

Notes on the Onward March of Folly (with apologies to Barbara Tuchman)

Nine Wrong Ideas or Notions which are threatening to wreck the modern world, and how we here, now, in Britain can counter them.

[This is an updated version of a list compiled ten years ago and it is really worrying to note how many of them remain just as threatening and damaging today.]

The further and Onward March of Folly

The further we look back the further forward we can see. (Churchill). Are today's most dangerous notions and obsessions just pure folly, as with Barbara Tuchman's classic examples, where the whole establishment, along with the media, were united in a view which turned out to be disastrously wrong? Or are we dealing with deliberate wrecking tactics (luring our country and society on to the rocks)? Or is it just a matter of the endless 'ignorance of the learned' (William Hazlitt's favourite phrase) – and an alarming absence of the common sense which the mass of society possess but which 'the learned in all ages want' (Hazlitt's words again)?

A bit of all three, I suspect. Partly we are confronted with well-meaning intentions which have gradually grown up and secured almost universal support, with doubters shouted down, and execrated until everything ends in catastrophe, as per Barbara Tuchman's original ideas, (from the 'good idea' of dragging the Wooden Horse into the centre of Troy, to the Vietnam War based on a gigantic fallacious theory).

Partly there are indeed malign and deliberate attempts to sabotage stable societies and create turmoil (The Jihadist strategy). Partly we face just economic illiteracy, shallowness of understanding and yearning for 'inevitable' history to lead to nirvana – the dangerous swirl of ideology and historicism against which Karl Popper warned us, but which today's ideologues on either wing of politics seem to have forgotten, or maybe never read.

And partly we have to contend with the truly pitiful state of the public experience and memory in most departments and assemblies of governance and the state. Possibly the last remnants are to be found in the much reviled House of Lords. As Herbert Agar, author of *The Time for Greatness* long ago warned '*If the web of history breaks civilisation breaks. Such a break is the most fearful of calamities that can fall upon humankind*'.

So here we go.

One- The Isolation Fallacy

We have to grapple with the widespread belief that Britain today is belittled and 'marginalised'. Behind this is the fallacy of spheres and blocs – and the insistence that Britain is being 'isolated' (see Garton Ash, Philip Stephens etc.) It fatally overlooks the emergence of The Network World, and of the revolution in mass communications which has changed the dynamics of international relations, as well as shifting power both eastwards and downwards into the hands and minds of mass opinion. The 20th century pattern was a hierarchy of Western nations with the USA at the top. But networks defeat hierarchies.

That is what 'leadership' voices both sides of the Atlantic have not grasped. It is why the vast Commonwealth network and Britain within it has become so important and why the rising significance and power of Commonwealth countries – especially in relation to global security and defence, in climate combat and in energy resources is becoming so central. Easternisation and rising Asian power are set to become the drivers and the stabilizers. Africa is coming in from the cold: Japan's friendship and twinning with the UK is a crucial new part of our re-positioning.

We are not quite at the Decline of West. We must always stay on good terms with, Washington - and if possible, with Brussels. But we should run a mile from the Manichean view of the world of which American professors are so fond, as are our right-wing tyros here. Forget all the talk of a clash of civilisations, the Thucydides trap, inevitable war with 'the enemy' (Russia this week, China the next). Actually, convergence between East and West, and between philosophies and styles of governance, is more likely than clash, as countries like Vietnam (yes, the one where 55000 American soldiers died) prove clearly.

The United Kingdom, if we can keep it united, and as much of the British Isles as we can befriend and impress, should stay well clear of this kind of absolutism, which always slides off into mild political hysteria within the old carapace of left-wing and right-wing – a philosophical casing now completely outdated by technology. And that is precisely why Britain will feel more of a safe haven than other nations, with disputes hopefully more contained in Parliament (now badly in need of further reform) and democratic debate, and less fought out with placards and car-burning (and alas, inevitable violence) on the streets. Pray that moderation and reasoned argument can hold the line.

Two- The Public Opinion and Will of the People Fallacy

- The pollsters are always wrong, wrong on foreign policy, wrong on human resilience, wrong in trying to treat people as categories and to divide between rulers and ruled (as Popper repeatedly warned). Why, because they start from the basically fallacious belief that 'opinion' amongst millions of individuals in all its mosaic and constantly shifting diversity, can somehow be collectivised, extracted via 'typical' samples and paraded as the view of the public, or worse still, and much more dangerously 'The Will of the People'. When we start hearing that phrase then it really is time to start sounding the tocsins of liberty. The next phrases will be in the language of denunciation of alleged enemies of 'the people'. (NB this was written in 2010. By 2017 the phrases duly appeared).
- Opinion polls skim the surface of opinion. They fail utterly to elicit or reveal feelings of purpose, pride, identity. They fail to reflect 'the Commonwealth Within'. They fail to interpret the exercise of soft and wise power par excellence, the mixed feelings of hope and trust portrayed in relation to Governments, rulers and 'the State'. They fail to pick up how other disciplines reinforce networks and generate consilience between the ideas streams. They are good for selling branded products but not for distilling public wisdom or evolving sentiments, hopes and fears.

Three - The Integration Fallacy

Let's turn to the European Quagmire and the Fallacy of Integration: This is how we drifted into the EU mess. The idea persists – the idea of Britain in irrevocable decline and defeat because somehow left out. It began with Harold Macmillan, prevailed in the upper reaches of Whitehall and in academia and with the likes of the late Hugo Young, amongst many others. The yearning remains for some blueprint, for a destiny or advance to some ideal within a larger bloc. But this overlooks the most common of fallacy, fully recognised by engineers - that compression leads to explosion. Push societies and nations too hard together and the result is not integration but disintegration. All along British leaders have failed to see this and lacked the courage to nudge, push and persuade leading Europeans that they are on the wrong foot.

Had they understood, they would have seen that the 21st century key to a stable and prosperous Europe was reform – reform to adapt to the digital

age, reform to adapt to the new centrifugal forces of localism and identity, and that reform should come BEFORE negotiation.

Four -The Fallacy of Exportable Democracy

We are submerged by American illusions and the Fallacy of exportable democracy: it is time to see why America no longer leads and should not try to: American strengths and weaknesses in a world where big is vulnerable and not necessarily beautiful: (Edward Luce) :the errors of Condoleezza Rice and now Hilary Clinton: dangers of liberal interventionism: getting the Arab Spring wrong: hideous error in Iraq, tragedy in Afghanistan: British complicity: Iran, Syria and Libya: The nature and varieties of modern democracy: culture specific patterns and the China conundrum: are the Gulf autocrats democrats?:Russia and China NOT the enemies: The West not in pole position , but rescued from decline by the digital revolution. No-one has world supremacy in a multi-connected network.

Five - Fallacies of Climate Control and Energy Policy

Climate and Energy Confusions and the failures of both green and energy security policies: the unconvincing message and the Carbon crunch (Dieter Helm). The danger (this was 2010) is that we put our own 'virtuous' policies of greening Britain ahead of the real policies needed to reduce world carbon emissions and genuinely combat climate dangers. The truth is that China, India, Russia and the USA are at the centre, the really big emitters. Unless we can focus our genius on the solutions to their vast emissions, their massive coal-burning and their need for cheap energy to survive and prosper the whole climate battle will fail. (This was 2010. It did fail, and is failing now,2020!). The politics have been grossly mishandled: wrong-headed carbon penalties and targets which do not work: the fallacy of peak oil and gas: British energy errors – penalising the poor to subsidise the rich and the Deben letter: destructive green zealots. The receding low carbon goals: the billions without power, and energy supplies for growth in low income countries. Technology the key to the global greener future. Costly attempted climate policies kill more than they will ever cure.

Six - The Fallacies of Modern Economics

The Fallacy is of economics as a science and system built on rational behaviour and 'rational man'. This is central to our present discontents. It leads directly to erroneous growth measurements, to the belief in Government capacities to promote growth and happiness. The economy is in fact a process and a

catallaxy, **not** a machine or system. (Kaspars) : Capitalism is bound to transform itself: Recovery is international and cannot be delivered by domestic policy manoeuvres, however dexterous: The power of copying and network effects (Ormerod): the economists slowly discover reality (Kay): Utterly misleading statistics are fed to the media that do not measure reality. We have here the fallacy of aggregates, the concepts invented by Keynes and others to try to understand, and manage, the economic conditions of his day, but which have all been superseded.

Seven - The Fallacies of Aid and Development

The reality which well-meaning and compassionate aid enthusiast cannot face is that aid programmes are stifling development. The engines of growth have been spelt out again and again, (by such perceptive gurus as Hernando de Soto and Dembisa Moyo). What has happened in Africa is for all to see. Yet still the lessons are not being learnt. The African scene is now being transformed. Along the way there has been the need to avoid the curse of aid becoming the curse of oil, although with the shrinkage of oil and as prices on a long term basis this will solve itself. Meanwhile the Chinese are everywhere (and creating common problems of balancing cooperation and containment in every Commonwealth member state). This is an area where Britain constructively should be leading, instead of sinking into blind Sinophobia. In Africa it spells another way for development and another way for defeating poverty.

Eight - The fallacy of 'solutions'.

The fallacy of 'solutions'. To many issues there are none. The mysteries and complexities are beyond the human grasp. Mysteries, Shiva the God of paradoxes, dichotomies, the noosphere, de Chardin, all show the darkness of political ideologies and the danger of blueprints, destinies and dreams. The new network world has no centres – or numerous and multiplying centres. Take your choice. There is no new Rome (although Washington is built like one) and no blueprints. We need to be guided by the insights of Matt Ridley (everything is evolving) and the apophatic view of Karen Armstrong. A sacred river runs through our affairs. Democracy means constant testing of view by argument, not visions or history and scientific inevitability somehow trumping politics (The central Marxian error) .

On another tack there is NO 'solution' to the problem of Europe. We have to live with a Europe of constant bargaining and unending argument. This will come to be understood when nothing is ever 'settled'. By 2020, even the negotiating officials in London and Brussels were beginning to grasp that ahead lies a 'Europe of constant argument'. There will never be settlement – on level playing fields or much else - because the ground is always shifting. The Swiss found that out long ago.

Nine- inevitably – the fallacy of disproportionate pandemic reaction.

This is the first time in history that a genuinely dangerous and contagious world disease has coincided with the on-going digital revolution in information transmission and in consequent international, societal and interpersonal behaviour.

First some basic figures. World population 7.9 billion (approx. now). World Covid cases reported, just under 23 million. World Covid deaths (as reported - could be more or far less), just under 800,000.

ERGO, the other 7.877 billion, untouched by Covid-19, may be disturbed but are unaffected. In short, most of the world, in fact all but a tiny margin, carries on. That may be sad and tragic, but there is not the remotest comparison with past pandemics, whether Spanish flu, TB, Swine flu, Malaria, HIV, polio, smallpox, let alone with any earlier plagues. It seems that global stock markets, and an overwhelming proportion of world business, instinctively know that and are getting on with life, wherever and whenever allowed to.

One more statistics set. The UK has upwards of 12,000 hospitals. It has at least 140,000 beds. Currently it has 841 Covid sufferers in hospital, leaving thousands of empty beds and under-occupied staff.

Only possible conclusion, vast lockdown overreactions by many governments and world media, caused by substantial but a fallacious , but very easily purveyed and instant view stream about the nature, threat and impact of Covid virus.

Digitalisation both greatly improves control and limits spread, but also greatly raises the scare level. Modern technology, as it races ahead, is two-sided and cuts both ways - a complex phenomenon which many are unable to grasp, whether in government, academia, science or media. Hence completely disproportionate response – a real wrecking fallacy at loose in the modern world.
