

At the End of an Age

By John Lukacs

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Reviewed by Paul Devlin

At the End of an Age is a fascinating but uneven "extended essay" (or "jeremiad") by the eminent historian John Lukacs ("loo-cash"), author of about twenty books including the popular success *Five Days in London, May 1940* (Yale, 1999) and also *The Duel: The Eighty-Day Struggle Between Churchill and Hitler* (Yale, 1990). Mr. Lukacs is a world-class historian and also a talented writer who expresses clear affinities in this book for the days when history was regarded as a branch of literature and not as a social science. Now retired, he spent most of his career at Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia.

At the End of an Age is a meditation about the state of the world as he sees it, on the cusp of great change as the "modern age", which began circa 1500, is coming to an end, or has already ended. His controlling idea is that the institutions and traditions developed over the last five hundred years in Europe are changing beyond recognition, and we should be aware of this change – and beware of certain negative implications this offers, such as the possible rise of more dictators. He examines a necessarily *wide* range of topics. Aside from glib, antagonizing comments about modern art, (which he doesn't like) and his highly questionable discussions of American demographics (which could benefit from a reading of Albert Murray's *The Omni-Americans*), the book makes for stimulating reading. He admits that current post-modern assessments of the limits of objectivity are useful and overdue, but he also calls subjectivity *and* objectivity "two sides of the same debased coin". Perhaps most interesting are his discussions of the limits of applied science, including an explication of Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle.

This book is unpredictable because he will not tow *any* party line. He is not coming from either the right or left:

"Most 'conservatives', votaries of what is still wrongly called 'capitalism' and of technical progress, deny the need to preserve or conserve. Most 'liberals' still cling to outdated dogmas of the so-called Enlightenment, unwilling to question the validity of 'Science.'"

Lukacs does not fit neatly into any political category, except to say that his hero is Sir Winston Churchill* and he is a devotee of Anglo-American liberalism.

One thing Lukacs deserves great credit for is his constantly reminding us that the rise of Hitler was *not*, as many people seem to think, an isolated historical phenomena that can happen only in Germany. To prove Lukacs right, we need only look at the bizarre hypocrisy of the radical Hindu nationalists in India. (See Arundhati Roy's "Fascism's Firm Footprint in India" in *The Nation*, September 30, 2002, and Pankaj Mishra's "The Other Face of Fanaticism", in *The New York Times Magazine*, February 2, 2003.) Lukacs talks about how the Prussian elite stood behind Hitler because they thought they could control him. In India today, the Brahmin aristocracy stands firmly behind Hindu mobs committing anti-Muslim violence.

Sometimes Lukacs's arguments are well-reasoned and highly logical, other times he throws out unsupported opinions. Sometimes he convinces easily, other times not at all. He states early on that the book is "flawed", and he is not kidding, but it is also hard to put down.