

— Introduction —

Why has history taken the course it has? Has it been an accident – down simply to fate, or time and chance, or the operation of some unseen and unseeable hand? Or have there been great, inevitable, themes of human behaviour that have recurred to change the way societies have developed throughout the millennia in which history has been recorded? And do they continue to influence events now, and defy projections that a different, more permanent world order is being instituted?

If we look at why events have happened we soon realise that the same handful of reasons recur. In his 1989 article *The End of History*, written as the Soviet empire evaporated, Francis Fukuyama wrote: ‘What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the endpoint of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalisation of western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.’¹ His thesis cannot yet be proved. He was conscious that the final, universal acceptance of democracy would come slowly. Much of the two decades since he outlined his thesis has set it back. Liberal democratic values

seem to be in retreat. Fukuyama's vision seems ever more Utopian, compromised by eternal forces.

The rise of Islamist extremism since al-Qaeda's formation in the late 1980s does not in itself prove him wrong; but the refusal by certain Islamic states to condemn al-Qaeda's activities; or to make any reforms themselves that might lead them towards democracy; and the hostility of a wider number to the American-led 'war' against Islamism, suggest a settled new world order is some way off. Nor are these the only impediments.

America's response to the threat it perceives against itself has also compromised its own liberal democratic values. Former Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe have espoused democracy, but Russia itself is a sham democracy – a tyranny in disguise – as are some former Soviet republics. Russia still interferes in democracies, such as the Baltic states, that it resents having had carved out of 'its' territory. China may be moving towards capitalism economically but it remains repressive socially and in terms of human rights, and makes no pretence of espousing liberal democracy. Much of the Middle East and Africa are despotisms of one stripe or another. Latin America has its beacons of democracy – notably Brazil – but elsewhere has repressive regimes and some states – including Mexico – on the edge of anarchy.

The desire for power, sovereignty, hegemony and control is basic, and will always ensure that

tyranny exists. But force and repression are not now the only methods of pursuing power. Three of the world's most formidable polities – America, China and Russia – adopt economic means, with armed force to support them. America's recent excursions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Russia's assault on Georgia in 2008 and China's use of force against some of its own minorities have all exemplified this. Actions by these powers in the first decade of the 21st century show that history is not simply about progress: disputes will still be settled by force, just as in Thucydides' time. Those disputes may arise for reasons that are tenuous or disingenuous, just as when the Spartans and the Athenians fought each other.

In the mid-1990s Samuel P. Huntington's response to Fukuyama was that clashes between civilisations would replace those between ideologies.² As we have recently seen, those clashes may be armed. Democracies strive to avoid war because of the perceived immorality of bloodshed in the democratic model and to protect their standards of living. However, so long as there are nation states with distinct national identities, and so long as religion plays a role in the world, the four reasons for the pursuit of power by polities that I will detail in this essay – land, God, wealth and ideology or minds – will continue to cause turbulence, and will throw up ideas that challenge the settled order.

Carlyle's assertion that 'the History of the World

. . . was the Biography of Great Men' has echoed for the last 170 years.³ Events have happened, and continue to happen, in sovereign polities because powerful individuals, whether as tyrants or despots operating by fiat, or acting in concert with others as oligarchs, or with a democratic mandate from an electorate, take certain decisions. What motivates those decisions? Has it not most usually been the urge to assert control, or to resist its assertion by others? The argument of this essay is that the desire to acquire, preserve and exercise power, and the autonomy that the possession of power brings, have been the driving forces behind the account of events in the past that is called 'history': and that they will continue to be the driving forces behind events in the future. Such things are inseparable from human nature. The history of the world is not the biography of great men, but the history of power.

The question of what in any polity constitutes the basis of power – the basis of the right to rule that political unit – has troubled philosophers as long as there have been polities. Aristotle observed that 'there is also a doubt as to what is to be the supreme power in the state: is it the multitude? Or the wealthy? Or the good? Or the best man? Or a tyrant?'⁴ The choice now is simplified. It is between democracies and non-democracies.

The four basic motivations behind the pursuit of power have been, first, territorial, when a polity