

Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Failure of Politics and the Parting of Friends*

Allen Lane: London 2020, £16.99, hardback

224 pp, 978 0 241 41971 7

SUSAN WATKINS

THE FRACTURED RIGHT

Anne Applebaum is an acerbic right-wing journalist who specializes in anti-communism. Titles like *Gulag*, *Iron Curtain* and *Red Famine* appear at regular intervals. Her latest book, however, is about her own tribe, the intellectual right, and perhaps more interesting. A Never Trumper, Applebaum is appalled at the role her erstwhile friends are playing as ideologues for the new right-wing forces that have entered office in the past decade. Back in the nineties, she writes of her extensive conservative milieu, 'it felt we were all on the same team'. Today, former political allies cross the street to avoid speaking to each other. A profound divide runs through what used to be the right, she notes, in the US but also in Britain, France, Spain, Poland and Hungary. While some conservatives still support the political idea of the West and its international institutions, others actively oppose the liberal-democratic order. How to explain this transformation?

Twilight of Democracy's answer draws heavily on Applebaum's personal experience of right-wing intellectual circles in London, Washington, Warsaw, Budapest and, latterly, Madrid. Born in 1964, the daughter of a wealthy DC lawyer and artistic mother, she was an ardent young Reaganite, educated at Yale, the LSE and Oxford, and appointed as the *Economist's* correspondent in Warsaw at the age of 24. In 1992 she married Radek Sikorski, son of right-wing émigré Poles and a Bullingdon Club chum of Boris Johnson's, and returned to London to join the *Spectator*. There, under the 'brilliant' Dominic Lawson, she reports, the tone of every editorial meeting was 'arch', every office conversation amusing, coining headlines like 'Gdansk on Thin Ice'. Enoch Powell was simultaneously a revered authority and a figure of fun. Admiration for Thatcher was universal. There were summer parties

and lengthy lunches, champagne and oysters at the Savoy with the proprietor of the *Spectator* and the *Daily Telegraph*, Conrad Black.

Applebaum became an honorary member of this post-Thatcherite group of ‘nostalgic conservatives’—nostalgic not so much for Empire, she writes, as for a world in which England made the rules. It included Simon Heffer, Roger Scruton and John O’Sullivan, Thatcher’s speechwriter, soon to become editor of the *National Review*, where he would hire Sikorski as a roving correspondent. Meanwhile Johnson, the *Daily Telegraph*’s Brussels correspondent, was lobbing jolly stories of EU regulatory excesses into Tory circles, to enjoy the ‘amazing crash’ of greenhouse glass. Moving back to Poland in the late nineties—Sikorski was smoothing NATO relations and launching a political career—Applebaum was again surrounded by fellow thinkers. Their party guests were journalists, diplomats, junior ministers, members of ‘what the Poles called the right’: conservatives and anti-communists, but also free-market liberals, ‘all believing in a Poland that was a member of NATO and on its way to integration in the EU’.

Back in Washington, where their good friend David Frum was crafting Bush’s ‘axis of evil’ speech, Applebaum wrote for William Kristol’s *Weekly Standard* and Roger Kimball’s *New Criterion*. Sikorski ran a programme on the trans-Atlantic alliance for old and new NATO members at the American Enterprise Institute, where Rafael Bardaji, a genial Spanish Zionist who, as Aznar’s security advisor, steered the country into the Iraq war, was a dinner guest. Meanwhile Applebaum was deepening her ties with anti-communist intellectuals in the now happily capitalist Eastern Europe. In Budapest, she applauded her friend Mária Schmidt’s newly opened House of Terror museum, whose first room justly had a screen of Nazi propaganda opposite a matching Soviet one.

Fast forward to 2020, and this happy scene has vanished. Schmidt has become an *aficionada* of Breitbart News. The proprietor of the storied weekly *Figyelő*, she assails anti-Orbán NGOs as mercenaries for Soros and attacks Applebaum’s *Washington Post* pieces on Hungary as ‘arrogant and ignorant’. O’Sullivan is also in Budapest, installed at the Danube Institute—which he defends to Applebaum as ‘conservative in culture, classically liberal in economics, Atlanticist in foreign policy’—and escorting Orbán to international conferences of the intellectual new right. Back in London, Heffer has become an ardent Brexiteer, denouncing the EU as a foreign power which overrules Britain’s courts and elected government, and welcoming an upsurge in national consciousness that hadn’t been seen since the Blitz spirit of the Second World War. In *England: An Elegy*, Scruton has succumbed to cultural despair, blaming the EU for boarded-up town centres and wastelands of illuminated concrete. The *Spectator* under Fraser Nelson has gone soft on Orbán, too, staging a joint event with the Századvég Foundation,

a Fidesz think tank. In the US, Kimball is churning out pro-Trump pieces for *American Greatness* and comparing congressional Democrats during the Trump impeachment to the mob that sided with Barabbas. Laura Ingraham, fondly remembered from the early nineties as a young Reaganite in a leopard-print mini-skirt, is the 45th President's go-to interviewer on Fox News. And the jovial Bardaji is masterminding publicity for Vox, Spain's new hard-right party, with help from Netanyahu's spin doctors, who have also put him in touch with Trump's short-lived national security advisors, Michael Flynn and H. R. McMaster. Bardaji proudly claims credit for a video of Vox leader Santiago Abascal fording rivers and scaling mountains, with a soundtrack of soaring music and the slogan, *Hacer España Grande Otra Vez*—Make Spain Great Again.

To make sense of this, Applebaum turns to Julien Benda's *The Treason of the Intellectuals*. In 1927, Benda saw the *clerks* of his time falling prey to political passions and betraying the central task of the intellectual, the search for truth. Though not strictly comparable to the rise of fascism, the 21st-century 'twilight of democracy' has parallels with it, Applebaum thinks. Similar treasonous intellectuals play an important role in undermining the values of the Western liberal order and envisaging new systems. In doing so, they exploit the 'authoritarian predisposition' of sections of the population that cannot tolerate the complexity of contemporary society: the shocks of the economic and refugee crises, but also the increasingly fragmented and cantankerous forms of political discourse.

In Applebaum's view, only the latest revolution in the means of communication, comparable to that of Gutenberg, can explain the global rise of iconoclastic new rights in countries with widely varied economic cycles and political cultures—Brazil, the Philippines, Poland, the US. The post-war media of national broadcasting corporations and a centrist broadsheet press had created a 'single national conversation', a common debate with shared narratives, symbolized by FDR's fireside chats. In the world of internet communications, political and moral authority is fragmented, while social-media algorithms actively distort perceptions of the world through confirmation bias and upgrade more emotive content. In this hyper-partisan environment, servants of the state are readily portrayed as having been 'captured' by political opponents. The new *clerks*—ideologues, journalists, spin doctors—are adept at deploying these social-media tools to reach those predisposed to authoritarianism and seeking certainties in complex times.

Equipped with this conceptual frame, Applebaum sets out to investigate concrete cases. Her research is hampered by an apparent lack of empathy on her subjects' part, and *Twilight of Democracy* records a succession of calls unreturned and emails unanswered. Some give as good as they get. After attacking Applebaum's know-nothing arrogance, Schmidt assails

the patronizing attitudes of those in the Western liberal media who ‘talk down’ to people in Central Europe as they once did in the colonies. In her view, Merkel’s refugee policy was just an attempt to prove that this time the Germans were the good people and could lecture everyone else on humanism and morals. O’Sullivan tells Applebaum in no uncertain terms that it is she who has changed and has now become part of a liberal-bureaucratic international elite, opposed to democratically elected parliaments. He points out that, by comparison with Hungary, the US quality media are also overwhelmingly ‘one-party’, only in this case pro-Democrat.

Applebaum confesses herself somewhat baffled by these *clerics’* responses. Even if Schmidt’s anti-colonial anger and proud Hungarian nationalism are genuine, perhaps her real motive for keeping in with the Orbán regime is material—funds for her House of Terror and two historical institutes, run from her ‘spectacular home’ in the Buda hills, a legacy of her late husband’s post-1989 real-estate speculation. As for O’Sullivan, who also enjoys an enviable Budapest apartment, Applebaum grumbles that he would once have been proud to call himself a member of a trans-Atlantic international elite, attending Rupert Murdoch’s glittering parties and enjoying expensive dinners with Conrad Black.

She is on firmer ground with the nostalgic-conservative Brexiteers. ‘Democracy’ as an international cause was less important to the *Spectator-Telegraph* crowd than she, the Reaganite *ingenue*, had imagined. What really mattered to them, she now sees, was ‘a world in which England is *special*—perhaps even superior.’ Her old friends had always been suspicious of the EU’s single market, despite its manifest free-trade virtues; to them it was unacceptable that the one Allied country which had never surrendered to Hitler should now have to make concessions in product labelling or trade regulation. At the same time, Applebaum points out, they were extremely happy to work as junior partners with the US, a real superpower, whose reflected glory bathed the UK and its leaders in a flattering light. Tory grandees were dismissive of US politics, snobby about American popular culture and sceptical of its ideological foreign policy, *à la* Graham Greene. But the US was big, strong and globally oriented, a fitting partner for the exceptional English. If Americans were keen on spreading democracy, the UK would be happy to join them, extolling a ‘special relationship’ that was little more than a joke in Washington.

As for Boris: in the normal course of events he would never have become Prime Minister, given his history of gaffes, sackings and scandals. He was narcissistic, lazy, with an aura of carefully studied helplessness that concealed a streak of cruelty, though he also had an intuitive grasp of the mood of the crowd and an uncanny charisma, attracting people and putting them at their ease, such that, when Applebaum went for an impromptu drink

with him during his Mayor of London years, they were mobbed by pub customers wanting selfies. Nor was he a committed ideologue, on the model of Benda's passion-driven *clercs*. 'Nobody serious wants to leave the EU', he told Applebaum at a London dinner party in 2014. 'Business doesn't want it, the City doesn't want it. It won't happen.' He assured Cameron, 'Brexit will be crushed like a toad under the harrow', while nevertheless calculating that to support it would make him a hero with the Tory rank and file.

Applebaum claims she was unsurprised by the outcome of the Brexit referendum, having predicted the 52:48 result a few nights before at a dinner party thrown by a leading Remainer. The Tories, however, were totally unprepared even to think about leaving the EU. But thanks, in Applebaum's telling, to Theresa May's 'unforgivable mistakes', the situation worsened to a point where the Conservatives desperately needed a leader who could tell stories, make them laugh and bring back the feeling of English superiority. Johnson himself was no revolutionary, of course, but a member of the old elite. Yet the new political world created by leaving the EU required unprecedented steps. Applebaum rails that, while democracy was supposed to be the paramount reason for Brexit, the nostalgic conservatives now launched an unparalleled attack on British institutions. As Johnson's key adviser, Dominic Cummings, with his sinister hoodies and dark glasses, hinted at the need to look at broader aspects of the constitution ('as in Poland') and alter the BBC's funding ('as in Hungary'), while eyeing a Trumpian purge of the civil service.

At this point, *Twilight of Democracy* pulls back to consider the broader historical context. The fall of Thatcherism had coincided with the end of the Cold War, 'a more momentous turning point for Britain'—for Europe, she might have noted—'than we understood at the time.' The battle against the Soviet Union had offered British Tories the chance to take part in a moral crusade, as US allies. But victory, combined with Thatcher's exit, left a vacuum. The American right's response to the fall of the Berlin Wall was less nostalgic, more optimistic than the British. In the early nineties, Applebaum's Reaganite friends were buoyed up in their belief that 'the revolution would continue', united in their ambition to share America's great democracy with the world. Yet in retrospect, when the Soviet Union collapsed, the links that had bound American anti-communists—from centrist Democrats all the way to the outer edges of the Republican Party—broke as well.

The tectonic shifts took time, however, and their scope and scale were not immediately obvious. For a while it seemed the War on Terror could forge a genuine coalition of the willing to fight Saddam. Alongside the US, Aznar in Spain, Blair in Britain, Rasmussen in Denmark and Kwaśniewski in Poland appeared to be 'a strong Atlanticist cohort', even if the invasion of Iraq lacked the Cold War's unity of purpose. But by 2016, with the election

of Trump, that buoyant nineties band of young conservatives had split in half. For Applebaum, where there's mischief afoot, Lenin's shade is never far away. He single-handedly brought the one-party system into existence and is the ur-model for lack of faith in the great institutions bequeathed by America's Founding Fathers. Unforgivably, Trump's *clerics* married Leninist scepticism about bourgeois democracy to the Christian right's horror of moral depravity, drugs and crime. This is what the twilight looks like. Yet Applebaum hopes, of course, that history's wheel will turn.

The flimsiness of this construct scarcely needs underlining. Even on its own terms, *Twilight of Democracy* doesn't succeed in clarifying the motives of the new-right *clerics*, beyond crude venality and thrill-seeking—in which case, surely they could have been bought off. Nor does 'democracy' here entail effective accountability or accurate reflection of popular dispositions, but merely respect for the existing institutions of representation, however rigid, archaic or corrupt. As Gavin Rae pointed out in NLR 124, the processes by which the Western powers installed the structures for capital accumulation in the post-communist countries were anything but democratic: in Poland, Balcerowicz's 1989 raft of laws for privatizing state-owned firms and slashing subsidies was pushed through after the trade-union movement had been crushed by military dictatorship and two years before the first parliamentary election—meeting no objection from Applebaum and friends. Rae also notes Sikorski's earthier take on the trans-Atlantic alliance, overheard in a pricey Warsaw restaurant, which got him sacked as Poland's Foreign Minister in 2014, part of a chain of Civic Platform corruption scandals that did more to catapult the national-conservative PiS into power than did scheming *clerics*. In *Twilight of Democracy*, the actual record of the 'liberal international order' is nowhere examined; instead it is hurriedly tidied away behind the pseudo-concept of the 'authoritarian predispositions' of the benighted masses.

With her hectic social schedule, and pressing deadlines for the *Atlantic* and *Washington Post*, no one could expect Applebaum to pore over every dot and comma of her Benda, but she does seem to have missed his main point. The term *cleric* was not an insult for him, as she seems to imagine. On the contrary, with its echoes of monastic devotion, it was the highest possible calling. Traditionally, as medieval intellectuals, the *clerics* engaged in pure metaphysical speculation or artistic contemplation, pursuing 'non-material ends'—in contrast to the brute materialism of the masses. The 'betrayal' of this mission by twentieth-century intellectuals involved choosing to immerse themselves instead in material realities—aiming to make the world a better place—by adopting political passions. According to *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, the defining features of a political passion are 'the fixed idea and the need to put it into action'. In other words, anti-communists and golden-age Reaganites were already betraying their vocation as intellectuals,

in Benda's terms, in fighting the Cold War's moral crusade. The powerful political passion of 'national feeling', he argued, expresses itself first and foremost in 'the exercise of pride'—pride in America's great democracy, for example, and ambition to share it with the world.

Whatever one thinks of Benda's fiery quietism, it's clear that in Applebaum's case, political passion has indeed foiled the 'search for truth'. Applebaum is too angry to be capable of the imaginative sympathy needed to engage with a position not her own—or, perhaps, too driven by her *idée fixe*. Nevertheless, her book does have something to offer, if read symptomatically. For surely O'Sullivan is correct. It is Applebaum who has shifted her position, joining the international 'liberal-bureaucratic' mainstream and abandoning the crusading right. In this she is not alone. The most significant feature of the recent period may turn out to be, not so much the rise of radical new rights, spectacular as these may be, but the ultimate strengthening of the liberal-mainstream bloc at elite level. In the nineties, it was bolstered by absorbing the social-democratic forces to its left. The unintended outcome of the 'populist wave' may be to reinforce it from the right, joined by two, three, many Applebaums and Frums. However, strengthening the bloc at elite level still leaves the problem of mass electoral support to be solved. This is where questions of democracy come in.