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SUICIDE OF THE WEST



BOOK REVIEW

Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics is Destroying American Democracy by Jonah Goldberg

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Reviewed by John Towey

Jonah Goldberg's latest book, "Suicide of the West," is regarded by many familiar with his work as his best to date. It is a harrowing and cautionary tale of Western civilization, and the breadth of Goldberg's

research is commensurate with the scope of his book's subject: the entire development of Western society and the prospects for its continuation along a modern trajectory. For Goldberg, the task of reconciling the

pitfalls of modernity must first begin by recognizing the core principle of political life. In Goldberg's examination, this focuses on the fundamentality of human nature and the political order that grows out of it.

Man, in his nature, comprehends the world in terms of the tribe and individual status. This has been the irreconcilable truth of our existence from the Paleolithic Era through today. From the time of our birth up until the latest stages of our life, we are programmed with an inherent skepticism towards strangers and deference to those with status and power. This immutable part of our nature manifested politically in several hundred centuries of aristocracies and disproportionate power structures, comprising what is now commonly understood as the pre-modern political tradition. Goldberg contends that the break from the pre-modern paradigm was nearly inconceivable when considered in a historical context replete with regimes structured by human nature. The achievement of the liberal democratic revolution in the face of its seeming impossibility is why Goldberg ascribes it the moniker, "the Miracle." In a blink, aristocratic rule, economic stagnation, and the arbitrary application of laws ceded to liberal democratic rule, aided by a free market order, sufficiently codified in constitutions guaranteeing man's rights and liberties.

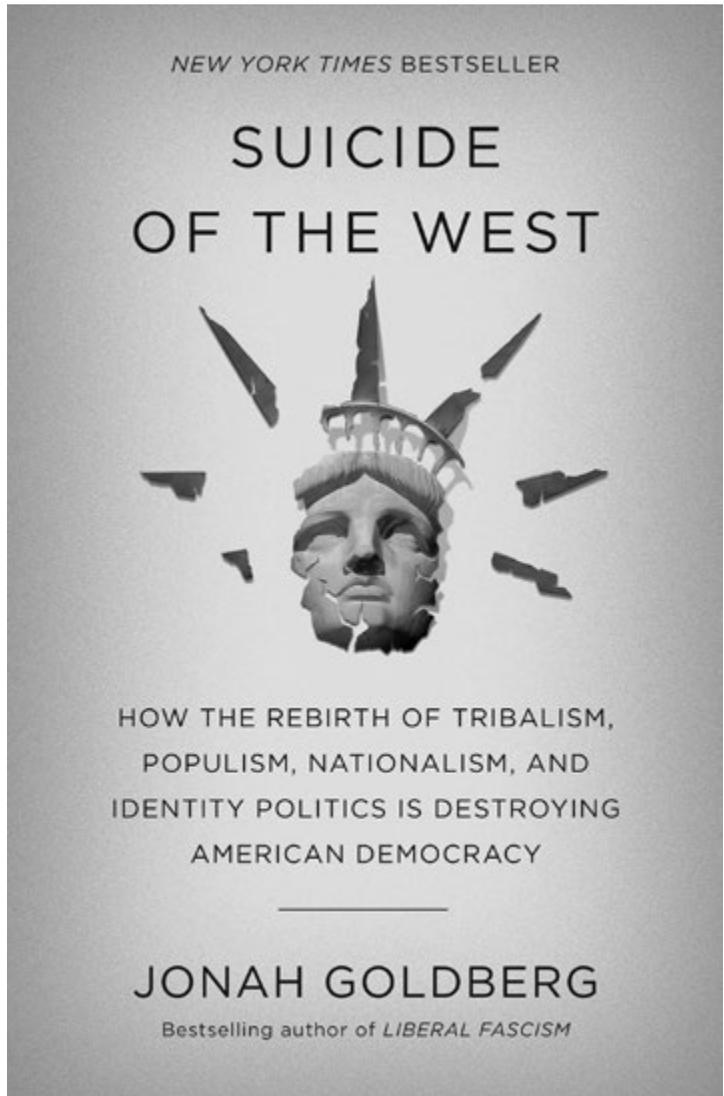
The Miracle was born out of what Goldberg likes to label the "weirdness" of 18th Century Great Britain. The Enlightenment, and the new political order it authored, was primed to take off on the island because of the nation's uncommon tradition of written law and political pluralism. The

British proved to be exemplars of modern governance because their political tradition stemmed from the Magna Carta and its emphasis on the rights of the individual and just taxation. Moreover, the post-Westphalian creation of the secular nation state dispersed power within British society, creating the pluralistic structure required for democratic rule. Proceeding this revolution, there blossomed a consequent economic revolution larger than anything seen since the hunting/gathering culture gave way to agriculture. Unchained from the economic taboos and superstitions of medieval rulers, industry grew, and new markets emerged.

The United States universalized the British ideal. The American ethos, as it existed at the founding, consisted of a reverence for the creative energy of the entrepreneur and a due respect for the autonomy of the individual. In Great Britain, these principles faced obstacles to application in the form of rigid and stratified British political traditions, which constrained individual liberty and economic enterprise to specific aristocratic classes. The ideals of the Miracle, although born of British political thought, found their full adaptation in the American model. This socio-political order is the high-water mark of civilization. For Goldberg, progress properly understood has to proceed from this baseline liberality. When we steer away from the tenets of the Miracle, we quicken our dissolution. When we fail to recognize the brilliance of the Miracle and instead choose to deride its contributions to the world, our conversation about Western society is reduced to an elegy.

The corruption of the Miracle was

prompted, in part, by the prominence of the progressives. Goldberg's handling of the progressives is fair and circumspect, never admonishing them needlessly. Nonetheless, Goldberg's primary contention is that the progressive model is the revival of a pre-modern aristocratic structure of governance. At the heart of this model is the notion that government can be best administered by a class of apolitical, scientific experts capable of rising above the dog-eat-dog environment of politics. However, the principle of the disinterested expert wrongly idealized human nature. The disinterested experts were, in fact, not disinterested at all. In fact, Goldberg would contend that they were very interested. The giants of the progressive movement would not settle for just being the visionaries of the new government. Their horizon stretched well beyond the realm of academia and think tanks into the highest echelons of government, where they themselves would enact the reform. The intelligentsia of administration has been, and still is, a tribe. Within the tribe of this new form of government, ambition no longer counteracts ambition; instead, ambition begets ambition in a continual effort to expand government.



The Administrative State

The administrative state is the legacy of the progressives. Conceived in the spirit of progress, the administrative state has been anything but progressive. Disconcertingly reminiscent of our tribal past, the modern administrative state bears a resemblance to medieval guild economies where special interests controlled entry into the marketplace. Free enterprise and open market competition, which have been

hallmarks of the Western Miracle, are now being suppressed by civil servants who impede market entry through complex regulations and occupational licensing. Goldberg's description, which is far better than my own, brilliantly summarizes this point, lamenting, "Guild economics is a sign of entropy and decay for the body politic. Such sclerosis has helped hasten the demise of empires from ancient Rome to the Soviet Union."

While this book is an insightful analysis of surface-level political developments, the true mark of Goldberg's brilliance, and the point of intrigue in "Suicide of the West," is his ability to look inward and examine the philosophical roots of cultural and social movements in the West. The problem that we are left to wrestle with is a systemic ingratitude towards liberal democracy in political discourse animated by a Nietzschean spirit of resentment. Instead of focusing on the profound economic and political achievements of liberal democracy, we direct our focus to the inequities and inadequacies of the system, creating the impression that liberal democracy has failed us. Common now is a romantic longing for the pre-modern era where man's existence and political life were more natural, a sentiment Goldberg attributes in full to Rousseau.

Goldberg observes that our society's disrespect for the democratic and capitalistic order has placed us in the impossible dilemma of picking between two

forms of statism: progressivism on the left and nationalism on the right. Of the many maxims Goldberg drives home in his work, few resonate as sharply as this: When we fail to civilize our world in the framework of the Miracle, the vices of human nature will rush in. The allure of populism and nationalism is no less surprising than the popularity of progressivism. All of these systems function as a retort to modernity by fostering authoritarian power structures and tribal impulses aimed at romanticizing a pre-modern past.

Jonah Goldberg's "Suicide of the West" is a prolific piece of political commentary for the sole reason that it offers not only a sobering exposition of the current state of our system of politics but also an invitation to reverse its course. Inherent in the word "suicide" is a choice. Decline is not inevitable; rather, it involves an ongoing series of decisions that confront us daily. The remedy to the tribalism and nationalism, which underscore the book's title, is a renewal of gratitude to the principles of the Miracle. Keeping with the Goldberg theory, the shape of society is a result of the story we tell about it. If we can renew the Western saga of freedom and prosperity, we can prove ourselves worthy of our inheritance.

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