

WORLD WAR I, THE CENTENNIAL OF THE ARMISTICE AND THE LEGACY OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS STRUGGLE

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- 1) The understanding of human nature and its place in the order of reality is the greatest philosophical question that humanity has faced.
- 2) In order to understand who and what we are, cultures develop what I call **instruments of understanding**. These diverse institutions comprise a diversity of ways through which knowledge is attained and successively transmitted.
- 3) The more these instruments prove meaningful beyond the scope of the cultures they first emerge in, the more universal they become, the greater the dynamic of civilization they generate.
- 4) Throughout European history and its ramifications, and we must speak of European history because World War I was, first and foremost, a **European civil war**, there has existed this persistent tension between the local, or pagan, and the universal.
- 5) We find it in Aristotle, who was right in many, many things, but who did not espouse the conception of the equity of all human persons, and we also find this recurrent tension, centuries later, in the enormously influential particularistic thought of German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder.
- 6) At the heart of European philosophy lies the tension between the dictum of the great Stoic philosopher and Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius that: “As Marcus Aurelius I am a citizen of Rome, as a man, I am a citizen of the world,” and Herder’s contention that “I am a man because I am a German.”
- 7) How we approach and constitute universality is an essential issue to our every day.

- 8) The Roman State—based on the legacy of philosophical thought emergent from the three great centers of civilization under its domain: Athens, Jerusalem, and Rome—developed this conception of human universality through both practical and philosophical means: through its system of laws, which is still influential to this day, through its Stoic philosophy, and through the religions that formed within its fold, chiefly, Christianity.
- 9) The Roman State has been such a massive influence on European civilization that we can differentiate its history according to two key moments: Its breakdown, first in the West and then in the East, and the successive attempts at re-establishing it.
- 10) We speak of WWI as a European civil war because as the great Czech philosopher Jan Patočka pointed out in his seminal “Plato and Europe,” (1) the current European nation-state system came from the pre-existing international system of the Roman State. (2) because both WWI and WWII constituted a struggle between the core groupings of what was once the Roman State and of the attempts at re-establishing it, mainly, the struggle between France and Germany, which were the core of the Carolingian imperial restoration. (3) Because Europe as such constituted a unity of knowledge about human nature, which had been assembled by Rome and preserved and elaborated upon by the Roman imperial successor states, namely, the Holy Roman Empire, or the *Res publica Christiana*, as it was also known.
- 11) This doctrine of human nature is called *natural law*.
- 12) Our modern human rights doctrine comes from natural law doctrine and Roman law.
- 13) So when did World War I begin? It began in 1648, with the treaty of Westphalia.
- 14) WWI began in 1648 when the Holy Roman Empire was unable to defeat the rising power of the German principalities and these principalities proved unable to defeat the Empire,

the fact that both sides signed a treaty signified that a new sovereign entity...the nation-state, had emerged.

- 15) This was essential for human rights doctrine because part of the Imperial Roman tradition was this conception of natural law: the idea that all human beings are born with certain immanent rights and that the authority of the state, the role of the state emanate from this nature, that what is right and wrong is imprinted into the human soul, and that it is man's duty to understand this, to build upon it, but never to oppress or destroy it. The set of liberties fundamentally associated with these rights are what are today referred to as "negative freedoms." In other words, law must be limited to very specific regulations on inherent right or liberty, in order to make social life possible, prosperous and enduring. The Holy Roman German Emperor Charles V had ruled on the universality of these rights, prompted by the discovery of the pre-Columbian cultures. At the council of Valladolid (1550-51), Father Bartolomé de las Casas, arguing in favor of rights for all people, proclaimed that, "All the world is human!" The emperor, Charles V, ruled in his favor.
- 16) However, the newly emergent creature of the nation-state recognized no authority above itself. As nation-state theorists like Jean Bodin argued, the recognition of any sovereignty above itself now meant that the nation-state could not be independent, as was its internal mandate, if it had to respond to any power above itself.
- 17) The logic of the nation-state eventually led to the idea that the state was not the protector of sovereignty but instead, its source.

- 18) If we connect this idea with the fact that national armies, which meant the new phenomenon of mass armies, became the pillar of the nation-states, we see more clearly the components of the machinery that set World War 1 in motion.
- 19) Two worldviews emerged from WWI, the old imperial tradition was finally buried. World opinion was now also very much aware that the doctrine of balance of power, of composition and re-composition of alliances in order to prevent any European nation-state from being more powerful than the rest was a dangerous one, that if the old imperial order was obsolete, the anarchic nation-state order was apocalyptic.
- 20) The United States attempted to fill in this void by proposing at Versailles a new world order based on the exercise of rights by peoples of all nations. This would have amounted to a global community of democracies.
- 21) From WWI also emerged a new monster: totalitarianism. Hannah Arendt has masterfully described how the militarism of WWI shaped totalitarianism. How the mass militarization of politics, how state worship, led to the deaths of millions in two world wars.
- 22) In the internal logic of totalitarianism, all life was struggle, the state was the greatest expression of that struggle, and there was no transcendent right or wrong, just a world of victors and vanquished.
- 23) Both totalitarianism and modern democracy made universalist claims. Either their theories were valid for all of humanity, or they weren't valid at all.
- 24) In theoretical terms, their coexistence was impossible.

- 25) Marxist-Leninist totalitarianism had two basic flaws: it did not understand, or explain the concept of law, and it did not understand the uniqueness of the mechanism that generates wealth upon the world.
- 26) Nazi totalitarianism made the mistake of equating race, or biology, with the state, with the very conception of ideas. This, both determined it to be a fearsome monster and established its bloody fate.
- 27) After the end of WWII, through the United Nations and other international institutions, through an alliance of free governments aimed at confronting communist world-domination, the United States returned to the Versailles project of a global community of democracies.
- 28) After the end of the Cold War, the United States took up this project again with greater force than ever. Democracy promotion became a recognized part of US foreign policy. This new age of attempting to build a world order of democracies ran into two major quandaries.
- 29) The first was the Middle East: the confrontation with a pan-state movement defined as jihadism, that has totalitarian, universalist aspirations, the invasion of Iraq and the civil war in Syria.
- 30) The second was Latin America: where the strength of Cuban totalitarianism was underestimated leading to the exportation and mutation of the vines to what was once the strongest democracy in the region: Venezuela, led to a regression of freedom that affected dozens of countries in the region.
- 31) The inability of the Bush Administration to coherently explain the reasons for the Iraq War, besmirched the whole concept of democracy and human rights promotion for many.

At worst, it came to be seen as a handy tool of a state's foreign policy, at best, idealistic and aimless babble incapable of achieving specific foreign policy objectives.

32) In Syria, the level of atrocities carried out, and the inability of the Obama Administration to act to stop it, took the teeth out of international human rights standards and created a new horrible precedent of massive human rights violations that has created a whole new school of justification for the existence of authoritarian regimes.

33) These two failures result from the unique character of the United States: it is at heart, very much still the New World republic, one whose universalist aspirations are checked by the very real conscience of the moral and monetary limits of pocketbook of its citizenry.

34) Unlike the Roman State, which was driven by what it interpreted as a civilizational mandate to rule the world, or the Holy Roman Empire, which had a religious drive to place the world under its authority, the US has never really sought to control the planet. The nature of its internal politics and the deeply divided philosophies over its role in the world prevent it from doing so.

35) So, where are we now? Human rights constitute a body of knowledge about human nature which has generated a series of institutions to protect it, we should term this human rights civilization.

36) Human rights civilization is threatened by the following:

- a. Postmodern Totalitarianism. The prime example is China, where a totalitarian regime ably adapts to capitalism without carrying out democratic reforms, and uses advanced technology to support its systems of repression. China is accepted as a legitimate partner by the international system, hence contaminating it.

- b. Democratic Regression. We have seen it, for diverse reasons in varying degrees, in diverse countries: South Africa, Turkey, Brazil. Typically, a mass ruling party takes power through legitimate elections, then uses that power to usurp institutions and achieve a hegemonic party model which seriously limits public freedoms and the possibility of the people being able to elect alternative opposition parties to power. Worse yet, internationally, these regressive democracies become allies of totalitarian and authoritarian states in the international system, limiting the ability of the system to enforce human rights standards.
- c. New Authoritarianism. These systems, such the ones in Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Russia are hegemonic party systems where these parties and their leaders have established total control. A few democratic openings may exist but are purely decorative. Political control has, in effect, been wrested from the public realm.
- d. Old Authoritarianism. Regimes such as Saudi Arabia, which are technically allied with the United States, and other democracies are actually working in combination with the above to subvert international human rights standards.
- e. The Internal weaknesses of Democracy/Republics. The improvement of human life that has resulted from respect for human rights and the democratic institutions that have developed to safeguard them is an empirical measurable fact. Republics, however, require a great deal of effort to be sustained. It requires a great deal of intellectual work focused on the universal values we have discussed and the permanent spiritual realities which underpin them. The rise of materialism, the

crisis undergone by those instruments which allow for the study of deeper realities, hedonism, the overflow of the ego, are all illnesses of the human condition that all great republics have suffered from. This is a strictly social and spiritual phenomena which calls on human beings to decide what they will do, given the circumstances of their times. Totalitarianism, in all of its different aspects, preys precisely on these weaknesses in the social fabric in order to create its own model of state and society. Truthfully, totalitarianism is a result of an illness of the human soul.

37) The class-based world of order and hierarchy that still predominated in Europe before World War I was terminated by that conflict. Much was lost, a whole central European civilization that is today scarcely remembered. World War I was generated by the conflict between diverse nationalisms and great power aspirations. Kubrick's 1957 classic film "Path of Glory," comes to mind in its depiction of this aristocratic world at war. WWI, however, ushered in a far more pervasive conflict over the new world order. This conflict initially entailed a struggle between the community of national democracies envisioned in the Treaty of Versailles, and promoted with more or less energy by the United States, and the totalitarian Leviathan that emerged out of the ruins of the Russian and German Empires.

38) In truth, the democratic model of governance and the core values around which human rights civilization has been structured, have proven to be conceptually resilient. Totalitarianism lost that battle. Even tyrannies seek to disguise themselves as democracies. The mission now lies in authenticity, in recovering civilizational values, in

not discarding mores and customs of civility, in not succumbing to the temptations of relativism, but of rising to the rigors of true leadership. The mandate lies in the adherence to the innate beauty of truth, be it found through science, religion or politics...power must always be held to the guide of ethics.

39) The goal of responsible foreign policy by the free governments in this day and age should be, rather than blocs of regimes held together by ideology, a community of democracies within the civilization of human rights who associate under a code of conduct.