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America: Enemy of Change, Midwife of the Future - Part I

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The world is changing, but not the way we think. Once the bringer of change, America has now become the enemy of change. After nine Iliad-years fighting change, we find change remaking us. Not only have we lost control—we shockingly find ourselves the midwife of the very future we fear. Here is the first of a two-part story.

The historical narrative of the West is long established. Out of Western Europe arose a superior civilization that would come to shape the future. In the 20th century it would lead all humanity to create a single global civilization. This was the West's destiny.

American narrative is even more passionate. The United States is exceptional among nations—the best country on earth and on a mission from God to redeem humankind. America will finish the job Europe began and fulfill the triumph of Western Civilization.

This is our sense of history in modernity after the American and French revolutions. History for us takes a story form, but is much more than mere literature. History is about shaping, reinforcing and celebrating what is most sacred. History is homiletic narrative. Sermon delivered as story is still religious.

Sacred identity in Western modernity enshrines the nation-state. Because history serves identity, good history makes you proud to be an American. Your breast swells with pride as you relive great victories. You shed a tear to read of injustice and sacrifice. Then your heart beats stronger as Americans transcend and set things right. Connecting us to the past, history connects us to ourselves. Our belonging and meaning is our collective identity.

Change in history then takes on a kind of predestination and this is especially true for America's Calvinist belief system. History must show us fulfilling God's charge to the American nation. Where we have failed in the past, self-criticism is required for atonement and represents a divine marker of virtue regained.

Yet Americans falling short is different from failing collectively as a nation, which would mean no less than the loss of God's favor. The closing of our earthly divine enterprise would signal another Fall of Man—the end of civilization.

Hence, American historical homilies come in two flavors only: fulfillment of mission (what Romans called *Eternal Victory*) or stark decline and fall. Remember that Gibbon began his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in the same year as the Declaration of Independence.

Think again of the sermon: There is uplift and then there is fire and brimstone. Keeping us together and virtuous means both inspiration and fear. History's purpose is both civic and sacred. History is not about objective truth or actual reality. (Truth and reality may drive academic histories, but these are only for other academics.)

Reality vs. Homily

History as homily speaks to our most enduring strength—mobilizing our collective passion in times of trial. The more we believe, the more we make it so. The United States always triumphs in its history. But homily has not stayed the course.

Missing change only becomes a liability if actual reality departs strongly from the reality of national-historical homily. If the world described by homily no longer describes the world as it is, then this is a problem. If the basis for strategic action is rooted in a set of environmental conditions that no longer exists, this is a problem.

If the actual world dynamic has changed and no longer fits the desired trajectory of national historical narrative, then the unchallengeable belief in that trajectory, once the heart of national strength, now becomes that nation's greatest vulnerability.

Change in actual reality—our posterity's history—is now deviating from American sacred narrative. In truth, it was never really moving to our narrative. Rather, for two centuries we were riding the rhythm of change.

Actual history is about the larger human rhythms of change. Think of human change as shifts in consciousness expressed through migrations of identity. These are big shifts. They represent collective movements that alter the very nature of how we understand (together) what it means to be human. The nature of our being, the purpose of life, the textures even of how we relate



marble sarcophagus, 4th century BC, found in Athens



Fayum mummy portraits is the modern term for these realistically painted funerary portraits on wooden boards attached to mummies from Roman Egypt. They date from the Roman period, from the late 1st century BC or early 1st century AD to the middle of the 3rd century. They are the few survivors of the

to each other—and *certainly the ways we define ourselves*—all of this awareness shifts when consciousness *shifts*.

New Consciousness in the Fayyum

Can history show us an example of a culture's shift in consciousness? *Behold late antiquity!* In Egypt, in the Fayyum, in the many surviving wax-encaustic portraits and on sarcophagi, there is a message to us.

The Golden Age of Greco-Roman antiquity ended with the death of the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius. After 180 A.D. the Roman world entered a time called late antiquity, which everyone has thought was a time of decline leading to the Dark Ages. But new thinking now tells us something very different.

Book-ended by the rise of Christianity (200s) and the rise of Islam (600s), late antiquity was not just a bridge time but also a special and unique epoch of its own, a time of true transformation. Between Marcus Aurelius and Constantine lies nothing less than a revolution in human consciousness, a change so big it still has much to teach us today.

The Greco-Roman Golden Age, which we remember through movies like *Gladiator* and *Ben Hur*, was golden only for the very few. One percent of the world's people called themselves real persons. The glories of Greek philosophy offered them the choice of individuated consciousness. But what of the other 99 percent? For them the world was bounded, as it had always been, by three iron realities. The supernatural was everywhere, but humanity was separate and apart from it—hence, the special place of oracles in peoples' lives. Only through the oracular could people approach the gods. Humanity was intimately bound in the loam of the earth, of nature, of the mundus. People were embraced and imprisoned in the remorseless rhythms of the cicada call. Finally, those lucky enough to escape to the world of the city found themselves still ruled by archons, the 1% of significant persons. These curiales (city fathers) ran a tightly ordered society where life, status and expectation were locked in eternal equipoise well beyond Victorian stuffiness.

But all of this fell apart in the 3rd century and what took its place was completely different. If we look at Christianity in functional and human terms rather than theological terms, what we see is this: The supernatural came into humanity. It is not as though Man became God, but rather that God became part of Man. New consciousness, as Peter Brown describes, "lodged contact with the divine directly in the structure of the personality itself." This movement was nothing less than an overturning of the nature of consciousness, opening the way for ordinary people to discover senses and empower truths formerly denied them.

The inescapable bonds to the earth too had now been broken. We were rudely separated but also free—even commanded!—to follow our own course to the divine. How do we know this happened? I give you the wax-encaustic funerary portraits of the Fayyum. Gaze at the 2nd century Golden Age ornamental sarcophagi of Asia Minor (p. 9). Wiegartz says of them, "We learn nothing of the individuality of the dead person. The carvings speak to us only of the distinguished, refined lifestyle and classical culture of those who had themselves buried."

Now, in contrast, look at the 3rd century Fayyum portraits of men, women and children (above). On one level you see the person, beautiful and unique. On another you see yourself and the pathos of your own future. On yet another you sense how these fated young shared a calling to the divine. This is not only an advance in consciousness, but in what it means to be human. These new humans broke down the equipoise of urban society, which only further opened up individuated consciousness for ordinary people. The old itself participated in the transformation even as it came apart.

Rome's Golden Age regime was a fragile network-racket co-opting local elites. The imperial state did not rule; local elites did. Peter Brown calls this *soft government*: "The emperors of the second century had ruled with 'a magnificent economy of effort,' through the tacit collusion with the upper classes of the cities."



prestigious panel painting tradition of the classical world. The existent examples were mounted into the banks of cloth that were used to wrap the bodies. Almost all have now been detached from the mummies. About 900 are known.

This system fell apart in the third century. By its end, the elites had all become K Street clients of the emperor. In the new system of *hard government*, “the collaborators came to identify their status and power with the position they enjoyed in the imperial government.” This meant a slow collapse of civic mindedness and a decline in the ancient trust-relationship between city elites and people. Second, it also meant that alternative communities rose to offer what the new hard state had taken away.

Why Changing Consciousness is the Biggest Change

Peter Brown tells us that Christianity “offered a community which, in symbolic form, clearly accepted the breakdown of the equipoise on which the traditional pagan community had rested. Its initiation was conceived of as producing men shorn of the complexities of their earthly identity. Its ethos produced a more atomistic view of the person, who was less bound than previously to the ties of kingship, of neighborhood, and of region.”

Do you see the transformation? The consciousness revolution of the 3rd century was not only a migration of identity. *It was the end of Rome.* It was the prefiguration, the signpost up ahead that Rome had already fallen. That amazing city on the Tiber had already transferred full authority to a new world.

Late antiquity was a new world. Part of it was the hard government of bureaucrats, senators and soldiers. Yet overshadowing it, the other was a society in transformation. This Rome was already looking to the Middle Ages. Visible continuity was unbroken. There were still great marble buildings and, of course, the Roman state. Their ‘world’ network—globalization in antiquity—still functioned. But everything had changed.

This is not the way we see it. We see events. Events are always favored in homiletic history. Events compel us with their immediacy and pathos, and never more so than in war and revolution. Great events are the theater of change. Yet deeper revolutions, like the 3rd century without visible events get us much closer to change. How can we stitch real change to visible events?

Real change—in *consciousness*—initiates all sorts of second-order effects, almost like a switch being thrown. Turn it on and new history is written. Ancient stories are forgotten or become fable. New stories weave the events of their birth into new homilies, delivered in new cathedrals of humanity.

So the Roman narrative of Livy (1st century) yielded to the Roman narrative of Prokopios (6th century). Eventually even history itself faded. In a darker age it was exchanged for the ultimate in homiletic history: Hagiography (7th to 9th centuries).

Eternal Victory and the Erosion of Authority

What does the 3rd century tell us about today? We are doing just like old Romans. We use homiletic history the same way, and likewise make grand opera out of our wars to sanctify national narrative. Also like old Romans, we are locked into inescapable narrative: *Eternal Victory*. Perhaps too, like them, we have come to a time when homiletic history and actual reality have begun to part ways.

Has America entered its own 3rd century? To simply ask this question suggests that consciousness is shifting. What evidence do we have of this? It is one thing to talk about old Romans, but they were low-tech, agricultural, poor, superstitious, mostly rural and mostly illiterate. We, in contrast, are so different!

Unlike Rome, our high-tech industrial world has succeeded—putting billions into mega-slums. So our seven billion today are as socially segregated as the 60 or 70 million Romans of late antiquity. In their world, 90% were banished to peasant landscape; only the privileged lived in cities. Today modernity has given a billion ‘the good life.’ But billions more scrape by in hardship and insecurity, and there are billions at the very bottom without running water, sewage or even a corrugated roof as desperate token of survival.

Maybe we are not so different. Our shifting consciousness resonates like a tuning fork with the 3rd century.

The Roman world faced these challenges:

- Decline in *Romanitas*—the authority of ancient Latin identity
- Rise of empowered non-state actors, steeled to resist the state
- Counter-civic shifts in consciousness in the world-network of cities
- Failures of leadership, betrayed trust and lost world legitimacy

And how did they meet these challenges? Rome the city-state got super-sized and its identity joined the dominant culture of the Hellenistic East. As Germanic peoples threatened in the later 2nd century, the state levied crushing taxes to build armies to crush *Barbaricum*. People fled the land and became *Bagaudae*, both brigands and terrorists. Much of Rome's Western empire became the realm of the resistant non-state. Then there was the big shift in consciousness in the Greek East. By 300 the world was taking on the textures of the Middle Ages.

Finally, Roman leadership failed. In the 3rd century the Roman state came apart. Germanic and Hunnic peoples overran the empire. This was just a flashflood. But the price of security and stability was a militarized, authoritarian state. That lost the trust and loyalty of the people.

New community identity moved away and Rome the world polity became Rome the military shell.

So see us today, the America of late modernity:

- Decline of Western religious nationalism
- Rise of resistant non-state actors
- Shifts of consciousness incongruent with identifying with the nation-state
- Failures in US world leadership and absence of collective leadership

The pulse of modernity for two centuries has been Western religious nationalism. In 1900 every state could claim not simply the loyalty but the very lifeblood of its young manhood. Young men willingly sacrificed themselves by the millions in the 20th century's terrible wars. States could also mobilize the collective energy of all their people, and will them to unstinting labor in the service of sacred narrative. But this is no longer true.

No Western society today will fight a great war in the name of its flag. Even the United States, the last towering keep of Western religious nationalism, dares not claim its citizens for military service. Instead, it lures a very few into its precious clutch of legions. America's legionary army, compared to those of Europe, is large, yet it is incapable any longer of achieving grand goals. The United States has the military strength to occupy only a single medium-sized society in force. It can occupy such a place, but no longer truly conquer it. Furthermore, it has lost the power to convert others to the American Way.

The decline of Western religious nationalism since 1945 has been significant. In 1900 Western military forces were free to intervene

anywhere and conquer everywhere. They had conquered all the earth—and now settled in to administer their spoils. Today the West can kill but it cannot usefully intervene for good or even effectively defend its own interests. Since 2001 we have had difficulty meeting even the most limited objectives.

In contrast, the riotously proliferating ecology of the resistant non-state has been highly successful. In the few places it has been crushed, like the Tamil of Sri Lanka, it has required genocidal-like ruthlessness at the end of decades of conflict—and still the story is not over. Chechnya too speaks to the power of resistance today. Look carefully at so-called defeated non-state resistance.

In many instances, the triumph of the state is merely an artificial and momentary distortion. In Sri Lanka, for example, Chinese military assistance enabled the Sinhalese at last to prevail—for a very stiff, neo-colonial price. The next resistance has been seeded, and the myth of Tamil heroes cannot be defeated. Likewise, the US in Colombia is trumpeted as triumph in Washington, but look what our intervention has wrought: Over 4 million displaced and destitute, a country-wide drug ecology in place of cartel oligopoly, and independent militias freed from Senatorial elites, reshaping an already deeply corrupted political fabric.

But there are so many places where resistance has triumphed against the full technology-panoply of the West. Witness here Hizbullah and the Taliban. Then there is resistance outside of insurgency—like the criminal gangs of Mezoamerica and the *Jefes de Favelas* of Brazil's teeming cities. Within the eroding jurisdiction of the nation-state, great swathes of humanity become temporary autonomous zones—new realms of the *Bagaudae*.

What of movements of consciousness? They may be hard for us to see, but we still have eyes to see. We see new things as a threat to the system or, at the very least, worrisome deviance. Yet what seems black and wrong to us are also authentic. They are not only real; they have risen for a reason.

They speak to the intrinsic failure of the very system we are desperate to defend. The ideas that threaten us are witness to that system's corruption—that to so many, offers nothing.

High and pent-up demand for new identity—which the decayed tentacles of our system cannot meet—is being met by new things. Initially identity demand is met by somewhat traditional-looking forms. It is only later that highly original and truly new forms rise to view. In the 3rd century the precursors, like the cult of Isis or Mithraism, helped open the space for Christianity's straddling syncretism.

Think of Islamism and Pentacostalism—each worldwide in the hundreds of millions—as contemporary precursors. Look at the Islamic revival. To many Western scholars this is simple fundamentalism, a getting-back-to-basics extremism rising from the ashes of Muslim establishment failure with its corruption and complicity with the Western Dajjal (devil).

But in all its mysterious guises Islamism is not in any sense fundamentalist. It represents instead an act of new cultural creation. Not simply revival, these are visions from a new age, seeking out the restless and the dispossessed—restless people who have lost the comfort of life meaning and old identity, dispossessed by the decrepit and hardened residues of Islam that no longer speak the sacred in life.

Islamism is creating new narratives of belonging and meaning. Yet, at the same time, it also reconnects Muslims to the ancient sacred river of Islam. It seems old but it is actually vibrantly new. This skirts heresy and apostasy, but it is not simply reinterpretation. Some of it is pure invention—a new Islam even.

Much like Pentecostalism is for Christianity, Islamism is a way station, a prefiguration of things to come. Revivalist movements express the collective power of human yearning as old claims on the spirit erode. These movements seek to reclaim the power and glory of what was because new courses in humanity always seek continuity with a treasured ancestral past.

But new ideas that actually break our continuity of consciousness await us. Yet we may not see these until it is too late, just as the establishment Romans of the 3rd century remained oblivious to the transformation happening all around them.

Like Rome, America has Vested its World Leadership in the Authority of Military Deeds: *Eternal Victory*.

We have come to equate world authority with military authority. We never apologize for our martial behavior. Like Romans, as Michael McCormick tells us, we celebrate *Eternal Victory* in ritual triumphs on TV.

Hence, from powerful political quarters, our current president was roundly taken to task for addressing the Muslim World. This Cairo speech actually did much to reclaim a world authority ceded by the former administration, but many at home accused the president of showing weakness and appeasing the foe. Authority comes only as triumph.

This example reminds us how militarized US leadership has become. Yet the former president's extravagant deployment and display of American military power had the reflexive effect of severely diminishing our world authority. His use of force was supposed to bring enemies to tremulous submission, fill anxious allies with confidence, move millions of fence-sitters to our side, and leave observing great powers in a sweat—and, by the way, fill a united American nation with bursting pride.

The exact opposite was attained: The enemy fought harder, our allies became disheartened, fence-sitters cheered our foes on, and great powers grinned and began to scheme against us—and, by the way, Americans became passionately divided against themselves. Strategy had become self-destructive.

This corrosive dynamic will likely linger on for decades. Americans are again gun-shy about occupying foreign lands to no purpose. We are out of money, thanks to the former administration. Our allies are deserting with their feet. We waste our strength warring against the most wretched on the very rimlands of civilized life and ignore challenges to our world system closer to home. World stability erodes even as we squander the resources needed to defend our world core.

Is this in anyway comparable to the failure of the Roman imperial state in the 3rd century? Deglobalization did not happen in 2008—but its specter was raised high.

Today there are no barbarians at the gate. Or are there? Some experts say 10% of Mexico is linked in some way to the drug cartels. The *Principes de las Carteles* have as many *tiradors* (shooters) as the entire deployable Mexican Army. So whose gates are we talking about?

Change in history—homiletic history—sees events themselves as the change. Niall Ferguson writes that empires can come apart quickly, and that the dynamics of collapse are local.

But change has been building. It is too big for crisis management to suppress much longer. And if we insist on seeing it all as bad, we will miss the actual change itself.

Dalton Trumbo saw this eloquently. His screenplay *Spartacus* began: “The age of the dictator was at hand, waiting in the shadows for the event to call it forth.”

We await, not a dictator, but a restless and chaotic transition to a new age in which America may come to be an unhappy yet decisive, steel-helmet participant.

Our unhappy, even tragic, role is through war to become midwife of a new world. Yet in the doing we shall also become a very different American nation. This will be the message of the second part of this story in the Fall/Winter 2010 issue of Kosmos Journal.
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