

Iranian theocracy: the totalitarian threat of our day

1. How public opinion missed the point in the thirties

Ian Kershaw is rightly considered as the most important reference on the history of Hitler and his rising. He is particularly brilliant in portraying the general environment that allowed said rise to happen, as in his masterpiece '[Making friends with Hitler, Lord Londonderry and Britain's Road to War](#)'.

As the title implies, the book centres on 'Lord Londonderry'. Perhaps more crucial in paving 'Britain's Road to War' was the public opinion he analyses in section I of Chapter I (pp.27 – 36). I vividly recommend its reading for all those who seek to understand how the Western citizenry and most in particular its political establishment were led into the idiotic beliefs on Hitler which ultimately made war inevitable:

'The Times, the most important newspaper for the British political class, agreed that Hitler was a 'moderate' [this is the British press consensus at the time, 1932] compared with some of the more radical figures in the Nazi Party, and thought that he was gradually gaining a sense of responsibility. It even suggested that Hitler should constitutionally be made President of the German Reich, imagining that the Nazi movement might break apart if its leader were to be elevated 'above politics' (pp. 29-30)'.

'The Times, for instance, had already indicated on 29 January [1933], the day following the fall of the government of General von Schleicher, that a government headed by Hitler commanding majority support in the Reichstag was 'held to be the least dangerous solution of a problem bristling with dangers' (p.30)'.

As we know, William Churchill was quite isolated and was called to power only in a last resource scenario - when the United Kingdom's war situation seemed truly desperate.

Public opinion makers, however, have yet to make a critical assessment on their own responsibility regarding both the political establishment and popular beliefs so as to avoid repeating old mistakes.

Public opinion has been rightly concerned with fundamental issues such as the safeguard of humanitarian values and democracy, nuclear proliferation and peace, environmental protection and the fight against drug trafficking.

The real issue at stake, however, concerns whether we are sensibly looking into the sources of these problems - or are we confusing issues and priorities instead, as we did in the thirties.

2. The misperception of present threats as 'populism and nationalism'

Several works recently published focus on the danger of coming back to the thirties of the XXth century. Yet they fail to understand where the real danger is coming from and



often put the World upside down. The best example being Madeleine's Albright recent book 'Fascism: A warning'.

The introduction of Madeleine Albright's book starts with her escaping with her parents after the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 and ends with the fall of the Iron Curtain – understandably for her better symbolised in Prague. It leads us towards the present erosion of democracy for which, quite predictably, she sees 'the first reason' being Donald Trump.

The discussion on the essence of fascism has been endless within Western societies and, as Ms Albright confirms, also in her classrooms. She perceives the 'popular' character of fascism as a distinct feature from traditional forms of despotic regimes, but she fails to establish a distinction between 'fascism' and 'communism', actually even using these concepts interchangeably in the expression 'Soviet-style fascism' (p. 4; Chapter 7).

Ms Albright flits on such diverse leaders as Viktor Orban, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Hugo Chavez, Vladimir Putin, Recep Erdogan or the Korean Kim dynasty – none of them she calls fascist, but all of them she describes with some diverse fascist tones – apparently only in order to attack Donald Trump and suggest in indirect ways his link to a present fascist danger.

Ms Albright book sheds no light on what was there intrinsically distinctive about 'fascism' as it emerges in the 1930s and, most in particular, what are the distinct signs of a re-born fascism in our own days. What is most striking in Ms Albright's approach is the complete silence she maintains on the contemporary regime that most resembles old-era fascism – the Iranian theocracy – or on the most performing and significant contemporary authoritarian regime, the Chinese communist system.

Ms Albright's book's silence on Iran, Pakistan and China is easily understandable if we consider her own heavy responsibilities in the failure to confront these regimes while working at the top of US administration. Otherwise, the twisting of concepts and arguments so as to target Donald Trump is typical of the unfortunate partisanship dominating her and most contemporary political analysis.

Ms Albright book is important mainly for presenting a good summary of the distorted picture of political reality we are fed by our 'mainstream media' and how it serves to conceal the real threats to democracy - which it sees as coming exclusively from 'populism' and 'nationalism' (code names for 'Donald Trump').

If we are to understand present-day challenges to democracy, we certainly have to look at last century's fascism and communism as the closest available examples - while keeping in mind political science's both general and abstract criteria.

What we today call democracy is a complex structure based on the rule of law and containing both democratic and aristocratic features. Strong democratic structures can be found within the United States, which couple traditional representative structures for both the executive and legislative branches with a varied weight of direct rule through referenda, some democratic control on the judiciary level and lesser power capabilities for civil servants.

The European Union is on the other side of the ‘liberal-democratic’ spectrum. Here aristocratic features are more salient, there are little to no referenda, and we witness decision-making power by representatives of representatives which weakens democracy. There is no democratic control over the judiciary and an unelected bureaucracy hold crucial amounts of power.

Otherwise, in both sides of the Atlantic, there are strong features of plutocracy, stemming among other factors, to the great power attributed to a financial elite. This might be seen as the main reason for the oligarchic perversion of the aristocratic elements of the system, causing the so-called ‘anti-elitist’ rebellion.

So-called ‘populist’ rebellions against the ‘aristocratic’ or ‘elitist’ features of the political system have happened often in the US - Andrew Jackson, president from 1830 to 1838, being the best historic example, Donald Trump being a present one.

In the US such developments never transformed democracy into demagogic, and therefore never facilitated the overall system’s degradation into a tyranny - a well-known danger already feared by Aristotle. We believe this has to do with the robustness of the rule of law and in particular the separation of powers in the US. The same democratic ‘populist’ manifestations might have different results elsewhere.

Such popular revolts can in less robust political systems cause demagogic derivations leading towards tyranny. In my view, this was exactly what happened in Venezuela, perhaps the clearest example of such kind of political decay.

The same is even more likely and dangerous when ‘populist’ revolts occur in autocratic countries, as was the case of the Arab Spring. There, the most well-organised totalitarian forces rapidly took control of the movement and transformed a democratic revolution into an attempt to impose a new dictatorship.

To see ‘populism’ as the problem is to see the events upside down. That the people want to take control of its own destinies is on its own a good thing. The problem lies with the fragility or even inexistence of lawful institutions - or sufficient forces to defend them – and with the oligarchic, incompetent or authoritarian rule which provoked populist reactions in the first place.

The criticism of ‘populism’ tends therefore to become a criticism of ‘democracy’ or even a corporatist protection of an institutionalised oligarchy.

The criticism of ‘nationalism’ is also misguided. Democracy developed in the context of nations, and national pride is by itself a positive thing. It becomes dangerous when obsessive and totalitarian - when it ceases to be the love of the fatherland and becomes the hate of the others.

The key to British resistance to Nazi expansionism was its patriotism, that is, British nationalism. It was certainly not a negative thing, quite on the contrary. Nazi nationalism was xenophobic, imperial and hateful of the other and cannot be confused with the United Kingdom’s nationalism during the Second World War.

Therefore, when we repeatedly read the mainstream media, and the politicians echoing it, saying that we are facing the danger of ‘populism’ and ‘nationalism’ we are being



misdirected from the issues that really matter, sometimes only with the objective of denigrating the political opponent (Donald Trump) at any cost.

That being said, it is clear that many of us strongly disagree with many of President Donald Trump's views, me included. It is perhaps convenient to remind here that Winston Churchill was wrong in a variety of issues and several of his points of view and declarations were fully unacceptable even by the standards of his own time – let alone now. Yet he was crucially far-sighted in understanding where the main danger was.

When we witness a confrontation between Trump and Khamenei, exactly as when we witnessed a confrontation between Churchill and Hitler, no one can doubt where the fascism threat lies and in which side we shall stand.

Whoever tries to confuse this clear reality is making a great disservice to the struggle we have engage. That is the struggle against the Iranian theocracy: the totalitarian threat of our day.

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(Paulo Casaca)