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Grand Illusions

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It's time to abandon the intellectual narcissism of cold war Western liberalism.

In



Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg and London/© Yinka Shonibare CBE, All Rights Reserved, DACS/ARS, NY 2020

Yinka Shonibare: *Clementia*, 2018

Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation (2006), Jonathan Lear writes of the intellectual trauma of the Crow Indians. Forced to move in the mid-nineteenth century from a nomadic to a settled existence, they catastrophically lost not only their immemorial world but also “the conceptual resources” to understand their past and present. The problem for a Crow Indian, Lear writes, wasn’t just

that “my way of life has come to an end.” It was that “I no longer have the concepts with which to understand myself or the world.... I have *no idea* what is going on.”

It is no exaggeration to say that many in the Anglo-American intelligentsia today resemble the Crow Indians, after being successively blindsided by far-right insurgencies, an uncontrollable pandemic, and political revolts by disenfranchised minorities. For nearly three decades after the end of the cold war, mainstream politicians, journalists, and businesspeople in Britain and the US repeatedly broadcast their conviction that the world was being knit together peaceably by their guidelines for capitalism, democracy, and technology. The United States itself appeared to have entered, with Barack Obama’s election, a “post-racial age,” and Americans seemed set, as President Obama wrote in *Wired* a month before Donald Trump’s election, to “race for new frontiers” and “inspire the world.”

This narrative of a US-led global journey to the promised land was always implausible. Four years of Trump have finally clarified that between 2001 and 2020—and through such events as the terrorist attacks of September 11, intensified globalization, the rise of China concurrent with the failed war on terror, and the financial crisis—the world was moving into an entirely new historical period. Moreover, in this phase, many ideas and assumptions dominant for decades were rapidly becoming obsolete.

Today, those who insisted that there was no practical alternative to Western-style liberal democracy and capitalism have no concepts with which to explain how China, a Communist-ruled country, became central to global networks of trade and finance; how India, ostensibly the “world’s largest democracy” and fastest-growing economy, as well as a counterweight to China, came to be ruled by Hindu supremacists inspired by European fascist movements of the 1920s; and how electorates angered by dysfunctional democracy and capitalism at home empowered far-right demagogues. An intelligentsia shocked and traumatized by Brexit and Trump has seemed largely bemused, too, by the biggest protests in the United States since the civil rights movement—mass uprisings led by young people and fueled by the stunningly swift spread of a new historical awareness of how slavery and racial capitalism underpinned the wealth and power of the United States and Britain.

As members of what Lear calls a “literate culture,” we may seem to be better placed than the Crow Indians to grasp our altered reality. But the upheavals of our times have devastatingly exposed our own deficit of conceptual resources, and it won’t be addressed by anything that happens in the US elections in November.

Guilty of calamitously mismanaging their response to the pandemic, Trump and his fellow travelers in Britain have plainly staked their future on victory in the “culture wars”: stories of past greatness, of America and Winston Churchill, and the villainy of “cultural Marxists” are their talking points. But rational illumination has not been forthcoming from their critics, who lurch from shock and despair over outbreaks of Trumpism to absurd hopes that Joe Biden’s election will restore the “liberal order.” Whether in the Murdoch-owned *Wall Street Journal* and *The Times* of London or in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, and the *Financial Times*, the laments and exhortations of a still largely white, male, and middle-aged commentariat bring to mind James Baldwin’s verdict that “the white man’s world, intellectually, morally, and spiritually, has the meaningless ring of a hollow drum and the odor of slow death.”

A new way to understand the forces at play is urgently needed. But it will come about only if we make a conscious attempt to interrogate and discard the formative influences of many writers over the age of forty.

The late Tony Judt, born in 1948, once spoke of the “pretty crappy” generation he belonged to, which “grew up in the 1960s in Western Europe or in America, in a world of no hard choices, neither economic nor political.” In Judt’s view, too many of his intellectual peers moved from radical postures into the “all-consuming business of material accumulation and personal security” in the 1970s and 1980s as the postwar consensus in favor of the welfare state gave way to neoliberalism; they were especially quick to internalize the popular belief when the Berlin Wall fell that liberal democracy and capitalism had “won.”

A similar worldview prevails among a still younger generation than Judt’s. Its members, beneficiaries of an even more complacent era, the end of the cold war, are entrenched in senior positions in the periodicals, television channels, think tanks, and university departments of Anglo-America. Growing up during the triumphalist 1990s, they assumed that American-style democracy and capitalism had proven their superiority; “the class issue,” Francis Fukuyama wrote in 1989 while declaring the end of history, had been “successfully resolved” in the “fundamentally egalitarian” West—and it was only a matter of time before “authoritarian” China and Russia moved to duplicate such Western accomplishments, and “democratic” India became a stakeholder in the liberal international order.

It is imperative today to abandon not only these shattered fantasies of two Western generations but also the intellectual narcissism implicit in them. For only then will the deeper structural changes of a suddenly unfamiliar world come into view—the changes that flow from decolonization, the central event of the twentieth century.

It was clear, even during the cold war, that the shape of things to come would be decided by ideas and movements occurring in places geographically remote from the West, with their vast majority of the world's population, rather than by Western cold warriors. The Chinese Revolution of 1949 always seemed to hold greater consequences for the wider world than the Russian Revolution, and Mao Zedong's declaration that "the Chinese people have stood up" after a century of humiliation by Western countries was always more than just boosterish rhetoric, inaugurating as it did a feverish, calamity-prone, but ultimately successful pursuit of national wealth and power.

Today, it cannot be denied that the major developments within Anglo-America—from deunionization, increased corporate clout, and the outsourcing of jobs to extreme inequality and white supremacist upsurge—cannot be explained without reference to the rise of China as a manufacturing giant and aggressively nationalist world power. In other words, understanding the contemporary world requires a truly global perspective—and not just one that merely adds the history of "democratic" India and "authoritarian" China to preexisting narratives of Western eminence. It means forsaking the whole structure of preconceptions on which a parochial West-centric view has long been based.

It is not easy to stop beating the old drums. The self-images and modes of thought and perception developed during the cold war are as pervasive as they are tenacious. American and British commentators were then battling against a potent indictment of Western-style democracy and capitalism by Communists and Communist sympathizers around the world. One consequence of this intense ideological clash was that anti-Communist commentators consistently overestimated their "free world": they saw in it more widespread and enduring material, moral, and intellectual uplift than could be supported by historical facts.

In the most significant defensive maneuver by Western commentators during the cold war, liberalism became "not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition," as Lionel Trilling confidently put it in 1950. This moral promotion was an odd fate for an ideology of individual freedom and property rights that had been denounced from both the left and the right for conceitedly fueling inequality and mass disaffection. As Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in 1944, "bourgeois liberalism was, on the whole, completely unconscious of the corruption of its own class interest and fondly imagined its perspectives to be ultimate."

Nevertheless, as the cold war intensified, liberalism came to have, almost by default, a flattering image, especially when set against the miserable realities of Soviet and Chinese communism. It acquired, too, as contemporary scholars have shown, a prestigious intellectual ancestry, with John Locke and Thomas Hobbes enlisted as brainy

forebears. The Enlightenment, sharply questioned within Europe from the late nineteenth century onward, came to be depicted as the source of the free world's uniquely good fortune. This tradition of self-congratulation has reached its *reductio ad absurdum* in Steven Pinker's door-stopping data banks that claim things are getting better all the time and we just don't realize it.



Voltaire; drawing by David Levine
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Many outraged young people today want to know how it became possible for white police officers to murder black people and for armed vigilantes to assault antiracist protesters in broad daylight with the tacit consent of a sitting US president. The glowing accounts of the free world as custodian of liberalism and democracy, heir to the Enlightenment, and nemesis of authoritarianism were never going to be of much help here. These cold war mythologies of virtue suppressed too many awkward facts—about, for instance, Voltaire, who described black people as “animals” with “little or hardly any intelligence”; Kant, who believed that dark skin constituted a clear proof of stupidity and that women were unsuited for public life; or John Stuart Mill, who assumed that Indians were “barbarians,” unfit for self-rule.

Moreover, a fixation on the crimes of Stalin, Mao, and Hitler managed to obscure the long centuries of global violence and dispossession that made Britain and the United States uniquely powerful and wealthy. As the feminist philosopher Lorna Finlayson recently wrote:

As surely as terrible crimes have been committed by socialist states, the history of liberal nations is the history of systematic acquisitive violence: from the genocide of indigenous populations, to chattel slavery, to contemporary “regime change” and “humanitarian intervention.” This much is uncontroversial, even though it may not be thought relevant—or polite, perhaps—to talk about it.

Certainly, those who invented entire intellectual genealogies (“Counter-Enlightenment,” “Romantic irrationalism,” “Islamofascism”) to define the enemies of the liberal-democratic and enlightened West weren't going to talk about it. And those who could—the long-term victims and necessarily close observers of the enlightened West—were effectively silenced or marginalized.

The problem with this cold war liberalism, exploited to the hilt by antiliberal demagogues today, wasn't only its moral haughtiness and corruption by class interests. It was also that liberal internationalism amounted in practice to an ignorance of, and reflexive contempt for, other worldviews. Even those devising a respectable philosophical

pedigree for the free world ignored much that was happening and had happened in the supposedly unfree world. Take, for instance, the writings of Isaiah Berlin, a frequent contributor to *The New York Review*.

Berlin came to prominence as an Anglo-American sage after World War II, precisely during the time when anticolonial movements across the world started to achieve their delayed victories, and black activists in the United States intensified their long battle for fundamental rights. By the 1950s, these often interconnected global struggles against white supremacy had generated a vast archive of political thought. Those degraded by racist Western empires obviously had very different ideas about how to achieve liberty and justice, and a range of figures—from Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, José Martí, Rabindranath Tagore, Mohandas Gandhi, and Sun Yat-sen to W.E.B. Du Bois, Aimé Césaire, and Frantz Fanon—offered both a strong critique of Western political and economic arrangements and alternative visions of human coexistence on a fragile planet.

Many Asian and African countries floundered soon after liberating themselves from white rulers, their formal sovereignty radically curtailed by the cold war and economic neoimperialism. This fraught experience—of failed modernization and state-building, secessionist movements and ethnic-religious insurgencies, demagoguery, and despotism—provoked an even deeper intellectual engagement with the perennial problems of politics and society. The works of the Egyptian economist Samir Amin, the Indian social psychologist Ashis Nandy, the Malaysian sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas, the Moroccan feminist Fatema Mernissi, the Jamaican historian Orlando Patterson, the Chinese critic Wang Hui, the Brazilian philosopher Roberto Unger, and the Colombian scholar Arturo Escobar are exemplary in their overturning of assumptions derived from histories of Western exceptionalism.¹

But their voices have rarely been heard in the Western mainstream. Consequently, there has been little challenge to the presumption that the “liberal” political institutions of Britain and the United States can be disentangled, and assessed separately, from such grossly illiberal practices as slavery and imperialism. Berlin’s own advocacy of liberalism ignored its tormented history, and he barely acknowledged any non-Western intellectual and political traditions. Theorizing influentially about concepts of liberty in 1958, a year after shocking images of the forced integration of Little Rock’s Central High School circulated globally, Berlin even managed to overlook the world-transforming quest for liberty launched by the “darker nations,” to use Du Bois’s phrase.² Berlin seemed to have assumed, like Mill before him, that only the liberty of the white male mattered.

In a critique of Berlin's work, the anthropologist Ernest Gellner once pointed to its peculiar lack of social, political, and historical context. Working with a similar handicap, John Rawls, author of *A Theory of Justice* (1971), the most influential book of political philosophy in the late twentieth century, assumed that Western political institutions are fundamentally oriented toward promoting liberty and justice.

Strangely, such ahistorical thought emanating from members of a credentialed Western elite became hegemonic inside and outside academia just as the United States and Britain entered a period of decline in the 1970s. As the political theorist Katrina Forrester points out in her recent book on Rawls, *In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Philosophy and the Remaking of Political Philosophy* (2019), a few "affluent, white, mostly male analytical political philosophers" drawn almost exclusively from Harvard, Princeton, and Oxford "tried to expand their theories across space to encompass wider communities, nations, the international realm, and ultimately the planet." A deep facility with their historically innocent abstractions became, as Forrester writes, "the price of admission into the elite institutions of political philosophy," at the expense of feminist and anticolonial writers. A whole history of conquest and domination and its political legacy was thereby erased—what is being uncovered, however belatedly or imperfectly, today by efforts like *The New York Times's* "1619 Project."³

A worldview disconnected from both history and contemporary reality came too close to resembling propaganda, and today Gellner's verdict on Berlin—that he was the CIA's John Stuart Mill—doesn't seem entirely an instance of backbiting in academe. Certainly, as Forrester writes, "the story of Anglo-American liberal political philosophy" today resembles "a ghost story," lingering long after its enabling conditions have disappeared.

What then is to be done to exorcise the many ghosts in those cold war stories of liberalism, democracy, and the free world? How can we escape an intellectually enfeebled milieu where the self-interests and self-perceptions of privileged white men are passed off as "global thinking," and world philosophy and world history are essentially



John Rawls; drawing by David Levine
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John Stuart Mill; drawing by David Levine
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Western in nature and provenance? (The left tradition, with its endless and repetitive invocations of Marx, Gramsci, Adorno, Benjamin, and Arendt, doesn't escape the trap of insularity, either.)

An essential task here would be to address the staggering imbalances of intellectual life that mimic larger asymmetries of socioeconomic power across the globe. A newspaper columnist from India, China, Ghana, or Egypt is unlikely to be recognized as an authority on global affairs unless she can demonstrate some basic knowledge of Euro-American political and intellectual traditions. Most Western scholars, let alone newspaper reporters, do not have even a passing acquaintance with Indian, Chinese, African, and Arab history and thought.

Still, merely adding a few unfamiliar names to the curriculum, something already fiercely resisted by the conservative and reactionary right, won't advance global thinking, as distinct from the institutional aims of "inclusivity" and "diversity." Something more radical and arduous will be required to avoid the total conceptual loss suffered by the Crow Indians: the interrogation of an intellectual tradition that distorts our sense of reality, and the relearning of world history, with the recognition that fundamental assumptions about the inferiority of nonwhite peoples have tainted much of our previous knowledge and analysis. This may seem a tall order, but the alternative is to keep banging meaninglessly the same old drum.

—October 21, 2020 ■

Pankaj Mishra

Pankaj Mishra's new book, *Bland Fanatics: Liberals, Race and Empire*, was published this fall.^[P]_{SEP} (November 2020)

1. Linking the histories of the United States, Nazi Germany, and apartheid South Africa, Mahmood Mamdani's forthcoming book, *Neither Settler Nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Harvard University Press, 2020), demonstrates how a broad rethinking of political issues becomes possible when Western ideals and practices are examined from the vantage point of Asia and Africa. ↵
2. See Adom Getachew's recent book, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019), for an account of the Black Atlantic's political thought during decolonization. ↵

3. Priya Satia's new book, *Time's Monster: How History Makes History* (Harvard University Press, 2020), bracingly describes the ways imperialist historiography has shaped visions of the future as much as the past since the nineteenth century. ↵