

Patrick Lawrence

## **The turning of history's wheel.**

It is typically quite difficult for those living to see and understand their moment as a passage in history. We are too much “inside” the present to view it with the requisite detachment. So it has long seemed to me. Toynbee made this point another way as he recalled his childhood in late-imperial Britain. “One thought of history as something rather unpleasant that happened to other people,” the British historian wrote. This memorable *aperçu* appeared in [the February 1949 edition of \*Commentary\*](#), the American monthly dedicated to Jewish affairs. The headline atop the piece was, “Can Western civilization save itself? Our present anxiety in the light of history.”

Ours is a singular time in these respects. If it is usually difficult to know ourselves as actors in history, the history we make as 2023 delivers us to 2024 is daily “in our faces,” as people say. It is unpleasant, just as the young Toynbee thought it to be, but there is no saying it is happening elsewhere and only to others. Seventy-four years after *Commentary* published his essay, Toynbee’s question is ours: Can the West save itself, restore itself—redeem itself, indeed?

My answer turns on the genocide Israel openly commits against the Palestinians of Gaza and—the point not to be missed—the Atlantic world’s political, diplomatic, and material support for the truly historic scale of this barbarity, altogether the nakedness of it. And my answer is simple and complicated all at once. No, in my view, the West will never recover from this lapse into “moral vandalism,” as Conor Gearty, a prominent human-rights scholar, put it in [a recent essay](#). Never again will it credibly claim the place in the global order it has long insisted it merits by virtue of its “values”—a term I have always mistrusted.

How shall we date the West's assertion of its superiority—moral, material, scientific, institutional—within the community of nations? We can consider, first, the postwar order the U.S. established after the 1945 victories, when it asserted that human rights, the rule of law, “democracy,” and—let us not forget—free markets were universal values. Or we can go back another century, to the mid-19<sup>th</sup>, when the European powers first conceived of “the West” as a political construct in response to czarist Russia's rise. Was not this—the West as an essentially reactive notion—the first manifestation of the “democracies vs. autocracies” theme with which the Biden regime frames its foreign policies?

There are grounds to go further back on history, in my view—half a millennium back. I have 1498 in mind, the year da Gama set foot on the sands of present-day Kerala and the modern encounter between the West and non-West began. We cannot describe the Portuguese explorer as a modern liberal, and certainly not a neoliberal in our contemporary parlance, but the assumptions he bore with him as he arrived among in the Zamorin of Calicut's kingdom: Were these not the seeds of the liberalism commonly professed today?

However we wish to date it, wherever we trace its origins, this liberal project is now dead. This is the casualty of the West's craven abandonment of liberalism's most fundamental “values.” The rule of law, human rights, democracy without quotation marks: These the Western powers sacrificed in the year now passing to the Israelis' visceral, primitive hatred of Palestinians and their obsessive determination to ethnic-cleanse them in the name of an ideology that perverts the very heritage, the Judaic heritage, that has been among the wellsprings of Western liberal tradition.

It would be near to impossible to overstate the historic significance of the moment to which apartheid Israel and its backers have brought us. I say this

because a great deal more than “the Jewish state” has been exposed for its betrayals of all it purports to stand for. If the blood on Israel’s hands is also on the West’s, the latter’s long history of genocides, racism, and systematic abuses of others stands just as nakedly exposed for what it has been over centuries. We must now understand the liberalism long professed across the Atlantic world as a vast, prolonged conspiracy of lies and misrepresentations in the service of but one thing: This has been in the service of power and its exertion over others behind a veil of virtue.

“Let’s not let universalism disappear without lighting a candle,” Conor Gearty concludes with evident bitterness in in the essay mentioned above, which appeared in the 9 November edition of *The Tablet*, the Catholic newsweekly. By then he had already asked, “Who will stand for universalism?” I cannot make out whether Gearty thinks someone should, but as an American I come at the question with suspicion. To me universalism is the close cousin of exceptionalism and is, if anything, more the more insidious of the two.

Wilsonian universalism, as we have it in modern form, is the ideology that has turned liberalism’s professed ideals into a cover for America’s pursuit of global hegemony this past 70–odd years.

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With a symmetry I find uncanny, the dramatic collapse of the liberal project across the West has been accompanied by the emergence of the non–West as a material and, in its way, a moral force that is not so short of rivalling the Atlantic world by way of its global influence. I do not wish to mislead in putting the case this way. China, the Russian Federation, India, South Africa, groups such as the BRICS–Plus and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: For none of these is the intent to stand against or replace the Western powers. It is to advance a new world order—China, especially, favors this phrase—wherein the West is

welcome even as its professed universalism is superseded by a kind of neo-coexistence based, in effect if it is not specifically articulated, on the [Five Principles](#) Zhou Enlai advocated in the mid-1950s: noninterference, respect for sovereignty, and so on. In a speech delivered, pointedly, at Independence Hall in Philadelphia on 4 July 1994, [Václav Havel spoke](#) of this, if indirectly, as “the need for self-transcendence”—“transcendence as the only real alternative to extinction,” he explained movingly.

Much has been written about the dense network of partnerships and alliances non-Western nations continue to form. The Chinese, in particular, displayed a new eagerness to play a role in global diplomacy, notably in its sponsorship last August of a rapprochement between the Islamic Republic and the Saudi kingdom. I see promise in these trends. But 2023 also proved a disappointment in this context. Where is the non-West, we have to ask, as Israel prosecutes its savage campaign against the Palestinians of Gaza? Where is its forthright support as the West descends into Conor Gearty’s moral vandalism?

The stunning collapse of Western liberalism, the less dramatic but equally significant rise of the non-West’s influence: History’s wheel turned decisively in the year now ending. It does not drop us off in the most comforting of surroundings. Nothing in 2024 will be especially neat: The West’s great failure will be realized over a long period of time, as will the non-West’s rise. But the direction is right, in my view. We live in a time when things must come apart before new things can be built to replace the old.

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