

Homage to Veneto

There is no status quo in politics. Things really do fall apart, to quote the overly quoted Yeats. For those of us born after WWII, the seven decades of Pax Europa and subsequent founding of the European Union seemed like a permanent state and a symbol of progress and hope for human solidarity. History, it turns out, really is a cyclical story, where collective human action occasionally succeeds but is often defeated by the other deeper and stronger human impulses: tribalism and greed.

The United States has not been so disunited since 1865. The United Kingdom will not remain united for long (nor, possibly, a kingdom). The European Union, after many expansive years of plenty, is now receding and fighting a losing battle against internal enemies of unity. Despite barbarians outside the gates, the fall of any empire always comes from internal pressure within its borders. In Europe these days, that pressure takes the form of nationalist political parties.

In Spain, the autonomous region of Catalonia held an illegal referendum on independence on 1 October, 2017. In Italy, the regions of Lombardy and Veneto are holding a legal referendum on autonomy on 22 October, 2017. It seems that the first step to independence is greater autonomy, and that is what Lega Nord, the dominant political party in the north of Italy, has been agitating for ever since it was founded in 1991. Though I am not Italian, I have lived in the Veneto region for over 10 years, and this is where I will now focus.

Liga Veneta (that strange L is supposed to represent elision in the local dialect, though I've never heard this elided L at the beginning of a word) is a political party allied with the Lega Nord, both of which ultimately want to secede from the Republic of Italy to form a new nation called Padania. Why would they want to do this? Obviously it's all about the

money. The north of Italy is much wealthier than the south, and supporters of the Lega Nord want to keep all that money for themselves. The central policy platform of the Lega Nord is greater fiscal autonomy and eventual secession. It is a populist right-wing party, strongly opposed to immigration and the EU, allied with like-minded parties in other countries such as the French FN and the Dutch PVV. Just as with these other parties, the Lega Nord are not as popular as they like to appear, and they have never been able to translate their separatist sound and fury into electoral success.

In the 2013 federal elections, they took about 4% of the national popular vote. In the 2014 European Parliament elections, they took about 6%. Even in their regional strongholds of Lombardy and Veneto, they only took 12% and 10% respectively. They have had a bit more success in the regional elections, winning the governorship for both regions, including a record-high 40% in Veneto in 2015. Despite this, the Lega Nord has never won a majority of votes even in its own territory. Part of that is due to the fractious nature of Italian politics and the huge number of political parties appearing on the ballot (I counted over 100 different party "lists" at one point). Maybe a larger part of it is that northern secession is just not as popular as the Lega Nord wants it to be.



Sign advertising the referendum next to my town's elementary school. It shows the Italian flag torn in half with the intact Venetian flag flying away, an [illegal](#) image according to Italian law.


I am writing this one week before the referendum on autonomy, so the results are still in doubt. It seems very probable that the "Yes" vote will win in a landslide, though I'm less sure if there will be a quorum. This is not an election between many different political parties and platforms, but merely a single-issue emotional appeal to the citizens of Lombardy and Veneto to "take control of their history and their future". A few days ago, I noticed an elderly Italian man stuffing papers in my mailbox, going from house to house on foot doing the same throughout my small town. I thought it was probably a fundraiser for a church event or advertising for the town's upcoming chestnut festival. Almost everyday mailboxes are stuffed with brochures for supermarkets or other local businesses, but 100% of the time these are distributed by African or Asian immigrants (who probably do this work 12 hours a day for a pittance, all so that those reams of wasted paper can go straight to the bin), not by retirees. When I opened the box, I found a well-made, colorful, 25-page pamphlet supporting the "Yes" vote, full of statistics and other propaganda.



The pamphlet enjoins "The Venetian People" to "rewrite its history" and finishes with the slogan, in Venetian dialect, "Vote Now, or Shut Up Forever." Catchy. I'm doubtful that the individual tax burden will relent if Veneto becomes autonomous. In fact, the whole referendum seems like a victory for propaganda rather than actual change to the status quo. Unlike the illegal Catalonia independence vote, the Lombardy and Veneto referendum for autonomy is based around a weakly worded question, and even the results would have to be voted on for approval by the full Italian Parliament afterwards. The question appearing on the ballot is: "Do you want the Veneto Region to be given other particular forms and conditions of Autonomy?" Not very specific, to say the least.

Here are the highlights from the pamphlet, all resembling mytho-historical propaganda rather than facts, and none of which seem remotely relevant to the current political or economic situation in Italy:

- the Veneto civilization is older than the Romans, with foundations in the 13th century B.C., fighting with the Trojans against the Greeks (shouldn't need much commentary, but my Master's Degree in Ancient Greek and Roman History gives me reason to be skeptical of this one)
- the @ symbol was invented by Venetian merchants for commercial reasons (impressive!)
- Federico Faggin, a scientist from Vicenza, invented the world's first microprocessor (Faggin was actually my neighbor in one of the apartments I used to rent in Vicenza overlooking the magnificent Basilica Palladiana; I'm doubtful that he supports the referendum despite being named—he has lived mostly in America for the last 50 years, has American citizenship, and received a medal from President Obama in 2009)
- the American Constitution was inspired by the laws of the Venetian Republic, and Benjamin Franklin entertained himself in Venice for almost a year (almost as impressive as the @ symbol!)
- the Venetian Republic lasted 1100 years (I'll concede historical accuracy here, even if "Republic", just like the earlier Roman variety, meant something more like "oligarchy", and by the time Napoleon put an end to it the "Serenissima" had been in decline for two centuries)
- in October 1866 the Veneto became Italian because of a fraudulent referendum, which then caused widespread hunger and forced the people to emigrate to all parts of the world (tendentious and overly simplified; after the Austro-Prussian war, Veneto was passed from Austria to France, who passed it directly to the new Kingdom of Italy according to prior agreements; Italy was unified

- by force and fortune, not by popular votes)
- the first state to abolish slavery was the Venetian Republic in the 16th century (difficult to confirm; cherry-picking from a long and complex history)
 - Elena Cornaro, a 17th-century philosopher, was the first woman in the world to receive an academic degree (no qualms with this one; too bad most Venetians or humans today are not more like the highly intelligent philosopher herself)
 - the bells ring at noon to celebrate the Venetian victory over the Turks at the 1571 Battle of Lepanto, which stopped the Muslim advance into Christian Europe (the Venetians single-handedly won the victory with only a bit of help from the Kingdom of Spain, Naples, Sicily, Papal States, Genoa, Tuscany, and a few other friends like England and the Holy Roman Empire; also, this plays into the current Islamophobic narrative of European right-wing parties such as the Lega Nord)
 -  the Venetian flag is the only flag in the world with the word “peace” (the actual Latin translation says “Peace to you Mark, my evangelist”; seems similar to when Muslims say “peace be upon him” when they name Muhammed; we could also add that this flag is the only one in the world with a flying lion—impressive!)
 - Veneto has the highest number of volunteers in Italy (can’t find any source data on this; even if accurate it probably counts food-selling volunteers at the ubiquitous town feasts more than anything else)

Yes, that was fun to deconstruct, but propaganda and manipulative emotional appeal for political gain is something that I am always happy to fight against (even if I will probably always be on the losing side). The rest of the pamphlet is a series of tables and cherry-picked statistics basically stating the same thing over and over: that Veneto contributes more money to the federal government than it receives in public services. What a terrible tragedy! A

relatively rich region subsidizes other poorer regions in a modern nation-state. It would appear that there is no poverty whatsoever in Veneto, and all its problems comes from the federal government (or immigrants!). This is a widespread opinion among well-off citizens in every developed country; it is the mentality of self-interest over altruism; tribalism over human solidarity.

The last part of the pamphlet takes much time and care to compare Veneto with the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, also known as Alto-Adige or Südtirol, the German-speaking, formerly Austrian region ceded to Italy after World War One. One table shows how Alto-Adige keeps 50% of tax revenue for local administration while Veneto keeps only 24%. One point of emphasis is also that education is completely managed locally in Alto-Adige while in Veneto the federal government manages 70% of the budget. There is no reason given for why this is good for Alto-Adige or bad for Veneto. One obvious point is that Alto-Adige is 100% German-speaking and has always been awarded special autonomous status because of its history and culture (along with four other Italian regions with similar situations: Sicily, Sardinia, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and Val d'Aosta). I have spent a lot of time in schools across Veneto and I can tell you that a huge number of teachers come from the south of Italy (Veneto has a relatively low educational level and the Southern regions are relatively high, probably because there is no work in the South so more people attend university and get advanced degrees). Many residents of Veneto in general also have roots in other parts of Italy or other countries, especially Romania, Morocco, Moldova, and Albania, since there is more work to be found in here.

One of the main platforms of the Lega Nord and Liga Veneta is xenophobic anti-immigration, but given the history of Italian emigration (including huge numbers of Venetians, who mostly fled to Brazil, Argentina, and Australia) it seems myopic and hypocritical to use immigration as a rallying cry. There are

plenty of racists in Italy, just like every other country in the world, and the presence of more dark-skinned people on their streets and in their schools and companies has scared the natives. This is unfortunately a universal trait in humans that can only be expunged with education, travel, empathy, and an open mind, many of which are sorely lacking in Italy, Europe, America, and the World.

My main question regarding autonomy, secession, and independence is this: why is a smaller political unit necessarily better than a larger one? It seems like flawed logic to me that any given region with mostly arbitrary borders would automatically and by definition be better at governance than a nation-state with mostly arbitrary borders. Why not autonomy or independence for every province, every city, town, village, and house? On the other hand, why isn't every world region divided into European Union-like entities that together would make up a single world government? The contingencies and accidents of history have determined our present political circumstances. If Princip's pistol had misfired, if Marshal Ney had taken Quatre Bras earlier, if Ali Pasha hadn't missed his coffee before Lepanto, if Hektor hadn't killed Patroklos outside the gates of Troy, history might have turned out differently and there might have been no Veneto, no Italy, and no EU.



Superstrada Pedemontana
Veneta

The point is that history and culture are not the same thing as governance. Appealing to history and culture in the name of more fiscal autonomy is incoherent. I see no evidence that an autonomous or independent Veneto government would be any more efficient or less corrupt than the obviously inefficient and corrupt Italian government. On the other hand, I need only to mention Veneto President Luca Zaia's project of a new highway

called the Superstrada Pedemontana Veneta to make the opposite argument. It is an unnecessary highway, that no one asked for, being built across the previously beautiful foothills south of Monte Grappa and the Asiago plateau. It has created a hellscape of endless trucks, dust, and cement where once all you could see were cherry orchards and castles. It is so enormously behind schedule and over budget that it may never be completed. If so, it will be financed by increased taxes on local residents, followed by the additional slap in the face of making it a toll road for the same residents. A recent collapsed tunnel under the hills near my town is the latest construction setback for this environmental and economic disaster. This, along with policies favorable to corrupt, Mafia-driven cementification, enormous [banking scandals](#) involving the Popular Bank of Vicenza and Veneto Bank, and the super expensive and useless [MOSE](#) flood prevention project surrounding Venice, proves that regional government is no more efficient, capable, or trustworthy than federal government.

Absent oppression or persecution, I see no justification for nationalistic separatist movements. That is why the propagandists of these campaigns, including the Brexiteers, rely on disinformation as well as natural human greed and tribalistic tendencies. There is a difference between Kurdish or South Sudanese independence, and that of Catalonia, Scotland, Lombardy, or Veneto. There is nothing wrong with being a proud patriot or even being appreciative of one's history and culture; there is something wrong with being a nationalist who bends and misuses that history to suit exclusivistic political aims. The best thing to do is to help one's country and everyone in it to succeed, rather than retreating into a fantasy world of mythical history and no taxes. What's needed in Italy, Europe, and the whole world is not more division and greed, but more openness, activism, and human solidarity.

In Defense of Writing Modern Epic

At some point during my education, I developed a powerful sense of skepticism toward the Epic. Every literary or cinematic attempt to tell the story of a nation on behalf of the nation ended up oversimplifying distinctions, privileged the powerful over the weak, and trivialized or marginalized individual stories outside the mainstream. I don't remember whether it was high school or college when this idea metastasized in my consciousness as a kind of intellectual given, but somewhere between having to read Virgil's *Aeneid* and watching *Saving Private Ryan* it occurred to me that big H History did more harm than good.

Timing may have had something to do with it. What was probably unthinkable to someone living in, say 1870s Great Britain was much more logical to a young man in 1990s USA. After the WWII and the Cold War, it felt like stories creating national frameworks were just so much exploitative triumphalism—not worth the effort it had taken to write them.

In the years since then, I've seen the U.S. begin its first "post-modern" wars—wars without any particular meaning or significance on a political or individual level beyond whatever an individual decides to ascribe to it. The world has watched as Russia invaded Ukraine, a war that continues to this day, actively affecting millions of displaced civilians and hundreds of thousands on or near the front lines of fighting. The United Kingdom has voted itself out of Europe, while Germany and France have forged an increasingly humane and just path forward for the EU, working together. America, under Donald Trump, threatens to spin away from the rest of

the world, or maybe even spin itself apart.

If the world is stable and secure, there is more space for individual storytelling, and individual stories take on a greater significance. But as the center collapses through a combination of inattention, greed, political nihilism and pressure from the extremities, it becomes more urgent to ask the question: if individuals are owed stories, allowed privileged place as the focus of modern novels or cinematic works, should some nations (those without Epics) be allowed to develop stories in order to help justify their existence, too?

The Argument Against Modern Epic

Epic is the purest intellectual form of nationalism—a powerful piece of literary or cinematic art that, in its execution, delivers an aesthetic, emotional justification for a nation's existence. It always begins with a hero who is struggling to build something from little (or sometimes nothing). Nationhood, and nationality, begin from a position of weakness. The arc of a television series or epic poem or novel moves from weakness to strength—often through war against some specific enemy. *The Iliad* describes Greek city-states struggles against the Trojans. *The Aeneid* explains the animosity between Rome and Carthage, as well as its struggles against various other nearby Latin tribes, and the Greeks. An Epic story is therefore an imperial story, whether or not the nation in question achieves empire, or (in the case of civilizations before the modern nation-state) nationhood. Hypothetically, this is not necessarily the case—many tribal societies describe their origins in terms of celestial or supernatural birth.

Anything that founds its argument on the necessity of violent struggle against an enemy should be viewed with extreme skepticism. Violence on an individual and collective level can only be argued in the context of self-defense, and even then,

moral purists might argue that peaceful non-resistance is a *better* way of conducting one's personal and professional affairs.

Even people who support "pre-emptive strikes" still couch the necessity of attacking another country or civilization in defensive terms—Germany of The Great War, Nazi Germany of World War II, Imperial Japan's sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, George W. Bush's U.S. invasion of Iraq and Vladimir Putin's Russian invasion of Ukraine all required that a significant portion of their country viewed their attacks in defensive terms. No modern nation state wages war purely for territorial expansion—most people instinctively recoil from the idea that violence is to an individual or community's long-term advantage.

Epic and national storytelling depend on heroes and villains, in-groups and out-groups, appropriate and inappropriate behavior. They create hierarchy, and ways of describing actions that exclude certain types of behavior. They are conservative, [nativist](#), reactionary, and tend to privilege heteronormativity. They can give rise to fascism or national socialism, and taken to extremes, work to oppress individual rights.

Generation War

In 2013, Germany finally got around to making its own modern WWII mini-series. Inspired by *Band of Brothers* down to the last name of the two army protagonists (Winter), "Generation War" follows a group of typical Germans during WWII. Its original title in German translates loosely to "Our Fathers, Our Mothers." It came in for [a good deal of criticism](#) by anyone with a hand in WWII who wasn't fighting for or alongside Germany.



Germany's "Band of Brothers" is a dark anti-Epic that follows the birth of modern Germany through the struggle of those citizens who were of fighting age during WWII

When the series came out, those criticisms felt universal in a way that they don't today. While there was always something to be said for German children and grandchildren getting a say in how they remembered their dying grandparents (caveated by the requirement that they face their crimes in daylight, without flinching). The makers of *Generation War* did not avoid the worst parts of WWII. the extermination of Jewish people, the extrajudicial murders of civilians and combatants, the basis of modern German *guilt*.

They did tell the story of WWII from the German perspective. This necessarily grants viewers a feeling that the protagonists deserve to live, a chance to make decent lives for themselves after the war. From this perspective, given that Nazi Germany is defeated, *Generation War* functions as an Epic, by forging a unified identity through loss.

As already noted, when one encounters this German story from the outside, either in terms of time, or space, or identity, the story quickly becomes problematic, even offensive. I noticed that the U.S. and the U.K. were left out of the story, save throw-away lines about the U.S. having entered the war, the destruction of Germany's North African Army, and then about 150,000 Allied soldiers having landed in France. So much for my version of WWII! *Generation War* occurs almost entirely in or near Russia, on the Eastern Front. So it was for most

German soldiers, whose experience of WWII was something that involved fighting Bolsheviks and/or Central and Eastern European partisans.

Meanwhile, the war represents Germany allies very unsympathetically. The two times Ukrainians are seen or mentioned are first as savage auxiliary police who horrify the protagonists by murdering Jewish women and children, and then later as “camp guards.” But this isn’t a Ukrainian version of WWII—it’s *German*. Didn’t Germans employ many locals to carry out reprisal killing against groups the Nazis saw as undesirable? Of course.



In German and Russian versions of WWII, there’s always a savage auxiliary policeman beating helpless Jewish women and children, and that policeman is always Ukrainian

The Polish government brought a similar criticism to bear against the series. Watching *Generation War* it’s not difficult to see why—Polish partisans play a major role when they shelter a major character, who is Jewish. This is important for the purposes of the plot because the Jewish character, Viktor, must keep his identity secret from the partisans, who are *far* more overtly anti-Semitic than even the creepy SS major (there’s always a creepy SS major hunting and killing Jewish children in WWII stories). Whereas the SS major seems fairly dispassionate about the killing of Jewish people—it’s either his job, or he’s a psychopath, or both—the Poles clearly harbor a personal hatred that transcends professional duty. Were the Poles all serious anti-Semites, moreso than the Germans? Surely not, surely not in *any* imagining or remembering. Then again, their hands weren’t clean, either,

regardless of Poland's experience of the war as a victim of German and Soviet aggression.

Why Defend Modern Epic

The point of this piece is not just to maintain that Germany has the right to tell WWII (caveated, as stated earlier) from its own perspective. German filmmakers succeeded in making *Generation War* into an Epic of their defeat, dignifying the characters who reject war and punishing those that don't. More broadly, the point of this piece is to argue that we live in an era when smaller nations like Poland and Ukraine should also seek to create national Epics that tell their stories, in as expansive a way as possible.

Let's focus on Ukraine. Portions of Ukraine's history have been told by Germany, Russia, Poland, and Austria-Hungary. This isn't sufficient for Ukrainians, and leads to a dangerous sense of national inferiority. Rather than having a central story to which all citizens can look, citizens interested in identifying themselves with nations look outside Ukraine. There is enough history to furnish an epoch-spanning story about the country—yet none exists.

What would such a project look like? A Ukrainian Epic would need to accomplish the following objectives. Firstly, there should be likable (which is to say heroic) characters from different national and historical backgrounds. Jewish, Polish, German, Hungarian, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian and other groups all helped build modern Ukraine. Second, the story should be written to accomplish the difficult task of giving people from different backgrounds a place to inhabit—something to call their own. Third, the series should begin at some suitable point in pre-history—maybe with the Scyth, or the Hittites—and, over the course of progressive seasons, follow history through to the present time. One way of diminishing the effect of casting certain people as groups or villains

would be to use the *Cloud Atlas* approach. A character who is heroic as a Jewish Ukrainian resisting a Cossack pogrom in the 18th century might return as a Russian during the season that deals with WWI and the capitulation of Kiev to the Bolsheviks. As the seasons approach the present, time would condense, and people would have to be stuck into the roles that they inhabit the season before—until the final season, which would likely detail Euromaidan, and the current conflict with Russia.

All of the more dangerous elements of Epic would be difficulties that filmmakers or writer would need to overcome. But I think that it's possible to do so, to write or film a great work about and for Ukraine without relying on villainous enemies. To give Ukrainian children in the East and in the West an idea into which they can fit themselves—the idea of people loving and living under difficult conditions, in a vibrant crossroads that often finds itself in defensive wars against more powerful neighbors.

Last Week This Week: 6-26-16 (Brexit and Michael Herr)

Since the last time we conducted a wrapup, the following has occurred: NATO finished the largest joint exercises in over a decade, England voted to leave the EU, personal hero to all WBTERS (and creative non-fiction pioneer) Michael Herr passed away, and Bernie Sanders pledged to vote for Hillary Clinton, which some had feared would not be the case. For your reading edification:

Michael Carson's essay about Michael Herr, published first in 2014: <https://www.wrath-bearingtree.com/2014/02/michael-herrs->

[teenage-wasteland/](#)

Adrian Bonenberger's final dispatch from Dragoon Ride and Anaconda, the US military's slice of the joint NATO exercises—sadly pro-EU and pro-NATO (given England's decision to exit the agreement): <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/21/dragoon-ride-6-what-eastern-europeans-say-as-they-watch-the-u-s-and-german-militaries-head-toward-russia/>

Brexit: a tragic split that undermines decades of progress in erasing the national rivalries between European powers, nearly culminating in the end of the world during World War II (which was concluded with the detonation of atomic weapons). Perspective from The Economist, a magazine that has spent years vilifying the EU and deriding the Euro as a viable currency and now, now that it's really happened, seems to be feeling slightly differently about things <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21701265-how-minimise-damage-britains-senseless-self-inflicted-blow-tragic-split>

Is a simple majority a high enough bar for important decisions in democracies, such as the Brexit vote? This article argues not, especially considering that low voter turnout means that only a third or so of voters generally decide things for the whole country. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/brexit-democratic-failure-for-uk-by-kenneth-rogoff-2016-06>

As if the Brexit vote wasn't bad enough for political reasons, it also empowers the type of "leader" who think protecting the environment and addressing climate change is a waste of time. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/damian-carrington-blog/2016/jun/24/uks-out-vote-is-a-red-alert-for-the-environment>

Is the Brexit victory a good sign for Trump? Probably not. http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2016/06/embattled_whiteness_gave_us_brexit_it_won_t_give_us_president_trump.html

On Racism and Other Bigotries

Racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, homophobia, tribalism, nationalism, parochialism, xenophobia, jingoism, bigotry, intolerance, hatred. These are the topics to be discussed presently. I was inspired to write this after reading a short essay by Sartre called "Portrait of an Antisemite," and realizing that all forms of bigotry are connected and share the same pathologies and deficiencies. Firstly, the bigot appeals to emotional and passionate arguments rather than reason. The bigot is happy to confound rational interlocutors by means of either worn-out cliché, invented evidence in his favor, or, in the last case, hysterics. The bigot prefers intimidation and bullying, and uses these tools to bring his opponent down to his level. He does not accept the authority of logical consistency, and if he uses any form of logical argument at all, it is an obviously flawed one that he hopes will go unchallenged. Therefore, the bigot is typically (but not always) anti-intellectual. He reacts to challenges by resorting to hysterical or violent rhetoric, or, in the best case, merely dismissing the challenger as "one of them".

Secondly, the bigot lives in a world that is constantly defined by "us versus them" and other types of Manichean struggle. His world must be a simple one in which he is on the side of "Good," and there is always something else which

threatens his own well-being, which is "Evil" or "the Other." His world is defined negatively, by what he is not or what he is against, rather than positively, what he is for. Therefore, the bigot is often (but not always) politically conservative, and when changes happen in the world he tends to become a reactionary.

Thirdly, the bigot only exists in a specific social context. He is never alone in his beliefs. His attitude itself is always the product of social indoctrination, and often validates the bigot's special sense of belonging in his community. Sartre writes: "Antisemitism is distinguished, like all the manifestations of an irrational collective soul tending to create a conservative and esoteric France. It seems to all these feather-brains that by repeating at will that the Jew injures the country, they are performing one of those initiation rites which allows them to feel themselves a part of the centers of warmth and social energy; in this sense anti-Semitism has retained something of the human sacrifice."

The impulse to bigotry almost certainly stems from a vestige of the human tribal instinct which has survived in the development of our species. Everyone who was not a member of our immediate family or tribe was potentially, and most likely, an enemy to be avoided or killed. We are no longer in need of this ancient urge, however, and its survival attests to the strength of the instinct. The more prominent place in our modern lives of reason, science, and historical knowledge also dictates that there is no excuse for those intolerant masses of people who cling to beliefs that have long outlived any usefulness they might have once had in pre-history.

Of all the types of bigotry, anti-Semitism is one of the oldest in existence and most infamous. Its history can be dated specifically to the first two centuries of Christianity, and its roots derive completely from religious intolerance, though it has acquired over the centuries a racial aspect due to the fact that Jews did not often mingle with Gentiles and

thus kept their Semitic physical features. [Note on the word "Semitic": it derives from a root word that originally only described a broad group of languages that were based around Mesopotamia and the Arabia peninsula. Though "Semitic" is commonly used to refer only to Jews, or speakers of Hebrew, it could properly be used for anyone who speaks Arabic, Aramaic, Maltese, or diverse ancient languages such as Phoenician and Akkadian.]

The Gospels of the New Testament became gradually more anti-Jewish as they were written. Mark, the first to be written around roughly 65 CE (over 30 years after the crucifixion), took no especial notice of the role of the High Priests of the Temple, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, or any other Jewish agents as complicit in the death of Jesus (except Judas, of course); it was a Roman-led affair. By the time we get to John, written around 100 CE, the local bands of new Christians had begun to spread, and to win ever more converts among the Gentiles as well. The new religion needed to separate itself as a faith from its monotheistic progenitor, and placing blame on the Jews for the death of Jesus was an easy solution. After John, we see the earliest of the Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr and Tertullian, place emphasis on the guilt of the Jewish people as a whole for their crime of deicide. Ironically, Tertullian, who was an anti-Semite and celebrated the eternal hellfire awaiting all non-Christians, also wrote tracts arguing for religious freedom for Christians, who were being persecuted sporadically around the empire. From there, it is a long 2000-year history of intolerance towards Jews in European societies leading ultimately to the Holocaust.

Racism is the belief that a difference in the amount of the pigment melanin in his skin makes a person of particular hue incomparably superior to those with a slightly higher or lower amount of the pigment. Europeans and their descendants, having first achieved dominance over the rest of the world due (mostly) to fortunate geography that led to the strategic and

ruthless deployment of guns, germs, and steel (Jared Diamond has written a book by this title that explains convincingly the long series of causes and effects that led to Europeans dominating the world through colonial expansion and empire—I previously reviewed the book [here](#)), are the biggest abusers of the bogus “racial superiority theory” which roughly states that some “races” (namely, Europeans) are superior to others (the rest of the world, and especially other humans with darker skin) because they (Europeans) have stronger militaries. Never mind the fact that these militaries were developed over the centuries through a vicious cycle of escalating warfare amongst themselves, to which all other indigenous peoples would have rightly been unprepared and shocked upon finding themselves on the receiving end of European barbarity during the Age of Discovery. Because of this rather arbitrary course of history, we most often witness humans with white-ish skin tone being racist against other humans with darker skin tones. I must emphasize that the mental disease of racism can be found in all societies, but that it is especially common and despicable when used by those wielding power (Europeans and their descendants for the last 500 years) against those who are relatively powerless (Third World countries, and the poor and minorities in all countries).

Italy, the country in which I live, recently elected a new government; one of the appointed ministers of the majority Democratic party is Cecile Kyenga, a woman of African origins, having immigrated to Italy at a young age from Congo. She received an education in Italy, lived her life in Italy, and is obviously Italian for all practical purposes; she now serves as the Minister of Immigration, a post which would seem to fit her skills quite well. If you ask a racist, however, the only pertinent issue is her inferiority and otherness due to the higher level of melanin in her skin. Members of the Italian Parliament from the far-right Northern League party felt that it was appropriate, during a recent speech of the

Immigration Minister, to throw bananas at her and yell "Go back to Africa!". Another senior member of Parliament from the Northern League party publicly and shamelessly called Kyenga an orangutan. These were elected members of Parliament, and racists, who were elected by other racists to support their bigoted beliefs and to try to stop the immigration of people with more pigmented skin.

Closer to home for me is the case of Barack Obama. The election and re-election of America's first black president (half-black, but no one seems to care about that distinction) would have naturally made us assume that racism was waning. In some ways it was true (we elected a "black" president!) but in other ways it revealed exactly to what extent racism is alive and well. The election of Obama seems to have deeply offended racist bigots around America (I cannot imagine why). For years they had quietly been forced underground and could not openly express their racist beliefs in mixed company, but they always knew they were right since people like them – people with white-ish colored skin – were in charge of things. They muttered about the injustice of affirmative action, and howled whenever a darker skinned person was accepted for a job or in a university when there was at least one person with lighter skin who was rejected. They knew that there was something inherently superior about their relative lack of melanin. So you can imagine the shock when Obama was elected.

Obama represents, for the racist, the Great Other—a person who is so far removed from the familiar and correct world that the racist inhabits that he might as well be an alien. Never mind that he is just a moderate, centrist Democrat with a great family and biography who is almost totally inoffensive as a person. Never mind the fact that the people who oppose him as if he were the second coming of Vladimir Lenin in America are basically opposing a guy who would have been a moderate Republican a couple decades ago. I have visited America three times since Obama was elected, and one of those times I

visited the dentist. This dentist was previously unknown to me, and I went to him on the recommendation of my family due to his low prices. He and his two assistants were very friendly and loquacious elderly people with deep Southern drawls (one might even say Southern charm). When it came time for the final inspection of my teeth, the dentist, while I was unable to talk or reply due to the metal tool jammed in my mouth, proceeded to tell me in confidence that Obama was secretly a Muslim, and that of this fact he (the dentist) had never been so sure of anything in all his life. Charming.

Though they are rarely empowered to openly state their racism (progress!), the bigot can easily transfer the reasons for his distrust of Obama from one thing to another. He will not say, in company, that the amount of pigment in the president's skin makes him evil, but that is what they mean when they accuse him of being un-American, socialist, fascist, Marxist, Kenyan, and talk about "taking their country back". Back from whom? Since white people exploited black people for slave labor in the building of America, after completing the genocide of the original darker skinned native people, to the racist this is the proper relationship for all time. In America, the strongest form of racism appears as white supremacy, which was used to control the huge African slave population of the South for centuries, as well as to ensure that the lower classes of poor and disenfranchised whites never sided with the slaves against the rich upper classes.

One final note about racism and politics in America: the Southern strategy. This was a cynical strategy formulated by Republican party operatives in the time of Richard Nixon to exploit and wield the racism of the South to create a wedge between white voters and black voters, and to ultimately win elections. The strategy was used quite effectively by Ronald Reagan, who mocked black recipients of welfare aid and casually let the white racist voter know that he will not allow black people to take advantage of the system to get

ahead any longer. The Republican party continues to use the strategy today, kicking and screaming and becoming less and less coherent in their indiscriminate use of intolerance for political gain. The two elections of Obama, and the changing demographics of America, has basically doomed to failure the Southern strategy (though not racism itself). Another strategy will doubtless be formulated to pit people of different skin tones against each other, and distract them from those who truly exploit them.

Sexism, on the other hand, is the belief that a human animal of one sex is inherently, or innately, superior to one of the other sex. While there are surely some scattered examples of women who hate or look down on men as inferior, it is obvious to all that the real issue is male chauvinism, or misogyny (from the Greek "hater of women"). This is the belief that humans of the male persuasion, who are genetically predisposed to produce more of the hormone testosterone and so become physical larger and stronger, are therefore superior, more intelligent, and more fit for power than women. You see, to the sexist bigot, bigger size means both bigger intelligence and bigger right to rule the human world. It is hard to say which is more prevalent between racism and sexism, but sexism is probably more tolerated and more bound up in the structure of all except the most progressive societies. This has been the story ever since the rise of modern human civilizations around 10,000 years ago, when agriculture led to new cities, new kings, and new war gods (who overthrew the old mother goddesses). Is there any reason a women should not get paid the same amount of money as a man for doing the exact same job for the exact same amount of time? Rationally speaking, no. But to the chauvinist a woman can never be as good as a man in anything (except raising children, of course), and so she should not deserve equal pay or equal rights.

Back to Italy, my country of residence, we can see some of the worst examples of structural misogyny in the developed world,

as well as some reasons to have hope for improvement. The man who has led Italy for the largest part of the last two decades, Silvio Berlusconi, is both the richest man in Italy and the owner of a media empire. He surely has one of the most openly disrespectful attitudes towards women of any "leader" in the developed nations. He appointed female porn stars to cabinet positions, and has very effectively employed Italy's long-standing culture of chauvinism and machismo for his own purposes. Though he still controls the country's right-wing party, he was finally convicted in one of the dozen lawsuits against him (this one not for underage prostitution but for tax fraud) and will not serve again as prime minister. On the flip side, a recent election has just made the new Italian parliament the youngest ever (average age 47) and the highest female representation ever (31% – for comparison, after the recent US elections Congress now has its own highest female representation ever at "only" 18%). This part is too easy: elect more women, and things will improve!

It is no secret that religions have played a huge part in maintaining and justifying institutional sexism. We shudder to imagine the sad lot of most women born into most majority-Muslim countries. Not being able to drive, not being able to leave the house without a male relative, and husbands being legally protected against beating and raping their wives are three common features. It is difficult to even imagine a road towards political empowerment at this point, but we can hope for an quick improvement in basic education and human rights at the very least. Christianity has also celebrated the submission of wives to their husbands, and the second-class status of women in general. Thus, many Christian women have accepted their lot with resignation for millenia because it was written in the Good Book. Fortunately, the Enlightenment and the advent of secular politics in the Christian countries has led to the gradual enfranchisement and empowerment of women. We can already imagine the potential sexist resurgence that will accompany the first female American president (much

like the resurgent racism after Obama), but let us hope in any case for more women in positions of power.

Changing to another form of bigotry, homophobia is when a person hates human beings who love other human beings who happen to share the same genitalia. The homophobe is filled with fear, hate, and typically suppressed homosexuality. Religions, once again, have told people that homosexuality demands a death sentence, and there are probably not a small number of homophobes who would like to enforce such a legal code (and still do today in certain Third World countries such as Uganda and Russia). In Leviticus, there is a long list of verses specifically outlawing sex with mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, sisters and brothers in law, mothers and fathers in law, sons and daughters in law, mothers and daughters or granddaughters at the same time, women having their period, and animals, in addition to those proscribing men lying with other men (the preceding verse also warns against child sacrifice); those other things tend to get ignored and forgotten. That would require too much logical consistency for the bigot. Even so, I do not recall any of the words of Jesus condemning homosexuals – he hung out with 12 unmarried dudes! –, or for that matter women (he hung out with prostitutes!), dark-skinned people (he was a dark-skinned person!), or Jews (he was a Jew!). He did say, however, that all of the laws of the Old Testament were valid, so we should assume that he was anti-incest, anti-child sacrifice, and anti-gay. Homosexuality is a trait that can be found in at least 1000 other animal species, including all the primates (such as chimpanzees, monkeys, and humans), many other mammals, birds, and even fish. It is a product of evolution, just like higher or lower amounts of melanin or testosterone. And despite the bigoted homophobe, love always trumps hate.

Finally, let's talk about nationalism. This is the peculiar belief that the particular section of the earth's crust on which you are born is superior to every other piece of earth,

and thus it demands your lifelong loyalty. This idea is appealing to large numbers of ignorant and easily manipulated humans who, as we have seen, often need little excuse for emotional prejudice against anyone other than those who look like them or were born in close proximity to their section of earth. This idea has had great utility for governments since the advent of the modern nation states in state-sanctioned homicide and theft against people born on more distant pieces of earth. Never mind the fact that national borders are highly artificial and arbitrary, and are often the result of accidents of history if not intentional theft. Also never mind the fact that the place where you are born is completely random and outside of your control, and that the only thing we can ever control is our own actions. Those would be facts based on reason and reflection, which are things not to be found in the bigot's arsenal.

It is no wonder that nationalism has been expertly and cynically whipped up by political leaders since the beginning of civilization, but especially since the rise of the modern industrial nation states in the last few centuries. At the outbreak of World War One, Germany and England enthusiastically asserted their mutual superiority and hatred towards each other, despite each being the biggest trading partner with the other prior to the war, and despite being the most developed scientific nations in the world. Dr. Samuel Johnson famously said: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." While we cannot be sure exactly what he meant, we can guess that it has something to do with the ease with which a malicious intent can be excused by an appeal to Patriotism. Presumably, love of one's country, but not love of anyone else. It is not common in which we find even the most ardent patriot who evinces love even towards all the people of his country.

So now, what do we do about racism and other forms of bigotry? First, we always keep in mind that there are no different

racism, but only one human race. Race is a social, rather than a biological construct. Biologically, the genetic diversity between the human species is a tiny fraction of a percent of our genetic code, and the genes that determine pigmentation are even still a smaller fraction of that fraction. According to the United Nations, there is no distinction between the terms *racial discrimination* and *ethnic discrimination*, and superiority based on racial differentiation is scientifically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust and dangerous, and that there is no justification for racial discrimination, in theory or in practice, anywhere. Similarly, there is no human nature, but only human behavior. We are all free to make our own choices in how to act, but there is no excuse for acting badly towards others.

Next, we need to keep in mind that there is no paradox of tolerance, and tolerance of intolerance is, in fact, intolerance. If we create a system based on rules and reasons, and someone acts outside of those rules and reasons, then that person is outside the system. Our society is what we make it, and to protect tolerance we must not support intolerance. Every act of intolerance or bigotry is, however minor it may seem, ultimately an emotional injunction to hatred and violence. As Sartre writes: "Antisemitism is not in the category of thoughts protected by the right to freedom of opinion." This could be applied to the other forms of bigotry as well. He writes later: "The Jew is only a pretext: elsewhere it will be the Negro, the yellow race; the Jew's existence simply allows the antisemite to nip his anxieties in the bud by persuading himself that his place has always been cut out in the world, that it was waiting for him and that by virtue of tradition he has the right to occupy it. Antisemitism, in a word, is fear of man's fate. The antisemite is the man who wants to be pitiless stone, furious torrent, devastating lightning: in short, everything but a man."

Equally, the bigot is someone who falls short of reaching full

humanity by excluding other humans. What is needed is a sense of solidarity, for our shared planet, our shared lives, and our shared fate. What we need is a love of humanity as a whole. That is the only way to live, and the only way to live together.