



Book review essay: the free world: from Cold War art and thought to the return of History

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BOOK REVIEW

Book review essay: the free world: from Cold War art and thought to the return of History

The free world: art and thought in the Cold War, by Louis Menand, London, Harper Collins Publishers, 2021, 880 pp., £30.00/\$39.00 (Hardback), ISBN 9780007126873; £14.99 (Paperback), ISBN 9780007126880; £17.99 (eBook), ISBN 9780008489311; £26.99 (Audio-book), ISBN 9780008489328

World politics since 1989, by Jonathan Holslag, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, and Medford, MA, USA, 2021, reprinted 2022, 416 pp., £21.35/\$28.85 (Hardback), ISBN 9781509546725; \$24.00 (eBook), ISBN 9781509546749

I am fortunate in that the two books reviewed in this essay are, in their separate ways, books of high quality, written by highly reputable academics, who are also experienced in popular journalism. Louis Menand has been contributing editor of *The New York Review of Books*, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, and a Pulitzer Prize winner.¹ Jonathan Holslag describes himself as a world politics generalist contributing to, among others, *Le Monde*, *The Straits Times*, and the *BBC World Service*. This encourages confidence in both the scholarly research that gives the books their foundation and in the clarity and cogency of the prose. The reader will not be disappointed. Although quite different from each other, taken together the books provide both historical knowledge of and intellectual insights into the eras that followed the Second World War.

Louis Menand considers art and thought in what he describes challengingly as the “Free World” and their international influence during the Cold War. Jonathan Holslag, by contrast, considers world politics since 1989 from a political economy perspective. The books were published before Russia’s open geopolitical challenge to the post-Cold War world order and rules-based international system, with its second invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Without claiming prescience, both authors provide outstanding accounts of the cultural and political eras that led up to this. Past as prologue indeed!

Louis Menand, professor of English at Harvard University, has written an exceptionally wide-ranging, detailed, and absorbing book. It is about America’s dynamic modern culture; but also, indeed essentially, about its engagement with other peoples and cultures during the Cold War. Again, fundamental to the book is the concept of ‘freedom’ with its implications for politics as expressed through art and thought since the Second World War. As Menand says in his opening sentence: “This book is about a time when the United States was actively engaged with the rest of the world.” (xi). Politically, this was through the collaborative formation with other Great Powers of the United Nations Organization which it hosted; economically, and again collaboratively, through the Marshall Plan, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund; domestically, the legal basis for the social and political equality of Americans was steadily established, accompanied by the slow erosion of persistent prejudices; intellectually, through an

exponential development of educational opportunities, cultural creativity, and international exchange: "Through its governments, its philanthropic foundations, its universities, and its cultural institutions . . . [while] Its entertainment culture was enjoyed almost everywhere. And it welcomed and adapted art, ideas, and entertainment from other countries." (xi). Internationally, colonial empires were collapsing, sometimes swiftly, sometimes slowly, usually painfully.

Menand argues: "Most striking was the nature of the audience: people cared. Ideas mattered . . . People believed in liberty and thought it really meant something . . . They believed in authenticity and thought it really meant something. They believed in democracy and (with some blind spots) in the common humanity of everyone on the planet." (xii). O brave new world, that has such people in it! And yet: "In the same period, American citizens were persecuted and sometimes prosecuted for their political views. Agencies of the government spied on Americans and covertly manipulated nongovernmental cultural and political organizations." (xii). The consequence was: "A cold war rhetoric, much of it opportunistic and fear-mongering, was allowed to permeate public life. And the nation invested in a massive and expensive military buildup that was out of all proportion to any threat." (xii).

By the end of the 1970s, the United States " . . . grew wary of foreign commitments, and other countries grew wary of the United States . . . And yet, something had happened. An enormous change in America's relations with the rest of the world had taken place." (xiii). And yet again, Menand argues, the artistic and intellectual culture that came to dominate after the Second World War was not exclusively American: "It was the product of the Free World." (xiii). It is this broad concept that Menand presents and analyses. His is not he says " . . . a book about the 'cultural Cold War' (the use of cultural diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy) and it is not a book about 'Cold War culture (art and ideas as reflections of Cold War ideology and conditions.'" (xiii). It is instead an account of an exceptionally dynamic period of " . . . cultural change in which the existence of the Cold War was a constant, but only one of many contexts" (xiv). That said, the book continually considers art and thought as integral to Western cultural, and political hegemony, an ideological concept of the "Free World," rather than a purely geographical location. This is now being openly challenged which makes the book relevant to our understanding of contemporary geopolitics.

It is a comprehensive, yet very readable, indeed absorbing book, especially for someone who, like Menand himself, grew up in the intellectual, cultural, and political world he describes. In addition to the Preface to which I have already referred, the book comprises a brief, yet crucial Introduction: "What the Cold War Meant" followed by a further eighteen chapters. What did the Cold War mean? Menand correctly describes the wartime alliance of the Western allies and the Soviet Union versus the Axis powers as a temporary political necessity, held together " . . . by one common goal: the total defeat of Nazi Germany." (4). Military victory opened the way for geopolitical differences hitherto postponed to being brought into the open.

The key ideological moment from the perspective of the West was on 12 March 1947 in a speech by President Harry S. Truman that became known as the *Truman Doctrine*. He said: "At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life. One way of life is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression. The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed

elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms." (4–5). As Menand reminds us: "The speech was, effectively, the declaration of the Cold War" (5) that would last forty-four years and which " ... was about ideas, and ideas in the broadest sense – about economic and political doctrines, civic and personal values, modes of expression, philosophies of history, theories of human nature, the meaning of truth." (5).

Truman, Menand argues, thought that " ... all totalitarian systems are essentially police states and essentially the same." (6). The question was and is could it happen here?² However, it raised a fundamental paradox in that: "It made questions about value and taste, form and expression, theory and method into questions that bore on the choice between 'alternative ways of life.'" (6). Menand gives several examples which are still current, such as how could racial and gender inequalities be compatible with democratic principles? Menand observes that: "Artistic and philosophical choices carried implications for the way one lived one's life and for the kind of polity in which one wished to live it. The Cold War charged the atmosphere. It raised the stakes." (6).

These are the issues and dilemmas which are considered using international comparisons and perspectives in the eighteen chapters that follow. It is not possible in a review essay of this length to examine these in detail. The reader will find each rich in examples, valuable in critical analysis, and written with clarity and verve. They review in absorbing and, to this reader, pleasingly familiar detail, American culture from the end of the Second World War to the retreat from Vietnam. They show also the intimate if not always mutually congenial circular flow of ideas between America and Europe; the influence of immigrant intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt; and trends such as the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and feminism of Simone de Beauvoir. The multi-faceted concept of "freedom" is a continual theme of analysis.

What then was and is the "Free World" according to Menand? He answers in his concluding chapter, an excellent detailed analysis of the realities of the often dubious aspects of American cultural diplomacy. He points out the irony that the greatest impact came not from state-sponsored high-brow cultural programmes, but an immensely popular commercial culture. He argues that: "Modernist literature did not provide moral sustenance to dissidents in Eastern Bloc countries. Beat literature did. Very few people knew who Lionel Trilling was. Everyone had heard of Elvis Presley." (717). He also cites George Kennan and Hans J. Morgenthau who pointed out the moral damage done by the bombing of North Vietnam. Menand argues that: "The political capital the nation accumulated by leading the alliance against fascism in the Second World War and helping to rebuild Japan and Western Europe it burned through in Southeast Asia" (716). A costly mistake repeated elsewhere in the decades that followed. Yet, Menand also concludes that: "The Vietnamese Communists did what totalitarian regimes do: they took over the schools and universities; they shut down the press; they pursued programs of enforced relocation and reeducation; they imprisoned, tortured, and executed their former enemies." (716) How to struggle against such regimes without becoming the enemy in the mirror was and is the moral dilemma of the "Free World".

Louis Menand's book is a most valuable work of scholarship and opinion, and timely considering the continuing challenges to the idea and reality of "the Free World." The book is supported by eighty-four pages of notes, a comprehensive forty-page index, and is very reasonably priced for a well-produced hardback.

Jonathan Holslag, professor of international politics at the Free University of Brussels, has attempted what most would consider an impossibly challenging task, or at least to do well. To his credit, he has succeeded in writing an excellent, and measured, single-volume account of world politics since 1989. Jonathan Holslag begins his book at this date as it marked the fall of the Berlin Wall and the final years of the Soviet Union, and

the beginning of what promised to be an era of freedom and prosperity – an Age of Globalization and what Francis Fukuyama and others declared to be the End of History. It is a panorama written from a political economy perspective but is structured and reads like a classical tragedy or a dramatic opera. The epigraph from Scipio sets the tone: “No society is fortunate when its walls are standing while its morals are in ruins.”³ The book is comprised of five parts: An introduction titled *The pendulum*, a section of three chapters titled *Overture*, three further sections titled *Acts 1, 2, and 3*, again each of three chapters, and an epilogue titled *Watershed*. In a review essay of this length, it is not possible to consider each in detail. It will instead focus on the introductory *The pendulum*, in which Holslag describes his motives, themes, and approach; and the epilogue *Watershed* which gives his conclusions. *Acts One, Two, and Three* survey chronologically the decades 1989–2000, 2000–2010, and 2010–2020.

As an effective introduction should, *The pendulum* explains his motives saying: “This book is a history of recent world politics. I wrote it in the first place as a provocation for my students . . . What is world politics in the first place? Events, some would argue . . . This book certainly pays attention to decisive events, like the fall of the Soviet Union, the terrorist attack against the United States in 2001, and so forth. But at least as important . . . are incremental changes. Economic change, for instance, which alters the balance of power between countries, changes in consumer choice which affect the organization of an economy, the productivity of countries, and the allocation of financial wealth.” (9). The road itself is considered, not just the milestones and from an international political economy perspective. The fundamental problem for the West, as a concept rather than a geographical expression, has been of complacency: “The three decades of relative peace in the West were a long-missed opportunity, a crisis of politics, diplomacy, and in a way, civilization.”(4).

Again, Holslag explains that: “A history of world politics cannot be about external politics alone.” (9). Citing Kenneth Walz, he comments that “ . . . it is not domestic politics that shapes the behavior of states, but the world system.’ This is similar to what Holslag himself refers to ‘ . . . as the school of strife.” (9). Importantly, he gives as an example Russia’s steady reversion to what he calls “battle mode” since the optimistic 1990s, aggravated by indifference from a complacent West, mistrust, and the emergence of nationalism. The same, he says, happened to China. However, he says: “Still, instead of seeing the world as an engine, controlled by mechanical laws, it is indispensable to examine the internal dynamics that help understand why some countries grow their power and why others lose it, what mediates their response to external challenges, in terms of institutions, values, public expectations, and so forth.” (10). In the West, these include an overriding concern with consumption and with a “ . . . a class of professional election campaigners” increasingly substituting for active citizenship. (12).

Yet, as Holslag says, a study of world politics must also consider the place, influence, and power of non-state actors such as commercial enterprises, especially multi-national companies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), of which there are now many and varied examples, cities, and opposition movements, including one presumes social movements. It is interesting to note that while citizenship, civic education, civic engagement, and their argued neglect in the West figure in the index, the concept of civil society and what it might mean in distinct cultural and political contexts does not. Nor does the concept of a municipality or rurality as local states. This underestimates civil society and community in the West and how they function as shock-absorbers between the individual citizen and the centralized state. The point is made, however, that the relationship of non-state actors with the state is an ambivalent one. Russia and China

with their adherence to state capitalism are given as examples: "They forced large domestic companies to serve the national interest and twisted the arm of Western investors to do the same." (10). In Russia and China, national interest is determined by those who control the central state; while civil society is weak and harassed when compared with the West.

The same ambivalence, Holslag says, applies to international organizations, such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the World Health Organization. He points out that while they have some autonomy from states, and the latter often find multilateral cooperation useful in sustaining their legitimacy in world politics, such organizations are made impotent when powerful states fail to achieve mutually beneficial compromise. In short: "Multilateralism remains power politics by different means." (11). Such failure often results in what has become known as proxy or grey zone conflicts and hybrid wars. The last is also an information war. The Russian annexation of the Crimea and engineering of conflict in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 are examples. Such conflicts are, of course, not peculiar to the 21st century, although the range and capacity of contemporary technology have dramatically increased their intensity. Holslag recognizes this, saying: "The form changes, but the issues are not entirely new. Environmental change, migration, and technology have shown their capacity to make societies flourish and suffer many times in the past." (12).

What then are Jonathan Holslag's conclusions? They make gloomy reading from the perspective of the West. In the epilogue titled "Watershed," he says: "During the Cold War, the Western model was superior to the Soviet system in terms of economy, innovation, and governance. The West still holds advantages, but is debilitated ... a pressing question is whether the West can reinvent itself." (326). The problem his book identifies is that since 1989: "The priority of the West was not to revitalize democracy and the free market, or to empower citizens and entrepreneurs; its main priority was to empower consumption and corporate giants, whatever the consequences in terms of financial instability, pollution, and geopolitics." (314).

As a result, "... economic globalization no longer coincided with the spreading of democracy ... Throughout the world, a new generation of strong leaders took the helm, happy to send more oil and other goods to the West, yet increasingly determined to restrict its influence." (315). The book was published before Russia's second invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 which exposed these tempting weaknesses of the West and the impotence of liberal internationalism's multilateral institutions. It should not have been unexpected for, as Holslag says, "... liberalism in international politics has [had] little to do with enlightenment, with the pursuit of a society of emancipated citizens, and more to do with profit and power. Astute authoritarian states have been quick to exploit that inconsistency." (330). The criticism of the political class in the United States and Western Europe is explicit. The present crisis could well be a make or break moment. It depends on whether the military response is accompanied by a renewal of humane civic values both domestically and internationally as a positive challenge to authoritarianism; bordering on fascism in the case of Putin's Russia. A healthy civil society is crucial to this, but what this means in theory and practice is neglected here.

Jonathan Holslag's book is a most valuable and timely work of scholarship and opinion. It is supported by maps, figures, a table, notes, suggestions for further reading, and a comprehensive index. It is again very reasonably priced for a well-produced hardback.

The books reviewed are quite different in style and content. Yet, for this reader at least, they complement each other very well, providing rich accounts of the multifaceted post-Second World War eras in which the authors and he grew up. They focus

on the West as a cultural, political, and economic concept and its impact on the rest of the world. Neither Menand nor Holslag claims omniscience and readers will find much in these books that they will question and with which they will disagree. That is their scholarly purpose. They are challenging, well-written, excellent examples of the past as prologue, of the return of History.

Notes

1. For *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*, 2001, Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, New York, N.Y. In 2016, Louis Menand was awarded the National Humanities Medal by President Obama.
2. See for instance *It Can't Happen Here*, the 1935 novel by Sinclair Lewis, Penguin Modern Classics, 2017, London, for an earlier example of this fear.
3. Echoed by among others St. Augustine and, most recently on 28/11/2021 by Imran Khan, then Prime Minister of Pakistan.

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