

Preface

The reason for writing this preface

In 2011-13 I studied for a Masters degree in Modern History, writing a dissertation focussing on Britain in the 1930s, entitled 'The Failure of Peace'. This concentrated, firstly, on the peace movements in the early part of the decade and, secondly, on British attitudes towards Spain and the Spanish Civil War towards the end, by which point there seemed to be a fatalistic acceptance that a second war could not be avoided. A middle section on British fascism, originally intended as a bridge between the two, was omitted in the submitted version because of the word limit.

In 2016 I started work on expanding the original text and re-instating the section on fascist views, and in 2017 decided to incorporate this lengthy new preface analysing comparisons between the 1930s and the present day. This was prompted by significant events in that year and explicit parallels being drawn in the press.¹ In addition, of the intervening decades, the midpoint of the 1970s could be viewed as showing some of the most positive trends and developments for the future. It could be claimed that the state we are in today is the result of subsequent reversal of these progressive movements. As this revised version is not intended for academic assessment, there is less need here to aim at standard academic objectivity, and this preface is a personal view. For this reason, many of the sources are drawn from non-academic publications such as the London Review of Books, though the reviewers quoted have solid academic credentials. Furthermore, some aspects of the 1930s and the present day are impossible to treat entirely dispassionately.

Tectonic plates

To consider a modern metaphor² for the history of the last century, WWI represented a major tectonic shift (producing earthquakes largely localised in northern and southern Europe). But the tensions released didn't settle for the long term and so further movements could be predicted. After WWI pressure again built up, with minor shocks, indicating subterranean fault lines and there grew a depressing sense of inevitability that a much bigger shock was due at some time.³ There were side shocks in unexpected places such as Spain, East Africa and China, which in themselves did not release enough of the pressure building up to prevent the greatest quake of all within 20 years. Reflecting on current prospects for the future raises the question of how well protected we are from major shocks to come.

Threats to the human race

To understand the serious nature of today's political uncertainty, it may be useful to set it in a very broad context, and it is not unreasonable to claim that there is no long-term future for the human race without the greatest degree of co-operative effort: the only way to deal with the gravest threats to the whole world. Looking in more detail at the present day, some of the greatest threats or demands on co-operation affecting all populations across the world appear to be:

- armed conflict and civil war
- mass migration (politically significant and warranting the section to itself below)
- predatory global capitalism⁴
- environmental degradation (e.g. drought, the fashion for powerful cars, conspicuous consumption, using up fossil fuels, climate change and extreme weather)⁵.

¹ For example, Paul Mason, in the Guardian 1/8/2016 'Are we living through another 1930s?'

² The theory of plate tectonics was established by the early 1960s.

³ See *The Morbid Age* Richard Overy, 2010.

⁴ See the inequality index reported in LRB 39/20 19/10/2017 p. 23 review of Walter Scheidel 'The Great Leveller: violence and the history of inequality from the Stone Age to the 21st century' (2017): 'In 2015 the richest 62 persons on the planet owned as much private net wealth as the poorer half of humanity, more than 3.5 billion people.'; this was restated by Bernie Sanders, Guardian 13/1/2018.

⁵ Those who deny climate change, for example, or propose migration to another planet once we've irrevocably wrecked this one, are indulging in irresponsible fantasy. How do these advocates of jumping ship reckon humans will be able to work together in colonising a new planet when they have

- mass poverty (relative and absolute); as ever, it is the poorest and weakest who will continue to suffer the most, while the rich and strong will always be able to protect themselves and their families; class conflict
- terrorism
- exploitation of minorities, women, modern slavery, people trafficking

These are, of course, inter-linked, and will only become more severe if uncontrolled and accelerate as co-operative institutions are deliberately weakened. Whatever the analysis of these threats to general stability and peaceful co-existence, the notion that the leadership of Trump, Johnson, Farage, Le Pen and others will provide the answer is delusional. These politicians show little inclination to promote collective action on these largely moral issues. Instead, they try to achieve electoral success through a series of populist messages, including competitive trade protectionism and self-sufficiency, which appear to look forward to the survival of the fittest.

Migration

A key factor in the EU referendum and Trump's presidential victory was migration. The issues of economic migration, refugees from war, asylum seekers and legal or illegal migration have become highly contentious and were deliberately conflated by Farage et al to stir up conflict. These are extremely sensitive and can easily be linked to fears about erosion of national identity, security, public finances and fairness in public services (for example, housing). However, if the British, French, Dutch, US and other imperial powers hadn't wanted foreigners in their countries, they should have stayed at home and not occupied and colonised innumerable other territories around the world with their own (often surplus) people, who were 'not the best' (as Trump calls Mexican immigrants to the USA) the colonising powers could produce.⁶ It is not hard to make comparisons with the Fascism of the 1930s and its reliance in Germany and Britain on anti-Semitism. Even a British Union (of Fascists) candidate (Charles Wegg-Prosser, who failed to win election in 1937) could make the following criticism. He wrote to his leader Oswald Mosley that anti-Semitism is a 'smokescreen to cloud thought and divert action with regard to our real problems ... You sidetrack the demand for social justice by attacking the Jew, you give people a false answer and unloose lowest mob passion ... I tried to interest these people in real problems, unemployment, wages, housing, and so on. I watched with dismay the mentality which said "Get rid of Jews, and you will automatically get rid of unemployment, slums, sweating".⁷

Migration issues should be dealt with very cautiously as, firstly, humanitarian requirements by international agreement; secondly, as administrative matters (for example, short-term sanctuary versus longer-term asylum provisions and immigrant labour) and importantly kept out of party-political confrontations as too explosive. Responsible politicians would do this rather than attempt to take personal political advantage from the controversies.

Populism

The fissiparous forces now gaining ground in the US and some European countries, most notably in the UK, depend on a newly-confident populist nationalism. Separatist movements in regions within countries, such as Catalonia and Scotland,⁸ should be differentiated from international divisions, as should nationalist movements for independence from colonial occupation such as Indian and Irish. 'Populism' is treated by left/liberalists as a negative approach to electoral politics, a view decried by the right as undemocratic ('what's wrong with policies being popular?') It seems to some that the danger in populism is that it is fraudulent. It gains support by and depends on persuading just enough voters

proved incapable of doing so here? Stephen Hawking advocated exploring other planets for this purpose, described by the Astronomer Royal, Martin Rees, on Hawking's death as 'delusional'.

⁶ Shashi Tharoor, in *Inglorious Empire*, describing the British colonial civil servants sent to India writes 'mediocrities ruled the roost' p. 51.

⁷ Stephen Dorrell, *Blackshirt* p. 414.

⁸ Paul Mason in *Postcapitalism* says of the Scottish independence referendum in 2014 'this was not a nationalist surge but a left-inclined plebian movement ... to break away from a neoliberal state committed to austerity for the next decade'. p. 260.

that problems in society and the political state are easy to diagnose and simple to solve. In electoral terms, these are reduced to very simple and generally backward-looking slogans:

- Take back control⁹
- Make Britain great again: a Fascist slogan of the 1930s, along with 'Britain First'¹⁰
- Give us back our country
- Make America great again
- America First¹¹
- Drain the swamp
- Lock her up
- Build the wall

These are imperative, quasi-religious chants, like 'Praise the Lord', to be repeated by large crowds, inevitably evoking memories of the rallies staged by German National Socialists in the 1930s. Present day populists make a virtue of conflict (as seen in Trump's treating politics in the same way as aggressive business dealing) and the promotion of political force over diplomatic skill and subtlety. The target of much of their attack is the status quo, however vaguely defined.

Populism is often promoted by men and women with narcissistic personal ambition.¹² They appeal to emotions they can fabricate but may not be able to control (an attitude described as 'deceitful' by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Christmas 2017). It is the easiest accomplishment of a politician to stir up hatred of foreigners. A responsible leader recognizes the risks and attempts to avoid the worst consequences, knowing the dangers of it getting out of control. In the 1930s, Mosley, like Farage today, could deny personal anti-Semitism, but they cannot deny that their political strength, however temporary (UKIP with a single *raison d'être*, having won it died), depended on those who were racist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic. Hatred may start with deluded verbal aggression (such as references during the EU referendum campaign to 'the dictatorship of Brussels'), but lead on to the murder of Jo Cox, Labour MP, and that of a Polish immigrant, Arkadiusz Jóźwik (in the UK perfectly legally) by anti-EU fanatics, just before and a few months after the referendum in 2016, respectively. Douglas Murphy, describing Johnson's role in the Leave campaign, says 'now they'd won, the fires of xenophobia had been thoroughly stoked, and the UK was driving itself off a cliff'.¹³

Populist winners claim to speak for all the UK or US people, stating that the British people have decided or spoken, though only 37.5% of the electorate voted to leave the EU in 2016.¹⁴ Such a major constitutional change should have been supported by a minimum vote, perhaps 66%, as some Leave supporters suggested before the referendum when they assumed they would lose. Some might question whether yes-no, in-out referenda are the appropriate way of determining major international relationships.¹⁵ The result of the EU referendum is often attributed to the attitudes of the older

⁹ Linda Colley in 'Can History Help?', LRB 22/3/2018 p. 14 suggests 'Taking back control sounds alluring. But we need to think hard about who exactly is going to be doing the controlling, and how these potential controllers are themselves to be better controlled'. Over the centuries, 'the House of Commons, the House of Lords, the monarchy, the pre-eminence of London and certain conventions of political and electoral practice: these things endured'. ... 'Could it be that Britain's political stability has become too pronounced?'

¹⁰ Today the name of a far-right racist and ultranationalist group formed from the BNP in 2011.

¹¹ The far-right, anti-Semitic and nationalist 'America First' campaign in the 1930s was addressed in Des Moines Iowa by the aviator Charles Lindbergh on 11th September 1941: 'Their [Jews] greatest danger to this country lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio and our government. ... We cannot allow the natural passions and prejudices of other peoples to lead our country to destruction'. [Quoted in Philip Roth *The Plot against America* p. 388]

¹² LRB 39/23 30/11/2017 letter from Lawrence Rosen p. 5: 'But where racists feel superior to particular categories of people Trump is something far worse: he imagines himself superior to absolutely everyone'.

¹³ *Nincompoopolis* Douglas Murphy, 2017 p. 243

¹⁴ In 2016 the margin was 51.9% to leave against 48.1% to remain, with a 72.2% turnout. In the comparable referendum in 1975 the vote to remain was 67.2%, to leave 32.8% with a turnout of 64.5%.

¹⁵ It is often forgotten (or conveniently ignored) that the result was advisory, not binding on the government.

generation and to the young not voting.¹⁶ However, the voting patterns should be seen in relation to education and region, not solely to age.

The dominant attitude of the less politically aware British towards the EU pre-2016 was lack of knowledge and indifference. The Leave campaign was an example of stirring up political antagonism where little had existed publicly pre-2010, outside the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Sun*, a minority of Tory MPs and UKIP. Many in the UK never understood the principle of EU membership and financial contributions. “We get back less than we put in!” That was the whole idea of the Union (developing the economies of the poorer members, which would in time benefit all), which, obviously, the Leave campaigners didn’t want to explain, and the Remain side appeared nervous about doing so.

Trump is sometimes described as a demagogue, and in 20th century history a parallel can be found in the behaviour of Oswald Mosley in the 1930s. John Beckett (a former supporter of Mosley) is quoted in *Blackshirt*¹⁷ as describing the leader of the British Union of Fascists (BUF, later BU): ‘not one person of integrity has remained his associate. This is the fault of his enormous ego, combined with a peculiar shallowness of judgement and ability to deceive himself. The man who brings him good news is his friend, the carrier of unwelcome tidings slowly becomes his enemy’.¹⁸ In 1937 Mosley sacked a lot of the BU staff, ‘every other man or woman on his staff who had reasoned with or contradicted Mosley or his henchmen’.¹⁹ John McNab (another fascist activist) said à propos William Joyce’s (later to become the Nazi propagandist Lord Haw Haw) expulsion from the British Union: ‘Mosley went livid and thumped the desk and shouted that Joyce was nothing but a traitor; that he would never rest until he had broken him; that he would roll him in blood and smash him’.²⁰ A.K.Chesterton (cousin of G.K. and editor of a fascist newspaper) said of Mosley ‘Flops were written up as triumphs and enormous efforts were made to “give the impression of strength where there is weakness, of growth where there is declining influence”.²¹ Writing of 19th century US electoral politics, and making comparisons with the present day, Eric Foner has described ‘the tendency of ordinary Americans to act on their passions rather than reason’ (in connection with Aaron Burr the 19th century politician). ‘Like then, however, we are surrounded by hyper-partisanship, alternative facts, widely accepted conspiracy theories, demagogic politics and prominent political figures collaborating with foreign governments. Some things never change’.²²

Nationalism

The nationalism associated with populism is a very superficial attitude.²³

- A person’s nationality is in most cases an accident of birth or an enforced change through positive choice or negative desperation.
- Static populations might have their nationality changed; or populations may be forcibly moved across borders: In eastern Europe over centuries borders have moved as a result of occupation, war, treaties etc. So, static populations have often had a new nationality imposed²⁴; Mass enforced migrations, for example, between post-war Germany, Poland and Ukraine, can change populations’ nationality.
- Populations of German origin were deported to Central Asia by Stalin in the 1930s. Post-communism they had the right to ‘return’ to countries they had never been to and acquired a

¹⁶ See the inter-generational divisions stoked by David Willett’s blaming baby boomers for the current disadvantages of the young, and Vince Cable blaming those over 65 for ‘crushing the hopes and aspirations of young people for years to come’ by voting to leave the EU. *Guardian* website 11/3/2018.

¹⁷ Stephen Dorrell 2007, p. 411-12.

¹⁸ Beckett’s falling out with the leader then turning on him is reminiscent of Steve Bannon’s relationship with Trump, as reported by Michael Wolff in *Fire and Fury*, 2018.

¹⁹ Beckett in *Blackshirt* p. 413.

²⁰ p. 413.

²¹ p. 433.

²² ‘The embryo Caesar’ LRB 39/24 14/12/2017 p. 24.

²³ Patriotism is regarded here as distinct from but often confused with nationalism. It may be an automatic support for one’s country but may be an attachment to a place and culture that is essential when these need to be defended without any sense of superiority or comparison with any other group.

²⁴ See *Between East and West* Anne Applebaum 1994.

new nationality. In due course many chose to return to Kazakhstan because the new Germany was not what they had imagined.

- Some countries allow, others refuse dual nationality.

Mrs May stated her belief in a speech to the Conservative Party conference²⁵ that 'if you believe you are a citizen of the world you are a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what the very word 'citizenship' means'.²⁶ May cannot really be ignorant of the creativity in all areas of life stimulated by people who don't feel solely tied to a single nationality or state.²⁷ In today's world the real 'citizens of nowhere' are the stateless: Palestinians, Tibetans, Rohingyas and others, totalling 3.6 million in 2015, according to the UN.

All the above highlights a critical and disturbing range of developments in the 21st century that compels comparisons with earlier periods in modern history to help understand what we are living through and in what direction we are moving.²⁸ One of the most worrying aspects of modern populism is the lack of interest in history, either through ignorance or duplicity. Trump and some of his predecessors ignore the historical background of their most powerful adversaries, especially Iran and North Korea, and previously the Soviet Union and at times China. Trump's knowledge of some significant history closer to home (for example, the Mexican-US war in the 1840s) is lacking. The complexities of internal politics in Iran are ignored or presented in only the most simplistic terms. This is a danger for the world.²⁹

An understanding is needed of how these nations became powerful; how and when they became regionally dominant; and what accounts for their antagonism towards the USA and the West. The answers to some of these questions lead back to well before WWII, and to a time before the 'West' existed as a geo-political entity, before the USA had become the dominant power in that region and even to a time before the USA was created. Trump and his followers may be genuinely ignorant of history or don't care; Johnson, Farage and other British populists don't have that excuse. Russians, Iranians and Chinese have long memories and value their distant pasts. Trump refuses to recognize that Iran, Russia, North Korea and China have pride in their histories, culture and language. They have in most cases endured great suffering and survived. The USA, on the other hand, has not experienced major bloody conflict on its own mainland soil since the 1860s, which was self-inflicted.³⁰ Populists also appear ignorant of or prefer to forget the historical consequences of racism, especially anti-Semitism.

Trump and Farage are or masquerade as anti-intellectual, rejecting the deep analysis of complex issues. It is ironic that they should team up with people like Johnson and Gove, who have a high level of elite education. However, Gove attempted to jump on the bandwagon as an anti-expert in the run-up to the EU referendum. Lara Feigel reviewing *Enemies within* by Richard Davenport-Hines quotes the author saying 'that when Michael Gove said that the public had had enough of experts, he was stoking the "populist delusion that one person's opinion is as good as any other, and pretending that it is improper to value trained minds and rational expertise higher than instincts, inkling, hunches and overemotional fudge".³¹ Anti-intellectualism was a hallmark of 1930s fascism. William Joyce wanted

²⁵ 5/10/2016.

²⁶ In response, Vince Cable, leader of the Liberal Democrats, said in 2017 that this sentiment could have come from *Mein Kampf*, Independent 5/7/2017

²⁷ In *Life and Fate* Vasily Grossman (a trained chemist) describes the situation in pre-war Berlin: 'It was these men [Jews who were dismissed as 'cosmopolitan'] who were responsible for Germany's advances in dye chemistry and the synthesis of nitrogen, who researched the properties of gamma rays and refined the production process of high-quality of steel. It was to see them that foreign scientists, artists, philosophers and engineers visited Germany. And yet these were the men who were the least German of all. Their home was anywhere in the world'. p. 461.

²⁸ See Linda Colley 'Can History Help?' LRB 22/3/2018.

²⁹ Max Hastings reviewing a history of US criminal actions in Vietnam wrote 'the US ignorance of and disdain for Vietnamese history and culture was a major factor in the atrocities such as My Lai'. 'Wrath of the centurions' LRB 25/1/2018 p. 21

³⁰ Chamberlain displayed a shameful and disastrous attitude of ignorance towards Czechoslovakia in 1938; see *The Oster Conspiracy* Terry Parssinen, 2004.

³¹ Guardian 13/1/2018.

fascism to apply ‘the stomach-pump of common sense to the unclean system of English intellectualism. If our intellectuals are still seeking new sensations we have something original [i.e. physically violent] for them’ ‘[they] please their own morbid mentalities ... by a propaganda of filth’.³²

The frivolity of the right

The lack of political responsibility shown by Farage, Trump, Johnson, Cameron and Osborne may be the result of their immunity to any ill effects of the policies they promote (or from which they along with their associates will benefit). This is the legacy of their public school education and culture. In relation to Johnson’s background, Douglas Murphy describes the ‘curse of the public schoolboy’: ‘no matter how little effort they put in, no matter how little aptitude for something they have, they cannot help but succeed anyway’.³³ William Davies³⁴ supports this view of Tory Brexiteers, among whom ‘ignorance and a lack of effort is taken almost as a mark of distinction- how else to explain David Davis’. This is reminiscent of the frivolity of Edward VIII and his Nazi sympathies. Mosley and the aristocratic supporters of fascism and Hitler (such as Diana and Unity Mitford) could also be seen as lacking responsibility. Men who continued their public school nicknames into adulthood (for example, Mosley’s brother-in-law Fruity Metcalfe) suggest there is a degree of infantilism engendered by deference to the monarchy, the aristocracy and a public school upbringing. Reviewing Johnson’s mayoralty, Murphy concludes: ‘Looking back from this point [2017], perhaps the least we could hope for is that someone in a position like that might have taken their job just that little bit more seriously’.³⁵ The architecture critic Gavin Stamp described Johnson’s involvement in the London Garden Bridge project scrapped in 2017 as the ‘pernicious legacy left by the mendacious, posturing former mayor who has done so much damage to this country’.³⁶

Nincompoopolis focusses on the actions of Johnson while Mayor of London (2008-16). He writes à propos Johnson’s behaviour at the Beijing Olympics. ‘As far as Johnson is concerned, this just shows yet again how his conception of his responsibility as the Mayor of a world city barely stretched past the idea of effectively being a sales rep, a gimmick merchant for the tourists’.³⁷ ‘The frivolous option [was] picked as it would make him look better’.³⁸ William Davies puzzles over the Conservative Party’s ‘seemingly deliberate demolition of the United Kingdom and its economy [by leaving the EU]’.³⁹ He writes of the ‘frightening lack of responsibility displayed by its main instigators ... [such as] Boris Johnson, a man whose only apparent goal is to make political weather’. ‘Trump has no sense of humour where Johnson sees the funny side of everything. No doubt men such as Johnson and Trump have always existed, but healthy political systems have ways of keeping them away from the highest echelons of power’. Johnson, Gove, Rees-Mogg and others show a ‘blasé indifference to the impact of policy ... Tory Brexitism can have a strange flippancy about it ... just another attention-seeking strategy ... thanks to the recklessness of individuals who see public life as an opportunity to show off. Britain’s misfortune is that matters of the greatest seriousness are now in the hands of basically unserious people’.⁴⁰

Colin Kidd also describes Tory right-wingers as childish. Postmodern Britain is ‘a country where super-annuated teenagers in certain walks of life, including journalism and politics, stay in a condition of more or less permanent adolescence from puberty to retirement. Some of those not-so-young poseurs are Gove-like Tory boys nostalgically entranced by a sterile fantasy of this island’s immutable heritage’.⁴¹ There are childlike impulses visible in the behaviour of Farage and Trump (described in exactly this way by Michael Wolff, 2018; Trump’s response was that he was ‘a stable genius’) to destroy what took serious politicians decades to build up. They will not be around for the task of re-building a safer world based on collaboration between states. A clear comparison can be made with

³² *Blackshirt* p. 401.

³³ *Nincompoopolis* p. 243.

³⁴ ‘What are they after?’ LRB 8/3/2018.

³⁵ p. 251.

³⁶ Quoted in *Private Eye*, 12-25/1/2018, p. 21.

³⁷ Douglas Murphy, 2017, p. 92.

³⁸ p. 157

³⁹ ‘What are they after?’ LRB 8/3/2018

⁴⁰ Sometimes the best response to this frivolity is mockery: see Appendix “*Destruction is progress*”.

⁴¹ ‘You know who you are’ LRB 25/1/2018 p. 18.

the 1930s and a view of Fascism described in 1936 in relation to Mosley: 'Fascism has the crudity to destroy; it lacks the subtlety to create'.⁴²

'Make Britain Great Again!' The nostalgia for Empire

The slogan 'Make Britain Great Again!' begs the question 'When was the period of British 'Greatness' that Farage, Davis, Johnson, Duncan-Smith, Rees-Mogg and other Leave campaigners look fondly back on and wish to return us all to?' Firstly, it was never 'all'. The height of the British Empire, around 1890-1922, peaking in 1914, was a period of great inequality, poverty, disease, wretched housing and low wages in the United Kingdom. The American writer Jack London immersed himself in the East End of London in 1902, to witness and describe the conditions. '[In the hard winter of 1902-3 in London] great numbers of the unemployed formed into processions, as many as a dozen at a time, and daily marched through the streets crying for bread'. Quoting the New York *Independent* in January 1903 he added 'The workhouses have no space left in which to pack the starving crowds who are craving every day and night at their doors for food and shelter. All the charitable institutions have exhausted their means in trying to raise supplies of food for the famished residents of the garrets and cellars of London lanes and alleys'.⁴³ He continued his observations: 'the sanitation ... was wretched. From the imperfect sewage and drainage, defective traps, poor ventilation, dampness, and general foulness ... [people] attacked by diphtheria, croup, typhoid, erysipelas, blood poisoning, bronchitis, pneumonia, consumption, and various kindred disorders'⁴⁴ '450,000 of these creatures are dying miserably at the bottom of the social pit called London. ... the heart of the greatest, wealthiest, and most powerful empire the world has ever seen'. He concluded 'Either the Empire is a profit to England or it is a loss. If it is a loss, it must be done away with. If it is a profit, it must be managed so that the average man comes in for a share of the profit'.⁴⁵

The wealth that the minority enjoyed in British cities depended on the exploitation of resources and labour of subject territories.⁴⁶ The benefits did not spread to a larger proportion of the general population in the UK until much later, post-WWII. The popular picture of the Edwardian period of country house building and expensive house parties (financed by the loot from empire), as sold to the modern day public in TV and cinema costume dramas such as *Downton Abbey*, should be examined alongside the prevalence of poverty and strikes in the docks, mines and on the railways that characterised 1900-1914 (especially the 'Great Unrest' of 1910-13). Popular literary myths can be very persistent: London, Orwell and others attempted to dispel them. Secondly, the British Empire started to decline 100 years ago and Britain had lost much of its influence by the post-WWII period, as that of the US grew. It is hard, therefore, to pin down when this greatness was so apparent.⁴⁷

⁴² Douglas Jerrold, Catholic supporter of fascism in Italy and Spain, editor of the *English Review*. Quoted in Dorrell p. 400.

⁴³ Jack London *The People of the Abyss*, first published in 1902, reprinted by the Library of America in 1982. p. 5.

⁴⁴ p. 20. Lenin contracted erysipelas in London.

⁴⁵ p. 28-9; p. 48; p. 181.

⁴⁶ Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire*, 2017, provides a detailed and damning account of the economic and industrial looting of India by the British during their 200-year occupation. Quoting the American Will Durant's 1930s study, he writes: 'The British conquest of India was the invasion and destruction of a high civilization by a trading company [the British East India Company, "founded on a mixture of outrage (at competition from the French and Dutch) and greed", Gaskill LRB 2/8/2018 p. 38] utterly without scruple or principle, careless of art and greedy of gain'. p. 1. Later, quoting Richard Gott, he says 'The British empire was essentially a Hitlerian project on a grand scale, involving military conquest and dictatorship, extermination and genocide, martial law and 'special courts', slavery and forced labour, and, of course, concentration camps and transoceanic migration of people' p. 237. There is a clear parallel between the low-wage, highly taxed economies of the British Empire and the regular attempts by businesses to force down wages in industrial Britain.

⁴⁷ An associated and persistently visual aspect of British culture, the cities of Oxford and Cambridge, have been described as 'Oxpor'. Colin Burrow, reviewing Phillip Pullman accuses him of overblown Oxford-based writing. [LRB 4/1/2018 p. 8]. Danny Dorling points out in response that this romantic picture is itself false and that 'most existing Oxford college and university buildings date from the plunder of the British Empire, not the tithes of the Middle Ages'. [LRB 25/1/2018 p. 4]

However, it seems that there are still many in the UK who look back to WWII (subconsciously linked to an Imperial past⁴⁸) with nostalgic pride. Ian Jack commenting on reports of cinema audiences standing and applauding *Dunkirk* and *The Darkest Hour* films released in 2018, considers that 'these reactions suggest an England congratulating itself on its past – an idealised past, shorn of inconvenient fact'.⁴⁹ Tharoor reports the results of a YouGov poll in 2014, which 'revealed that 59 per cent of respondents thought the British Empire was "something to be proud of". ... An astonishing 34 per cent opined that "they would like it if Britain still had an empire"'.⁵⁰ Vince Cable, leader of the Liberal Democrats and prominent Remainer, stated that too many older voters (in the 2016 referendum) were driven by 'nostalgia for a world where passports were blue, faces were white and the map was coloured imperial pink'.⁵¹ Gary Younge considers that this 'nostalgia for a particular, and peculiar, version of our history long preceded Brexit'. He quotes an academic, Paul Gilroy, on the subject of continuing anti-German football chants that refer to WWII: 'The boast which the phrase ["Two world wars and one world cup"] gives voice to is integral to a larger denial. It declares nothing significant changed during the course of Britain's downwardly mobile 20th century ... that the nations which triumphed in 1918 and 1945 live on somewhere unseen, but palpable'.⁵²

William Davies writes: 'The fantasies of hardliners such as Liam Fox, Daniel Hannan and Jacob Rees-Mogg are based on dimly learned lessons from British history. The mantra of "Global Britain" resurrects an ideal of laissez-faire from the era of Manchester cotton mills and New World slavery. Discussing the range of Brexit options at a Tory Conference fringe event in October, the former Brexit minister David Jones concluded: "If necessary, as Churchill once said, very well then, alone"'.⁵³

In the 1950s and 60s, there was a widespread British attitude of self-satisfaction. We had the best education system, legal system, health service in the world, and, above all, were the mother of parliaments and the cradle of democracy. These claims were accompanied by no comparative analysis, and were possibly linked to the post-war self-congratulation over being victorious. These claims were fallacious then and now appear a form of crude propaganda or at least a denial of reality. In schools history was often taught without any explanation of why things happened or why they were being studied. (For example, British Imperial rule over the Indian subcontinent was presented uncritically as an assumed good thing.) Much of what is now being looked back to was a period when the middle classes had an easier life than today (with cheap labour to maintain their lifestyle); a good education was available to a small selected minority (often subsidised by the rest), and the great majority of the population did not need to be included in generalised boasts about the quality of British life.

Complexity

Rather than simplify and distort descriptions of social, economic and political life, we need to accept the reality, as is known by the liberal left, that society has always been and is getting increasingly complex, difficult to understand, with increasing numbers of vocal interested parties (as was the case in the 1930s) pulling in their own directions, and any solutions will depend on negotiation among those parties and compromise (a concept which is anathema to populists and dismissed as weakness and incapable of producing the change they somewhat emotionally desire). In March 2017 a survey of the political voting patterns of UK academics reported 88% left- to 12% right-wing. This may be because they are trained to analyse complex situations, an analysis which centre- and left-leaning debates stimulate. This seems less true of the right. Vasily Grossman (a Soviet Jewish journalist) in *Life and Fate*, published in the 1960s and banned for many years in the USSR, claimed that

⁴⁸ This linking is personified by Churchill, whose extreme imperial instincts are expressed in his disdain for Indians and their ambitions for independence. He said that the Mahatma 'should be bound hand and foot at the gates of Delhi, and let the viceroy sit on the back of a giant elephant and trample [him] into the dirt'. Quoted in Tharoor p. 133.

⁴⁹ Guardian 27/1/2018, Journal section p. 1.

⁵⁰ Tharoor p. 214.

⁵¹ Guardian website 11/3/2018.

⁵² Guardian website 3/2/2018.

⁵³ 'What are they after?' LRB 8/3/2018.

'humanity owes many great books and great discoveries to people who were indecisive and full of doubts; they have achieved at least as much as the simpletons who never hesitate'.⁵⁴

Complexity is often said to be due to an increase in the influence of technology (which is rapidly changing) in everyday life. There is also an increase in populations, their density and mobility in many parts of the world, which leads to a greater degree of contact between people who are or are perceived to be different from one another, and there are many more factors affecting an individual's personality, behaviour and attitudes. These all increase the chances of conflict and therefore lead to a greater requirement for compromise and negotiation not less. As modern life becomes more complex, it is precisely now that greater collaboration and co-operation is needed and less competitive rivalry, shows of strength and muscle-flexing.

In contrast to the Leave campaign, the slogans of the Remain campaign were descriptive or aspirational, not simplistic imperatives for action, and mostly forward-looking:

- Britain stronger in Europe
- A brighter future in Europe
- More jobs and opportunities
- More jobs, lower prices, workers' rights

The 1970s

Searching for historical links between the situation today and 80 years ago, the 1970s could be seen as pivotal. This decade is often derided, particularly by those who were not yet born, were too young to remember (i.e. now under 50) or benefited from the subsequent reactionary political reforms. A lot of the ridicule is based on entirely superficial social features (fashion and other aspects of style) though there was genuine concern over some aspects of the economy, such as currency devaluation, focussed on industrial unrest and regularly reprinted headlines reporting three-day weeks, rubbish piled in the streets, the dead unburied and miners on strike (summed up as the 'winter of discontent'). Much of this at the time and in retrospect is linked to Labour governments and internal Labour conflict (focussed on the Militant Tendency), though Tories were in power for about half of the decade and economic and industrial problems were experienced post-Labour in the 1980s and early 1990s (rises in inflation, unemployment, miners on strike and recessions). In fact, at the time the industrial and social disruption was relatively short-lived and quite easily tolerated by most. In 2017 there are those who reject the label of 'the failed ideologies of the 1970s'.⁵⁵

In many respects this was a positive decade when a lot of progressive movements were continued from the 1960s and gathered pace. Much of this was slowed down or reversed from 1980 onwards. Johnson's championing as mayor of the New Routemaster London Bus (from 2012), 'could be seen as some kind of harkening back to an indeterminately better time'⁵⁶, but it 'highlighted the significance of the previous Routemaster bus design [1954-1968]. ... [which] is a fragment of a very different view of the UK's history, that of the forward-looking, high-technology egalitarian society that at certain points in the post-war era it looked like the UK might become. ... it appears as an undeniably utopian symbol of the lost promise of the UK, destroyed by Thatcherism and the nostalgia industry'.⁵⁷

Social progress in the 1970s can be seen in:

- Interest in the environment, the human place in the ecosystem, green politics, small is beautiful, zero growth
- Concern about uncontrolled capitalism; Tory PM Edward Heath described 'the unpleasant and unacceptable face of capitalism' in the House of Commons in 1973 with reference to Lonrho. There was some moral restraint on rampant, ostentatious displays of wealth. Now this is out of control and it is a long time since anyone was made to feel guilty about showing off their affluence.
- Feminism and the legislation for social equality

⁵⁴ Grossman p. 732.

⁵⁵ Guardian Leader 30/12/2017.

⁵⁶ Murphy p. 82.

⁵⁷ Murphy p. 91.

- Membership of the Common Market indicated a willingness to co-operate in key economic/industrial/social areas⁵⁸
- Trades union rights and attempts at a 'social contract/compact' with government
- Peace, anti-war, CND, anti-apartheid, progressive student politics
- The 1970s saw the end of the period of de-colonisation, and freedom movements were active in finishing the process
- Stronger race relations legislation
- Comprehensive education reforms
- Overall, there was an emphasis on collective action being essential for the future of humanity and the planet where it lives

The shift from the 1970s to the 1980s

There was a significant reversal after Thatcher's victory in 1979, mostly with an emphasis on individualism, 'greed is good' and 'no such thing as society'. Thatcher attacked the EU, demonstrating a typically and lasting mercenary interest in membership of the Union. She appeared to have little interest in the position of women and some of the gains of feminism in some ways appeared to be lost.⁵⁹ Thatcher did what she could to curb trades union rights. She privatised as much that was state-owned as she was able and laid the groundwork for attacks on the welfare state and public services continued by later Tory administrations and Blair's New Labour. Paul Mason wrote 'in the last 25 years ... the market destroyed the plan [of the left]; individualism replaced collectivism and solidarity; the massively expanded workforce of the world looks like a 'proletariat', but no longer thinks or behaves purely as one'.⁶⁰

She denigrated environmentalists and had little interest in preserving the environment, which was mainly there to be exploited, built on and made profitable. She was very much against financial and economic regulation, and along with Reagan promised liberated post-communist countries a future that could not be fulfilled. She promoted deregulation, leading to the financial crash in 2007, following which Cameron and Osborne successfully blamed the previous New Labour government for lax controls, and, bizarrely, claimed the Tories to be the party of tough regulation. She, along with Reagan, promoted acceptance of military force to be used against the USSR and Cuba, and weakened opposition to South Africa and its oppression of non-white majorities in the region.⁶¹

Thatcher promoted a low taxation economy, justified by the supposed 'trickle down' benefits. Instead, inequality rose. Industrial decline was accepted and accelerated, leading to dependence on the service especially financial sector. This led to a concentration of wealth in the SE of England, now grotesque and damaging in its effects. She promoted competition as the primary motivation not only of business but also of many other human relations. Human relationships became opportunities for people to make money from each other: a 'nation of shopkeepers', knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing, a government 'selling the family silver' (comments by former Tory PM Harold Macmillan). Wolfgang Streeck, reviewing Perry Anderson discussing the post-revolutionary 1970s, suggests it came to a 'new epoch that could dispense with ideology since capitalist hegemony now "lay in a set of lifestyles, conducts, needs, demands, whose origin and end was in the world of commodities". Now ... there was "no ethos, no directive idea, no concern with the inner life of the individual, which was delivered over to the market and the unconscious", and no need either for intellectuals and their passionate devotion to ideas. The new era's "basic value" was "tolerance, that is,

⁵⁸ It is claimed (e.g. by A.C. Grayling in 2018) that the UK economy has strengthened since the 1970s largely thanks to its membership of the EU and the single market.

⁵⁹ Especially in fashion and some aspects of public behaviour. Feminism seemed to be interpreted by some as the right to be as drunk, loud and loutish as some men. Misogyny since the 1970s seems to have increased to a crisis level and there is a renewed focus on the pay gap in a wide range of occupations.

⁶⁰ Mason *Postcapitalism*, 2015 p. xiv.

⁶¹ See the Queen's attitude to Thatcherism revealed in December 2017: 'Such was her anger, the Queen considered scrapping her weekly audience with the prime minister, a Buckingham Palace source told a diplomat. In October [1987] Mrs Thatcher refused to back tighter sanctions against South Africa agreed by 47 other leaders at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting'. Times online edition 30/12/2017.

indifference".⁶² There was irony in the speeches made by Thatcher on her arrival in Downing Street in 1979 ('harmony in place of discord'), managing to sow greater discord in the subsequent years. This was imitated by Theresa May in 2016, whose first speech in Downing St. suggested she was living in a fantasy world of future harmony that she would engineer, while ineptly trying to manage the UK's exit from the EU for the benefit of all.

The neo-liberalism promoted by Thatcher, Reagan and others such as Pinochet in Chile, 'resolved to smash labour's collective bargaining power, traditions and social cohesion completely'. 'Neoliberalism's guiding principle is not free markets, nor fiscal discipline, nor sound money, nor privatization and offshoring- nor even globalization. All these things were by-products or weapons of its main endeavour: to remove organized labour from the equation'.^{63 64}

2016-7 and the 1930s

In looking back from 2016-7 to the 1930s the present period can be seen as a retreat to a state of insularity, self-absorption and a loss of concern or responsibility for the welfare of the world or international leadership. The reversal didn't suddenly begin in 2016, but in the UK the political attitude clearly visible now could be seen as the logical conclusion of the shift in political philosophy from the 1970s to the 1980s.

In the first half of the 1930s there were frantic attempts at bilateral and multilateral treaties, and international conferences on peace, limiting warfare, especially in the air, in order to avoid a second world war, which everyone agreed would be calamitous. Now, great efforts are being made to dismantle international organisations (EU), deny their value (NATO), undermine their effectiveness (UN), ignoring Security Council resolutions on Israel, and bullying weak countries into supporting the strong. In 2017 the US threatened to remove aid from countries that didn't support its position on Jerusalem as capital of Israel. UN support for the invasion of Iraq was achieved in a similar way in 2003.

UKIP and others on the right dismiss out of hand any parallels between the present day and the 1930s, especially that there is anything fascist about the far right in Europe and the USA today.⁶⁵ However, for parallels to be identified, it is not necessary to claim that Farage and others have fascist, xenophobic or anti-Semitic beliefs themselves. For the Leave campaign to win, they relied on just enough supporters who are xenophobic. The arguments needed to be reduced to simplistic slogans to appeal to a broad enough set of voters. The coalition of leaders ranged from the purely opportunistic (Johnson, Gove) to the ideologically driven (Rees-Mogg, Redwood, Farage). There were also a number of minor hangers-on who perhaps hoped for advancement if Leave won (Fox, Davis). They also relied on the weakness and incompetence of remainers (Cameron, May). This confusion of attitudes in the ruling party can be seen among the proponents and opponents of appeasement in the 1930s.⁶⁶

Labour was in a difficult position before and since the EU referendum, as they were in the mid-1930s over Spain. Firstly, they have had to acknowledge the democratic result. However, there has always

⁶² 'You need a gun' LRB 39/24 14/12/2017 p. 26.

⁶³ Paul Mason *Postcapitalism* pp. 91-2.

⁶⁴ Comparisons can be made with Italian fascist theory of 'corporatism' in the 1930s, which sought to subject labour to the interests of the state and private business.

⁶⁵ However, Boris Johnson has compared Vladimir Putin's use of the World Cup, held in Russia in 2018, with Hitler's exploitation of the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936 for their propaganda value. [House of Commons, 21/3/2018]

⁶⁶ The EU referendum and the vote to leave could be compared even further back than the 1930s: with the protestant reformation. A movement resulting in massive destruction and a national anti-Catholic hatred that lasted for centuries, was motivated, in part, by a demand to 'Give us control over our church'. 'Henry VIII's imperial claims, couched in Thomas Cromwell's majestic legalese, were introspective, asserting the power of the monarch freed from the constraints of papal rule. The economy was beset by inflation, there were land shortages and there was growing poverty, along with anxiety about the balance of payments and the value of sterling'. [Malcolm Gaskill 'Dining with Ivan the Terrible', review of Stephen Alford: 'London's Triumph' LRB 8/2/2018 p. 37]

been a principled opposition from the left to such a multi-national body (Benn, Shore), which has promoted globalisation and competition between public and private providers and suppliers, though whether employment rights would have been advanced outside the EU, especially under Tory administrations, is debateable.

The 1930s and 2010s share some additional characteristics:

- Weak governments and coalition; ineffective opposition
- Electoral mistakes by prime ministers (May and Baldwin)
- Dealing with the aftermath of economic crises
- A government distracted from important domestic reforms by an overwhelming foreign policy problem (the EU now; Germany then)
- Governing parties internally very divided
- Divisions ultimately bringing down the Tory leader (Cameron and Chamberlain)
- The US was isolationist and focussed on domestic problems and very divided
- A lack of strong internationalist leadership

Comparison of the threats today (see above) with the 1930s

Looking back at the list of threats to today's world, it can be seen that none of them is new and all can be observed in the 1930s:

- armed conflict and civil war: for example, in Abyssinia, Manchuria and Spain
- migration: refugees from war, such as the Spanish republicans who fled Spain post-Civil War to France; Jews and others from Germany
- capitalism: Wall St crash; the Great Depression 1929-33; strikes in the UK against reductions in wages 1900 - 1930s; General Strike 1926
- environment: considerable pollution in industrial areas, though there was possibly less general awareness of the future global impact
- poverty everywhere: in the US, the UK (see Orwell's descriptions of the north of England), in British colonies; class warfare
- terrorism: in Palestine, anarchists in US and Europe
- exploitation of minorities: everywhere, in European empires, in the southern US states

Paul Mason in his 2016 *Guardian* article, warns against making too direct comparisons, and considers that today we have the benefit of a globalized world to protect us from some of the worst threats. However, he claims that 'The problem is, politically, we have in one sense gone beyond the 1930s. ... When Franco's troops took Badajoz, and put 2,000 of its inhabitants against the wall in the early days of the Spanish civil war, the Wehrmacht's military observer was so disgusted that he advised German troops should never be allowed to serve alongside Franco's lest they become "brutalised". Today, an entire generation of humanity has been brutalised – whether it experiences mass slaughter, rape and torture firsthand, or whether it simply sees the pictures and hears the stories [of ISIS atrocities and massacres in Syria and elsewhere]. If you read any memoir from the 30s and the war years, there is almost always a moment of realisation: what a cadaver looks like; that prisoners can be shot; that the Geneva conventions may be flouted. Sadly, in sheer brutality, we are past the 1930s – and in the struggle between governments and civilian populations the Geneva conventions do not apply'.⁶⁷

In his book-length study *Postcapitalism* (2015), he also states 'In this scenario [the consensus breaking down], lip-service to international law evaporates; torture, censorship, arbitrary detention and mass surveillance become the regular tools of statecraft. This is a variant of what happened in the 1930s and there is no guarantee it cannot happen again'.⁶⁸

Class is associated with most of the above threats. Class warfare was explicit in the 1920s and 30s. Today it is not so associated with the working class (perhaps more with activist groups such as Class War), whose interests the much weakened trades unions attempt to defend. Whenever a mildly

⁶⁷ *Guardian* online 1/8/2016: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/01/are-we-living-through-another-1930s-paul-mason>.

⁶⁸ Mason p. x.

socialist point of view is put forward by the Labour Party or a trades union, for example in advocating higher taxes for the wealthy, a mansion tax or on non-domiciled individuals, it is dismissed as 'the politics of envy' by the Tory right and the right-wing press. Slogans from the Tories and press, such as 'hard-working families', 'strivers versus skivers', 'benefit cheats' (prominent in press campaigns in the 1979 and again in 2010 elections) eventually have some effect and become unanalysed 'facts'. As a result, the public have been encouraged to denounce benefit 'cheats' and 'illegal' immigrants (infamously by May's billboards towed around the country when she was Home Secretary).

The Press

It may be true that the print media are far less influential today than they were in the 1930s. They are no less anti-Labour, but perhaps younger voters don't read the *Mail*, *Express*, *Sun*, *Telegraph* or *Times*.⁶⁹ However, if they get more of their news, information and opinion from social media and other online sources, it is not clear that these are any less biased or partisan. There has been a growth of pressure groups organised largely online ('Stop the War', 'Occupy', etc.) and these have perhaps had some alternative effect on large-scale opinion and action.

One further point of comparison with the 1930s is the vitriolic language used by some of the right-wing press and political commentators. Post-referendum, the *Daily Mail* in a front-page headline described the judges who ruled in favour of a case brought by a Remain supporter (Gina Miller) as 'Enemies of the People'.⁷⁰ This newspaper was notorious in the 1930s for its support for Fascism, culminating in the unambiguous headline 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!'.⁷¹ William Joyce in 1935 attacked the supporters of the India Bill (which proposed a degree of self-rule) as 'one loathsome, fetid, purulent, tumid mass of hypocrisy'.⁷² Other reactions to the Remain side of the EU argument came from ConservativeHome, a 'centre-right political blog', which described the BBC as unpatriotic for reporting warnings about negative effects of leaving the EU. In 2017 Tory MP Nadine Dorries demanded that Tory 'rebels' against May's exiting the EU legislation should be punished: 'Tonight, the Tory rebels have put a spring in Labours [sic] step, given them a taste of winning, guaranteed the party a weekend of bad press, undermined the PM and devalued her impact in Brussels. They should be deselected and never allowed to stand as a Tory MP, ever again' ... 'I've been a rebel myself, but never when a Marxist government was knocking at the door'.⁷³ The *Daily Mail* website, following the conviction of the driver responsible for the Finsbury Park terrorist attack in June 2017, commented: 'TODAY, the *Daily Mail* accuses Jeremy Corbyn, John McDonnell and Diane Abbott, the troika who could run the next government, of being unashamed apologists for terror, who have devoted their lives to befriending the enemies of Britain while undermining the very institutions that keep us safe in our bed ... [Corbyn] is 'the man who loves terrorists around the world'.⁷⁴ In general, partisanship in politics, sport and entertainment today has become more aggressive and abusive, because an individual's views can more instantly be communicated to many more people and become noticed and in some cases remain anonymous.

"Make Our Planet Great Again!": President of France Emmanuel Macron, reported by CNN 12/12/2017

Writing about a cigar-shaped cosmic object sighted in the sky in October 2017, Nick Richardson comments 'There are so many signs that we're on the cusp of a new dark age. Religion is on the rise, as are the numbers of believers in astrology and conspiracy theories, and average IQ is falling'. 'Get it wrong and we'll forever be the dunces of the universe, pointed at and mocked by aliens as they pass through in their cigars on their way to somewhere more sophisticated'.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ The combined circulation of 5 of the most popular daily newspapers published in both 1939 and 2017 shows a decline from 6.6 million to 3.1 million, while the UK population rose from 47.5 million to 65.6 million in the same period. This equates to a drop from 1 in 7 to 1 in 21.

⁷⁰ *Daily Mail* 4/11/2016.

⁷¹ *Daily Mail* 19/1/1934.

⁷² Dorril p. 348.

⁷³ Quoted in the *New Statesman* 14/12/2017.

⁷⁴ Quoted in *Private Eye* 1463 9-22/2/2018 p. 8.

⁷⁵ 'From a distant solar system' LRB 39/24 14/12/2017 p. 36.

