We are the Fallen Riding the Tiger of World-History: Christmas in the Post-Truth Condition

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The Great War and the Decline and Fall of Imperial Man

The Electoral College may have secured Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 US presidential election, but that was just one battle in the ongoing wars over truth and knowledge that have been raging for a century now. These wars began, not with the 2016 election of Donald Trump, nor with the various culture, canon and science wars of the 1980s and '90s, nor even with the protest movements of the 1960s against the oppression of the weak at home and abroad. They began shortly after the First World War, when the modern narrative of human progress began to seriously unravel. Although it tends to be overshadowed by the Second World War—its memories of concentration camps and atomic bombs persisting to this day—what was originally known as 'The Great War' anchored the sensibility that continues to govern our sense of being-in-the-world. In short: *We are the fallen.*

It is worth recalling how the world was before The Great War. It was the peak of Imperialism, whose boosters claimed provided training wheels for more 'backward' parts of the world to participate fully in a globalized world of free trade. Imperialism cast itself as the economic backbone of the grand narrative of human progress. And make no mistake: Most Imperialists were Liberals—indeed, Liberals who believed that their aspirations for those abroad should be matched by their aspirations for those at home; hence, the origins of the UK welfare state (Renwick 2017). Indeed, the only difference in the spirit between the Imperialists and the 'development' theorists who still dictate policies at the United Nations is that the UN respects political sovereignty in ways that make the UN both more tolerable and less effective than the old Imperial powers. This point was incisively drummed home in the early works of the late great world-systems Andre Gunder Frank.

Because today's interpretations of Imperialism tend to be cloaked in the recriminations of postcolonial discourse, it is easy to forget that, generally speaking, Imperialists were heady enthusiasts whose adventurism would find a kindred spirit today in Elon Musk—especially if H.G. Wells were sent as their time travelling emissary. Imperialists believed their own *vangardiste* hype. To be sure, more sober heads, such as John Hobson and Joseph Schumpeter, held that Imperialism was financially unsustainable and thrived only as long as the home nations could be persuaded to make enormous sacrifices, fuelled by mythical conceptions of superiority and feudal conceptions of power. More to the historical point, these developments led Lenin to predict that Imperialism's implosion would spell capitalism's demise, which is how he read The Great War. Thus, the Bolshevik Revolution took full advantage of the Russian Empire's vulnerability during the conflict.

However, The Great War's aftermath left a sour taste in everyone's mouth. It was quickly realized that the war's unprecedented carnage reflected the involvement of cutting-edge science and technology, typically with the endorsement of the relevant experts. In this regard, the specific targeting of Germany for war reparations seemed grossly unfair from a world-historic standpoint. Everyone had brought their latest know-how to the table, and it just happened that Germany lost. Moreover, the supposedly superior Marxist science promoted by Lenin and his fellow Bolsheviks was quickly producing a brutal and authoritarian society. As a result, the 1920s witnessed the rise of various cross-cutting

intellectual movements that historians now call 'Weimar culture'. I have described it as the prototype for today's globalized 'postmodern condition' (Fuller 2003). Hanging over the onset of this world-historic change in mood was Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, a multi-volume best-seller published shortly after The Great War that cast occidental hubris as 'Faustian'. Spengler envisaged an oriental ascendancy, which of course remains a vivid prospect today.

Survival after the Fall: Philosophers Struggling to Learn the Lessons of the Great War

Whatever one makes of Spengler on his own terms, the legacy of self-involved occidental responses to his work are still very much with us. All of them have claimed the mantle of 'critical' at some point and together suggest a recognition that something is fundamentally *wrong* with our being-in-the-world—or at least, the Western being-in-the-world. Much of this self-critical turn has looked to the past for guidance. Christian fundamentalism dates from this period, paralleled by Heidegger's more pagan musings about modernity's 'forgetfulness of being'. The Frankfurt School, soft Marxists burnt by the Bolshevik Revolution, tried to drive a wedge between 'science' and 'technology', alleging that the latter had colonized the former. The Vienna Circle agreed but tried much harder to liberate the good 'science' from the bad 'technology'. However, they succeeded only at the level of logic.

To be sure, some thinkers of the era successfully navigated the turbulence of the last century that has resulted in our post-truth condition. To paraphrase the title of the best known book by Steve Bannon's favourite philosopher, Julius Evola (2018), they 'rode the tiger' of world history. Three figures of rather different ideological dispositions—György Lukács, Carl Schmitt and Karl Popper—fall in this category. They were neither obscured nor engulfed by the events of their time, yet they always remained somewhat against the grain. They were never fashionable. Their perennial awkwardness has underwritten their longevity.

Interestingly, these philosophers were not 'critics' of the regimes in which they lived. On the contrary, the critics of these philosophers typically accuse them of having been apologists for the regimes in which they thrived: Lukács in the Soviet Union, Schmitt in Nazi Germany, and Popper in Cold War Britain. But on closer inspection, they proved less useful than might have been expected of a genuine ideologue because of their keen sense of the difference between the spirit and the letter of the normative orders under which they lived: Their writings extracted and amplified the spirit, while disregarding much of the letter. The result in each case is a virtualization of their home regimes that could conceivably serve as a template for a society other than the one in which they actually lived. Such multi-purpose Platonism has proven of great use in the post-truth condition.

The 'pluralism' associated first with Weimar and now with postmodernism amounts to an acknowledgement of the divergence—not convergence—of science, religion and politics (especially when glossed as 'democracy'). While providing fertile ground for the 'arts', understood as a purgatory between thought and action, pluralism has been profoundly frustrating in its own right, as reflected in the allergic reaction that those living in Weimar and postmodern times have had toward any teleological conception of the truth. *À la* critiques of Imperialism, 'unsustainable' looms large in this context as well. Pluralists have believed that competing notions of progress would eventually lead to global war, as different parties regard themselves as the chosen messengers of the true message. A self-limiting

relativism would therefore seem to be a *prima facie* safer strategy. However, the historical record on this matter is much more equivocal.

Our Incommensurable World: The Legacy of the Cold War

The Great War is generally agreed to have been an accident waiting to happen. It was an overreaction to an assassination that quickly acquired world-historic significance as more parties became involved, suggesting that all sides were primed for a fight—each believing that it was guided by God, science and capital. The Second World was the unintended consequence of the extreme reparations imposed on Germany after the Great War. At the same time, it is clear from contemporary accounts of Nazi political economy that the aftermath of a Hitler victory would not have been global domination but a partition of the planet that based on racialized principles of 'sustainability' (e.g. Neumann 1944). The Nazis had grasped the anti-ecological animus of Imperialism very well but perverted any idea of sustainability to their own political ends by demonizing the Jews as Imperialist agents. Nevertheless, many 'alt-history' fiction plots have been generated from this feature of a Nazi victory, most notably Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*.

Against this backdrop, the Cold War appears almost like a Golden Age. It certainly was the high watermark worldwide for public science funding—and trust in science more generally—as well as the reduction of economic and social inequality. Add to that the avoidance of the much threatened—and even expected—global nuclear confrontation. Little wonder that Steven Pinker has repeatedly pointed to the conduct of the Cold War as evidence for humanity's moral progress. Of special note is that the *de facto* partition of the world that took place after the Second World War was also governed by competing universals, if not outright empires: one based in Washington, the other in Moscow. Yet the proxy wars they fought in terms of sheer arsenal size, overseas influence and outer space ventures remained high-pitched yet rigorously stage-managed for nearly a half-century.

To be sure, this is an impressive record of achievement, though I stop short of issuing a Pinkeresque congratulation to our species because we have yet to learn its lessons. After all, the Cold War should have prepared us for today's post-truth condition, whereby the same set of facts are routinely coded in systematically different ways. Twenty years ago, when I published *Thomas Kuhn: A Philosophical History for Our Times* (Fuller 2000), I observed that US international relations theorist Robert Jervis (1976) had unearthed the Cold War unconscious of Kuhn's notorious idea of *incommensurable* paradigms. In both politics and science, one person's 'conversion' is another's 'defection'.

The point about incommensurability is that two (or more) parties face each other as being neither on the same side nor opposing sides, but so to speak, at 'right angles' to each other. It means that they share many of the same ends but they diverge significantly on the possible means to achieve them, largely due to other ends over which they differ but each would also like to pursue. Thus, they are neither 'friends' nor 'foes' in the neat sense that famously defined the 'political' for Carl Schmitt. This was certainly true of 'Capitalism' and 'Socialism', when their ultimate embodiment were, respectively, the US and USSR. Each boasted about their 'democracy', 'power' and 'progress', while contesting the standards by which they were

judged. Yet we managed survive the Cold War and, in many respects, came out better for having gone through the experience.

Incommensurability is ultimately about *orthogonality*, a term I first picked up as a graduate student in Pittsburgh from the late Jerry Fodor's critique of the logical positivists' 'unity of science' movement. On 2020 World Philosophy Day, I highlighted the concept as the one that has most guided my thinking. Fodor thought that the positivists' Comte-inspired idea of a *hierarchy* of sciences failed to do justice to the relationship between psychology and physiology, or mind and brain, which he regarded as 'orthogonal'. Paul Feyerabend and Richard Rorty, both in their youthful phase, had already seen the problem in the early 1960s. However, their response involved the 'elimination' rather than the simple 'reduction' of the mental in favour of the physical. They seemed to understand ontology as a zero-sum game, in which what Wilfrid Sellars' was calling the 'scientific image' would ultimately replace the 'manifest image' of reality. The self-styled 'neurophilosophers' and ex-Sellars students, Paul and Patricia Churchland have made careers from following this line of thought *con brio*.

However, from a strict Cold War standpoint it would have been an admission of failure, the equivalent of the US or USSR outright vanquishing the other. (What actually happened, of course, was that the US outspent the USSR into bankruptcy, which amounted to a win by default.) Luckily, that product of the Cold War imaginary called 'game theory' enabled us to think in terms of a 2x2 matrix, whereby 'the other' is presented as neither an opponent to be vanquished (aka 'elimination') nor a potential realm to be colonized (aka 'reduction'). Rather it proposes the other as someone who shares the same reality but interprets it in such radically different terms that a negotiation is required to achieve a satisfactory outcome for the two parties, albeit one in which the terms of the negotiation are not completely transparent because of lingering uncertainties about the full scope of the other side's ends. This captures the Prisoner's Dilemma, US-USSR relations and the mind-body problem. Fodor got the point, which perhaps enabled him to facilitate Kuhn's 1979 passage from Princeton to MIT—though I'm still not quite sure that Kuhn himself ever got the point.

Riding the Tiger into the Post-Trump Future

We can acclimate to the post-truth condition by accepting that we live in just such an orthogonally organized world, where the problem is less about establishing the facts than agreeing on their significance as a basis for collectively beneficial action. As I've argued in my new post-truth book, it is akin to bridging the gap between the 'duck' and the 'rabbit' interpretations of the same 'duckrabbit' Gestalt figure (Fuller 2020). The difference between the Cold War and now is that we live in a world whose political dimensions have gone beyond two, which means that reality appears as multiply orthogonal. Every action we take can be coded at many different levels, as we go through life effectively playing a version of multi-dimensional chess. This is not simply an abstract point of 'multi-verse' ontology but key to understanding how it is possible that governments worldwide have come to be simultaneously focussed on nation-states, terrorists, hackers and viruses as potential threats.

It is a great mistake to think that we live in a world that is less rational than before—and the more that political and scientific elites adhere to this conviction, the more trust and power they will lose. People have never been so educated nor exposed to so much information in a media environment that enables them to register their opinions. Unless one wishes to argue

that the last two centuries of mass literacy at multiple levels have been a complete waste of time, this is the world of 'democratic empowerment' that we have all apparently longed for (Fuller 2018). Think of it as an updated version of the 'Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil' that God had instructed Adam to avoid. It was always a Habermasian fantasy to think that such enfranchisement would result in a 'consensus' that converged with 'enlightened' opinion. In the end, the only consensus that can be achieved is one backed by the rule of law. This seems to be happening in the US, as Joe Biden gingerly proceeds to become the next President. It is a great testimony to the US Constitution and its legal system that the 'rules of the game' have weathered the storms of all sorts of players who have come to the field over the past two centuries, the latest and arguably most formidable being Donald Trump.

Of course, Trump is unlikely to go away and may well channel his sizeable following into a media outlet that presents a running 'alt-commentary' to the official line coming from the Biden White House. And it could have traction, paving the way to a Trump 2024 bid for the presidency. However much one might fear this prospect, it nevertheless suggests that our seemingly super-sophisticated world of multi-dimensional chess playing has returned us to the world that Foucault (1970) originally identified as the 'pre-classical', or more simply 'pre-modern': It is the world of *allegory*, in which the same text is inscribed with multiple meanings. However, in the past that text might have been Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in which the various semantic levels were encoded by the same author. Nowadays that job is a spontaneously divided labour, as many parties spin the same newsfeeds and information streams in systematically different ways. The result is indeed that everyone 'speaks their truth' but that truth is Platonic not empirical, the only difference being that we now live in a world of competing Platonisms. The challenge ahead is to deal with a world in which the problem is not lack of data but lack of agreement over the idealizations projected from those data. It would seem that ours is the incommensurable world of Kuhn's 'many-worlds realism' (Fuller 1988, chapter 3).

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