

Book Review Essay: Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018); Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016); Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016); Thorsten Benner, Jan Gaspers, Mareike Ohlberg, Lucrezia Poggetti, and Kristin Shi-Kupfer, *Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China's Growing Political Influence in Europe* (Berlin: Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2018), <https://www.merics.org/en/publications/authoritarian-advance>; Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018); and Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

Dictatorship against Democracy

Stein Ringen

The story of democracy, in the title of John Keane's grand history, is one of life and death.¹ It is not a glorious story. Death has been more prevalent than life.

"The Greeks invented two of the most potent political features of our present age: they invented the very idea of citizen, as opposed to subject, and they invented democracy."² But it did not last. Democracy emerged, haltingly, in the fifth century B. C. and collapsed with the end of Athenian independence less than three hundred years later, having suffered several fits of near death in the process.

After that, the world forgot about democracy for two thousand years, until it was reinvented in the Constitution of the United States in 1787. Whereas Athenian democracy had been direct—decision making collectively by assembly to which all citizens had access—the Americans invented representative democracy. Now, citizens would elect representatives to the national and local congresses who would take charge of decision making on their behalf.

Although the Athenians invented the idea of the citizen, the inclusive concept of citizenship and of universal suffrage took hold only in the twentieth

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¹ John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009).

² S. E. Finer, *The History of Government*, vols. 1-3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 90.

century. In the latter part of that century, this form of government expanded from a minority to a majority of countries and territories. At the entry into our century, 140 of about 190 countries in the world had functioning multiparty elections.³ If, finally, there has been glory in the story of democracy, that has come only recently. And even so, the lesson to be drawn from history is that democracy is not a natural form of rule. It must be wanted, it must be created, recreated, and nurtured, and it is inevitably exposed and in danger.

Russia

The world today is dominated by three big national powers, two of them—China and Russia—authoritarian-dictatorial, and one—the United States—democratic.

The demonic player in this triumvirate is Russia. In *All the Kremlin's Men*, Mikhail Zygar takes us inside “the court of Vladimir Putin” and describes how policies have emerged from shifting cabals of insiders and outsiders and how the orientation of Russian policy has changed during the Putin years. Zygar is a Russian journalist, independent and highly respected internationally but (therefore) at home having suffered beatings personally and seeing his TV station *Dozhd* effectively silenced by the Kremlin’s stifling machinery of media control.

Putin’s Kremlin is indeed a court. The old court was made up of the Czar and around him the nobles who owned the country, but at his discretion. The new court is made up of the president and around him the “oligarchs” who now own the country, but again at his discretion. Putin is king in such a way that none of his “inner circle dared to argue with the president, because they know that he was the source and guarantor of their wealth.”⁴ The court is exposed to no outside controls, no effective legislature, not effective judiciary, no effective press.

Vladimir Putin emerged as the president of post-Soviet Russia in 2000, served in that office until 2008, was prime minister until 2012, was then reelected president, and, as of 2018, has commenced a new six-year presidential term. He is today Russia’s undisputed strongman.

Putin’s presidency falls in two parts. The first period could be seen as an attempt to impose some kind of order in the Russian state after the turmoil resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union. The satellites in Europe and Central Asia pulled free, Kazakhstan alone becoming the world’s ninth biggest country in territory. The Soviet economy of state control had broken down, resulting in a scramble for the spoils that gave rise to a class of super-rich

³ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2002* (New York: Oxford University Press for the UNDP, 2002).

⁴ Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016), 303.

oligarchs in an otherwise underdeveloped economy and poor population. At the time, it seemed, possibly, that Putin was seeking to clean up the corruption he had inherited and drag Russia toward a semblance of rule of law at home and collaborative engagement abroad.

It turned out that was not happening. By 2014, “it became clear that the liberals inside the Kremlin had lost.”⁵ The man who had wanted (or so he said) to be a liberal European president turned against Europe. The man who had wanted Russia to become a full member of NATO (or so he suggested), now saw “the West” as an enemy, convinced that the Americans and Europeans would never afford Russia respect and never recognize her as an equal partner in collaboration. The man who had wanted to respect liberal disagreement turned to describing dissidents as “national traitors” and a “fifth column.”⁶ The state had become oppressive internally and aggressive externally.

Mikhail Zygar offers a fascinating insight into the workings of Putin’s court in a series of sharp (and gossipy) portraits of the characters who have operated within it, and their manifold collaborations and conflicts. What we learn is that Putin at the start had very little idea of what to do with the presidency, that he gradually made himself a determined leader, that he emerged as a different kind of leader than both he and others had anticipated, and that the post-2012 court was, politically speaking, a different animal from what seemed to be in the making in his initial term. However, what Zygar’s analysis does not have, for all the insights it offers into a court’s machinations, is an analytic apparatus to explain why it happened. No doubt it was the result of shifting constellations of who’s in and who’s out in the court, but no doubt also there were deeper forces at play behind those shifting constellations. Why did the liberals lose, and why did the hard-liners win the upper hand?

In fact, Putin’s court was not self-sufficient and did not move only according to shifting internal constellations. Yascha Monk, in *The People vs. Democracy*, reflecting on why democracy failed in Russia, makes the point that no autonomous civil society with any counterbalancing force to the Kremlin’s bureaucracy emerged after the collapse of communist dictatorship and that this in part explains the shift back to autocracy: there was no social force to prevent it.

However, a network of organizations of different kinds emerged at the fringes of the court and around it, sometimes Kremlin supported and generally Kremlin supporting. There are various political parties which the Kremlin allows to operate (in the 2018 presidential election, there were seven candidates in addition to Putin). These parties are there to give elections a sheen of democratic legitimacy. There are also, more importantly, think-tank-like organizations that have served to supply the Kremlin with the ideas that have shaped its policies.

⁵ Ibid., 294.

⁶ Ibid., 301.

In *The Road to Unfreedom* and *Black Wind, White Snow*, the historian Timothy Snyder and the journalist Charles Clover look beyond the inner life of the Kremlin to the interactions between the Kremlin and its support system.

The oligarchic economy of Putin's early period was one of competing clans and gangs in a system that left the state with little control. Wealth was privatized beyond the reach of the state, leaving the Kremlin deprived of resources. Putin took on this system. Some unfriendly oligarchs had their takings confiscated, some were imprisoned, many escaped abroad. By the end of his first period, the Russian oligarchy "was consolidated as the kleptocratic control of the state by a single oligarchical clan under Putin."⁷ This autocratic-kleptocratic behemoth was not an accidental byproduct of Russia's difficult emergence from the collapse of empire but a deliberate state design by Putin and a circle of trusted associates.⁸ That design included control over propaganda, information, and media, and various machinations to make elections meaningless. The Kremlin had taken control and made itself able to act.

And act it did. Already in 2008, Russia had invaded two areas of Georgia, throwing that country into turmoil and undermining its advance toward Europe. In 2014, it was the Ukraine's turn. The Crimea was occupied and "reunited" with Russia and a covert war was launched in eastern Ukraine. In response to criticism from the West, the Kremlin simply denied that there was any military action on its part, in a now familiar pattern of lies and denials over obvious facts. When Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down over southeastern Ukraine by a Russian missile stationed on Ukrainian territory, killing 298 passengers and crew, the reaction was again denials, now with the addition of blaming Ukrainian forces for what was sometimes said to be a failed attempt on the life of the Russian president, and other times an accident of military training. Before this, Ukrainian politics had been destabilized by various manipulations, with the effect that a reasonable consensus in the population of aligning the Ukraine with the European Union had been shattered.

In Europe,

Putin befriended and supported politicians who were willing to defend Russian interests. One was Gerhard Schröder, the retired German chancellor, who was in the employ of the Russian company Gazprom. A second was Miloš Zeman, elected president of the Czech Republic in 2013 after a campaign partly financed by the Russian oil company Lukoil, and reelected in 2018 after a campaign financed by unknown sources. ... In the post-communist East European member

⁷ Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018), 258.

⁸ Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

states of the European Union, such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland, Russia financed and organized internet discussion outlets to cast doubt on the value of EU membership. ...In the larger West European media markets, the international English-, Spanish-, German- and French-language television network RT was more important. RT became the media home of European politicians who opposed the EU, such as Nigel Farage of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and Marine Le Pen of the *Front National* in France.⁹

Populist and right-radical organizations throughout Europe—the *Front National* in France, the *Freiheitliche* party in Austria, the *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany—received financial and/or propagandistic support from Russia, and links of collaboration were created between their people and Russian quasi-official organizations. In Britain, Russia engaged propagandistically on the side of Scottish independence and of Brexit in that country's two eventful referendums. In the United States, various Russian organizations invested heavily in the last presidential election of 2016, both in favor of Donald Trump and against the candidacy of Hillary Clinton, and against Barack Obama's reputation, mainly with the use of cyber-manipulation techniques. This was a carefully crafted campaign, described by a Russian commentator, a year ahead of the election, as "our boy can become president of the United States and we can engineer it."¹⁰ Any economic links between the Trump organization and Russian operatives are, as is well-known, yet to be uncovered.

Neither Snyder nor Clover discusses Russia's involvement in the Syrian war, nor the two known assaults with chemical weapons on ex-Russian agents in Britain, one an assassination and one an attempted assassination. In Syria, Russia not only has given support to the most deadly regime in today's world, but also has condoned this regime's use of illegal weapons of mass destruction, including chemical poison and indiscriminate barrel bombing. There is a mystery here. The Russians must have known that they would be identified as responsible for these atrocities and it is difficult to see their actions as anything but deliberate provocations.

The Russian state has essentially three resources available to it. The first one is inequality. The nation's wealth, which is not great, is in the hands of the Putin oligarchy. The state can therefore deploy resources of its own and also resources that are technically in private ownership. This has been made possible by Putin's kleptocratic consolidation. The claimed Russian hold on President

⁹ Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 100.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 221.

Trump, for example, comes from his organization's alleged dependency on Russian oligarchic money.

The second resource is the use of cyber capacity for propagandistic and manipulative purposes. This is a weapon with two advantages: it is cheap and it is effective. It is ideal for a state like the Russian one. It is probably a mistake to think that social media manipulation, even if extensive and sophisticated, can be counted on to fix an electoral outcome, however much the engineers of manipulation claim they can. But what it can do is to wreak havoc in the form of discord, disinformation, conflict, and distrust within the fabric of democratic culture. That is the aim of the politics of a spoiler like Russia. After the shootings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida on February 14 this year, it took only an hour for a flurry of posts from Russia-linked Twitter accounts to set Americans against each other on the issue of gun control.

And the third resource is ruthless determination. When we look at Russian policy—destroying Ukrainian autonomy, undermining the credibility of the European Union, destabilizing the workings of electoral democracy in the United States, undertaking assassinations on British soil, brutalizing the conduct of war in Syria—nothing is forbidden. The awfulness of the social media messaging that was inserted into the 2016 American presidential election is really beyond belief: repetitious lies, maliciousness, racism, misogyny, and attacks on the very meaning of truth.

The final question in understanding what is unfolding is to understand where this steely and cynical determination comes from. It takes some explanation!

Snyder and Clover find that explanation is in the realm of ideas. Timothy Snyder is a historian in the “ideas matter” school. The Russian state, he says, under Putin, has made itself not only autocratic but also ideological. It is inspired by a set of ideas that make it self-righteous and with which it has given itself a certificate to ruthlessness.

As seen from the West, the collapse of the Soviet Union was the collapse of communist dictatorship. As seen from Russia, it was the collapse of the Russian empire. The Soviet Union had been monumentally successful in consolidating a vast empire across Central Asia and Eastern Europe, the culmination of centuries of Russian expansion. All that was lost. In addition, Russian leaders, probably also Russian people, came to feel, not without justification, that the West had betrayed them in their moment of weakness. Gorbachev had accepted German reunification in return for a promise from the United States and Germany that NATO would not expand eastward. That promise was broken when the ex-Warsaw Pact nations, including Poland and the Baltic republics, were brought into NATO, or at least so it was seen from Moscow.¹¹ The European embrace of the Ukraine was viewed as a continuation of that betrayal.

¹¹ Neal Ascherson, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

The loss of empire, dignity, and respect created fertile soil for ideas of an alternative Russia. Relevant ideas filtered up from the undergrowth of organizations on the fringes of Putin's court and were embraced by a Kremlin in need of a grand project.

The relevant ideas draw in part on religious—historical mysticism. “Russia” has evolved from the Kyivan Rus with origins more than a thousand years back in history. It has been guided by its own church of Russian Orthodox Christianity. It grew into the biggest empire the world has known. That empire was geographical but it was even more to be understood as spiritual, an empire of virtue. Technically, the empire has collapsed, but its spiritual legitimacy survives. It exists as a spiritual fact, never mind the momentary coincidence of national borders. This, for example, is why the Ukraine cannot be independent and European, because that is not what it is, because it is inescapably a part of spiritual Russia.

This spiritual empire has rights. It has the right to exist and to fight for its existence, which it must do since it has enemies. Since it is spiritually superior to others, it has the right to do as it wishes in the defense of its own virtue. The long-term aim is the reconstitution of the physical empire. The short-term aim is to weaken its here-and-now enemies: the European Union, the United States, Western liberalism, democracy.

In the practical world, this inevitably translates into an ideology of nationalism. The meaning of policy is to serve the nation, now meaning spiritual Russia. The unit of purpose is the nation, the state is the nation's custodian, and state action is right or wrong depending on whether or not it serves the advancement of the nation.

The peculiar brew of contemporary Russian spiritual nationalism has been in the making since Russia was overwhelmed by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Émigrés settled throughout Europe and beyond, some of whom made themselves thinkers about, for example, the historical—linguistic origins of the Russian people, and some about an alternative Russian future. Much of this suggested a Russia that was “Eastern” more than “Western,” a Russia that has its moorings in Asia rather than in Atlantic Europe. Many of the émigré thinkers gravitated toward fascism.

Some of this thinking made its way back to Russia during the slow-motion disintegration of the Soviet Union in the 1980s and 1990s and was elaborated further there in both regime-inside and underground circles. This mélange of fantasy and mysticism gave birth to an idea that subsequently has attracted power. “Russia's salvation lay in turning back the tide of democratic liberalism, re-establishing repressive central control, and bringing to power a regime of patriots, beholden to an imperial concept of Russia, [in a] distinctly non-Western space—Eurasia.”¹² This all came with a nasty baggage of strongman

¹² Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), xii.

politics, conspiracy thinking, cult of violence, and anti-Semitism.

This brand of nationalistic—authoritarian thinking started its life in fringe movements of apparent irrelevance. However, during the Putin presidency, “conservative theories of nationalism...made dramatic inroads into Russian politics.”¹³ By the time of his second presidential period, as of 2012,

he began to use new terminology. Referring to the West, for example, he began to use the term “Atlantic,” and when he spoke of Russia’s broader identity he used the term “Eurasia.” When he refers to Russians, he increasingly uses the term *Russky* (ethnic Russians) rather than *Rossiisky* (national Russians). He also replaced the term “nation-state” with “civilization-state” as more appropriate to the historical sweep of the Russian people.¹⁴

Putin had consolidated the kleptocratic state and was now sending signals of new nationalistic directions in the policies of his state.

This amounted to an official embrace of a tradition of Russian fascism. At the core of that embrace, explains Snyder, is the elevation of a hitherto obscure thinker from among the post-revolution émigrés by the name of Ivan Ilyin to a position of court philosopher. Ilyin, born in 1883, was on the side of the Whites in the civil war and, after the revolution, was exiled in 1922, thereafter living and working mostly in Germany. He died in Switzerland in 1954, forgotten. In the early 1990s, some of his works started to circulate in new Russian editions and found powerful supporters, eventually also Putin. He organized a reburial of Ilyin in Moscow in 2005, had his personal papers returned to Russia from an American university, referred to him as his authority on history, distributed a collection of his political writings to members of Russia’s ruling party and civil servants as a gift from the Kremlin, and had Russian television commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution with a film that presented Ilyin as a moral authority.

Ilyin was an outspoken fascist and a theoretician of spiritual Russia, nationalism, and political violence. The core of his thinking is that the nation is one and indivisible and that individuals have their existence as components of the nation. Individualism is the idea of European decadence, and great leaders such as Mussolini and Hitler, who represented their people by the force of a mythical connection, were the bearers of hope in a corrupt world.

The reference to Ilyin thereby also offered a solution to the problem of state and society. For nationalists, individuals are a problem. If individuals matter, they stand in the way of the nation and of the state as the custodian of

¹³ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴ Ibid., 4.

the national interest. This is why the powerful dictators—Stalin, Hitler, Mao, and now also Xi Jinping—all rely on ideas of their own making in which the good of the individual comes from the good of the nation. The nation comes first and individuals as individuals do not have genuine autonomous interests. They do not matter in the bigger design. Putin and his thinkers have resurrected this component of autocratic nationalism as well.

The Russian political class followed Putin. Ilyin became a standard reference in official political and legal discourse. He was called on as the inspiration for Putin's centralization of political power in the Russian Federation. He inspired a crop of neo-fascist producers of ideology in the wider Putin camp. Notable among these is Alexander Dugin, the central and colorful character in Clover's *Black Wind, White Snow*. Dugin started his intellectual life in the Moscow fringe underground, probably with no notion that his thinking would become prominent, but improbably, and in tandem with the Kremlin's embrace of authoritarian nationalism, found himself one of the country's most influential and promoted public intellectuals, described by Clover as "the St. Cyril and Methodius of fascism," meaning its Russification.

It turned out, then, that the Kremlin, in its shift toward aggressive nationalism, was inspired by and dependent on various ideas men outside of the court. The common currency in these circles was a peculiar mixture of ideas: Eurasianism, enmity (toward Europe, in particular, both in fact and idea), conspiracy, anti-Semitism, autocracy, violence, and antidemocracy. The argument in Snyder's *The Road to Unfreedom* is that in Putin's Russia, Europe and the United States are up against not only an adversary with certain interests that may be on a collision course with their own, but also an ideological state that has given itself license to uninhibited and determined ruthlessness in its dealings with those it has come to think of not simply as competitors but as enemies.

China

The biggest player in the triumvirate is China: 1.4 billion people, a state with vast reserves of capital creamed off from trade surpluses with the rest of the world, a heavily extractive tax system at home, and in command of a military machine second only to that of the United States. Like Russia, China is on a quest for domination in the world, but there is a difference. While the Chinese state has real strength, the Russian state has behind it a weak and unsophisticated economy and a population with a poor standard of education and public health. As a result, "the essence of Russia's foreign policy is strategic relativism: Russia cannot be stronger, so it must make others weaker."¹⁵ China's situation is different, it is making itself stronger by the day. While Russia is a spoiler, China is a maker.

¹⁵ Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 249.

The Chinese state is in the hands of a regime that claims the right to rule by force of its 1949 civil war victory and revolution. It sees itself to be the order that can hold China united and strong. It is a regime, like Putin's Kremlin, of utter determination: the rise of China to preeminence in the world and the perpetuation of the regime itself as the instrument of the great Chinese nations. The West mostly wants to see in China an economic giant. What we should see is a political giant. The People's Republic of China is a *political* project.

As the Russian state must be understood through Putin, the Chinese state now must be understood through Xi Jinping. Xi has proved himself the most formidable leader after Mao and has reshaped the regime to such a degree that it is now common to see his reign as the third phase for the People's Republic, after those of Mao and Deng and their followers. But this reshaping, although drastic, is still a case of continuity. Under Xi, the People's Republic is becoming what it from the start was supposed to be but had deviated from in the process. By the time Xi came to power in 2012, the economy was booming. "Unity" had been secured by the crackdown in 1989 at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, and in an unknown number of other cities, in a message to the people not to be misunderstood: you may hope for prosperity, but liberty is not available. The state was fiscally solid, in control at home and strong abroad.

The nature of this regime has been analyzed in a previous recent review essay in this journal.¹⁶ There is, however, more to be said about its policies as an agent of influence on the world stage. Xi's Beijing is every bit as determined to promote its own greatness as is Putin's Kremlin, but with the difference that, while Putin must play his game with vulgar means, Xi has the power to operate with statesmanlike elegance.

As for Russia, China has turned out to be a very different operator than was expected in the West. The PRC has established itself as a competitor rather than a collaborator.

The most confident regime in today's world is on a quest for domination. That quest is obvious for all to see in the region. The rule of law in Hong Kong is being nibbled at.¹⁷ Taiwan is threatened with annexation, in which the will of the people of a democratic country is to count for nothing. In the South China Sea, 3 million of 3.5 million square kilometers have *de facto* been turned into Chinese territorial waters, in contravention of international law and a ruling of the Tribunal of the Law of the Sea, with island bases, some of them military, being built in other countries' waters. Australia and New Zealand are on the forefront of China's purchase of influence, in persistent

¹⁶ Kharis Templeman, "'The China Model': How Successful Is the Chinese Regime?" *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (December 2017): 177-201.

¹⁷ Greg Torode and James Pomfret, "Hong Kong's Judges Voice Fears over China Influence in Judiciary" (March 15, 2018), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-law/hong-kongs-judges-voice-fears-over-china-influence-in-judiciary-idUSKCN1GR0LD> (accessed May 27, 2018).

interference in politics, media, and universities, described in a recent Australian book as a “silent invasion.”¹⁸

Domination is at the heart of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Xi’s personal brain-child and the main vehicle of his foreign policy. This is a monumental program of investments in transport routes and infrastructure facilities, as spikes in a wheel with Beijing the hub, now with projects in at least sixty-eight countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe, and counting. What this program is building is, first of all, a global structure of power. Physical links are being laid down horizontally between China and “recipient” countries, but less so vertically among recipient countries. Everyone is being linked with China, no one with each other. China is making itself, literally, the “middle kingdom.” Secondly, it is building a structure of dependency. The Chinese state can fund the BRI investments with capital from trade surpluses and domestic extractions, but it is doing so by lending to recipient countries. This is a program not of charity but of debt. Recipient countries put themselves under Chinese domination as debtors. The International Monetary Fund has been warning recipient countries that they are taking on more debt than they can manage. This may be so but is beside the point. As always with China, the BRI needs to be understood as a political project. It does not matter that recipient countries may not be able to repay all the debt they are taking on. What matters is that physical—financial structures of power and dependency are being entrenched.

That a great power seeks domination in its own neighborhood and uses economic clout to spread influence more broadly is only as to be expected. However, China’s influence policy reaches further than might be seen as normal. In *Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China’s Growing Political Influence in Europe*, the Mercator Institute for China Studies in Berlin (MERICS) has compiled a pioneering report on the detailed nature of Beijing’s quest for influence and control far outside of its own sphere, in this case Europe. This is the first in-depth study available on the detailed nature of Beijing’s influence policy. It offers an insight into a regime that is, one is tempted to say, paranoid in fear of criticism and in desire of praise.

Beijing is (perhaps) not intent on imposing its model on others. But it is imposing something else: silence. If you want to collaborate, be you a business, an organization, or a government, you are not allowed to say or do what the men in Beijing see to be unfriendly. Preferably, you should speak and act in favor of the China model and its ideas and achievements, but failing that, at least without criticism or offence. A recent case, illustrative of Beijing’s dogged attention to detail, is systematic pressure on non-Chinese airlines, hotel chains, and tourist agencies to always, in any kind of public display, use the designations of “Taiwan, China” and “Hong Kong, China” and never simply

¹⁸ Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion: China’s Influence in Australia* (Sydney: Hardie Grant, 2018).

“Taiwan” or “Hong Kong.” One might not think it matters, but to the men in Beijing it does, very much, enough for it to be dealt with systematically and with serious effort.

To the end of spreading influence and control, Beijing deploys a range of state and party agencies ranging from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries, via state academic, think-tank, and media agencies, to state-owned enterprises. The targets of influence are political elites, media and public opinion, and civil society and academia. The means are a combination of threats and inducements.

As Benner et al. emphasize, influence and control are central components of China’s foreign policy:

China is not just at Europe’s gates, it is now already well within them. ...China’s rapidly increasing political influencing efforts in Europe and the self-confident promotion of its authoritarian ideals pose a significant challenge to liberal democracy as well as Europe’s values and interests. While Beijing’s efforts have received much less scrutiny than the efforts of Putin’s Russia, Europe neglects China’s increasing influence at its own peril. Drawing on its economic strength and a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) apparatus that is geared towards strategically building stocks of influence across the globe, Beijing’s political influencing efforts in Europe are bound to be much more consequential in the medium- to long-term future than those of the Kremlin. China commands a comprehensive and flexible influencing toolset, ranging from the overt to the covert, primarily deployed across three arenas: political and economic elites, media and public opinion, and civil society and academia. In expanding its political influence, China takes advantage of the one-sided openness of Europe. Europe’s gates are wide open whereas China seeks to tightly restrict access of foreign ideas, actors and capital. The effects of this asymmetric political relationship are beginning to show within Europe. European states increasingly tend to adjust their policies in fits of “preemptive obedience” to curry favor with the Chinese side. Political elites within the European Union (EU) and in the European neighborhood have started to embrace Chinese rhetoric and interests, including where they contradict national and/or European interests. EU unity has suffered from Chinese divide and rule tactics, especially where the protection and projection of liberal values and human rights are concerned. Beijing also benefits from the “services” of willing enablers among European political and

professional classes who are happy to promote Chinese values and interests. Rather than only China trying to actively build up political capital, there is also much influence courting on the part of those political elites in EU member states who seek to attract Chinese money or to attain greater recognition on the global plane.¹⁹

One country that has recently found itself on the receiving end of this influence is Norway. Last year, China and Norway “normalized” relations (which had been cut off for six years after the Nobel Peace Prize had been awarded to the human rights activist Liu Xiaobo). For “normalization,” the Norwegian government had to promise, in writing, to undertake no action that could disturb the new harmony between the two governments.

A business subjected to Beijing’s policy of influence is Mercedes-Benz. The company happened to mention the Dalai Lama in promotional material outside China, for which it met criticism in China. Its biggest foreign market in danger, the company first promised to “take steps to deepen our understanding of Chinese culture and values.” That, however, was not enough and the company found itself branded “an enemy of the Chinese people” in the *People’s Daily*. This caused it to issue a second apology for “the hurt and grief that its negligent and insensitive mistake has caused the Chinese people.”

NGOs under influence include Greenpeace, the World Wide Fund for Nature, and Conservation International which all, to not risk exclusion from operations in China, have remained silent on China’s environmental destructions in the South China Sea.²⁰

Educational institutions on the receiving end include 525 universities that host Confucius Institutes and 1,113 schools that host Confucius Classrooms. These Institutes and Classrooms are Chinese state institutions that come with Chinese money, embedded in universities and schools in now 146 countries, in a program that started in 2004. Their stated purpose is to contribute to Beijing’s global effort to, in Xi Jinping’s words, get “China stories told well” and to contribute to “overseas propaganda” (propaganda is not a bad word in Beijing’s terminology) for increasing soft power.²¹

The MERICS report proposes two motivations behind Beijing’s international influence policy: to secure regime stability at home, and to present itself as a competitive and ultimately superior political and economic

¹⁹ Thorsten Benner, Jan Gaspers, Mareike Ohlberg, Lucrezia Poggetti, and Kristin Shi-Kupfer, *Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China’s Growing Political Influence in Europe*, Report 2018 (Berlin: Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2018), <https://www.merics.org/en/publications/authoritarian-advance> (accessed May 29, 2018), 2.

²⁰ Greg Rushford, “How China Tamed the Green Watchdogs,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 29, 2017.

²¹ John Fitzgerald, “Unis Could Bide Their Time and Escape the Long Arm of Beijing,” *The Australian*, March 3, 2018.

model. No doubt this is correct, but there is something more to account for: as with Putin's Russia, the regime's ruthless confidence, determination, and energy in promoting itself.

Here, I think we are advised to follow Timothy Snyder in his analysis of Putin's Russia and look to the realm of ideas. Under Xi Jinping's watch, not only have all the reins of dictatorship been tightened, but also ideological fervor has returned with a vengeance. Under Mao, the ideology was revolution. That is no more. Under Deng and his followers, there was no ideology, only economic growth. That is no longer enough. Xi's ambitions for Chinese greatness and regime strength are audacious. They need a narrative of justification, a narrative the leaders themselves can believe in, a narrative that can gather unity within the regime, a narrative that can rally support in the population. Xi's main instrument of ideology is his now omnipresent "China Dream" of national rejuvenation and greatness. For him, as for many other autocratic leaders, Putin included, the narrative that works is nationalism.

Again, there is a difference from Russia. Putin's nationalism is vicious. Others are enemies, they are to be battered. Xi's nationalism is superior. Others are inferior, they are to be pitied. But both regimes have made themselves ideological and given themselves the confidence and determination that ideology generates.

America and Democracy

Russia and China, in the authoritarian corner, are on the offensive, with both confidence and determination. The United States, in the democratic corner, is on the defensive, in self-doubt and confusion.

In *How Democracies Die*, the political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt start from the historical lesson that democracies often have failed. They sometimes have failed by being brought down in violent coups and sometimes at the hands of elected leaders who subvert the very process that brought them to power, then usually slowly in barely visible steps and while maintaining a veneer of democratic forms.

The authors' question is whether the United States now is vulnerable to this kind of democratic backsliding, and they warn that it is. Democracy is in danger, they argue, when, firstly, political parties fail to prevent candidates of authoritarian leaning from prevailing through the processes of nomination and election, in particular candidates to the presidency. In the United States, the president holds vast powers, so much so that democracy is endangered if a person of nondemocratic instincts manages to be elected.

However, American democracy is one of robust constitutional institutions which normally should be expected to check the possible transgressions of would-be authoritarian leaders. It therefore takes more for a democracy such as the American one to wobble than that unsuitable candidates make it to power. "Constitutions must be defended—by political parties and organized citizens,

but also by democratic norms. Without robust norms, constitutional checks and balances do not serve as the bulwarks of democracy we imagine them to be.”²²

“America failed the first test in November 2016, when we elected a president [Donald Trump] with a dubious allegiance to democratic norms.”²³ Historically, the American system has worked well and democracy has survived extreme strains: the Civil War, the Great Depression, the Cold War, Watergate. The reason there is cause for alarm now, they argue, is not just that a man without allegiance to democratic values has won the presidency, but that unwritten democratic norms have been weakened, in particular, norms of mutual toleration and restraint in the exercise of power.

The challenges facing American democracy run deeper. Not only did America elect a demagogue in 2016, but we did so at a time when the norms that once protected our democracy were already coming unmoored. The weakening of our democratic norms is rooted in extreme partisan polarization. And if one thing is clear from studying breakdowns throughout history, it’s that extreme polarization can kill democracies.²⁴

How Democracies Die is a book of historical analysis. One line goes through American political history. This is a very rough history, indeed, with demagoguery and power abuse in abundance. Some of the now most revered presidents—Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt—were in their time practitioners of constitutionally questionable methods, to put it mildly. There is no romanticism here of any previous golden age of immaculately correct politics.

Still, American politics did mature within the acceptance of certain unwritten rules. “By the turn of the twentieth century, then, norms of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance were well-established.”²⁵ These norms were generally accepted in both the exercise of presidential power and congressional proceedings. For example, the use of filibuster in the Senate, although permitted, was in practice rare.

By the 1970s, however, American politics were into what the authors call “the unraveling.” A young candidate for a congressional seat in Georgia, Newt Gingrich, found that rough means and language were the ways to success. He took with him to Washington the ideas that politics is war and that opponents are enemies, and spoke a language that seasoned members of Congress “had never heard before from either side.” This took on and congressional work became mired in enmity, lack of civility, and obstruction. The atmosphere in

²² Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018), 7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

state houses throughout the land was much the same. The use of filibuster in the Senate reached “epidemic” proportions. Both presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama started their tenures by calling for a spirit of bipartisan cooperation, but to no avail. The Obama presidency became mired in “rising extremism and partisan warfare.” Divisions hardened by being cast as matters of race and religious belief, in particular, by the force of Christian evangelism.

This polarization in political life, in turn, is embedded in a profound polarization throughout society. It is not only American politics that is divided, American society itself is now deeply divided. “Being a Democrat or a Republican has become not just a partisan affiliation but an identity.”²⁶ The authors display some shocking statistics. Americans have been asked in surveys how they would feel if their children married someone who identified with the other political party. Between a third and a half of the respondents say they would be “somewhat or very unhappy.” Forty or fifty years ago, such sentiments were hardly reported. Between 60 and 70 percent of politically engaged Americans say they live in fear of the other party. “By the 2000s, the Democratic and Republican voters, and the politicians representing them, were more divided than at any point in the previous century.”²⁷

The authors’ other historical line is to look internationally to the experience of faltering or challenged democracy elsewhere. They look to both cases where democracy has failed and succeeded to withstand challenge. Here, the authors find some forms of political behavior that contribute to explaining how democracies have stood up to various forms of authoritarian challenge. One is “gatekeeping,” the ability to stand guard against the rise of authoritarian leaders. A common fault has been not to recognize soon enough that political operators who are prepared to subvert democratic values and practices are dangerous to democracy. Another fault is the willingness to tolerate democratically subversive language and behavior, to not take it seriously, to perhaps play along with it. And a third fault is to accept alliance with leaders of autocratic leaning who have risen to power. Common to these faults is political opportunism and a resulting failure to take on, early enough and strongly enough, democratically subversive candidates and leaders.

They find all these faults in operation in the present American predicament, in what they call “the Great republican abdication.” The Republican Party has failed both in its role of gatekeeper, and in going down the opportunistic path of accepting alliance with a president who is democratically subversive and of not countering his subversion of democratic values in language and behavior.

From historical precedent, the authors identify four behavioral warning signs in a political leader in a democracy to suggest that the leader represents an authoritarian challenge: (1) the leader rejects, in words or action, the

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

democratic rules of the game; (2) the leader denies the legitimacy of opponents; (3) the leader tolerates or encourages violence; and (4) the leader indicates a willingness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents and of the media.

Levitsky and Ziblatt also identify three strategies by which elected authoritarians seek to consolidate power: capturing the referees (law enforcement, judiciary, and intelligence services); sidelining key players; and rewriting the rules to tilt the playing field to the disadvantage of opponents.

In a “report card” for President Trump’s first year in office, Levitsky and Ziblatt find that he possesses all four characteristics of authoritarian inclination and that he has been pursuing all three authoritarian strategies in the exercise of power. However, they also find that although President Trump “followed the electoral authoritarian script during his first year... [he has also] talked more than he has acted, and his most notorious threats have not been realized.” Their book, then, ends in a warning: American democracy is in danger but is not destroyed.²⁸

Yascha Mounk’s *The People vs. Democracy* deals in part with democracy in the United States and in part with democracy more generally. It is another book of warning. “For the better part of a century, liberal democracy has been the dominant political system in much of the world. That era may now be drawing to a close.”²⁹

Mounk speaks of an “existential crisis of liberal democracy.” There is much in his book, as in *How Democracies Die*, about the winning of power by a candidate like Donald Trump in a democracy like the American one, but here the Trump presidency is mainly seen as a symptom of deeper problems. Those problems are in the nature of long-term gradual erosions in the fabric of liberal democracy itself.

One erosion is in beliefs and confidence in liberal and democratic values and principles, on the part of both leaders and the public. Interest in politics is in decline, respect for leaders is in decline, people are less inclined to think living in a democracy is essential, more apt to think of democracy as a bad way of governing a country, and more disposed toward one form or another of strongman rule. “Citizens are less committed to democracy and more open to authoritarian alternatives than they once were. Respect for democratic norms and rules has precipitously declined. No longer the only game in town, democracy is now deconsolidating.”³⁰ The result is that “liberal” and “democratic” are being decoupled. This has created a void in democratic idealism and democratic practices into which “populist” movements and leaders have stepped in, as can be seen in “illiberal democracy” in Central Europe in particular, in the rise of political extremism throughout Europe, and

²⁸ Ibid., 187.

²⁹ Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 254.

³⁰ Ibid., 120.

in the winning of the American presidency by Donald Trump.

The author identifies three origins of democratic deconsolidation. The first is in social media. With the IT revolution, the cost of political organization has plummeted and political elites have lost control over the most important means of communication. It has become possible for people to engage politically without the cumbersome trouble of organizing as traditionally understood and to spread information and disinformation as they will. Political parties have lost their grip on the process of politics and thereby also their ability to serve as gatekeepers to deny undesirables the rise to the level of leadership.

A second factor is economic slowdown and inequality. The effect has been a stagnation in living standards for huge parts of the population and that young people, in particular, are less confident about their future. Although Western European countries, for example, remain affluent, they “can no longer offer their citizens a real sense of momentum [thus] their expectation of material improvement has been dashed.”³¹

The third factor is discussed under the heading of “identity.” The “speed with which highly homogenous nations have become heterogeneous since the end of World War II is remarkable.” What is at play, here, is not so much displeasure with a lived reality as it is fear of an imagined and unknown future. It has proved very difficult for many people to come to terms with the idea of “diverse democracy.”

There is a communality of analysis in the two books by Levitsky and Ziblatt and Mounk. Both see democracy as a demanding form of government that depends on an interplay of some harmony between constitutional practices and cultural foundations. Both are critical of the way democratic governance operates, even in the most established democracies such as in North America and Western Europe. But both also see the unravelling of democratic delivery as finally the result of erosions in the democratic culture. The great theoretician of democracy, Robert A. Dahl, put it thus:

The prospects for stable democracy in a country are improved if its citizens and leaders strongly support democratic ideas, values, and practices. The most reliable support comes when these beliefs and predispositions are embedded in the country’s culture and are transmitted, in large part, from one generation to the next. In other words the country possesses a democratic political culture. ...Lucky the country whose history has led to these happy results!³²

³¹ Ibid., 159-160.

³² Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 157-158.

Neither book is despondent and without hope and both discuss remedies which are eminently sensible. However, since the message in both books is that what is breaking apart is not just the practices of governance but more basically the foundations of political culture, these are books that in the end must be interpreted as offering profoundly and deeply pessimistic analyses. Political and constitutional reform is something we can always think of as at least possible, but how does a broken political culture go about repairing itself?

A Historical Transition?

In the early years of the twenty-first century, the world looked good and stable. The remains of fascism in Europe had been removed from Spain and Portugal. Communist dictatorship had collapsed in the Soviet Union and its satellites. Military dictatorship was over in Latin America. Russia looked to be working its way toward democracy, as did Turkey. The Middle East remained a powder keg but there was, for a moment, hope of democratization in North Africa. The big remaining dictatorship, China, was going capitalist and was expected to become more “like us.”³³ Apartheid had been defeated in South Africa. The world economy looked strong and growing. Emerging markets were here, there, and everywhere. The global order was stable under American leadership and the custodianship of the Washington institutions.

Fast forward to 2018 and this outlook has changed dramatically. The spread of democracy has stopped, and in some respects been reversed. China has not become “like us,” but instead has consolidated into a neo-totalitarian Leninist dictatorship, bent on domination in the world. Russia has not democratized but reverted to authoritarianism, as has Turkey. Stability has been displaced by a new Cold War, with a Third World War by proxy raging in the Middle East. The world economy collapsed into a crash, comparable only to that of 1929, of a kind the custodians of the world order had come to think impossible. The leading capitalist democracies, the United States and Britain, and others, responded to the crash in ways that stabilized massive inequalities, protected established privilege, and left rafts of ordinary families deprived of income and property. Autocracy has made itself assertive and confident, and is increasingly rewarded with respect. Western Europe is in the grips of the politics of anger. Democracy has been pushed on to the defensive, and democratic countries are riven by self-doubt and internal divisions. The United States elects Trump. Britain goes for Brexit. If democracy has fallen into an existential crisis, it may seem that Robert Dahl’s luck may be running out. In the history of democracy, there has been more death than life. Are we heading for death again?

³³ Stein Ringen, *The Perfect Dictatorship: China in the 21st Century* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), 164-165.

Too early to tell, of course. But the question is not frivolous. In the works reviewed, here, we get a picture of, on the one hand, autocratic—dictatorial systems that are determined, aggressive, and confident, and, on the other hand, democratic systems in disarray.

The democratic disarray seems to be both external and internal. It does not seem that the fact of adversaries that are dictatorial and ideologically committed is appreciated. “Western leaders and analysts have often projected on to China an image of their preferred imaginings, seeing it through the rose-colored glasses of the West.” So writes Kevin Rudd, former Prime Minister of Australia, now the President of the New York-based Asia Society Policy Institute.³⁴ Nor does it seem that the democracies are now capable of critical self-analysis. There can be no doubt whatsoever that the democratic world is in need of an injection of confidence in itself and its values, and that individual democracies are in need of reform (as they always are). But neither confidence nor will to reform seems to be forthcoming.

³⁴ Kevin Rudd, “What the West Doesn’t Get About Xi Jinping,” *New York Times* (March 20, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/20/opinion/xi-jinping-china-west.html> (accessed May 27, 2018).