

Trapped in False Antitheses: Timothy Snyder's Analyses of the Global Authoritarian Turn Are Crippled by His Anti-totalitarian Framework

*A Discussion Article on the topic of Timothy Snyder's book
The Road to Unfreedom. Russia, Europe, America.*

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Abstract: This paper critically scrutinizes Timothy Snyder's book *The Road to Unfreedom. Russia, Europe, America* (The Bodley Head, Vintage, London 2018). It claims that the main reason for his failure to present a convincing account of the current neo-nationalist and authoritarian turn and outline an adequate intellectual and political response to it is his clinging to an anti-totalitarian framework which he had applied to Eastern Europe in some of his previous historical works (Snyder 2003, 2010). The framework reduces three main ideological alternatives that fought with each other in the last century into two: liberalism was supposedly challenged by totalitarianism. Since Snyder reduces the present crisis to the threat of the return of totalitarianism, he sees an appropriate response in the revival of the human and civic solidarity associated with the anti-totalitarian movements of the last century. The essay outlines an alternative view: it links the present crisis of democracy to the ravaging effects of neo-liberal globalization and, accordingly, suggests combining anti-authoritarianism with anti-capitalism – or human and civic solidarity with social solidarity.

Keywords: crisis of democracy, totalitarian paradigm, false dichotomies, neoliberal globalization, the new and old social movements.

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*“He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby becomes
a monster.”*

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*. Aphorism 146

Until the 2000s, the tone of the global debate was set by the discourses of globalization, human rights, liberal democracy, supra-national integration and humanitarian solidarity

across national borders. Since the 2010s, however, these discourses and actions based on them have been challenged. To use the terms to which Donald Trump, the leading protagonist of this change, had recourse in his speech at the General Assembly of the UN in September 2018, “globalism” has been displaced by “patriotism”. The universalistic and future oriented narratives of solidarity “without borders” (in the world) and of “ever closer union” (in Europe) have been eroded by particularistic narratives of national sovereignty and self-reliance rooted in the heroic past.

In his book *The Road to Unfreedom. Russia, Europe, America* (Snyder 2018) Timothy Snyder conceives the switch from a universalist and future-oriented legitimation to a particularistic and past-based one as a drift from the “politics of inevitability” to a “politics of eternity”. The automatic forward march of human history – driven either by the development of forces of production and class struggles in the case of Soviet communism, or by self-regulating markets in the case of American liberalism – has been replaced by the eternal return of threats and enemies and the perennial struggles for national survival. Snyder’s point indeed captures one of the crucial aspects of the ideological change we have been experiencing: the liberal utopia which had replaced the communist one in the early 1990s has begun to fail. The milestone that marked the beginning of this process was the financial and economic crisis of 2008–2009.

Having correctly identified one aspect of the ideological predicament of the last decade, Snyder errs, however, both in the further elaboration of his diagnosis, and in the proposed cure. In this essay, I critically scrutinize Snyder’s book in terms of its interpretive framework. I claim that the main reason for his failure to present a convincing account of the current neo-nationalist and authoritarian turn and outline an adequate intellectual and political response is his clinging to an anti-totalitarian paradigm which he applied to Eastern Europe in some of his historical works (Snyder 2003, 2010). He inherited it from the Cold War liberalism in its last version, which was brought about by the human rights revolution of “the long 1970s” (Moyn 2010, 2014; Eckel – Moyn 2014). This framework reduces the three main ideological alternatives that fought with each other in the last century (Mazower 2000: x) into two: liberalism was allegedly challenged by one enemy that showed either a nationalist or a socialist face, if not a mixture of both.

This association, if not identification, of radical nationalism with radical socialism, since he views them as merely two manifestations of one oppressive state collectivism, makes Snyder see in the current neo-nationalist wave a return of the same evil which the West fended off in the 20th century. He thereby inadvertently reproduces the same cyclical time framework which he rightly places at the core of the politics of current neo-nationalisms, as if the 20th century never ended and the enemy of the past kept coming back. If Jarosław Kaczyński and Vladimir Putin re-enact in their ideological posture the Second World War, Snyder re-enacts the Cold War. In both cases, an obsession with the past supersedes the novel features of the present. By claiming that Western democracies are basically fighting the same ideological and geo-political enemy today as they fought between the 1930s and the late 1980s Snyder obscures the main underlying structural cause of the current crisis – the globalized capitalism of the last forty years. Its ravaging social and political effects have prepared the ground for the recent successes of authoritarian and populist demagogues.

The main purpose of this review is to bring attention to the philosophical and methodological reasons of this obfuscation and – on the basis of this critique – outline an alternative view of our present crisis. In *the first section*, I bring out the two main assumptions of the anti-totalitarian paradigm as they can be read off from Snyder’s interpretation of Putin’s Russia: individualism, which he presents as the “good” antithesis of the “bad” Hegelian holism, and methodological idealism – the belief in the magical power of ideas to translate directly into political reality without contextual interpretations of the actors

which change their concrete meanings. Both assumptions lead him to a Popperian rejection of the Hegelian and Marxist intellectual heritage since its collectivist ideas have supposedly brought about mass graves of the last century. A typically anti-totalitarian staging of individual freedom and collective solidarity as two mutually exclusive values hinders Snyder from looking for the ways they can and must be combined if we are to face both the effects of globalized capitalism, and authoritarian threats of anti-globalist neo-nationalism.

In *the second section* I show that Snyder inherited the sterile antithesis of individualism and collectivism from the anti-totalitarian movements of the 1970s and 1980s. With their defence of human rights against the state and preference of human and civic over social solidarity these movements prepared the ground for the liberal hegemony of the 1990s and 2000s in which the cult of individual freedom went hand in hand with the neo-liberal dismantlement of the limits to global flows of money and capital. Despite his acknowledgment of social inequality as one of the sources of the present crisis, Snyder sees the main danger in the return of totalitarianism, which, in his eyes, has already regained its foothold in Russia and threatens to spill over to Europe and the US. If the enemy is the same as in the last century, the response should be the same as well. Accordingly, Snyder tries to revive the spirit of the anti-totalitarian movements of the 1970s and 1980s.

In *the third section* I deem it a completely inappropriate response by pointing out that we are faced with a different challenge than in the last decades of the Cold War: then, the state was too powerful and overwhelming vis-à-vis the civil society (at least on the Eastern side the Iron Curtain); today it is too weak and powerless vis-à-vis global forces of capitalism. Dissident movements in the Eastern Europe of the 1980s contributed to this current predicament since the civic revolutions which they brought about were compatible with if not conducive to the dismantlement of the welfare state. Instead of appropriating their legacy uncritically we have to reflect upon their hidden assumptions and blind spots that made them, at worst, obedient assistants of the neo-liberal project or, at best, its passive on-lookers. This does not amount to a wholesale rejection of their legacy. Rather, their human and civic solidarity should be combined with social solidarity and its project of re-invention of the welfare state for the 21st century. This is also the lesson from the dashed hopes of the Arab Spring of 2011–2013. One of the causes of its failure was precisely that its liberal-democratic protagonists followed too closely the script of the Eastern European anti-communist revolutions and, consequently, they were not able to combine the two kinds of solidarity.

The fourth section starts with the assumption that whereas civic solidarity (associated with the “new social movements”) cultivates “thin ties” between people and can, therefore, dispense with formalized and hierarchical structures, for social solidarity, which cultivates “thick ties” (associated with the “old social movements”), such structures are indispensable. Accordingly, movements of social (as opposed to merely civic) solidarity have to build strong and formalized institutions which transcend the whims of individual choice. Although Snyder does not use this terminology, his individualist bias makes him prefer the “new” over the “old” social movements. As a result, he is able to theorize an action “from below” merely as an endeavour to *limit* structures or *interrupt* their automatic functioning, but never as an effort to *build* or *transform* them. In Snyder’s historical writings such a transformative effect is reserved only for an action “from above”. His analyses of the clash of Stalin’s and Hitler’s empires in the 1940s (Snyder 2010) and the transition to democracy in East-Central Europe at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s (Snyder 2003: Part III) focus exclusively on the ideas and decisions of the political elite (including a counter-elite of Eastern European dissidents) and pay almost no attention to the weight of extant structures. (His account of the Holocaust in *Black Earth* is a partial exception to this rule [Snyder 2015].)

The fifth section points to Snyder's mischaracterization of the prevailing strategic posture of America in the post-Cold War era as a passive "politics of inevitability". The belief of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush in the historical possibility of a global spread of human rights and democracy, however, did not spawn their passivity, but rather boosted their readiness to intervene. Barack Obama's anti-interventionist posture did not stem from a belief in an "inevitable" progress either. While the pro-democratic *activism* of his two predecessors might have been driven by the idea of a pre-established harmony between American values and the direction of history, his restraint in terms of action followed from a more sceptical view of history and human nature (Obama 2009). Here again, by pitting a "good" voluntarist belief in agency against a "bad" deterministic reliance on structures, Snyder presents us with a false choice. The matter is not whether idealistically minded politicians or citizens are willing to act or whether they passively rely on historical providence but rather whether they are able to make choices that will transform structures they did not choose.

In the last section, I deal with yet another of Snyder's dichotomies: an intergovernmental integration (such as the EU) is pitted against an imperialist expansion (such as the annexation of the Crimea by Russia). Snyder's inability to include hegemony as the third form of international power is a major flaw of Snyder's framework. Unless one takes into account the waning of American hegemony and the transformation of the Western-centric world into a poly-centric one, one can propose neither a valid analysis of the present global backlash against human solidarity and democracy, nor an adequate response to it.

PUTIN'S RUSSIA AND ASSUMPTIONS OF ANTI-TOTALITARIANISM

Snyder argues convincingly that in the Soviet Union, the ideological switch from the politics of "inevitability" (based on Marxist historical predictions) to that of "eternity" (invoking the return of the same) first took place under Brezhnev (Snyder 2018: 134). It was he who replaced the project of the radiant communist future with the memory of the Great Patriotic War as the main ideological anchor for the justification of the Soviet Union's intransigent Cold War posture, as if it had to brace itself against a comeback of the same fascist enemy which it had beaten in 1945. Once Putin had taken up a hostile attitude towards the West in the early 2010s, he fell back on this Brezhnevian position, which he combined with a Eurasianist discourse. Given the overlaps, both historical and ideological, between Eurasianism and fascism, the official doctrine of Putin's Russia could therefore be conceived as an "anti-fascist fascism" (Snyder 2018: 175). Snyder gives innumerable examples of how this paradoxical creature manifested itself in the official Russian discourse justifying the intervention in Ukraine in spring and summer 2014.

The easiness with which Brezhnevism or, in Snyder's words, neo-Stalinism could be combined with fascism and anti-Semitism serves him as a confirmation of the general approach that informs his book, and which we might call the anti-totalitarian paradigm. This framework rests on the opposition between liberal democracy on the one hand and its far-right and far-left challengers on the other. Two mutually supporting elements of the totalitarian paradigm are salient in both this work and Snyder's previous work, characteristically entitled *On Tyranny. Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (2017). *On the one hand*, the differences between the enemies of liberal democracy are levelled so that they all fit into one homogenous category. The far right and the far left are reduced to their alleged common denominator. The same process of homogenization pertains to the differences between various positions or currents within each camp. Different movements within Marxism and revolutionary socialism are presented as merely different faces of one identity. Similarly, the differences between Nazism, fascism and ideologically less aggressive authoritarianisms, such as Salazarism, are minimized. *On*

the other hand, and in order to buttress this homogenization, the opposition between liberal democracy and totalitarianism is traced back to its alleged philosophical roots.

The founding fathers of the anti-totalitarian paradigm, Karl R. Popper and Friedrich Hayek (to whose *Road to Serfdom* the title of Snyder's book alludes), identified the philosophical source of totalitarian evil (which was supposedly shared by all totalitarian ideologies from Left to Right) in its holistic approach to the world and social reality. Snyder follows in their footsteps when he identifies the roots of totalitarian danger in Hegel's philosophy, which was used as the point of departure by both Karl Marx and some fascists. Hegel also provided the common anchoring point that allowed Brezhnevism to be merged with Eurasianism. Ivan Ilyin, of late Putin's main philosophical reference, wrote his dissertation on Hegel and used his idea of the Objective Spirit (i.e., the Spirit descended into an inner-worldly collective identity) to make Russia a sacred organic entity that would be profaned if any part of it (such as Ukraine or the Caucasus) was cut off (Snyder 2018: 30–31). Ilyin was an anti-Bolshevik who, after a brief flirtation with Nazism in the 1930s, ended up subscribing to Franco and Salazar's authoritarianism after WWII (he died in 1954). Ilyin's defence of the integral nature of the Russian empire went hand in hand with his fear that it would decline and fragment as a result of the end of Bolshevik rule and the overspill of liberal values such as individualism, parliamentarianism and cosmopolitanism from the West to Russia. The overlap between Brezhnev's and Ilyin's anti-Western xenophobia facilitated Putin's merger of the ideology of late Soviet socialism with the legacy of White anti-communism. This seems to substantiate the assumption that the far right and far left are morally and politically equivalent. According to the anti-totalitarian paradigm, they are identical in their ideal essence while remaining distinct in their empirical existence. Putin's hybridization of Brezhnevism with fascism would make those two extremes identical empirically.

As has been already mentioned, the levelling of differences between and within the far right and the far left is buttressed by the identification of the philosophical substratum of the far right and the far left with Hegel's holistic transcendentalism. Snyder understands it as the absolute opposite of individualistic empiricism, which he presents as the philosophical core of liberal democracy. In his view, behind the clash of Putin's regime and his Eurasianist allies with the West is a clash of two epistemologies. Their attack on the West is an attack on "factuality" itself. Empirical facts, which can be rationally ascertained (tested or falsified), are replaced by fictional stories, which can be only believed or disbelieved. Their strategy is not so much to promote their truth compared to the untruth of their enemy, but rather to replace factual truth as such with a proliferation of narratives (Snyder 2018: 159–160). The place of factual truth is occupied by faith in a Russia that has been victimized by the West and is, therefore, innocent. A holistic epistemology that makes reference to transcendental and, therefore, unverifiable claims is pitted against an epistemology of verifiable facts which are, by definition, individual. One epistemology corresponds to totalitarian rule, and the other to liberal democracy.

Inadvertently replicating the Hegelian idealistic approach to history Snyder gives the clash of Putin's Russia with the West a philosophical content, as if it has not been primarily the result of contingent processes, events and decisions but had its core in the struggle of ideas. In other words, Putin's ideological and political posture has not resulted from a series of decisions and moves motivated by momentary opportunities and weaknesses of the West, as for instance Mark Galeotti has shown (Galeotti 2019), but rather from a resurrection of the totalitarian philosophical programme formulated by a Russian maverick one hundred years ago. In the eyes of Snyder, Putin is not only re-asserting Russia's power vis-à-vis the West and strengthening his power in Russia but waging a full-scale crusade against the Western values and way of life. In this rendering, ideas and discourses are not the tools of the will to power but, rather, the driving force behind

it. Notwithstanding the brilliance of some of Snyder's insights into the ideological configuration of today's Russia, his attempt to make of it a philosophically coherent system lacks any plausibility. Snyder defends his approach by stating that "*ideas matter*" (Snyder 2018: 19). They certainly do, but often in an unpredictable and contingent manner. Ilyin and some other Russian nationalist intellectuals of the last century (such as Lev Gumilev) that Snyder refers to (Snyder 2018: 87–89), have been certainly used by Putin's propaganda machine. To make of their ideas the source and core of today's tension between Russia and the West is to mistake a history of ideas for history *tout court* – a mistake which Snyder shares with his Hegelian enemies.

Such a methodological idealism ignores a plethora of ways in which ideas are used and misused, re-interpreted and twisted, given new meanings and re-functionalized for new tasks by concrete actors in concrete situations. An idea does not have a fixed meaning at its core which could be grasped behind the veils of its different interpretations; rather, its meaning is always one of its possible uses and interpretations. If the meaning of an idea is, therefore, not accessible in itself, without an interpretation linked to a concrete application, then we cannot know the political effects ideas have unless we study their uses in concrete contexts. Snyder starts with the opposite assumption. His analyses imply that one can infer from an epistemological and/or moral (un)soundness of an idea its (un)sound political consequences, as if the nature of a political action could be directly inferred from the nature of the ideas invoked by its protagonist.

Such a straightforward relationship between ideas and their political consequences, however, cannot be empirically substantiated. This is because ideas do not have the magical power to translate into reality by themselves. In order to have an impact they have to be interpreted by human actors, who use them for their own particular purposes in particular circumstances. According to its different appropriations, one idea can have different meanings and political consequences at different times and in different places (which does not mean that it can have any meaning in any place and time). Moreover, there is no direct and unproblematic relationship between an intention and its realization or operationalization in a given context: even an apparently good idea can have disastrous consequences.

Snyder imputes his idealistic approach also to Marxists when he claims that Lenin was "*the most important Marxist since he led a revolution in the name of philosophy*" (Snyder 2018: 31). Marx, who claimed that philosophy as such should be overcome (*aufgehoben*) by emancipatory practice, would be certainly surprised by this argument. If we replace Snyder's "realist" approach (in a scholastic sense) with a "nominalist" one, we can claim to the contrary that Karl Kautsky, defending the necessary correlation between democracy and socialism in the face of the dictatorial methods of the Bolsheviks in 1918, was as important a Marxist as Lenin was: he simply deployed a pro-democratic (one might even say "anti-totalitarian") interpretation or use of Marx (Kautsky 1918).

To reject the whole intellectual heritage of Hegelianism and Marxism is not only philosophically wrong to the extent that it is based on faith in the transcendental existence of ideas beyond their interpretative use and their magical power to translate themselves into reality. It is also politically self-defeating: it deprives us of intellectual weapons that are of vital importance in the face of our present challenges. Snyder buries these traditions because they are holistic and, therefore, supposedly lead to the establishment of regimes which suppress individual liberty. By rejecting holism in the name of individualism, however, he lets himself be caught in the sterile dichotomy. This would be fine if he were a Friedmanite neo-liberal, but he claims to be the opposite – he defends a strong welfare state that puts limits on the inequalities brought about by an unregulated capitalism (Snyder 2018: 267–268). In Western Europe, however, such states were built after WWII by political parties (both Christian and Social Democratic) under pressure from – or in

concert with – strongly institutionalized trade unions (within the context of ideological competition with the Soviet Bloc). In other words, those welfare states would not have been possible without the deployment of a strong collectivist emphasis on social and national solidarity. Thus, instead of reviving the sterile dichotomy between individualism and collectivism, it would be advisable to re-think the relationship between individual freedom and collective solidarity and look for the ways they could be mutually supportive rather than mutually exclusive. In this effort, we may learn a great deal both from practical experiences of Marxist and non-Marxist socialist movements and from the theoretical attempts to overcome this dichotomy.

THE LAST UTOPIA AND AN ANTI-STATE GLOBALISM

Snyder cannot take this road, however, because of his fidelity to the anti-totalitarian paradigm which absolutizes the opposition between the individual freedom ensured by the liberal order and the collectivist solidarity promised by the far right and the far left. He has inherited the legacy of the ideological transformation of the 1970s and 1980s, in which the anti-totalitarian paradigm played a crucial role by expressing reasons for the rejection of all collectivist utopias. Since fascism had been defeated on the global level in 1945, the favoured target became the utopias of revolutionary socialism.

Samuel Moyn called the human rights globalism that arose in the 1970s and 1980s the “last utopia” – a minimal utopia that came after the maximalist utopia of the far left had supposedly shown its true face in the Gulag (Moyn 2010). Instead of a political vision of human self-fulfilment, the last utopia laid down a negative vision of what man should not do to other men. Basic human rights were supposed to create a sacred space around every individual which should not be transgressed. Human rights internationalists of the 1970s and 1980s replaced *social solidarity*, incarnated in the constraints and redistributive schemes through which the national states had limited and harnessed capitalism, with *human* and *civic solidarity*, expressed by support for the human rights of individuals against national states. A similar transformation of solidarity could be detected in the new humanitarianism of the 1970s and 1980s, the paradigm of which was represented by the French “Doctors Without Borders”.

The modus operandi and values of these new social movements were much more individualistic than those of the old social movements, such as the movement of the working class incarnated in trade unions and socialist political parties. The Central European dissident networks of the post-68 decades can be conceived of as one of the new social movements. These dissidents defended human and civil rights *against the state* rather than the re-distribution of goods and opportunities *by the state*. They replaced social solidarity with human and civic solidarity and, by the same token, traditional political parties with civil society associations.

On both sides of the Iron Curtain there was a shift from positive projects of state transformation to negative projects of state limitation, from political programmes to moral principles that put constraints on what any political programme could do. These anti-totalitarian movements operated in the vacuum brought about by the demise of the hopes which had driven the movements of social and national emancipation. Even if their protagonists were sometimes critical of economic neo-liberalism, they could not really stand up against it because they, too, believed that there was no alternative to capitalism.

Just as the utopia of the Czechoslovak reform communists of 1968 was socialism with a human face, the last utopia of the above-mentioned new social movements of the final decades of the 20th century was capitalism with a human face. Despite this vision and will to *constrain* capitalism, however, in actual fact they took part in the process of the gradual *dismantlement* of the constraints which had countered capitalism’s asocial and anti-egalitarian consequences (Moyn 2018: 180–186). Instead of the humanization of

capitalism they contributed to its dehumanization. They thus provided yet another historical example that disproves the methodological idealism criticized above: it showed that good intentions can indeed pave the road to hell. The collapse of Soviet socialism in the late 1980s served their neo-liberal allies as the final proof that any robust state regulation of capitalism was destined to end up in poverty and unfreedom. The last ideological barrier had fallen away – capitalism did not have to prove its social superiority (by self-limiting welfare institutions), as during the Cold War, since everybody agreed that there was no alternative to it.

Snyder agrees that the kind of capitalism which has prevailed since the 1980s and 1990s undermines the social bases of democracy, but he does not see that the anti-totalitarian paradigm and movements based on it were complicit in its establishment. In Chapter Six, entitled *Equality or Oligarchy*, he rightly claims that extreme social inequality paved the way for Trump's victory (Snyder 2018: 260). Despite this acknowledgment, however, his insistence that Putin "*escorted [...] Trump [...] to power*" (Snyder 2018: 16, 219) puts an emphasis on the exogenous nature of the danger – its source is in the Kremlin, which has invented a new kind of authoritarianism and wants to spread it to the West. This idea figures on the cover of some versions of his book, where "the road to unfreedom" is represented by arrows leading from "Russia" through "Europe" to "America". This emphasis on a mono-causal explanation distracts the reader from the endogenous and structural causes elaborated on by Snyder himself in Chapter Six. It also implies that – to the extent that Putinism represents a (sort of) post-modern synthesis of neo-Stalinism and fascism – one can fight Trump and his ilk with the same tools with which the dissidents of the 1970s and 1980s fought communism.

THE RISE AND FALL OF AN ERA OF CIVIC REVOLUTIONS

Both in his last and in his previous book (Snyder 2017), Snyder conjures up hope for the rebirth of the spirit of anti-totalitarian movements. If my analysis above is correct, however, the revival of the new social movements associated with the liberal utopia of the last quarter of the 20th century cannot bring a solution to the present predicament because these movements were, however inadvertently, part of the neo-liberal transformation in which capitalist accumulation was liberated from the constraints of the welfare nation-states. The new social movements introduced flexible networks in place of the rigidly structured trade unions and parties, diverted attention from parliaments and governments to civil society and acted on moral principles instead of according to political programmes; rather than replacing established political powers they preferred to oversee, limit and judge them. They often took the form of transnational networks which were supposed to rate national governments according to universal normative standards. The international human rights movement, of which East European dissident networks were part, was a case in point. Its "negative politics" (Rosanvallón 2008: 181–182) or "anti-politics" (Konrád 1984) expressed and was based on human and civic solidarity which thrived on the ruins of the social solidarity associated with the "old social movements" that built social-democratic parties, trade-unions and welfare states.

As part of the wave of the new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s, emerging East European civil society networks helped to shape an era that replaced revolutionary and collectivist utopias with post-revolutionary and individualist alternatives that were compatible with the unfettering of capitalism. Therefore, their spirit and *modus operandi* cannot represent an adequate response to the socially disruptive effects of the neo-liberal globalization of the last forty years. Some of those who took part in those networks or helped them from across the Iron Curtain have recognized this in the wake of the financial and economic crisis of 2008–2009 (which functioned for many as an eye opener). Tony Judt – Snyder's mentor and a leading representative of the last version of the Cold War

liberalism – for instance conceded that the switch from nationally-based party politics towards morally grounded human rights or humanitarian activism in the international arena, which East European dissident were part of and which they, in turn, inspired in the West, was part of the process of the dismantlement of the Western welfare-state. Hence, it cannot be conjured up as an answer to it:

“Indeed, the example of the ‘antipolitics’ of the ’70s, together with the emphasis on human rights, has perhaps misled a generation of young activists into believing that, conventional avenues of change being hopelessly clogged, they should forsake political organization for single-issue, non-governmental groups unsullied by compromise. Consequently, the first thought that occurs to a young person seeking a way to ‘get involved’ is to sign up with Amnesty International or Greenpeace, Human Rights Watch or Doctors Without Borders. The moral impulse is unimpeachable. But republics and democracies exist only by virtue of the engagement of their citizens in the management of public affairs” (Judt 2010: 163–164).

The shift of activism from the substantive project of societal transformation to the defence of human rights, as they are ensured by the liberal-democratic procedures, was part and parcel of the coming of the post-revolutionary era. Politically speaking, this era started with the dismantlement of authoritarian regimes in Southern Europe (in Greece, Spain and Portugal) in the mid-1970s and sang its swan song in the Arab and Ukrainian revolutions (2011–2014). The era reached its peak in the revolutions of 1989–1990 in Eastern Europe that played an inspirational role in the subsequent processes of democratization in Africa and Latin America. The most important feature of those revolutions was that they did not have any programme other than the establishment of liberal democracy as it already existed in the West. Their focus was on human and civic rights, rule of law, a parliamentary regime, “checks and balances” and, last but not least, the restoration of the system of private accumulation of capital. Although some dissidents would have preferred Keynesian regulation and a strong welfare state, they were crushed by the victorious crusade of their monetarist allies. As has been shown by Ivan Szélényi and Gil Eyal, the human and civil rights liberalism of Central European dissidents had its counterpart in the economic neo-liberalism of Central European technocrats (Eyal – Szelenyi – Townsley 2001; Eyal 2003). At the beginning of the anti-communist revolutions, the relationship of these two wings of liberalism was complementary – they reinforced one another in their shared drive to liberate *both* the spontaneous self-organization of civic associations *and* the private accumulation of profits from the burden of the state interference.

The defence of liberal democracy by former dissidents was based on procedural and moral principles. It lacked any substantive political or social project. For this reason, their movements may be called “civic” rather than “political”. Their “self-limiting revolutions” corresponded perfectly to the spirit of a post-revolutionary age. Their programme was to ensure that citizens were allowed to determine the future of their lives on their own, without interference from the arbitrary power of the state. Their programme, that is, was not a political programme proper but a project to establish the procedural framework within which autonomous individuals could choose among political programmes. *Prima facie*, the idea of such a framework evokes a connotation of political and ideological neutrality, but in actual fact, it leans heavily towards the liberal ideology and its individualistic worldview. Rather than proposing a distinct idea of the *good society*, dissident civic movements stressed fair procedures which would ensure the equal right of every individual to seek his or her *good life*. Accordingly, their revolutions were not carried out by parties promoting political projects but by civic associations defending (what they

thought were) universalistic moral principles on which a (procedurally) just polity should be based.

Unlike the revolutions of the “short 20th century” (E. Hobsbawm) – from the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 via the de-colonizing revolutions of the post-war decades through the revolts of 1968 in the West – the civic revolutions of 1989 were not driven by the idea of substantive societal transformation. Their only programme was the re-constitution of the framework of basic human, civil and political rights within which substantive programmes could be formulated and promoted. The political emptiness of these civic revolutions went hand in hand with their short life span. They interrupted the normal time with an abnormal task of the reconstitution of a political body and had no lasting political legacy beyond the rights and democratic procedures that they instituted.

To the extent that today’s neo-nationalists – from Trump and Bolsonaro to Orban and Kaczyński – threaten to undermine the procedural framework of civil and political liberties, the anti-totalitarian civic movements can indeed serve as an inspiration for those who want to stand up against them. However, to the extent that their victories have been symptoms of a crisis caused by the neo-liberal globalization of the last forty years, those movements should be critically scrutinized as part of the problem rather than its solution. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s they unwittingly strengthened the triumph of globalizing capitalism as allegedly the only alternative to the state-controlled economies of Soviet regimes. This statement amounts to a retrospective self-criticism on my part. I was a signatory of the founding manifesto of the Czechoslovak Movement for Civic Solidarity in October 1988, whose programme was to a large extent taken over by the Civic Forum during the Velvet Revolution in the fall of 1989. I still think that participating in *civic emancipation* from the authoritarian communist regime was the right thing to do. In retrospect I recognize, however, that its long-term consequences went against *social emancipation*. My lesson is that rather than replacing one kind of emancipation with another we should look for ways in which they could be combined.

As has been said, the era in which civic revolutions represented the paradigm of emancipation (replacing in that role the political - socialist and national – revolutions of the previous era) sang its swan songs in the Arab and Ukrainian revolutions of 2011–2014. For a brief moment, the hopes of 1989 were revived at Tahrir Square in 2011, only to be crushed by the Syrian civil war and the Egyptian military coup in summer 2013. When the Maidan civic revolution in the winter of 2013–2014 gave way to a protracted national conflict between Ukraine and Russia, it seemed only to confirm the pessimistic lesson of the Arab Spring. Instead of the rule of law that civic activists in both countries craved, the rule of the military was restored in Egypt, and the rule of the oligarchs in Ukraine.

Other hurdles aside, the Arab and Ukrainian revolutions foundered on the problem of the articulation of civic emancipation with the transformation of political institutions. Indeed, the anti-communist revolutions of 1989–1990 in Central Europe might have become bogged down in the same problem. In contrast to the Tahrir and Maidan movements, however, they were helped by an opportune geopolitical and ideological conjuncture. They happened against the background of – indeed, as part of – the demise of the Soviet Bloc and of the establishment of a unipolar world of American/Western hegemony that put their proceduralist and individualistic values on its banner. The Tahrir and Maidan revolutions, by contrast, took place in the 2010s when this unipolar world of the Western hegemony (both geopolitical and ideological) was waning. The symptoms of this change were numerous: the (re)emergence of illiberal regional hegemony such as China and Russia, the mainstreaming of illiberal discourses and movements in the Western world and the rise of neo-nationalist and/or authoritarian leaders in non-European democracies (e.g., Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines or Narendra Modi in India), not to mention the authoritarian turn of Recep T. Erdogan in Turkey. In contrast to what Snyder

claims, Putin's embrace of neoimperialism and his meddling in European and American affairs were merely part of this global change, not its source. He might have helped Brexiters and Trump to win but was certainly not the main cause of their victories.

AGENCY VS. STRUCTURE

The anti-totalitarian paradigm provides too narrow a framework for an adequate intellectual and political response to the global neo-authoritarian turn for two main reasons. One is its exclusive focus on politics (as opposed to economy); another is its exclusive focus on civic emancipation. This kind of emancipation is good at destroying oppressive structures but insufficient to build new structures that are able to connect civil rights with social solidarity.

To combine civic with social solidarity requires transforming *civic* resistance against an authoritarian state into the *political* will to construct a constitutional welfare state. An action limiting the state power has to be transfigured into an action appropriating it for its own societal project. A civic movement has to become a political one.

In order to theorize such a transformation, we have to be able to transcend the dichotomy between individual agency, which thrives in loose civic associations and movements, and social and political structures (including political parties) that suppress and encumber agency by institutionalized collectivism. The Manichean antithesis between individualism and collectivism must be overcome. As the title of Chapter One of the *Road to Unfreedom: Individualism or Totalitarianism* (Snyder 2018: 16) announces, Snyder does the exact opposite. He invokes agency and history proper (as opposed to the pseudo-historical myths of inevitability or eternity) as a way of halting or transcending automatic functioning of structures: "*To think historically is to see the limits of structures, the spaces of indeterminacy, the possibilities of freedom*" (Snyder 2018: 112).

History, that is, should point to the moments of free action that interrupt an allegedly inevitable progress or eternal return of the same; "*it opens an aperture between inevitability and eternity, preventing us from drifting from the one to the other, helping us see the moment when we might make a difference*" (Snyder 2018: 12–13). Snyder conjures up agency that affirms itself outside structures, but he never shows how it could positively transform them, as if the main obstacles and limits of our actions were not real structures "out there", but mere mythical structures in our heads. His task, then, is to unmask them as ideological constructions so that we see history as it is made by our deeds, as if it was enough to clear our mind from the false consciousness of inevitability or eternity to find ourselves in a free space where only our choices decide what our future will be: "*Inevitability and eternity are not history but ideas within history, ways of experiencing our time that accelerate its trends while slowing our thoughts. To see, we must set aside the dark glass, and see as we are seen, ideas for what they are, history as what we make.*" Only then can we "*exit the road to unfreedom*" and "*begin a politics of responsibility*" (Snyder 2018: 277–279). The one-sided celebration of individual agency as independent of and able to subdue extant structures in *The Road to Unfreedom* and *On Tyranny* is in line with the "great men history" of the *Bloodlands* (2010). Snyder, however, deviated temporarily from his methodological individualism in *Black Earth. The Holocaust as History and Warning* (2015) by his emphasis on the territorialized structures of the nation-states as the main bulwark against the genocidal policies of the de-territorializing empires of Hitler and Stalin.

As we have seen from the above quoted passages, he renews his anti-structural bias in *The Road to Unfreedom* (2018). He conjures up virtuous action that would interrupt the swing of the pendulum from the politics of inevitability to a politics of eternity. Both types of politics are grounded in reference to structures that supposedly direct history independently of human action: one relies on the automatic development of anonymous

forces leading humankind to a better future, and the other points to the eternal return of the enemy whose aggression makes “us” innocent victims of “them” and thus whitewashes any crimes we commit in our defence: if the enemy is evil and we are fighting for sheer survival, all means are allowed.

Snyder is undoubtedly right when he places the cult of innocent victimhood at the centre of today’s neo-nationalism. Its leading representatives follow in the footsteps of the Israeli right, which made this cult the core of neo-Zionist ideology in the 1970s. This was when the reactionary Zionism of Menachem Begin was able, for the first time in Israeli history, to win politically over the progressive Zionism of the political heirs of David Ben Gurion (Zertal 2010; Gorny 2003; Segev 2000). This Israeli shift corresponds perfectly to Snyder’s idea of the point at which a linear and optimistic vision of history reverses itself into a cyclical and fatalistic one. It is no wonder, then, that most neo-nationalist and neo-authoritarian leaders across the world – from Orbán and Zeman through Trump to Jair Bolsonaro and Narendra Modi – love today’s Israel, where the neo-Zionist right reigns supreme.

If the model of politics of eternity is adequate to express an important feature of the current neo-nationalist wave, then the model of politics of inevitability is too broad and, therefore, too indeterminate to do the work which Snyder needs from it. It comprises (this time in breach of the anti-totalitarian paradigm) both revolutionary collectivism (Marxism or progressive nationalism) and evolutionary liberalism. Snyder rejects both of them for one reason – they assume a pre-established harmony between historical necessity and moral ideals and, therefore, minimize the weight of virtuous action. In their reliance on structure, which transcends and determines agency, they resemble their cyclical opposite – the politics of eternity. Thus, despite a *prima facie* triad, Snyder once again ends up in a dichotomy: agency *interrupts* structure (be it linear or cyclical), which *threatens* agency.

This zero-sum game relationship between freedom and necessity corresponds to *the modus operandi* of the civic revolutions. It correlates with the above-mentioned difficulty which they have in translating their emancipatory energies into social-democratic institutions. Their main obstacle in this is the inertia of the socio-economic, geopolitical and cultural structures. The liberal politics of inevitability believed that history itself prepared the structural conditions for emancipation. Snyder rejects this belief as illusory and places the onus of change squarely and exclusively on the responsible action of free agents. These are able to suspend the self-reproduction of structures and begin a new world from scratch. Through this new beginning they interrupt the eternal return of the past and open up the future. Hence the title of Chapter Four of his book: *Novelty or Eternity* (Snyder 2018: 111).

The paradigmatic philosophical elaboration of action as a new beginning which transcends automatic processes, was provided by Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution* (Arendt 1963). She stressed the paradox of revolutionary beginnings that always point to the desired future, whereas in actual fact they reach their main goal in the present – by starting something new they actualize human freedom as such. According to Arendt, the political institutions which are to be built by revolutionaries have to ensure a stable space for the action of those who are able to begin, whereas other, non-political questions are relegated to outside this political space. Snyder is not an aristocratic republican like Arendt, but a liberal democrat with social-democratic leanings. Hence he shifts the centre of gravity from the political conditions of action to the social condition of (democratic) representation, which is, in his view, equality (Snyder 2018: 260–261). He does not reflect, however, upon other structural conditions such as the distribution of international power (unipolarity/multipolarity) and the place which a given society occupies within it (core/periphery). Neither does he reflect upon other historically contingent features of

a society such as its ethno-national and class composition, the level of economic (under) development or previous experience (or lack of it) of democratic rule.

A good example of Snyder's underestimation of these structural factors is provided by his – in other respects ground-breaking – book *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (2003). There, he presents as one of his research problems the question of why the collapse of communism led on the one hand to bloody conflicts among Yugoslav nationalities, and on the other to the establishment of co-operative relations among Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians and Belarussians, albeit that the latter may have inherited just as many mutual grievances from the past as the former (Snyder 2003: 2–3). His answer is that unlike the Yugoslav intellectual elite, the Polish intellectual elite had in the 1970s already drawn up a plan for the peaceful settlement of national conflicts, and the post-communist political elite immediately started to carry it out once the Soviet bloc began to crumble (Snyder 2003: 217–255). The chance of sliding back into the diplomatic or ethnic warfare which marked the Polish-Lithuanian and Polish-Ukrainian relations between 1918 and 1945 was thus pre-empted.

Despite his own detailed depiction of the process which led to the creation of an ethnically and religiously (almost) homogenized Poland after WWII (as opposed to the pre-war Poland, where one third of the population belonged to religious and ethnic minorities) Snyder's enthusiasm at the virtuous *action* of Polish intellectuals and politicians makes him forget the deep *structural* difference between Poland and Yugoslavia. The latter was burdened by an ethno-religious heterogeneity which was entrenched in and reified by the institutions of communist ethno-federalism (Brubaker 1996: 23–77). This situation severely limited what even the most virtuous politician could have done at a time of collapsing communist rule.

POLITICS OF INEVITABILITY? REALLY?

This brings us to the question of what the outside world and the hegemonic West could do for the establishment of democracy in Yugoslavia. Did, for instance, the intervention of NATO forces and the Dayton agreement, engineered by the Clinton administration in 1995, usher in a liberal-democratic future for Bosnia? Does the rule of law really function in today's Kosovo, which was liberated from Serbian rule by NATO in 1999? It seems that the caution and restraint of Obama's foreign policy was not the result of his belief in the "inevitability" of progress, as Snyder seems to suggest, but rather the result of an opposite attitude – the acknowledgement that there are limits as to what any outside intervention can do as far as the establishment of the rule of law and democracy is concerned (Dueck 2015).

Still, if Obama's policy of America's retrenchment does not fall under "the politics of inevitability", then Bill Clinton and George W. Bush's interventionism does not fit it either. Their belief in pre-established harmony between history and liberal democracy did not make them passive, as Snyder implies, but active. Their assumption that history is on their side – that there is a synergy between their foreign interventions invoking liberal-democratic values and anonymous structural forces – was supported by the victorious end of the Cold War and the establishment of American hegemony on the global level. It is no wonder, then, that this belief began to lose its credibility once this hegemony started to wane in the wake of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Not only the disastrous consequences of this action, but also the outcomes of the Clinton interventions of the 1990s proved the limits of what military intervention is able to do for the establishment of the rule of law and democracy. After the Russian intervention in Ukraine, Snyder waged a vigorous one-man campaign for clear Western backing to be given to Ukraine against Russia. More recently, he concluded that the West had failed Ukraine. What exactly would it take to not fail Ukraine? To liberate Crimea militarily in order to help

the Ukrainian oligarchical regime transform itself into one supporting the rule of law and democracy? Did any intervention of this kind in the post-Cold War period have a hope of attaining such a goal?

The post-Cold War belief in the pre-established harmony between history and liberal democracy has allowed for the bridging of the philosophical gap between structure and agency, determinism and voluntarism. Snyder reacted to the breakdown of this belief by reducing it to the first of the poles of which it was a synthesis (“inevitability”) and proposed to switch to the opposite pole: instead of on structure, we should rely on agency. The misconception of the post-Cold War attitude as passivity has led him to the conclusion that we should replace it by action. If I am right in claiming that the prevailing attitude of the previous era did not stem from a one-sided historic determinism but rather from its articulation with moral(istic) voluntarism, then the right answer to its crisis would not be to pit one pole against the other but to re-articulate them differently: even if there is no pre-established harmony between historical process and our moral ideals, we should continue our efforts to translate those ideals into action. The change in attitude entails the change in the nature of action. While historical providence minimized its properly political character, its absence brings it to the fore. Even if the harmony between structure and agency is no longer granted, we have to interconnect the two sides. In other words, political action has to work even with forces and trends that run counter to its moral motivations. It cannot hope to change the course of history, but nevertheless it has to try to curb it in such a way that – under the given circumstances – the worst outcome may be avoided and the best one possibly attained.

Despite the absence of pre-established harmony between structure and agency, their relationship should not be seen as a zero sum game. Agency should be able not only to interrupt, halt or limit structure, but also to transform or modify it. In more concrete terms, civic action should be connected to and make space for political action proper. To paraphrase a classic, whom Snyder deems hopelessly totalitarian, while people make their history through their choices, they should be able to take into account and work with conditions which they did not choose.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

Snyder’s reflection on European empires, nation-states and supra-national integration in Chapter Three of *The Road to Unfreedom* goes beyond the anti-totalitarian paradigm to the extent that it does not take for granted the idea that the democratic self-determination of different societies should automatically usher in peaceful relations between them (as the so-called “democratic peace thesis” claims). He argues convincingly that the idea of the just and stable co-existence of democratic nation-states is a mirage (Snyder 2018: 76–77). In actual fact, Western European nation-states were colonial empires, and when their overseas possessions began to crumble after WWII their metropolises found soft landings in the project of European integration. On the other hand, the national sovereignty of the ethno-linguistic groups that had lived in the Eastern European empires before WWI did not bring long-term peaceful co-existence. Rather, it ushered in yet another war, which ended up re-establishing an updated empire in the form of the Soviet Bloc. After its fall the most successful post-communist countries found safe haven in the European Union. In this they followed the southern European countries that joined the EU after they moved from authoritarianism to democracy in the mid-1970s. The lesson is that neither former empires nor the ethnic nations that liberated themselves from them can survive without supra-national integration.

On the general level I agree with the thesis. The problem is that, like Snyder’s dichotomies between individualism and collectivism and agency and structure, the relationship between integration and empire is presented as an absolutized moral

opposition which does not allow us any other choice than joining the good side against the bad one. Whereas empire brings about exploitation and violence, integration establishes justice and peace. It would be very comfortable if we lived in a world in which our choices would be so clearly cut that they would become superfluous. Who would ever choose the evil against the good? Unfortunately, the real world is filled with moral ambiguity. Most of the roads we are to choose among are neither completely good, nor completely evil but rather lie somewhere in between.

In international politics, such a third road – which, in Snyder's world, is an “excluded third” – filling the gap between supra-national *integration* and neo-nationalist *empire* is *hegemony*. Without it the world of the 20th and 21st centuries cannot be adequately described (Ikenberry 2014). Hegemony is a form of international power which influences and regulates the behaviour of other states without exerting direct and formalized imperial control over them; at most it uses merely intermittent punitive interventions against unruly (“rogue”) states to dissuade others from their kind of behaviour. Hegemonic rule is a specific form of international power that has developed hand in hand with modern capitalism, in which the centre of gravity of social power has shifted from direct power of man over man to an indirect power mediated by wealth (Arrighi – Silver 1999; Wallerstein 2004). The hegemon combines coercion with consent, rules-based governance with arbitrary force, and direct with indirect means of influencing the lesser states.

As the global hegemon, America differentiated itself from its predecessors, who had combined hegemonic with imperial rule. Unlike them, America denounced empire and gave explicit primacy to indirect influence over direct command, consent over coercion, rules-based relations over arbitrary power, and multilateralism over unilateralism (Ikenberry 2013). In addition, America linked its hegemony not only to the promotion and spread of free trade but also – albeit often purely rhetorically – with the spread of freedom and democracy. After the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the USA became the centre of global power. This unipolar moment represented the geopolitical context of the spread of freedom and democracy eastwards: from America and Western Europe to Eastern Europe and Russia. We cannot understand why the flow of political influence was suddenly reversed and began to go in the opposite direction in the last decade (as depicted on the cover of Snyder's book) without taking into account the weakening of American hegemony.

Snyder's silence about this geopolitical context is deafening. Only indirectly, through his indignation at Russian interference in domestic American affairs, does the reader learn what is at stake for him. As the global hegemon, America regularly and quite explicitly interfered in the domestic affairs of other countries – sometimes helping to change their regimes according to its own democratic values, at other times condoning or even buttressing their authoritarian character as the price for their cooperation (e.g., the countries of the Persian Gulf during the Arab Spring). America is now facing an effort by another great power – which, just recently, found itself in the American sphere of influence – to do the same to it. And, as if it were not enough that its hegemonic power is being challenged, its president has renounced the responsibilities which went hand in hand with it. Trump's slogan “America First” makes a nice parallel to Yeltsin's liberation of Russia from the burdens of the USSR. As the end of the Soviet state was announced from its Russian centre in 1991, so the end of Western hegemony was announced from its American centre in 2017. In both cases, the centre signalled that from now on it will care only about itself. In Trump's terms, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, American “patriotism” triumphed over American “globalism”.

After four years of Trump's presidency, we know that the surrender of America's responsibilities has not entailed a halt in the use of its asymmetrical position vis-à-vis others to its own advantage, or in its asserting itself against its peripheries. Trump's

isolationism, that is, has not made America stop being a super-power which is militarily, economically and politically present – directly or indirectly – in all major world regions. It has merely made it use its global preponderance to further its narrowly defined interests much more recklessly and aggressively than previously, that is, without any regard (or at least a pretense of it) for the interests of lesser powers or less developed and wealthy societies. The liberal globalism of Bill Clinton and the neoconservative globalism of George W. Bush could always be accused of hypocrisy – veiling the egoism of the global hegemon in the rhetoric of universalistic concerns. Their claims to care about the interests of others, however, allowed their detractors to take them at their word. Some sort of discussion or negotiation was possible. If a global great power drops the claim that it uses its preponderance to create a better future for humankind as a whole, and instead starts to ground its policies exclusively in its particular interests, then it becomes dangerous not only to itself but to others, since, by definition, its power reaches to all the regions of the world. Because it has dropped any pretense to standing for the universal interest and values, arguing with it becomes superfluous, and the only possible way of countering its ambition is by ruse or force.

Since Snyder avoided the very concept of hegemonic power in favour of the Manichean dichotomy between (nationalist) empire and (supra-national) integration, he became blind to the possibility that America could become a global threat to the world's stability and peace. Thus, in the last chapter of *Black Earth*, he points to the dangers which may arise from the neo-colonialist policies of Russia and China (Snyder 2015: 329–333), but there is no hint of the dangers that could come from the misguided policies of the USA (although he mentions a dangerous domestic lobby of apocalyptic Evangelicals who support occupation policies of Israel and deny climate change [Snyder 2015: 229–333]). By leaving out hegemony as the third form of international integration (besides empire and confederation) in *The Road to Unfreedom*, Snyder avoids naming the place from which he as an American academic speaks. Since the mid-20th century, the USA has been neither a nation-state like the others, nor an empire like GB in the 19th century, but a hegemonic world-power that has systematically intervened (ideologically or otherwise) in the domestic affairs of the states within its sphere of influence.

Because he refused to take into account American power in the world (i.e., hegemony), the idea of America as the major threat to the world was beyond his imagination. Once this idea got materialized in the person of the current American president, no other options were left to Snyder than to look for an external enemy to be blamed for it. Thus, Trump had to be depicted as a manifestation and product of Russian neo-imperialism rather than of American neo-nationalism. Insofar as the mono-causal explanation (as it figures on the cover of *The Road to Unfreedom*) amounts to the main message of the book, Trump's America is presented as a victim of Putin and not as a rogue global power that has put the world in danger.

Let us sum up. The conceptual opposition between a neo-nationalist *empire* as represented by Putin's Russia and a post-nationalist *confederation* as represented by the EU is a hopelessly flawed tool for grasping our present dilemmas since it leaves the most important aspect of the post-communist times out of the picture: American *hegemony* defined the basic global parameters of the last era, and its unravelling defines the times of its passing – our times, that is. Snyder's blindness to this major background condition of our present predicament invalidates his diagnosis and cure. Leaving out the concept and reality of American hegemony while attacking real or alleged ways in which Russia has been recently interfering in the domestic affairs of Western Europe and America, Snyder slides inadvertently into the posture of innocent victimhood that he so aptly attacks in his analysis of Putin's Russia. Claiming that it was an external enemy who escorted Donald Trump to the White House, instead of looking for domestic

contradictions that fuelled Trump's victory, makes him resemble the monster he is fighting with. Behind the façade of his liberal internationalism a spectre of American nationalism is lurking.

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