

Last Words

Andrew Gamble

Andrew Gamble is Professor of Politics at the University of Sheffield. The Epilogue to his new book, The Western Ideology & Other Essays, sets two priorities.

In 2120, assuming there is still some intelligent life left on earth apart from robots, if anyone should come across these essays what might they make of them? They will certainly seem of their time. The issues that animate and preoccupy one generation are rarely those of the next. Thatcherism, neo-liberalism, capitalist crises, Brexit, devolution, European integration, and early twenty-first century culture wars will probably by then be only of interest to historians. Other things will have arisen to take their place. Some of those it is impossible to guess at, but two at least we know from our own experience –the existential dangers of nuclear weapons and climate change. Any human society in 2120 is likely to look back in amazement at the behaviour of earlier generations. We did know about the dangers of climate change and nuclear weapons yet we did very little. And very little space is devoted to either issue in these essays. To our 2120 observer that may seem extraordinary. From their vantage point these may seem the only issues worth discussing.

The politics of these two issues has been rather different. For decades the issue of nuclear weapons and the possibility of a catastrophic nuclear exchange and human extinction was present in everyone's mind. It inspired mass movements of protest and global concern. The doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD) highlighted the absurdity and fragility of human life and led to famous satires like the Kubrick film *Dr Strangelove*. The Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, the closest the world ever came during the Cold War to a nuclear exchange between the superpowers, made everyone

aware of what the stakes were. It was followed by an easing of tensions, the signing of a limited test ban treaty, and efforts to make resort to nuclear weapons a very last resort. Wars like Vietnam were fought without the use of nuclear weapons. But heightened tension returned during the second Cold War in the 1980s with the deployment of Cruise and Pershing missiles in Europe to deter a possible Soviet invasion of Western Europe. Mass protests erupted again. The danger was defused, and Reagan and Gorbachev signed significant nuclear reduction treaties which were continued into the post Soviet era, when the West paid for the decommissioning of a significant part of the Soviet arsenal. For a time the world forgot about nuclear weapons. But they were still there, and more countries were acquiring them. Nuclear proliferation remains a huge problem. The only country ever to unilaterally get rid of its nuclear stockpile has been South Africa in 1994. In the 2010s the growing rivalry between great powers started undermining the nuclear reduction treaties and threatened a new nuclear arms race. The risk has not gone away.

The environmental crisis is even graver than the nuclear crisis, because much harder to resolve. It cannot be said that we have only just become aware of the risks we are running. The Club of Rome's report *Limits to Growth* was published in 1972. Although much criticised at the time its basic message has been proved correct. It warned that if we continued on the path of business as usual the planet's ecosystem would collapse. Since then numerous reports have confirmed and refined that message, with the emphasis switching to the effects of rising temperatures on sea-level rise and on the spread of deserts, alongside the effects of pollution, species loss and an increased likelihood of pandemics. The Brundtland report *Our Common Future* in 1987 and the Earth summit at Rio in 1992 kickstarted a concerted effort to get global collaboration to address the dangers. The Kyoto protocols, signed in 1997, committed all the signatories to a substantial reduction in carbon emissions. The Paris Agreement signed in 2016 reinforced and extended those commitments. But action remains uneven and nowhere matches the scale of the challenge. Carbon emissions continue to grow and the heating of the planet continues. With the evidence now of the melting of the polar ice caps and the Siberian permafrost, and the increasing violence of forest fires and hurricanes, we appear to be approaching the tipping point which scientists have long warned about. The chances of keeping temperature increase below 2 degrees are receding. The mounting evidence that we are living through a major extinction of species caused by human activity and the pollution of the natural environment has also become compelling. Yet the political will

to act decisively to avert the catastrophe remains weak, particularly in an era of populist nationalism with leaders like Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro in open denial of the evidence. Those leaders who do not deny the evidence fail to take urgent action because other issues always seem more pressing.

A nuclear exchange could destroy the human species by making the planet uninhabitable for humans. The multiple threats to the biosphere caused by human activities are unlikely to make the human species extinct but will destroy most other species and will fundamentally change the world we inhabit. I wrote on these issues first of all in the 1970s with an essay 'Towards a sustainable state economy in the UK' co-authored with my brother, David Gamble, which was presented at the World Alternatives to Growth conference in Houston in 1977, and was awarded a Mitchell Prize. I wrote about these issues again in *Politics and Fate* (2000), in my critique of Hayek in the essay in this volume, and most recently in *Politics: Why it matters* (2019). But I accept that I did not make them the central focus of my writing. There were other things I wanted to write about more.

Francis Fukuyama was not wrong when he spoke of the end of history in 1989. An era had ended, a major historical alternative to capitalism had finally disappeared, and a new and very different era opened. But there had been ends of history and ends of ideology before, promoted by thinkers as different as Herbert Marcuse and Daniel Bell. Where Marcuse, Bell and Fukuyama were wrong was to suppose that the new eras they described would have no history of their own, no further deep and irreconcilable conflicts. The triumph of the western ideology after 1991 was short-lived. Within twenty years capitalism and democracy were in crisis again, challenged by forces from within as well as without.

The environmental crisis sheds a new light on capitalism and on the western ideology. In the last two hundred and fifty years we have created this huge engine of wealth accumulation and environmental destruction. They are two sides of the same process. There is little secret to the formula at the heart of free market capitalism. From the very beginning it has been a system which privatised gains and socialised costs. But we are risking a future in which the gains shrivel and the costs mount exorbitantly. Neo-liberal fixes such as cutting taxes and constantly paring back state spending on public services have reached their limits. Markets cannot solve the environmental crisis. They are making it worse. Technological fixes are urgently needed, but by themselves they will not be enough. Only new ways of living and new ways of cooperation within borders and across borders will offer hope. But these are the hardest things to achieve on the scale that is needed.

I have always been optimistic about the future although I concede it is increasingly hard to be. Some like Dylan contemplate a world filled only with power and greed and corruptible seed, and it is true sometimes you can see it like that. Others, like Christopher Lasch in his last writings, lapse into deep pessimism and despair. He wrote that it was difficult to understand why serious people still believed in the future. Neo-liberalism and social democracy in all their many variants are optimistic doctrines. They believe in the possibility of progress, against all the evidence. There is certainly no consistently upward progress in human affairs. Radical hopes are dashed, new dawns fade. Sometimes there are advances, at other times we start slipping back. The last decade has seen a lot of slipping back, just at the moment when the need for international cooperation to meet the challenges we face is more urgent than ever before. The situation we face is a bit like Pascal's wager on the existence of God. We can either resign ourselves to scepticism, disillusion and despair, cultivating our garden as best we can, or we can wager that a better world is possible and that our individual efforts may still count in trying to bring it about.

From The Western Ideology & Other Essays by Andrew Gamble, reprinted by permission of the author and publishers, Bristol University Press, from whom the book can be ordered at 20% discount (bristoluniversitypress.co.uk).

