

Rewriting History

A Keynote by Russell Shorto

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I would like to share with you some reflections on a book I wrote called *Amsterdam: Geschiedenis van de meest vrijzinnige staat ter wereld*. First of all, it was published in 2013 and still sells briskly, which of course is a happy thing for an author. On the other hand, continued sales after a period of years is not necessarily surprising for a work of history. I mean, the past is still the past, right?

Well, yes and no. There is a common misapprehension that history is all about the past – that once history is written, it's set and established, more or less for good. But while by definition a work of history entails that which came before, history is ultimately about the present, about who we are today. A good history book is a sporting ring, in which an author, serving as a kind of representative of people of today, wrestles with actions and ideas and people of the past. In a sense, the purpose of doing history is to build a foundation for the future: to process the past in light of who we are now so as to help craft a way forward. That's why there are always new books appearing on subjects that already have shelves of volumes devoted to them:

the Roman Empire, the House of Orange, the Vikings, the Dutch Age Formerly Known as Golden.

That last reference gets precisely at the point I am making. The controversy that erupted in 2019 when the Amsterdam Museum announced it would scrap the term “Golden Age” in reference to the seventeenth century – the period when the tiny Dutch Republic rose to become, arguably and improbably, the most powerful nation in the world – involved a clash of beliefs about the role of the present in history. The museum’s rationale was essentially that, from the mindset of the present, when we are grappling with questions about race, colonialism, and exploitation, referring to that era as “golden” amounts to a whitewashing of much ugliness that transpired. One tweede kamer member criticized the decision this way: “Eerst moesten de straatnaambordjes weg, toen de standbeelden en nu de hele Gouden Eeuw? Het is nogal laf om onze geschiedenis te willen herschrijven.”¹

Consider this way of expressing the matter. It takes it for granted that “rewriting history” [herschrijven geschiedenis] is categorically a bad thing. But there is a difference between altering facts and reinterpreting them. We can all agree that papering over historical facts with falsehoods is wrong, but rethinking the past – including, in this case, the labels we choose to give to certain periods – is precisely

¹ <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/642098599/amsterdams-museum-doet-gouden-eeuw-in-de-ban>.

the job of history. It's why history is a living enterprise. More than that: it is how we maintain our identity, part of what it means to be human.

The Amsterdam Museum asked me to ponder whether, if I were writing my history of Amsterdam today, I would go about it in the same way. In one sense, my answer is yes. I believe the general approach I took is sound. The theme of my book is that the city of Amsterdam was a launching pad for several elements of liberalism, the system of values that underlies everything from democratic government to science, and includes tolerance, our modern notion of ourselves as individuals, and our commitment to the rights of individuals. I believe that argument to be valid.

And yet, if I were writing the book today, it would have a very different tone. It would be bolder, more insistent – strident, even. It would have the voice of someone who believes his very life is under threat, because that comes pretty close to my feelings on the matter. The year 2013 doesn't seem so very long ago, yet it was a different era of world history. It was before illiberalism became acceptable. And by illiberalism I don't mean "politics I don't agree with," but a system that rejects independent checks on power. It was before Donald Trump's presidency, during which he made 30,573 false statements (according to the *Washington Post*²), many of them seemingly right out of George Orwell's playbook for dictators. In *Nineteen*

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/>.

Eighty-Four, Orwell presented a reality in which the inversion of truth was necessary to uphold an anti-democratic regime: “War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.” Such a complete upending of reality is essential to getting a populace to buy into a mass political lie, Orwell maintained. The success of the effort in America to replace facts with lies is quantifiable. Even after the failure of 61 lawsuits that were filed in a systematic attempt to overthrow results of the 2020 election, in which Joe Biden defeated Trump, 71% of Republicans continued to hold the belief that Biden’s victory was “not legitimate.”³ And “stop the steal,” a campaign based on the blatantly false idea that that election was taken by theft, has today become a formalized effort to take control of the electoral system around the country, the mechanism by which votes are monitored and counted, including the swing states of Nevada, Pennsylvania, Arizona and Michigan.

My book was also written before an organized mob of armed insurrectionists assaulted the U.S. Capitol Building, planting a Confederate flag, the symbol of the pro-slavery South in the Civil War, in the seat of American government. It was before one of the two major political parties in the U.S., having decisively lost that presidential election, mounted a fullscale – and baseless – effort to repudiate the results, thus repudiating one of the basic tenets of the liberal order. It was before that

³ <https://polsci.umass.edu/toplines-and-crosstabs-december-2021-national-poll-presidential-election-jan-6th-insurrection-us>.

same party, in response to that election loss, began a systematic movement to disenfranchise Black voters across the country.

I pick examples of illiberalism from the U.S. both because I’m an American and because of the power the U.S. continues to wield. Would that the trend were confined to my home country. Alas, this same trend – toward authoritarianism, toward a system in which a rule of lies replaces a rule of law – is global. The nonprofit Freedom House, in its 2021 report, concluded that democracy was actively deteriorating in 73 countries.⁴ The state-of-democracy report published by the Swedish-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance in 2021 presented an even starker view.⁵ Jutta Urpilainen YOU-ta OOR-pil-lynen, the European Commissioner for International Partnerships, said the report “is not a wakeup call, it’s an alarm bell. Authoritarianism advances in every corner of the earth. Universal values – the pillars of civilization that protect the most vulnerable – are under threat.” The Russian and Chinese regimes have not only eradicated uncomfortable facts from the history books of those countries as they deepened their hold on power, but have taken advantage of the trend toward illiberalism in other parts of the world and worked to actively destabilize democracies.

⁴ <https://www.axios.com/global-decline-democracy-illiberal-democracies-9c34044f-1f15-4d56-a145-b08c325d98f4.html>.

⁵ <https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/democracy-faces-perfect-storm-world-becomes-more-authoritarian>.

And now we are witnessing the greatest manifestation of illiberalism in our lifetime. The Russian invasion of Ukraine signals the dawning of a new era. Remember how we used to refer to “attacks on democracy”? In those naïve days, we were speaking metaphorically. We are only now beginning to realize that we have rested our heads each night on an illusion: a fantasy that we lived in a post-historical world in which armies did not invade sovereign nations. Such nightmarish experiences, we thought, were so twentieth century. We were sure we lived in a different world, of smart phones and remote working, in which digital reality transcended mud and bombs. There are upsides to this invasion, of course. Europe has found its voice, in a military sense. NATO is a thing again.

But Europe knows that Russia isn’t the only threat. America is boiling with racist, tribalist, anti-democratic fervor. And Europe itself is no stranger to those forces. None of us knows where this will end, where we go from here.

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In Europe and America, then, society is being wrenched in two opposite directions. On the one hand is this rising tide of illiberalism: of naked aggression, tribalism, thuggishness, racism, a cheapening of the intellect, a commitment to wholesale manipulation of facts in order to prop up one’s gang.

On the other hand, there remains a commitment to a system of values created in Europe that we know as the Enlightenment. There were actually two Enlightenments. The more well known one swept across the continent in the 18th century, and spread to England's American colonies, where it spawned a revolution and a new type of government. But that Enlightenment grew out of the 17th century Dutch Enlightenment, which, as the renowned historian Jonathan Israel has argued in a long and prolific career, was rooted in the Dutch provinces. The history of Amsterdam that forms the center of my book has at its center this Dutch Enlightenment.

Some of us still hold in our hearts the idea of a society governed by reason and based on the principles first laid out by the so-called father of modern philosophy, the French philosopher Rene Descartes (whom we can maybe count as part Dutch since he spent most of his adult life in the Dutch provinces): that our first duty as responsible human beings is to recognize the human mind and its “good sense” as the grounding of all our decisions.

My book was animated by two guiding spirits, one of whom, Baruch Spinoza, stands alongside Descartes as a titan of modern philosophy. Spinoza's life, which transpired mostly in Amsterdam, the city of his birth, took place against the backdrop of the rise and fall of the Dutch Republic. The philosophical theories of great thinkers don't originate in an idealized intellectual universe. They arise from the eras of the

people who crafted them. Spinoza was an Amsterdam Jew who, in his early life was a partner in his family business, importing raisins and olive oil. He likely spent time in the city's stock exchange, which was the first in the world, and experienced for himself the arrival of ships from all over the globe, the explosion of commerce, and with it the creative explosion that made Amsterdam Europe's emporium both of goods and ideas. The Dutch Enlightenment was built on a radical new commitment to the individual. Each one of us has the capacity to reason, to discern truth and falsehood, and thus to help find the path forward for society. From that universal ability to reason follows the conviction that each person is to be equally valued. Our idea of democratic government comes from this. So does the concept of civil rights, which is something that has slowly unfolded since the time of Spinoza.

The equality of all individuals and the concomitant belief that the only acceptable government is one that upholds and reinforces that equality are bedrock ideas of the Enlightenment. The Dutch Republic played an outsized role in the development of these ideas. Though some of you may disagree, I believe Amsterdam today continues its long tradition of upholding those ideas and advancing them on new fronts. Were I to write my book today I would give more attention to those who participated in that process. I would focus more aggressively on women in the city's history – on individual women as leaders, but also on the circumstances of women's lives in different eras, and on the extent to which women in recent years

have and have not achieved equality with men. I would focus on the role of immigrant groups in the city's history. I would explore the extent to which people of Moroccan, Turkish and other backgrounds have and have not been embraced as fully Dutch, and the extent to which they themselves have or have not worked to integrate and achieve equality.

I would look at events in recent years through the lens of liberalism. For example, in the Covid pandemic, the reactions of many against vaccination and lockdown I see as emblematic of a tension between two values that are rooted in the city's history. On the one hand is the commitment to the individual and individual liberty, which goes back to Spinoza. On the other hand is the principle of people banding together to do what is best for society as a whole, which as I see it goes back to the original dam, which became Dam Square, to the creation of the canal system, and the institution of a water tax, all arising out of the need to work together for the good of all.

I would give more attention, too, to the many failures to live up to the principles of liberalism that I associate with the city. The role of the Dutch West India Company in the slave trade. The global exploitation that the East India Company got away with for centuries, and which for centuries after was conveniently overlooked as historians paid homage to the VOC for providing the gold that fueled the so-called Golden Age. I would explore how much of Amsterdam's wealth in the nineteenth

and twentieth centuries came from exploitation and conquest in Indonesia. I would devote space to the variety of tribalism that has crept into Dutch politics since my book was written, which dresses itself in upscale clothing and uses refined language as a veneer covering what seems to me to be a pool of tribalist notions about ethnic superiority.

I would explore the central tensions that I see as defining Amsterdam today. The tension between global outreach – the effort to make the city a hub for foreign corporations – and meeting the needs of local communities. The tension between the city center and its expanding periphery. The tension between social democracy and capitalism. The tension between tourism and the city where people live and work.

The second figure I focused on in my book to illustrate the city's history was Frieda Menco. She was born in 1925 and raised in a happy, middle class Jewish family in Amsterdam. Her youth was interrupted by the NSB and the Nazis. Her friendship with Anne Frank extended from their Amsterdam Zuid neighborhood to the concentration camp at Auschwitz, where they both were taken.

Unlike Anne Frank, Frieda Menco survived the holocaust. I met her when I was director of the John Adams Institute, the American cultural center in Amsterdam, and while I was working on my book. With Frieda's permission and encouragement, I used her story in my book to illustrate both the triumph of Amsterdam's liberalism and the failure to live up to it. I showed Frieda succeeding in life once she returned

to the city following the war: healing from her substantial injuries and diseases, and from the trauma of the deaths of most of her extended family members; absorbing the radical transformations of the Sixties; becoming a journalist in the Seventies who chronicled much of the changes unfolding in the city of that era; and finally serving as a spokesperson for human rights from her living room on Gerrit van der Veenstraat, well into the 21st century.

Frieda and I remained friends long after the publication of my book. When I visited her in her last years (she died in 2019, at the age of 93), she often expressed bemusement at the startling changes in the urban fabric as her hometown became a global city. She regretted some of those changes but found wonder in many of them. She was a hopeful person, both for her city and for humanity. But she was also fully aware of the ugliness creeping not just into Amsterdam but far beyond. As we sat in her living room one day in 2017, the television was on in the background, and the figure of Donald Trump suddenly filled the screen: the same Donald Trump who, as bombs fell on Kiev at the start of the present invasion, called Vladimir Putin “a genius.” We listened to Trump fulminate idiotically for a moment – about the need to “make America great again,” how that feat would be achieved by building walls, how it could only be achieved by him, him alone, and how any media that criticized him was by definition “fake news.”

We absorbed the roaring of the crowd that followed these pronouncements.

Frieda turned from the screen to me. “This is very familiar,” she intoned darkly.

Someone once said that history doesn’t repeat itself but it rhymes. If there are echoes of dark passages from our past in the air today, I would like to think that the refrain that filled the air above the city of Amsterdam centuries ago still echoes as well, and that our voices today can find a rhyme for it, lift the light up above the dark, and create a brighter song of the future.