

25 Years After the Fall of the Berlin Wall.

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'Wherever I look searchingly in city and world chronicles, to seek out the reason why, till they draw blood people torment and flay each other in useless, foolish anger... (each) thinks he is hunting, but hears not his own cry of pain when he digs into his own flesh... Man, woman, servant and child, fall upon each other, as if crazed and blind... madness prevails to rain blows, with cuts and blows and thrashings to quench the fire of anger...' (Wagner, the Wahn monologue from Act 3, Scene 1 of *Die Meistersinger*)

'We cannot predict the future course of human history.' (Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, preface to the 1957 edition, where Popper argues that historical development is strongly influenced by the (unpredictable) development of human knowledge and ideas.)

We are asked to consider the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the twenty five years following that momentous event. I defer to those more expert than me on the vagaries and details of the history then and subsequently, and, as a would-be *philosopher of history* I will simply consider the two universal truths expressed by my unlikely duo of authorities, Wagner and Popper: original sin, the source of what Hans Sachs is describing in such agonised terms, and Popperian historical unpredictability, particularly unpredictability emerging from ideas and ideology.

We could start with unpredictability. I went behind the Iron Curtain quite a few times in the 1970s and 1980s. In the spring of 1987 I was in Brno, talking to dissidents (about tradition in art, in fact, something they had a far more existential grasp of than I) - a mere fifty miles from Vienna, but as you crossed the boundary from west to east, you entered a different landscape, not just mentally, but physically, a place of ecological and physical desolation. We went out into the countryside with two of our friends, leading figures in the dissident movement in Czechoslovakia, and over a beer, I asked them would this awful regime ever end. It will, I was told, because everything ends... eventually (the long view!), but not in our lifetime.

Well, 27 years later, both my friends are still alive, and what none of us knew was that at that very moment Gorbachev was in Prague telling the Czech communists that they could no longer rely on the Red Army to sustain them. Even though an already fierce repression in Czechoslovakia actually increased dramatically *after* the fall of the Berlin Wall, without the Red Army it was indeed unsustainable and collapsed after a few weeks. But, from where we were in 1987 and from where my friends were at the heart of the movement against communism, it didn't look like that *at all*. Nor did it look like that from the heights of western academia and diplomacy, stuffed to the gulleys with analysts, political scientists and policy experts, where Mrs Thatcher and President Reagan were despised and derided for their staunch anti-communism, and Pope John Paul widely regarded as a quasi-medieval religious crank, as bad as mid-Western fundamentalists, excused only partially by the fact he was Polish.

In hindsight maybe we could argue that the pressure exerted on the USSR by western military build-ups (including the much scoffed-at Star Wars) undermined their economy, and also that dissident and religious movements inside the Eastern bloc exposed the fundamental rottenness of the system – and so led to its collapse, while the mujahedeen in Afghanistan played their part too. If we are in the business of historical explanation, I would not demur from this analysis, except to point out the role that faith and hope played in all these factors. (Even in the West's military stance: domestic opponents of both Reagan and Thatcher, including most of the respectable media, constantly urged détente and more concessive stances.) Could we say that faith and hope – unpredictably – triumphed against reality?

I would like to say so. But this brings us to original sin. As some will remember, riding the wave of optimism which followed the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989 Francis Fukuyama published an article entitled 'The End of History' which was expanded into a book in 1992. (*The End of History and the Last Man*, London: Penguin, 1992) A lot of what Fukuyama said is interesting, but his central claim now seems incredible. Filled out with tables and statistics, it was that liberal democracy was sweeping the world, and this process was unstoppable, in part because when people saw the advantages of this form of life, they would simply accede to it. (World-wide pacific liberal democracy was, in Fukuyama's terms, the end of history.)

As we all know, in 2014 things look very different from how they seemed to Fukuyama and to many of us, in 1992; unpredictability again, of course. If we had a hope that all the places not currently benefitting from liberal institutions and the free market would quickly see the errors of their ways and rush to embrace it and the necessary underlying institutions, actually the reverse has happened. Seeing their comparative disadvantage compared to the West, there has been wave on wave of resentful violence against the West or its proxies, fuelled often enough by militant Islam. Interestingly Fukuyama did discuss contemporary Islam once (just once) in his 1992 book (pp 45-6), where he says that it has virtually no appeal outside areas that were not culturally Islamic to begin with, that it has no resonance for young people in other places, and that it 'cannot challenge liberal democracy on its own territory on the level of ideas', but is actually more vulnerable to influences moving in the opposite direction. As we see in the toppling of brutal regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, in so-called Arab Spring, and also, crucially in western European cities as well, the very reverse of what Fukuyama so optimistically predicted is true.

And while, from one point of view, once could see the unpredicted and probably unpredictable rise of militant Islam, in both Sunni and Shi'ite forms, as examples of the ascendancy of faith and hope over reality, they have unfortunately unleashed waves of murderous violence too. I am not of course saying that such manifestations of original sin are confined to militant Islam, not at all. In the last 100 years, two world wars and the depradations of Nazism and communism, which had nothing to do with Islam, would be more than enough to refute any such suggestion. What I am saying – reluctantly – is that a vision like Fukuyama's end of history is as close as anything to moonshine. Wherever you look in history, it seems that the murderous manifestations of original sin will find their pretext and their location, and we probably won't predict where, how and when, just as we might also not predict occasions when they are, for a time, overcome.

If we are living – most of us here – in places and times when they are overcome, we should cherish our good fortune and also the institutions that make it possible. But, and this is a Nietzschean point

made by Fukuyama himself, because of the comfort and attitudes it engenders, people in liberal democracies – the last men, of Fukuyama's title - are less prepared to take hard measures to defend themselves against attack. They are, or become unprepared to fight, in other words. Popper, who knew from personal experience something about the collapse of a democracy, constantly warned that a free society had to be prepared to defend itself even by illiberal means, if it was being subverted by people wanting to exploit its liberal institutions for illiberal ends. 'We should claim the right to suppress them (intolerant philosophies) even by force.' And I would add, even more the subversive activities of the intolerant. (cf *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966 edition, vol 1, 265) In 2014, it seems to me, this is a question we in the West are being forcefully posed, both at home and abroad. Fukuyama, in his book speaks of 'the weakness of strong states', by which he means dictatorial or authoritarian states; more worrying to us, now, is the weakness of democratic states, in the face of both unpredictability and original sin.