

BOOKS RECOMMENDED BY ETHOS

Michiko Kakutani, *The Great Wave: The Era of Radical Disruption and the Rise of the Outsider*, New York: Crown, 2024, EPUB.

Reproduced on the cover of Kakutani's new book, Katsushika Hokusai's *Great Wave off Kanagawa*, an image showing three tiny fishing boats about to be surged by a huge wave, embodies, as the author expounds, "the feelings of dread and hope that come with swift, unpredictable change" (Introduction). The emotions grasped by the Japanese master in his famous wooden block print are characteristic, according to Kakutani, of a foreboding time in which a sense of imminent change prevails. Undefined as it is, the change will nevertheless be tantamount to shaking the foundations of culture conceived as both a conceptual universe and a lifestyle. Kakutani, a literary critic—but also the author of *The Death of Truth*, where she spoke against the demise of objective truth in public life—believes that a current wave of nature and history combined will forever change not only the condition of humanity as such, but also everything we consider as familiar and safe: "The great wave of change breaking over today's world is sweeping away old certainties and assumptions and creating an inflection point of both opportunity and danger" (Introduction). The marks of the current times are "volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity," continues Kakutani and adds that the reality in which we live, the third decade of the third millennium, is "more unpredictable ... than the bipolar one of the Cold War era." It is already at this point that the reader, in particular one who actually experienced the Cold War era from behind the Iron Curtain, begins to wonder: Yes, it is true that COVID and what was going around the pandemic in the world killed millions of people, yes it is true that there has been a war raging in Ukraine after Russia invaded it over two years ago, that there are inequalities of income among people, that the political parties do not speak in unison, and that the technological developments, in particular those responsible for the ubiquity of artificial intelligence, may turn out harmful if left totally uncontrolled, but how can one even try to compare the two periods in history? More than that, calling the world of the Cold War era "bipolar" is a grave oversimplification of a complex issue: the communist totalitarianism in Central and Eastern Europe was by no means a natural product of the social and political evolution of the nations living there, but it was imposed on them as part of the agreements made

at the Yalta Conference in 1945 (also called the Western betrayal), which left that part of the world in the Soviet zone of influence. A reader who, sadly, did experience life in an undemocratic system and knows what it actually means not to have the freedom of speech will also be surprised to read that “democracy is under threat in the United States, where Donald Trump and his Republican enablers are undermining trust in our electoral system and the rule of law” (Introduction). Equally surprising are mentions of Victor Orbán as an autocratic and right-wing populist who is also a racist, because he disapproves of illegal mass immigration into Hungary of individuals from non-European cultures. In the nine chapters and the epilogue that follow, Kakutani continues her argument, comparing the present condition of the world to that of the one immediately before the Second World War (but also to that of the late medieval period and of the Gilded Age, respectively), non-leftist political powers to fascists and non-leftist ideas to extremism. Her point of reference is the views of Antonio Gramsci, but she also wants to see the current changes in the world in the light of Thomas S. Kuhn’s concept of a paradigm shift. Many parallels between our contemporary reality and events from the cultural past of Europe and America are made by the author, yet few of them, if any, explained. We read, for instance, “This systemic racism persists to this day, as MAGA [Make America Great Again] Republicans try to roll back the progress made in civil rights, and the Supreme Court—with 6–3 conservative supermajority—undermines affirmative action and LGBT+ rights, in addition to eliminating the constitutional right to abortion and narrowing the reach of key environmental regulations” (Chapter 1, “A Hinge Moment”). There is no further explanation. We do not get to know how “Republicans try to roll back the progress made in civil rights,” why there should be a liberal rather than conservative majority in the Supreme Court, what elements of the affirmative action the author has in mind and how affirmative action relates to equality and justice, or why the right to abortion should be constitutional rather than regulated by the states. Non-American readers of the book would be most interested to find out such details. Neither do we learn what “the key environmental regulations” are and how they impact everyday life in America.

Various political phenomena observable in countries historically or (and) geographically distant from the USA of today are considered by Kakutani as manifesting similar (mostly non-leftist) tendencies, even though it is obvious, even to a reader who is not a political scholar, that you cannot simply juxtapose what is going on in the USA, in Hungary, in Germany or in Afghanistan and draw similarities. Indeed, there are a lot of “big words” in the book, but very little (if any) justification for them. For instance, Kakutani writes about “escalating resentment of globalism and European Union policies, which has led to a wave of growing nationalism and anti-immigrant hate.” Again, there is no going into detail: we do not learn why globalism is better than national cultures, in particular when the nations in question have their own histories and have existed for over a millennium. What kind of “nationalism” does Kakutani have in mind? Advocating ethnic cleansings or perhaps attachment to the intellectual and linguistic traditions? What does she mean by “anti-immigrant hate”? Do Europeans wish to persecute immigrants, or do they express concerns for their

own safety and are afraid of the prospect of a rising crime-rate? An American reader who is not familiar with European politics will not find answers to such questions in the book.

Neither does Kakutani stay away from disparaging epithets which express her negative opinion of certain public figures. For instance, Trump is described as a “nihilistic leader,” a “twice-impeached, four-times-indicted pathological liar,” and a “would-be autocrat” (Chapter 1) and Milton Friedman, after all a Nobel laureate in Economic Sciences, is referred to simply as the “conservative monetary policy guru” (Chapter 1). No evidence of Trump’s alleged nihilism is brought up, and no criticism of Friedman’s views is offered. Interestingly, Kakutani underestimates the fact that the inherent weakness of democracy is simultaneously its power: regardless of his legal situation, or even his morals, a politician is never deprived of his civil rights and can run in the election.

Against her description of the political side of the changing world of today, Kakutani offers her insights into the essence of modern culture, which, to a large extent, is created by outsiders, enabled in their role by open access to broadband and digital technologies, in particular to smartphones and social media. Modern day technological revolution resembles that introduced by the invention of the printing press, she holds, the difference being, however, that while print fosters critical thinking, mere proliferation of data suspends it. The parts of the book focused on an analysis of the transformation of today’s culture are probably most engaging, and yet they also point to the rootedness of culture in politics, and in particular to the need for identity politics.

Why do we recommend Kakutani’s book? The reason is that it offers an excellent instance of a post-true narrative and, as such, should be given attention in a volume focused on this subject. The author openly favors a chosen political option (call it leftist, democrat or liberal) which she takes for granted, and it is from this vantage point that she analyzes various phenomena occurring in the world, be it the one immediately around her or one geographically or historically distant. It is clear to her readers that her views, also her unconcealed negative opinions about certain personalities or social phenomena, express her emotions and her personal beliefs, which, as such, do not need any grounding in facts or any argumentation. From the philosophical point of view, a post-true narrative is difficult to argue with, since serious arguments involve putting forward the premises accepted by each of the parties involved, and truly philosophical debates are precisely ones on the presumptions of the discussed views rather than on the conclusions that follow from them.

If one nevertheless wished to enter such a debate with Kakutani, it might be one about values. While criticizing those who voted for Trump, she writes, in the first chapter of her book, that they “felt marginalized by changing cultural values” among others. The question comes up of what “cultural values” are and how they are different from the values which are studied by moral philosophy. For instance, is it the matter of a “cultural” or a moral value whether we approve or disapprove of late-in-pregnancy abortions? Are “cultural” values relative? Are all values “cultural”? Does it follow then that all values are relative? But if so, such is also the set of values promoted by Kakutani in *The Great Wave*. Probably the most intriguing fact about a debate with a post-true narrative is

that its outcome may be much more surprising than in the case of a debate whose participants have accepted the prerequisites of rationality.

The Great Wave is certainly worth reading by anyone interested in the workings of post-truth in today's world, and in the case of its Polish readers, it might be also helpful in a better understanding of the political discourse continued in this country.

Ironically, the great wave depicted by Hokusai and appealing to us from the book's cover might be seen as a surge of post-truth which puts today's world on the brink of disaster.

D.Ch.