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Historical roots, cultural selection and the "New World Order"

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[\(This paper also appears as CAGE Discussion paper 647\)](#)

December 2022

No: 1441

Warwick Economics Research Papers

ISSN 2059-4283 (online)

ISSN 0083-7350 (print)

Historical roots, cultural selection and the ‘New World Order’¹

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30 November, 2022

Abstract

Francis Fukuyama’s bold prediction that Western liberal democracy is ‘the final form of human government’ was promptly challenged by Samuel Huntington, who foresaw the future as a continuing clash of civilisations. This latter view has found support in the recent Beijing declaration by China and Russia of a ‘New World Order’ with distinct spheres of influence for different cultures.

After discussing the contrast between such historical perspectives (of ‘immaculate convergence’ versus cultural diversity), we outline two accounts of how forms of governance emerge from competitive struggle (either domestically or between nation states).

However, to set the scene for applying these perspectives to current events, the paper begins with a summary of three eras of political economy post World War II - including the current ‘age of the strongman’, to use the terminology of Gideon Rachman.

Subsequently, these various perspectives are employed to see what light they may throw on the disastrous turn of events following the Beijing declaration, with a focus on Russia, where the history of a powerful central state has played a crucial role. How enduring the Russian example may prove in the Darwinian struggle of cultural competition is, of course, a key issue for our time.

Introduction

With their proposal to create a New World Order, the leaders of Russia and China have - like knights before a jousting match - declared a clash of civilisations. But the first shock of arms has pitched brother against brother in

¹ The author is most grateful to Peter Hammond, Andy Krupa, Herakles Polemarchakis, Dennis Novy, Robert Skidelsky and Bill White for their comments at seminars at Warwick University and in Reykjavik; to Gerard Roland for making his data files available; and to Jennifer Smith for help in analysing them.

the heart of Europe. How to comprehend the origins and implications of these earth-shaking events?

A broad overview of post-WW II developments in the realms of macroeconomics, politics - and geopolitics – is first provided. Then various lenses for viewing these developments are offered - beginning with the once-fashionable forecast of liberal democracy as the ‘end of history’; moving swiftly on to the contrary view that ‘deep historical roots’ play a decisive role in creating cultural divergence. There follow two perspectives involving competition -- either a social struggle *inside* the country concerned, or a more internationalist, cultural struggle *between* countries.

These perspectives are then employed to focus on Russia under President Putin, leaving China for others to discuss.

Three post-war Eras

Era	Duration	Setting	Economics	Politics	Geopolitics
1	1945 – 1975 (30 years) ‘Keynesian era’	Rule-based international economic order (including IMF, World Bank, GATT) on US dollar standard.	Keynesian demand management in <i>les trentes glorieuses</i> . But oil price shocks of 1973 lead to global inflation	Post-war construction of Welfare States in the West.	Allies set up UN in 1945. But Cold War starts in 1947; NATO set up in 1949. Chairman Mao’s experiments fail in China.
2	1975 – 2005 (30 years) ‘Neo-liberal era’	Win-win world of Globalised Capitalism, with floating exchange rates	Monetarism; then Inflation Targets (inspired by Milton Friedman, then Robert Lucas)	Liberal democracy in ascendance (with Thatcher and Reagan as cheerleaders)	Collapse USSR in 1990; end of Cold War , with US as hegemon. Deng sets China on spectacular growth path.
3	2005 - ? (17 years -- and counting) ‘Era of the Strongman’	Global financial crisis of 2008; Covid pandemic of 2020 onward; Russian invasion of Ukraine 2022	Recourse to unconventional macro policy measures to cope with crises(e.g. QE and furlough)	Populism and protection. Democracy in disarray in US and UK.	Putin and Xi Jinping emerge as strongmen, with plan for New World Order in 2022 - leading to New Cold War?

Table 1 Three eras of political economy post-WW II Source: Rachman (2022b)

In opening his account of the Gallic War, Julius Caesar famously noted that the lands he was invading could be divided into three distinct regions². In like fashion, Gideon Rachman, in his account of global political economy post WW II, suggests dividing the period into three eras. We follow this lead in Table 1, where key features of political economy in Europe and North America are briefly indicated, along with global geopolitical developments.

The first two periods, of thirty years apiece, are labelled as Keynesian and Neoliberal respectively to mark the prevailing economic orthodoxy of the time. The third - still ongoing - is a time of crisis which has spurred the worldwide rise of strongmen to positions of power. Further discussion follows.

The first era (the three decades following the end of WW II in 1945)

As well as major physical reconstruction after the ravages of conflict, the immediate post-war years saw the creation of welfare states in European countries - and of global institutions, designed to promote a rule-based international order. These included the IMF and World Bank based in Washington, the GATT³ based in Geneva, and the United Nations in New York.

The hope that wartime alliances would persist into peacetime was soon dashed by the onset of the Cold War, setting Russia at odds with the West. This triggered the organisation of NATO, starting with a dozen members in 1949; and, not long after, it took the world named the to the edge of nuclear war⁴ in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

In terms of domestic politics, according to Robert Reich, these years - referred to in France as *les trentes glorieuses* - saw an intellectual shift from concerns of “political economy” to more universal and scientific “laws”⁵.

After World War II, under the powerful influence of Keynesian economics, the focus shifted from the field of political economy toward government taxes and transfers as means of both stabilizing the business cycle and helping the poor. Reich (2015, p. xx).

² *Gallia est omnis divisa en tres partes* is the first line of Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic War*.

³ General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, later succeeded by the World Trade Organisation

⁴ How close, is analysed dispassionately in Dixit et al. (2021)

⁵ John Maynard Keynes's *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936) dominated American economic policy from the end of World War II until the late 1970s.

But when the global economy got close to capacity in the early 1970s, the rise in commodity prices – oil in particular – set in motion a widespread wage-price spiral of inflation.

The second era (i.e. the thirty years following 1975)

As a consequence, the pragmatism of Samuelson, Solow, and like-minded ‘saltwater’ economists, yielded pride of place to the ‘freshwater’ economics of mid-western universities, inspired by the market fundamentalism of Friedman and Lucas. With Mrs Thatcher and Ronald Reagan acting as joint cheerleaders, indeed,

for a brief period of world history, liberal democracy seemed ascendant and unchallenged. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the big economic and political questions appeared settled. In economics, the answer was free markets. In politics, the answer was democracy. In geopolitics, America was now the sole superpower. Rachman (2022, p.16)

This liberal ascendancy was not to last: for the hubris of capitalist triumphalism met its nemesis in a financial crisis that threatened a repeat of the Great Depression.

The third era (where we are now after 2005)

What if the elite in the US and the UK were in the process of consolidating their power and wealth via their market dominance, as alleged by Robert Reich (2015)? And what if Hyman Minsky’s prediction of financial market instability were to come true – but those who practised what he described as a Ponzi lending were to be bailed out in order to prevent the collapse of capitalism? Such factors would favour the rise of political strongmen offering to save the people from the self-serving elite. As Robert Reich put it:

The real question is not whether [Britain and the United States] will move towards a capitalism that works for the many rather than the few. ... The question is whether this change will occur through democratic reforms or by means of authoritarian mandates. Reich (2015, p. xiv)

Economic disaster was avoided by timely fiscal intervention together with prolonged Quantitative Easing; but economic recovery was slow. Moreover, the nostrums of governance in the West faced a challenge from statist, top-down control in China, where economic growth proceeded at a spectacular rate.

With democracy in disarray, one country after another yielded control to those Rachman labels strongmen, as listed in Table 2, where Presidents Putin and Erdogan feature as early starters (who have nevertheless remained in power to the time of writing).

	Strongman Rulers	Country	Since
1.	Putin	Russia	2000
2	Erdogan	Turkey	2003
3	Xi Jinping	China	2012
4	Modi	India	2014
5	Orban and Kaczynski	Hungary and Poland	2015
6	Johnson	UK	2016
7	Trump	US	2016
8	Duterte	Phillipines	2016
9 and 10	MBS and Netanyahu	Saudi Arabia; Israel	2017
11 and 12	Bolsanaro and Amllo	Brazil and Mexico	2018
13	Abiy Ahmed	Ethiopia	2019

Source: Rachman (2022b, pp.vii, viii)

Table 2 Strongman leaders in the 21st century

What then are the distinctive characteristics of strongman rule? Rachman (2022b, pp. 10 - 15) lists the following:

- **Cult of the personality.** Thus, for example, in imitation of Mao Zedung, ‘Xi Jinping thought’ has been put into Chinese constitution, which is rewritten to allow the President more than two terms of office.
- **Contempt for the rule of law,** as challengers are – to put it mildly - denied the opportunity to run for office. Thus Alexei Navalny was first poisoned then imprisoned at the behest of the Russian President, with his supporters proscribed as agents of a foreign power.
- **Populism** - with claims to represent the ‘real people’ against governing elite, as when President Trump promised to just ‘Build the Wall!’ to check immigration from Mexico.
- **Nostalgic nationalism** - with politics driven by fear, as with Putin’s claim that, to meet increasing threats from NATO, the Russian empire must be restored.

Four Perspectives

According to Kantian maxim, ‘theories without facts are empty, but facts without theories are blind’. So, to follow our brief factual summary, we appeal to various theories advanced to help explain these facts – beginning, however, with an auspicious precedent.

In a celebrated meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Oxford in June, 1860, two sharply contrasting perspectives of early human history were presented to the waiting throng - a thousand strong! First came Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, adhering faithfully to the writings of the Old Testament; to be promptly countered by Thomas Henry Huxley, the ‘bulldog of Darwin’, citing the just-published theory of natural selection. When challenged to say whether it was through his grandfather or grandmother that he claimed his simian descent, Huxley replied that, if asked to choose, he would opt for a humble monkey as progenitor rather than a privileged and pompous figure like the bishop. At which point, Robert Fitzroy (Darwin’s captain on the famous voyage of *HMS Beagle*) left the rowdy proceedings holding aloft the Bible and crying ‘The Scriptures! The Scriptures!’.

Inspired by this example, we examine different perspectives to help understand the historical developments summarised above. The first of these is the bold prediction of Francis Fukuyama, who reckoned that “Western liberal democracy is the final form of human government”. This claim of a clear path of convergence to a universally acceptable model of governance is surely not one that Darwin would have supported. In *The Descent of Man*, after citing with approval a remark of Walter Bagehot⁶ that “We are apt to look at progress as the normal rule in human society; but history refutes this”, he went on to observe that “The ancients did not even entertain the idea; nor do the oriental nations at the present day.” Darwin (1873, Chapter 5, p.166)

In any case, Fukuyama’s confident forecast was famously challenged by Samuel P. Huntington (1993). He proposed instead that, with the end of the Cold War, deep-seated cultural divisions would define future conflict, in what he called a Clash of Civilisations. For a contemporary formulation of such a historical perspective, we turn to research conducted by Gerard Roland (2020). He investigates how current cultural divisions may have their origins in the ‘deep historical roots’ of founding civilisations - be they statist hierarchies like those

⁶ an early supporter of his evolutionary theory of society, Bagehot (1872)

of the orient, or individualist, market-driven societies like that of early Mesopotamia, the cradle of Western civilisation.

In place of such cultural determinism, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, hereafter designated A&R, have developed a game theoretic perspective where the political structure is viewed as the outcome of a continuing tussle between competing domestic forces – the state *versus* that of the common people. In *The Narrow Corridor: how Nations Struggle for Liberty*, A&R (2019), the pursuit of liberal democracy is seen a hazardous enterprise, with “liberty is as rare as it is fragile, wedged uneasily between tyranny and anarchy”⁷.

But what if it is not so much forces *within* a given society but competition *between* different societies that better describes the forces at work in our history? This was the perspective offered by Charles Darwin himself in the *Descent of Man*, where natural selection determines the evolution of societies in global competition for survival.

	Perspective	Key idea	Author(s)
1.	‘End of History’	“Western liberal democracy is the final form of human government”	Francis Fukuyama (1989)
2.	Significance of ‘Deep Historical Roots’ (DHR)	Cultural continuity of statism and individualism	Gerard Roland (2020)
3.	Liberty and justice nurtured in a ‘shackled state’	“Political liberty comes from social struggle of equals”	Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (2019)
4.	Darwinian competition of cultures	Altruism pays international dividends	Charles Darwin (1873); Bowles and Gintis (2015)

Table 3 Various Perspectives

The four different views to be considered, listed in Table 3 For convenience, are now discussed in some more detail.

⁷ Joel Mokyr, cited in Acemoglu (2019)

First perspective: Fukuyama's prediction of 'immaculate convergence'

In "The End of History?", published in the summer of 1989, Francis Fukuyama foresaw the coming global triumph of liberal democracy. He wrote:

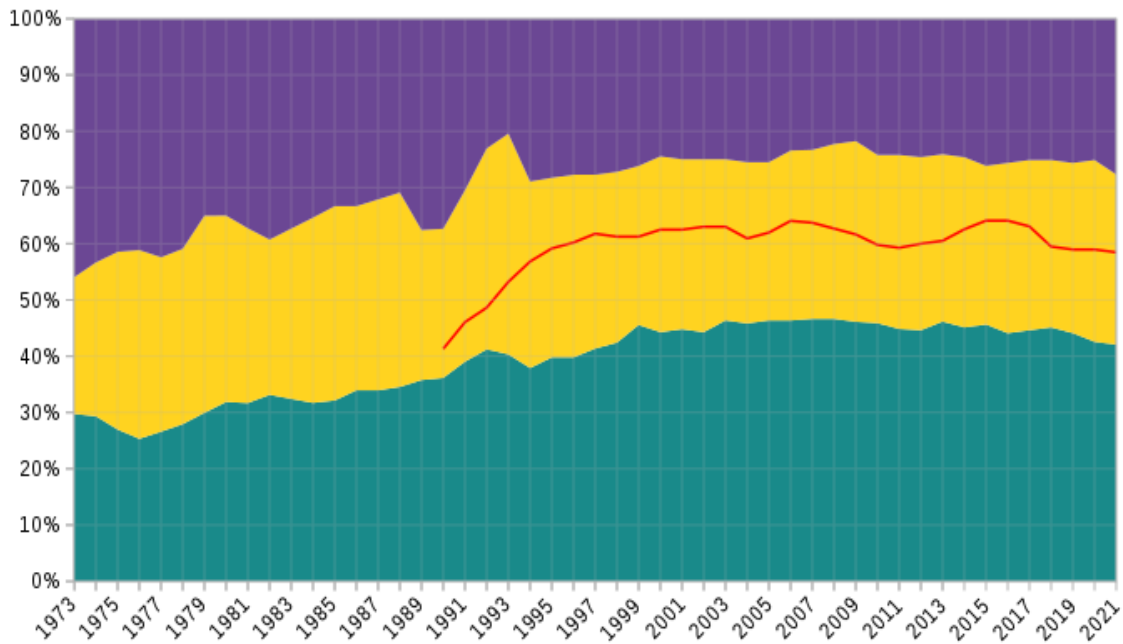
What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such ... that is, the end-point of mankind's ideological evolution and the **universalization of Western liberal democracy** as the final form of human government. Fukuyama (1989, p.4) Emphasis added.

The fall of the Wall of Berlin within the year and the dissolution of the Soviet Union two years later in 1991 appeared to offer dramatic confirmation of his bold prediction - one that was music to the ears of President Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, key leaders of the neo-liberal era.

That Fukuyama's forecast was ultimately set to fail, however, is indicated by surveys collected by Freedom House⁸ shown in Figure 1. To start with, in seeming support of Fukuyama's perspective, the red line showing the percentage of 'electoral democracies'⁹ in the world rose sharply from 40 to 60 percent over the next decade. That he was riding a wave about to lose impetus, however, is indicated by the subsequent levelling out of this bumpy line; and of the fraction of free countries, which peaked at about a half in the early years of this century, before echelons of strongmen came to power.

⁸ An NGO that measures the degree of civil liberties and political rights in every nation around the world.

⁹ Note, however, that Freedom House's term "electoral democracy" differs from "liberal democracy" in that the latter also implies the presence of a substantial array of civil liberties (as enjoyed in free countries)



Key: Bottom layer (green): free. Middle layer (yellow): partly free. Top layer (purple): not free

Source: Freedom House (2022)

Figure 1 Countries that are free, partly free or not free (colours indicate percentages); and electoral democracies (line shows percentage).

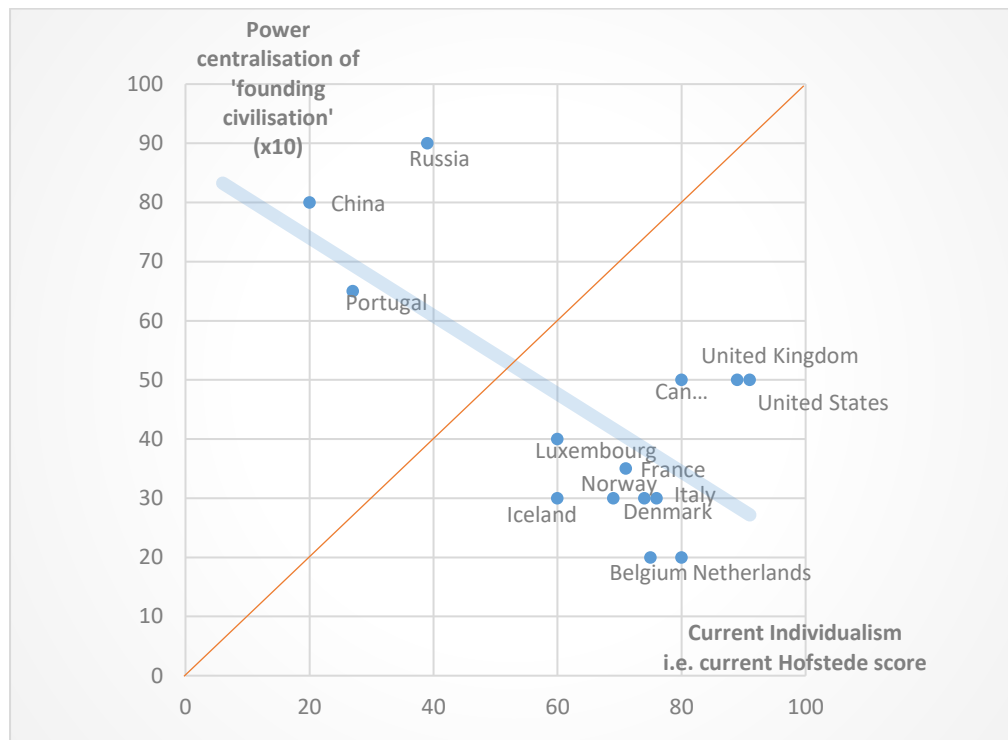
Second Perspective: Gerard Roland’s postulate of cultural determinism

Speaking in St Petersburg in 2017 on the anniversary of the Russian Revolution, Gerard Roland proposed that the contrast between Communism and capitalism was but one chapter of a very long-running saga. In the published paper, entitled “The deep historical roots of modern culture”, this view is elaborated as follows:

There have been since antiquity two opposed types of institutional systems: one resembling central planning and present in ancient China, ancient Egypt, the Inca Empire and other territorial states, and another one, with strong market institutions [and] protection of property rights, present mostly in city-states, not just in the Mediterranean but throughout the world. ... These institutional differences can be seen to be at the root of the two cultural systems in today’s world: collectivism versus individualism. Roland (2020, p. 483)

A currently relevant illustration of this hypothesis (of cultural bifurcation based on Deep Historical Roots, hereafter DHR) is provided in Figure 2 for a subsample of the extensive dataset he has assembled – specifically, China and

Russia together with the twelve founding members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. This shows a current measure of each society's individualism (its Hofstede score, on the horizontal) plotted against a measure of power centralization in its founding civilization (as provided in Roland's dataset and kindly made available).



Source: Roland (2020)

Figure 2 Historic centralisation of power and current Individualism: East v West

From the downward sloping line of best fit, it is evident that, in this sample, the historical centralisation of power is negatively associated with current individualism, in line with DHR hypothesis. A further striking feature is the contrast it provides between the East (as represented by China and Russia - both situated well above the 45 degree diagonal), and the West (represented by NATO, whose original members, all except for Portugal¹⁰, lie below).

Could current events be bearing out Roland's idea of enduring cultural types? For, in what Samir Puri(2022, p. 206) calls the 'now legendary bilateral meeting' between Putin and China's President Xi Jinping at the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics, on 4 February 2022, the two

¹⁰ Note that the Portugese *Estado Novo* regime was one of the longest surviving authoritarian states in 20th century Europe, lasting from 1933 to 1974, with Antonio de Salazar in charge from its inception until 1968!

presidents proposed a New World Order. What this involves was described by Gideon Rachman (2022a) as follows:

Beijing and Moscow argue that the current world order is characterised by American attempts to impose Western ideas about democracy and human rights on others ... The **new world order** that Russia and China are demanding would instead be based on distinct spheres of influence. While the Western liberal tradition promotes universal human rights, Russian and Chinese thinkers make the argument that different cultural traditions and “civilisations” should be allowed to develop in different ways. (Emphasis added.)

In the joint declaration, moreover, China backed Russia’s objections to any further expansion of NATO – whose earlier expansion is widely seen as the *casus belli* for Russia’s attack on Ukraine that began only three weeks later, as discussed further below.

It should, however, be added that the support for the enduring effect of historical hierarchies, as in Figure 2, is much less obvious when one includes all countries for which Roland has provided relevant data. Though the line of best fit for the much larger sample still has a negative slope, the wide scatter of the data points cautions against relying too heavily on such historical roots as a general guide to current culture.

Third perspective: non-cooperative game theory

In *The Narrow Corridor: how Nations Struggle for Liberty*, A&R explicitly reject both such ideas of cultural determinism and those of ineluctable progress towards enlightenment. They propose instead a contingent, game-theoretic perspective, where political liberty may - or may not - emerge from social struggle. This approach received the enthusiastic endorsement of Avinash Dixit (2021), a distinguished game theorist¹¹, in an extended review which covers the technical details with admirable clarity.

The conflict they describe is between society (the people) and the state, where the latter is represented by elite institutions and leaders. As Acemoglu (2019) explains, however: “You need this conflict to be balanced. An imbalance is detrimental to liberty. If society is too weak, that leads to despotism. But on

¹¹ who, as indicated above, recently analysed the evolving risk of Armageddon in the 1962 nuclear confrontation between the USA and the Soviet Union (Dixit et al., 2021).

the other side, if society is too strong, that results in weak states that are unable to protect their citizens.”

To illustrate how this creates a ‘narrow corridor’ in which liberty flourishes, they present their approach in a diagram, see Figure 3, where political outcomes depend on the relative strength or ‘power’ of the two parties engaged in a dynamic, non-cooperative game – rather like two firms competing to patent a new product or process.

In what is labelled the Narrow Corridor around the diagonal - where the two powers are in approximate balance – liberal democracy prevails and economic growth is encouraged, as indicated by the arrow pointing towards the upper right. Outside this corridor, however, the stronger party is assumed to enjoy increasing returns, while the weaker suffers from a fatal ‘discouragement effect’. As a consequence, paths outside the corridor lead to divergent outcomes lying in the segments labelled either S_1 or S_3 , where either Society or the State is ultimately reduced to abject powerlessness.¹²

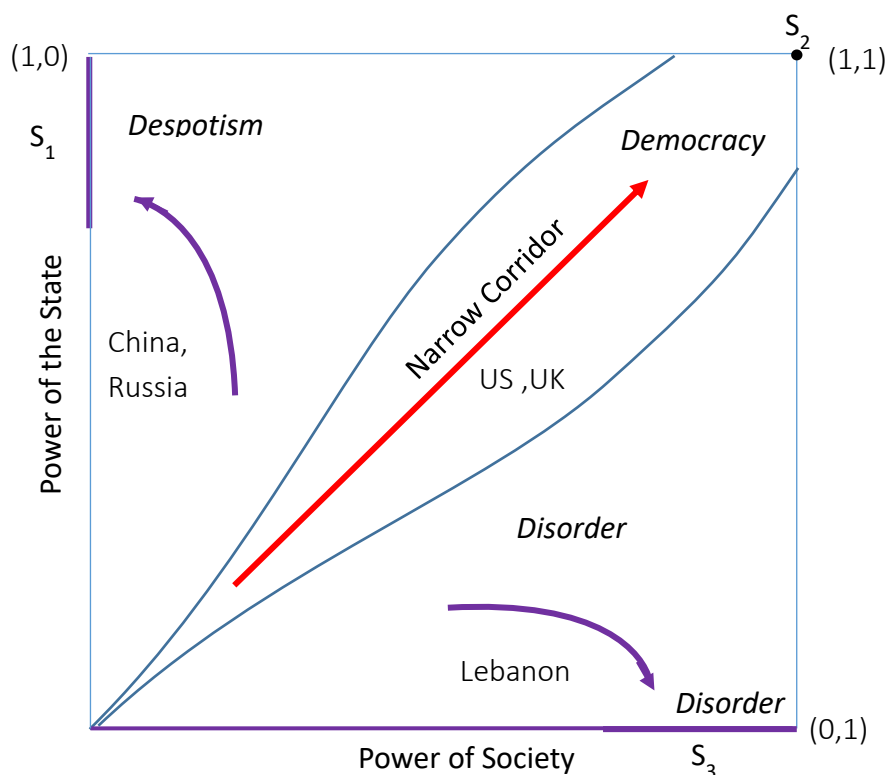


Figure 3 How the evolving powers of state and society can lead towards different forms of government

¹² The country names shown, and their location, are as indicated in A&R (2019).

Here too there are trajectories that lead on to liberty and justice, as for Fukuyama; but there is no guarantee that these will be chosen rather than others leading to Despotism or Disorder. In short, A&R offer a dynamic perspective, with dangerous downsides that lead to highly undesirable long-run steady states.

It is interesting to note that the path for Despotic regimes, shown on top left of the figure, seems¹³ in accord with Acton's Dictum that 'power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely'.

On the persistence of Despotism, indeed, their perspective resembles the DHR view of Roland; for according to Acemoglu (2019), the longer a despotic state exists,

the more self-reinforcing it becomes. ... The more it takes root, the more it sets up a hierarchy which is hard to change, and the more it weakens society. ... That's why I think dreams of China smoothly converting to a democratic system have been misplaced — [it's had] 2,500 years of state despotism.

An important qualification to this gloomy prospect is noted by Dixit (2021, p. 1355), who observes that: "A literal interpretation would be that polities are fated to follow whatever destiny their historical condition may entail. But A&R have examples where the initial point can be shifted or manipulated." Their treatment of the collapse of the Soviet Union – treated as a downward shift in the power of the state¹⁴ - is a key example of how an 'exogenous political shock' can have a major impact by shifting society onto a new path¹⁵.

Are there shifts or shocks that might rescue society from the depths of Despotism, one is tempted to ask? At the conference, William White appealed to cyclical theories of politics – such as those described by the Greek historian Polybius. Our preferred response is reserved for the Conclusion.

¹³ On the assumption that corruption involves reducing the power of society.

¹⁴ see Figure 3 in A&R (2019, p.290).

¹⁵ In his review of *The Narrow Corridor*, James Fenske (2021, p.10) argues that 'External shocks may matter more than they appear in the book', an important critique explored in the next section.

Fourth perspective: Darwinian cultural competition

A further challenge to cultural determinism comes from the perception that different cultures are engaged in international competition. In *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin sketched the role of 'natural selection' in the diffusion of social and moral qualities:

Selfish and contentious people will not cohere, and without coherence, nothing can be effected. ... When two tribes of primeval man came into competition, if one tribe included, other things being equal, a greater number of courageous, sympathetic and faithful members, who were always ready to warn each other of danger, to aid and defend each other, this tribe would succeed best and conquer the other...

A tribe possessing the above qualities in a high degree would spread and be victorious over other tribes; but in the course of time it would be in turn overcome by some other more highly endowed tribe. Thus social and moral qualities would tend slowly to advance and be diffused around the world. Darwin (1981[1873], pp. 162-3).

This perspective finds support from Samuel Huntington, who begins his analysis of the 'global politics of civilizations' with the assertion that:

Civilizations are the ultimate human tribes, and the clash of civilisations is a tribal conflict on a global scale. Huntington (1997, p.207).

In their wide-ranging study of human reciprocity and its evolution, Bowles and Gintis (2015, pp. 50,51), after citing Darwin as above, go on to observe that:

Differential group success plays a central role in the evolution of human behaviors and institutions, members of less successful groups copying the more successful or being eliminated by them. Examples of this process include the peopling of many parts of the world by people of European ancestry and the associated spread of European customs and institutions in the past half millennium, and the spread of agriculture and its associated novel systems of social organization and behaviour from the Middle East to Europe beginning 11 millennia ago.

Empirical evidence of the spread of individualist culture (based on 'genetic closeness' to the USA) has been provided by Gorodnichenko and Roland (2017). This appears to support a dynamic Darwinian view of how culture gets disseminated (i.e. by imitation, migration, and/or elimination).

A focus on Russia¹⁶

The first perspective – Fukuyama’s forecast

Russia provides a leading counter-example to Fukuyama’s doctrine of ‘immaculate convergence’ to liberal democracy. As Samir Puri puts it bluntly: “Putin’s Russia is now mounting an open civilizational revolt against Western-led hegemonic uniformity.” Puri (2022, p.252,3).

Second – the role of history

What then of the pervasive power of Deep Historical Roots in explaining its current culture, as illustrated graphically in Figure 2 above? This appears much closer to the mark. While there have, apparently, been successive efforts in Russian history to move towards liberal democracy, each in turn has failed, Sixsmith (2012) and Figes (2022).

Historian Robert Skidelsky (2022) explains this as follows:

Because serfdom was abolished only in 1861 and the system of Russian autocracy collapsed only in 1917 (only to be swiftly restored), Russia never experienced the period of bourgeois civilization which, in Europe, established the outlines of the constitutional state. ... Russia was always an empire, never a nation-state. Autocracy is its natural form of rule.

Samir Puri concurs, for in his view:

The immensity of Russia’s imperial past must never be understated: for around 500 years, Russia’s experience outside the confines of formal imperial identity is limited to two relatively brief moments in history, one in the 1990s during Russia’s flirtation with democracy under President Boris Yeltsin and the other in 1917 [with] the Provisional Government led by Prime Minister Alexander Kerensky. Puri (2022, p.11)

With respect to Ukraine, he goes on to explain,

Vladimir Putin thinks that Russian-speaking parts of Ukraine belong to a Moscow-centred Slavic civilization state, and that Ukraine as a whole must pledge fealty in perpetuity to Russia. Puri (2022, p.252)

To enforce this historical perspective, and to check the eastward extension of NATO, Putin has unleashed the dogs of war upon his fellow Slavs.

¹⁶ An update of an earlier assessment in Miller (2021).

With this war, Putin did not want to rebuild the USSR but to reunite the lands of Ancient Rus, the civilization space that Putin feels has been turned against itself by the USA's use of NATO as a vanguard for injecting the nefarious temptations of geopolitical Westernisation into the region. Puri (2022, p.256).

The third perspective – on life outside the Narrow Corridor

Writing in 2019, A&R forecast with commendable accuracy what was to come; and their framework provides a convenient canvas for describing the course of events since then. They reckoned that, following the collapse of the USSR:

Russia was too distant from the corridor. Though the collapse of the despotic Soviet state pushed it in the right direction, it wasn't enough to tame the Russian state, which just picked up where the Soviet one had left off and reconstituted its despotic control over society. A&R (2019, p. 288)

This was illustrated in their diagram, A&R (2019, p. 290) by a movement leading downward from where things stood in the USSR (before the collapse in 1990) to where they saw them under Putin in 2019 (still above the Narrow Corridor), as is illustrated in Figure 3.¹⁷ To capture the notion of strongman rule in this context, an elliptical shape has added to the figure, lying largely above the Narrow Corridor, with Russia under Putin in 2019 situated therein.

¹⁷ This simple downward shift leaves out of account significant interim steps taken by Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin himself, which are indicated, albeit briefly, in the Annex.

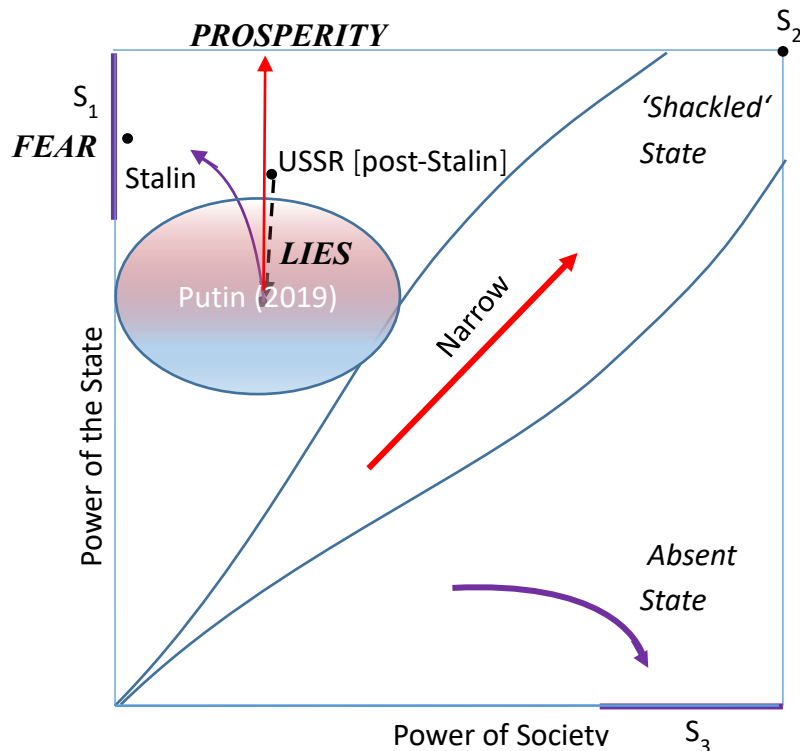


Figure 3 The options facing Putin as strongman President

On the question of where Putin was to go from there, Sergei Guriev (2022) referenced the three 'authoritarian options', as defined by Adam Przeworski of Columbia University, that lay open to the president - indicated in Figure 3. These options - and their feasibility - may be described as follows, starting with Economic Prosperity, shown by an upward pointing arrow; and ending with Fear, which involves following the trajectory heading towards Despotism.

Economic Prosperity – the idea of implementing a more efficient autocracy. This option was stifled by increasing centralisation and endemic corruption - as Alexei Navalny bravely showed after he recovered from attempted poisoning by Russian security services.

Lies – the strategy of staying put, using propaganda to maintain political control without resort to terror. The façade of fake democracy had worked for a while¹⁸ - but Putin's popularity fell below 60% for the first time in April 2020.

Fear – i.e. to carry on along a path towards Stalinesque despotism, as indicated in A&R's analysis. This is what Putin has chosen. Political

¹⁸ And was to fool outside observers like Guriev and Treisman (2022) - and Miller and Zissimos (2022)!

opposition has been suppressed, with Navalny imprisoned and his Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) outlawed, for example; and an invasion of Ukraine - launched, perhaps, in the expectation of boosting the President's popularity as when Crimea was annexed in 2014.

The fourth perspective: cultural competition

To judge from the list of practitioners in Table 2, the strongman approach pioneered by President Putin has proved attractive elsewhere. So Russian culture has passed an important test for international success.

But Putin's conduct has greatly changed over time. As reported in *Financial Times* in March 2021, for example:

Over two decades in power, Russia's leader has cast himself first as champion of prosperity and then as anti-western patriot. But now ... he has transformed once more – into brutal strongman. Foy (2021)

And that was written before the invasion of Ukraine - a conflict where Darwin's parable of two warring tribes offers Putin cold comfort.

So will Russia preserve its allure as an exemplar of the NWO? A diplomatic response would be that of Chinese premier Zhou Enlai in 1972 when asked about the impact of the student uprising in France: that it is "too early to say".

With the advent of nuclear weapons, however, the clash of cultures involves more than issues of moral and social choice for society; there is a real risk of a war to end all wars. But what if the NWO is viewed as a type of cartel? Is there not then the prospect of self-discipline? By waging sudden war to widen Russia's already vast territorial sway – and threatening nuclear escalation when his battle plans go astray – Putin could be seen as cheating on the terms of a pact of cultural cooperation. If so, as an ex-colonel of People's Liberation Army has put it bluntly, China could intervene "by simply telling Russia; don't use nuclear weapons, Mr President." (Bo, 2022).

Conclusion: history matters, but cultures evolve in competition

With strongman leaders pledging common cause to confront the West with authoritarian rule in a New World Order, the world stands witness to a clash of civilisations. Deep historical roots of absolutism seem to propel both Russia and China towards Despotism - along a path that is set to continue if the prognosis provided by Acemoglu and Robinson holds good.

The words of Alexander Dugin, a Russian academic, offer chilling confirmation:

Huntington was absolutely right and Fukuyama was absolutely wrong. There are civilisations and one of them is Russia. And we had no other way of proving Huntington right than by attacking Ukraine. It's us who started this conflictual situation in order to be heard. Puri (2022, p. 26)

In this context, however, the ideas of Darwin and Bagehot (on natural selection as among societies) must give pause for thought. For what the West seeks to offer is liberal democracy – where governance relies on institutions and the rule of law. But what autocracy provides rests perilously on the shoulders of authoritarian leaders, free to change constitutional limits on their power – and to go to war with close neighbours - as the spirit moves.

From this, Rachman (2022, p. 232,3) derives an important conclusion:

Strongman rule almost invariably leads to the creation of a personality cult [which] ultimately has to rest on fear and coercion. ... Even if their physical health holds up, decades in power can often cause a leader to succumb to megalomania or paranoia... When a strongman loses power, the stability of the entire political system built around him is at risk.... For these reasons, strongman rule is an inherently flawed and unstable form of government. It will ultimately collapse.

This implies that it is wrong to treat Despotism as a permanent steady state, as do Acemoglu and Robinson. Since it is an unstable form of government, then, from the Darwinian viewpoint of natural selection, it should not endure.

Epilogue¹⁹

When the history of this clash of civilisations comes to be told, will the vaunted champions of absolutism be fated to be forgotten? like Ozymandias, King of Kings,

*Whose vast and trunkless legs of stone stand in the desert;
And, on the pedestal, these words appear:
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!*

¹⁹ With due acknowledgement of lines from “Ozymandias” by Percy Bysshe Shelly and “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus.

Or could the lofty Statue of Liberty be dethroned from her pedestal at the sea-washed, sunset gates of the New World? no more to cry:

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.*

Only time will tell.

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Annex: On USSR/Russian governance 1990 - 2019: Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Putin.

The broad perspective of Acemoglu and Robinson is shown in Figure 3 as the modest reduction in the power of the state as between the point labelled USSR [post-Stalin] and that labelled Russia [2019]. As indicated in Figure 4 below, however, to reach this point Putin had to reverse the reform efforts of his two immediate predecessors.

First was the attempt by Mikhail Gorbachev as Head and State, and finally President of the USSR, to democratise the USSR – by modernising the state (with *perestroika* and *glasnost*) and by ending the monopoly of the Communist party. Such changes were designed to take the system into the narrow corridor, as indicated – tentatively - in the figure.

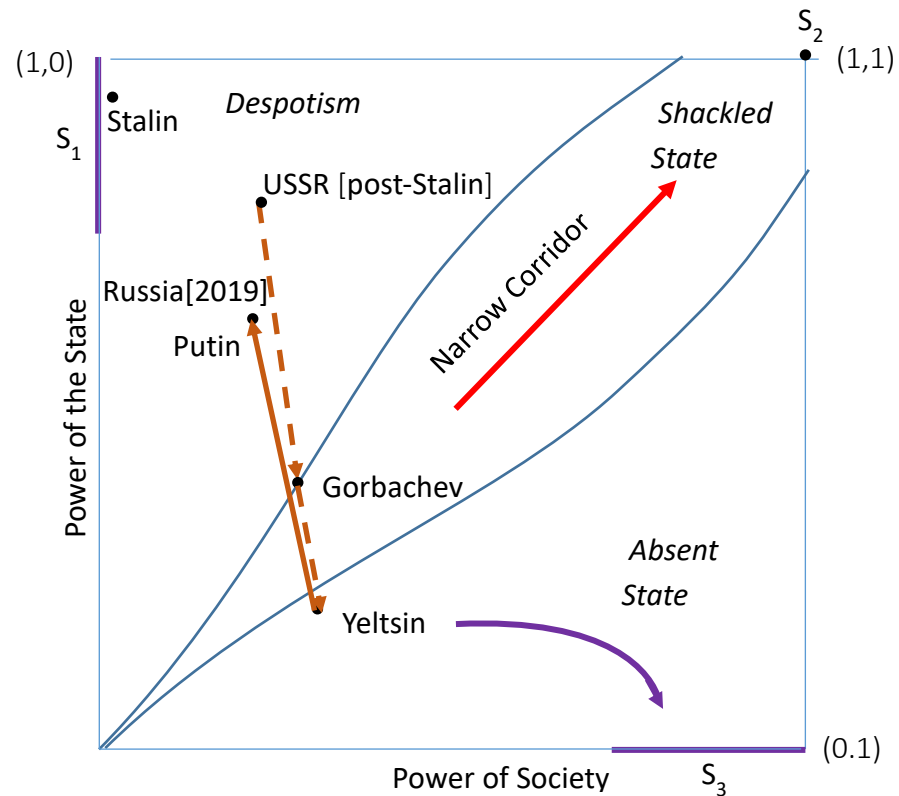


Figure 4 USSR/Russian governance 1990 - 2019: Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin.

Second was the takeover of power by Boris Yeltsin, who had been elected as Chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet, and became President of Russia after the USSR collapsed in 1990. *Ex ante*, things looked promising:

His platform ... included a radical program of market reform. Democracy, economic reforms – it looked like the Russian despotic state was getting tamed. A&R (2019. p.285)

But, with the Russian elite benefitting enormously from the corrupt privatisation of state assets (the ‘loans for shares’ scheme in particular), these hopes were dashed. For many, indeed, it seemed that the government, though technically powerful, was failing in the essential task of running the country - as suggested by locating Yeltsin’s regime just inside the region of the Absent State in Figure 4. In any event, he was persuaded to leave his post early, designating Vladimir Putin as his unelected successor.

Including these interim steps suggests there was considerable instability in how Russia was governed in the 1990s before Putin took over in December, 1999 – and proceeded to lead Russia back to the point labelled Russia[2019]. For what happens next, see main text.