

The Whole World Can Indeed be Wrong. Dead Wrong.

Review of Richard Landes' *Can "The Whole World" Be Wrong? Lethal Journalism, Antisemitism, and Global Jihad*

by [Juliana Geran Pilon](#) (June 2023)



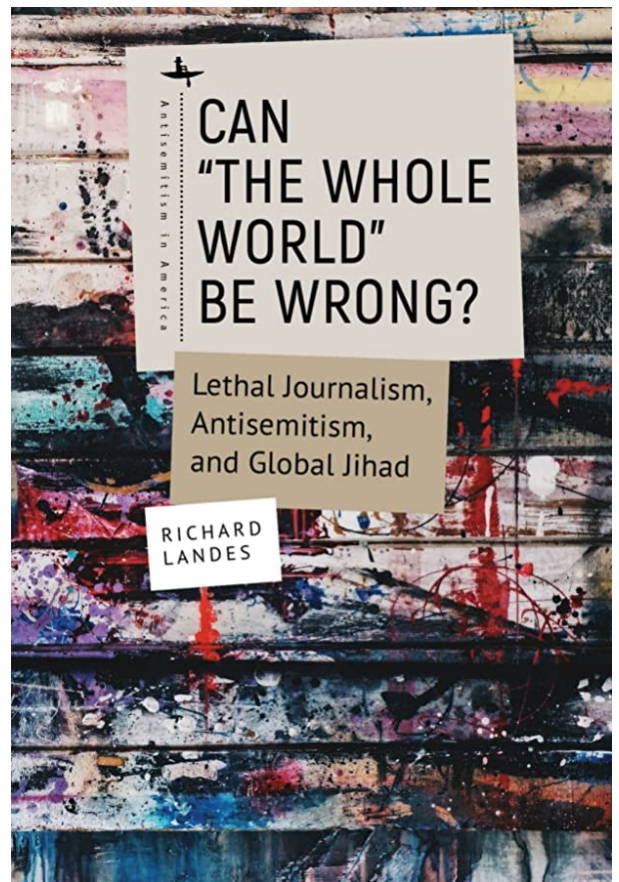
Jerusalem, Plate 100, William Blake, 1804

When Aristotle declared man to be a rational animal, he was talking about potential, not performance. Even Sigmund Freud, who attributed a far greater role to the subconscious than to the hapless ego in explaining most behavior, eventually had to concede that humans are plagued by “death drives” (*Todestrieb*,

in German). Historian Richard Landes, dispensing with psycho-jargon, calls it simply “stupidity,” and expresses “astonishment at a collective folly that I see at this troubling dawn of the new millennium.” The putatively civilized segment of humanity appears to be about to commit suicide.

The apocalyptic reference is no throw-away metaphor for this specialist in eleventh-century theology, the former Director of Boston University’s Center for Millenarian Studies. As for “stupidity,” the term was defined by Italian economist Carlo Cipolla in *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity* (2011) to mean “creating damages for others when it does not advantage you.” By extrapolation, Landes coins “astounding stupidity,” to describe the current rush toward Armageddon. Dangerous times call for specific definitions.

The astoundingly stupid are no mere garden-variety cretins. They tend to be intellectuals (or at least credentialed). Their mystifying *métier* is to “create advantages for those who want to hurt them,’ those who, in the name of positive-sum [meaning, both parties win] principles, fall dupe to the hard, zero-sum [I win, you lose] strategies of their self-declared, demopathic enemies.” Demopathy, another neologism, is defined in the book’s glossary as “invoking human rights in order to violate them.” So does Landes in one fell swoop of a sentence capture concisely the possibly terminal malady of the declining West, thus delivering an update to Oswald Spengler’s doorstep-sized



Decline of the West (1918-22) superior in both substance and style.

What else but the so-called Free World's own astonishing stupidity can explain how in the comparative nanosecond of just two decades, the Islamist Caliphators have managed to become stronger than ever? The Taliban runs roughshod over Afghanistan, Iran's Ayatollahs are holding their own people hostage while arming terrorists and drug cartels throughout the world, and ISIS terrorizes Iraqis, all with the assistance of the satanic regimes of Vladimir Putin, the Ayatollahs, and Xi Jinping. Meanwhile, the West is lost in navel-contemplating self-flagellation.

Landes blames himself and his fellow educators for not having "done a good job of teaching each generation about what modernity has accomplished" and disclosed the real nature of millenarian delusions. We are now incapable of appraising apocalyptic Islam; and "when our exegetical schemes hit an extant iceberg of violent apocalyptic discourse, whose magnitude we dramatically underestimate, whole civilizations can sink." The result is "an attitude among thought leaders of Western culture ... [that] could not suit their enemy's agenda more ideally: *when jihadis attack a democracy, blame the democracy.*" The impact of this mindset, which Landes calls the "Y2KMind" based on the year it took hold, "on the course of the millennial war between Caliphators and Westerners," is evident in the profound "cognitive and moral dissonance" resulting in a "politics of outrage that fills 'the worst ... with passionate intensity,' and produces a radically disoriented West under attack.'" It is a powerful, eloquent indictment by a passionate liberal (in the classic, not distorted sense), copiously documented.

The book begins with the first jihadi attack on a democracy (Israel) in late September 2000, which saw the launching of the first blood libel of the twenty-first century and the blaming of the attacked democracy. It is followed, in Chapter

2, by the 9/11 and the blaming of America for that attack. Chapter 3 discusses the April 2002 "Jenin Massacre," now thoroughly debunked, which "inspired Western progressives to protest a democracy defending itself from jihadi attacks—even, to show their solidarity, wearing mock suicide belts, the very weapons soon to be turned on them." Chapter 4 considers the Danish Cartoon Scandal of 2005-6, which saw the West back down "accepting a de facto extension of Muslim blasphemy laws" into the putatively free world.

These and many other examples, all amply resourced, provide the evidentiary background to Landes's most original and important analysis of the key players in this millennial war, a set of six heuristic socio-intellectual categories.

- Shame-honor warriors who play by the hard-zero-sum game of rule or be ruled
- Caliphators who seek world conquest in this generation by some combination of jihad (kinetic war) and da'wa (cognitive war)
- Western liberals who project their own refined mentality on others, however inappropriate
- Western progressives seeking a global community of equality, diversity, tolerance and dignity for all
- Lethal journalists who report the war propaganda of one side, their own enemy's (e.g., jihadists), as news: own-goal war journalism
- And last—or is it first, in sheer pathology? —Jews-against-themselves, who side with their declared enemies in order to prove their good will and commitment to progressive values.

Left out of the picture are the supporting actors on both sides, variously self-identified, who sometimes switch

allegiances based on calculations that may seem rational at first blush, were it not for threatening the species' survival as a whole, and incidentally their own. Though often overlapping, the categories are all indicative of a proclivity to self-delusion and disregard for self-interest. It seems that shame-honor warriors and Caliphators would rather risk dying than prospering, if the enemy prospers as well, thus raising *Schadenfreude* to its logical illogical conclusion. Meanwhile, the other four groups levitate in a fantasy world of their own making. All are thus astonishingly, infuriatingly, frighteningly stupid.

And all, without exception, whether knowingly—hence cynically—or unconsciously lie. For which heinous crime against man and God the largest share of the blame must be borne by “lethal journalists,” whom Landes declares “the bane of the West in the twenty-first century.” Unconscionably dispatches which reflect the assassins' perspective, disguised as news, are thus bankrolled by both Caliphator regimes and Western charitable aid agencies. Only the latter's rationale is delusional, the former's is clear and simple. As Osama Bin Laden's former partner Ayman al Zawahiri explained to an Iraqi operative in an October 2005 letter declassified by the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, information provides the most powerful weapon against the West: “I say to you that we are in a battle, and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. And that we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Umma.” He meant the Muslim community, especially in the democratic diaspora, but in reality it is the world at large, particularly those in the West who imagine themselves smarter than everyone else.

Do Western journalists understand this? Don't they realize that “[t]he Western audience for this news, immensely reluctant to believe that their journalists were collectively bearing false witness on behalf of their mortal enemies, found

themselves wildly disoriented ... [while] global jihadis found themselves greatly empowered”? That so many of these scribblers are Jews, and even Israelis, is the ultimate insult to an injury so vastly self-inflicted.

Which is why the last was, for Landes, by far “the hardest chapter to write.” He is ultimately at a loss to explain why anti-zionist Jews could take the otherwise commendable tradition of self-criticism to such pathological extremes. He finds it “painful/embarrassing both for Jews and Gentiles” to watch the self-destructive hyper-self-criticism of the former. Worse, the reasons “have more to do with the banal and petty among the seven deadly sins—envy and pride—than the grand and dramatic emotions to which the actors aspire.”

As befits a student of millenarian illusions, Landes ends on a note that transcends mere politics. He appeals to William Blake, who in the poem “Jerusalem,” written two centuries earlier, describes what he called a “soul disease,” when people lie even to themselves, their souls eviscerated. He denounces “A pretence of Art to destroy Art; a pretence of Liberty/To destroy Liberty, a pretence of Religion to destroy Religion ... ” When truth is sacrificed to pretense, death is not far behind. “Progressives who partner with Caliphators in the mistaken idea that they too are fellow ‘anti-imperialists’ have embraced a pretence of progressivism to destroy progressives, a pretense of life, to destroy life ... They are passively; their ‘allies’ are actively, suicidally murderous.”

His advice? “Choose life, however difficult.”

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eight books include *The Utopian Conceit and the War on Freedom* and *The Art of Peace: Engaging a Complex World*; her latest, *An Idea Betrayed: Jews, Liberalism, and the American Left*, has just been published. The author of over two hundred fifty articles and reviews on international affairs, human rights, literature, and philosophy, she has made frequent appearances on radio and television, and is a lecturer for the Common Sense Society. Pilon has taught at the National Defense University, George Washington University, American University, and the Institute of World Politics. She served also in several nongovernmental organizations, notably the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), where as Vice President for Programs she designed, conducted, and managed programs related to democratization.

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