

Can liberal democracy survive?

Can liberal democracy survive our tumultuous, bewildering, frightening, dangerous times? Can it surmount them? Can it contain and even direct the flailing social forces at work towards positive solutions, a viable human future?

As things stand, it seems not to be coping at all. It is surely in great danger of allowing and even encouraging the irresponsible and anti-social worst to take command, leaving the nurturing best in shadow, self-doubt, helplessness and despair. The cheap or vicious slogan both placates and enflames the crowd and wins the vote. Arguments based on fact are swept aside, while juvenile street-gang fantasy attracts the support of multitudes. True seeing is left to some furrow-browed fool in the corner, who mutters and mumbles and fails to find the words that catch and no one has time to listen, anyway.

And the disease is spreading. The pull towards brute dictatorship, nihilistic creed and mob rule gets stronger and stronger in country after country; the forlorn stranger becomes again a source of dread and threat, an easy object of persecution. Nightmare not only prowls the stage, it infiltrates the audience.

Centuries in the making, with many lives and even whole generations of lives sacrificed for the development of its principles and structures, democracy in itself is a statement of optimism – of respect for and faith in human nature, and of reverence for its wonder and its creative potential.

But democracy is also profoundly vulnerable – to the apathetic, the frightened, the corrupt, the unscrupulous, the manipulative, to the steady rending of those essential bindings of trust and faith and co-operation that hold this delicate and intricate system together; it is vulnerable ultimately to the wicked and weak in human nature, even while it offers human nature its best chance for fulfilment and realisation.

And something has gone very wrong with this careful creation of ours, this garden developed and tended over centuries. It, or something in it, has “broken”, as the UK’s ex-prime minister Cameron once said, before he himself began laying about him with his sledgehammer and his slick vacuousness, truthlessness and divisiveness. Or some minotaur is galloping ahead of our rooted structures and is now stampeding blindly here and there, pulling everything and everyone along behind it.

Is liberal democracy failing us in this frantic “post-modern” era? Or is the system we are part of no longer a real democracy – merely an appearance or collection of masks, while the real thing – however imperfect that may always have been – has long ago died of degeneracy or merely been overtaken by present conditions now racing ahead of it, out of its reach?

Something is wrong. The urge to identify what this is, to trace its possible features, is inescapable. Lots of us seem to be at it, seeking to chase down and name the beast. Maybe all of us.

I doubt if there is a single cause or cure. And I doubt whether anyone can really do much more than guess – some more shrewdly than others, perhaps – snatching at the dim shapes as they rush past, rush through.

I am going to contribute my own guesses here by presenting a short book list, summarising each book in turn. I think each book is one which any browsing “general reader” might pick up. But I also think that singly and collectively they have much to say on what is now happening within us and all around us.

I have come across each one of them more or less by chance over the years. But inevitably they reflect my own interests and perspectives, having in common an emphasis on human psychology and functioning. So in what follows, there will be little talk of “globalisation,” or economics, or developments in technology and communication, even though it is obvious that these and other factors are also playing a huge part in our present reelings and consternations.

Most of the books are several decades old. Maybe this reflects something about me – that books hit me harder when I was younger. But I do not think the books are dated or have been “superceded” in any way. If anything, they press yet harder and unarguably now than they did when I first read them.

Let’s start with ***Future Shock*** by the late Alvin Toffler. An American futurist, Toffler died on June 27th 2016, three days after the result of the UK’s EU referendum was announced.

That book appeared in 1970. I was 23. The book appalled me, but already I was old enough to recognise the world he was describing – the acceleration of time and change, the impact on individuals and on society of continuous novelty, breaking into and entering us, faster and faster, threatening our sense of who we are and where we belong.

In exhaustive fashion, Toffler (with his co-writer wife Heidi) tabulated the degree to which our culture, our surrounding world, our pace and manner of life, were being transformed and speeded up, due to the discoveries of our race. In effect the book was a careful description of a world losing its solidity, a world turning into an invasive and frightening blur.

He wrote : “We must search out totally new ways to anchor ourselves, for all the old roots – religion, nation, community, family, or profession – are now shaking under the hurricane impact of the accelerative thrust.”

That was written nearly half a century ago. Even then, in 1970, the “accelerative thrust,” the “hurricane impact” were fit descriptions of life at that time. These fifty years later, they are even truer and the hurricane is blowing very much harder, than in 1970.

Toffler’s book should have transformed politics in liberal democracies across the world. A main aim of policy henceforward should surely have been to look for and agree and establish those new “anchorages,” to avoid total breakdown in human individuals and societies. Toffler became an iconic figure and *Future Shock* an iconic concept. But did anyone actually take real note of what he was saying, the explosive implications of his observations and his warnings? In the years that have followed the publication of that book, have our leaders devoted themselves to coordinating a search for new routes to human anchorage and binding, sound footing, sure basis, true community? Or have they merely adopted the features and symptoms of the hurricane itself?

I think the latter. And all around us now, we are seeing the breakdown of which Toffler warned. Someone recently called the UK Brexit “vote” and its aftermath a “national nervous breakdown.” And Trump in the USA? He is America’s minotaur, running amok to the gleeful applause of nearly half a great nation.

The next book on my list has been a standard text book for social workers and counsellors for years. It is called ***On Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life*** and was written by a psychiatrist called Colin Murray Parkes. Its first edition was published in 1972.

Much of the book’s argument is now so familiar that it does not need repeating in much detail here. The book proposed that there are successive stages of grief, following loss. We shall, and need to, live through those stages as a natural progression, each in his/her own way and at our own pace. We

sometimes need help, in order to live each stage fully, so as not to get stuck. Some of those stages, natural and healthy and necessary, can nevertheless be disturbing and cause behaviour that is dysfunctional. In other situations, such experience and behaviour might even be associated with madness. But they are natural and almost “healthy” responses to loss.

The book’s influence on me was profound - as much for its implications as for its main findings and exposition.

Here are some of the implications I took from it. We have all been bereaved, in some sense or other, at some time or other. Therefore, all counselling and all therapy, in fact all human meeting, is in a sense and in part an encounter with loss, with things lost, with people lost, with worlds lost. And it helps just to share that commonality in honest words.

The experience and crisis of bereavement, the process of encountering and living loss, is not restricted to the loss of people close to you, who leave or die. The loss of anything that once was a significant part of your life and is no longer, can occasion the same process of grieving. A limb, a pet, one’s youth, one’s middle age, one’s house...

We all know that moving house can be a hugely traumatic time, involving very strong emotions, many of them to do with loss. Moving one’s house is like changing one’s skin, one’s enclosing world, one’s anchorage.

But what is *not* a house? We live in different “layers” of house, layer upon layer.

Thus, I am also housed in the town in which I live and to which I wake each morning.

And I am “housed” in my home country, my culture, my ethnicity.

And the world itself houses me. In this respect, I have no other house. I need the world to be habitable. And I need it to be familiar enough, so that I can move in it with confidence. I need it to be sufficiently still, so that I can rise up in it and walk.

But now all of us are losing our familiar world all the time, at greater and greater speed (*pace* Toffler). The world our house has become a rushing corridor. We are all stuck, therefore, somewhere in the middle of a bereavement process, in the middle of many bereavement processes. This is

not fanciful. And it raises the question, are *any* of us in a fit state to address the world which we have made, the problems in it which we have created – constantly and tumultuously bereaved as we all are, among the worlds we have lost and keep losing?

The third book on my list is a very short one by a historian, the late Hugh Trevor-Roper. It is called ***The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*** and was published in 1969.

Basically, Trevor-Roper was asking the question, what was all that about? At different times and in different parts of Europe (and America) during those two centuries, certain women were singled out and accused of having supernatural powers which they used to work harm on their community. Life was thus dangerous for a woman who stood out, or lived as an “outsider” or outlier, during that time. If picked on and accused of witchcraft, she would find it extremely difficult to prove her innocence. She was very likely to be tortured and burned to death. Beforehand, there was often a bizarre ritual of pseudo-rationality, with sober legal argument and chop-logic being used to justify entirely irrational suspicions, leaving the accused with no hope of real justice.

The witch-craze begs all sort of questions, and I am making no attempt to cover all of them here. But Trevor-Roper found that these outbreaks of scapegoating and persecution over the two centuries had two different main elements in common : they either took place in times of special uncertainty, or along borders and frontiers which were in doubt.

The inescapable conclusion from these findings is the obvious one; people in doubt and anxiety are prone to accuse, to take comfort in accusing; they are prone to delude themselves that blaming a fall guy, placing the problem in some false and externalised “guilty party”, will somehow magic away a problem which, in reality, is inescapable and fundamental and difficult to eradicate.

And the present time is of course one of extraordinary uncertainty. And our borders have never before been so “porous”, so uncertain, finally so anachronistic. For, in many ways, borders actually don’t work anymore in real life. They can’t successfully just keep people out, as they used to do. We have been flying over and speaking across borders, by plane and phone and through the internet, for many decades now. With physical borders less and less effective in holding the world separate and at bay, many of us are left with a

sense of universal uncertainty, anonymity and porousness, surrounded and made insignificant by the world's huge numbers of human beings, of which we are so much more conscious than people used to be and from which we feel unprotected and indistinguishable.

By and large, we no longer accuse women of being witches, in lieu of dealing properly with our anxieties. But does that mean we have advanced too far for such delusions? Does it mean we have grown out of scapegoating? Manifestly not. Blaming the stranger, the refugee, the immigrant, the poor, people on Benefits, the "elite", the "experts," is the new way of creating and then blaming a dangerous Other, of "taking back control."

Book number four is *I and Thou*, by Martin Buber. Buber was a Jewish philosopher and theologian and teacher. *I and Thou* was published in 1923. I met it in my early twenties and forty years later still keep referring to it for direction and imagery. Buber posits two essential but very different ways of relating to people and things around us. On the one hand "I – It" and on the other "I – Thou". Each approach, each mode of addressing and operating in the world, is necessary and potentially positive. But the one must not encroach upon the other, nor seek to replace it.

The space and ground between people and the world is where our life is, the life that matters. It is where we breathe and live and where all our hope lies.

But the space, or hyphen, between I and "It," while a necessary aspect of where and how we live, can also serve as a pathological retreat, and represent a failure to be fully open to reality and truth. Instead of being truly "alive" to you, I stand back emotionally and spiritually from you, assessing, measuring, maintaining control. In *I-It* mode, I treat you as my object, maybe my object of study, an entity separate from me myself, less central. You are just "customer," "electorate," "audience", "foreigner" a mere representative of Outside, a mere representative of "Them". You are not "You" as you feel yourself to be, in real connection with me, or I with you.

The skills of love are to be found in the space between I and "Thou". It is pivotal and essential ground. But in times of anxiety, franticness and false gods, we are going to find it many times harder to establish and hold this ground. There will be a tendency to deny and devalue the qualitative skills of love and to persecute and diminish their practitioners, such as social workers, health workers, teachers, priests – people who keep society connected. There

will be a tendency to reduce such people to mere functionaries, frantic box-tickers, measurable quantities. Society itself will be over-run by the mechanistic, the commercial, the acquisitive, the Selfie, the Me and Mine, the unconnected and unkind.

Buber's book examined the ground between I and Thou and he put his faith there. It becomes a cause, an aspiration, a beacon, a rock, a lighthouse. In our times, that ground is our only hope, even while it is denied and under attack as never before. We have to return there and defend it and nurture it.

The final book on my list describes another sort of elemental duality, but this one traced and established, not as a concept, an abstraction, an insight, but in the laboratory, as empirical fact. First published in 2009, it is much more recent than the other books described here, although it was twenty five years in the writing. Entitled ***The Master and his Emissary – the divided brain and the making of the western world***, it is massively ambitious in scope. The author is a psychiatrist called Iain McGilchrist.

I find the book extraordinary and immensely important. It is another which every politician and community leader should read and be influenced by.

The book examines the latest research findings on the human brain, our two brain hemispheres, the (growing) physical gap between the hemispheres, their respective roles and functions, the fact that the hemispheres are neither equal nor complementary, but in a relationship of tension and struggle behind each human face. Here are some more brief descriptions of the book, written by McGilchrist himself :

“This book argues that the division of the brain into two hemispheres is essential to human existence, making possible incompatible versions of the world, with quite different priorities and values....And we now know that every type of function – including reason, emotion, language and imagery – is subserved not by one hemisphere alone, but by both.... But, like the brain itself, the relationship between the hemispheres is not symmetrical. The left hemisphere, though unaware of its dependence, could be thought of as an 'emissary' of the right hemisphere, valuable for taking on a role that the right hemisphere – the 'Master' – cannot itself afford to undertake. However it turns out that the emissary has his own will, and secretly believes himself to be superior to the Master. And he has the means to betray him. What he doesn't realize is that in doing so he will also betray himself.”

“..Through an examination of Western philosophy, art and literature, [the book] reveals the uneasy relationship of the hemispheres being played out in the history of ideas, from ancient times until the present. It ends by suggesting that we may be about to witness the final triumph of the left hemisphere – at the expense of us all.”

For, although there is no simplistic separation of functions between the two hemispheres, the right is nevertheless the more instinctual, the closer to nature and creation, the more open to sensation, the less intent on ordering, manipulating, counting, suspecting. It is the first gateway of experience and then turns to its lieutenant on its left merely to provide further assessment, not to over-ride and replace. For the world to be restored to balance and health, the more calculating and detached left hand side of our brains needs to work in the *service* of the right, not seek to negate it. For our survival in the world which we have made for ourselves, we need to support in ourselves the primacy of the right hand side of our brains.

The distinction between *I -Thou* and *I – It* is not the same as that between the right and left brain hemispheres. But some of the implications of those distinctions are not dissimilar And the conclusion we have to draw from them both is similar as well.

Society, and every individual alive in Society, are in flux and question. Huge problems associated with ever-accelerating change and time and loss and uncertainty have to be addressed and resolved by Society’s leaders, themselves at sea on the same furiously rushing wave as the rest of us. How can they manage and keep up with themselves, let alone the world outside their doors, caught in time, left behind by time; how can they match the structures and norms of liberal democracy to the needs of our frantic present tense?

At the beginning of this piece, I asked a succession of questions. Then came my book-list, with my summaries of each book and some random thoughts on their relevance. Have the list, and the thoughts that came with it, suggested any answers? Or is it all despair?

Maybe there are no answers as such. But the alternative must not be despair. We must seek to refuse despair, even while we would be most unwise to flinch and look away from that which might bring despair about.

And surely some suggestions and possible directions are implicit in this material, and can emerge from it. I shall propose a few here which for me are unavoidable.

Back again to Toffler's observation : "We must search out totally new ways to anchor ourselves." Yes, of course we must, thinking blue sky and across the board. Otherwise we shall all be swept away. And we must find totally new ways of anchoring ourselves in *community*, as well. The individual alone is not enough to stand against or to ride the tide.

But a related point has to be made, and it is this. In our present conditions of frantic change and flux, with the individual so greatly in question, so small and at sea, the search for anchorage can lead in false directions. Siren voices sing with especial allure at times like these, bewitching captain and crew into steering, not towards harbour, but straight onto the rocks. Thus, extremism and fundamentalism are flourishing all over the world, in our time, in different forms. Our time makes their pull all the more irresistible. People find false anchorage in simplistic answers, facile scapegoating, degenerate savagery, the creation of delusional Us/Them frontiers. Here in the UK, look at Brexit and the Left's sterile travails and self-immolation. In the USA, regard the Trump, but more than that, his following and the vacuum around him, in which he has found it so easy to swell and write himself so dangerously and destructively large.

And at the start of this piece, I was asking, can liberal democracy itself survive these immense forces, this "accelerative thrust," the mass bewitchment of whole populations by siren voices which overwhelm the power of reason, of fact, of truth, in our desperate need for anchorage of all or any kind, however unreal, however base.

We – or many of us – like to think of "liberal democracy" as a given good, something to which everyone else in the world should and maybe one day will subscribe. Freedom and all that. Free speech and the rule of law.

But although I do not think that liberal democracy is as good as its strongest advocates imply; although I think that it is only as good as human nature allows it to be, and that is often very bad; although the gross materialism and anti-social individualism and inequality it so often seems to support, along with its refusal adequately to tend the environment our children will have to

inhabit; although these features and failures call it hugely into question, I cannot see a better way, or a greater hope.

In crisis times, one is tempted to sweep aside the chatter and complexity of “democratic” process and look instead to that alluring figure of the autocrat, the “strong leader”, the incorruptible, the broad-shouldered, the all-seeing, the benevolent despot, the father or mother figure. But that’s another false anchorage and will not do.

The liberal democracies seem hugely vulnerable to our present disarray. An incoherent muddle of unhappiness, incomprehension, lies and misinformation in a troubled and divided island off the coast of Europe emerges as a self-defeating “decision” to leave the EU. An unscrupulous and unhinged demagogue is president of the most powerful nation on earth.

But worse will follow if these events lead to a retreat from democratic principles and structures. Instead, they must lead to our democracy’s urgent reform and renewal.

No structures we build, for whatever political system, will be able to keep up with the present pace of change for which we the human race are responsible. Those structures will always tend to lag behind the forces they contain. No house can be expected to be a perfect fit for its inhabitants for very long, if ever. Therefore, at the very least, we must expect rigorous review and reform and restoration to be a constant necessity.

But the present conditions make the need for reform more urgent even than that. We are not just failing to adapt the house to shifting needs. It is buckling and needs urgent renewal of its foundations. There is rot and corruption in its walls and inner systems, which need urgent clearing out.

As once Diocletian the Roman Emperor had to tighten and adapt the sinews of his empire in order to secure its future, so do we.

People in their millions now spurn and despise their own “elected” leaders, distrust the “experts,” feel alienated from and disowned by, the entire political process. Just as our brains are split in half between the two hemispheres, countries are split into opposing halves of Right and Left, educated and uneducated, young and old, class and class, urban and rural – each population increasingly appalled and polarised by the other.

I can't begin to comprehend all that is needed to be done to heal and re-create community. But I *can* keep putting forward my certainty that appropriate regulation is needed for freedom to flourish and that mere license is absolutely not the same thing as freedom and, in fact, *threatens* freedom. And with those things in mind, I need to keep repeating that language is fundamental to democracy and that the Lie is fatal to both. The politician who lies to, or otherwise deceives, the electorate, for his/her own ends, is a criminal and a fraud and a dangerous cheat, an enemy and abuser of the freedoms of democracy ; and as the athlete who is found cheating is banned from competition, and the financial fraud who is found guilty is put in prison, the politician or campaigner who lies to the People should be charged with High Treason and punished to an extent and with an efficiency so great that such behaviour is purged from our system.

Thus, I suggest again that the result of UK's referendum on its membership of the EU is null and void, due to the fact that it was "won" through a plethora of lies and misinformation and dysfunction, counter to the essential tenets of democratic decision-making. The referendum process itself did untold harm to this nation and the only meaningful conclusion to draw from the result is not that "The People" have decided that Brexit is the answer, but that the people who live on these islands are just angry and unhappy, the country is fragmented, and democracy here is a foul dog's dinner. I suggest that the UK can and should hold no further election of any kind until an enforceable code of honour on the part of all those aspiring to public office or a public hearing in election or referendum is passed through Parliament and made law.

Further, the rampaging press barons and their mercenary hacks, who have usurped the title "Free Press" while transforming it into a force of mere anti-democratic and self-serving propaganda, will have to be rooted out and defeated, so that our newspapers can provide trustworthy news again, restoring the public forum to an appropriate reverence for the language of truth-telling.

But we don't just need "reform." We need revitalising. And for my proposal on this I will turn again to Toffler – "we need new ways to anchor ourselves." For of course he meant true anchorages, not siren ones.

And for help in guiding us toward true anchorage, let us remember the Buber concept of "I -Thou" and McGilchrist's finding that, for our future's sake, the right hand side of the brain must regain its ordained predominance.

For decades now, in my opinion, as a citizen of the UK, all those frontiers in our society which have to do with I-Thou connection, such as teaching, social work, nursing, even in some of its aspects policing, have been under reductive pressure. Their activities and definition have been incorporated into a commercial model, as if this is necessary to maintain or regulate high standards. They have been broken up into units and then made to compete with one another, as if this is the only way to motivate them and keep them to standard. Targets have been enforced, by which to assess their work, those targets measurable only by quantifiable externalities, the world of the subjective and the qualitative accordingly being forced out and by degrees and by default discredited and finally devalued.

I would equate this process with a very dangerous take-over by the left hand side of the brain of the nation's heart and well-being. There needs to be a major uprising of devotees and ambassadors of the right hand side of the brain, to recover the nation's heart. They will need help from the nation's leaders, and should expect it, because even though they have been oppressing them for years, those same leaders are dependent upon them to help restore the nation's health.

I shall put what I am trying to say another way. I remember a very good social worker saying a few years ago that he was faced with a constant internal battle these days – between seeing someone who needed to see him, and staying at his desk to write up all the reports and evaluations and boxes that nowadays he was required to write, in order to keep his job. He said that more and more often he was staying at his desk. But with iron in his soul.

Or another way. Anyone who seeks to use *I-Thou* connection to help people, needs to be something of an autonomous creator, an artist. That person thus needs all their faculties available and he or she needs to believe in his or her skills and expertise. The target culture undermines all of these things and people who wish to give their working lives to holding our community together are turned into slaves of schedule, slaves of the target, slaves of the external show, slaves of the market, of sell and spin. We are all the losers. For our community's sake, liberal democracy needs to give freedom back to the people best able to sustain and heal it.

It is as if the state has put the right hand brain hemisphere of thousands of its citizens out of bounds, out of circulation. It is expecting our teachers to

prepare our children for adult life, with one half of those teachers' brains banished from the classroom.

Think of all that creative energy of which this nation has deliberately deprived itself. Think of all that creative bridge-building we need to do to restore our community, to *save* our community – even while we assiduously weaken our principle bridge-builders, putting iron into their souls, driving them to despair, driving us all towards disaster.

So what conclusions are there to draw?

I have suggested that while liberal democracy is under threat, it is those of us who live within its remit who are its chief enemies; democracy needs better regulation in order to protect its freedoms.

For there is no real alternative to liberal democracy. We just need to make it work better for us, and us for it. And we need to hurry.

And let's not hold another election anywhere until we have come up with regulations which protect the election process and hence our democratic governance from the enemies of freedom and trust and truth and community – true connectedness.

And let's restore to vigorous leadership the right hand side of our brains, to make community and re-connection possible.

I'll give Iain McGilchrist the last word: "Meaning is not in *things*. Meaning can never be in a discrete entity. Meaning is in the joins – well, not strictly the joins, but more like in the 'betweenness', the new whole... Meaning comes from connection..."

Rogan Wolf