

Article

A Critical Gloss on "China is Watching Western Democracy Eat Itself"

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The Working Group on Empire of the Coalition for Peace and Ethics is undertaking an examination of empire. Other writings produced by the Working Group and published in the present issue of *Emancipating the Mind in the New Era*¹ have begun to consider empire in the shadow of quite distinct older imperial models, and rising new approaches. One of the most interesting aspects of this project on Empire touches on the way in which Western intellectuals and other cultural leaders weave self-reflexive and inward looking conceptions of empire into the way in which they both see the world, and the way in which they see others in the world. That self-reflexive dialogue has significant implications not just for constructing the frame of reality within which analysis is possible, but of molding it for the purpose of educating the masses to guide them toward appropriate interpretations and judgments about current politics, economics and the like.

It was with that in mind that the Working Group on Empire considered Nic Robertson, CNN's International Diplomatic Editor recent essay. Entitled "*China is watching Western democracy eat itself*".² That essay follows, courtesy of CNN, with in-line comments.

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- 1 CPE-Working Group on Empire, Foreword: In the Shadow of Empires—Latin American Perceptions of Development and International Law; Larry Catá Backer, A Report on Empire in the New Era: 共建“一带一路”倡议进展、贡献与展望 [The Belt and Road Initiative Progress, Contributions and Prospects]—China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Shadows of the Empire of Contemporary Globalization, LAW AT THE END OF THE DAY, April 24, 2019, available at <https://lcbackerblog.blogspot.com/2019/04/a-report-on-empire-in-new-era-belt-and.html>; Flora Sapio, Summary Description of the BRI Report 共建“一带一路”倡议进展、贡献与展望 [The Belt and Road Initiative. Progress, Contributions, and Prospects]
 - 2 Nic Robertson, China is watching Western democracy eat itself, CNN, April 28, 2019, available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/27/opinions/brexit-and-trump-making-room-for-china-robertson-intl/index.html>

China is watching Western democracy eat itself

“(CNN) Over the next few months, the world's current and previous superpowers are set to undergo enormous self-harm.”

Commentary: The incarnation of states is an old trope. We might thank Freud and perhaps Jung (and others of course), for the extension of the psychology of individuals to the incarnated personalities of bodies corporate, like the state. And yet that requires several leaps of ideologically contingent faith. The first touches on the solidity of state, which themselves might be sometimes unstable aggregations of power and legitimacy centers precariously cobbled together. The second touches on the value judgment inherent in concepts like "self-harm". This implies a values-based baseline for judgment (of "the self" and of "harm") especially valuable where its characteristics remain unstated and assumed. And indeed, from other perspectives what appears to be self-harm might instead represent a profound (perhaps positive) metamorphosis. The third touches on the categorical distinctions between the self-harming that superpowers might do to themselves and that sort of self-harming that is perhaps less harmful (for its spillover effects?) when undertaken by other states. And yet that itself suggests the inevitability not just of empire (even in a world dominated by the ideology of liberal democracy, the equality of states, and their interplay through the United Nations system) but of empire that ought to be subject to a set of trans-imperial normative presumptions and expectations.

“The biggest victim could be democracy itself, and the biggest losers the approximately 4 billion people who live in its imperfect embrace. As London and Washington convulse, China belches along, gobbling up cultures in a way that should alarm us all.”

Commentary: We love the imagery of hungry empire. It naturally follows from the incarnation of empire (as a beast?). But such feasting continues to give all empires indigestion. What are now Italians are still holding the same dancing celebrations as the Greeks did on the Italian peninsula 2000 years ago, playing the same instruments.

“This week, China's future global dominance was on full display as foreign leaders headed to Beijing in the hope of securing lucrative projects as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. It is the flagship policy of Chinese President Xi Jinping, and it seeks to bring the world into China's economic embrace by building infrastructure on a mass scale, ultimately improving transport, ties with and reliance on China across the world. The promise of increased trade

with what will soon be the world's largest economy — not to mention the immediate prospect of the aforementioned contracts — are too tempting to ignore. Xi is doing what all aspiring empires do, threading the world in a web of dependency, slowly creating dominion in other powers' backyards."

Commentary: What is an Empire? The difficulty here is that the statement depends for its meaning on a very specific and critical way of reading and understanding "empire". But is a Western way of reading a set of contemporary taboos back in time to adjudge systems that now appear to embody the rejection of the core set of contemporary economic, political, and societal taboos. It is not empire in the technical sense, but empire in a cultural sense that serves as the foundation of the statement. And also serves as a foundation of the name calling — for here empire (with its current sets of Western ideological baggage is used as an opprobrium — an easy way to engage in name calling and of painting a Chinese Empire both "white" (the fashionable term now for Anglo-European in a culture continually obsessed with race essentialization, but now with its vectors of values reverses) and historically and inextricably embedded in the violation of the taboos for which core manifestations of such empires are now condemned.

"His ambitious show in Beijing seems perfectly timed to exploit the self-inflicted political crises the United States and the UK are imposing on themselves. In the United States, a presidential election campaign pitching President Donald Trump against a crowd of Democratic foes will be firing up in the coming weeks, particularly now that heavyweight contender Joe Biden has officially thrown his hat in the ring. Meanwhile, the UK will continue a very public evisceration of centuries of democratic process and precedent by executing an excruciatingly painful exit from the European Union. Amusingly, the next deadline falls on Halloween. These two nations may yet reverse their direction and show that the current political spasms are nothing more than a spike in democracy's growing pains."

Commentary: The notion of "political spasms" as somehow "bad" is itself ideologically contingent. It draws its power from the dead hand of middle Enlightenment thinking about the "scientific" order of things as logical, mechanically systematic, and orderly. It is not for nothing that one of the great apostles of Enlightenment thinking in the early 21st Century, Raúl Castro of Cuba, is found of always referencing reforms and the operation of political and societal spheres as dependent on order and discipline. The "great clockmaker" notion of the Divine — has now been resurrected in the form of the Divine algorithm, and of the notion that a well-functioning political society is defined by order and discipline. This goes hand in hand with the great project of the late Enlightenment — the "legalization" of politics and economics and its alignment with the deliberate mechanical qualities of a well running machine. In this world view spasms are indeed a sign of instability rather than one of dynamic change, and thus valued

negatively. And indeed, one might as much worry about the easy embrace of a reactionary stance explicit in this passage as about the aggressive projection of Chinese imperial ambitions. And that the reactionary trope comes from the so-called progressive faction of the intelligentsia and its mouthpieces ought to invite furious self-reflection.



[Still life in the machine elements, 1918 - Fernand Leger \(Wikiart public domain\)](#)

“But blind faith in the democratic system we've grown up with blinkers us to the realities of how China, the world's superpower-in-waiting, gets stronger through democracy's misadventures.”

Commentary: Might it be possible to surmise that democracy is not the object of a "blind faith," at least not in the manner asserted by the author? Democracy is one of the foundational values of our systems. It is something that our grandfathers constructed in Europe through WW II. Either one internalizes its normative ideology, and tries to contribute to improving it, or one is deemed unfaithful to one's country. Democracy is not a belief, it's something you do — that is, one performs democracy as an act of affirmation of the normative construction of the political rules that bind a community, as an act of belonging. And that performativity is both longitudinally (across distinct cultures) and latitudinally (across time) contingent.

“Lesson here: Your overlords in the new world order won't give a fig for your democratic values or your grandchildren's rights and desires. China is creating a society without public debate in which unelected officials use artificial intelligence to control everything from promotion at work, to travel, to

housing, to welfare. It holds its population in a grip that no one living in a democracy could ever countenance. Yet our mostly tolerant society, built upon trust in our leaders, seems focused on petty personal attacks that risk throwing out that most valuable commodity in any democracy: trust. A lie gets halfway round the world before the truth puts its shoes on, so the adage goes."

Commentary: China has at last achieved the role of "the other", the bête noire the bogeyman which populates the nightmares of the god-fearing and serves as a reminder of what happens when these god-fearing communities stray from the golden path. The radical binary employed by leading intellectuals and the drivers of mass opinion is an effective mechanism for social control (the Chinese use it as effectively in the context of their own societal and political disciplining). It is interesting and somewhat ironic to note that the very intellectuals which as a class have been highly critical of the radical binary created by combatants during the two 20th Century World Wars (US is God fearing versus Soviet Union as godless, etc.), can now without missing a beat employ the same discursive techniques against a new threat, even more useful for ensuring internal self discipline along specific ideologically mandatory lines. And yet there is an important insight here that emerges from out of the irony — a society is rarely destroyed from the outside; societies (and their political orders) tend to destroy themselves. And that insight indeed ought to be taken to heart. That it requires the construction of a radical otherness to achieve a desired result (the protection of a social and political order against decay), is perhaps an irony worth bearing. That it deploys the imagery of a very specific meaning of empire is to be regretted.

"Trump personal put-down has double the speed and power, often knocking out opponents before they're even ready for a fight. "Crooked Hillary," "Little Marco" — these are just two of the stinging epithets that have instantly ensnared an opponent. Who but Trump could really own the argument that Sen. John McCain was not a war hero? China's Xi and his autocratic Russian ally, Vladimir Putin, must be lapping up this election cycle as Trump lathers faux sympathy on Biden, labeling him "Poor" Joe Biden over allegations of inappropriate conduct with women."

Commentary: All empires have their own problems. It is actually more interesting to surmise which empire will be more weakened by their own internal contradictions than whether they profit more from the playing out of the internal contradictions of their competitors. True enough, though, at some point, all imperial internal contradictions can be turned to the advantage of their competitors. But the Anglo-European world has been as adept at doing this as its competitors.

"Trump's opening catch-all salvo in this election cycle is to label Democrats

"socialists," hoping Republicans can unhinge themselves from democracy's roots and act on his slur. The President has defined his opponents before one has arisen from the gathering mass of Democratic challengers. The next year will be ugly for many at the center of the coming political storms. But its effect on democracy's global reach could be far more damaging. The electorates in the UK and the United States will emerge bitter, divided and likely thoroughly underwhelmed at what has become of social and political discourse in their countries, while leaders and electorates in emerging and wannabe democracies will be questioning their own judgment."

Commentary: The problem of analysis of this sort is that it is no analysis at all but merely polemical tropes necessary to manage reader sentiment toward a specific position and framing of mind. That is unfortunate because there are glimmerings of insight buried within these. Indeed, from a historical perspective it is the well-mannered politics of the last 70 years rather than the rough and tumble of its current manifestation that might be understood as the base line for a robust imperial democracy. The question isn't about manners (though every society likes the well-mannered) but about whether political, social and economic institution are still robust enough to thrive in an environment of constant contention. And indeed, the radical transformation might well have been the effort to move from a robust populist and contentious politics over a stable administrative order to an order of well curated politics overseen by a knowledge-power aristocracy.

"In the UK, Brexit is already shifting voters to the extremes. Debate is shrill, opinions entrenched, democracy weakened. Some believe politicians have failed to deliver on the will of the people; others are flabbergasted that three years since the referendum, no one represents their values and views. Brexit is turning the Conservative Party toward the right. Hard-line Brexiters are winning the internal party argument, even if they are failing to win the argument with the public at large. Meanwhile, the opposition Labour Party drifts closer to a softer Brexit, and possibly a second referendum. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has placed jobs at the center of his Brexit message. It could turn out to be a canny move, especially among older Labour voters in poorer parts of the country who voted to leave the EU in 2016. So Corbyn turns left while the Conservatives turn right."

Commentary: It is always amusing to watch the press and its higher members treat Mr. Corbyn in a way that whitewashes his radical deviation from the very pillars of Western liberal democracy which they decry, and for which these sorts of essays are written to defend. The contradictions, grounded in political affinity, might themselves undermine those objectives. Yet it is hard to see how this litany of evils undermines anything but a political status quo that had been reached after 1945. Indeed, the opposite might be true

— that these fissures in the US and UK might well expose the contradictions of imperial societies that are both necessary to progress and which signal not collapse but ultimately positive transformation (but in ways that may not sit well with those who it leaves behind). It is always fun to suggest how Madison and Jefferson would not recognize the American Republic today; it is harder when their joke is turned on the current ruling elites.

“The result? The UK's politics are being pulled to extreme poles, leaving a vast middle ground where people such as former Prime Ministers Tony Blair (Labour) and John Major (Conservative) once stood. The erosion of the middle ground and the crash in trust that it engenders is not new. But this year it could be edging toward a tipping point. It's not just in the United States and the UK. In France, "yellow vest" protesters are testing President Emmanuel Macron's political abilities. Italy, like many other European nations, is riven by rising nationalism. Only recently, Finland, a historic fault line between democracy and autocracy, narrowly voted in a liberal party that edged out nationalists. All the same, it will struggle to form a coalition with the other right-wing party.”

Commentary: The situation in Italy is more complex than this. One of the two parties sharing power at the moment — the Northern League — was never and it is not nationalist or populist. It's a de-ideologized political party, composed by persons born in the North of Italy. They saw themselves as descendants of the old Celtic tribes, a belief functional to claiming superiority on those who saw themselves as descending from the Latins, the Oscans, the Samnites and other ancient inhabitants of Italy. They adopted a Celtic symbol as their logo. They made up their own rituals involving taking water from the springs of a certain river.

This approach to politics continues to exist, but it is hidden behind a rhetoric calling to of "real Italians" because of obvious reasons. Real Italians don't exist. Regionalisms and localisms, on the other hand, are still very much alive. Italians identify with the city they were born in. This is the strongest layer of their identity. For this reason, nationalism can never really take enduring roots in the context of Italy. Trans-nationalism can easily be accepted, if presented in a way respectful of local identities (and this is objectively a challenge for everyone).

“Europe is not having an easy time. Newer members of the EU, like increasingly autocratic Hungary, challenge the bloc's better social instincts. They seem to be looking for a different version of democracy, one that in reality can quickly become no democracy at all. The EU always defied a single idea and managed to muddle through with a string of fudges. Indeed, fudges and compromise are what define democracy -- the trust in the other to find a

mutually agreeable way forward. But in the event those time-sweetened bonds ooze away, what will be left is an unpalatable aftertaste of division and weakness, precisely what the world's superpower-in-waiting wants. It is worth considering that as we embark on democracy's greatest challenge to date, demonstrating this is not some transient experiment but a cherished, albeit imperfect, life choice for more than half the planet."

Commentary: Democracy, like the empires it has helped fashion and strengthen, cannot be domesticated and curated if it is to remain robust. Democratic system are not objects best contemplated in a museum, or frozen forever like one's long deceased grandmother in increasingly moldy family photos of less and less relevance to the living. Democracy's greatest challenge is to avoid domestication or management by risk managers, by elites grown arrogant in their power and deluded into thinking that they can oversee a system that is eternal and eternally unchanging even as the world changes around them and new historical eras emerge. A viable democratic system is built to absorb shocks — not to avoid them. And in that context, the empire of democracy, like other forms of the organization and management of human activity among autonomous but dependent communities and the allocation of authority, responsibility and rights among them, might be most viable when least curated. That does not mean that vanguards do not socialize the masses, but in this system at least, it might mean that the protection of institutional integrity is purchased by ceding a great leeway to the quite fickle expression of popular will. It is a pity when one confused those expressions with a fundamental assault on system integrity itself. And it is in that confusion that one might see both the outlines of new imperial models emerging.