The End of the Liberal Democratic Era?

The origins of the modern democratic era can be dated in institutional terms to the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Specifically, the US declaration of independence (1776) and the French Revolution are the most emblematic markers of the beginnings of the modern democratic age. The ideas, however, that informed the crafting of the institutional dispensations that, historically, we have come to associate with liberal democracy were principally crafted in the seventeenth century with the articulation of social contract theory, and were further elaborated upon during the European (including Scottish) Enlightenment. Fundamental to these ideas was the concept of a social contract through which the legitimacy of government no longer turned on traditional modes of authority or sacral 'revelation', but on the freely given consent of a polity's populace.[1]

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The evolution of the modern democratic form of political association was long, and punctuated by a number of setbacks. It is not uncommon to invoke Samuel Huntington's time-line in terms of which the phenomena of democratisation could be seen as coming in the form of "waves", punctuated by caesurae and even 'regressions'. The most recent and globally significant of these waves is the so-called "third wave of democratisation". For the sake of convenience, we can regard this third wave as having begun with the "Carnation Revolution" in Portugal in 1974 with the fall of the Caetano (*Estado Novo*) regime and with the abandonment by Portugal of its remaining colonial territories in southern Africa (Angola and Mozambique). This "third wave" gathered momentum in the context of the 1989 "velvet revolutions" in Eastern Europe which presaged the collapse of the Soviet Union and thereby, by extension, the viability of the Soviet, or "state socialist", mode of political and economic organisation. South Africa democratised during this third wave. The most important feature of the third wave was the remarkable spread and perceived attractiveness of liberal democracy as a form of political organisation.

In 2018, Freedom House 'recorded the 13th consecutive year of decline in global freedom'[2]. One could fairly confidently say that the third wave of democratisation ended decisively in 2011 with the so-called "Arab Spring" which – sadly – was not followed by an "Arab Summer". Since then, the extension and entrenchment or consolidation of democracy has largely come to a halt, though with some regional exceptions. Furthermore, from 2015 onwards, it could be claimed that there has been something akin to a retrenchment of democracy among the seemingly more "robust" democratic countries in the "developed" world – such as Hungary, Poland and Austria. Perhaps the two most iconic markers of this retrenchment have been the Brexit Referendum in the United Kingdom in 2016 and the election, by virtue of the "peculiarities" of the US's Electoral College process, of Donald Trump to the office of President in the United States of America.

The perils confronting liberal democracy

There appears to be evidence of a growing popular disenchantment with modern liberal democracy, associated as it is with the triumph of both capitalism and of its associated liberal political dispensations. This triumph was a consequence of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the centrally planned communist-style systems – the

only major alternative forms of politico-economic organisation in the second half of the 20th century.[3]

The sources of this disenchantment would seem to have both economic and also, importantly, societal and cultural dimensions. In economic terms, what we have witnessed is, certainly in the context of the more developed economies, growing inequality and a decline in the economic status of significant sections of the population. This has been especially notable with regard to the United States of America, with wage stagnation, but also elsewhere.[4]

> Especially significant among these social movements have been the various stripes of feminism and movements orientated towards asserting the rights of individuals and groups previously marginalised, such as LGBTQ communities, people of colour, people with disabilities or people identifiable in some way as "marginal".

To some extent, this can be traced to the consequences and impact of globalisation, not least in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, as a financial, economic, social and political phenomenon. Globalisation could be thought of as an extension, beyond national boundaries, of many of the aspects of modernisation and "post-modernisation' processes.[5] All modernisation processes produce both winners and losers. This applies to some extent to the impact that globalisation has had on the perceived wellbeing of citizens in the more developed countries.

Alongside this, modernity has produced normative outcomes which came to be manifested in, for example, the rise of social movements centred on the need to valorise various forms of "marginal" social and personal identities. Especially significant among these social movements have been the various stripes of feminism and movements orientated towards asserting the rights of individuals and groups previously marginalised, such as LGBTQ communities, people of colour, people with disabilities or people identifiable in some way as "marginal".

The rise in the salience and political presence of these identity-defined groupings has produced a "blowback" response among groups of people – especially hitherto "dominant" groups - who have felt, in one way or another, threatened. The rise of these groups, especially in the US, might be seen under a number of aspects. One aspect would be the perceived undermining of the established normative framework or order of the society. In this regard, traditional, conservative, white population groups appear to fear that the Judaeo-Christian underpinnings of their own identities were being upturned. Another aspect would be the extent to which the perceived preferential treatment of these erstwhile outgroups might impact on the economic wellbeing of older, established, classes of people. The sensitivity of such "established" groups to the perceived threat posed by newly ascendant groups may well, too, have been exacerbated by fears of the consequences of ongoing modernization and globalization – such as job losses to "foreigners", immigrants or to robots, artificial intelligence and automation.

The broader geopolitical context

As indicated, both the outcome of the British referendum – a thin, arguably somewhat transient – majority preference for the United Kingdom to exit from the European Union – and the electoral college-based triumph of Donald Trump's presidential bid, have had significant global repercussions and reverberations. Donald Trump's victory, albeit on the basis of a less-than plurality share of the popular vote in the 2016 US presidential elections, has translated into the pursuit of an essentially anti-globalist, nationalist (if not nativist) persuasion on the part of the executive branch of the US government.

Similarly, the outcome of the British referendum brought more clearly to the surface some of the underlying fractures and tensions within the European Union. Furthermore, the Trump administration's turn away from and even substantive abrogation of commitments within the context of multilateral, international, institutional arrangements has had implications for the international system crafted in the wake both of the Second World War and in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet-type system from 1989 through to 1991.

These developments taken together have come to raise questions about the longer-term durability and viability of what came to be known as the "international liberal order", or in the felicitous phrase of John Ikenberry "the liberal leviathan".[6] The significance of the multilateral institutional system is that it facilitated coordination among often diverse, and even divergent, interests in pursuit of certain social, cultural, economic or political goals. Matters such as climate change, international financial and economic transactions, and the provision of emergency relief and aid projects come to mind. All of these speak to the extent to which, globally, people of very diverse ethnic, religious or geographical backgrounds have, especially in the post 1989 period, come to be interdependent.

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Some of these multilateral arrangements are of a more specifically regional kind, such as the European Union or – related to it but distinct from it – the Schengen group of countries. Some, however, have been of much more global reach, such as the Paris Climate Accord or, indeed, the Iran Nuclear Deal.[7] These two examples attest to, respectively, the potentially catastrophic existential threat posed by global warming and climate change as well as of other environmental phenomena, and to the geopolitical instability of the Middle East as well as South-West and Central Asian theatres, characterised as they are by intense volatility and often violent conflict.

The fracturing of the liberal democratic consensus

In a richly cadenced book, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (2017), Edward Luce, the chief US commentator for the *Financial Times*, adverts to the structural factors that have undergirded the rise of anti-establishment forces in Western countries – broadly and loosely referred to as "populist". These populist phenomena, as Edward Luce himself noted in a plangent Tweet, could be seen, in one respect, as "Pluto populist". The popular discontent with the architecture of the regional, national as well as international systems that evolved subsequent to the Second World War has been mobilised by often wealthy elites. To effect the mobilisation, recourse has been made to essentially emotional factors, not least those that relate to peoples' sense of vulnerability with regard to their "identities" and sense of self-worth.[8]

One of the key rhetorical instruments that has been deployed by those articulating and mobilising such discontent has been myths of "nativist authenticity" and "cultural purity". Recently, Eric Kaufmann has spoken of a "whitelash", and globally it would seem that a loosely articulated white supremacist movement has been unleashed, not least with the help provided by the now-near universally accessible social media.[9] Furthermore, the disenchantment with the liberal democratic institutional dispensation has manifested itself across the countries of the European Union. In some instances, right-wing movements have transmuted into parties of government in countries such as Hungary and Poland. In others, they have emerged as potentially significant "veto players" both in national and European Union politics in countries such as France, the

Netherlands and even Germany. The triggers for the growing attractiveness of such right-wing nativist populisms have included a sense of 'distantiation' and alienation – sometimes referred to as a 'democratic deficit' – from central, Brussels-based decision-making instances. This has been reinforced by a fear of cultural displacement by immigrants and refugees.[10]

One of the features of the "mythical-nativist" narrative has been to obscure the de facto achievements of the European Union and exaggerate the power of the "Brussels bureaucracy" with its imputed threat to "national sovereignty".[11]

> In global geopolitical terms, this uncertainty has rendered Europe more fragile and vulnerable, not least in light of a resurgent Russian nationalism, which at least at the level of ideological discourse has intimated a possible future Russian engagement with Europe in an essentially "imperialist" mode.

Global geopolitical implications

An immediate consequence of Donald Trump's ascendency to the White House was to render less certain the assumed stability and reasonable normative consensus undergirding the international political system. The US immediately withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Furthermore, the rhetoric emanating from the new administration adverted to a potential weakening of the Trans-Atlantic Alliance – the institutional anchor of the post-WWII liberal system. This rhetoric was expressed in a number of registers, ranging from concerns about free trade through to concerns about the US's reliability as the ultimate underwriter of NATO.

In global geopolitical terms, this uncertainty has rendered Europe more fragile and vulnerable, not least in light of a resurgent Russian nationalism, which at least at the level of ideological discourse has intimated a possible future Russian engagement with Europe in an essentially "imperialist" mode. One here is reminded of the import of the writings of Russian nationalist thinkers such as Aleksandr Dugin, with his articulation of a Russia-centred Eurasian vision – a vision which sketches a picture of a Europe divided politically and economically along ethno-national lines.[12]

In tandem with the weakening of the Trans-Atlantic Alliance has been the re-emergence of China as a potentially, if not necessarily hegemonic, major actor with regard to defining the rules of global international relations. This rise and reassertion of China's power has, of course, been emboldened by China's quite extraordinary economic growth over the last forty years.

The trajectory of China's economic growth, and of the politico-economic model that it embodies, constitutes a cautionary signal for the defenders and protagonists of liberal democracy. The Chinese achievement since 1979, has been remarkable. Vast swathes of the population have been lifted out of abject poverty, massive infrastructural projects have been taken to successful conclusions and China's technological capabilities have provided the Chinese leadership with significant capacity for surveillance and societal control. One should also beware of the temptation to attribute this technological prowess simply to pirating and to the theft of intellectual property. China has a vast and rich civilizational history, marked by extraordinary past scientific and technological accomplishments which provide a cultural basis on which to further augment its scientific and technological capacities. The cautionary note is attached to the fact that, contrary to the expectations of many, a demographically substantial middle class has not yet translated into significant pressure to forge a liberal democratic polity. China's model, in effect, can be seen as a "moniker" of a potentially symbiotic relationship between a "state capitalist" type of economy (with a fairly significant measure of decentralisation) and the *dirigisme* of a one-party state.

Angela Merkel has indicated that the structure of the global international framework has been redefined and that what is emerging is neither a bipolar system (of the kind that characterised the "Cold War") nor the seemingly unilateral hegemony of the US after 1989 – a hegemony which Hubert Védrine, a former French Foreign Minister, once referred to as a "hyper power" (*hyper puissance*). Rather, Merkel sees it transforming into a multipolar system. She sees the "political structure" of the emerging global system as consisting of China, Russia, the United States of America and Europe as the major powers.[13] One might add to this the likely emergence of a rapidly growing and modernising India, also associated with a newly assertive and increasingly authoritarian Hindu nationalism under Prime Minister Modi. It might even be that, of all of these, the now only essentially non-imperialist power (if Timothy Snyder's claim is warranted[14]) is Europe.[15]

There is a perspective in international relations theory known as the power transition theory, associated in particular with the pioneering work of AFK Organski.[15] In terms of this perspective, inter-polity conflict, not least of a military kind, is most likely to occur when the dominance of an erstwhile hegemonic power comes to be challenged by significant emerging powers. Especially important, in this perspective, is that the danger of inter-state wars is most acute when the legitimacy of a current hegemon's status comes to be questioned and challenged. This insight, if it is empirically warranted as the power transition theorists claim, might well betoken a coming global context of "great power" struggles, contestations and, at worst, conflicts of a potentially military kind.[16]

> To this end, the rise of nativist, xenophobic discourses and policies is connected to the move to economic protections. Trade barriers coincide fairly neatly, and are ideologically consonant, with the erection of physical barriers, as exemplified by President Trump's cry to "build that wall"

Trade wars and the growth of protectionism

Against this backdrop of a tectonic shift of the structure of the international system, we are also witnessing the rise of what some might even see as a kind of "neo-mercantilist" style of economic nationalism. Economic nationalism was an avowed objective of the 2016 Trump election campaign. This has already come to entail the pursuit of bilateral, transactional international trade disputes and a disposition, especially on the part of the US, to challenge the multilateral arrangements that were crafted during the long period from the end of WWII through to the present. Specifically, this distancing from such arrangements refers to NAFTA and is, arguably, reflected in the relative weakness – at the level of policy formation and implementation – of the WTO.

Further, such economic nationalism – embodied in the promissory note contained in the "Make America Great Again" campaign cry – implies a move to protectionism. This has potentially detrimental consequences for global economic growth and the spread of prosperity. In this regard, the lessons of Adam Smith and David Ricardo appear to have been forgotten. It is not clear that trade wars, such as the one developing between the US and China, augur well for the health of the global economy or indeed for the economies of the respective protagonists and antagonists.

The temptation to pursue protectionist policies cannot be easily uncoupled from the crafting of barriers with regard to the free movement, not just of goods, services and finances, but of people. To this end, the rise of nativist, xenophobic discourses and policies is connected to the move to economic protections. Trade barriers coincide fairly neatly, and are ideologically consonant, with the erection of physical barriers, as exemplified by President Trump's cry to "build that wall".
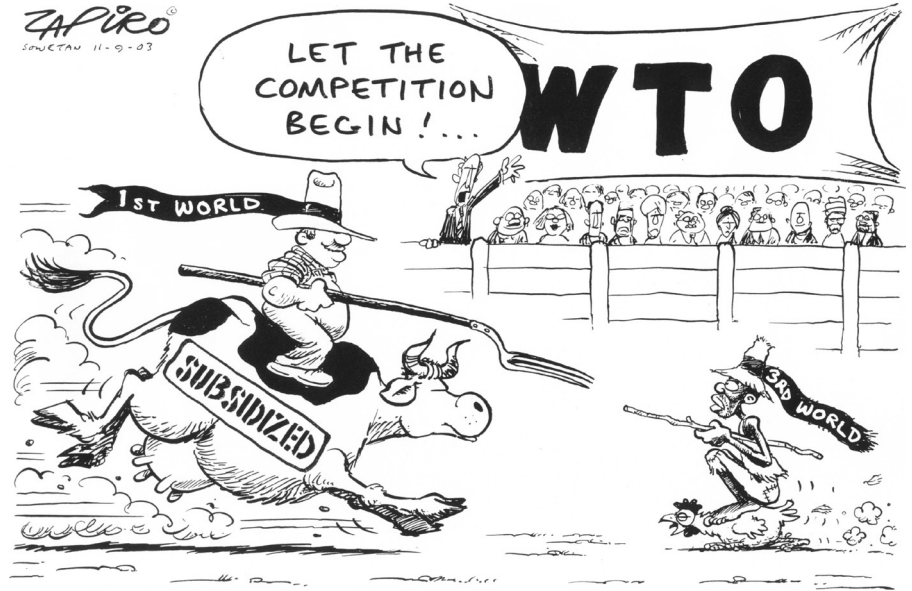
These developments entail ominous dangers to liberalism and, by extension, to liberal democracies as political arrangements. Classical liberalism has tended to emphasise the values of individualism and individual choice with regard to social and geographic mobility, electing and pursuing diverse "ways of life" and of "being in the world".

In counterpoint to the rise of nativist, populist movements (which tend also to embrace protectionist economic policies and nationalist politics) are the findings of the World Values Survey, led by Ronald Inglehart and based at the University of Michigan. This long-term, global survey would suggest that, as countries become wealthier, there tends to be a shift away from "survival values" to "self-actualisation" values. The World Values Survey also intimates that the shift towards self-actualisation values reflects an interesting degree of convergence between diverse societies. This is not to say that there are not culturally distinctive properties attached to the variety of self-actualisation values that have come to be associated with growing prosperity and human wellbeing.[17]

> This would suggest that cultural shifts associated with modernisation and growing prosperity constitute something of a "shield" behind which the achievements of liberalism and liberal democracy may be safe from destruction. Whether this protective shield will be sufficient to offset the rise of authoritarian regimes is yet to be established.

This would suggest that cultural shifts associated with modernisation and growing prosperity constitute something of a "shield" behind which the achievements of liberalism and liberal democracy may be safe from destruction. Whether this protective shield will be sufficient to offset the rise of authoritarian regimes is yet to be established. The US presently offers an interesting case study in the tension between the preferences of an assertive, non-liberal, "imperial" presidency and the institutional framework of the US's democratic dispensation.[18]

The rise of "strong man" regimes

One may be tempted to abjure and criticise the international liberal system, but one does so at one's peril. The reason for this is that the components of this system, characterised as it is by a multiplicity of multinational institutions and organisations,

have seen the end of the era of inter-state "Total Wars". The post-war era has witnessed a marked decline – indeed – near disappearance of inter-state wars. While Britain might have attacked the Argentinian navy to reclaim the Falkland Islands and the US might have invaded Iraq and removed Sudan Hussein's dictatorial regime, no liberal democracy has gone to war against another. This is related to the character of liberal democracies, whatever their individual failings might be. Such peaceful interstate relationships were anticipated at the time of the European Enlightenment by the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant in his seminal *On Perpetual Peace*.[19]

One consequence of this "Liberal Democratic Peace" has been that, overall, the mortality and casualty figures in wars have been reduced and wars have come to be more concentrated in the realm of developing countries. Wars today tend to be civil wars and wars between competing warlords and providers of patronage for control of the relevant states. There have been other changes in the nature of war, too, such as the "feminisation of war" and the increasing deployment, injury and death of children.[20]

The threats to liberal democracy that we have identified, such as the rise of authoritarian leaders and the destruction of the liberal dimension of liberal democratic states (e.g. Hungary under Orban), potentially augers ill for a peaceful global framework going forward. The danger here, not least, takes the form of the rise of "strong man" authoritarian regimes, such as Duterte's The Philippines, Balsonaro's Brazil, Putin's Russia, Erdoğan's Turkey, Netanyahu's Israel (though Israel, while becoming less liberal, remains, technically, a reasonably well "consolidated democracy"), and many others. This phenomenon has been referred to as the "retrenchment of democracy" by scholars such as Larry Diamond, and is being monitored in an increasingly worrying set of essays put out annually by Freedom House.[21]

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Among the dangers is not only the potential ease with which authoritarian leaders can destroy the institutional safeguards that define liberal democracies, but the ease with which they may be able to collaborate across the planet. One can – in a moment of 'Dark Fantasy" – imagine a hard carapace of closely-connected authoritarian regimes systematically eroding the achievements of the modern democratic era. Of course, there will be differences, as we have already witnessed in the case of the Trump administration's response to the challenges to Maduro in Venezuela, and Vladimir Putin's response. But, there is least some reason to fear that something akin to an "Authoritarian International" could emerge as the political space within which coordinated action against popular movements, authentic democratic demands etc. might be made.

One of the implications of the ascendance of such authoritarian polities is the weakening of the international liberal system's institutional leavers of power and multi-lateral capabilities on the global stage.

Conclusion

It is too early to predict confidently the end of the era of the global pre-eminence of modern liberal democracy. However, there are sufficient toxic straws in the ever-stronger winds of authoritarianism and populism blowing across the world to be a source of concern. These serve as a call to action on the part of those who value what, after all, has been a political and economic dispensation that has facilitated greater human prosperity and wellbeing than any other in recorded history.[22] Rather than attacking liberal democracy, the challenge is to rescue it from its assailants and to promote its spread to those polities that have not yet embraced it. This certainly is not

intended as a "conservative" call to hide the deficiencies of existing liberal democratic arrangements, but rather as a progressive call to reflection and action – because for all the virtues associated with them, the liberal democracies of the world remain flawed, and can be seen in a number of respects (not least in regard to growing inequalities and bureaucratic overreach) in need of repair.

NOTES

1   Instructive here is John Locke's critique of Sir Robert Filmer's Partiarcha, which articulated a defense of the doctrine of the 'divine right of Kings', as well as Locke's account of the consensual, contract-based character of what Max Weber would refer to – in a more rigorously urticated manner - as 'legal-rational' authority.

2   Freedom House. Democracy in Retreat (2019)

3   See Philip Bobbitt's magisterial assay in The Shield of Achilles: War: Peace and the Course of History of the three major political economic 'system types' that emerged in the course of the 20th Century: Fascism, Communism and Parliamentary rule (The Penguin Press, 2003).

4   See, among other studies, Thomas Piketty's Capital in the 21st Century (Harvard University Press, 2017).

5   On the origins and global impact of the financial crisis of 2008, see Adam Tooze's compendious Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World (Viking, 2018), for the most cadenced, comprehensive and methodologically rigorous study to date.

6   See G. John Ikenberry, 'Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order', Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton University Press, 2011).

7   For a brief overview of the details of this agreement, see the report: 'Iran nuclear deal: Key details', BBC News (7 May 2019)

8   See Francis Fukuyama, Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018) and Ronald Aronson's contribution to this edition of Focus, among others.

9   See Eric Kaufmann, Whiteshift: Populism, Immigration, and the Future of White Majorities (Harry N. Abrams, 2019). Interestingly, Kaufmann suggests that the sense of vulnerability and insecurity experienced by such communities that feel threatened needs to be addressed by "Establishment" political elites.

10 These fears and resentments are not unrelated to, and have been reinforced by, the catastrophic consequences of the ill-wrought American invasion of Iraq in 2003.

11 See Sir Ian Kershaw in The Global Age: Europe from 1950 to 2017 (Penguin, 2019), especially pages 541-563, which provide an excellent summary balance sheet of both the accomplishments and achievements as well as the shortcomings of the European Union as a project of reconstruction and development in the post WWII era. The balance sheet speaks emphatically to the overall benefits as distinct from costs of the European Union.

12 Aleksandr Dugin, said to be influential in Russian political elite circles, has consistently, in podcasts, attacked the 'individualism' of the USA and of European liberalism. His vision for Europe bears an uncanny resemblance to the 'Bantustan' vision that informed the Apartheid system in South Africa, with Europe divided along 'nativist lines into separate polities and national economies ideologically under the aegis of the Russian Orthodox Church or its surrogates in Europe'. Dugin, who – along with Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's campaign strategist – draws inspiration from an Italian 'romantic nativist' thinker, Julius Evola, author of, among many other works, Revolt Against the Modern World (Inner Traditions, 1994). See Marlene Laruelle, Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

13 Fried et al. 'Merkel: Europe must unite to stand up to China, Russia and US', The Guardian (15 May 2019)

14 See Timothy Snyder's Speech to Europe 2019, on the myth of Europe's origins – the need to look towards one another after empire.

15 Organski, AFK. World Politics (New York, 1959)

16 There is, in the "Realist" tradition of international relations' study, the notion of a "Thucydides Trap". In a recent, important book, Graham Allison, director of Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, asks the question: Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap? (Houghton Mifflin, 2017).

17 See the World Values Survey .

18 The intensity of conflict between the current USA Presidency and executive arm of government on the one hand, and the Democratically dominated House of Representatives on the other, illustrates the conflictual relationship between the rule of law and sanctity of institutions and the ambitions of an "imperial presidency". 19 The intensity of conflict between the current USA Presidency and executive arm of government on the one hand, and the Democratically dominated House of Representatives on the other, illustrates the conflictual relationship between the rule of law and sanctity of institutions and the ambitions of an "imperial presidency".

19 What Kant, in this brilliantly anticipatory essay, referred to as "Republics" would today be termed "liberal democracies".

20 Adverted to in the literature by Herfried Münckler in his book The New Wars (Polity, 2005), among many others.

21 www.freedomhouse.org

22 For "comfort", one might look to Stephen Pinker's Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress (Viking, 2018). For disconcerting reminders of the fragility of liberal democracy, one should look to Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, How Democracies Die (Broadway Books 2019); Edward Luce's The Retreat of Western Liberalism (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017); and Yascha Mounk's The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It (Harvard University Press, 2018).