

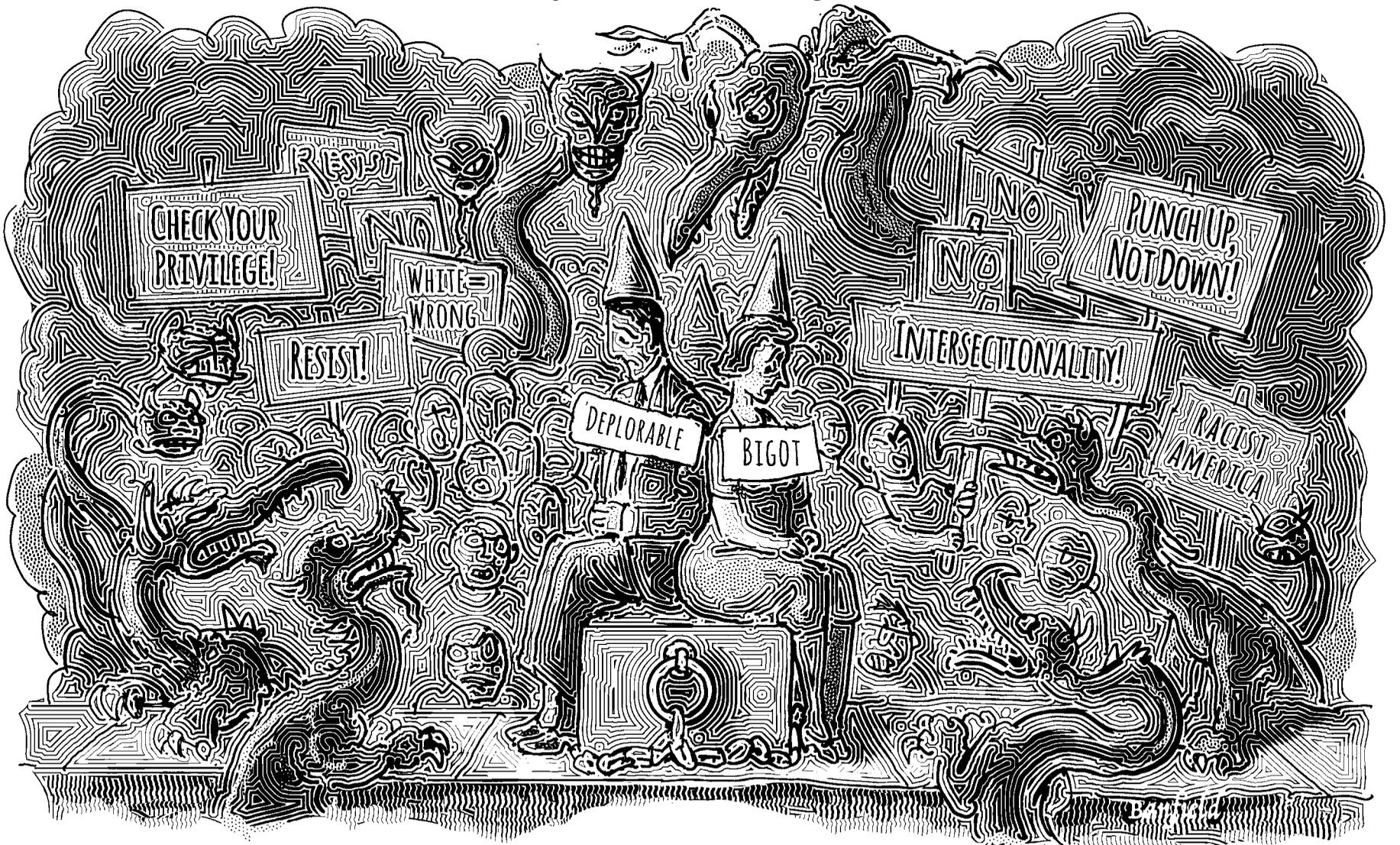
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# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

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Book Review by James W. Ceaser

## APOCALYPSE NOW

*Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy,*  
by Jonah Goldberg. Crown Forum, 464 pages, \$28



**W**ANT A BOOK ON EVERYTHING? Jonah Goldberg's *Suicide of the West* comes close. In a few hundred pages, the *National Review* senior editor and American Enterprise Institute fellow treats the evolution of man, the Enlightenment, the American Founding, capitalism, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Romanticism, the administrative state, rock and roll, populism, the family, and, inevitably, Donald Trump. Nor are these discussions brief or superficial. Goldberg is a prodigious reader, and the book is replete with extensive citations to important thinkers, especially modern social scientists, ranging from Ernest Gellner to Francis Fukuyama.

Aficionados of Goldberg's blog, which includes weekly updates on the exploits of his two canine masters, may be surprised at the book's scholarly tone. "I hope readers see this as a serious book," he writes. But those who persist through its lengthy anthropological,

philosophical, and historical reflections will be rewarded with some choice Goldbergisms, such as his description of Senator Ted Cruz as "a deeply establishmentarian politician who knew all of the lyrics of populism but could not convincingly carry the tune," or his account of Trump's "warning to his followers that they would one day suffer from chronic winning fatigue."

**S**UICIDE OF THE WEST WANDERS IN many different directions, but it is held together by a distinctive thesis. It begins with a bird's eye account of the development of *Homo sapiens* since his initial appearance some 200,000 years ago. Though possessing a good degree of adaptability, the post-Neanderthal species is hardwired in certain ways, possessing a definite underlying nature. Human beings began apparently by scavenging, before they turned at some point to the more aggressive occupation of hunt-

ing. In groups they eventually became adept at pillaging, murdering, raping, plundering, torturing, and, at some point, enslaving. All told, man doesn't appear by Goldberg's account to be a particularly edifying creature. The term he uses to describe human nature, which appears in the book hundreds of times, is "tribal."

Goldberg moves quickly from the first agricultural revolution and the Axial Age (9000 to 2000 B.C.) to the modern era. During this period, which merits more attention (the book's first draft was twice as long), man discovered philosophy, poetry, the city state, empires, diverse political forms, monotheistic religions, and systems of law, not to mention seamanship, steel, weaponry, medicine, architecture, astronomy, and mathematics. For at least a portion of mankind civilization then existed at the highest level it may ever have attained—even without television, air travel, and the internet.



Goldberg picks up the story in more detail with the advent of modern constitutionalism and liberal democratic capitalism. “[N]early all human progress has taken place in the last three hundred years,” by which we must assume he means material progress. He marvels at a diagram displaying the average wealth per person for the past 2,000 years, which is essentially flat and right near zero until 1800, when the curve begins a spectacular rise, making it “the most important ‘hockey stick’ chart in all of human history.” (He adds a detailed appendix, citing the work of tireless scholars who seek to specify the actual living standard, measured in modern dollars per day, for people over the past millennia.) The graph is meant to stun the average reader, who is asked to swallow such unfathomable assertions as that “the average member of the working poor in the United States lives better by any imaginable material measure than the wealthiest human a thousand years ago.”

**G**OLDBERG ATTRIBUTES THE CHANGE responsible for this growth to what he calls “the Miracle” (with a capital M), meaning the advent of modern commerce and constitutionalism. Despite common linguistic usage, the Miracle is not the result of

divine intervention but of a chance concatenation of events that we cannot fully understand. For someone who upholds the primacy of ideas in directing history (civilization “was created by ideas,” he writes), Goldberg in this case is content to jump over the preparatory thoughts of Machiavelli, René Descartes, and Francis Bacon, not to mention Galileo and Isaac Newton, and go right to the economic and political arrangements that supported freedom. It is the bourgeois freedom of England, and then America, that ultimately set in motion the amazing economic transformation of which we are the beneficiaries.

Goldberg is less concerned, however, with the origins of the Miracle than with its status today. His most surprising claim is that—properly understood—we live at the end of history. By this he doesn’t mean that things can’t change. To the contrary, they can deteriorate, and we can fall away, out of forgetfulness or ignorance, from the principles of liberal democratic capitalism. Nonetheless, he claims, “Look around, everybody: You’re standing at the end of history. In terms of economics, no other system creates wealth.... [W]e cannot improve upon the core assumptions of the Miracle.” This claim allows him at many different points to assert, reverting

to italics for emphasis, that the abandonment of these principles would be *reactionary* and a step *backward*.

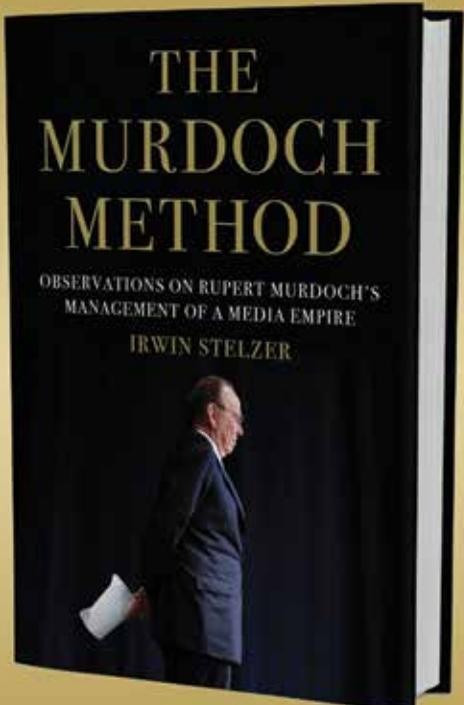
We are today, he believes, at the gravest risk of relapsing and giving up all that we have gained. This would be the suicide of the West. The source of this threat is Romanticism, which is the name Goldberg bestows on a way of thinking that sets aside intelligence and reason, and gives way to the “primacy of feelings.” Romanticism, traceable especially to Rousseau, is the “school of rebellion against the unnatural nature of the Enlightenment and all of the Enlightenment’s offspring: capitalism, democracy, natural rights, and science.” Romanticism pairs with the ubiquitous tribalism to form the two horsemen of our apocalypse. One can throw in as well “populism,” which is “not an ideology. It is a feeling”; and the growing appeal of identity politics.

Goldberg expresses a version of the old quarrel, sketched by Plato in the last book of the *Republic*, between philosophy and reason, on the one hand, and poetry and emotion, on the other. Romanticism is the appeal to emotion, uncorrected and unguided by reason. It pervades our culture like a drug, appearing inside mass society as a tonic that captivates modern man. “Entertainment is fundamentally romantic and tribal.” Romanticism works to cede control to the “angry drumbeats of our primitive brains and the inner whispers of our feelings.”

**G**OLDBERG ONCE DISCOUNTED THE power of this Romantic reaction, which he thought was largely under control, cowed by rational defenses of constitutionalism and liberal capitalism. But the rise of Donald Trump during the writing of this book forced a reassessment. Trumpism has shattered, in particular, the force of conservative thought, the strongest advocate of these principles, and “showed me that the American right was far more susceptible to the corrupting tug of human nature than I had ever imagined.” For Goldberg, Trump’s brand of politics represents nothing less than “a potentially catastrophic surrender of conservative principles, and a sign of how deeply the corruption has set in.”

It seems almost inevitable in 2018 that anything touching on the subject of politics, even a book that begins with the development of *Homo sapiens*, will somehow make its way around to the subject of Donald Trump. Goldberg gives over a large part of his book to Trump, situating himself as an implacable antagonist. He calls the president

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a demagogue, populist, tribalist, nationalist, and fraud, to mention only some of the epithets. Goldberg acknowledges that his criticism over the past two years has cost him much, as some Trump partisans have not only strongly objected to but viciously attacked him. And yet, though it takes 315 pages for him to get there, and is virtually hidden away in a backhanded comment, Goldberg mentions that he preferred Trump in the 2016 election. In the choice between Hillary Clinton's progressive social engineering and Donald Trump's nationalism—a choice he never wanted—Goldberg inches towards doing what every serious citizen in the end must do: make a decision in the real world. "[A]s much as I hold Trump in contempt," he writes, "I am still compelled to admit that, if my vote would have decided the election, I probably would have voted for him." Probably.

Unlike Oswald Spengler, who 100 years ago published his blockbuster, *The Decline of the West*, which predicted the inevitable collapse of European dominance and the death of modern civilization, Goldberg begins his book with an almost defiant defense of free will: "Nothing is foreordained." We always have a choice, and Goldberg is at great pains to rally Americans to the defense of liberal capitalism. Yet as the book proceeds, reason leads him in the grim direction of prognosticating collapse. The subtitle virtually tells the story: *How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy*.

**T**HE CENTRAL THEME OF HIS ARGUMENT bears repeating. It revolves around the ever-widening gap Goldberg sees between modern principles of liberal capitalism and humans' brutish inclinations. After hundreds of thousands of years, man at long last has discovered best practices in politics, which move us further and further from our underlying nature:

Capitalism is unnatural. Democracy is unnatural. Human rights are unnatural. The world we live in today is unnatural, and we stumbled into it more or less by accident. The natural state of mankind is grinding poverty punctuated by horrific violence terminating with an early death.

Our world, constructed since the advent of the Miracle, goes all the way down to how we compute our existence. No longer, when we're thinking rationally, do we grasp the world as

a "whole" and as a place where we can find meaning and authenticity. Instead we divide and partition things: one category for business, another for family, another for religion, and so on down the line. Seeing reality in distinct silos "is wholly alien to how man evolved to live."

Our situation naturally leads one to ask why we shouldn't just submit to the siren song of tribalism and allow nature to reclaim us. This question, for Goldberg, should answer itself. The facts, as shown by the chart that sketches man's progress, prove beyond any doubt the superiority of our modern world, which "has helped to produce enormous prosperity, cure diseases, reduce violence, and liberate humanity from millennia of superstitions that held individual humans from realizing their potential." And yet, and ever more so, so many in our society remain oblivious, unconvinced, or unsatisfied: "our inner tribesman doesn't like this world, and he is desperate to get back to where he came from." Everything today is objectively better, but our modern way of seeing things suffers from the fact that it does "not give us much by way of meaning... [W]e miss the unity of the pre-Enlightenment mind." Romanticism, by contrast, promises a way out and a path to authenticity. Only it does so falsely. It represents a "totalitarian temptation, and a corruption of the civilization we are blessed to live in. And it is utterly natural."

**G**OLDBERG'S ANSWER TO THIS DILEMMA, at least when the book begins, is to ask us to live up to our responsibilities and stay true to thought and reason, not feelings. He no doubt intends his book to be an important reminder of the stakes. He appeals, it seems almost from nowhere, to the virtue of gratitude, asking us to give back to liberal democratic principles what those principles gave to us. Yet by the time Goldberg reaches his conclusion, his tone seems to shift. Perhaps sobered by the difficulty of the dilemma he has described and the challenge of Trumpism, he turns in two other directions. First, directly to God. Despite having banished religion from the book in its first sentence—"There is no God in this book"—Goldberg breaks faith and comes back to a largely Biblical deity, reminding us that God is watching, and that, when the Miracle happened, it was God, "as defined by organized Christianity and informed by Judaism, who shaped our understanding of what right and proper human behavior was." God, let's say, was at least somewhere in the neighborhood. And second, he turns to dogmatic belief. In

a surprising change, Goldberg shifts to what reason may not be able to do for us, but what a new type of romanticism can. "The cure for what ails us is dogma. The only solution to our woes is for the West to re-embrace the core ideas that made the Miracle possible, not just as a set of policies, but as a tribal attachment, a dogmatic commitment."

**J**ONAH GOLDBERG HAS WRITTEN A POWERFUL lament, sure to make its mark on contemporary political debates. It may well be that his fervid efforts to link anthropology directly to the current political situation go beyond what is reasonable, though there is no doubt that forging such a connection is a key reason he wrote this book. The larger theoretical issues nevertheless stand on their own and merit independent consideration. His diagnosis of man's nature, which fixes the framework of his argument, raises the most important questions. On this point the difficulty is not what he includes in his description of the natural, which focuses on tribal instincts, but what he leaves out. The tribal view, vague as it is, leaves unexplained how humans have managed to evolve as they have, from, say, a dimly lit cave to the marvels of Mont St. Michel, or from a simple hunter to the extremes of a Stalin. Something can't come from nothing.

For anyone who has contemplated the cave paintings at Lascaux, it is clear that our species from an early period possessed a spiritual or aesthetic impulse, along with perhaps a wish to communicate to posterity. Further on, and possessing the gift of language, man came to use this tool to develop different modes of addressing the world around him and channeling his wonder, eventually coming to the higher developments of literature and philosophy. An investigation of man's nature would need to look not just at selected aspects of beginnings, but at different ends to which humans have aspired; and not only to the ends that all men have in common, but also to the ends of men of unusual talents and capacities. This kind of inquiry would make clear how much Goldberg's description of man as governed by primitive tribal yelps oversimplifies human nature. A fuller account of man might help us discern what we may aspire to, and what limits it behooves us to respect. The best of conservative political thought, which goes beyond questions of economics, has always asked us to think in this way.

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