

GUEST VIEW

# The endless winter that liberal democracy has been staring at

If 2020 is unlikely to usher in the long summer we had hoped for decades ago, could it at least be the harbinger of spring?



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the war of manoeuvre remained precarious. Is the tide turning and is liberal democracy now losing the war of ideas? And to what, exactly?

Both classical philosophers, such as Plato, and modern political thinkers such as the founding fathers of the US, saw populism as the Achilles' heel that could destroy democracy. By its very nature, it could throw up dictators with clarion calls that cynically polarize society along receding social fault lines embedded in underlying ethnic, religious, and exclusivist national identities. Societies based on reason and compassion can swiftly get fired up by bigotry and hate.

Thinkers are still debating the causes of what is arguably the second major counter-revolution of the modern era. Consider the inability to recover from the global financial crisis of 2008; rapid change that outpaces the human capacity to adjust; a democracy-aiding capitalism gone rogue as it starts feeding off the "middle" class that spawned it; widening inequality within nation states generating despair; a backlash against globalization; and, finally, inept intellectual and political leadership unable to come up with new solutions for today's problems.

Bigoted ideas have gone mainstream not because civil society is turning bigoted, but because of the cacophony multiplier effect of social media. The numbers who subscribe to such ideas are far lower than what the increasingly automated

noise online would suggest. Efforts to subvert true expressions of the popular will speak of the weakness, not strength, of those engaged in it. The big difference from the earlier inter-war counter-revolution is that a far larger proportion of civil society fell under the spell of demagogues in Europe, even as others were too afraid to speak up.

If this analysis is correct, we can look to the future with a sense of hope. Looking at the recent spontaneous ferment among the youth in faltering democracies and stable dictatorships across the world from Chile in the West to Hong Kong in the East, reminiscent of the late 1960s, one would like to think that would-be demagogues are caught in a time warp. The youth have moved on. Maybe, just maybe, we are finally seeing a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. The least we can do is lend a helping hand by fearlessly standing up for decent values, for what is righteous and good, and for what unites rather than separates us as human beings, so as to make the world the kind of place that was hoped for at the turn of the last century. Like the poet Shelley, we may well ask the west wind, which combines the destructive and regenerative energies of the Indian deities Shiva and Brahma, that if winter comes, can spring be far behind?

If 2020 is unlikely to usher in the long summer hoped for more than two decades ago, could it nevertheless be the harbinger of another spring?

*These are the author's personal views*

*Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favour fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.*

—Robert Frost, *Fire And Ice*

The year 2019 saw the highly popular TV serial *Game Of Thrones*, based on George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice And Fire*, finally brought to forgotten sadness after several false stops. The last few years, however, have been disquieting at best, even depressing, for other reasons.

The year 2020 was a long-awaited marker of the 21st century. Several optimistic projections were made of what the world would be like in 2020. Beyond fantastic predictions—such as robot therapists, personal helicopters, tele-transportation and men on Mars—technological change, increased openness, and the spread of democracy were expected to deliver a global boom. Few anticipated that we could be staring at a dystopian future. As we finally enter 2020, the jury is still out on how this new challenge might end.

Dark clouds hover over the basic values of reason, humanism, and individual liberty—the decencies on which modern civilization rests, just as they did almost a century ago. Liberal democracy was the ultimate guarantor of these values then, as it is now. The earlier assault was along its fringes, in young democracies, and it ended in unprecedented human tragedy. This time, the challenge springs from the very cradle of modern enlightenment—Western Europe and the US—and isn't limited to it either.

Is liberal democracy in retreat? The Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci spoke of two kinds of political power, one evanescent and the other more permanent. The capture of state power by political parties was what he described as a war of manoeuvre as this could be lost any time. Real power lay in what he described as a war of position, involving a battle for the hegemony of ideas in civil society. Durable power required victory in both wars. Indeed, he saw the latter as more important, because if this were won, the former would, too, sooner or later.

Liberal democracy had won both wars in the West. Governments of the left, right and centre came and went, but these were all rooted in a liberal democratic consensus. The war of ideas was also being slowly won in newly rising powers, such as China and eastern Europe, even as progress in

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American rapper 50 Cent REUTERS

## Don't leave home without 50 Cent's number

It's hard to see why 50 Cent's phone number would be a vital component of one's time abroad but a Briton thought it was so important that [he/she] turned to the Foreign Office for help. The enquiry for the rapper's contact details was among the weirdest made by Britons to the Foreign Office in 2019. Others included a complaint from a traveller about the quality of the food on his flight, and a request for embassy staff to retrieve a pair of headphones from a French hotel room. A British couple in China who "had engaged the services of a sperm donor wanted to know if our staff could verify the nationality of the sperm as British", the department added. Among the honourable mentions was a caller who asked if their son could get a British passport due to the fact that he had been conceived in the UK.

*Sky News*

## The Dutch are done with the name 'Holland'

The Netherlands no longer wants to be known as Holland. The Western European nation, which includes the famous Dutch region, is dropping the nickname as part of a tourism rebranding effort designed to bring in more of the right kind of visitors, the Sydney Morning Herald reported. Rather than being known for such things as Holland's drug-culture capital Amsterdam, Netherlands government officials want to reinvent the country as a whole to promote its commerce, science and arts... The Netherlands' Board of Tourism and Conventions is also scrapping its symbol featuring a tulip... and the word "Holland" and replacing it with a new logo that has an orange tulip and the initials "NL". The country has the most competitive economy in Europe and the fourth in the world...

*New York Post*

## Drowsy drivers deserve a nudge to stay alert

When you're driving a car, losing focus can be a killer. Distraction—be it a smartphone, a cigarette, music or eating—factors in up to 30% of road crashes, while fatigue is involved in up to 20%, according to the European Commission. This is why, as of 2022, new safety technologies will become mandatory in new European vehicles, including "a warning of driver drowsiness and distraction." Bosch, the German engineering and technology company, is positioning itself to be one of the main providers of this technology, announcing in December that it has developed an interior monitoring system that detects drowsy and distracted drivers. The system can alert drivers, recommending a break if they are tired, or even reacting by reducing the speed of the vehicle.

*CNN*

## Wave yourself past Amazon's billing counter

Amazon is set to 'wave' goodbye to card payments at its cashierless grocery store. The firm received a patent for a 'touchless scanning system' that identifies customers using hand recognition. Customers would scan their hand in order to enter the store and again when they are ready to purchase items at the register—the system identifies individuals through the wrinkles and veins in their palms. Although a patent is not a sure thing, that Amazon [has tested] a similar system at Whole Foods that lets people checkout at a register by scanning their hand. The patent was filed on June 21, 2018, and published December 26 by the US Patent & Trademark Office. The document describes a contactless biometric system with a hand scanner that captures images of a customer's palm.

*Daily Mail*

## The case of a sheep advised to wear a bra

Veterinarians in New Zealand said a sheep with severely damaged and saggy udders was spared surgery or worse when she was fitted with a bra designed for humans. Dr. Sarah Clews, a veterinarian with Franklin Vets Lifestyle Farms, said Rose, a romney ewe from a small farm in the Auckland area, suffered damage to her udders' suspensory ligaments when she started producing a high volume of milk while pregnant with triplets. Clews recommended Rose's owners try supporting her udders with a bra to prevent her from requiring surgery to repair the ligaments or remove her udders. A large maternity bra, size 24J, was obtained from lingerie company Rose and Thorne, which inspired the sheep's owners to name her in honor of the company.

*UPI*

THEIR VIEW

# A world without capitalism is not too hard to envision

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Anti-capitalists had a miserable year. But so did capitalism. While the defeat of Jeremy Corbyn's Labour party in the UK this month threatened the radical left's momentum, particularly in the US, where the presidential primaries loom, capitalism found itself under fire from some unexpected quarters. Billionaires, CEOs, and even the financial press have joined intellectuals and community leaders in a symphony of laments about rentier capitalism's brutality, crassness, and unsustainability.

Increasingly stressed and justifiably guilt-ridden, the ultra-rich—or those with any sense, at any rate—feel threatened by the crushing precariousness into which the majority are sinking. As Marx foretold, they form a supremely powerful minority that is proving unfit to preside over polarized societies that cannot guarantee non-asset owners a decent existence.

Barricaded in their gated communities, the smarter among the uber-rich advocate a new "stakeholder capitalism", even calling

for higher taxes on their class. They recognize the best possible insurance policy in democracy and the redistributive state. Alas, at the same time, they fear that, as a class, it is in their nature to skimp on the insurance premium.

Proposed remedies range from the languid to the ludicrous. The call for boards of directors to look beyond shareholder value would be wonderful if it were not for the inconvenient fact that only shareholders decide directors' pay and tenure. Similarly, appeals to limit the exorbitant power of finance would be splendid were it not for the fact that most firms answer to financial institutions that hold the bulk of their shares.

Confronting rentier capitalism and fashioning firms for which social responsibility is more than a marketing ploy requires nothing less than re-writing corporate law. To recognize the scale of the undertaking, it helps to return to the moment in history when tradable shares weaponized capitalism, and to ask ourselves: Are we ready to correct that "error"?

The moment occurred on 24 September 1599. In a timbered building off Moorgate Fields, not far from where Shakespeare was struggling to complete *Hamlet*, a new type of company was founded. Its ownership of the

new firm, called the East India Company, was sliced into tiny pieces to be bought and sold freely.

Tradable shares allowed private corporations to become larger and more powerful than states. Liberalism's fatal hypocrisy was to celebrate the virtuous neighbourhood of butchers, bakers and brewers in order to defend the worst enemies of free markets.

Then, toward the end of the 19th century, as the first networked mega-companies—including Edison, General Electric, and Bell—were formed, the genie released by marketable shares went a step further. Because neither banks nor investors had enough money to plough into the networked mega-firms, the mega-bank emerged in the form of a global cartel of banks and shadowy funds, each with its own shareholders.

Unprecedented new debt was thus created to transfer value to the present, in the hope of profiting sufficiently to repay the future. Mega-finance, mega-equity, mega-

pension funds, and mega-financial crises were the logical outcome. The crashes of 1929 and 2008, the unstoppable rise of Big Tech, and all the other ingredients of today's discontent with capitalism, became inescapable. In this system, calls for a gentler capitalism are mere fads, especially in the post-2008 reality, which confirmed the total control over society by mega-firms and mega-banks. Unless we are willing to ban tradable shares, we will make no appreciable difference to the distribution of wealth and power today. To imagine what transcending capitalism might mean in practice requires rethinking the ownership of corporations.

Imagine that shares resemble electoral votes, which can be neither bought nor sold. Like students who receive a library card upon registration, new staff receive a single share granting a single vote to be cast in all-shareholder ballots deciding every matter of the corporation, from management and planning issues to the distribution of net revenues and bonuses.

Suddenly, the profit-wage distinction makes no sense and corporations are cut down to size, boosting market competition. When a baby is born, the central bank automatically grants her or him a trust fund (or personal capital account) that is periodically topped up with a universal basic dividend. When the child becomes a teenager, the central bank throws in a free checking account. Workers move freely from company to company, carrying with them their trust-fund capital, which they may lend to the company they work in or to others. Because there are no equities to turbocharge with massive fictitious capital, finance becomes delightfully boring—and stable. States drop all personal and sales taxes, instead taxing only corporate revenues, land, and activities detrimental to the commons.

But enough reverie for now. The point is to suggest, just before the New Year, the wondrous possibilities of a truly liberal, post-capitalist, technologically advanced society. Those who refuse to imagine it are bound to fall prey to the absurdity pointed out by my friend Slavoj Žižek: a greater readiness to fathom the end of the world than to imagine life after capitalism.

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