

Continuer l'histoire

by Hubert Védrine, Fayard, 2008, 200 pp.

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Hubert Védrine is no ideologue. He never has been and *Continuer l'histoire* confirms it. [1] As both an intellectual and a politician, he has staunchly stuck to realism. An outsider in the French Socialist party, which he may have joined in order to follow Former President François Mitterrand, whom he served under as special advisor, Védrine later became French Foreign Minister when left-wing Prime Minister Lionel Jospin cohabited with right-wing President Jacques Chirac.

Védrine remains famous for coining the term 'hyperpower' to describe the United States. It has typically been interpreted as a criticism of America, and Védrine has been a tough critic on several occasions. But it was really a statement of fact: in 1998, the United States was by far the greatest power in the world, and no other power could threaten American supremacy on the world stage. The collapse of the Soviet Union had ushered in a new world order and some scholars, such as Francis Fukuyama, Robert Kagan, and Charles Krauthammer, perceived the victory of liberalism and democracy over communism. Fukuyama wrote of 'the end of history.' Védrine was always sceptical and *Continuer l'histoire* is a summary of his thinking. The book deserves notice for Védrine may today remain the most influential politician in France when it comes to foreign affairs.

In the 1990s the West 'believed itself to be the sole master and the great organiser of the post-Cold War global world' but today it must recognise that 'it does not have the monopoly of History anymore' (p. 177). [2] President George H. W. Bush and President William J. Clinton, he thinks, were leading the United States in the right direction. The elder Bush's administration endorsed a sober realism, 'with no excessive arrogance or particular proselytising or spirit of conquest' (p. 14); America was the reluctant sheriff of the world, becoming a 'hyperpower' during the Clinton administrations.'

However, two events led to the fall. First, the Republicans won the 1994 congressional elections. Védrine has no conciliatory word for the state of the GOP at that time: the Republican Party had turned into a 'reactionary' party (p. 16). The return of the Republicans in Congress paved the way for the election of George

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W. Bush and the revival of ‘a tradition of democratic messianism’ (p. 19). Second, a variety of actors developed sets of universal principles that were overzealously optimistic in their pursuit of the unlimited spread of liberty, equality and tolerance. Védrine is vituperative about the movements that singled out *Realpolitik* as an inadequate tool in foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. He recalls a discussion he had with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright when he said: ‘Democracy is not instant coffee!’ (p. 27). He stresses that it is crucial not to confuse ‘internal democratisation through the implementation of the adequate potential that lies within each society and the imposition of democracy from outside’ (p.28). However, he fails to define a solution when freedoms are squashed by a regime. Liberal and democratic movements may flourish in a country where the government accepts some contradicting voices – often the result of foreign pressures – but a regime that tightly controls its society will never allow any opposition to raise. Védrine ends his tirade on a very harsh note against what he sees as the naïve movements of the 1990s: ‘self-righteous, well-intentioned, hegemonic, paternalist and overconfident, stuffed with irrationalism and blurred with “irrealpolitik” Western universalism ... [they] stumbled upon the realities’ (p. 32).

A new approach is needed to deal with the four fractures of today’s world. First, the opposition between the North and the South is now irrelevant compared to the gap between the rich and the poor. The latter has worsened because of the measures imposed by the international financial organisations imbued with the Washington consensus. This situation has become exacerbated as the disconnection between the real economy and the financial sphere widened. Second, climate change threatens the very viability of some societies that lack of adequate healthcare systems, drinking water, forests, and so on. Third, every year, three percent of the world population is forced to migrate because of conflicts and natural disasters. Fourth, a clash of civilisations is not out of the question, ‘even if this statement frightens and is rejected’ (p. 44).

The world is changing but the West is not, Védrine argues. The West must understand these new realities and forsake the zeal that has so often characterised its actions since the end of the Cold War. Instead, Western countries should simply ‘formulate their interests’ and then ‘negotiate them accordingly’ at the UN, and in all the other organisations, with the new emerging powers and the rest of the actors in the multilateral system.’ (p. 55) He sketches what a ‘genuine foreign policy’ would look like (something that was oddly absent in the first edition): ‘Foreign policy has become irrelevant since its only purpose is now to congratulate friends

and allies, and it is not allowed to deal with the others, the opponents, the pariahs, or the rogues.' (p. 163).

While it is now fashionable to question the nation state [3] Védérine believes its last hurrah is not in the offing. Indeed, the world 'suffers from the powerlessness of the states [rather] than their excess of power' (p. 73). Nation-states lie at the heart of the comprehensive vision Védérine lays out. Without them multilateralism cannot emerge, markets cannot flourish, and international organisations become empty bodies. Today, supranational entities acting as 'a world government' are overstressing their mandate by attempting to regulate social, societal and economic life in sovereign countries. Védérine favours a reform of the U.N. Security Council by the extension of permanent membership to new countries, such as Japan, India, Germany, and, on a rotating basis, one country from Latin America, one from Africa, and one from the Arab world. He is undecided about the veto, unsure whether to offer an unconditional veto to each member or to set up a complex system in which, for instance, each member would have a limited number of vetoes. 'All those reforms,' he argues, 'would tend to bolster a more legitimate and efficient multilateral system... But it is essential to restlessly dispel any ambiguity: these organisations cannot and must not – unless explicitly urged – substitute for their member-states' governments.' (pp. 83-5)

And what of the EU? Védérine endorses a phrase suggested by the French former President of the EU Commission, Jacques Delors, to describe Europe: 'an unidentified political object' (*'un objet politique non identifié'*). But Védérine has a grand project for the EU. He wants it to become a major influential actor in the world and believes the first step is to definitely draw its boundaries. He does not support Turkish membership to the EU, arguing it would be demeaning for Turkey to have its hopes raised, and to embark on a wide range of reforms to live up to the EU's standards, with only a 'no' waiting at the end of the line. Instead, Turkey and the EU should share a privileged partnership. Second, Europe needs to clarify the distribution of power within the Union. It acts as if it is 'a constituted power' (p. 125), but it remains difficult to define what 'Europe' refers to. A first step in the right direction would be the implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon. And these steps are needed to realise a larger vision of Europe as a counterweight to the US.

Suppose the Europeans consider themselves as something else than a commercial, democratic, and philanthropic entity; that they define together a line other than declaratory, compassionate or charitable on the global major

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issues, in other words, a true foreign policy: what would be the consequences? The United States would not be able to define alone the position of the Western world, nor would it be able to impose all its decisions on its allies. ... The world would obviously gain a lot if the Europeans were to make Europe one of the poles in the multipolar world. (pp. 133-4)

To some extent, the vision Védrine cherishes is slowly coming into place, but there is an aspect he dropped in the revised version. Previously, he was in favour of giving back more powers to the states explaining that it would force them to take more responsibilities for their actions. 'Brussels' has become a glib scapegoat for any domestic problem. It is rather intriguing that he left this interesting solution out.

In the first edition, the chapter on France was a long litany of how France has become a passive actor trying to hang onto the past. In the revised edition, the author still laments the loss of French influence in the world, but the new chapter is designed for foreign audiences and in trying to summarise recent events in France Védrine sometimes loses the focus of the book. The world reflects on France, and 'has a tendency to judge her inadequate,' he writes (p. 139). Védrine has long been an advocate of a renewal of French power, suggesting that all the elements to exist – influence in international organisations, prestigious history, profitable corporations – except one: the French people lack the will to adapt to globalisation. This view may not be a surprise to many outside France, but there are only a handful of French politicians that would take the same line, especially on the Left. It is rare to find a politician willing to criticise the Europeans, not to mention the French, for living in a 'post-tragic world,' or to refer to Robert Kagan's concept of Europe as 'Venus' (p. 24). While many in Europe want to embrace Joseph Nye's idea of 'soft power,' Védrine reminds us that 'soft power' does not come without 'hard power.'

To be more critical, Védrine does not analyse why some non-Western countries are turning into great powers or what the implications of this shift are. Moreover, he never calls for the reform of troubling non-democratic policies in those emerging powers. 'The rise of the rest,' as Fareed Zakaria puts it, will be fateful for the West, but Védrine never really addresses this issue, assuming that if 'the rest' grow in power, it will necessarily disadvantage 'the West.' He fails to mention the BRICs, let alone explore the implications of their growing influence. India may yet face an earth-shattering challenge when the tens of millions of Muslim people who are not yet educated get an education and realise that the country still largely relies on an unfair distribution of wealth and an unequal system of freedoms. China may evolve

into the leading economic power in the world, but only if the global economy does not suffer a grave crisis. Its economy is still fragile and mostly untested to global economic downward spirals. *Continuer l'histoire* is a blunt and provocative plea to Europe and the West in general. But it has curiously little to say to, or about, the rest of the world.

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References

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Notes

- [1] *History Strikes Back: How States, Nations, and Conflicts Are Shaping the 21st Century* is the title of the English version recently published by the Brookings Institution Press.
- [2] All the translations are my own.
- [3] See Rosecrance 1999, pp. 3-26; Guehenno 1995, pp. 1-18; Bobbitt 2002.