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Revealing the truth about the West through war (Review)

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The distinctiveness of this book is manifested in its being a *mélange* of theoretically framed and journalistic discourse. *On one hand*, the book demonstrates its grounding in the theoretical problems of social sciences (for instance, it immediately mentions the intention to correct Max Weber's thinking regarding the relationship between economic rationality and Protestantism). *On the other hand*, the author strongly aims to address current trends in Europe, America, and ongoing wars—about which he presents a series of polemical and sharp claims.

In other words, the book is a synthesis of sophisticated theoretical articulations and various, almost declarative, statements that serve the aforementioned *polemical* nature—for example, the type of sentence that points to the fact that the CIA funded the French edition of John Rawls's famous book can certainly be understood in light of such an endeavour (here arises the perennial question of how much this compromises the given work; behind many works are various financiers, sometimes with a significant arsenal of power). Of course, behind this, we actually see the paradigm of a certain type of regression that is demonstrated in relation to the position of the West. In this specific case, we identify the emerging gap between the normative projections of a political philosopher regarding the organization of justice and the real configuration of justice that arises in a world marked by inequalities.

The author unequivocally aims to guide his readers toward interpreting the present: he simply starts from the premise that the (particularly) Russian-Ukrainian war constellation has opened an exceptional perspective regarding the historical trajectories of the West. Right now, we are at a moment where we can critically recapitulate the failure of the Western project. This can explain why, on its horizon, there are emerging all those states (with demographic and other potentials) that can be at least indirectly connected to the Russian-Ukrainian war. For example, let us mention the case of Scandinavian countries, which have shown strong subordination to American strategic interests—Todd's reflections revolve around this phenomenon.

In addition, the fact that the book at the beginning enumerates the various „surprises” (Todd) that have come to the surface on the occasion of this war is in fact an expression of Todd's efforts to shed light on the current situation. Or the fact that he presents different projections that can hardly be theoretically verified, such as the expected commonality between Russia and Germany (despite the current divergence) due to the similarity of the fertility rate, can also be observed in the context of the sharpening of attitudes.

Finally, Todd does not fail to comment on almost any episode of today. For example, he makes an assessment of why women-politicians in the Scandinavian and Baltic countries have shown such intense belligerence, even pointing to the „feminist dimension” (Todd) of Western bellicist engagement — confronting the assessment of one Ronald Inglehart who claimed that the willingness to make war sacrifices is constantly waning due to the „feminisation of society” (Todd) („*déclin général de l'intérêt pour la chose militaire dans le monde occidental à la féminisation de la société*”). Or he makes a declarative decision about whether there is a popular phrase of *deep state* or not (the author makes a negative decision here).

Thus, in the book we read theoretical positions (which are otherwise supported by numerous data), but also polemical claims that dissolve academic frameworks and open the possibility for intervention in debates centred on the present. In the form of such interventions, the author of this book, for example, defended the position that the real stake of the eruption of war is the subjugation of Germany, that is, the old geopolitical imperative that America cannot afford too close an alliance between Germany and Russia — in this book we get a lot of material as Todd explains it. He is, of course, not the only author who thematized the „fall” of the West in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, because we note various similar interventions — but Todd's undertaking is one of the most ambitious.

Todd, otherwise the author of significant books with a provocative charge, as a young scientist became known for becoming a prophet *ante litteram* regarding the collapse of the USSR

based on the analysis of infant mortality (*La Chute Finale*, 1976) — this fact gains significance if we consider that until the end of the eighties of the 20th century, there was widespread belief in the permanent stability of the Soviet regime. (Todd also in this book presents several hypotheses regarding the key importance of infant mortality, more precisely, he registers various intriguing „*correlations*” regarding infant mortality, such as in relation to corruption, or the effects of education). Finally, Todd, as we can read about him in various biographies,¹ is the grandson of Paul Nizan, that is, the important philosopher and writer who died in the war — at least some know him on the basis of a significant article by Jean-Paul Sartre regarding his death.

However, the Hungarian reader will also notice a more incidental hint that develops in the discussion about the kind of affectivity displayed by various politicians who have ventured into the world and become actors in the American power infrastructure (Victoria Nuland, Anthony Blinken, etc.) toward the places tied to their family lineages: his Jewish great-grandfather, Ob-latt Lajos, lived in Budapest. The connection between memory and affectivity is particularly emphasized. Moreover, Todd adds that he shaped the main thesis about the dissolution of the Soviet Union while traveling to Budapest and simultaneously searching for his ancestors. Hungary (as well as the politics of its prime minister) appears multiple times in the book, though this occurs within the framework of discussions about Eastern and Central Europe, where the author addresses a theme that also applies to this region: the „fragility of the middle class” (Todd). Although, it is worth mentioning that Todd particularly emphasizes the „exceptionalism” („Hungarian exception”, Todd) of Hungary in terms of the „originality” of its religious articulation, and he specifically highlights the intriguing relationship between Catholicism and Calvinism in this country (especially the question of significant figures in Hungarian history who emerged from Calvinism). While discussing the modes of Russophobia, he also thematizes the fact that, despite the 1956 uprising, there is no Russophobia in Hungary.

Todd is often associated with Peter Laslett, who was his mentor at Cambridge regarding the thesis titled *Seven Peasant Communities in Pre-Industrial Europe*. Laslett—let us recall his famous book, which weighs the losses and gains of the Industrial Revolution: *The World We Have Lost: England Before the Industrial Age*—clearly had an influence on Todd. The emphasis by the author of *The Defeat of the West* on the ultimate significance of family structure, on the „patrilineal principle” (Todd), bears the marks of these influences. It is more than symptomatic that Todd’s arguments about the „lonely West”, which unsuccessfully waits for other countries to join it in condemning the aggression by Putin’s Russia, further affirm this core thesis. In other words, many countries in the world follow the logic of the aforementioned principle—this is then at least one serious reason that prevents various non-Western countries from showing solidarity with the West, which imposes interventions regarding sexuality and promotes transsexuality under the banner of an imaginary progressiveness.

However, Todd does not stop at these observations: he adds that globalization, glorified by America under the leadership of Bill Clinton, is in fact a cunning mechanism of „economic exploitation” (Todd)—this deters non-Western countries from aligning with the West, which is competing (in vain) to disseminate economic sanctions. For Todd, who could be classified in many respects as a conservative, it can be said here that he is radical in the sense of emphatically highlighting the historical significance of „economic exploitation. Moreover, he sees lines

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmanuel_Todd.

connecting pre-1914 colonization and the machinery of globalization: although he does not cite Marxist authors, he references the founding figure of literature on imperialism, namely John Hobson.

Todd unequivocally makes it known that he draws elements of his approach based on an anthropological perspective, or as he puts it, through the „eye of an anthropologist”. He expects anthropology to show sensitivity to the constitutive differences of the world—it is no coincidence that in his numerous critiques of the West, the accusation arises that, unlike America after World War II, which knew how to respect these differences, today’s America (which should be the leading agent of the West) is no longer capable of doing so. It now deliberately seeks uniformity as an expression of superiority. But this reveals its weakness rather than its strength. The same America was expected to steer historical processes, but it is gradually losing its grip.

The Defeat of the West: after the dystopian predictions of Oswald Spengler in the second decade of the 20th century, it is difficult to shake the impression that any similar negative projection, at least in part, bears the stamp of the German’s prophetic vision. However, Todd does not follow any cyclical pattern regarding the erosion of the West but introduces a dialectical move concerning Protestantism. He offers a picture in which the West becomes involved in its own defeat by gradually destroying its religious foundation—losing its epistemological bearings, failing to recognize the deep tendencies of the world, and ultimately, as the repeatedly mentioned war and the alignments of various states in the world convincingly show, becoming „isolated”. Or, as Todd puts it: it can no longer „represent” the entire world, even though this is its fundamental ambition.

Todd is keen to show that, despite the West’s self-understanding, its essence is not exhausted in the affirmation of liberalism. The fact that, for example, a (militaristic) Japan has become an integral part of the Western hemisphere is symptomatic.

The regression of the West is typically explained by either internal or external reasons. In summary, Todd leans more toward internal reasons. One of his key concepts in his various arguments is „zero”. Thus, he speaks of a „state of religion that is zero” (*état religieux zéro*), „Protestantism that is zero” (*protestantisme zéro*), and „morality that is zero” (*moralité zéro*). It hardly needs to be added that all of this is an extremely negative assessment that opens a *horror vacui* for the West.

It is worth mentioning that Todd also frequently uses the term „neoliberalism”—the fact that he equates the state of „neoliberalism” with despiritualization justifies the comment that his phrase „liberal oligarchy” can be understood as a situation in which liberalism transforms into neoliberalism (one of Todd’s characteristic moves is when he labels the Ukrainian constellation as a „synthesis between Sovietism and neoliberalism” (Todd).

Incidentally, it is at this point that we see Todd’s moves engaging with Weber, more precisely introducing innovations in relation to his well-known narrative. Protestantism is indeed of crucial importance for the emergence of the West, but it has completely emptied itself, says Todd. That is, the arc of the rise and decline of Protestantism coincides with the rise and fall (defeat) of the West. Thus, an interpretation is outlined that, at one significant point, is identical to Hegel’s explanation: Germany, due to the influence of the Protestant principle, was one of the states promoting universality in modernity. But it enters a regressive phase, as does the West as a whole.

Namely, Todd distinguishes different stages of religious dynamics, but his ultimate assessment is that, despite all today's rituals and invocations, Protestantism as the spiritual axis of the West is part of the past. More precisely, he operates with a three-part scheme regarding religion: „active”, „zombie”, and „zero” phases. He definitively writes the obituary for Protestantism („death of Protestantism”, Todd), indicating that Todd diagnoses an „irreversibility” that has occurred. This assessment of his is strongly emphasized in the case of America as well; moreover, Todd delivers a verdict on the generally mistaken policies of Donald Trump, starting from his protectionism in economic policy to his policies toward Israel. Trump 1.0 did not convince Todd that Protestantism could overcome its „zero state”. As for Trump 2.0, he could not comment on it in this book. That is, his pessimism regarding religious reconstitution is uncompromising in nature.

Todd's explanation always interprets Protestantism alongside education—an equally significant component in his explanations. The fact that the decline of America is reinforced by weaknesses in the proportion of engineers in that country, especially in relation to Russia, or the „overrepresentation of Asians” in the American system, the decline of WASP (White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant) culture, demonstrates Todd's intentions.

Somewhat unexpectedly, Todd recognizes several relevant parallels between the dynamics of Protestantism and „communism” (this is an imprecise term used by Todd, which should refer to *real socialism*). Regarding the relationship between communism and Protestantism toward education, he speaks *per analogiam* of their „obsession” (Todd). The focus on education produces a middle class² that is a source of fear and experiences constant discomfort in existing society—Todd does not offer any apotheosis of the middle class, which our era, in various forms, eagerly places at the forefront as an expression of desirable reality fabrication.

Todd's *non-economic* explanation regarding the fall of the Soviet Union (we are familiar with such explanations: there was not enough market rationality, there was no competition promoting rationality, etc.) highlights the emergence on the social scene of an „upper educated middle class” as an extraordinarily significant factor in the collapse of the Soviet Union. Educational processes, namely, inevitably create patterns of hierarchy between different types of education that are in tension with communist principles. Finally, what Todd calls a mere „dream” of today's Western thought—that an enlightened and self-reflective Russian middle class (which is morally appalled by the horrors of war and fears impoverishment) will eliminate Putin's regime, which is stuck in aggression—shows his clear distance from any idealization of the middle class. On the contrary, this class (and its upper echelon) has accepted his regime—moreover, Putin's disciplining of the oligarchy, which at one point felt omnipotent, prevents it from acting as an autonomous factor.

Furthermore, Todd emphasizes the fact that Protestantism widely opened the doors to the principle of equality, namely, considering the fact that everyone must be literate to have free access to the Bible. The realization of literacy is simply a prerequisite for Protestantism. However, here we encounter the presented parallel with „communism”, which also places a strong emphasis on mass education as a guarantee of emancipation. This produces the fact that, despite all differences, both Protestantism and communism become entangled in similar contradictions.

² Todd also speaks of „educational underdevelopment” and, in an extended historical reflection, illustrates this with the example of the „overrepresentation of Jews” (Todd) within certain segments of the middle class.

Protestantism is both a religious transformation that enables the expansion of nation-states, it is also the meeting point of „sexual puritanism” (Todd).

At the same time, Todd notes the presence and germ of primordial inequality and authoritarianism in Protestantism. He has in mind the fact that with the logic of predestination the established inequality between people is legitimized in advance. In addition, the seeds of authoritarianism can be found in the same framework — this allows Todd to recognize the hidden authoritarianism already in the very beginnings of the West. In the light of this explanation, he reaches the point that he shows the social configuration of Germany historically through the prism of authoritarian Protestantism: he claims that those parts of Germany that were influenced by Protestantism to a greater extent accepted Nazism. More precisely, Nazism occurs to a greater extent where Protestantism passes into a „zombie” phase — according to Todd’s diagnosis, Protestantism reaches its regressive phase in the period between 1880 and 1930.

In conclusion, let’s note the negative dialectic in the very Protestantism that made the West famous: namely, if Protestantism is the source of rising economic rationality, and the foundation for the „unbound Prometheus” (Landes), authoritarianism shines in all these phenomena — it is disguised in different ways, but inevitably returns to the scene.

Along with religious emptying, we must mention another term that has a strategic significance for Todd: *nihilism*. It is a term that has been vibrating at least since the end of the 18th century, but it was made famous by the German Nietzsche and the Russians in the 19th century. Interestingly, Todd’s main source seems to be Russian nihilism after all.

As for the term itself, he treats it in two ways:

a) tendency towards „destruction” — here we understand the relevance attributed to war in this book; in it, nihilism comes to a special expression,

b) the destruction of the relevance of „truth”, which is now losing support as a landmark.

Todd places these meanings of nihilism in the West’s relations with Russia in the current war and identifies forms of nihilism in the „anti-Russian” position. Moreover, analyzing Ukrainian politics and social configuration, he comes to the same conclusion. Todd is, among other things, a defender of the nation-state, and he views with a great deal of suspicion European trends that contribute to the disintegration of the nation — the term „European nihilism” testifies to this.

But there are also some other situations when one operates with nihilism: for example, Todd and the American unreserved acceptance of Israel’s policy is characterized by the functioning of nihilism. However, it seems that he concentrates his observations to a significant extent on the „zero” situation and complete nihilism in the sphere of sexuality: transgender orientation, which implies the possibility of interference in genetic determinations and in general the subordination of sexuality to the preferential structures of the subject, is for him the crowning act of nihilism. In any case, nihilism also has clear cognitive consequences: the self-blinding of the West, as well as another assessment of Todd, namely, „the incompetence of Western elites” is a consequence of this.

Of course, one could have expected that many interpreters would receive Todd’s book with uneasiness and that he would receive the epithet of an intellectual who is an undisguised Western helper of the Russian president. Todd is certainly under the influence of wrong self-reflection: in certain places, as if looking for an alibi for his assessments, he explicitly claims that he acts only as a „researcher” who does not impose his assessments, but only collects material

that he considers important. *Defeat of the West* does not correspond to this self-understanding: this book would never have come to life without precisely such acts of judgment, which go far beyond the position of „researcher” who refrains from evaluations.

Pace Todd, this is a book that is organized on the basis of performative acts of judgments that are possibly accompanied by materials for research. Is it, for example, Todd’s strong opposition to the European turn in Maastricht due to the course towards the weakening of the matrix of the nation really only a selection of material? Is the thematization of the euro as the embodiment of European nihilism just an expression of neutral research? Is agreeing with John Mearsheimer and his „realism”, which (along with Jeffrey Sachs, an economist, once known as a strategist of the post-socialist transition) established himself as the most lethal critic of American foreign policy, just a selection of research material?

By the way, Todd hardly criticizes Russian social constellations at all. The only thing he analyses are the negative trajectories of the Russian demographic situation (in some interviews he even expresses admiration for certain effects of the Russian regime). For him, today is actually the place of a colossal confrontation between the „liberal oligarchy” (Todd) of the West, which is increasingly bothered by the uncertainty and contingencies of democracy, and the „authoritarian democracy” of Russia, which balances authoritarianism and democracy, but always with the goal of the superiority of authoritarianism. From Todd’s perspective, the liberal platitude about populism is of little value: his critical addressees are Western elites who are the subject of renewed criticism, and the hint of populism is only an expression of their weaknesses. In a situation where Protestantism is brought to the „zero” situation, the meritocratic dynamic is doomed, and liberalism necessarily passes into the phase of oligarchy: America is a protoexample of this. After all, the „anthropological eye” of Todd could not be indifferent to the well-known research of Angus Deaton, which shows the degree of increase in the mortality of Americans between the ages of 45 and 54.

The position of Germany in Todd’s considerations is interesting. We have already seen that it is given importance due to the importance of Protestantism for the West. In today’s view, the characterization of Germany as a „machine society” (*société-machine*) stands out. Among the numerous analyzes of Germany’s political and economic trajectories (social mobility, fertility rate, economic reforms during Schroeder’s time, etc.), there is an assessment that illuminates the meaning of the metaphor of machine: German society functions without the „symbolic” horizons of the nation. Its apparent „economic power” without which it cannot do is without national boldness and nationally formulated goals (weakening in terms of the symbolic sphere is not only Todd’s diagnosis; he uses different standard terms anyway such as atomization, etc.).

Here, Todd reaches for the division between „active” and „inert” nations: accordingly, Germany becomes the leader of Europe, but when it is only an „inert nation” (although it should be added here that for Todd, Russia does not stand out from the ranks of „inert” nations either; with this assessment, he explains Putin’s emphasized caution regarding the mass mobilization of Russians). He also calls Angela Merkel’s 2015 move to open the door to migrants simply „German hubris” (*„hubris allemande”*).

But, despite numerous criticisms of German policy, and despite allusions to its hypocrisy, or considering the fact that Germany was powerless in terms of subordinating Europe to America, the reader in some places has the impression that some potentials of overcoming the finalized

state of nihilism are vibrating in Germany. Thus, Germany is still „semi-patrilineal” (with Japan), it is not individualistic like the Anglo-Saxon sphere, that is, it enables mediation between the level of individuality and communality. But whether this is enough to transcend „German hubris” that never ceases to exist, remains a question.

To conclude: Todd’s unconventional actions are destined to achieve success, which is, of course, always a burden. Following his use of the term nihilism, we could qualify him as an anthropologist with Nietzsche’s stamp. The author’s large radius of movement, which ranges from various theoretical claims to polemical reflections on daily intellectual turmoil, makes him a candidate for an important witness of the epoch. In other words, *Defeat of the West* is predestined to be a bestseller. The book belongs to the series of those achievements that start from the fact that war is a special moment of catharsis and when the social sciences have to be extremely strained.