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## How the West Can Save Itself

Sweden and Switzerland found ways to avoid Europe's sclerosis: the former deregulated, the latter opened up to more immigration. Brendan Simms reviews "The Fate of the West: The Battle to Save the World's Most Successful Political Idea" by Bill Emmott.



A woman poses near a recently painted mural by British graffiti artist Banksy, in Dover, England. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By *Brendan Simms*

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There is no shortage of books on the predicament of the West. Fareed Zakaria, Niall Ferguson and Ian Morris, among others, have described a civilization in crisis, challenged by populist unrest, economic stagnation and terrorist violence. With Britain's vote to leave the European Union and America's election of Donald Trump, the West's long-standing assumptions about itself and its future seem less stable than ever. In "The Fate of the West," Bill Emmott, the former editor of the *Economist*, seeks to examine anew "the battle to save the world's most successful political idea"—the idea of a free and open society that undergirds Western democracy and is now seemingly under threat.

Like many, Mr. Emmott discusses the challenge of Europe's recent migrant influx, the rise of China and the danger posed by Russian territorial revisionism in Eastern Europe. Like many, he is aghast at the Trump presidency and deeply regrets Britain's "Brexit" vote. Unlike many, though, he does not conflate these last two developments. He stresses the commitment of British "leavers" to the West's institutions, such as NATO, and to the ideas behind them, such as free trade—both objects of attack during Donald Trump's campaign.

Mr. Emmott sees the roots of Western decline not abroad but at home, in the decline of "openness," by which he means, among much else, "the freedom to choose, to speak, to know, and indeed to hope for new opportunities and better lives." He notes that "sizeable parts of our societies feel that they have been left behind" and adds that it is "our own failures" that have created these feelings, failures that "pose a bigger, more lasting danger to us than do Islamic State, President Putin, or China."

Following the economist Mancur Olson's diagnosis 30 years ago, Mr. Emmott sees Western societies succumbing to a kind of sclerosis as interest groups accumulate like so many "barnacles." High on the list of his targets are the banks, which have managed to maximize risk and minimize responsibility by relying on "a massive public safety net." The banks, he says, are "the biggest single cause of rising inequality, distortion of public policy, and generation of collective economic pain and anger."

Contrary to what the word "fate" in the title might suggest, Mr. Emmott does not believe that the decline of the West is preordained. He quotes the scene from David Lean's

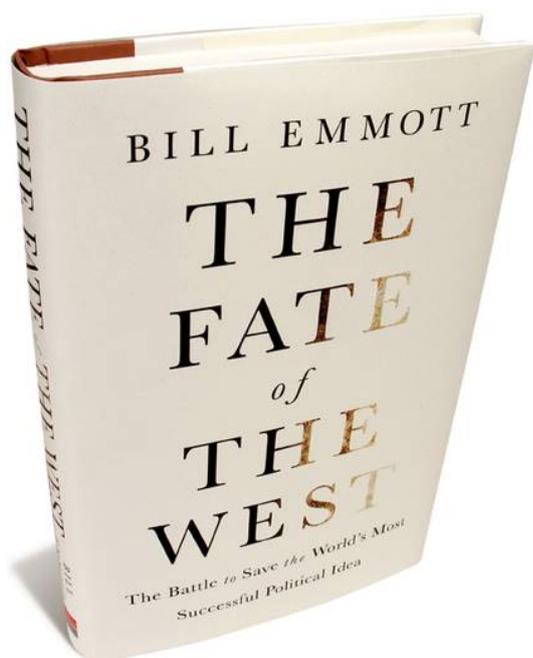


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 THE FATE OF THE WEST
 

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By Bill Emmott

*Economist Books, 257 pages, \$28*

“Lawrence of Arabia” in which the hero reproves a fatalistic friend who believes that a comrade lost in the desert is doomed because “it is written.” Lawrence pronounces, “Nothing is written” and rescues the man. Our fate, Mr. Emmott argues, is in our own hands.

To show what can be done, he focuses on two “Houdinis,” societies that have escaped the shackles of outmoded policies. One is Sweden, which by “reducing taxation and deregulating all manner of industries” has made itself more prosperous than it once was, with “more freedom of choice and creativity.” The other is Switzerland, where a flexible labor market has encouraged economic dynamism, as has a willingness to take in more immigrants after 2007, when a

quota system was lifted. “Such openness to new people,” Mr. Emmott writes, “coincided with greater internal openness to competition and innovation.”

Such arguments are conveyed in engaging though uneven prose. Discussing the surge of skilled and unskilled migrants into Britain, Mr. Emmott remarks perceptively that “the brain drain had become a brain gain as well as a brawn gain.” But this pithy comment is followed by the windy suggestion that “the UK is a revival story which is now in need of a new revival thanks to new obstacles and anxieties, but which nevertheless can be seen as a cause for optimism for the rest of the West.”

At times in “The Fate of the West” it is not clear whether the “West” is a geographical zone with a particular cultural inheritance or an idea that might take hold anywhere. Unsurprisingly, Europe is the book’s main focus, along with the U.S.: Mr. Emmott admires America’s readiness to finance emerging technologies but worries about the decline in male labor-force participation and laments a political system that features two “highly dysfunctional” parties. He devotes a chapter to Japan, where years of stagflation, he says, may well continue because of astronomical public debt and a lack of “the sort of entrepreneurship or corporate investment” that might produce new wealth. One wishes that he had explored whether China might someday develop into a representative democracy. If it did—though at the moment the possibility seems remote—the “West” might live on in another guise, whatever its destiny in Europe and America.

Throughout the book there is a tension between openness and equality, both of which Mr. Emmott deems desirable, even essential. But in competitive modern economies, rewards seem to skew ever more toward cognitive elites. Meanwhile, open borders, though facilitating the inward migration of talent, create cultural fissures as well as communities heavily dependent on social services. Here the two Houdini cases are not much help, because Mr. Emmott attributes their ability to conduct effective reforms not to their openness but to the cohesion or trust engendered by a shared national identity.

Mr. Emmott might have returned to “Lawrence of Arabia” to describe the scene in which

Lawrence is forced to execute the man he had previously saved while an observer notes triumphantly: “It *was* written, then.” No civilization lasts forever; that much is indeed written. But its full span is surely contingent on human agency. It is in this spirit that readers should approach Mr. Emmott’s stimulating book—to grasp how much is at stake in our policies and politics and to ponder how a great civilization can be encouraged to thrive rather than decline.

*Mr. Simms is the author of “Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy From 1453 to the Present.”*

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