

The Great Struggle for Liberalism

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In 1978, the Russian dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn gave a commencement address at Harvard, warning us about the loss of American self-confidence and will. “A decline in courage may be the most striking feature that an outside observer notices in the West today,” he declared.

Today, those words ring with disturbing force. The enemies of liberal democracy seem to be full of passionate intensity — Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping,

Donald Trump, campus radicals. Meanwhile, those who try to defend liberal norms can sometimes seem like some of those Republicans who ran against Trump in the 2016 primaries — decent and good, but kind of feckless and about to be run over.

Into this climate emerges Fareed Zakaria's important new book, "Age of Revolutions: Progress and Backlash From 1600 to the Present." One of the powerful features of this book is that Zakaria doesn't treat liberal democratic capitalism as some set of abstract ideas. He shows how it was created by real people in real communities who wanted richer, fuller and more dynamic lives.

His story starts in the Dutch Republic in the 16th century. The Dutch invented the modern profit-seeking corporation. The Dutch merchant fleet was capable of carrying more tonnage than the fleets of France, England, Scotland, the Holy Roman Empire, Spain and Portugal combined. By the 18th century, Amsterdam's per capita income was four times that of Paris.

Dutch success wasn't just economic. There was a cultural flowering (Rembrandt, Vermeer). There was urbanization — the building of great towns and cities. There was a civic and political stability built around decentralized power. There was a relatively egalitarian culture — until the 19th century, there were no statues of heroes on horseback in Holland. There was also moral restraint. Dutch Calvinism was on high alert for the corruption that prosperity might bring. It encouraged self-discipline and norms that put limits on the display of wealth.

The next liberal leap forward occurred in Britain. In the Glorious Revolution of the late 1680s, a Dutchman, William of Orange, became King of England and helped import some of the more liberal Dutch political institutions, ushering in a period of greater political and religious moderation. Once again, you see the same pattern: Technical and economic dynamism goes hand in hand with cultural creativity, political reform, urbanization, a moral revival and, it must be admitted, vast imperialist expansion.

British inventors and tinkerers like James Watt perfected the steam engine. From 1770 to 1870 real British wages rose by 50 percent, and over the first half of the 19th century British life expectancy increased by about 3.5 years.

The great reform acts in the 1800s gave more people the right to vote and reduced political corruption. The rise of, for example, the evangelical Clapham

Sect in the early 19th century was part of a vast array of social movements led by people who sought to abolish the slave trade, reduce child labor, reform the prison system, reduce cruelty to animals, ease the lives of the poor and introduce codes of propriety into Victorian life. America was next, and the pattern replicated itself: new inventions like the telephone and the electric lightbulb. People flooding into the cities. During the 20th century, American culture dominated the globe. Thanks in part to the postwar American liberal order, living standards surged. As Zakaria notes, “Compared to 1980, global G.D.P. had nearly doubled by 2000, and more than tripled by 2015.”

And yet for all its benefits, liberalism is ailing and in retreat in places like Turkey, India, Brazil and, if Trump wins in 2024, America itself. Zakaria’s book helped me develop a more powerful appreciation for the glories of liberalism, and also a better understanding of what’s gone wrong.

I’m one of those people who subscribes to the Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl’s doctrine: “Man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life.” To feel at home in the world, people need to see themselves serving some good — doing important work, loving others well, living within coherent moral communities, striving on behalf of some set of ideals.

The great liberal societies that Zakaria describes expanded and celebrated individual choice and individual freedom. But when liberalism thrived, that personal freedom lay upon a foundation of commitments and moral obligations that precede choice: our obligations to our families, to our communities and nations, to our ancestors and descendants, to God or some set of transcendent truths.

Over the past few generations, the celebration of individual freedom has overspilled its banks and begun to erode the underlying set of civic obligations. Especially after World War II and then into the 1960s, we saw the privatization of morality — the rise of what came to be known as the ethos of moral freedom. Americans were less likely to assume that people learn values by living in coherent moral communities. They were more likely to adopt the belief that each person has to come up with his or her own personal sense of right and wrong. As far back as 1955, the columnist Walter Lippmann saw that this was going to lead to trouble: “If what is good, what is right, what is true, is only what the individual ‘chooses’ to ‘invent,’ then we are outside the traditions of civility,” he wrote.

Trust is the faith that other people will do what they ought to do. When there are no shared moral values and norms, then social trust plummets. People feel alienated and under siege, and, as Hannah Arendt observed, lonely societies turn to authoritarianism. People eagerly follow the great leader and protector, the one who will lead the us/them struggle that seems to give life meaning.

During our current moment of global populism, the liberal tradition is under threat. Many people have gone economically nationalist and culturally traditionalist. Around the world, authoritarian moralists promise to restore the old ways, the old religion, national greatness. “There are certain things which are more important than ‘me,’ than my ego — family, nation, God,” Viktor Orban declared. Such men promise to restore the anchors of cultural, moral and civic stability, but they use brutal and bigoted strongman methods to get there.

President Biden tried to win over the disaffected by showering them with jobs and economic benefits. It doesn’t seem to have worked politically because the real absence people are feeling is an absence of meaning, belonging and recognition.

This election year, in the United States and around the globe, will be about whether liberalism can thrive again. Zakaria’s book will help readers feel honored and grateful that we get to be part of this glorious and ongoing liberal journey. He understands that we liberals can’t just offer economic benefits; we also have to make the spiritual and civic case for our way of life. He writes: “The greatest challenge remains to infuse that journey with moral meaning, to imbue it with the sense of pride and purpose that religion once did — to fill that hole in the heart.”

There’s glory in striving to add another chapter to the great liberal story — building a society that is technologically innovative, commercially daring, with expanding opportunities for all; building a society in which culture is celebrated, families thrive, a society in which the great diversity of individuals can experience a sense of common purpose and have the space and energy to pursue their own adventures in living.

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