

Drink Your Port While You Can



Gilles Kepel

by Theodore Dalrymple

My memory is good in almost exact proportion to the uselessness of the information I call upon it to memorize. Why this should be, I do not know; perhaps it is an unconscious rejection of utilitarianism as a guiding principle of life.

In like fashion, I have spent a considerable proportion of my allotted time reading about current events over which I have no control and upon which I can have no influence, and which will affect me only marginally if at all. Does one have a duty to keep oneself informed about what is going on in the world, considering also that, however hard one tries, one cannot keep abreast of everything? For all I know, a terrible epidemic may be raging in some corner of the world, killing multitudes; but why should ignorance not be bliss, where knowledge will make no difference?

An old friend of mine called me the other day and asked me whether I thought that he should drink his oldest vintage port (1955) before the Third World War broke out: It would, after all, be a shame to die without having drunk it. I could not advise him since I am not gifted with exceptional foresight. My predictions are usually wrong, partly because I mistake, as many people do, projections for predictions.

For example, I remember predicting, on the occasion of my first visit to Egypt in 1982, mass famine in the near future because the population was growing by 3 percent a year while the area available for cultivation was decreasing by 1 percent a year. While one could not say that things have gone swimmingly in Egypt ever since, there has been no such famine:

There are too many variables and imponderables in human history to be able to predict its course by recourse to the simple (and simplistic) logic that I employed.

My friend with the vintage port was worried that the situation in the Middle East would develop into the Third World War. It so happened that, at the very time he phoned me to ask for my advice on his important dilemma regarding his port, I was reading a book on the current, so far regional, war. It was by the excellent French academic and commentator on the region, Gilles Kepel, titled *Holocausts: Israel, Gaza and the War Against the West*.

This author, it seems to me, is fair-minded and prepared to follow the evidence wherever it may lead (he has therefore to live under police protection and was excluded from his university post). The convolutions of Middle Eastern affairs are so intricate that they can make one dizzy, we who long for a quiet and simple life, and generally achieve it. Hypocrisy is too weak a word for the changing alliances, betrayals, reconciliations, underhandedness, double-dealing, disinformation, and inflated rhetoric of the politics of the region. Neither is the expression *double standards* quite adequate to describe the way in which events are assessed from a moral point of view. *Kaleidoscopic standards* would be a far better term.

Kepel has for many years been a proponent of the view that the religious ideas and beliefs of Islamists are to be taken seriously, even if they are intellectually nugatory from the rational point of view, as a factor—perhaps the most important factor—in the creation of the present conjunction. We in the West, having undergone a long and unidirectional process of secularization, now find it difficult to believe that anyone, apart from a few very odd people, could take religious millenarianism or utopianism seriously. Just as people at one time could not believe that Hitler meant what he said, so we cannot believe that the words of Yahya Sinwar, the leader of

Hamas in Gaza, are other than mere rhetoric.

According to Kepel, among the deceived was the Israeli prime minister, Mr. Netanyahu. He thought that Sinwar was essentially a windbag and his threats rhetorical. Therefore, he thought it safe to station most of the Israeli army in the north of the country, to protect the settlements on the West Bank. This was important to him because his whole government relied on the support of those small political parties that were most in favor of such settlements; and this in turn enabled, or emboldened, Hamas to attack Israel and commit its atrocities on Oct. 7 of last year. An additional consideration for Netanyahu was that, if he lost power, he would face certain legal difficulties that might end in his imprisonment. Politicians don't just think of their countries, they think of themselves, though they are apt to conflate the two.

Kepel's book stimulated me to think of the problem of proportional representation. The two-party system, in which political competition is reduced to that between two parties in which winner takes all, and which cannot possibly represent all shades of opinion on all important subjects, means that large numbers of people may feel unrepresented, or indeed totally ignored; but in a system of proportional representation, in which many more opinions enter the fray, the tail may end up wagging the dog, and a small minority of near-lunatics may become disproportionately influential. This is because its support is necessary for the survival of a coalition government, led usually by someone who is avid for power, or at least office, and would rather have the support of the near-lunatics than lose all possibility of power. Politicians, at any rate successful ones, do not go into politics to play eternal second fiddle. Mr. Netanyahu is said now to enjoy the support of only about 15 percent of his countrymen, but it is in the nature of a constitutional order, and perhaps an inevitable weakness of it, that a country may be legitimately led by a leader who is disliked or even hated

and despised. The problem is that the alternative to this, constant palace revolution or constant referenda, is probably worse. I can see no perfect solution to these dilemmas.

But now it is time for a real decision, one that I can (within limits) deeply affect: What am I going to have for lunch?

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