

**SUICIDE OF THE WEST: HOW THE
REBIRTH OF TRIBALISM, POPULISM,
NATIONALISM, AND IDENTITY POLITICS IS
DESTROYING AMERICAN DEMOCRACY**

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I think this book is meant as a #NeverTrumper manifesto, an attempt to create intellectual backbone for that wispy band of conservative holdouts, who crouch behind the crenellations in their *National Review* fastness, wondering why the final assault on them has yet to begin—not realizing it is because everyone has forgotten about them. Strictly speaking, though, I have no idea what the point of this book is, because it's a jumble of thoughts, anecdotes and superficial facts, strung together with no clear audience and only the most simplistic of analysis. It's a boneless mess.

The miniscule hard core of Goldberg's argument is clear enough, to be fair, mostly because it is repeated like a prayer on a Buddhist prayer wheel. It is that we, the West, have created a world that is a "Miracle," and we are in danger of losing it by our actions. From there, though, chaos promptly enters Jonah Goldberg's writing, blurring it to incomprehensibility. One of the major problems with this book shows up immediately—a miserable failure to precisely define, or even to try to define, every crucial term, starting with "the Miracle." The second major problem also rears its head quickly—constant bootstrapping and begging the question. For example, on the very first page we are told that "the highest form of argument in a democracy is one based on facts grounded in reason and decency." Why is this limited to democracy? More broadly, why is this true? What is "decency" in this context, and what is it doing here, especially since in the prior sentence Goldberg rejects any role for religious belief in his analysis? Who knows? Not the reader, certainly, at any point in this book.

Let's start with the most simple question—what is this "Miracle"? At first, the reader intuits it is the material progress made in the modern world, represented at its core by GDP per capita, globally and within certain regions and countries. This is well-trodden ground, covered recently by everyone from Angus Deaton in *The Great Escape* to Gregory

Clark in *A Farewell to Alms*. Even this simple, because wholly derivative, discussion of material progress is obscured by hurried denial of all causes other than “ideas,” by which Goldberg means “Enlightenment political ideas,” having rejected in all of five words that the Scientific Revolution had any relevance, and not having addressed a single one of the vast number of competing theories advanced to explain this material progress. Not happy to limit himself to one facile claim, at other (repeated) points Goldberg, without discussion, also directly equates the “Miracle” with being the same thing as “liberalism” and as “capitalism.” Again, none of these terms are ever defined (leaving aside for now that under any definition, these are indirectly related to material progress at best). “Liberalism” seems to be shorthand for “Enlightenment ideas as embodied in John Locke,” though it is also casually and ludicrously equated with the rule of law, with an implication that pre-Enlightenment such a thing did not exist and could not have existed. “Capitalism” seems to bear some relation to the “free market,” but is often used in a sense so broad as to have nothing to do with the market, and is sometimes tied to the Enlightenment, or to certain political ideas, sometimes not. Interspersed with all this are various simplistic conclusory statements such as a claim that, until the West magicked up the undefined “Miracle,” all governments were solely and entirely devices for the elites to exploit the masses (something easily disproved by, say, the career of Charlemagne), and a wide variety of other non sequiturs and claims advanced without any evidence or reasoning.

The second step of the Goldberg “analysis” is that, assuming we agree that in the West, we have gotten ourselves a “Miracle,” we are in danger of committing suicide (a very different suicide from that James Burnham identified in the book from which Goldberg steals his title). For Goldberg, “suicide” is any retreat from liberal democracy, the apogee both of our civilization and of any civilization that can ever exist, a height from which no further advances are possible. Suicide is any slipping back down the mountain, which necessarily means a total reversion to a nightmare of tribalism. Goldberg says “[a]fter thousands of generations of trial and error, we discovered ‘best practices’ out there in the world, like prizes in some eternal scavenger hunt.” He says explicitly there is no better way: “You’re standing at the end of history.” What that means is opaque (although he is very much aware that Francis Fukuyama is

widely ridiculed for a similar, but at least clearly presented, claim), but it appears to mean mostly that we're rich, since "no other system creates wealth." And so on. There is a danger, though. That is backsliding, which means "corruption," "decay," a turn to the "reactionary," "giving in to the drumbeats of our primate brains," "rot," and "putrefaction"—all in the space of one page, and all meaning choosing anything different than (take your pick) liberalism, capitalism, or liberal democracy.

Leaving aside its mental confusion (we'll return to it, don't worry), *Suicide of the West* is a common type of modern hack political book—the narration of (cut-rate and cut-down) history masquerading as analysis. For, after all, narrating history is a lot easier than analysis, so spreading a thin layer of thought on a slanted rehash of history is an easy way to push out a book. And although Goldberg cites a variety of mostly modern, though all secondary, works that revolve around modernity, a lot of his footnotes are to lightweight material: blog posts, newspaper articles, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and so forth (and those that are books often cite to "Kindle location," a miserable practice that should be forbidden by any decent press).

So, Goldberg begins the "substance" of his book by regurgitating Steven Pinker, to demonstrate that human nature exists, and that it is tribal and mostly unpleasant, as shown by that we tend to kill each other, and primitive man killed at a massive rate. His point seems to be that if we don't cling tightly to the Miracle of liberal democracy, we'll all immediately start killing each other with spears in dawn raids. For the limited point that human nature exists, Pinker is correct enough, but since Goldberg is a huge Pinker fanboy, he immediately slides from this relatively narrow point into lecturing us that bad people are leading a "rebellion against the unnatural nature of the Enlightenment and all of the Enlightenment's offspring: capitalism, democracy, natural rights, and science." This claim of the Enlightenment being the source of everything good in the modern world is, of course, a constant and ludicrous trope of Pinker's which I already dissected and refuted in my review of Pinker's most recent book, so I will not repeat that demolition here, though at least Pinker writes clearly and precisely. Goldberg is trying (I think) to establish that if anyone dares attack the Enlightenment, or claims that the West made any moral progress prior to the Enlightenment, that person must want us to go back to the torture practices of the Aztecs

and the Assyrians, which he narrates in great detail in case we miss the point, footnoting mostly to Pinker. Then Goldberg solemnly tells us, "But few societies put more time, energy, and ingenuity into the practice [of torture] than medieval Europeans." His evidence for this? Nothing, which is not surprising, considering it's wholly untrue, since the use of torture by medieval Europeans has been exaggerated for propaganda purposes for centuries—something of which Goldberg seems unaware, because he (like his hero, Pinker) seems to know zero history other than that history "everybody knows," mostly gleaned from surfing the internet.

On and on the silliness goes. Thus, we are told, with a straight face, that "Slavery was destroyed by capitalism." For this bold and radical claim, which ignores the social movements (found only in Christianity) that actually destroyed slavery, as well as many other sophisticated (and unsophisticated) arguments about the interplay of capitalism and slavery, along with the inconvenient fact that slavery existed in the West long after the Enlightenment was in full flower and without real objection from its leading lights, we are directed to a blog post at "Cafe Hayek." That ten-line, 2009 post states that "Slavery and capitalism are opposites." For proof, or rather to "challenge the notion that slavery is or ever was essential to capitalism" (not the same claim at all, and in fact there are three distinct claims about slavery now being made) a link to a 2005 column is provided. That link is dead. Oh well—I guess we will remain in the dark. Then Goldberg tells us that "we needed a war to end the institution." Huh? I thought capitalism destroyed it. We are also told that "the child of a [Roman] slave did not inherit that status," which is flatly untrue. And that's about the level of facts, reasoning and backup that is found throughout the book. Your mileage will not vary.

This ends Part I. Next, in Part II, Goldberg steps back to give us his not-very-deep thoughts, in separate chapters, on "the State," Capitalism, Reason, and the "American Miracle." As far as the State, we get a second Cliff Notes version of the Enlightenment, in which John Locke is again the only person who matters and all other political thinkers of the time, not to mention modern thinkers, are ignored. And, certainly, anybody who sees any value to pre-Enlightenment societies, from James C. Scott to Christian integralists, or who sees any problem with liberal democracy or the ever-expanding sphere of unhinged personal autonomy and

emancipation from non-chosen ties that is the Enlightenment's real gift to us, from Ryszard Legutko to Patrick Deneen, does not appear. Offerings are burnt at the altar of the supposed social contract. Much rambling about Hammurabi, Gregory VII and Henry IV, and chaotic discussion about monarchy, aristocracy, and father figures, ensues. We are then abruptly offered a cheesy conclusion about the State, which has little to do with what preceded it: "[E]very effort to do away with liberal democratic capitalism is reactionary, because they all attempt to restore the unity of purpose that defines the premodern or tribal mind." Leaving aside the breathtaking hubris, bad history, and total falsehood of this claim, it illustrates Goldberg's main method of "analysis," which is repeating his pre-baked conclusion at random places, hoping it becomes ever more fixed in the reader's mind.

Then the focus turns to Capitalism, where the talk is again mostly about modern prosperity, and again ignores competing theories about the Great Divergence, and also ignores that it indisputably began long before the Enlightenment. We are treated to endless confusion, along with near-continuous channeling of Deirdre McCloskey, of whom Goldberg is also a fanboy, as he is of the amazingly stupid Matt Ridley. I know a great deal about this topic, and I cannot fathom most of what Goldberg says, since it is incoherent, but it apparently revolves around claims that until the Enlightenment, for both Catholics and Protestants, we had no progress, because "Notions of betterment, innovation, and improvement were seen, literally, as heresy. . . . [C]uriosity was a sin, and the innovator [was] a heretic." Thus capitalism, which is undefined, but is also the Miracle, and also the Enlightenment, created the Scientific Revolution, of which Thomas Edison was a part. To narrate these claims is to refute them.

Grinding on, Reason began with John Locke, whose only opposition was Rousseau, who was a romantic and a reactionary, which are the same thing. Rousseau's descendants still fight reason with ignorance, though (and presumably want to torture everyone). Then the American Founders channeled Locke, giving us the best government ever (although, of course, every time he mentions something good about the Founding, Goldberg also hastily offers pre-emptive apologies for everything bad of the time, such as slavery and the supposed bad treatment of women, since he does not want to become *persona non grata* on the DC and New

York cocktail party circuits). James Madison invented separation of powers out of whole cloth, in an improvement on Locke. (The names Polybius and Montesquieu do not appear.) Thus, we got the “American Miracle,” which bears an undefined relationship to the “Miracle,” but must be good, given its name.

Goldberg again and again tells us variations on that any deviation from the “liberal order of the Miracle” is both “fundamentally romantic” and “reactionary.” Those are not compliments. By “romantic,” he seems to mean in the Rousseau and Goethe sense, and by “reactionary” he means “a return to some form of tribal solidarity where we’re all in it together.” Again with the pre-baked and ludicrous conclusions; the basic contention seems to be that the hive mind was everyone’s goal until 1750. For Goldberg, with no exceptions, all political ideas since the Enlightenment that are not the Enlightenment are both romantic and reactionary. Communism? Yup. Nazism? Yup. Bernie Sanders? Yup. Trump? Yup. Environmentalism? Yup. To accomplish this neat division, he seems to define “romantic” as “any of the stupid illogic that disagrees with John Locke.” And he defines “reactionary” not with its proper meaning, the creation of a new political order by reference, at least in part, to the past, but with the puerile and simplistic meaning of “wholesale return to some imagined Golden Age”—that of forced unity, or the Borg, or something. In other words, he creates imaginary meanings and then uses those meanings to shunt all other political analysis into a siding, in which he can ignore it. This, if one can be chosen, is the besetting failure of this book. It refuses in any way to engage with the thinking of anyone else. Not for Goldberg a grappling with those many modern conservative thinkers who reject the Enlightenment in whole or in part. Not for Goldberg a grappling with the struggles of Americans living under “liberalism” and “capitalism” that led to the rise of Trump. Not for Goldberg any attempt to see why progressives think what they think. No, all of them are simply knuckle-dragging tribalists, eager to destroy the Miracle and cast us all into the pit.

Then the reader is frog-marched through Part III. We are told how aristocracies are natural, and because they are always bad, they are always trying to destroy the Miracle, for which claim a grossly inaccurate thumbnail history of Venice is offered. Following we get a long (but good) explanation of the Progressive Era, summarizing Goldberg’s

earlier *Liberal Fascism*. Then the administrative state, which is a form of elitist aristocracy, and therefore a form of anti-Miracle “corruption,” cribbed (with attribution, as always) from Charles Murray and Philip Hamburger. Then a screed on “Tribalism Today,” which you would think would focus on white nationalists or some other undesirables, but mostly talks about leftist identity politics. We get bonus stupidity, though, such as the claim that “the struggle for gay marriage [succeeded] because it appealed not to radicalism but to bourgeois values about family formation.” And, on a more personal note, Goldberg talks glowingly of Hungarians escaping from Communism in 1956 as saying they are going to America, not because they were forced into exile by the evils of Communism, but “Because, son, we were born Americans, but in the wrong place,” which, as the child of a Hungarian refugee from Communism, I find offensive and disloyal, and not likely something a real Hungarian would say. Finally, though, we do get a nod to the problem that identity politics on the Left may create the same on the Right, immediately followed by the claim that economic protectionism of any sort is a manifestation of tribalism.

To end the book, we get a chapter on “The Trumpian Era,” which does touch on Trump (highly negatively), but is mostly an attempt to draw a magic circle around “democracy” and to claim that no democracy, no Miracle. Not that any evidence for this is offered, except pointing out that much of the world is still crappy, and most of the world is not democratic, so it must be that crappiness is caused by lack of democracy. We also get snark about Michael Anton. (On a side note, Goldberg claims Anton is a “multimillionaire hedge fund partner,” a claim he has repeated, if you search the internet. I had never heard that, so I went hunting. The only job Anton has had that meets that description is “Managing Director” of BlackRock, from October 2015 to February 2017. According to his federal financial disclosure forms, he was paid a base of \$200,000 a year by BlackRock, and got a bonus of \$150,000 one year and \$170,000 in the second year. Those are pittance by New York hedge fund standards. There is no indication of any ownership or partnership status, and no assets other than retirement accounts, plus a bank account with around \$100,000. I conclude Goldberg is spreading a falsehood, though I suppose it’s hardly a slur to say a man is rich.) And we get the cliché-named chapter “Things Fall Apart,” saying that because,

as Charles Murray has demonstrated, the family has fallen apart, and Trump is a jerk, the flood-tide of tribalism is about to sweep over us all.

None of this is even remotely convincing, even if some of the facts adduced are not totally wrong. One problem, I realized after getting to the end, is that Goldberg just can't write. Page after page bounces around from idea to idea, usually roughly related to whatever the basic focus of the chapter is, but rarely tied together in any coherent way. Ideas bleed from chapter to chapter, uncertain where their home is. It does not help that typos abound (Phil Gramm is introduced in one sentence, and called "Graham" in the next), and that the book features a total lack of consistency as to the generic pronoun (sometimes "they," sometimes "he" or "her"). And even Goldberg's attempts to show his pop culture chops backfire—he talks constantly about *Game of Thrones*, the nihilistic fantasy television series, such as quoting a character, the "Mountain," as saying "a man has to have a code." But it is not the Mountain, Gregor Clegane, who says that. It is his brother, Sandor Clegane, the "Hound," and this is an bush-league error, since the brothers are utterly different characters and hate each other. The Mountain only says a few words and is quickly killed and turned into a zombie, while the Hound is a cynical motor mouth with a heart of gold. These are small problems (if irritating), compared to the rambling of the book, which could be boiled down to a short and punchy (if mostly wrong) pamphlet by a competent writer (like me). (And if I were constructing a counter-argument to that pamphlet, I would demonstrate that, in the material realm, the Enlightenment, a movement of political ideas, had nothing to do with the creation of the modern world; and that in the political realm, there are many, and probably better, alternatives to the pass that the Enlightenment has led us, none of which involve tribalism or barbarism, or, for that matter, rot and putrefaction. Another day, perhaps.)

But really, all this aside, the larger problem for Goldberg is that he and all his conservative tribe are failures. He seems to try to avoid this self-realization, by positioning his writing as being for a non-existent constituency for warmed-over Reaganism, styling himself as putting forth a middle ground. However, the reality is that nearly everything Goldberg has worked for, politically, his whole life, has either been denied effect (the entire program of the Heritage Foundation) or has been a heinous mistake (the Iraq War). He doesn't seem to mind, though. He notes that

“For years, conservatives have complained that Republicans surrender too easily.” After listing numerous conservative failures over decades, from the New Deal to social issues (the latter described as “symbolic,” of course, signaling that he really isn’t a troglodyte like those Middle Americans), he claims that failure and defeatism “is simply the nature of conservatism. We tend, as Hayek said, to get pulled in directions not of our own choosing. In principle, that doesn’t bother me, because giving society time to digest inevitable changes is an important function. Still, it would be nice to win more.” This is nearly unbelievable—Goldberg, who claims to represent a once important, powerful faction, is happy to lose on every issue that supposedly matters to him, as long as we get “time to digest” losing? He should resign his pundit’s seat and go meditate in silence on his sins, since apparently manning the barricades isn’t on his to-do list.

Anyway, analyzing this book is like nailing jelly to the wall. I feel sorry for Goldberg; he obviously had no third party with a critical eye, or one well-versed in ancient or modern political thought, read this book. It could have been improved, or even made useful, such as some of the books Goldberg himself has read, because he refers to them, such as Yuval Levin’s *The Fractured Republic*. Maybe possible pre-publication readers were all too busy manning the battlements, scanning the horizon for the chimerical attack on the last redoubt of #NeverTrumpism. As I say, that attack will never come, and so I predict this book (unlike the original and durable *Liberal Fascism*) will deservedly drop like a stone from the public eye.