Lessons Against Authoritarianism
Interview with Timothy Snyder

By Alex Defroand

A week after the election of Donald Trump, Timothy Snyder, a historian of twentieth-century Europe, posted a Facebook message entitled, “Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century.” Reflecting on the experience of Europeans “who saw democracy yield to fascism,” Snyder urged Americans to heed lessons such as “do not obey in advance” and “be kind to our language.” The post was shared more than 17,000 times, published in the Dallas Morning News, and translated into Czech, Polish, Hungarian, and Ukrainian. It inspired articles for the New York Review of Books, The Guardian, Slate, The New York Times, Süddeutsche Zeitung, and Eurozine and was expanded into a book that was published on February 28, 2017. Like many historians, the current demand for Snyder’s work is perhaps a reflection of a public desire for perspective and precedent in light of unexpected developments in global politics. To some observers in the United States, Trump’s election, combined with rising nationalism and attacks on the judiciary and the free press, recalls 1930s Europe. More broadly, the resurgence of Russian imperialism, the rise of populism, the destabilization of the European Union, and the impenetrable crises in the Middle East represent an unhinging of the liberal international order. Historians are being called upon to provide context, clarity, and reassurance.

Snyder wishes this attentiveness to history had come earlier. In his view, Western democracies have become complacent in their attitudes to the past since the end of the Cold War. The fall of the Berlin Wall was interpreted as proof of the inevitable triumph of democracy against totalitarianism. This precipitated what Snyder calls “the politics of inevitability,” where politics in Western democracies was understood simply as a progression toward a more liberal, democratic future of more peace, more globalization, more enlightenment, and more prosperity. Accordingly, Western democracies lowered their guard against the dangers of tyranny.

It’s not that people want authoritarianism, per se, but that they have forgotten the reasons against it.
“Twenty-five years ago we said history doesn’t exist and we don’t have to think about how systems change,” he told me. “If you think history is over, and [the future is] just more the same, whenever anything happens, like terrorist attacks or Trump winning an election, you think nothing like this has ever happened before. You’re shocked, you’re surprised, and therefore you’re vulnerable.”

Snyder argues that authoritarians use shocking events to consolidate power, hence the lesson to “be calm when the unthinkable arrives.” It is the oldest trick in the Hitlerian book,” he writes. “Don’t fall for it.”

According to the “politics of inevitability,” the future of democracy is assured. Therefore, it is unnecessary to beware the cautions of history and the threat of non-democratic alternatives. The past offers little from which to learn.

**Actual journalism is edgy now.**

The disregard for lessons from history, Snyder argues, has allowed for the resurgence of authoritarianism in Europe and the United States because people have forgotten “how bad un-freedom is.” Democracy has been taken for granted. “It’s not that people want authoritarianism, per se,” he explained, “but that they have forgotten the reasons against it.”

This is not to say that history plays no role in politics, however. I put to Snyder that, unlike in the twentieth century, ideologues today do not appeal to visions of a future utopia, but rather rouse support through a nostalgia for the past. Vladimir Putin recalls the expansionism of the Tsarist Empire in his vision of a “New Russia.” Trump uses the far-right “America First” rhetoric of the 1930s when promising to “Make America Great Again.” Marine Le Pen evokes a time when France had fewer mosques and its own currency, and Brexiteers vow to “take back control” from the European Union. The political mood, I suggest, is now directed toward restoring the nostalgic glories of the past rather than striving for a different future.

Snyder partly disagrees. “I’m not sure I would call it a nostalgia because nostalgia is for something that really happened. It’s more like myth.”

Misunderstanding history is central to this trend. In the case of challenges to the European Union, for instance, Snyder observes that Eurosceptics in the U.K. and France advocate for a vision of an independent and prosperous nation state that never actually existed.

“[What] they are calling the nation-state was in fact an empire,” he told an audience in Amsterdam recently, referring to the height of French and British colonial power. Rather than admit that their respective global influence has declined due to the disintegration of their empires, he explained, Eurosceptics claim that a previously flourishing nation-state lost its prosperity by joining a doomed European project.

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The past is invoked, therefore, but in a way that is inconsistent with the realities of the nation’s history.

Snyder sees this misunderstanding as part of a broader parochialism in western politics. We are often guilty of believing that events are without precedent, both historically and geographically, he says. The emergence of “post-fact” politics, for example, may seem new in the United States, but has been experienced elsewhere. “Fascism was also impatient with facts,” he observed, while even in its current manifestation, “a Ukrainian or Russian will say [Americans] are about five or six years behind.”

Snyder’s twenty lessons aim to break this parochialism. They highlight ways that democracies can use history to arm against the spread of tyranny. In the fight against post-factuality, for instance, he encourages us to subsidize investigative journalism. “Journalists are going to be the heroes,” he told me. 

“Actual journalism is edgy now. It is difficult and dangerous and underfunded,” he said. “And that’s another thing, by the way, that is like the 1920s and 1930s. Back then they went to Spain and wrote about it; now they are going to Ukraine and Syria.”

To Snyder, history is full of examples like this. Understanding the complexities and contingencies of history – what happened and what might have happened – is fundamental to participating in politics today. As unusual as the current political circumstances may seem, it would be unwise to ignore those in the past who have experienced something similar or worse.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE

Timothy Snyder is a historian and public intellectual specializing in twentieth-century Europe. He is a permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna and a member of the Committee on Conscience of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. He has received state orders from Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland. Among his publications are six single-authored award-winning books; the most recent is Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning (2015).
