

THE AUSTRALIAN

Keeping it together as society falls apart

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A still from video, by Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck in collaboration with Media Farzin. Source: Supplied

HOW do societies fail? Collapse can be precipitated by external invasion, but when an otherwise sound civilisation is overcome by the sheer military force of barbarians, it frequently succeeds in assimilating and converting the invaders, as the Chinese absorbed their Mongol conquerors, or the Persians civilised the Turks who ruled them for centuries.

This was even, in the very long run, the case with the Germanic barbarians who invaded the Roman Empire in the 5th century, although Europe had to endure five or so perilous centuries before emerging into the Middle Ages with a different ethnic composition and geographical balance.

The causes of this central event in Western history have preoccupied historians for centuries, but it seems clear that external invasion would not have succeeded without prior internal breakdown.

Gibbon thought the other-worldly concerns of Christianity distracted the Romans after their conversion, sapping their will to fight and eroding their belief in all the values that had sustained their power. But the decline was also manifest at every level in the failure to expend the resources needed to maintain complex infrastructure, failure to pay attention to the administration of temporal matters and the failure of education and training that resulted in a rapid loss of technical expertise in everything from engineering to art.

At the heart of all these problems is the loss of morale, the ebbing of belief in the values of the society. Constantine Cavafy, the 20th-century Greek poet from Alexandria, articulated the terminal phase of this condition in his poem *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1904): the leading citizens of the city are resigned to defeat; they wait for the inevitable entry of the enemy into their city. We feel the pathos of their situation. But then no one comes, and we realise that their situation is more pitiful and more contemptible than we had imagined: they secretly long for the barbarians to arrive and put an end to their limbo.

There are interesting analogies with the mood of contemporary Western society. We have not realistically had to worry about invasion from any non-European society for two or three centuries, although in the past century we managed to create our own intra-Western disasters, and then lived under the shadow of the Cold War.

Since detente with the Russians and then the collapse of the communist system, we have discovered new threats and found new opponents. We have managed to work ourselves into a state of what has recently been described as panic over threats as different as Islamic terrorism, the invasion of asylum-seekers and global warming - which is not to say that these problems are not real but that panic is a mode of mass consciousness in the media age.

Throughout the decades since the war, meanwhile, intellectuals in the West have done their best to undermine public morale. Eager to collaborate with the complaints of minority interest groups, they have joined in with their own acts of contrition and propagated a sense of guilt and anxiety about the values of Western civilisation in general. Again, this is not to say there were not wrongs that needed to be acknowledged and things that needed to be set right, but the systematic practice of breast-beating is a form of moral self-indulgence with deleterious consequences for public life.

Perhaps one reason for the shrill self-hatred of the intellectuals was their own feeling of irrelevance in a culture increasingly dominated by the commercial media, with its relentless messages of amnesia, materialism and self-gratification.

The result has been a double attack on the ethos of the West, from a commercial world concerned with nothing but consumerism, and from an intellectual class bent on undermining all forms of cultural authority, without understanding that authority is ultimately the only bulwark against power. Postmodernism, which particularly attacked cultural authority and perversely held up the kitsch products of commercial culture as equivalent to the expressions of high culture, represented a nadir in this respect.

For most of the postwar period, the Soviet Union and its communist social model represented the principal alternative to the West. Western intellectuals were frequently drawn to Russia as an alternative to the crasser aspects of modern capitalist society, but they were culpable in turning a blind eye to the ugly face of totalitarianism, which was evident even before the war and became unmistakable after the Hungarian uprising of 1956. The Berlin Wall, built in 1961, was a shameful admission of failure; the Prague Spring and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 were the beginning of the end, while the May 1968 events in Paris had hollowed out, as far as Western intellectuals were concerned, what was left of communist credibility; but it was still another two decades before the wall came down and the communist system evaporated.

The collapse of communism in East Germany is part of the subject of *Everything Falls Apart* at Artspace, dealt with in a pair of thoughtfully edited short films by Phil Collins. The longer of these includes black-and-white propaganda footage from East Germany in which a teacher demonstrates to his pupils that the workers of West Germany, for all their affluence, are still exploited. I recall passing through East Berlin before the wall came down and noticing that the railway station bookshop was well furnished with pamphlets explaining why the collapse of Western economies was imminent.

This clip is followed by an interview with a woman who had grown up in this world and had finished her studies just before the wall came down. She speaks of adapting without too much difficulty to the free market economy (which, as it happens, she had studied for her dissertation), but being left with a sense of emptiness in a society that seemed to value wealth and consumption above all. She also claims that her education in Marxism has provided her with an intellectual structure that remains valuable. A second, older woman then follows, speaking of her youth as an athlete in the East German Olympic team; she describes her confusion after the wall came down and how, oddly enough, she ended up running a dating agency. One is left with the impression that her background, in contrast to the previous case, has not left her with a sense of meaning or structure and that she is rather disoriented in the world of consumerism.

In the second film, we meet the first woman again, this time lecturing on Marxist economics to a group of contemporary students who have grown up in an entirely different world. They have no idea of the Marxist theory of the commodity, for example: she illustrates it by showing that an apple grown in her own garden for her own consumption is not a commodity (ware), whereas a second is, because it was bought from a grocer and grown for the market. She goes on to explain that surplus value (mehrwert) is the extra value created beyond the amortisation of capital, the cost of raw materials and the wages of the worker, but they remain unconvinced that the appropriation of this extra value by the capitalist constitutes exploitation.

The film cuts from the lecture to shots of the removal of a Soviet-period statue of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, but the real pathos lies in the delicate balance that is maintained between the lecturer's vestigial idealism and the sense that the theories she is explaining belong to a world that is remote from the experience of her audience.

A very different world, a different approach and a different audience are all implied by the other main film work in the exhibition. This is a collage of television discussions from an early American current affairs program called The Longines Chronoscope. The exchanges that have been selected are mostly from 1951, and relate to the situation in Iran soon after the nationalisation of the oil industry by Mohammad Mosaddegh, as prime minister under the young shah, and before the 1953 coup in which Mosaddegh was arrested with the help of British and American secret services.

The discussion is frank and open, pragmatic, canvassing various points of view and considering various courses of action; experts are asked to give their advice, they are questioned intelligently and they offer divergent opinions. The whole debate is held in public and is addressed to an audience of any concerned citizens who may wish to follow the broadcast. In all of these respects it contrasts with the regime of information in the Soviet world, where decisions are taken behind closed doors and decisions, in the form of unanimous verdicts, reach the public only as official pronouncements of the state.

On the other hand, one can also appreciate some of the inherent problems in the way that policy discussions, in a modern democratic society, are shaped by their presentation through the media. At the most obvious level, it is clear that the experts invited to take part, while representing a range of views, are not fundamentally at odds about the strategic objectives to be pursued. More subtly, and perhaps more insidiously, policy that should be considered deeply and carefully tends to be reduced to the well-turned phrase or the plausible formula. Such has always been a danger of democracies, but the premium on television time and the narrow attention span of a public stupefied by the mass media have conspired to reduce politics today to the obtuse level of the sound bite.

If this video pertains to the exhibition's theme, it is as representing the potential corruption of democracy in the mass media environment. More recently, we have experienced things falling apart in the fabric of the globalised economy. One of the consequences of the crisis that has clearly not yet run its course has been the spontaneous outbreak of anger expressed in the Occupy Wall Street movement - then inevitably copied elsewhere - and images from the original campaign are displayed on a series of video screens.

However justified the outrage at the greed, self-interest and short-sightedness that led us into the global financial crisis, the Occupy movement is naively misguided in its assumption that this kind of problem can be dealt with by demonstrations and people power. Wall Street is not an Arab dictator; it is something much more elusive than that. The real problem is a state of mind that cannot be changed by protest, but only by the kind of leadership that seems to be in short supply around the world.

Meanwhile, Sarah Goffman's set of neatly inscribed cardboard sheets with protest slogans, entitled Occupy Sydney, inevitably recalls the word pieces of Colin McCahon and imitators such as Robert MacPherson, to the extent that their ostensible meaning - of doubtful relevance and impact in an art gallery in any case - is swallowed up by self-referentiality.

Everything Falls Apart
Artspace, Sydney, to August 5