

My Readings 2015

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A variety of readings allow one to think, know and learn about the diversity of the world encircling us. Tolkien, an English poet, said it with his customary brilliance: "Not all who wander are lost". Here is a sample...

According to historian Fernand Braudel, time could be measured in three ways: long term, made up of lengthy, long-drawn-out changes, such as demographic movements and geography and that are determinant but nearly unperceivable; medium term in which history is portrayed in epic moments that render the rhythm perceivable and that are only understood with the passage of time; and short term, which we all can watch on the daily news.

This year I read two books that fall under the rubric of medium term. In *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution*, Timothy Tackett analyzes the mentality of those who became "terrorists" within the context of the Revolution. The fascinating thing about the book is that the author sets out to attempt to explain how it was possible that the revolutionaries and their Revolution turned out so badly. What is paradoxical, notes the author, is that those who instigated fear as an instrument of control did so because they themselves felt terrorized. Fear, Tackett says, lies at the heart of violence: fear of an invasion from outside, fear of chaos, fear of anarchy, fear of the conspiracies of their own cohorts. A fascinating history that bequeaths the sensation of how little is learned over the course of time.

Edmund Burke, an English intellectual of the XVIII century, has never been difficult to categorize, even if most place him wrongly. For some he is a liberal, for others a conservative, traditionalist or progressive. A critic of Enlightenment, he was at once secular and a defender of religion. David Bromwich, the author of *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, presents a Burke who opposes the French Revolution and later thinks himself vindicated by his judgment when the reign of terror begins. While impossible to pigeonhole in terms of a Left-Right axis such as that existing at present, Burke was, and continues to be, a formidable inspiration for world political leaders, to a good degree because, in subtle fashion, he emphasized equality when it was not a theme of political confrontation. The ironic part is that it is the Conservatives who procure him more often.

The image of North Korea that the international press reflects is that of an uncompromising dictatorship that oppresses a population composed of dehumanized creatures brainwashed by a monolithic government. Daniel Tudor and James Pearson*, two journalists who have observed that country at close range, offer a very distinct perspective. Yes, they say, North Korea is an impoverished country, but the population has access to mobile phones, many listen to the music from South Korea and it is addicted to its soap operas, to which they gain access via electronic means and DVDs from China. Corruption, overseen by the elite themselves, has made this situation possible, which was triggered by the famine of the mid-nineties, because without illegal foodstuffs the country would have collapsed. This tale brought to mind Cuba after the end of the USSR.

Thieves of State is a book by Sarah Chayes, whose thesis is that corruption generates insecurity. The author, a former U.S. Government advisor in Afghanistan, affirms that to the extent that "just a little corruption" is permitted, even a small bribe for something minor, this engenders a culture of permissiveness that sooner or later translates into the physical insecurity of the population. The kleptocracy, into which the Afghan Government installed by the U.S. evolved, says Chayes, generated a

governmental structure devoted to the enrichment of its functionaries, alienating the populace and giving rise to loyalties to the Taliban and other extremist groups. This is a polemical argument, above all due to its inherent intransigence, but not for that lacking in substance.

How does moral progress come about? This is an intriguing question above all for someone like me who is rarely given to moral readings or arguments. Kwame Anthony Appiah's book *The Honor Code* caught my attention because it addresses sensitive themes such as slavery, civil rights and democracy. Countercurrent to the predominant orthodoxy, Appiah observed that changes in perception about matters such as these are not set into motion by popular pressure or in legislative changes but rather by honor, this understood as respect for one's neighbor. The book made me recall the argument of Deidre McCloskey in *Bourgeois Dignity*: economic growth materializes when entrepreneurs are recognized and respected and their function is understood as the engine of progress. On both fronts Mexico continues to be exceedingly crippled.

Roger Moorhouse** studies the 1939 Stalin-Hitler Pact that, although lasting less than two years, had the effect of granting free rein to both dictators for them in turn to recast borders, assassinate *en masse* the civilian populations of countries that they mutually conceded to each other, ushering in the era of atrocities that characterized the subsequent years of the Second World War.

In *Mirreynato*, Ricardo Raphael not only coins a new term (a mix of my darling and government, the government of the children of the wealthy and powerful), but also literally opens Pandora's Box regarding a phenomenon obvious to all but on which no one has focused or conceptualized as the matter of transcendence that it encompasses: the poor manners and education of the children of the elite, their distance with respect to the national average and their disdain for everything happening in the country or why.

*North Korea Confidential

**The Devil's Alliance

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