

Book Review

Michael Burleigh (2017), *The best of times, the worst of times: A history of now*, London: Macmillan, 448 pp. + xvi.

Michael Burleigh's book published by Macmillan came out in late 2017. The British historian is a regular contributor to the *Daily Mail*, *The Telegraph*, and *The Times*. The author, who had been holding posts at the New College, Oxford, the London School of Economics and Cardiff, has focused on the history of WWII and the period after the war; however, his new book deals with events and trends of contemporary world politics primarily. His book attempts to find a rationale for recent changes in world politics, mainly focusing on the decline of American political and economic power. By underlining the global power shift in world politics, he tries to collect stories on this power shift piece by piece. That is probably one of the reasons why his book is full of good stories; however, that is also the very reason why sometimes coherency is lost.

In Burleigh's understanding, the transfer of power from West to East, in other words from the United States to China has speeded up over the last ten years, thus creating a more unstable political and economic environment. The main conclusion of his book is that instability will prevail in the world; however, the nature of cooperation among countries will remain peaceful and sudden dramatic changes are not likely to occur.

The book's structure is clear and coherent, since six of the eight chapters approach their topics geographically, so different polities, like the Islamic State, Turkey, China, Russia and the European Union are covered by separate chapters. In each case, a brief overview of political, economic and social trends of the last ten years is provided; however, it is clear that the targeted audience is American or British, since f. ex. the chapter on China unpacks very basic, elementary information regarding the country's history as well, which otherwise would not be necessary to the average reader. This approach cannot be found when analysing events in the American politics. The first chapter attempts to frame landmark events leading to the global power shift. Burleigh maintains that the Iraq and Afghanistan invasion were military debacles and their repercussions were crucial in damaging credibility of the American foreign policy. Credibility has been further damaged by the new American administration, and President who brought a cultural change – for the worse – in American politics. He maintains the other milestone on the road leading to our unstable present was the Great Recession of 2008 and 2009, which made the resilience of the Chinese economy very clear, and on the other hand it revealed the fragility of the neoliberal economies in the Western world.

In the chapter on the United States, it might be surprising, but the emphasis is put on cultural aspects, when the author underlines the definite change in the culture of politics for the worse. The court-like informality of the new American administration is stressed as sign for the new era, which is not worth being emulated by any other country. Regarding the future of the American political culture, the author does not see any chances of change, as he puts it: "The daily synthetic noise from the Trump administration will continue, damaging the US soft power as the Ugly American return as a figure of fear and fun, while visitor numbers to the US have collapsed since Trump's inauguration by

a third to the cost so far of \$11 billion to the tourism industry.” (p. 362). Clearly the losses of the tourism industry are only one side of the coin, the less important side; however, American dominance in the 20th century also meant the prevalence of American values, traditions, and consumption patterns to be emulated overall in the world.

Economic power goes with cultural dominance hand in hand, at the same time, but this is in contradiction to the new American policy. Economic insulation will not create new jobs and increase incomes for the American middle-class, since not only cheap Asian competitors threaten but machines, robots are new factors of these economic changes: “More (white-collar) jobs are likely to be lost to the Fourth Industrial Revolution than will be created to satisfy the former blue-collar constituencies which voted Trump into power.” (p. 362) In addition, protectionist measures, he argues, will accelerate inflation that along with a strengthening dollar significantly deteriorates competitiveness of American firms. However, the author is convinced of the stability of American democracy and democratic procedures: “Attempts to cow the free press and the independent judiciary will ultimately fail for both are tenacious opponents, while Trump’s claque at Fox News have been hit by sexual harassment.” The normality and thus the stability of American politics, the author argues, can be found on various levels of decision-making, since mayors, federal states, governors will pursue their own political agenda – despite or because of the Trump administration, regardless of whether they are Democrats or Republicans.

Weakening soft power, erratic foreign policy and isolationism will ultimately lead to the disintegration of allied blocs of the US, and at the same time the US will not be able to divide its enemies, the author of the book states. Burleigh also emphasizes the importance of stability or predictability of the hegemon power; as he puts it: “Xi’s China is more

stable and predictable ally, especially because for China, everything is ultimately about business beyond a few core regional interests.” In doing so, the author is not optimistic, since he underlines that Chinese development has two different sides which perplex the Western observer: “China has successfully coupled authoritarianism and modernity in ways that perplex some in the West, who imagine that economic progress and commerce must ineluctably lead to Western-style democracy” (p. 197). Burleigh rejects the idea that long-term economic progress must be linked to adherence to democratic values: “Those who confidently predict the (Chinese) system’s collapse may be disappointed at its resilience, or the high satisfaction levels when Chinese people are polled, for, like Putin, President Xi enjoys 80 per cent positive rating because of his aggressive campaigns against Party corruption and muscular foreign policy” (pp. 197-198).

There has been a growing consensus among development economists over the last decades that economic and political institutions are crucial in explaining success or failure, as they are key elements in creating and maintaining a favourable environment for businesses and innovations, as long as they are able to include broad layers of society. In their famous book *Why nations fail?* Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson argue that the way institutions within society are organized is decisive in the outcome, in the productivity of the economy and the well-being of citizens. This is a very old debate and an old argument. Seymour Martin Lipset in the 1950s was the first social scientist who connected economic success to democratic pluralism, thus provoking debate. A modern version of this argument is to be found in Niall Ferguson’s book *The West and the rest*, which summarizes all these essential elements of success under six headings: competition, science, property rights, medicine, the consumer society, and the work ethic. These “killer apps” not only characterize Western European countries,

but fast-developing Asian countries as well. Burleigh definitely disagrees with this optimistic assessment of the Western society, and he is clear at this point “To adapt a Churchillian aphorism, Communist rule is better than any conceivable alternative, especially as these seem increasingly dysfunctional.” (p. 198)

The reader might raise the question what the other alternatives are, which are not dysfunctional. At the first glance the Singaporean model might seem a possible future scenario; however, “Hopes of the CCP evolving into Singapore’s authoritarian People’s Action Party – as Deng Xiaoping and Lee Kuan Yew mused – ignore the problems of scaling up what works in a tightly controlled city-state of 5 million people to a complex society of 1.4 billion people in thirty-three provinces (some much bigger than the biggest European states) in a vast country” (p. 198), Burleigh maintains.

According to the author, there were four crucial elements primarily contributing to the success of the Deng era: (1) the sudden and prolonged swell of population helped decrease the dependency ratio; (2) to focus on business and not to invest in war was a crucial element as well; (3) the sheer size of the country enabled Chinese decision-makers to put forward pilot projects and see whether this solution works or does not; (4) at the end, Burleigh adds, Hong Kong and its geographic closeness has vastly contributed to successes. In addition to that, Taiwan grew to be one of the global hubs of electronic industry, “enabling China to become a giant assembly plant for computers and mobile phones as the supplier of Apple and the like moved there.” (p. 207)

Although he later adds to this list the “superabundance of low-cost labour” (p. 207), it is clear that the list is far from being complete: the economic policy freedom which derives from the size of the market, the inflow of foreign capital and technology which could be partly absorbed by the domestic economic players, and the importance of the well-

organized bureaucracy must also be added.

Notwithstanding, features that will decrease average long-term economic potential are mapped by the author properly. He describes this situation this way: “For a start, how else did China’s reforming leaders persuade an ideologically egalitarian party to buy into the rise of the capitalist system, other than by letting the comrades the slices of the pie for themselves.” (p. 213) The connection between the elite infightings and corruption has been analysed in the literature many times, that is a good example how vicious self-reinforcing circles can be brought about. The fight against corruption can be used against enemies and rivals, which helps prop up the effectiveness of the rule of the Communist Party.

There are other contradictions embedded in the system, he underlines: “Paradoxically the Great Firewall, which cuts China off from the American-dominated web, has led to the creation of a few e-commerce champions like Alibaba, but these do not have the global reach of an Amazon or Google.” (pp. 224-225) The quote clearly demonstrates the dilemma of a still not open economy which offers ample opportunities to the domestic firms and at the same time prevents them from growing truly global. Burleigh stresses threats coming from the so-called middle-income country status which refers to countries who had built their economic model on cheap labour as China did, but the successful positioning of the country itself leads to rising wages, that hamstrings further successes and forces the countries to find new competitive advantages.

Since the book rather focuses on world politics than world economy, the author does not give a proper answer as to how he thinks of long-term perspectives of the Chinese economy, which would be crucial in quantifying economic forecasts. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is analysed by Burleigh; however, the analysis is rather on the geopolitical

consequences of the initiative. There is one important point he makes about the BRI: China's inclusion in the Middle East disputes. As he puts it: "Ironically, having found it useful for first the Soviet Union and then the US to be mired in Afghanistan (and in the latter case Pakistan), Beijing now finds itself being sucked into the space the US is vacating, if only to secure one of the major axes of China's future economic development." (p. 248)

The general conclusion of the book regarding the Chinese model is clear, since it does not consider it as a model. "Developed democracies have nothing to fear from an authoritarian capitalist model that does not trade well, and whose daily arbitrariness and injustices even fervent Western 'Panda-huggers' would not tolerate for five minutes." (p. 253) However, he does not exclude the cooperation with China, because it is a stable and predictable partner, especially compared to Russia and the United States. He states: "With Trump and Putin around, Xi seems like the only responsible adult in the room. Many in Europe think so already, and Washington should not bank on their support in any clash with China that Trump rather than Xi is likely to provoke." (p. 253)

The Russian chapter projects Russia will be able to act as a superpower, and it is very likely to continue its provocations around the world. Improving economy and investment in information war enable it to act in the Middle East, Ukraine and frozen conflict regions. Putin is most likely to win the next election for another six years, although Burleigh states that: "Some claim he is weary of high office, though getting out of it will be even harder than getting in." (p. 364) When it comes to Russia's relations with the West, the main problem, Burleigh states, is the West's failing "to check communication subversion by Russia, notably by not highlighting what is wrong with life for ordinary people in Russia itself or how their own conservative (and sometimes liberal) media are bound up with Russian business interests." (p. 364)

In the case of the European Union, the analysis does not go too far, since it only projects the continuation of already existing trends, as Burleigh puts it: “A general anxiety about the state of the world in 2017 may give the EU a reprieve, though it will almost certainly be unable to agree which way to go at the fork in the road of its sixtieth anniversary and the euro remains a glaring problem.” (pp. 364-365) Despite the gloomy predictions of the author, there is hope in Europe, since there are already straightforward signs of a new impetus to the French-German relations, and the close cooperation of the two major European powers enables a relatively fast euro zone reform. He traces the slowness of the European politics as to the need to form great coalitions between the major political parties, as he argues, that is the only way to exclude the extremist, far-right and nationalist parties from power.

As for the Middle East, some of the author’s forecasts already came true. As he puts it: “Iraqi Arabs and Kurds may go to war over Kirkuk once ISIS is no more, and Iraq and Turkey may clash too should Erdogan seek to realize irredentist dreams.” (p. 367) In early 2018 Turkish tanks started their operation in Syria, as Erdogan was extending the invasion of northern Syria beyond Afrin District, and the city of Manbij was attacked next according to press releases. The author depicts a slow but determined withdrawal from Afghanistan which will be managed by China, Russia, Iran, India and Pakistan, though he signals the “embedded problems”: “Profound differences among these managers will ensure that Afghanistan will never find peace.” (p. 367)

To sum it up, Burleigh’s book is entertaining and very well-written, so it is easy to find passages worth citing, though there cannot be found very new insights, ideas or surprising approaches. Mainstream thinking is accompanied by very good, readable stories. The work is properly propped up by references; a very long list of references can be found at the end of the book, and of course there are in-text citations as well. And

as mentioned before, the book's structure is logical chapter by chapter; however, within each chapter many topics are touched upon by the author simultaneously which might confuse the reader.

The conclusion he has as regards the future for the Western world is again not surprising: "... the West is fading, not as a civilization or powerful assembly of economies, but as the major driving geopolitical force in the world. That is not a counsel of despair, and a world resembling the one in 1890 does not inevitably have to result in another 1914." (p. 369) However, one must heed his advice when it comes to future actions: "We need to study the mistake of the past as much its moral 'lessons' to avoid being trapped into a superficial discourse seemingly imprisoned by the immediate present, or, worse allowing us mentally kidnapped by foreign powers and their lobbyists whose interests are not ours." (p. 369)!

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