

IDEAS

The Democracies Can Still Triumph

Liberal societies need to show they can win—without destroying their own values from within.

By Simon Sebag Montefiore

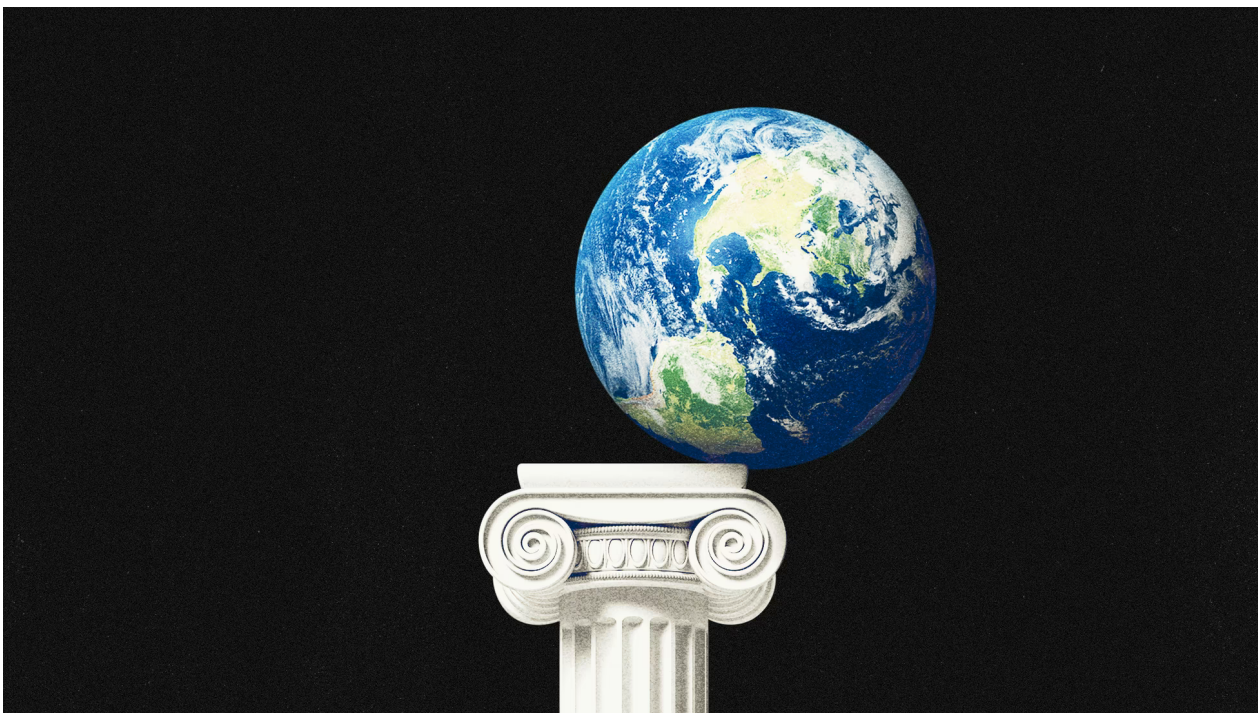


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There is such a thing as too much history. Although this may be a strange reflection for a historian who has just finished a world history in a time of European and Middle Eastern war, the fetishistic obsession with curated versions of nations and empires in the past can blind one to the present and what really matters: how people and their families today wish to live. Yet history is a deathless arsenal of stories and facts that teaches us how humans lived and also sometimes how we should live. In our post-religious era—in which, beneath the cloak of secular humanitarianism, righteous religiosity and virtuous crusading remain as potent as ever—history has attained the authority, authenticity and prestige that religion and its prelates once possessed.

Politicians deploy its propulsive power to justify their deeds and appetites. And that is why history matters and why it has to be right—or at least, as close to what happened as we historians can manage.

The Ukrainian war and the wars that followed October 7 in the Middle East marked the end of an exceptional period: the 70-Year peace, which was divided into two phases, 45 years of Cold War, then 25 of American unipotency. If the first era was like a chess tournament and the second like a game of solitaire, today is like a multiplayer computer game, a tournament of power in which many new smaller and middling contenders compete for power alongside the mega powers, some of them like India on the verge of superpowerdom, others that are suddenly planetary or at least continental players, and a few tiny but rich enough to deport themselves like mini-empires. Putin's invasion of Ukraine was not a new way of exerting and expanding power. Its flint-hearted ferocity was a return to what the dynasts of the past—warlords, kings, and dictators—would find routine. Normal disorder has resumed, but in a new realm of kinetic speed and inexorable interconnectivity that I call the Ultraworld. And there is no laboratory of technical ingenuity so fast and so rich as war.

Democracies won the 20th century on the battlefield as well as in the marketplace and the war of ideas, resulting in a world order made in their own image. But they did not prepare for or predict the resurgence of autocracies, nor the way that the postcolonial states—and the supranational institutions they now controlled—would, after many decades, reject the liberal democratic world order. The autocracies are surging, and democracies ebbing. It is impossible to define exactly what causes one state to fall and another to rise, but Ibn Khaldun identified *asabiyya*, the cohesion essential for a society to thrive: “Many nations suffered a physical defeat, but that’s never marked their end. Yet when a nation becomes the victim of psychological defeat, that marks the end.”

From the May 2026 issue: History is running backwards

Control states—autocracies that combine traditional menace and digital surveillance—disdain but also fear and envy the gaudy, outrageous, inventive, clamorous mess (part fairground, part farmyard) of the democracies that deliver freedom in the open world. Dictatorships move faster and plan bigger, and can even be formidable and majestic under experienced leaders. But they are also weaker: violence, corruption, coercion, and control are wired into the closed world. Virtually all contemporary dictatorships are cosplay democracies with term limits, elections, and legislatures—the

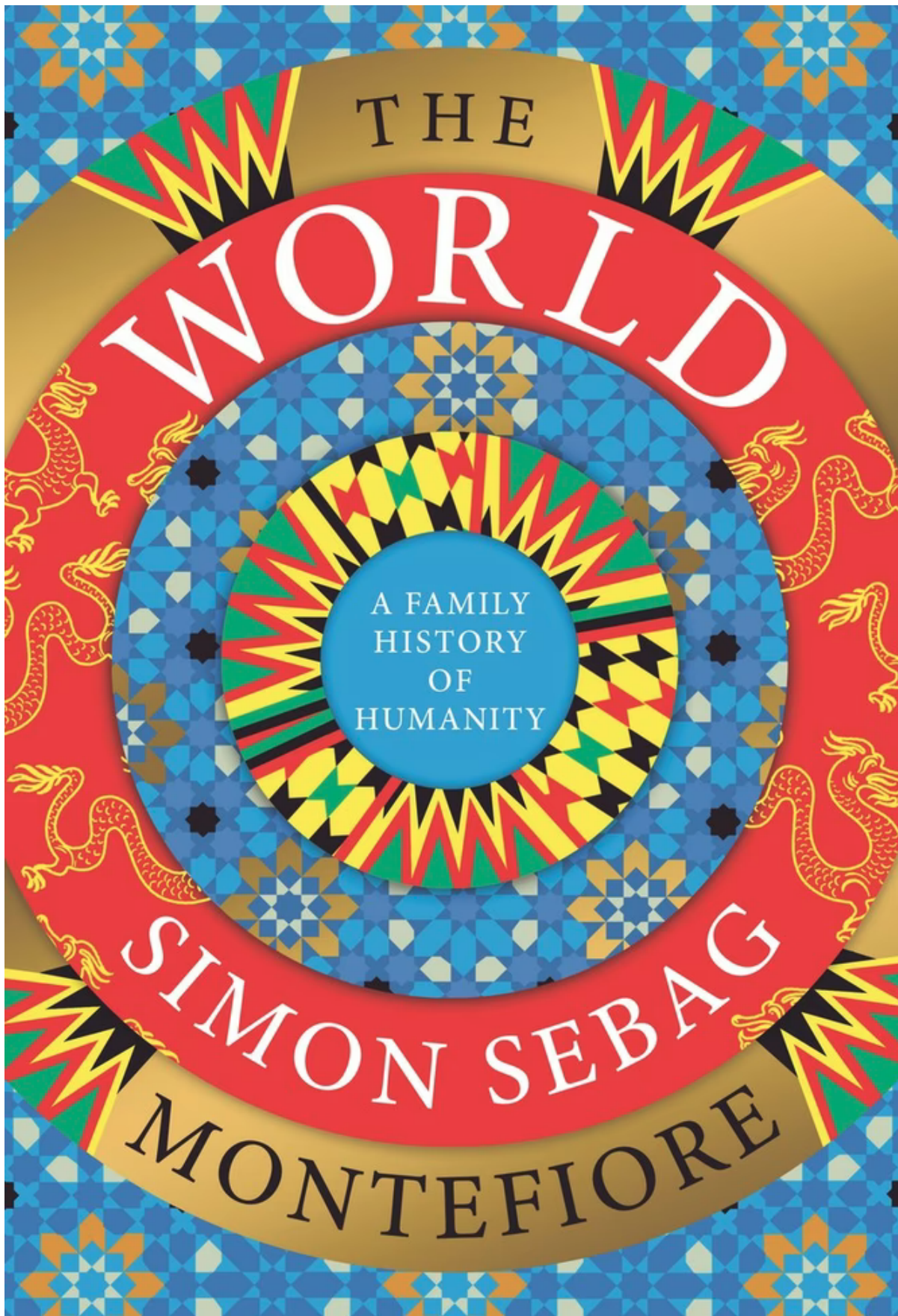
few ruling, as Amos Perlmutter put it, in the name of the many. The rigidity and delusions of tyrannies are incorrigible; their purity spirals end in executions, not just cancellations; their adventures end in devastation and slaughter. When autocrats fall, they take the state and the people down along with them. The only leaders more buffoonish and lethal than the fairground hucksters elected in our failing democracies are the omnipotent clowns of tyranny.

Democracies are built on invisible trust: Over and over again, when anomie strikes, trust disappears, and so does openness. “As soon as any man says of the affairs of state, *What does it matter to me?*” Rousseau wrote, “the state may be given up as lost.” The lesson of recent years is that the gains and values that were taken as won after the atrocities of 1939–45—making racism and anti-Semitism taboo, the legal structure that defined and banned crimes of genocide and war-making, the right to abortion and the other triumphs of the great liberal reformation of the 1960s—have to be fought for again.

The so-called rules-based order was degraded not just by the fecklessness or cynicism of U.S. presidents but also by its own ideological stagnation—as demonstrated in all manner of scandals and outrages, but perhaps best demonstrated in January by the failures of the United Nations and humanitarian NGOs to condemn the massacre of Iranian protesters by the Islamic dictatorship. In spite of their original values of humanitarianism and neutrality, these organizations have been morally debased from within, using the language of human rights and international justice yet deploying it on behalf of autocracies and against the liberal democracies that created them. They need to be reformed, or they will become impotent. And we may all live to greatly miss Western humbug in the decades ahead. Meanwhile, the very vocabulary of humanitarianism and antiracism has become so selectively applied or debased as to be meaningless. We need to develop a new vocabulary.

Now let us turn to the crisis of democracy. Open societies are slow, their leaders amateurish, their policies inconsistent, but when they mobilize they are flexible, efficient, and creative. Technology can undermine democratic solidarity and aid tyranny and conspiracism, yet it also advances openness and justice. Its very facility means that atrocities and wars can be instantly recorded and viewed everywhere in our new virtual-arena world. But the multiheaded, indestructible Hydra of social media is an unpredictable power center, competing with elected, parliamentary, civic, and media institutions to complicate and distort already polarized societies.

I no longer use *virtual* for online life, because its effects are only too real, even visceral.



This article was adapted from the new edition of Montefiore's book.

grants power without responsibility or consequence. Moral panics and witch hunts are built into human nature and feature frequently in history. But they end. Online, the inquisitions follow one another seamlessly. The once-vaunted values of public life are

now reduced to the lower standards of private life—venality, vulgarity, rudeness, incontinence, and ignorance. A society that diminishes the value of knowledge is at risk. The internet has promoted emotion over knowledge and memes over books, and it has created a crisis of literacy, leading sophisticated societies to embrace conspiracies and myths—a trend that could be fatal to the success of democracies but invaluable for despotates.

The immediate challenge is to learn to manage our new technologies, to control their addictiveness and surveillance and the lack of inhibition they encourage while enjoying their benefits. The invisible power of the unelected despots of data and tech lords must be diminished; if families cannot control the disaster of digital addiction, states will have to legislate for them. Artificial intelligence will replace many jobs globally but in the comfort democracies—those legacy states, once imperial powers, overstretched by welfare promises, legal entitlements, and executive paralysis—it will hit middle-class digital mediators who moved data around an onanistic internet economy. If things go wrong, the overqualified graduate activist class could provide the revolutionaries of the future. AI, too, would certainly be a dangerous tool in the hands of overmighty states just as it could be invaluable in the right hands.

Because everyone will have access to the same information, AI will accentuate the value of personal connections, again promoting lineages and networks that at their most extreme may appear to be sinister establishment conspiracies. The Ultraworld not only accentuates the effects of technology but also enables traditional systems. We live in a time of resurgent family power—from neo-monarchies such as North Korea, theocratic Iran where the Khamenei dynasty seems to rule, and many states in Asia and Africa to the demo-dynasties of the West—which proves surprisingly compatible with transactional politics and autocratic systems. Meanwhile foolish, faddish governments have promoted new technologies and made their societies more dependent on internet systems to the point that military catastrophes and the breakdown of entire cities or even countries will be inevitable—and lethal, given that most city dwellers have lost the most basic skills of craft and survival. In the case of massive grid sabotage, AI could compound the chaos and lead to a starvation of city-dwellers unthinkable in modern times. But AI will also, after two centuries of long days in factories and offices, contribute to new health advances and ways of working, and time for family and pleasure. Ironically, the loss of many white-collar jobs will raise the importance and prestige of artisans and craftsmen—the skilled people who can actually make things—and farmers who grow food. In the AI world, they, not men and women in suits, will be highly rewarded and even revered.

The peril for comfort democracies is that they can no longer satisfy the entitled demands of their citizens, nor assuage their popular, fearful rage against decline, poverty, and immigration. Meanwhile, the traditional markers of Western success—legal codes, civic institutions, bureaucratic processes, the guardianship of a cozy ruling caste and the pious but unrealistic orthodoxies of privileged patriciates—are in danger of becoming obstacles to governance and to individual freedoms, if not actual engines of paralysis. The sociologist Max Weber foresaw the paralysis of this bureaucratization that is now unleashing a rising fury against democracy itself. The cycle can probably only be broken only by the election of iconoclastic radical politicians. The selection of leaders who can dynamically solve the issues of the electorate is what democracy is meant to do to forestall collapse and revolution, though the danger with such radical governments is that they tend to break more than they solve, and move toward cults of personality and authority. The balance is delicate; the peril is one that only dedicated citizenship can prevent; the prize is democracies that again reflect the wishes and trust of their electorates.

A parallel crisis is the conundrum of how comfort democracies can fulfill citizens' expectations of social services and health care 'til death, a challenge exacerbated by aging populations, without such punishing taxes that they strangle their own golden geese. America and Europe have been immeasurably enriched, culturally and economically, by the arrival and absorption of immigrants from all over the world. Yet a new much larger immigration deluge is likely imminent, posing a dilemma for democracies that believe they must choose between virtue and survival. Political parties and leaders who do not legislate for this, nor discuss and confront factions and sects that are opposed to free speech and open societies due to ideological zeal—and fear of small groups of illiberal activists—will place democracy itself in danger by making it appear obsolete, unworkable, or corrupt.

The almost magical ability of smartphones and digital markets to deliver curated products to consumers has had unforeseen consequences. Even the richest emperors of the past did not have the ability to satisfy their whims that is now possessed by any student in Chicago or Berlin or Kinshasa. Yet these easy luxuries have simultaneously raised the entitlement of citizens and their expectations of largesse from their underfunded, over-bureaucratized, overpromising governments, which are left seeming slow and inept. Unsuitable leaders are chosen on irresponsible promises and then tossed aside in favor of new brazen or naïve overpromisers. This only encourages the distrust, fury, and conspiracism now raging through our societies. These digital technologies have also created an echo chamber of self-confirming views, which has

contributed to an unreal, simplified view of a nuanced, messy world.

Magical capitalism has likewise changed private lives. As education and prosperity rose, well-off people married later and had fewer children, and women had more choices and higher standards. Gender-selective abortion in East Asia led to a disproportionate amount of male children, who are adults today. In this century, a combination of prosperity, women's rights, and smartphones has wrought unexpected changes. Couples started to meet online, but the curation that catered to personal tastes raised people's expectations of dating, sex, and marriage, just as digital entertainment and powerful algorithms—offering gaming, news, and pornography—presented an initially thrilling but ultimately solitary life at home.

Not everyone is lonely; some women, no longer obliged to marry, are probably happier and freer. But in many cases, what I call algorithmic companionship—which doesn't require empathy or sympathy for others—has replaced the real sort. The result is an epidemic of solitude, if not loneliness; a dramatic drop in fertility; and a romantic famine across North and South America, Europe, and China. Yet as the populations there shrink, populations are booming in less prosperous and less secular regions, including Africa and the Middle East. This epoch of new middling and continental powers should be Africa's moment. Treasure-states such as Nigeria and South Africa, with their mineral resources, should be emerging as world powers. But if instead they continue to fail, migrants will move north to enjoy the benefits and safety offered by the comfort democracies. Migration has always been the engine of history.

Identities are evolving too; younger generations may no longer embrace the nation as their prime identity. Comfort democracies face a crisis that is a symptom of success: their grants of entitlements, of free education and social liberties, and luxurious lifestyles, all unequalled in human history, have empowered highly educated activist cadres of the young who exploit those values and rights while rejecting the legitimacy of democratic states that some even regard as historic criminal conspiracies fit only for destruction. Such movements as we see today may play out, and others will arise. Active citizenship can defeat intolerant ideologies in debate and at the ballot box. But in turbulent times, small, impassioned groups can capture or paralyze states, as has happened often in history. In what I call the war democracies—Taiwan, Israel, Ukraine—the stakes are so clear and society is so awakened that this is not a problem. But one wonders if young citizens of any of the comfort democracies—especially the fuddled legacy powers such as Britain and France—would now be willing to give their lives in conscript armies to defend supposed national interests, and if human-rights

activists would actually allow a struggle such as the Second World War to be fought today at all.

From the July 2026 issue: How America gave up on its own history

Capitalist democracies have inbuilt inequalities, but their inconsistency is also their strength: They are adaptable. To restore the trust, magnanimity, and *asabiyya* essential to democracies, they will need to address those inequalities. Companies and data panjandrums will have to share AI's profits and protect the poor. In foreign policy, too, the democracies need to regain self-confidence—and back democratic allies against forces that threaten our systems and values. Liberal democracies need to show they can win—without destroying their own values from within. That is how democracy triumphed after 1945—and why it is now under threat.

However unsettling these jactitations appear, the open world remains the happiest and freest place to live. Population growth and climate change can be solved only by either catastrophic population decline—pandemic, natural disaster, thermonuclear war—or cooperation on a planetary scale. “The real problem of humanity,” said Edward O. Wilson, “is we have palaeolithic emotions, medieval institutions and godlike technology.” To navigate the looming tempests of chaos, humans will seek not only the consolations of family but also some sort of religiosity, even God, to fill a void unfilled by political orthodoxies and unsatisfactory plenty, and to explain not just the unstoppable virtuosity of our own technologies, but the half-monstrous, half-seraphic nature of we who created them.

Just because we are the smartest ape ever created, just because we have solved many problems so far, does not mean we will solve everything. Human history is like one of those investment-warning clauses: Past performance is no guarantee of future results. Yet the harshness of humanity has been constantly rescued by our capacity to create and love. The family is the center of both. Our limitless ability to destroy is matched only by our ingenious ability to recover.

This article was adapted from The World: A Family History of Humanity, by Simon Sebag Montefiore, which is now out in paperback.

The World: A Family History of Humanity

By Montefiore, Simon Sebag

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