



JIM'S READING CORNER

After having read *Bloodlands*, I was very interested in discovering *The Road to Unfreedom*. Snyder was a close friend of Tony Judt, whom I admired very much, and shares his view of the EU as a model of democracy, decency and the rule of law. (The book opens with the birth of Snyder's child in a Viennese maternity in 2010, "in conditions most Americans could only dream of"). A model, unfortunately, under increasing threats from dark forces, both inside and above all outside of the EU.

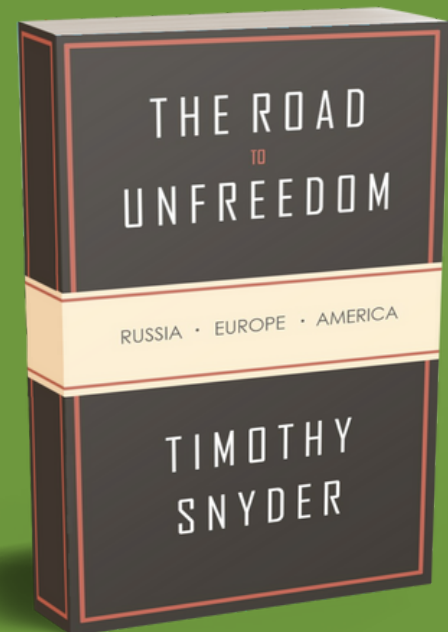
Snyder is as always fascinating to read. If I have a slight reservation on this book it is because it falls into the academic trap of inventing theoretical concepts and then squeezing reality in a narrative based on the concepts. He distinguishes the politics of *INEVITABILITY* and the politics of *ETERNITY*. Both have merits, but he packs too much into them, particularly the second one. *INEVITABILITY* is based on the tale of the end of history and a sense of linear progress towards Western-style democracy. In the (initial) American version: nature created the market which created democracy and leads us to happiness. In the European version, the lessons drawn from the wars led to the creation of an integrated Europe and a post-modern system that will triumph everywhere. *ETERNITY*, on the other hand, places one chosen country at the centre of a cyclical story of glory and more often victimhood. Politicians in this system manufacture crises and manipulate the ensuing emotion; they also create political fiction based on old myths. The best illustration here is present-day Russia, but you also saw this logic at work in Trump's America or in the rhetoric of some right-wing movements across Europe.

Snyder interprets everything bad that happens in modern times as a direct result of Russian manipulation and aggression. Now even if Putin has over the past months done everything possible to live up to this characterization, I would still caution against overestimating his power. Europeans sometimes seem to indulge in the masochistic delight of convincing themselves that Europe is old, basically finished, and incapable of competing with autocracies. This being said, I am impressed by the sheer force of Snyder's argumentation on Putin's machinations, as concerns Brexit and particularly the Trump election.

It is precisely because Putin tries to undermine our model that Snyder so violently denounces his politics and writes: "*Today's Russia is an oligarchy propped*

THE ROAD TO UNFREEDOM

BY TIMOTHY SNYDER





up by illusions and repressions. But it also represents the fulfilment of tendencies already present in the West. And if Moscow's drive to dissolve Western states and values succeeds, this could become our reality too". Russia certainly has huge wrecking capacities and is very adept at manipulating and sowing division; Putin uses our own deficiencies and weaknesses against us quite effectively. But it is economically unimpressive, demographically weak, culturally unappealing.

In the longer term, it is the evolution of America that will be more important, because America is still very powerful and because it has been the guarantor of the Western model. That is why some of the trends in American society, like growing inequality, political polarization, and calls for 'America first', are potentially disruptive. And then there is China, which is in the process of becoming once again a totalitarian entity, but this time backed up by enormous economic power and a growing expertise in using modern technologies to control and manipulate. The interplay between the US and China will be at the centre of geopolitics for the foreseeable future.

The book is structured in 6 chapters that oppose defining characteristics of the two over-arching 'philosophies': individualism vs totalitarianism, succession vs failure, integration vs empire, novelty vs eternity, truth vs lies, equality vs oligarchy. The approach is at times over-schematic, the more so since Snyder associates individual years to each of the six oppositions, which is a bit absurd. But I suppose it is a useful tool in terms of analysis.

Chapter One: Individualism or Totalitarianism (2011)

This part builds around the personality of a Russian philosopher called Ivan Ilyin who died decades ago but who was "rediscovered" and put on a pedestal by Putin and his followers. In his call for will and violence, a mystical leader and the end of globalisation (or 'cosmopolitanism' as it used to be called), Ilyin defended values that were closely associated with fascism. He clearly borrowed from the notorious Carl Schmitt who inspired Nazi ideology and for whom politics was the art of identifying and neutralising an enemy. There are elements of all this in Putin's world view. I doubt whether he reads Ilyin or anybody else of that ilk every morning before beginning his working day; he does not look to me like a philosopher-king. But Snyder's description of his *modus operandi* is fascinating.

Chapter Two: Succession or Failure (2012)

This chapter opens with a rather laborious and not particularly novel description of Soviet Russia and the transition period. Anybody who has followed events knows that Putin was plucked out of nowhere by a bunch of oligarchs convinced that he would be another marionette in their hands. How very wrong they turned out to be. It is also no secret that the new leadership used the 1999 bomb attacks in Moscow (and maybe worse than that!) to transform Putin into the strong leader they wanted him to be. Snyder's theoretical point here is more interesting: the fact that democracy is based on succession and continued change of rulers. Clearly, the way Putin went about "organising" democracy has prevented this rule from *de facto* applying. This has gone in parallel with increasing attacks against the Western model, described as decadent, failing, artificial. In this context, the shrill denunciation of gays and lesbians and the use of vulgar sexual metaphors have taken on epic proportions, together with the ridiculous masculinity cult around the great leader. To protect the 'pure Russian soul', the regime at the same time built a new repressive arsenal around elastic notions such as libel, treason, blasphemy or extremism.

Chapter Three: Integration and Empire (2013)

From 2012 onwards, Putin turned against the Western model, according to Snyder. While before Russia had wanted to be treated as an equal partner, it now pictured the West as the counter-model, as a threat to Russia, and as a haven of decadence. I think that this trend started earlier, with Putin's February 2007 speech to the *Wehrkunde* meeting in Munich. I thought at the time that some of the points Putin made were understandable, like the denunciation of the excesses of the wild capitalism of the 90s (notwithstanding the fact that his rise to power happened via the oligarch route!), the humiliation of Russia led by a drunkard, the way the West took Russia for granted, be it in Yugoslavia or elsewhere. I did not suspect that this was the beginning of a trip to hell. In view of the development of Russia and its politics ever since, Snyder's assumption that this was a reflection of deep underlying characteristics of "eternal" Russia becomes more plausible *ex post*. It is difficult however to know whether this return to eternity was fatal and inevitable or could have been prevented. Snyder makes the interesting point that the politics of *Inevitability* can lead to the rise of *Eternity* in societies that contest the end of history paradigm.



Be that as it may, Russia a decade ago chose the path towards empire rather than integration. And it conceptualised this by using the old concept of *EURASIA*, developed by people such as Lev Gumilev (1912-1992), the son of Anna Akhmatova, and taken up by the famous *Izborsk Club* created in 2012 as a hub of new Russian nationalism.

Chapter Four: Novelty and Eternity (2014)

This is the tale of what happened in and around Ukraine. Snyder sees this as a battle between the Ukrainian effort at novelty (a new kind of politics) and the Russian way of exporting its eternity. Again the question arises as to whether this in itself had an element of inevitability or whether the Russian action was at least partly prompted its perceptions of the western debate about NATO enlargement, the EU-Ukraine trade and association agreement or the assistance provided to opposition forces before Maidan. Whatever the answer, nothing justifies what Russia has done and even less so how it has done it; the blatant violation of Ukrainian sovereignty, the stream of disinformation about all Ukrainian patriots being 'Nazis' (levelled most vociferously by Russian Nazis), the invocation of Volodymyr's (Vladimir's!) conversion to Christianity in 998, as if that gave licence to Russia to claim Ukraine for itself.

Chapter Five: Truth vs Lies (2015)

This is still mainly about Ukraine. Chapters 4 and 5 could have been contained in one chapter. There is further description of disinformation, about the presence of Russian soldiers in Ukraine (undisputable), about the shooting down of the Malaysian airliner (clearly done by Russians having crossed the border before with the BUK missiles, as documented by the remarkable Dutch Court action), about Nazism reigning in Ukraine. And of course the use of historical facts/myths to create a picture of Russian eternity and greatness (998, 1941, as well as the victory against the Ottoman empire in 1774). Talking about the latter: that was the time when the concept of *Novorossiia* arose to qualify the territories in the south taken of the Turks. Now it was used to create the fiction of the 8 south-eastern provinces of Ukraine becoming a new territory of brotherhood and integration with mother Russia!

Snyder then moves into new territories, starting with the migration crisis in 2015. Russia certainly tried to fuel the anti-Merkel rebellion and the rise of the extreme right-wing AfD (like it has for a long time supported Le Pen and other movements of that ilk). I am not sure though that Putin bombed Syria with the primary aim of creating refugees so as to swamp Europe, as Snyder implies.

An interesting part of the book is about the crisis of

the Polish government leading to the downfall of Tusk. Snyder recalls the framing of Sikorski whose loose talk at a restaurant was taped and published. The assumption seems to be that this was a Russian plot, although Snyder does not say so explicitly. It is not implausible against the background of the Soviet and Russian habit of *kompromat*. Which often works because of the way politics functions: "*The only politicians who are invulnerable to exposure are those who control the secrets of others, or those whose avowed behaviour is so shameless that they are invulnerable to blackmail*". This is of course the secret of someone like Trump. I had my first experience with this principle early on in my career when a prominent member of the European Parliament, who used his mandate to gain favours for an important company that employed him, was never taken to task because he was ...very open about it.

Chapter Six: Equality and Oligarchy

This is the most convincing and disturbing chapter of the book. It is convincing in portraying the transformation of Trump, a failed real estate investor, into a "successful businessman", with the active help (including financial) of Putin. Many of the things said here are things we have heard before, but I for one, while not disputing them, had always thought that seeing the hand of Putin in the rise of Trump was a bit blown out of all proportions. After having read Snyder, I am far less certain of that. I say this also because Snyder sets the action of the Russians in the framework of the trends that have transformed the American political system over the past years. In other words, it is not the tale of Russia single-handedly changing the US system, which would not be credible. It is the very clever use of and investment in home-grown American deficiencies and perversions (growing inequality, the presents made to what one can only call American oligarchs, the elective disenfranchisement of many American citizens, the gerrymandering, the blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction, the nationalistic grandstanding) by a Russian leader who knows a lot about all of those things! I was also struck by the close Russian connections of Trump and a lot of those surrounding him, Paul Manafort, Rex Tillerson, Wilbur Ross, Jared Kushner, Michael Flynn, to name but a few.

All in all, I recommend reading this book, which is full of interesting information. It has led me to revise or at least 'nuance' some of my earlier judgements. It is a potent reminder of the need to defend ourselves against all sorts of attacks and disinformation and to fight for the integrity of our system. It is also an interesting invitation to always question the hidden assumptions in what we are made to read, including by Snyder himself, of course.