politicians hold themselves to no standards and others to impossible standards.

The last quarter-century has seen a revival of the Nazi legal thinker Carl Schmitt, whose elegant presentation of fascism fits the passive-aggressive mood of critiques in the twenty-first century. In his work on international law, Schmitt presents liberalism as the product of Anglo-Saxon and Jewish cultures. It is suddenly unnecessary to present a coherent alternative to liberalism: it is only necessary to present Germany as the unfortunate victim of what we now call globalization. Since globalization has been identified as the efforts of particular cultures, it follows then that German particularity, whatever it is, has an equal right to exist. Indeed, aggressive war, colonization, and genocide have a superior right to exist, because they expose the ‘hypocrisy’ of liberalism. Schmitt was a pioneer of what we now call ‘what-aboutism’: what was wrong with a Germany that claimed the right to dominate Eurasia, given that there was a Monroe Doctrine proclaimed in 1823?

Ivan Ilyin, the Russian fascist who is now the court philosopher of the Kremlin, borrowed Schmitt’s idea of the ‘pre-political.’ Whereas liberalism imagines (unrealistically, of course) that politics begins from an encounter of rational individuals who form some kind of contract, Schmitt imagines that politics begins from the collective choice of a collective foe. As Ilyin recapitulated (after the Second World War, in 1948), ‘politics is the art of identifying and neutralizing the enemy.’ In other words, opposition to liberalism or globalization need not begin from an effort to define norms or practices, but rather by the arbitrary gesture of claiming that all norms and practices are simply subjective and particular to someone else, ethnographic rather than normative. None of them better than any other, and therefore all is permitted. Any element of particularity around liberal norms or imperfection in liberal practices becomes an argument for the permissibility of everything else.

This opposition to the possibility of enlightened politics sounds fascist because it is fascist. We are confronted with the revival of fascist ideas within the politics of eternity, which is to say in a new setting, our twenty-first century one. What is most evidently lacking in twenty-first century fascism is the idea of will. Whereas the fascists of the 1920s and 1930s seriously aimed to supplant a world of reason with a world of ineffable will, a world of states and law with a world of races and deeds, the fascists of the twenty-first are content to imitate enlightened politics while destroying it from within. The original fascists wanted men on the streets; their revivalists want men on the couch.

Whereas fascists in the 1920s and 1930s usually had some idea of the redistribution of wealth (from Jews to gentiles, from one nation to another), the fascists of today are actually defenders of the durable inequality of wealth. In the United States, wealth
inequality is now about the same as it was in 1929. According to Credit Suisse, the one country in the world with substantially greater wealth inequality than the United States is the Russian Federation. What is interesting and new and worthy of notice is that fascist ideas are mobilized to enshrine these inequalities as an unchangeable part of the natural order. The politics of eternity works in conditions where forward motion seems impossible. What is important about contemporary Russia is that it shows how the politics of eternity can work and can spread.

From the United States or from Europe, it is tempting to see Russia as backward or behind. The premise of my book is rather that Russia is, if anything, ahead: it has moved through the politics of inevitability with greater speed than the European Union or the United States, and thus represents not the past but rather a possible future for both. In the 1990s, Russians experienced the bankruptcy of the American politics of inevitability: capitalism did not generate democracy. In the 2000s, Russian leaders abandoned the European idea of progress: after some hesitation, Vladimir Putin dropped the notion that Russia could follow a European path to law and prosperity. After Putin’s return to power as president in 2012, he proclaimed that Russia was not a state but a civilization, and that the goal was not Europe but ‘Eurasia.’

In addition to Ilyin, whom he regularly cited, Putin referred to other fascist legacies. ‘Eurasia’ was a favourite term of the geopolitical anti-Semite Lev Gumilev, whom Putin cited, and has been revived in contemporary Russia by the fascist Alexander Dugin, who was given the broadest possible access to the Russian media. Dugin is a good example of how the fascism of the twenty-first century, unlike the fascism of the 1920s and 1930s, does not take responsibility even for itself: he, like other Russian fascists I discuss in the book, refers to political opponents as ‘fascists.’ This schizofascism is new and characteristic of our era.

Within the politics of inevitability, we imagine that advantages in economics and technology will automatically translate into influence and power. Progress is indeed hard to imagine in Russia: corruption makes social advance very difficult, kleptocrats defend their position, and the head kleptocrat is president of the country. What is worse, since democratic institutions have been ritualized, no one has any idea what will happen when Putin leaves office or dies, and the subject itself is taboo.

Thus the fascist idea of a leader from beyond history is very helpful, and is supplied by Ilyin (and a number of contemporary thinkers.) Ilyin also explains, in a text that Putin has cited, that Russians should be content with a freedom that means knowing their place in society. Ilyin also advocated precisely a ritualization of democracy. Most importantly, however, is Ilyin’s fundamental endorsement of political irresponsibility. Nothing in this world is of value, he maintained, except for the possibility of its future salvation by a totalitarian Russia. There are no facts. The only truth is God’s unity, and Russian totalitarianism is the only possibility of its restoration. This opens the way to the televisual and internet politics of total irresponsibility for everything, on the logic that controlling a population and weakening rivals serves an essential Russia. It is not hard to see the value of such ideas for oligarchs in the twenty-first century.

Russian citizens understandably distrust their leaders. Those leaders, in effect, accept and weaponize this distrust: of course we lie, everyone lies, there is no truth. And from
this nihilism arises a new form of nationalism: given that everyone everywhere lies, one should prefer one’s own lies to those of others. And thus Russian television concentrates on the ‘hypocrisy’ of western societies and leaders, implying that Russia is superior because it is not hypocritical: a nihilist, after all, cannot be a hypocrite, and that lack of hypocrisy is presented (like Satan in Milton) as virtue.

Distrust, weaponized at home, is also weaponized abroad: the essence of the Russian offensive against both Europe and the United States is the export of distrust of facts, authorities, and institutions. The notion is not to spread any ideal of politics, but rather to undermine ideals as such, to make action seem naïve and pointless.

The book is meant as a defence of history, and so as a defence of responsibility against determinism. In every respect but one it is a very conventional, even conservative, work of history: it relies on primary sources in the relevant languages, it moves forward through time, and it provides a synthetic interpretation of events. It is unusual only in that it is a history of the present moment.

Time is out of joint, as Hamlet put it; the uncanniness that we experience every day is the slippage from one temporality to another, from inevitability to eternity. What history can show, I think, is that time need not be part of the anatomy of grand ideas. History can give a sense of both structures and their limits, of what we cannot but also of what we can do. It can help make time ours.

A history of the present moment can thus bring us to the threshold of the real question: if we know what is possible, then we have to ask what is desirable. History does not answer questions of good and evil, but it reminds us that we can raise them.

Footnotes


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