

Myths of Modern History: From the French Revolution to the 20th Century World Wars and the Cold War

Jacques R. PAUWELS

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Jacques R. Pauwels' *Myths of Modern History* offers a bold and accessible critique of the dominant narratives shaping our understanding of modern history, from the French Revolution to the present. As the culmination of the author's acclaimed trilogy (*The Great Class War 1914–1918*, *The Myth of the Good War*, and *Big Business and Hitler*), this work provides a concise counter-history of twelve key events, analyzed in twelve chapters, that have helped define the modern world. Pauwels deconstructs myths perpetuated by the media, elites, and conventional historiography —myths that promote a sanitized and benevolent view of capitalism's role. In doing so, he challenges readers to reconsider historical processes and their systemic causes.

Pauwels defines “mythologized history” as “an assortment of antiseptic, sometimes tragic, but ultimately feel-good tales” (p. 15) that obscure historical realities. These narratives condition the public to accept the capitalist order domestically and the imperialist order internationally, redirecting sympathy from the victims of exploitation to the architects of capitalist dominance (pp. 15–16). The book is a clarion call for historians and students to critically interrogate history beyond its mythologized versions.

Pauwels examines history through the lens of democratic progress, emphasizing the revolutionary underpinnings of democratic achievements and the counter-revolutionary forces — often led by the ruling classes — that have worked to undermine them. Contrary to prevailing views in historiography,¹ political science, and International Relations (IR), which often portray revolutions as futile or counter-productive for democracy, the author argues that revolutions are inherently democratic. He defines them as movements with broad popular

1 On the “historical turn” of International Relations (Historical IR) See: Von Pfaler, Lauri, and Benno Teschke. 2024. Quo Vadis, Historical International Relations? Geopolitical Marxism and the Promise of Radical Historicism. *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 21, 82: 21-40.

support, expressed through collective action, aiming for radical political or socioeconomic change, to benefit the lower classes at the expense of the upper classes (p. 21).

By equating revolutions with democratic change, Pauwels contrasts them with counter-revolutionary events, such as the political transformations in Europe's former Eastern Bloc in 1989, which he contends failed to deliver genuine democratic progress, offering only reforms that primarily served elite interests (see Chapter 12). Counter-revolution, he argues, encompasses not only armed resistance to change — as seen in the French and Russian cases — but also the rollback of social rights gained during the post-1945 welfare state period through neoliberal reforms after the 1980s (pp. 322–323). Pauwels identifies a persistent tension between bottom-up movements advocating for equality, emancipation, and democracy, and top-down systems designed to maintain oligarchic and capitalist dominance.

Pauwels' argument is grounded in a Marxist interpretation of history, which views the past as a domain of class struggle, shaped but not wholly determined by economic structures. This perspective avoids deterministic causality, while emphasizing the transformative potential of political subjectivity. Within this framework, revolutions such as the French and Russian Revolutions are positioned as pivotal moments fueled by lower-class aspirations for emancipation. In contrast, wars like the First and Second World Wars are portrayed as instruments of counter-revolution, designed to suppress democratic advances and consolidate capitalist and imperialist power.

Key myths are systematically dissected by Pauwels, including the portrayal of the French and Russian Revolutions as futile bloodbaths orchestrated by zealots (Chapters 1 and 4) and the depiction of the Great War as an accident or a “war for democracy” (Chapters 2 and 3). He critiques the rise of fascism and the Second World War as events driven primarily by the warmongering personalities of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin (Chapters 5 and 6), and challenges the idea that the tide of the war turned with the Allied landings in Normandy (Chapters 7 and 8). Pauwels also disputes claims that United States (U.S) involvement in the war was reluctantly driven by a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and a tradition of isolationism (Chapter 9).

Further myths debunked include the justification of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as necessary to save countless lives (Chapter 10) and the depiction of U.S involvement in the Cold War as a reluctant defense of democracy against the Soviet Union (Chapter 11). Pauwels critiques the narrative framing the downfall of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union — symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall — as a triumph of democracy. He also challenges the idealized notion that capitalism, euphemized as “the free market,” has driven the emergence and development of democracy globally, as well as the portrayal of U.S. involvement in global conflicts as altruistic (Chapter 12 and Conclusion).

The book aligns with and extends the critiques of historiography advanced by Marxist and critical historians and philosophers. Pauwels weaves together insights from scholars such as Paulo Freire, Herbert Aptheker, Silvia Federici, William Appleman Williams, Arno Mayer,

and Domenico Losurdo, emphasizing the interplay between class, ideology, and power. It resonates with works like Losurdo's *War and Revolution* and Mayer's *The Furies*, which challenge dominant paradigms that demonize revolutionary traditions and relativize the Nazi-Fascist phenomenon, in emphasizing the relationship between revolution and the advancement of democracy.

A major strength of the book lies in its critique of the myth that capitalism drives democracy. By highlighting capitalism's reliance on undemocratic practices such as slavery, colonial exploitation, and forced labor, Pauwels prompts readers to reconsider the relationship between economic and political systems. Similarly, his analysis of philofascists — ruling-class actors who supported fascist regimes for counter-revolutionary purposes — challenges conventional views of fascism as a revolutionary ideology. Instead, Pauwels shows that fascism was a calculated response by elites to suppress revolutionary pressures and maintain their dominance.

Pauwels' insights remain highly relevant amidst contemporary political and economic crises. He argues that the October Revolution not only transformed backward Russia into the Soviet Union, thus enabling it to become a relatively prosperous superpower in a remarkably short time. The revolution, he asserts, was also instrumental in defeating Nazi Germany, empowering colonies to achieve independence, and fostering unprecedented democracy and prosperity for ordinary Western people after 1945. One of the book's central conclusions is that the fall of the Berlin Wall marked not only the collapse of Soviet and Eastern European communism, with its socially oriented democracy, but also the decline of Western Europe's welfare state — the pinnacle of its social democracy (p. 324). His critique of capitalism's undemocratic tendencies speaks directly to debates on wealth inequality, corporate power, and the eroding of public trust in democratic institutions.

However, the book has some limitations. While effectively debunking myths about the French and Russian Revolutions, Pauwels does not fully engage with the theoretical frameworks underpinning counter-revolutionary narratives, notably the controversial concept of totalitarianism, which equates communism with Nazism. He also avoids addressing "historical revisionism" at a theoretical level, such as Ernst Nolte's theses on the Holocaust or François Furet's critiques of the French Revolution. Engaging with these debates could have enhanced the book's interdisciplinary appeal, and clarified how myths about revolution, democracy, and capitalism persist in historiography and IR. Despite its turn toward history, IR often reproduces the myths that Pauwels critiques, including "Whig"² interpretations linking democracy to capitalist progress and "anti-Whig" perspectives prioritizing particularity over universalist frameworks.

Overall, *Myths of Modern History* is a must-read for scholars, students, and anyone seeking to uncover the narratives shaping our understanding of the past. Although its radical

2 "Whig history" is a Eurocentric historiographical approach that views history as a linear progression from a dark past to an enlightened present, interpreting the past through the lens of present values.

approach may be found challenging to adherents of conventional historiography, the book's arguments are too compelling to ignore. For those exploring the intersections of capitalism, imperialism, and democracy, Pauwels' work provides a thought-provoking and accessible entry point, and serves as a necessary corrective to the sanitized narratives currently dominating public discourse and scholarship.